

ISSN: 0976-8165

Vol.8, Issue-V (October 2017)

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

8th Year of Open Access

The Criterion 

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Artist of the Brick Kiln

(Short Story by Gayatri Saraf: Translated from Odia by Dr.Chittaranjan Misra)

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Nuakhai festivities came to an end.

And then they started packing their luggage before heading towards Kantabanjhi Railway Station. Things followed like boarding the train, having popped rice, roasted peanut and *singda* from vendors. Scenes were crowded by bustle, police, crooks and agents until they were hustled out of the train to find an alien place. After a journey of two days and two nights. From there huddled in a truck they were led to the brick kiln. Babu, a boy of twelve and half years got down from the truck. He shook his new shirt and trousers to remove the dust. He was amazed by the sight of the new place. What a big place? "Oh father" he uttered automatically. The place was as big as their village. Everywhere was full of bricks and bricks. The bricks were either stacked or let on the ground to dry. It seemed to be a jungle of bricks. Babu was a little surprised. Are they bricks or anything else? They look so white. He never had seen such bricks. He drew close to his mother and asked her about that. But what could Bhumisuta, his mother explain to him? She herself was amazed of the sight. So he asked his father.

Kartika was Babu's father. He was a farmer in the past. Repeated draught brought an end to his farming. There was no job available. The piece of land had to be mortgaged. Even though he managed to work under the governmental employment scheme the wages were not available. As a consequence he had to come to the brick Kiln. He came with his wife and son as a *dadan*. The middleman had given him fifteen thousand rupees in advance. That made his way to this kiln. Close to this fire of helplessness. Tying the loosened knot of his dhoti tight he listened to his son. He had an idea that his son was very intelligent. He looked at his son and said, "the broker was telling that they use ash and lime and mix some other things to make brick in this kiln. Now a days in some kilns such ash bricks are being made. That is the reason why these bricks look so white."

"O... I see... from the ash of our kitchen oven such bricks are produced?" He was surprised.

"Not from the ash of our kitchen oven, you stupid! There are huge furnaces in factories. They get plenty of ash from there. If the ash is left to fly it will not be good. So they use ash in making bricks- you understand?"

Babu nodded his head: Yes.

Bhumisuta was a bit confused hearing this. She asked - "Do you know how these ash bricks are made?"

"Why are you getting afraid? We are new people. The contractor will explain to us all about that. Alright, let us walk. Come with all the baggage. Contractor is calling us to show us where we are going to stay. We'll build our house there."

The three of them joined a group of people. The contractor showed them the place. He said, 'Build your respective huts here. Beyond the furnace over there you see, walk a little further and then take a right turn. There is a market place for migrant workers. There all the house building and food materials are available. Go fetch your requirements spending from the advance money you have received. Build up your *gudsi*. Cook your rice and *pakhal*. Eat. Come by sunset near the furnace to register your presence by groups.

The brick kiln was yet to be heated by the sun. There was still a little time left.

Even then the contractor wore his dark glasses. Assuming air of superiority he left the place.

Bhumisuta kept watching the luggage.

Babu accompanied his father to the market place. He saw rows of shops there. Things like huge sheets of polythene, *kerpal*, bamboos, and dry palm leaf etc. were there for sale. Items related to cooking and many other things were available. There were two or more medicine shops. But everything was expensive. Added to that the shopkeepers were rude dismissive while speaking to them. They looked down upon the buyers. They called the buyers names and treated them like dirt. Their insulting way hurt Babu. What if they are migrant labourers. They too are like other human beings. They too deserve respect and dignity. He wanted to speak out what he felt:

"We are *dadan*. You profit only because we have come to work. You earn because we are here. The owner of the brick kiln is minting money only because we are building bricks. You should rather respect us. Yes."

But he did not say anything to anybody. He knew they won't change, nor their manner of talking would if he spoke to any of them. The migrants are no human beings in their eyes.

Both returned buying the building materials for their *gudsi*.

A house was built with a roof made of poly sheets overhead. On the sides were walls of *kerpal*. The luggage were unpacked. Mother and son put things in place. Babu said, "this is our house for the next six months." He looked at the house from outside and then from inside. He remembered their cement and tiles house at their native left behind a long distance. Stove started burning in that six month spanned house. Rice was cooked. The aroma filled the air. This kiln keeps burning not for anything but this regular aroma. He mouthed the address with expert memory: Andhra Pradesh, Ranga Reddy District, Subba Rao Brick Kiln of Potivilla village.

