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GAURI

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (Hindi)

Translated by: Dr. Jyotika Elhance (English)

About the author: **Subhadra Kumari Chauhan** (1904—1948) is one of India's most distinguished writers who also participated in the freedom struggle. Some of her popular works are *Jhansi Ki Rani*, *Veeron ka Kaisa Ho Basant*, *Rakhi ki Chunauti*, *Vida*, and *Jallianwala bagh mein Basant*.

It was twilight when Babu Radhakrishan returned home with the porter carrying his luggage on his shoulders. The weary and dejected look on his face and his heavy pace made it amply clear to Kunti that the mission had not been successful. He listlessly helped the porter take down the bedding and paid him some money for his services. As the porter saluted and left, Babu Radhakrishan sat down heavily on the old lounging chair which creaked under his weight. Its springs had probably become loose with use and rubbed against each other. The dog sitting by also flexed his ears and began to bark. When his wife Kunti entered the room, she did not ask him anything about his trip. Instead she coaxed him gently and said, "Come freshen up. Tea is ready."

"Tea? But I didn't asked for tea," Radhakrishan was a little surprised.

"So what if you didn't ask for it. Come and take it." Kunti said cajolingly.

"Alright, let's go," said Radhakrishan and followed his wife into the dining area.

Gauri was in the kitchen busy preparing tea for her father. She was feeling rather sheepish and was avoiding coming face to face with him. She felt responsible for the state that her father was in. She felt as if she's the root cause of all his problems. If she hadn't been there, probably her father would not have had to run from pillar to post looking for a match for her. She wanted to assure him that he shouldn't worry so much about her marriage. She'd be happy to marry anyone that he chose. Even if he isn't able to find someone for her, she won't mind. Gauri wasn't able to understand as to why he was worrying so much when it wasn't bothering her at all. She often used to think, 'am I such a burden on my parents that day and night they think of nothing else but my marriage?' This thought made her feel extremely guilty and helpless. She just wanted the earth to split wide open so that she could just disappear inside.

Gauri, who like a full moon, only knew how to grow more and more with each passing day and knew not how to stall further growth, became a cause of concern for Babu Radhakrishan. Gauri was his only child and he wanted an eligible boy for her. He didn't have enough wealth to give away as dowry. This was the reason that Gauri was in her nineteenth year and was still unmarried. He had showered all his love and attention on his only child since the day she was born. She was the apple of his eyes and he never was able to refuse her anything. She always got whatever she asked for. All her demands got fulfilled and as such she became strong-willed, fearless and adamant by nature. Once she made up her mind no one could get her to change it.

When she saw her father's predicament, many a times it occurred to her to ask him clearly as to why he was so worried about her wedding? She herself doesn't consider

wedding as important or necessary in life. And if he gives so much importance to marriage then how does it matter whether the groom is eligible or not? If he wants to marry her off, let him marry her off with whosoever he wants to. She'd feel contented in every situation. Her only condition is that he should be happy. She cannot bear to see him worrying endlessly. A thousand times over she had resolved to confide her feelings in him but every time her own bashfulness stopped her in her tracks. She felt extremely shy and embarrassed.

Seeing her father approach, Gauri quietly slipped into another room. Babu Radhakrishnan washed his hands and face and sat down rather listlessly on the chair. On the table, by his side Kunti had kept his tea and some *puris*. He just picked up his tea cup and started sipping his tea without even glancing at the *puris*.

Somewhere deep within, Kunti too felt guilty and felt responsible for having given birth to a girl for whom they were unable to find the right match. She asked him a little falteringly, "What happened? Was our proposal not alright for them?"

"Alright? What is left there to be alright?" sipping his tea Babu Radhakrishnan said, "Everything depends on us. If we want our daughter to be married in that family, then also it is alright and if we don't want to, then also nothing is alright."

Kunti wanted to know more, "Then what happened? Did you see the boy?"

"Yes, I did and that too properly!" Radhakrishnan continued sipping his tea.

Kunti could not understand what he meant. She said, "Don't talk in riddles. I can't understand what you are trying to tell me."

Radhakrishnan said, "Alright then listen, I'll explain what I mean. He's a man and not a boy. He would look like an office peon with your Gauri. Would you agree to such a match?"

Kunti said, "About that we'll talk later. But first tell me is he so bad looking? He didn't appear so in his photograph?"

