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Miss Soft

Gulzar Singh Sandhu (Punjabi)

Tr. By Madhuri Chawla (English)

Her real name was something else, but everyone called her Miss Soft. Two Years back or maybe a year before that, she had gone to America to do a course in Public Health. There, during a conversation she had revealed the English translation of her surname, because of which everyone had started addressing her as Miss Soft. I can't recall the Punjabi surname that is translated as Miss Soft. It was Sobti or Sohal or something. She had told me once. Anyway, how are we concerned with the name? After all what's in a name?

Who says there isn't anything in a name? Had her name been Stone or Steel, she wouldn't have remained soft. How soft was she! And how beautiful!

Miss Soft's name couldn't have been anything else. Had it been something else she would have neither been so meticulous, nor the decor of her room so fetching. Then she would have hung the imported Cross at a foot and a half rather than at a foot above the fire place. The government had not installed the peg upon which the Cross hung. So had her eyes faltered while drilling the nail, it would have naturally moved a millimetre this way or that. And that would have been sufficient to negate her identity as Miss Soft.

Even if we were to forget about the nail and the cross, there could have been some other mismatch in the way the things had been put together in her room. A lampshade could have been fitted in the Vat 69 bottle that held the money plant. The lipsticks placed on the right side of the triangular mirror of the dressing table may have been on the left side. The mini fridge could have stood where the 'charpai' was and the 'charpai' where the fridge. Not only this, the small wooden dog, with the decorative post in his mouth, standing near the bookrack, could have been placed on the dressing table. There facing one direction he would have looked like a sulking postman, while in the other he would have had the appearance of a barking stray dog. Instead of shoulder length hair, she would have had a close, crew cut like boys and would have been dressed in trousers rather than a 'saree' and her feet would have been in slippers instead of shoes.

So much so, the two black moles near her upper lip could have been replaced by three or even one. Or else if this hadn't been her name, then rather than being a dietician in our navy hospital she might have been born in Europe, and following the hippy cult might have come to our country with her white boyfriend, and loitered around sluggishly, flopping her slippers.

Anything could have gone wrong: Rather than remain simple, she could have been a much married woman. Instead of being Miss. Soft she could have been Miss. Stone. It was as if Soft had protected her against all kinds of ugliness.

The very first day Miss Soft had come to see her apartment in the multi-storied complex, located on the Colaba beach, eyes of more than half the residents were on her. Dressed in a naval uniform to the hilt, Miss. Soft had emerged gracefully from the tortoise like Volkswagen. She had shown neither the enthusiasm nor the wonder

associated with entering into a new place. The driver had walked ahead while Miss. Soft had followed. She had gone up by the lift, inspected the house, and returned by the same lift. Within ten minutes, she was back in her mini car and had left.

And why should she have waited; she had come only to see the place. In any case no matter what the room looked like now she was going to decorate it her own way. Besides, the balcony of the room overlooked the sea, from where she could get a good view of the ships as well as the flags.

By profession Miss. Soft was half a doctor. The doctors would examine the patient and then hand him over to Miss for an estimation of his diet. She had to calculate the patient's diet to the minutest detail and explain it to him. How many calories were there in a banana and how many in mangoes or grapes; which fruit was beneficial or harmful in a particular disease; how to gain or lose weight. She even had knowledge of how particular diets affected the various organs. In fact she had taken care of her own body following these diets.

My wife would station herself in the veranda every morning and evening at the time of Miss. Soft's departure and arrival, to catch a glimpse of her. She was highly impressed by Miss. Soft's uniform and her independent personality. In the evening, she would rush and position herself near the stairs the moment she saw Miss. Soft stepping out of her car.

We lived on the first floor and she on the third. She usually avoided the lift in the evening, probably to maintain good health! Her smile as she would climb up was enough to make my wife's day.

This smile, I realised, was a permanent feature of her face. I wondered how many people's day had been made by this smile! And to tell you more she never smiled more than this. Once an engineer's obese wife, who lived in our barracks, slipped when she saw a mouse. The entire neighbourhood had burst out laughing but Miss. Soft had walked on with the same smile she always had on her face when she walked past my wife positioned next to the stairs of the first floor.

