

*Nageen Rather*

**The Case of an Unmarried Mother**

Salma's father shivered with cold as it was cloudy outside. He wore a tired look and lazily stroked his unkempt beard. Seated on a wooden bench he began biting his finger nails. When called in by the doctor he signed the papers with his trembling hand and marked the date (1/12/1991) under his crooked name and waited in the corridor of the hospital, his head hanging low. A man and a woman came and shared his bench.

Half an hour later, Salma felt the first piercing pain in her stomach around 3 o'clock. Tossing on the bed, in the horrifying labour room, she murmured some verses of the Quran when pain coursed through her whole body. She clenched her fists and craned her neck sometimes right; sometimes left. She knew that, though the pain was sharp, it would relieve her from the longest pain. The longest pain that had been crushing her from within since the day the doctor declared her pregnant. For last few months Salma had been living as a benumbed soul. But, now the sharp pain snapped her out of her deadness and reminded her, for a moment, that she existed.

Salma welcomed the labour pains with a sense of relief. She could hardly wait to get rid of her burden—the child growing in her womb. What she had felt about the child was that she considered it like a bullet lodged in her chest. She had helplessly wanted it out but could not get that done. Only pain was her companion—her part of the existence all these months.

The pungent smell of phenyl in the room was nauseating for Salma who was turning and twisting on the lonely bed. She felt dizzy and her body ached. It seemed to her that she was swelling with every minute. Running her right hand over her gravid stomach, she soughed and sobbed.

With every second the pain grew sharper, Salma thought that she will die in a few seconds. It was not only the body that troubled her but also the memories that this bodily pain triggered tormented her. Many things of that dreadful winter night flashed across her mind: The smell of the rum and the Nevla, the chewing tobacco. The expletives the men mouthed, their merciless laughing, her own useless cries and the pain which lasted around an hour— are the residues which she had not been able to forget. Neither could she forget how desperately she implored them for a breath of air.

As the doctors entered and locked the door from inside, Salma shrank with the shivering tremble. She remembered that less than a year earlier those men too locked her room from inside. A tremor shot through her. She quivered and sighed but the presence of a cheerful nurse in the room soothed her. Salma knew that it was going to be painful again. The seeds of the present throes of pain were sown because of that equally painful past experience— some nine months ago during that wintry night. It was pain then; it would be pain now. But Salma could distinguish between the two. They had pounced upon her like beasts there; but these people

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are humans here. Both uniformed, but they were oppressors; these are savours. Salma thought and comforted herself. For a moment the train of her thoughts stopped but the physical pain didn't relent. She continued to writhe in pain and cried louder and louder.

The patients and the attendants in the nearby ward were stirred because Salma's piercing cries escaped the gaps of the labour room. When the fierce pang of pain shot through her Salma rubbed her feet against the cold bed. She then pulled her hair and dashed her head against the plastic back of the bed. A moment later she fell silent as a stone. The nurse told her to relax and Salma felt the touch of the doctor's hand on her face.

"Relax and take the long breaths." said the doctor.

Salma didn't respond. She turned pale.

"Which district have you come from?" The nurse asked to see if Salma was in good senses.

"Kupwara." Sakeen whispered deliriously.

"Can you tell me where you are right now?" the doctor asked breezily.

"*Lal Ded huspataals manz*, In Lal Ded Hospital." Salma whispered.

Both of the doctors and the nurse felt relieved to know that the patient was alright.

"Good! You must know that you are in the top maternity hospital of Kashmir. You have two best doctors around you. And this senior sister." The doctor comforted her. "Why should you panic? Keep calm."

"*Doctor saeb dagge seet chum zan zoo nearaan*, Doctor! I am dying with pain." Salma mumbled, her face drenched in sweat.

"Keep cool and push a bit harder. It will be soon over." The doctor assured her.

Minutes later, Salma pushed, moaned and cried louder. She felt her eyesight failed her. She closed her eyes and ground her teeth. Her nostrils wavered and her head fell to a side. She dug her finger nails into the flesh of her palms. She felt like someone was, so ruthlessly, pulling out her innards. She was so weltered in sweat that it looked as if she had recently bathed herself. The drops of sweat trickled down her bony milky throat. She breathed heavy and inconsistently. Her tongue turned dry and it didn't move. Salma then stretched her body, contorted her face and shrieked. Her mouth opened so wide and for so long that doctors could count her whole set of teeth. But gradually all the accumulated pain inside her slowly trickled out with her tears, and with the blood which flowed between her trembling legs. She dropped her head backwards, her eyes closing slowly.

A wide grin broke across the face of the doctor when he opened his arms to hold the baby.

'It is baby boy.' He announced and handed it to the nurse.