Rice was served hot and steaming. Each was given half a lemon and one chili pod.

Tears drops started oozing from eyes. They have left their village behind... the ponds and water, market place, deities ... friends and relatives, family and clan. Oh! What a distance. Miles away when can they ever meet them?

Babu wiped his tears in his left hand. Putting a morsel of rice into his mouth he said, "I thought there could be plenty of mud and clay here as there is a brick kiln and I could fashion mud toys in addition to bricks.

Hands of Bhumisuta and Kartik suddenly froze inside the rice bowl. Both looked at each other. Both knew how their son went to school, but his mind was not in studies but on the soil. He had an excessive fondness for mud. If he would find a lump of clay then he would knead the mass to build something. Be it a swan, a pigeon, hen, elephant, house, *ganesh* or *saraswati*. Nobody has taught him that. He did it by himself. He would paint them. The art teacher of the school had said, Babu could be a great sculptor given a chance. Kartik would wear a futile laugh. He knew his son is from a village, a poor family. If there is work there is food. Or else there is stark starvation.

And now things came to such a consequence that instead of a sculptor he became a *dadan*. They wouldn't have brought him here but how could he live alone in the village? That apart unless they are three they would not be a treated as a group to work as stone mason.

Father.... Oh Mother!, what are you thinking of ? About the village? About the loan? Don't think of anything. I am there. We would build plenty of bricks. Six months would pass very soon. We would return to our village again free our land and start farming."

Bhumisuta and Kartika felt relieved being restored to their faith. They took rice into their mouths and looked pleased. They got back new confidence. Let Babu's words come true. Both thought silently.

It became afternoon.

Night descended. It was a heated night of the brick Kiln. Babu was in deep sleep. But his parents would hear the sound of the night. The shrill screeching of insects, the howling of animals, the clinking of glass bottles, a moaning voice partly understandable were audible. Bhumisuta drew close to the body of Kartik and wept. Kartik put his hands on her back. She is the festive *dalkhai* song of his summer, rain and winter.

Night came to its end. Morning broke - a morning to work and earn bread by the sweat of one's brow.

Babu reached the work field with his parents. Myriad of ash hills big and small configured the space. There were mounds of stone dust and lime dust. Babu looked at the hills of ash and

thought; if there would be strong wind then ashes would fly and enter the eyes and ears of people. How can people work in such a situation? Now their turn is approaching. They too would inhale air filled with ash. Their bodies will be smeared in ash. This is really a bad thing. But why should the owner think of the health of these bonded labourers? He wants the work done.

Babu had an eye on everything. He observed so many masons with so many tools like baskets, shovels, pickaxe, and brick moulds. They will build their assigned number of bricks, dry them, stack them and count them. He was for a moment filled with a sense of enthusiasm. He too would build bricks. He would be first excelling others. His father brought all the tools of their group like shovels, baskets and other things used for making bricks. By that time a dark, fat man with mustache was rushing towards them. He was wearing a white *lungi* and a shirt. People talked among themselves - he is the owner, the master of the kiln - Subba Rao. His eyes were burning red as the kiln fire. Seeing him Babu went near his father. Two men who accompanied him instructed the workers about how the ash bricks would be built. How much lime would be mixed with how much of ash, what amount of powdered stone, plaster of paris and water would be mixed, how they would be rolled onto the moulds and left to be dried, and when the same would be dried upside down - everything with demonstration. Babu saw and learnt with focus. He said to himself - The intelligence required for building an image is superior to what is required in building bricks. He could be able to build bricks with quick pace.

Afterwards both the men explained the rules and regulation of the brick kiln.

The first rule was nothing but work. No cheating will be tolerated and will be dealt with severely. Among other rules was this - the workers will pay off the *khaeri*, the advance amount first. Then only they will get their wages. The master will not be responsible for the illness of the workers. Everybody should work for the length of months as per his contract come what may. If anybody wants to go away from the kiln he will be beaten to the point of being lame. Everyone listened. Babu too listened. At that time a gush of wind blew from the East. It slapped Babu's innocent face. He felt as if his face burnt. He craved for a soothing breeze. But that kind of breeze is a dream here. Two furnaces were aflame.

