

A Malayalam Short Story written by **S.K. Prathap**
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The Labour Room

The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. - Karl Marx

Dust, darkness, and cobwebs seemed to have invaded the rooms of the ancestral house leaving them in a state of deterioration. The patio was draped with wild shrubs, thickets and the thumba plants that had lined like troops.

Thara had come down from Delhi with Ashwin to look into the sale of Ashwin's ancestral house.

The property would be entitled to the new owner the very next day. The inheritors in the family had all reached set to sign the concerned documents at the Registrar's Office. They had all camped at a hotel in the city.

Ashwin had initially objected to Thara's journey to Kerala as she was pregnant. But Thara was firm. She was eager to see a typical Keralite ancestral house- a house that was more than a hundred years old. Once the property is sold it would never be possible for her to see a typical ancestral house ever again.

It was in fact Ashwin's mother who had evoked interest in her to see it. And it was through her that Thara had learnt first that they owned such a house in Kerala. She had also learnt for the first time in her life the existence of an exclusive labor room in the house just meant for pregnant women. The very idea that in the old times deliveries were conducted at home was in itself a surprising piece of information for Thara.

That was the reason why she had asked Shankaran Pillai to show her the labour room first before anything else. Ashwin's mother had told her that the orphaned Shankaran Pillai was Madhavettan's "all in all". After a Paralytic attack Shankran Pillai's fingers had curled together in a bunch and he dragged his feet as he walked. He hinted to her about the dilapidated condition of the house. "It's now a year since I've been ill. Till then I myself had taken care of the maintenance of Madhavettan's ancestral home." Thara did not find out who Madhavettan was. She recalled that Ashwin's grandfather's name was Madhavan Nair. Crossing over the southern footpath Thara made it around the entrance of the room on the western quarter and as she climbed down to reach the rear courtyard of the house the sight of the scintillating potent blue waters of the Ashtamudi lake made her gasp for breath.

"Look dear. This is the labour room" uttered Shankaran Pillai as he opened its doors with a huge brass key. There was the enthusiasm of a governor of a heritage building in his voice, as he opened it to let Thara see its interiors.

"Why do you have to lock it?" asked Thara.

"This is the only door of the labour room that opens into the courtyard. Then how could it be locked from inside?"

That was true. It hadn't struck Thara.

In the far rear corner of the compound near an empty cowshed it stood a small room that seemed to have suffered the curse of neglect. The entrance was hardly about three feet.

The cool gentle breeze that rose from the lake seemed to tickle Thara's nape. Ashwin often did that to her. She half expected Ashwin and turned around to find only a view of the lake. There she saw two boats moving leisurely in two opposite directions.

"This is my dream house too" Shankaran Pillai said as he bowed his head to enter the low threshold of the labour room. For Thara who followed him into the house his words that echoed her own thoughts drew her heart closer to him.

As Thara stood looking ahead of her from the darkness inside she caught a glimpse of the lake shimmering in the heat between a coconut grove and areca nut trees.

With old, shivering hands Shankaran Pillai lit a candle.

"Take a good look my child. Won't things be all over today."

Thara studied an isolated room. It was fairly large enough to be a bathroom. Then, in the faint rays of the yellow sun that seeped in, Thara sharpened her ears for the first strains of the new borns' of the age-old labour room. Her eyes intently searched the dark floor for those stains that might have oozed out of wombs.

At that instance, the life inside her womb braved a jerk and her stomach swelled instantly below her naval. As she writhed in pain she uttered to herself in silence: "Son, don't hurt your mom."

"Look, did you see that?"

Shankaran Pillai had his fingers pointed to the ceiling. As she looked up Thara noticed an iron ring that hung up there.

"That is a secret entrance to the loft. That was our shelter. Where else could you find a more secure place as this- as secure as the womb?"

"Shelter?"

"The police conducted an intense raid to identify those who were associated with the 'Sooranad' ¹ communists and in order to flush them out completely from their hide-outs. They assaulted and killed indiscreetly even those who did not have an inkling of an idea of the existence of such a group. But we did not yield to that. We needed to hold on in order to create a new world. Madhavettan agreed to keep us under cover here. Just over a night we swam across the lake and reached here.

Shankaran Pillai grew emotional.

"Let's go." Thara said.

He did not hear her. He had crossed the threshold and had already gone into the inner abyss of a world that was alien to Thara.

"Madhavettan knew that the police were heading for us here. Ah, what a man was Madhavettan indeed!"

Shakaran Pillai seemed to envision some kind of a God before him.

"Would you ever imagine child, what trickery he adopted to ward off the police-raid? He summoned his wife right here, who was at her full term of pregnancy, I still remember that day so clearly for I watched from the loft, she was laid here. Kaarthi, the aged mid-wife, was also summoned...."

"Who would believe such a story. Chettathi got into labor exactly at that very instance. Madhavettan, Govindan, Raghavan and I- all had coiled ourselves into the loft up there bearing witness to the cries of a true and live creation of life.

Shakaran Pillai swooned into a spell of silence as though he had forgotten some nuances of the story. In the stillness that prevailed Thara could hear only the sound of the breeze gripping hard against the leaves.

"I am not sure if the police that had entered breaking open these doors were stunned by the sight of a laboring woman. Perhaps even that could have served as a kind of entertainment for T.K's ² 'hunting-dogs like henchmen'. But the thundering alarm that the old hag Kaarthi raised could have easily felled a mighty oak and that did put them in their place for then they couldn't but leave the place.

