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Amulet (an extract)

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Abstract
As a child I grew up in the care of Punchi Menike, not my mother. She is the one who influenced my thinking and feeling. She was a round faced woman, a moon face with dark hair oiled back into a tight knot, low at the nape of her neck. I was fed, bathed, dressed primly and properly, rocked to sleep on her out-stretched legs. She used to pick lice out of my hair and kill them pressed between the nails of her two thumbs. Punchi Menike had one other task apart from following behind me all the time. She was given the important task of preparing mother’s daily chew of betel. I would watch, fascinated, her washing of the dark green, freshly plucked leaf, breaking the arecanut into pieces with the giraya, squeezing the chunam and other ingredients onto the leaf. While performing this daily task she would tell me stories of the good and the bad - the bad always ending up in hell worlds, the greedy as hungry peretayas always in search of food to fill their bellies.
As a child I grew up in the care of Punchi Menike, not my mother. She is the one who influenced my thinking and feeling. She was a round faced woman, a moon face with dark hair oiled back into a tight knot, low at the nape of her neck. I was fed, bathed, dressed primly and properly, rocked to sleep on her out-stretched legs. She used to pick lice out of my hair and kill them pressed between the nails of her two thumbs. Punchi Menike had one other task apart from following behind me all the time. She was given the important task of preparing mother’s daily chew of betel. I would watch, fascinated, her washing of the dark green, freshly plucked leaf, breaking the arecanut into pieces with the giraya, squeezing the chunam and other ingredients onto the leaf. While performing this daily task she would tell me stories of the good and the bad – the bad always ending up in hell worlds, the greedy as hungry peretayas always in search of food to fill their bellies. Despite this constant eating and satisfying of their hunger, they remained thin, skeletons always hungry, always greedy, wandering the earth lost and lonely. Often when I was frightened by these tales I would long to run to my mother but she remained a distant busy person, with a bunch of household keys dangling from her waist, tending to the drying of paddy, the cooking of meals or the garden. We drank milk freshly drawn from mother’s cows and then, of course, mother had brother to look after. She devoted her life to him, personally bathing, feeding. She entrusted him to the care of no hired woman, like she did me. I remember mealtimes clearly. While Punchi Menike rolled my rice into balls and forcefully overfed me by frightening me with stories of peretayas who would eat me if I did not eat, mother would distract brother’s attention by a story of a handsome prince who would become rich over-night and feed him unawares.

Every poya day Punchi Menike observed sit. Dressed in immaculate white cloth and white long-sleeved blouse and with a white shawl across her shoulder, she would retreat into the temple. On such days only, mother took care of me. Punchi Menike drilled me early into a superstitious belief in religion. Today I know Buddhism is a philosophy, not a superstition. But I cannot shake off early inhibitions. It was a sin to eat beef. It was a sin to even think of sex. Punchi Menike herself had four
children in the village looked after and brought up by her mother-in-law, but to Punchi Menike children were something apart from sex. I wonder now how she conceived. She never permitted me to read or think or meet people. She was always following me with advice, especially how important it was not to go against the wishes of parents. If I did I would go down into hell forever.

On such ground was the foundation of my life laid. Yet when I grew afraid, when I suffered from nightmares, it was Punchi Menike who cuddled and soothed me. When I attained puberty, it was Punchi Menike who protected me from ‘kila’, from demons. Punchi Menike had a favourite story about the last King of Kandy. I now wonder why she kept drilling this into my mind? Was it a kind of unconscious forewarning?

‘Bahirawa deviya was a brother of God Kataragama,’ said Punchi Menike. ‘He loved beautiful young women, especially fair Kandyan women. Once there was a severe drought. The water tanks ran dry, the rice fields lay with parched, cracked lips aching from water. But no rain fell. The river shrivelled up into a stream and even the waterfalls ceased to fall. It was a curse from God. The annual Esala Perehera was held by the King, Kapuralas were set praying daily, yet no sign of clouds. A merciless sun kept appearing in the sky every morning, sucking up whatever moisture was left anywhere. This was making the King very unpopular. People were whispering that he must have done something very bad to have made the God so angry. That he should do something to appease the angry God. The King had another problem. The British were occupying the lowlands and if there was a crop failure they could march into his kingdom saying he was a failure as a King. To save himself the King was compelled to sanction a ‘dola’, a sacrifice to the God to appease him and bring on the rain. A beautiful girl was to be sacrificed to Bahirawa. A virgin.