Curls of dark smoke of sorrows were rising up. Thousands of simple, innocent souls crowded the place. Subba Rao's kiln vibrated with activities. There were a number of adolescents of Babu's age. They were all away from books, pens and papers, away from the claims of adolescence. They will be engaged in work for low wage without protest.

Now Babu is into work.

He was bringing ash from a distance like gathering dreams. His parents are mixing ash and lime like building destiny. As a mother Bhumisuta was disturbed. She could not bear the site of sweat streaming from the body of her child. He was her only child, like lace of her neck, like the dark *Kanhu*, the spoilt child. Again and again she was wiping the sweat from his son's body. She was feeding him biscuits. Kartik was amused to watch this. *Munsi*, contractor and the master kept

coming on their rounds in the middle of their work. They were scrutinizing the progress. They were talking in Odia mixed with Telugu. They had some Odia expletives to throw at the workers which were at the tip of their tongue. They uttered those slang words repeatedly. Babu felt very bad but he was focusing on work. While mixing lime, ash and stone dust he was thinking of one thing. He will build elephant and horse out of this mix but not the image of Manorama. That needs earthen clay. Earth is after all earth. Its colour is different. Its smell is different. While thinking like this he often felt a girl going past him with soft footsteps like that of Goddess Laxmi. Who could be she ... Manorama ? He would ask his father: Did Manorama come?

In a peculiar voice he would ask his father. Kartik perceives the dream and desire of his twelve and half years old son. He gets scared. The dream concealed in his eyes is not the right dream. He chides him: Are you mad? She is the daughter of the *sarapancha* of the village- why should she come here? The daughters of big people are very proud. They don't come near the poor.'

'You don't know father. Manorama is not a girl of that type. She knows I am poor, yet she comes to be my friend. She has told me to build for her model image. I said to her that images of living people are not built. But she did not agree. She said I don't know those things. I need a image.'

His mother too grew unmindful hearing that. Her hands stopped. But the air from the blazing fire did not. She was bit irritated and said 'leave the idea of building images. We have come to build bricks. Do that. We have to make a large number of bricks.'

If silenced Babu. But his mind was not. His eyes and thoughts were not silent. They were seeking earth. At the end of the day when his parents returned from work site he said, you go. I'll return after a round."

The electric light from Gotivilla village was visible from the distance.

The brick-kiln was glowing with blazing flames.

A ray of glow was in Babu's smiling face by the time he returned to the *gudsi*. Rice was boiling. Parents were in the middle of a conversation. He came and sat in their middle. He took a biscuit from the hand of his mother and happily announced: Father! There is plenty of ash available here. I discovered a huge earthen mound. I don't understand why the boss is making bricks of ash while earth is available around.

"In a business, the businessman looks for his profit son. In making this kind of bricks, the expenses are less, profit is more. It also does not break easily. One does not need to soak them in water while building a house. That apart intelligent people think of new advantages all the time."

Babu said to himself, why these intelligent people do not think of the poor, poor of their kind. For the want of employment they are compelled to migrate as labourers. Why the rich do not think of their problems, why these people have to suffer so much. After having food Babu drank

water and said; "I'll build Manorama's image in that earth." How could he know how time and destiny were laughing at his words!

It's the last day of the work.

Babu was busy stalking and counting the bricks. But always the calculation went wrong. His focus was on the mound of earth. His father had already warned him that the mound belonged to the master. A worker has no right to touch it. But he was disturbed. The mound was calling him as it were. How can an artist evade that call? He left counting and moved ahead. He reached the mound of the earth. There was nobody around. He sat down there like sitting on the lap of mother. His body was charged. He always feels charged while touching the earth. Why he gets this feeling, he thought. He swam through his thoughts.

'Hey you boy!'

The voice was so loud and hoarse that it seemed to be like thunderstorm to his ears. He was bit shaken. A shiver ran down his whole body. Flakes of earth fell down from his fist. The lord of the kiln Subba Rao was running at him. He pulled Babu's hands and burst into a shout that was a mix of Telugu and Odia.

