

Swarna Sugunasiri

6.1 The Lady in the White Osariya

(Short Story)

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An explosion of abusive rage was sprayed out from the house a few doors away. The bullets came hurling out of a mouth of a plump woman in a white osariya. The raging madness inside her glared through her red eyes making her look like a trapped animal in a cage! She would be looking out to the street, and yell out curse after curse at any and everyone going past her house. People who walked by knew her daily routine.

Soon, after so much yelling, shouting and screaming, she would be exhausted. She would stop and that's when her oldest daughter would approach her ever so gently and kindly. Offering her a glass of water, she would in her soft voice, say, "*Amma*, would you like to drink something, *amma*. Why don't you just sit in this chair and take a break." Obediently, she starts walking past the living room, into the big rectangular dining room and looks at her two younger daughters, busy at their *beeralu* lace making on the pillow with the wooden *beeralu*, their hands and minds occupied with making their living serving a bunch of loyal customers. They turn towards their mother from time to time, casting understanding glances at her as if to say that they did feel her pain. One of them, the younger, with her fingers still on the *beeralu*, looked in the direction of mother, stopped working and followed her into the kitchen.

The older sister also a tailor, I was one of her customers, and later her student. Aachchi, my grandmother, had worked on my mother to get me into some kind of handcraft. At all of thirteen, she didn't want to see me just hopping in and out of the house, learning no skills, so much needed to become an exemplary housewife. I don't think anyone in my family had a clue, the faintest idea, that I would allow myself to be trained just to become a good housewife. They all thought that I would be Me, the very special me, the only girl in a family of seven boys. My mother could see that I was different from the daughters of her younger sister who lived next door in the middle house on the same ancestral land. They didn't think anything wrong in following the daily routine set down by their mother. They had chores to do, and their own sewing, knitting and crocheting. My mother, on the other hand, didn't find anything wrong in my being busy with reading, reading and more reading - newspapers, magazines, critical works by famous Sinhala authors and novels. Not wanting to miss a single nuance of a story, I would pour over novel after novel. *Jane Eyre* and *A Tale of Two Cities* were my favourites. My mother perhaps thought that a couple of hours away from the books couldn't possibly hurt me.

So one fine day, she took me to the tailor lady's house. It was just a few houses down the street from us. My mother's family was known to them. They knew me, too, because all my clothing was done by her. Whenever I took a length of fabric to her, she would right away go into a big grin and ask me what I would want made and in what style. I used to create my own designs for the frocks, blouses and skirts I wore. She was very liberal with me and sometimes would ask me to draw a picture of just what I had in mind. She would wait patiently for me to finish my design before she popped her questions for clarification. She had a pattern book with scores of European designs. I loved browsing through the pages before making a decision. When I chose a design, it was always a mixture of what I see on the pages and what had come up in my imagination. I liked plain European designs, although I had a penchant to add a frill or two here and there! She always encouraged me to think about the design. What particular feature of it attracted me to it? If it was a simple floral design, I liked to have a dress made. If it were a big bold design with flashy colours, I would like to have a skirt made.

My mother asked her if she could teach me the basics of crocheting. "Of course, I could" said she. Having decided the days I would be available, she told me what to bring for the first lesson. Mother looking at me added, "My daughter Teja was not all that gung ho to come for lessons in the afternoon. You know that that cuts into her play time...". "Oh yes, we know that she loves to play, especially tag on one foot. That's what we've seen her do at break time in the afternoon school. But I also know that she is a very clever girl, and that she could do anything that she puts her mind to. I know another student from her afternoon English class. She told me how smart Teja was." And the tailor lady added with a smile, "She has a very good memory!"

All the three sisters knew exactly when in the afternoon I would arrive at their home. So, close to that time, at least one of them would look out for me. At the front entrance or at the side entrance. They knew that I was scared of their mother when she was in that mood. As if to compensate for their mother's yelling and screaming, they all spoke in a very subdued tone. To me, they didn't look scared of their mother but seemed very understanding. The sisters worked according to some kind of a schedule. Each one of them took turns preparing the meals, and the mother was given enough attention when she was taking a shower or having her meals. It was amazing to see so much calm and peace there was in the midst of hurt, pain and shouting! From her screaming and shouting it seemed as if she had taken in all the wrath and abuse of the world.