Ensnared on a sweat smelling bed in ward number 6 to recuperate, Salma opened her eyes and slowly regained herself. She no longer felt

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any physical pain but the disturbingly recurrent images didn't escape her mind. Half asleep, she was roused by the nurse who brought over the child to Salma for milk. The baby made no sound and Salma thought that perhaps her wish had been granted and the baby was a stillborn after all. But before Salma could celebrate, the baby gave a sharp cry. Salma froze in shock and turned her head away. She cursed both—the child and her wretched self. She didn't pick the child up. She didn't want to touch it. She didn't milk it.



The child laying beside Salma, stretched out on a white sheet, perfectly still, his arms and legs splayed like someone surrendering before soldiers. Salma stealthily looked at its little fingers with their tiny real-life nails. The child's head was turned to right side. He was asleep and in his slumber he sucked in his little lips. His eyes moved rapidly under their translucent lids. Salma had a strange feeling when she observed the child's dark long eyelashes and his thatch of dark hair which was sticky with sweat. Salma saw that his sharp nose resembled hers. His breathing was rapid and rhythmic with little soft tummy rising and falling, up and down up and down. His little feet stuck up in the air motionless.

To Salma the child was simply a nameless little being who after nine months had come out of her body. Nothing more than that. She felt relieved that her entire past has spilled out of her body with this child. She felt so light as if she could get up that moment and walk away with no burden. She scowled her face and sighed. But out of an abrupt volition, she again turned her head aside, and a few droplets welled out of her almond-shaped eyes. She didn't know way she wanted to look at the child once again but she seesawed between yes and no. She was being hounded— rather ripped apart by numberless pair of opposing emotions— war, peace; love, hate; revenge, forgiveness; life, death and many more. However she ended up stealing few more glances.

As she was looking at the little creature sleeping, a murderous thought flicked. She recalled a scene from a movie she had happened to watch soon after doctors had announced her pregnancy. She closed her eyes and remembered the villain of the movie who entered in a room and found a little baby sleeping. The villain picked up the pillow and placed it over the baby. The baby had blonde hair, Salma remembered. The villain pressed the pillow down on the baby, covering it completely. After about five minutes it was over and the baby died.

When she opened her eyes she looked at the child lying beside her. "I too could do the same thing to this child. Yes I can." Salma thought. "Press down and it would all be over in a second, both my sufferings and my father's." The baby was sleeping peacefully Salma was sure he will not feel even a little. Then she stretched her hand, inserted it under the clothes and touched the baby, felt the warmth of his skin and saw how his ribcage fluttered with the beating of his heart. As she ran her fingers over the child's throat Salma abruptly withdrew her hand as if afraid harming it. No, she could not do it because she realised that she has seen so much death of youth in the Kashmir that the very thought of it made her sick.

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Salma felt helpless and wished if she had died in place of her mother. Her lips started to tremble and she burst into tears.



Salma fixed the gaze on the hanging bulb in the ward over her head. She remembered how peaceful her life was before that horrible night. How his father loved her and never made her feel the necessity of a mother. She had lost her mother less than a week after she was born. Her father didn't marry again thinking that the step mother could spoil Salma's life. Salma was the apple of her father's eyes. He himself taught her the Quran and he was perhaps the first parent from Poshpora who had admitted her daughter in private school for good education. Her father considered Salma's proper upbringing a passport for heaven. But life for the father and daughter turned hell on that fateful night of February 23 when Indian army launched a search and integration operation in Kunan and Poshpora— twin remote villages of Kashmir valley. Men were ordered to assemble in the open area and kept on the snow, most of them tortured. Salma father was one of them. The other hundred army men barged into the houses where only women had stayed. They drank heavily and gang raped the women— young and old. Salma was alone at home waiting for her father. They asked her to unlock the door. Salma shrank to a corner and stood silent, like a little child afraid of dogs. But the army men broke into Salma's room. They stripped her of her clothes and sprinkled rum on her virgin body. One army man stuffed his rexine hand gloves into her mouth and all fell upon her like hungry vultures. Since then this child, the poisonous fruit of their seed started growing inside her.

To avoid taunts and barbs of the people Salma and her father choose not to disclose to any one not even to a doctor. But once Salma's stomach began to swell they visited a hospital in Srinagar where doctor broke the bad news of her pregnancy. The words of the doctor fell like a bomb on Salma and her father. Her father fainted and collapsed to the ground.



The first thought that came to her mind when Salma realised that she was pregnant was death. This child was condemned to death from the start. It lived only because by that time it was already too late for an abortion. She had to carry through her pregnancy to the bitter end with a swelling stomach that made it impossible for her to move outside her house because hers and her family's dignity would have been marred. She never wanted to bring a slur on the fair name of her father. She is not yet married. How can she be pregnant? People would have raised such questions. To safeguard the family honour Salma's father decided to send her to his in-laws so that Skeena's swelling stomach that had deformed her body beyond recognition, doesn't invite taunts by the people of his vicinity. He knew how families unscathed by the incident even in the affected villages have banned all the social contacts with the victim's families. It became difficult for parents to get a groom for their daughters. Salma's father also knew how Bashir Dar, another parent from Poshpora was forced by circumstances to marry off his twenty year old daughter to a forty five year old divorcee.