The girl was chosen. She was already in love, this seventeen year old girl, with a handsome young man of her own kin. Yet she was selected for sacrifice.

She had been selected to save the land from drought. It was an honour to be selected by the King but the girl did not think so. She wept and wept, yet if she refused the King it would bring dishonour to her father.

On an auspicious day, the beautiful young woman came walking on white pavada to the porch near the King’s palace converted, for the occasion, into a magul, bridal platform. Bands of red and white calico spiralled the columns, arched like rainbows, composed of a thousand frills of red and white cloth. On either side of the pavada the floor was festooned with young coconut palms twisted and turned into decorative art. The bride was the only thing that looked wilted, like a freshly plucked lotus dying without water. She hung her head and stepped listlessly although she was decked as a bride with pendants on seven chains, gold bangles, emerald and ruby rings on her delicate fingers and tinkling silver
anklets. Despite all this finery, tears coursed down her cheeks for she knew she was being led to the slaughter —

‘Why couldn’t she have run away?’ I remember asking.

Punchi Menike looked stern. ‘A King’s word is law and by running away she would only have bought shame and dishonour on her family. And, besides, where, to whom was she to run to?’

‘But it was her life they were sacrificing,’ I had protested. ‘Surely she has the right to her own life?’

‘Her life belonged to her parents who had brought her into this world and they could not displease the King!’

‘Why couldn’t she kill herself rather than be shamed or tormented by an unknown demon God in the jungle? It would have been easier to die in dignity.’

‘It is a sin to take even your own life,’ said Punchi Menike who observed the religious rites every full moon day clad in white. ‘If you take your own life you have to pay for that sin in the next life!’

‘If you are born a King have you the right then to sacrifice other peoples lives and yet not pay for it in the next life? Do you have that privilege over life and death?’

Punchi Menike’s simple mind had no answer to my question. She looked frightened that I should hold such thoughts, put such questions. Religion was to be accepted, not questioned. Then triumphantly she found the reply to silence me. ‘The King ordered the sacrifice to save the country from drought. It was his duty to see that the crops were not ruined.’

The answer did not satisfy me but I kept silent because I did not want to harass my beloved old ayah. Besides she might refuse to repeat the tale if I requested it again.

As I grew from puberty into young womanhood, in my imagination I formed a love relationship with the only young man I came into contact with apart from my brother, Niranjan. I began to see him in my dreams, blush whenever our eyes met in brief encounters. He began to visit our house frequently on some pretext or other. Often it is was a message from my Loku Amma, mother’s elder sister. I once saw mother glance from him to me. I turned away and went inside my room. Even so his visits to our house ceased over-night. I remember nights of weeping and a bewildered Punchi Menike sitting up on her reed mat beside my bed, stroking my hair. She had not guessed how far my imagination had taken me. I felt, in some way, like the cheated girl in history. Niranjan was my cousin, my mother’s elder sister’s son. We had not even talked to each other, only exchanged looks. I realised then the prison I was in. I used to wake up in terror from sleep, screaming. Punchi Menike would wake up and rock to and fro in grief. ‘My poor child, my poor baby, possessed by some demon ...

I remember they held an exorcism ceremony for me. And then my parents hastily arranged this marriage for me with a man I had not met...
I wore traditional white and gold. Seven gold necklaces hung like seven heavy chains around my neck. The nalal patiya, the headband of the bride seemed to grip my head in a tight hold. Three gold bangles on each hand, anklets round my feet. A bouquet of white roses and gold high-heeled shoes was the only difference between me and the girl of Punchi Menike’s tale. Western influence had not yet touched the King’s kingdom when the sacrifice took place. I consoled myself with the thought that I was not going to spend a night tied to a stake in the middle of the jungle.