Radhakrishnan said, "It's not the question of looks alone, his living style also is not too good. He is quite advanced in age also. He'd be about thirty-five or thirty-six years of age and is a father of two children too. He wants to marry for the sake of his children. Otherwise he would not even have given it a thought. And besides, this would be his second marriage. As such, there is no excitement or desire left that I see in him towards this alliance. He just wants a foster-mother for his children. He has clearly said that he'd marry only for the sake of his children. But for our daughter it's the first marriage."

"Those who want to go in for second marriage generally talk like this only", Kunti said gravely.

Radhakrishnan said, "No, no. But his man is not a cheat. Whatever is there in his heart gets reflected on his face. His heart is crystal clear. There is absolutely no deception in him. His *khadi kurta*, *Gandhi topi* and tattered slippers make me hesitate. He's only a secretary in the Congress Party office with a meager salary of rupees thirty only. He has been to jail also thrice already and nobody knows when he'd have to go there again."

“He doesn’t seem to be a bad person,” said Kunti.

Radhakrishan said, “I wouldn’t call him a bad person, but he is not the right person for our Gauri and that’s the truth.”

“Then what did you tell him?” asked Kunti.

“What could I have said? He’d be coming over next Sunday. I have invited him to our house. He didn’t want to come at all but after a lot of persuasion he gave in to my request. He said, ‘I would not come to see the girl as I don’t want to insult anyone by doing so.’ Then I convinced him and told him that in this way he could meet the girl and the girl and the girl’s mother also could meet him. Only then did he agree to come.”

Gauri was listening to their conversation from behind the door. The man, about whom her father seemed to be so unsure and apathetic, aroused in Gauri a sense of deep regards without even her realizing it.

Radhakrishan took a betel leaf and retired to the living room, where he started penning letters to his friends and relatives to search for a groom for his daughter.

And then came Sunday when Seetaramji was to come home to see Gauri or to put in other words, he was to come to show himself to her. Radhakrishan had made it very clear that this visit should be kept hush-hush. He didn’t want any outsider to know that someone was coming to see Gauri. As such all the arrangements were made in the inner courtyard. Three-four chairs were put and a small table in the centre on which was spread a clean *khadi* table cover. And in a glass were put several roses which were plucked from their own courtyard, giving the impression of a bouquet. It was a very humble décor. In reality also Seetaramji’s visit didn’t warrant any kind of pretense.

Seetaramji came at the designated time with both his children. They too were very humbly dressed in *khadi kurta* and half-pants. No shoes, no socks, no show-off of any kind. They seemed to be of a happy disposition and started to play around as if they have always known this place. The house seemed to be filled up with their laughter. Kunti sat on one side. For a moment she felt as if her house has turned into children’s play zone. She thought whether the relationship between them materializes or not, she’d be more than happy to look after these children. She got so lost in their innocent babble that for a few seconds she completely forgot about the presence of Seetaramji and the fact that she also had to make a conversation with him. That very moment one of the children came to Seetaramji and stood before him and began to ask, “Babu, you said you’ll get us to meet our mother. Where is our mother?”

Babu laughed and said, “Granny is sitting there. Ask her, she’ll show you your mother.”

“Umh hum...no you show us our mother.”

That very moment they spotted a big white cat which darted across the courtyard and disappeared towards the room. The children forgot everything and ran after it. Gauri was standing behind the door lost in deep thoughts when the children caught her *pallu* and asked her, “Are you our mother?”

Gauri saw the two sweet innocent and healthy looking children. She took the younger one in her lap and said, “Yes”.

The child then asked her, "Will you come to our house? Babu and we have come to take you with us."

Gauri wasn't able to give any reply. She asked, "Would you like to eat some sweets?"

After some time when Kunti came in, she saw that the younger one was sitting in Gauri's lap and the elder one was sitting next to her. They were busy eating sweets. She breathed a small sigh and went out again. A little while later when Gauri looked up she found her parents looking at her affectionately. They asked her, "Come outside, won't you?"

Gauri didn't reply anything. She quietly got up, washed the children's faces and gave them some water to drink and then followed her parents into the courtyard where Seetaramji was sitting. Children were still hanging around her. They didn't want to leave her even for a second. With lot of efforts Seetaramji cajoled them to sit with him but at the first opportunity both of them left his side and sat next to Gauri. They had to register a lot of complaints against their father which they could not have done sitting near him.