At one time Salm'a father had made his mind that he would kill the child or throw it in some garbage but out of his religious scruple he

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shunned such thoughts. He knew he had to be answerable to God. Then he decided that once the child would be delivered he would give it to some childless couple. Because he didn't want the child grow in the house as a human form of a painful memory of colonial oppression. When he apprised Salma of his decision, first she didn't speak for a moment but after her father put forth the complexity of the case to her she nodded. Her love for her father and his honour overcome her emotions. Eventually nothing but animosity for her child developed in her. Salma often thought it a tumour multiplying inside with every new day. She had never thought of it as a child only as a disease, a burden she wished to get rid of.



Conscious of the child's presence beside her, Salma remembered the dark faces of the army men with bushy moustaches. She always wanted to kill them—the fathers of this child— nameless and drunk. She didn't know how many, but here and there she remembered their blood shot eyes, husky voices, rough hands, smell, often a stench. Any of them could be the father of the child.

Suddenly Salma blushed, her blood boiled. She wanted revenge. She imagined herself mowing the green grass in the apple orchard for cattle around the same area of Kunan Poshpora. She pictured that she suddenly caught the sight of a familiar face of an army man. She was sure it is one of them. She walked up to him and stabbed him with the sharp scythe in the abdomen making sure he got a good look at her face first. As the metal plunged into him, the army man bled to death. Salma felt relieved, even happy. She then poked the end of the scythe in the army man's eyes and finally slit his throat. Salma cried in furry that the just has prevailed. For a moment she felt she was no longer a victim.

But when the child kicked and hit the arm of Salma. The soft touch on her skin broke the string of her soothing pictures of imaginary revenge. She shuddered and soon realised that she was still helpless and still a victim, just a mass of flesh with the tumour lying beside her.

Salma was also obsessed with a sense of the dirtiness. This was another feeling she often had, and it was just as disturbing as her idea of revenge. She looked at her hands, at the dirt under her fingernails. 'I will never be clean again. No amount of water is enough.' She thought to herself.



Later, a withered couple slowly entered the ward. Salma saw them lumbering towards her. The man smiled gently at Salma but she didn't respond. She looked cold. The women stood motionless. Salma felt deaf and dumb. "Hope you are feeling good." asked the man hesitatingly. Salma kept silent. She felt helpless as if her right leg was going to be amputated. And she felt that like she had to go and ask her mother first. But Salma didn't know how her mother looked like.

Salma looked at the child who was no longer part of her, whose future doesn't belong to her. She felt that she was completely divested of any responsibility for him. Though it made her a bit relieved yet in the heart of her hearts she felt a strange hollowness. But in that instant she felt glad that she gave birth to him, that she gave him life rather than death.

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The childless couple put the thick woollen jacket on the child. The woman lifted it in her arms with smile on her face. Salma stirred and felt empty. Her heart skipped a beat.

"My lord may he live long. And forgive me." Salma murmured. A few tears rolled down her cheeks.

She swallowed a dry breath. Her head whirled. Under the quilt she rubbed her hands.

"I should kiss at least once on the child's little hand." Salma thought to herself. She tried to lift her hand to hold the child's tiny pink hands in hers. But her heart was racing fast. She dropped the hand promptly she didn't understand why. She vacillated and arrested her emotions. She repented why she didn't kill herself soon after that incident. She could have taken that extreme step but she didn't want to leave her father alone.

The women turned to Salma and said:

"Don't worry about his future. He is our son now. We would give him a better life to live."

Salma lowered her head and there was a long silence.

Then the women took out a milk feeder from a bag and pushed the nipple into the child's mouth. Every so often the baby pulled away from the nipple, waving its little arms and grimaced. The women then propped the child against her shoulder and smiled at Salma.

'He is the apple of our eyes. We will raise him with our blood.' The women asked, excited.

'May Allah bless you!' The husband of the women said.

Salma didn't utter a word. She fixed her gaze on the child till the women reached the door.

When the couple left the ward, Salma stuffed her mouth with the corner of the pillow-case and broke down. Lying on the bed in Srinagar hospital, Salma didn't know what name her existence had.

An hour later, Salma felt a sudden pressure in her breasts, her long gown was wet and the milk was flowing. She leaned against the pillow, confused, not knowing what to do. She took a towel and shoved it under her gown. What is going to happen to this milk now? She thought. She buried her face in her hands. And then an unending chain of tear drops trickled down her thin wrists from where they fell on the white cotton sheet and got absorbed.