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The Keeper of the Mangroves

Eptisum Laskar

I

Madhuri stood at the edge of the Sundarbans, where the land met the sea. The mangroves, once lush and teeming with life, now seemed to be shrinking into the earth as if the land itself was retreating from the relentless tides. The horizon stretched out, a canvas of dull greys and browns, but the sea whispered a foreboding hum, rising and falling like the breath of a sleeping beast.

She had been standing here for hours, watching the restless waves, her mind heavy with thoughts of the storm that was predicted to hit the village in the coming days. It had been years since the last one, but in the absence of Bon Bibi's guidance, the village felt abandoned, as though the forces of nature had turned their backs on them.

The villagers spoke of the mangroves dying—the trees that sheltered fishermen and nourished the land now bending down as ghosts, to whom the roots did not attach the earth against coming water. They said everything fell silent: there were no more shouts of animals and no more whispering of leaves.

Madhuri knew they were right. But she also knew there was something more—a darkness that had slowly crept into the heart of the forest.

Her grandmother had once told her, "The forest is alive, Madhuri. The trees speak to us if we listen closely. We have to protect them as they protect us."

But really, how could she protect that which is dying?

In the meantime, as the light from the sun was fading away, the wind picked up strength. Distant thunder rumbled across the sky while the briney smell of the sea hung heavily in the air. Madhuri pulled her shawl tightly across her shoulders, but still, the cold, biting wind found its way through, pricking her skin. A big storm was brewing.

She spared a glance behind her at the village where few huts scattered along the coast like frail promises against the sea's fury. The faint sound of children laughing could be heard from somewhere in the distance, then the calls of women preparing food, and the metallo clangs as fishermen cleaned their nets. There was life here yet such a fragile being. Everything felt fragile.

“Madhuri!”

There was her brother, Suraj, running towards her. His face was pale, and his eyes looked concerned.

“You've been here for hours,” he said, a lot of worry hanging on the words. “Come inside. The storm is almost here.”

“I can't,” she barely said. “I need to stay. The mangroves, Suraj—they're dying. And nobody cares. No one listens.”

Suraj placed a hand on her shoulder, his grip warm but firm. “Madhuri! You can't bear the weight of the forest alone; this whole village cannot be on your shoulders; it is too much for anyone, even for you.”

Her eyes welled with unshed tears, but she refused to let them fall. “But it's my duty, Suraj. The Keeper's duty.”

He sighed, pulling her into a brief, tight embrace before letting go. “You are not alone in this, you know. You may be the Keeper, but we are all part of this village. We all need to play our part.”

Madhuri nodded, her chest tightening. “I know. But what if the forest is beyond saving? What if Bon Bibi has already turned her back on us?”

Suraj's brow furrowed in confusion. “Bon Bibi? She's a goddess, Madhuri. She wouldn't abandon us.”

But Madhuri wasn't so sure. The goddess had always been silent, her presence no longer felt in the wind or the trees. The old rituals felt like nothing more than fading memories, distant echoes from a time when the earth was still alive, still speaking.

She turned her back on the mangroves, her eyes tracing the thick black outline of those trees across the sky. “I hope you're right, Suraj. I hope you're right.”

II

The storm arrived as predicted, violent and unrelenting. The wind screamed like an angry beast, tearing at the fragile homes of the villagers. Waves crashed along the shore, creating a cacophony and carrying debris and mud. The old, strong, and ever-supportive mangroves were

now swaying violently with the furious gusts. The roots of the trees, that at one time held the land together, were now clawing air; in that moment, it seemed that even they were trying to survive.

Madhuri could hear her neighbors wailing as floods overtook their homes—her calm little village, a picture of sheer vulnerability. Her heart raced faster as she sprinted down to the shore in search of a sign to cling to. But the panorama before her was gloomy. The water was rising like never before, with mangroves bent and broken, their tortured branches twisting in pain.

Madhuri felt the earth tremble beneath her feet. The storm was not just a force of nature; it was a reckoning. It was a warning.

“Bon Bibi,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Please... save us. Show me the way.”

There was no reply. Not a whisper into the wind, nor a rustling of the leaves; only the loud cries of the storm drowned all else.

With dread, she turned and ran back to the village, but something caught her eye as she passed the last row of mangroves. A flash of movement.

A shadow: quick and elusive, but it was there.

Madhuri stood frozen with her heart racing. Something had been there—a figure, tall and dark. It appeared to move between the trees like a wraith in the storm.

“Madhuri?” Suraj's voice cut through the wind's moan. “Come back! It's too dangerous!”

Yet Madhuri could not hear him. She was already moving toward the woods, guided by some instinct she could not begin to fathom. The shadow called her, beckoning her deeper into the mangroves.