"Why are you here leaving your duties? Stealing earth? You thief..." Babu was hurt. How could he be called a thief? He protested. He said, I just had held the earth, I'm not a thief."

"But why should you? Does this mound belong to your father? Does this earth belong to your native?"

Don't tell anything against my father and my place. I am fond of earth. I have a liking for building idols and images."

"See the taste of this migrant labourer boy?" He laughed out loud. "First repay the cash advance your father has taken. Or else I'll shatter all your zest. Do you know who I am?" Babu's blood started boiling. He too replied with slightly loud assertion: Yes - yes I know. I know how much damage you can do."

"What did you say? You shirker! You ungrateful.... this is my earth.... If you come to this spot again..."

"Earth does not belong to a single fellow. It belongs to all."

"Shut up you dirty boy". He slapped Babu heavily on both his cheeks. His cheeks reddened. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He started weeping panting. He returned to his parents. Both the father and mother felt something rending their hearts with pain. How can the master beat up their child? But they knew to what extent the master could go. All protests are fruitless in such cases. Everybody knows.

Some days elapsed.

Babu saw some children playing cricket at the far end of the kiln field. He had a strong liking for the game. In his village too cricket is popular. He thought of going near and watching the game. The contractor was on a round at that time taking stock of the work. There was another man with him. They were looking at the players and talking about the game. "Look how our Subba Rao's son is bowling. He has a strong liking for that." The words pierced into Babu's heart. He wiped his cheeks and thought - because he is the son of the master he can have the luxury of playing his fond game cricket. But he is a poor boy, he has come here to work as a migrant worker, and so cannot do what he likes to do. All pleasures are meant for the sons of the rich - not for the poor? Who has framed such rules? He asked. He asked gazing at the sky. He felt like snatching the ball away from the hands of the master's son. But angrily he kicked the mound of ash and lime.

Days passed. Months elapsed.

Babu became a familiar face in the kiln area. He started building more bricks with his parents in less time. He listened to the music of popular numbers coming from the mobile phone of the contractor. He made tiny idols out of the remnant mix of ash and lime and gifted them to his friends there. In spite of the refusal of his parents he visited the earthen mound. He sat, slept and spent time there. He thought of Manorama's eyes, nose, ears and forehead. How can he create her face? Her eyes? *Munsi* started driving him out of the place whenever he caught him there. But he grew somewhat defiant. His father suffered from cough working with lime and ash. He started gasping for breath. Babu gently stroked his father's back and chest and said, "Don't work anymore father. Take rest. We have already cleared our debt. Money has come to our hands." But Kartik would not sit. A migrant worker cannot afford to sit in a work place like the kiln. Come what may he has to work. He has to walk on fire.

Babu's parents were continuing working. One day Babu had a dream. In the dream Manorama had worn a red frock. She asked him, "have you built my image?" Babu replied mournfully, "No, I couldn't. A migrant labourer's child cannot do anything on his own. He is sold out to the owner of the kiln." "You too?" - Manorama asked. Before he replied the dream broke. He felt very bad. What would he do? How could he build Manorama's image?

Earth...earth... His eagerness pervaded everywhere of the kiln. Fire surged intensely. The colour of bricks changed. Life revealed its myriad manifestations on the mound of earth. Babu was tormented. He could not focus on brick building. His focus was lying on the earth of the mound. He imagined shaping the earth. Manorama has told him in his dream. What would she think if he failed to carve out her image? Poor Babu...

Babu.... Oh Babu !

From now on the voice was audible every day. Who is there! Babu enquired looking here and there. Nobody was there. He carried the load of lime and ash. He dried the raw bricks. He rotated

the bottom surfaces upwards intermittently. But, one day he was in a trance as if he was possessed by a spirit. He left working. Carrying a pot of water he headed at the earth mound. Probably the mysterious voice was coming from there. "I have come....." he said. He gathered earth cakes and kept them at a place. He cleared all pebbles and stones from the stuff. He soaked the earth with water. Again he said: "Look how the shaping starts from today." But time and destiny laughed again at him fiercely.

They conversed, "Poor child, he doesn't know how making and breaking are not in hands of anyone on earth."