"Babu never buys us any toys", the younger one stuttered.

And the elder one joined in, "he does not even give us sweets."

The younger one again said, "And he leaves us and goes to office and does not even come home the entire day. Babu is not good."

The elder one caught Gauri's *pallu* again and said, "Mother, you are coming with us, aren't you? Or we'll also stay here only."

Everyone was enjoying their innocent prattle when Kunti said smilingly, "Why don't both of you stay here only and let Babu go, Okay?"

Seetaramji said, "It's getting late. If we don't leave now, we'll miss the evening train." Then looking towards Babu Radhakrishnan, he said, "It was a pleasure meeting you. Your daughter is Lakshmi. I knew she'd be a *devi*, when I met you. And that's precisely the reason I didn't want to come to see her." After a little while, he again said, "I don't require a wife as much as I require a mother for my children. My life is so uncertain and unpredictable. Today I'm outside; tomorrow I might be in jail. Apart from me there is no one else who can look after them. It's only after a lot of thought that I've been able to convince myself to get married again. Otherwise imagine, getting married at this age?" and he began to chuckle at himself.

Radhakrishnan murmured to himself, would my daughter become a foster mother to these children? Kunti thought, any woman would be able to make her life really worthwhile by bringing up these children. Gauri, on the other hand, was greatly impressed with his nobility. She silently expressed her regards for him in her own mind and threw an affectionate glance at the children. It was as if her glance was saying that I would rather become a mother to these children than become a wife to a man whose life is steeped luxury and abundance.

When children saw that their father was ready to leave, they held Gauri even more tightly. Even if Radhakrishnan would have remotely suggested to him to leave the children and go, Seetaram would have gladly left them behind without any

apprehensions. But when there was no such suggestion from his side, with great efforts he had to lure the children with promises of cinema, circus and sweets to take them away with him. As he was leaving Seetaramji was completely convinced that it was just a matter of time for their marriage to materialize. The only thing that was left to be finalized was the marriage date.

Seetaramji waited for the letter that would convey to him the final auspicious date of his marriage to Gauri.

He was also aware of the rough times that the country was passing through and the repressive attitude of the British government. Besides, Mahatma Gandhi's speech also hinted at a strong likelihood of the intensification of the '*satyagrah movement*' in near future.

He himself didn't know when he would get taken as a prisoner and put behind bars. Last time when he was jailed, his old aunt was there to look after the children, but now she also is no more. Who would now look after them? Would the old *kaharin* be able to look after them? He was really anxious about their well-being. And they also have been constantly asking for their own mother. He again wrote a letter to Radhakrishan Babu requesting him to fix the marriage date as soon as possible.

Radhakrishan had decided something else for his daughter. In reply to Seetaramji's letter he wrote that Gauri's mother is very traditional minded and that she would not proceed further unless the horoscopes of the bride and groom match. And as such, he asked him to send his horoscope. When Seetaram read the letter, it did not take him much time to understand that this request is nothing but an excuse of saying 'no' to marriage. But still he sent it immediately. And he was right, within a few days he received a letter apologizing and saying that the horoscopes did not match and that it was not possible to proceed ahead with marriage.

Babu Radhakrishan had found another match for Gauri whom he considered to be more eligible. It wasn't that he was wealthier than Seetaram, but he had recently been appointed as *Nayab Tahsildar* (Assistant to District Revenue Officer) and the chances of promotion also were much better. He had done his B.A. and he wasn't much advanced in age also. He would be around twenty-four or twenty-five. He wasn't very good looking; in fact, he was rather ugly to look at. But who looks for beauty in menfolk? Here also there was no demand for dowry. Moreover, it was his first marriage too and he had a full-fledged family with parents and siblings. Radhakrishan didn't want anything more than this. He thanked the Almighty because of whose blessings he was able to find a suitable match for his Gauri.

The wedding date was fixed for the coming *aashad* (June-July). Both the parties got busy in wedding preparations. Gauri was Radhakrishan's only daughter. So he bought clothes for her with lot of enthusiasm. So what if there was a slight delay in her alliance but he had been successful in finding the right match for her. Kunti also was extremely excited with it. She had even started visualizing her daughter and son-in-law with their small children coming home to meet her. But whenever she dreamt of children, she got reminded of Seetaramji's children. There was no one to look after them. Then she used to think... Uumh....so what can I do? My daughter is not the only girl left for him to marry. There are others too that he can find in this world.