Once a friend of mine, desirous of Miss. Soft's friendship, took some reference from office and went to visit her. While my wife and I were still visualizing how my friend would have greeted Miss. Soft, how she must have returned his greeting with a smile, my friend was already back. Ofcourse she had met him with a smile. Standing in the doorway she had enquired as to where he worked and lived and then she had bid him good bye there itself. Probably, she had asked him to sit, but, her room was so well kept compared to my friend's that he couldn't decide where to sit. As if all the stools and settees were meant only for decoration and not for sitting. My friend was of the view that if anyone ever wished to love her, there would perhaps be a prescribed etiquette and a special manner of doing so.

Miss Soft knew exactly what distance to keep from people. And probably this was the reason that, though not meaning to, she had created a distance between people and herself, and, as a result now led an aloof and independent life. There could have been no other reason why despite her good qualification and a decent job she was still unmarried at thirty.

It wasn't as if she had no social circle. Newlyweds or couples with one or two kids would often visit her. Sometimes a batch mate would pay her a visit, accompanied by his wife or else some friend of Miss Soft, along with her husband and children, would come over. Sometimes a white couple would visit her, perhaps her friends from America. Sometimes a doctor, who was a bachelor and worked in the same hospital, would drop in but always accompanied by someone. In America, during the exams, she and a boy used to study together. One day a professor inquired as to when they were getting married. If merely studying together for ten days could lead to such conclusions in America, then in Indian culture any assumption was possible. Miss Soft decided not to develop intimacy with anyone. So much so that she never even invited anyone alone to her place.

During this time, we developed some intimacy with her. Our maid got her nephew who lived with her, employed as a servant in Miss Soft's house. Now all such news as to who visited Miss Soft, the gifts she received, the alterations she made to the house, even when and how many new utensils she had bought, when did she buy and check a particular record on her Player, would trickle down to us via our maid through her servant.

By and by our children too began to frequent her house. One day, looking for the kids, my wife too entered her house. She met my wife with her customary smile and cheerfulness and even accepted my wife's invitation to visit our home. My wife was extremely happy. Now she would be able to learn more about Miss Soft.

We had no son. Our two daughters were in standard third and standard fifth respectively. My wife would often liken her daughters' future with that of Miss Soft's, her pleasures and travails in life. Not educated enough to pick up a job herself my wife dreamt of educating her daughters to help them experience the same joys and sorrows as Miss Soft.

"An illiterate person is a mere beast, he can have no knowledge of the world", my wife often reflected, as she slid into dreams listening to the pronouncements of the lady Prime Minister of the country at night.

When Miss Soft visited our house my wife was naive enough to ask her several questions. We learnt that she had two brothers; one was a major in the army and the other an engineer. Her Subedar father had died in the second war. She was the eldest. Her mother had educated her and she in turn had educated her younger brothers. Now her brothers were married and her mother was all alone in the village and she was going to bring her.

Our elderly maid would feel very sorry for Miss Soft. She wanted that Miss Soft should like others find a nice boy and settle down with a family. What's there in the life of a single woman, no one to share joys and sorrows with. "If I am alone in the house for two days it starts haunting me", she'd chat up with my wife, who, though her heart cried/moaned, would answer only in monosyllables before lapsing into silence.

"So what if she was alone, atleast she was her own mistress. She did what she wanted to and dressed up as she desired! Tomorrow our daughters too would be like her". My wife was both pleased and saddened by such thoughts. The thought of Miss Soft's loneliness silenced her. What would life be without companions, one must have

someone younger in age, a few elders and some one's own age! People give each other support, and what is life without this support system?

My wife would then be dejected. She yearned to speak to Miss Soft about this but couldn't muster up courage. Why couldn't Miss Soft find a solution to this problem? After all the future of my wife's children was tied to it!

Meanwhile our maid's nephew ran away with two hundred rupees from Miss Soft's house. She had sent him with the money to deposit the telephone bill but he never returned. Miss Soft waited that day and the next day as well. Finally, on the third day, she came to our place.