The same roar was audible - the familiar loud cry of Subba Rao. He had allegations against Babu, his building images, his persuading the labourers that the owner is a man like anybody, his question: "Why do you call him 'Lord'?" He knew of how Babu was speaking about the owner as cheating the workers in calculations of wages; how he was shirking work and playing with mud. In both his eyes were burning the fire of the kiln oven. How dare Babu? Babu's trance disappeared immediately hearing the roar. He stood straight and looked at his face and said, spare me just a day. Another day I'll build bricks for you free. Give me some clay of earth. I'll build images today.

Subba Rao's anger doubled. He is the emperor of the kiln. And a mere child of a migrant labourer is dictating terms of trade with him? The fire of the kiln oven burnt more fiercely. He cried, "you wicked boy, you ungrateful ... you are instigating people against me and asking me for earth ? Are you such a great mason that you have embarked upon building effigies?"

Babu's mind however small too was ignited. Burnt with the flame he too spoke out, "just like your son who is playing cricket, I'm fond of building effigies. It's same. Are you preventing your child play his fond game?"

The oven of the kiln was all aflame.

Fire was there everywhere.

What? What did you say you ungrateful? How can the son of a king and the son of a beggar be equal? He ran crying. A stick was lying at a distance. He picked it up and lashed Babu vigorously hitting his right ankle. The master has the right to oppress the slave.

"O mother.... I'm dying...." cried out Babu. A flock of birds fluttered their wings flying. The wind came to a halt for a moment. The breast of earth quivered.

"You dare argue with me? And you want to build effigies in the mud of my land ? You migrant...." Subba Rao went away muttering the words casually. The parents could listen to the cry of pain. That pierced their hearts. "Oh my god.... our child' they said running. Two other men

of their village were following them. Babu was crying. He described everything crying. The three of them wept.

So much tears like these burn and turn to ash in this kiln. Nobody bothers.

"Oh mother its too tender." Mother caressed his hand wiping the sweat from his face with her cloth. She cleaned the earth stains from his hand. Father ran to master and requested him to take Babu to hospital. But the reply came: Is your child son of a Governor? Wants to go to the hospital for this trifle? Go back and resume work.

Do you too need a lash? What else Babu's father could do? He blamed his fate. Does he know where the hospital is? He ran to the marketplace and brought some pain killer tablets. He gave Babu some biscuits and then a pill. He left him in the hut and again came to the work site with the villagers and his wife. The villagers consoled him.

In the night Babu's head swelled. The pain grew more. Hot water sponging, turmeric, pain killer nothing worked. Parents spent a sleepless night with the suffering child. But in the morning the same routine started. They had to be present in the site. Babu too was not spared by the master. The master wanted to pacify his anger by engaging the ailing boy in hard work. Tears of pain and soreness not only oozed out from the eyes, they trickled out of the heart, of the soul. When a helpless soul weeps, God too weeps. It's true. Babu's living gods were his parents. Their eyes were full of tears the whole day. They were building bricks along with new miseries and new helplessness.

Babu could not move his hand. He could not comb his hairs, couldn't wear his dress. The parents were shattered. Babu stayed depressed. He thought in case anything happens to his hand then what would he do? No, he changed his thoughts. His hands would be alright. He would be able to do everything. He would resume his studies. He will help his parents in the fields in growing crops. He will build images.

New hopes were sprouting.

One after another, stars were shining in the sky.

Those stars illumined the sky, not Babu. Babu was shrouded in darkness. His parents could not find out a solution. They seemed to be lost but kept consoling Babu: "we'll go back to village. We'll go to the doctor. We'll go to the big hospital." But it was less than six months they had spent in the kiln. Twenty two days to go. They have too learned that the will of the master determines everything. He can leave you at his will or else can keep you stay for a year or two. The other day- a worker was asking for permission to leave for his village but the master declined. He rather threatened him on the contrary. He pulled his dhoti before others. The worker did not utter anything about leaving the place after that.

Then should Babu be left to suffer like this? Would they keep staying there putting the blame on fate? Hell it this brick building. One's life, one's health is to be considered first. What would they do? What could they do? To be in fear will not do. They have to do something. They have to court danger. The three of them looked at each other. They whispered to each other. Some of the workers do things like that. They will do the same, yes, they would escape in the dead of the night. Let the luggage be left like that. They could take with them a stick, the razor kit and two packets of chili powder. May be they would be of use. They decided. They wanted to be firm and brave. Whatever will be will be. If they win life lies ahead. If they lose they die. Babu's father first planned out the route.