I stood by Senani’s side on the poruwa. I was with the man who would become my husband. I knew nothing of him yet the Mangala Ashtaka was chanted invoking the blessings of Gods and devas over us. Each of our two small fingers were tied together with gold thread binding us to each other for life. Betel leaves were dropped on the poruwa calling on mother earth to be witness to our marriage. The earth that bears up anything must be the woman. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my cousin, my first love, looking as dejected as I felt. What chance had we to be together? We had been like unopened buds plucked from a tree before we had a chance to open our petals to the sun. We had been plucked and laid on an altar of sacrifice by our parents. A sacrifice of our feelings, our love, nipped in the bud. Senani tied yet another gold chain around my neck claiming me as his wife. I fed him milk rice symbolising our relationship. My mother was gifted with a roll of white doth, as was the custom, to repay her for looking after his wife to be and compensate her for my loss. I looked sadly at Punchi Menike. It should have been given to her. What would happen to her now? Most probably she would put on white and retire as a Sil Matha into a nunnery.

Young virgins clad in pure white sang the ‘Jaya mangala gathas’ wishing us well in our new life. I dared not even look sideways at my bridegroom, for fear he would think me forward. But I was aware of him with every beat of my palpitating heart. What would our life together be? Would he understand my fears like Punchi Menike had? What would it be like, this wedding night ahead of me? Would it be a sacrifice of my body as well as myself? Or would it be the beginning of a new life of happiness and friendship? Above all I wanted my husband to be my friend, even before he became my lover. He should understand that he must handle me with care and gentleness knowing the kind of inhibited life I had led. I saw Punchi Menike weeping openly.

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The view from the attic room remains unchanged. My instinct as a young, ignorant bride had nevertheless been correct. Even today hours pass without his wondering where I am, without his coming to look for me. As a young virgin bride I had feared the wedding night. Now I know it had not just been ‘wedding nerves.’ It had been a fore-warning. I had
over-estimated his capacity for feeling, for tenderness. Today I sit motionless before the statue of the Buddha in this secret room where I can at last be myself. I sit motionless, like the Buddha, knowing that he, Senani, will not come looking for me here. But unlike the Buddha, I am not beyond feeling. I suffer pain, knowing that he never wanted me for myself.

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The wedding night will remain with me until I die. I hope I do not carry a repetition of it into my next life. While he was in the toilet brushing his teeth and changing into black silk pyjamas, I was sitting on the large hotel double bed in my white silk nightgown with the rosebuds embroidered on it with loving care by Punchi Menike. I was shivering and shaking as if with a fever, my teeth chattering. Earlier Senani had helped me undress. It was always Punchi Menike who had undressed me and prepared me for bed. Silently, like a child, I wept for her. My brand new husband had taken off my chains, bangles and engagement ring and earrings and locked them in the hotel wardrobe. The key he put inside his wallet. I thought he was protecting my jewellery for me to use later. But he never gave them back to me. I went with only my ear studs on for the home-coming. Later he locked my jewellery in his home iron safe, the combination to open it being a secret to him. I was terrified of the white cloth spread over the hotel bed sheets. My moment of surrender was approaching. I recalled the maid tied to a stake at the top of the hill Bahirawakande and thought: 'Was she more frightened of the demon than I am of my brand new husband?' Then he unlocked the toilet door and came into the bedroom. On the pocket of his black silk pyjamas was embroidered his initials Senani Seneviratne- S S. He got into bed and waited for me to follow suit. There were no kisses, no fondling, no endearing words to coax a frightened virgin into sex. He acted as if I was another possession, like the jewellery he had taken over and locked up.

He was quick and brutal with me. He ignored my cry of pain and performed his act of penetration as if it was something he had to accomplish that night and when it was all over he left me crying, turned his back on me and went to sleep. Soon I heard him snore. I lay silent, looking up, tracing the patterns on a strange new ceiling.'

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The morning after the wedding night I rolled up the cloth that bore proud proof of my virginity and hid it in a paper bag inside the suitcase. No one came from my husband's side to inspect it. But I kept it in case at the home-coming I was asked to produce the evidence.

From then on it was just the two of us in strange places and situations. He took me to places I had never seen before and was afraid of. We went
into the heart of the jungle, into Yala game sanctuary. Often he left me alone in the bungalow with an old cook, who was often drunk, while he went shooting wildlife with his camera. I begged him not to leave me alone. He smiled an unreadable smile and took me with him. When the jeep went over ruts or when he came across a wild elephant or bear, I would cling to him, and although he smiled with amusement, he held me close. Once I became hysterical when we came very close to a lone elephant, who, startled by the jeep, raised his trunk and made as if to charge us. Even the tracker became excited and said urgently: 'Go faster, master, go fast.' But Senani took his time, watching me weep and cower down in the seat. When we passed the danger he said: 'See Shyamali, you must have more faith in my control over events. I would not have let that elephant harm you.'