Her feet sank into the mud, but she pushed forward, each step harder than the last. The trees around her grew thicker, the air heavier. The storm seemed to fade into the background as she entered the sacred grove—the place where her grandmother had taught her the old ways, the place where the spirit of Bon Bibi resided.

And there, in the center of the grove, stood the figure. Not entirely human yet not completely beyond the realm of description. An amalgamation of flesh and shadow, where its eyes glowed with otherworldly light.

“Madhuri,” the apparition spoke—both familiar and foreign at the same time. “I have waited for you.”

She froze. That voice—she knew it. The voice of Bon Bibi, speaking as if from the bowels of the earth, from within the very bones of the forest.

“Why have you come?” the goddess asked, her voice tinged with sorrow. “You have forgotten the pact, Madhuri. The people have abandoned the land, and the land has begun to wither. You are the last of the Keepers, the last hope of the forest.”

Madhuri’s heart beat in her throat. “I have tried, Bon Bibi. I have kept the rituals, honored the sacred grove, but the village is starving. The people no longer listen. They want to clear the land, to take what is left, but the forest is dying. What should I do?”

The eyes of Bon Bibi darkened, as she said, “There is only one way to restore balance. The forest demands a life, a sacrifice. The Keeper's blood must flow to renew what has been lost. You must give yourself to the earth.”

Madhuri felt her knees buckle; her breath caught in her chest. The words were a curse and a promise of salvation. She knew what Bon Bibi had meant. A Keeper had always been a protector of the forest, ensuring its survival. But it was a price she was not willing to pay.

“Please,” she whispered, tears flowing unbidden from her eyes. “I can't. I can't give myself to the earth. Not like this.”

But Bon Bibi’s gaze softened, and the storm seemed to calm. “It is not a death, child. It is a transformation. The land will heal; the people will remember. But you must choose. Will you be the Keeper of the old ways, or will you watch as everything falls into ruin?”

III

The villagers awoke to a new world the next morning. The storm had passed, but the landscape had changed. The mangroves were thriving, their roots firmly anchored in the earth, their leaves reaching for the sky. The air was thick with the scent of life—fresh and green, as if the forest had been reborn.

Madhuri was gone.

The villagers searched for her, calling her name, but she did not answer. There was no trace of her. No sign of her body.

Ratan stood at the edge of the forest; his heart heavy with guilt. He had been the one to push for the clearing of the land, the one who had disregarded the old ways. But now, as he stood before the renewed mangroves, he realized the depth of his mistake. The forest had protected them, as it always had, but they had taken too much. They had forgotten the sacred pact.

A soft rustling sound caught his attention. He turned and saw the villagers standing at the edge of the grove, their faces pale with awe. A figure stood among the trees, her presence ethereal and powerful. It was Madhuri.

She now looked different: her skin glowed with a faint green light, and her hair seemed now to be woven with the leaves of the mangroves. She was no longer just the Keeper of the forest; she was part of it. She had given herself to the earth, and in return, the forest had flourished.

“Madhuri,” Ratan uttered faintly, with quivering voice, “You... you offered your life...”

Madhuri nodded, her eyes filled with quiet strength. “I did not die, Ratan. I became one with the forest. And now, you must remember what we have forgotten. Guard the place, safeguard the mangroves or else all of us will fade away.”

And, she turned, disappearing into the depths of the grove, her presence still hanging like the scent of rain on the earth.

IV

Years passed, but the memory of Madhuri and the sacrifice she had made remained etched in the hearts of the villagers. The mangroves grew tall and strong, their roots weaving a barrier against the rising sea. The village flourished, its people living in harmony with the forest, honoring the pact that had been made so long ago.

Every year when storm season was nearing, the villagers would gather in that grove, chanting prayers to Bon Bibi and the spirit of the Keeper. They remembered the sacrifice that had brought them salvation and whose bond had tied them to the land.

Madhuri's story became legend, passed down through generations. And in the rustling of the leaves, in the gentle sway of the trees, the villagers could hear her voice, whispering in the wind, reminding them to protect the earth, or risk losing everything.

Author Bio:

Eptisum Laskar is a graduate with a Master's degree in English Literature from Diamond Harbour Women's University. She completed her undergraduate studies from Calcutta University. Her research interests encompass Memory Studies, Food Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Popular Culture, and Social Poetry. As an independent researcher, she aspires to pursue a Ph.D. in the future, aiming to contribute significantly to her field of study. Beyond her academic pursuits, Eptisum is an avid reader, writer, and artist, finding solace and inspiration in creative expression. Passionate about exploring the complexities of language and culture, she is committed to expanding her knowledge and engaging in meaningful scholarly contributions.