Both the husband and the wife were very pleased with their new choice of groom, but none of them had any idea as to what was it that Gauri wanted. She was in deep dilemma. She could not forget the sweet faces and innocent talks of children nor could she forget the simple, unassuming and considerate expression on Seetaramji's face. He was gentility and humility personified. Remembering his persona, Gauri's forehead inadvertently bent down in respect. She had a lot of regards for all the brave-hearted freedom fighters for whom the nation always came first. Seetaramji also had sacrificed his life for the nation; otherwise wouldn't he also have completed his graduation and got the job of *Nayab Tahsildar*? Why would he not have got it? But Seetaramji was not the kind of person who would be content to remain a slave to the British.

On the other hand her prospective groom was a complete contrast. He was a kind of a person who, for his own pleasure and comfort, would not have hesitated or shied away in razing the necks of his own country-men at the slightest behest of the British government. He would not think twice before doing the most despicable of works for a petty gain of a few silver coins. Gauri's heart was filled with hatred to the very core but who would understand her feelings? She suffered day in and day out and wanted to share her anguish with her mother. She didn't want to marry the *Nayab Tahsildar*. But once again she could not do so. She felt extremely shy and embarrassed to talk about her own marriage and expectations. As the marriage day drew nearer she became more and more tense.

A fortnight before marriage came a telegram stating that the groom's father had passed away and that the marriage would have to be necessarily postponed for a year. Gauri's parents got rather upset with the news but Gauri felt very relieved. She felt as if a big load has been taken off her head.

Meanwhile the entire nation was under the grip of non-violence movement and there were arrests on mass scale. Hundreds got imprisoned on a daily basis and there were no trials too. The Government had imposed Section 144 and had resorted to indiscriminate *laathi-charge*. The repressive measures were in full swing. Gauri was very worried about the children ever since the movement had gained momentum. She was worried about Seetaramji also as to when he'd be put behind bars. Who would look after poor children? Everyday she'd scan the newspaper intently. In fact she'd be extra attentive towards any news about Kanpur. And one day she did read about him being imprisoned under the charges of sedition. He was sentenced to one year of rigorous imprisonment. For a few seconds Gauri was completely taken aback. She then decided to do what she thought was correct. Gathering all her courage she went to her mother and said decisively, "Mother, I'm leaving for Kanpur."

"What's there in Kanpur?" asked her mother.

"The children are there", she replied.

"Children! What do you mean? Have you lost your senses?"

Gauri said, "No, mother, I have not. I'm not insane. You also know the children. They are still small and their father has been sent to one year of rigorous imprisonment. I'll go mother. I have to go."

Kunti was very well aware of Gauri's nature. She knew that if she has decided on something, no one or nothing can make her budge from the decision. She realized the futility of dissuading her and instead said, "but let your Babuji come back home."

"Mother, I won't be able to wait till then, it would get late. And I know I'd be able to manage. Now I'm a big girl."

And the same evening she left for Kanpur with her servant.

Seetaramji returned home after serving his sentence. He had not seen his children even once in the entire year. As per rules he did get news about their well-being every month but he still used to worry about them. He had left them with *kaharin* who herself had three-four children. He knew very well that it wasn't easy for her to take care of his children, but he was helpless. He couldn't do anything much about this situation.

Early morning at six o'clock he was released from the prison. He boarded a *tonga* and started towards home. He had some money in his pocket. He stopped at a sweetshop and purchased some fresh and hot *jalebis*. The door of his house was slightly ajar. His heart was beating very fast. He wasn't sure in what condition he'd find his children. He quietly entered his house but what was it that he saw? He just stood there spellbound. Then took a few steps towards her and said, "You?"

Gauri bent down and took the dust from his feet and put it on her forehead.

BIO-NOTE

Dr. Jyotika Elhance is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Vivekananda College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are Indian Literature and Translation Studies. She has been actively involved in various academic pursuits, including translation of Rajasthani Literature into English. One of her translated works, *Jaajam*, (original story by Jagdish Chandra Mathur) has been awarded a Consolation Prize in the *Golden Jubilee Literary Translation Competition* organized by Sahitya Akademi. She has also translated Chetan Swami's award winning book, *Kasturi Mrig* into English which has been published by Sahitya Akademi.

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