That night arrived, the night to escape darkness, a night to swim the swollen river of terror. The throbs of their hearts were audible. Praying god they left *gudsi*, the hut. Nothing was easy. On each step there was danger. The whistle of the guard and the barking of dogs were audible. They went past the smell of wine, the drunkard. Here the laughter of woman and there a wailing. In the midst of all these there were these three helpless creatures. Strength, courage, all determination were fast shedding. In spite of all these they continued stealthily and slowly. Oh God! Where is the end of this kiln? Oh god save us, Oh hills, oh spring, Oh witches help us...!

The Goddess of time heard and helped.

Life responded - God showed the path. The three crossed the river of terror. There was an auto rickshaw on the main road. They bargained, reached the railway station. Changing trains twice on the way they reached Kantabanji railway station. Tears rolled down their cheeks in the ecstasy of a great victory. But they had to fight another battle. They had to for the injured hand of Babu. Babu's father first went to the house of the sarpanch, the village head. But he said, I am busy now, come after two days. But he didn't have time to wait for the sarpanch too. He went straight to the Block Development Officer with Babu. He gave him an application. A copy was given to the Labour Officer. Some amount was given to him from Red Cross fund. Half acre of land was sold at last. Then they all went to the district headquarters hospital. Babu by that time had emerged as a hero of the kiln they had deserted. But he was not conscious of that. He was admitted to the hospital. Social activists, personnel from district administration, media representatives came to him. His photograph, photograph of his hand, his narrative of misery all were telecast through different channels. Many people came to meet him. Treatment continued under Governmental support but there was no improvement in the condition of his hand. The specialist doctor referred the case to the hospital at Burla. The family looked pale. Babu kept asking, whether his hand is alright and whether he could be able to work.

A young activist engaged in the welfare of migrant workers assured Babu and his parents: I'll accompany you to Burla. He took them to Burla. He contacted some people over his mobile phone.

The hospital was a huge one in Burla.

Babu was admitted to the huge hospital. There was governmental watch over the event. Immediately medicines, injection, tests, x-ray, reports were available. But Babu had the one same question to the doctor, will my hand be alright ?

'Yes.'

'Can I work? Can I build images?

"Yes..."

But the truth of the fact was told to the parent and the activist. The parents sank to their feet on the floor. The barriers they had constructed mentally gave way like a collapsed dam. The currents of pain and anguish swept everywhere. Babu's hand was not alright. The infected length from below the elbow was to be amputated. Or else his life would be at stake. The operation was to be done after a few tests. It was inevitable.

The operation took place. A hand of a migrant child work was amputated. This news went to the Legislative Assembly. The country heard of it. The opposition party started a commotion in the House citing the event as a national shame. Babu came to senses after the operation. Babu came to know, crying he asked, "Where is my hand?" His voice was audible everywhere. But the answer to his question was not with any Indian. His voice died into silence.

The activist counseled Babu. He wanted to boost his moral. He showed him pictures of many people on his mobile screen: girl without hand painting with the brush stuck between her lips, a boy taking Board Exam writing with the pen held in the toes. From pictures of this kind that was shown Babu thought that the rest of his body was alright except the hand. One can do wonders by will power. If he wants he can do many things. The activist left after teaching him the art of living. Lying on the bed Babu went on thinking like an adult. He became more mature than his age would have made. He became firm and made him strong. He created a faith in him that he was not disabled. He can dig earth; can plough. He can build Manorama's replica. He said to his mother, "Mama! Can I build image?" In the depth of agony a ray of smile flickered on the lips of Manorama. The trees on the premises of the hospital waved through the wind. They offered him faith.

After twenty one days Babu returned to village with his parents. The village looked more endearing. He had brought hope, faith and immense will power as it were in his bags and bedding. The villages came to meet him. They expressed sympathy. Manorama too came wearing a red frock. She wept and said "I am the cause of your misfortune. No more do I need my image to be built by you. Babu smiled and said, "Do you think I cannot build an idol because my hand has been amputated? I can. Not one, I'll build three idols replicating you. One for you, the second for me and the other one I'll install under the *sursiwan* tree of the village.