Hearing the charge, our maid flew into a rage. "You must have scolded him. I wonder where the poor child has run away! We too have learnt about it just now and are quite upset. Don't you dare impose your own shortcomings on the child." Our maid silenced Miss Soft with these words. She went back to her house.

For the first time that day there wasn't a smile on her lips.

My wife sat staring at the horizon, far into the ocean.

Miss Soft had left and so had the maid. There was silence in our house as if the theft had been in our house only. "Let's see what she does" we heard the maid's words as she descended the stairs. Miss Soft had seemed defenceless and the maid so powerful! The expression on Miss Soft's face, as she left our house, loomed before my eyes.

Her face had not been so distraught even when she had been locked out of the house in the middle of the night. She had gone out to put her garbage and had been left stranded outside only in her 'petticoat and blouse'. That day, descending the two flights of stairs in petticoat and blouse, in the middle of the night she had knocked at our door to ask for a saree and on finding me answering at the door, the usual glow of her face had deserted her. And that glow had not returned even after wearing my wife's saree, to go and fetch the duplicate keys from the watchman.

But there was a world of difference between the two incidents. That day, the absence of her smile mingled with bashfulness, had a charm but today it was dead.

Despite best intentions, we were helpless. From the maid's behaviour it appeared that her nephew had stolen the money with full encouragement on her part.

But had we helped Miss we would have lost the goodwill of the maid. She had been with us since our children were infants and had been a foster mother to them. In any case she refused to hear a single word in this matter. It was quite possible that initially she may not have had any intention of siding with the boy, but had relented due to the boy's stubbornness.

Now she roamed around as the incarnation of Goddess 'Chandi' herself. She had decided not to return the money, perhaps believing that Miss Soft could do nothing. One, it was too petty an amount for Miss Soft to raise a din over. Moreover, Miss Soft would remember her insult in our house when she had raised the issue and also that we had not been able to do anything about it.

My wife was even more worried. The future of our daughters was linked to this issue. Of course, all educated young girls did not remain unmarried. Yet the possibility could not be denied. And who knows when and how one pays for one's sins!

For several days neither Miss Soft visited our house nor did we call on her. Our children would bring the news that she was as happy as ever, yet we could not muster enough courage to meet her. We ignored her arrivals and departures for office. When the future of our daughters was not completely clear then what was the point of observing Miss Soft. But for this, I could fathom no other reason for my wife's silence. In fact, she wouldn't even speak to me, as if by not lending the required help in retrieving Miss Soft's money I had not taken care of the future of my wife's daughters.

On the other hand Miss Soft too had become withdrawn-the maid had been proved right. Her husband was a minister's driver. Why would she care for Miss Soft or my wife or my wife's husband! Who cares about people who are weak or have no support...

Such thoughts depressed my wife.

One day the maid entered the room mumbling. "Girls behave like prostitutes these days. Only prostitutes have as many friends as they have." The maid's voice appeared defeated.

We learnt that one day while shopping at the Mahatma Gandhi Road, Miss Soft had met Narendra Patil, her classmate from America, whose brother in law was posted as the DSP in the Colaba Police station. During the conversation she happened to mention the incident of the maid's nephew. The very same day, when Miss Soft reached her flat after watching the night show, our maid's husband- the minister's driver, stood waiting for her, holding two hundred rupees in his hand.

One threat from Narendra Patil had set him right.

My wife noticed that now the defeated maid took ages to climb the stairs to the first floor.

All thanks to her education! How strong were the roots of Miss Soft and for the same reason her contacts were many and powerful!

My wife felt as though Miss Soft was the several-armed Durga who remains untroubled despite the numerous snakes writhing beneath her feet.

"Get up baby, get ready, have breakfast- it's time for school", my wife shook her daughters affectionately to wake them up.

Translated from Punjabi to English by Madhuri Chawla

BIO-NOTE

Madhuri Chawla is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Dyal Singh Evening College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are Gender Studies and Diaspora Studies. She has published research articles in Journals and books, and articles of general interest in leading National Dailies. She also translates from Punjabi to English and has participated in several workshops organized by Sahitya Akademi, British Council and others. She has a book on translation and her translations have been published in various Anthologies and Journals as well. She has also presented Papers at several National and International Conferences.

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