Shakaran Pillai seemed to be oblivious to her proximity. He squatted on the floor and continued to murmur. "Let's go", she said to him twice yet he hadn't heard her at all.

Intrigued, Thara stepped out into the dense thicketed pathway and began to quest after those memories of which she was never a part.

The memories prolonged in her imagination and lingered on even as she cozily rested her head on Ashwin's chest and slept with her leg entangled in his, in the privacy of the hotel room that night.

Early next morning, all the relatives along with the document-writer had gathered at the porch of the house. They were there to take a final look at the house and also to kill time until the final registration began.

"Tried to fix it for seventy lakhs. Didn't work. Didn't want to stretch things too far. Fixed it for sixty five."

"It's our luck that the buyers are Dubaiites. Who else, in this town, could entirely afford to buy such a huge property at a single go?"

"Now that Dad is no more there is no point I say in keeping it simply without any use."

"True. Now nobody lives here any longer who belong to the category called relatives. Dad's relatives have sold out everything and have all left the place long back. The properties of most of the Hindus who lived in this area are not theirs anymore."

"In this, our case is indeed a fine example to others. Right from the beginning we had decided to sell the property only to the Hindus. Dad too before his death had expressed such a desire that if the house is to be given away it should be sold only to the Hindus. Honestly speaking, that came as a surprise. He was supposed to be a staunch communist you see. Atheist."

"Secularist."

"The malayalees down south here accuse us malayalees in the north for

being a little too passionate about Hindutva. That is why when Dad (as a South Indian) said such a thing we were taken by surprise.”

“Though Dad had given up politics no sooner than the party was bifurcated yet until his death his thoughts and readings were quite communist-spirited. Wasn't it for 'Gramsci's Prison Notebooks' that he was pleading for even while he was admitted to the I.C. U.”

“Shankarettan had told us once that a week before grandpa's death he had lit lamps with his own hands at the feet of the serpent-deity.”

“Ha ha. A hard core spirited communist had finally shredded all his pretensions towards his death and had come clear.”

“Anyway, I don't think the new owners would remove the serpent temple and its deity. If it's a heritage home they are going to convert this into, then retaining them would be apt to give it a traditional ambience. Even if they demolish the house the materials could still be used for some design or the other and would still remain here and there. People say that the labour room at the backyard is an apt piece for a typical bar if one side of the room is opened up...”

Thus as they killed time the document-writer reminded them of the time that sped past.

“It is Rahu Kaalam from 10.30. Let us not delay anymore. The buyers must have reached by now.”

It was only when they got into the vehicle that waited to take them to the Registrar's office that Ashwin noticed Thara missing in their midst.

“But where's Thara? Thara, Thara...”

They began to search for Thara.

In fact, it was some undecipherable agony that urged Thara to take a look around the house for just one more time.

The heavy double wooden doors of the labour room that were once guarded by the slavish midwives were closed. Thara shuddered at the thought of the possibility of the phantoms of agony that haunt the place rising up to face her directly and pointing out an accusing finger at her about the past.

When the painful groans of the laboring women seemed to reach her from behind the closed doors she was urged to push them open. They opened with a creaking noise. The faint sunlight that lingered on the river bank hesitantly leapt forth into the house and vanished. Sheer darkness filled the house.

Gradually, the vague outline of two benumbed feet slowly unraveled themselves before her along with the clogged odour that filled the air inside. Their toes were curled stiff together in a bunch. She saw Shankaran Pillai's body hanging from the roof like a mummy in a museum. Blood seemed to have fallen drop by drop on the floor from the sharp pointed big toe. The feet seemed as though they were rooted to the ground. As Thara's eyes moved up the bare legs they were caught for a brief while at the sight of the benumbed lifelessness of its private part. She felt a strange revelation run through her like the sparks of black stars across a stretch of white sky.

But now, Kuttiamma the first imprint of the progeny of the Padichigal

lineage, Paarukutty who bore the sons of the family and Kaarthiyayini held their hands tight over the fruit of the wombs.

No. You'll not scream. The new creation that is going to embrace the worldly life outside finds its haven only in the silence of this labour room.

Look at those dark clouds up there. Can't you see our comrades holding their heads bent between their knees like foetae that have been forced to annul the so-called truths engraved on them with the charge of lathis and guns?

Don't you hear the sonorous clamor of the boot-legged men at the serpent-deity's threshold, across the fields, in the impoverished huts of the untouchables, in the endless stretches of the thumba gardens, Hush. Suppress your writhing pain.

Thara saw everything. She heard everything.

At that very instance of revelation, her visions of mid-wives and the laboring women who were accustomed to stifling their cries- each withdrew cautiously and purposefully into her own respective cocoons. The disgrace about birth is the notoriety of Death. And in here, births are often the obnoxious discharge of sin. The placentae that were cast away hung suspended on the branches of the "seelandhi trees"* like ruthless devils, scorching in the heat. Until they were reduced into dust they would be forced to dangle there fathoming the immeasurable sins that lay enfolded in the historical labour room renowned for its lineage and inimitable deliveries.

Thus, in the deciphering of the details of Shankaran Pillai's end Thara was left all alone in the labour room..

References :

1. A Police clampdown of Sooranad Communists in Kollam District on the 31st Dec 1948 following the deaths of a few Police men caused by Communists invasion.
2. T.K. Narayana Pillai, Chief Minister of Travancore

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