After some days the land of Babu's house was freed from mortgage. The parents prepared for tilling. Flakes of wet earth were brought for Babu. He started building idol of Manorama. He didn't take help of his parents. All he did by himself. He did with a lot of difficulties. He was bent upon doing it, possessed by a spell. He will do it. He started building. He began building, rejecting and building again. He stumbled but tried to stand again and again. The whole village talked about it. People whispered that this boy was building three images of sarapancha's daughter. The sarapancha who was dreaming of becoming a member of Legislative Assembly heard this and was enraged. What is his intention? Is he going to scandalize by daughter. He sent the news to Babu's father: "How dare your son think of building image of my daughter ? Let him destroy it or else he cannot stay in his village."

He didn't break the idol.

It was amazingly beautiful and looked lively. Again threats came. That lame is eyeing on my daughter. He is thinking of building three similar images. I'll cut his other hand into three pieces. The parents were terrorized. Sarapancha can do anything if he wants. But Babu replied firmly, "our sarapancha too can slice my hand. Then what is the difference between him and the master of the brick kiln. My building will not stop. Go tell him..."

"What audacity this poor boy has ? I'll set his house on fire."

The whole village knew of it. The cold war between sarapancha and Babu turned hot and aggressive day by day. Friends visited and advised Babu not to act pigheadedly. But he didn't yield. The Art teacher warned: "Danger is approaching you. Be cautious. "Parents said to Babu, "Give up this pursuit or else let us leave the village."

"We may be poor, Father! But we are free citizens of the country. We have the right to live in our own village. We have the right to build image. Nobody can prevent us - no one can threaten us. If they do - I know what has to be done. I'll do the same thing just as I did while writing a report against Subba Rao. Let us go to report against Sarapanch. Mother! let us go.

They lodged a complaint in the police station. The police station in charge paused for a moment when he heard the name of the sarapanch. He said, go- bring a witness with you."

But nobody was prepared to sign as witness. Babu lost his hope. His parents too became hopeless. Who can speak against the sarapanch ? Who can come at the cost of his life? But one person turned up to support Babu. "I'll go to the police station with you." "No, no... You?" Babu hesitated.

But she went. Manorama spoke there in the police station : " I've told my father that Babu has no ill will building my image. He does not want to blemish me. He is an artist. I adore his art. I have told him to build the image to encourage him. But father is all against it because of his pride. The allegation made by Babu and his parents are true. The threat of burning their house if they don't

leave the village is also true. Babu has been warned to stop his art work immediately. You are free to do however the law says.”

The station in charge was surprised. He became thoughtful. Lifting his pen he was going to write something. But Babu said at that moment: "Sir, after all he is the head of our village. He is our elder. I have my respect for him. If he does not hinder my work and does not threaten me I don't need to write a report against him.

The in charge stopped for some time. He went to a distance and talked with somebody over his mobile phone. He returned and said, "Let me be out for some time. I'll be back" After half an hour he returned and said smiling, "All of you go home now."

A gush of chill wind blew the window curtain.

Babu after the episode built two idols. He dropped the idea of the third idol that he had thought of installing under the *sursiwan* tree. From the two he gave one to Manorama. The other he kept in his house.

These days Babu sits before the idol when he feels defeated or tired. He keeps his head gently on the feet of the idol. The feet appear like that of Goddess Laxmi. The idol too sheds two drops of tears in response.

Short Third-Person Biographical Note:

on the author:

Gayatri Saraf served as a teacher for a long time and received the best teacher award in 2005. She received the national award from former President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam at the Bigyan Bhawan in New Delhi. She has published eleven collections of fiction in Odia. Recipient of awards and honour like ‘Dharitri Samman’, ‘Jhankar Galpa Puraskar’, ‘Konarak Galpa Sammana’, ‘Kadambini Galpa Sammana’, ‘Sucharita Puraskar’, ‘Amrutayana Samman’, ‘Ashok Chandan Smruti Samman’ and ‘Utkala Sahitya Samaj Sambardhana’ she has earned reputation as a writer of short stories. At present she is working as the Vice President of Odisha Sahitya Akademy. She can be reached at her email - gayatri.panda77@gmail.com

Short Third-Person Biographical Note:

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