Yet when you looked at her in her saner moments, she looked really calm, collected and even good looking! Her clothes were always clean and neat. Very subdued colours. She wore a pair of black slippers at home. It was a habit of hers to walk back and forth the entire length of the house right after her meals. As she walks past her daughters, now she'd go to the youngest and gently hold the exquisite lace in her fingers, and looks at it admiringly. And then she puts it back exactly how it was. I thought the lady had a lot of stories to tell the world without having to shriek her head off!

The three sisters did have contact with the rest of the world. In addition to their regular customers they also had some loyal friends who would do anything for them. Some of them would do the marketing for them - buying fabric and other necessities for tailoring. Others would visit with tea time snacks! I liked all three sisters, but I was a bit scared of their mother even though I tried my best not to let it be seen outwardly. The next day I took the side entrance to get in because I saw the youngest sister at the door. As long as I was with one of them, I felt safe. I tried not to do anything that would ignite the rage inside their mother. I avoided making eye contact with her. My mind was always puzzling over if she really knew that I was a friend and that my visits were legitimate. One of these days, I thought, I will become brave and look her in the eye and see what happens!

In a few minutes I mastered the chain stitch which is the basic for any crochet pattern. Then she taught me the 'k' pattern which was an extension of the chain stitch. For home work, she asked me to do a yard of the 'k' stitch. The following day I was shown how to end the lace and she said that it would be a very simple lace for my grandmother's undergarment. I was happy to gift my first piece to my grandmother as soon as I saw her.

Now I was quite eager to get to my lessons. I cut back on my after school play time because I wanted to have more time with the three sisters. I wanted to learn more crochet patterns. The next day I learnt to finish off one pattern and fold it nice and neat, and the lace got safely tucked into a fancy little paper bag she brought out from her sewing cabinet. Right at that moment her mother was passing by. She stopped and turned towards us with a little smile. Finally we had made eye contact! "What's your name, child?", she asked. I was dumbfounded! "Teja", I stuttered out.

"This is Machcha nona's granddaughter, amma."

"Oh, you mean Marynona's daughter? We bought a lot of jewellery from your grandfather", she added, still eyeing me. "I was always sure that I got an honest to goodness fair deal from him", she said with a note of pride in her voice. My eyes brightened up. "This lace will sit nicely around her neckline, I'm sure". As she said it, she really looked engaging! I still stood shell-shocked. Without wiping away the smile on my face, I looked around in the room to see what the others were thinking. They all seemed to have the expression that cried out, "You don't have to be scared anymore. She recognizes you and she likes you. Now you can safely put behind all your worries".

My crochet teacher started working on a new pattern she called, 'the flower petal'. "This is a tough one." That, too, we started with a basic chain and then moved on to do the petal part of it. Having come out of the shock, I started beaming! I didn't have to say much. They knew what was going on in my head. For the rest of the day, I heard no any yelling or screaming. She sat in her favourite Wing chair in the living room and kept looking at the photos hanging on their west wall. There was a medium large wedding photo of a couple inside an elaborately decorated wooden frame. There were a few pictures of some kids peeking out of less elegantly decorated frames. In one of them, a smart looking boy was smiling away in a marine outfit. I noted her eyes moving from one picture to the next, and her eyes got glued to the wedding couple!

After staring at it for a while, she started muttering to herself, stood up, and glared into the gloomy sky. I thought to myself, 'thinking doesn't do any good for her'. She needed to be engaged in activities with unrelated unconnected folks.

That day when I reached home I was jubilant! First, I showed my mother the finished lace meant for aachchi. Then I showed her the new one we had just started - the 'petal' design. But ... mother was not with me. She seemed far, far away. And there was no usual joy in her face; rather she looked worried! "What's the matter amma", I asked her. "Your brothers are not happy to see you go to the tailor's house, because of their mother's foul mouth. They've been complaining to me from day one. But I kept hoping that you yourself would want to quit at some point. To make matters worse, when father came home this time, he ordered me to stop you from going there." He had come to know from a friend who happened to be a distant relative of my sewing friends.

It was as if I was struck by thunder! I couldn't believe my ears. Could this be true? The day that I felt I had won over the affections of this lady, my mother says I'm not to go there! All my dreams and expectations suddenly came crashing to the ground just like that! I was building castles in the air. I could get friendly with the woman. And she will forget her painful past. She might even be able to control her thoughts and eventually overcome her need to yell and shriek out. She might let go! And let in friendly thoughts.

I started bawling, ran into my room and hid my face in the pillow.

NOTE

* Osariya is a type of Saree worn by Sinhala women in the Upcountry areas. Both Swarna's mother and my mother wore it, even though they were from the Low Country.