Suddenly we came to a clearing. A cobra was moving slowly, heavily, on its belly towards a prey we could not see. A Gurulla bird circled the air, watching, ever watching the movements of the cobra. Suddenly it decided to swoop down and peck at the snake. The cobra began to go round and round in confusion forgetting its prey, a small jungle fowl who bounded away in relief. The bird kept on circling and swooping and pecking the snake, wounding it until it could take no more. It raised its hood to strike. But the cautious and cunning bird flew into the air and hovered about until the cobra writhed in agony and finally succumbed to its injuries. Then the bird returned to eat the flesh. Senani waited, watched and filmed the whole episode before going into the forest again. I had been crying through the whole unfair fight and now I felt sick.

'That is life, that is reality, Shyamali,' he told me. 'The strong always overpowers the weak. The cobra was going to eat a helpless, small jungle fowl anyway. It deserved the fate that awaited it.'

I felt a strange excitement in his voice, a savouring of the episode. Suddenly I felt cold, lonely.

From there we went to the cultural sites of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya. But Senani never halted at the places of worship. He only stopped the jeep he had borrowed from a friend, to take a snap of the Sri Maha Bodhi and Ruwanveli-seya like any foreign tourist. But he made me climb right up Sigiriya rock despite my feeling giddy. He made me look down the steep precipice, holding me firmly by the hands. One moment I thought he was letting me go, letting me plunge to my death, but the next moment he had me pressed firmly against his warm body. I began to cry. 'Why do you weep so easily Shyamali?' he asked.

I changed the subject, ashamed of my fear of heights. 'Didn't Kasyapa murder his own father?'

'He walled him in,' said Senani abruptly. Then he turned his attention to the filming of the moat, the rock, the lion's paws, the water lilies and white storks. I wished then I had canvas and paints with me. Mother had discouraged my interest in painting but maybe Senani could be persuaded
to let me follow my interests. New hope arose. I began to look upon my husband with tolerance.

We returned to Colombo for the home-coming. The honeymoon was over and although I had formed a kind of hero-worship of my new husband, proud of his dark, haughty good looks, still I was not completely happy. A certain unease had crept into my being which had been hitherto innocent as a child.

We drove straight into the house along a short driveway lined with palm bushes, past a smooth green lawn dotted with flowering trees and parked under the porch. I remember that porch very well for today's houses have no space for porches. The cars drive straight into garages. Inside the house there was no one to greet us, no lighting of crackers, no nekath time nor kith and kin. No lighting of the oil lamp although I saw that the lamp had been polished to a high shine. There was only Ramon, his male servant, who carried in our bags and Pinchamma the kitchen woman. She was a strange looking creature, squat, shapeless, with a square face as if someone had pushed it into place. Senani had not even informed my parents of our return. Quietly I went into the back of the house and threw the soiled wedding night cloth into the dust-bin. I saw Pinchamma watching and grinning. I felt the first chill run up my spine.

I became the mistress of a new household. I was like mother. Yet it was not the same. I felt the house did not belong to me. I was the mistress but was I really in command? In my uncertainty I began to constantly finger the amulet that my mother had hung for my protection prior to my leaving home. She had hung it on a thin gold chain with the barrel, the amulet itself hidden under my clothes, nestling between my breasts.

She had had this amulet made a month prior to my marriage. Why? I had heard Punchi Menike pleading that I was constantly in tears. Perhaps it was on account of this or was it because our horoscopes had not matched completely? I knew mother was a practical woman. Because of my involvement with my cousin and because she may not have been able to find a Kandyan who was willing not to have a share in the property, she may have fallen on the resources of the Kapurala to protect her child. Certainly mother spared no pains nor money to prepare the amulet. A special room was set apart in the house for the Kapurala to 'charm to life' the jeevan kireema, of the talisman. It took seven days and seven nights to endow it with the power of protection. Within the gold barrel was hidden the charm, a strip of copper engraved with protective symbols. Symbols strong enough also to bind a man to a woman for life.