The Homecoming

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Abstract
Pushing the bucket of dirty water away with her foot in an unconscious imitation of her mother, she swiped the floor in a final wide arc and thought of her mother's words - after you've mopped the floor, you should be able to see your face in it. Can I, she wondered? No, there was nothing. That's just Ai's way of talking, she thought scornfully. And she didn't want to see her face, anyway. She remembered the day she had looked at herself in Anju's mirror- it was new then, Anju had just bought it with her first pay - and how startled she had been to see her face so dear in it. This square face with the thick eyebrows and frizzy hair - is this me? She much preferred the grey ghost the old mirror showed her. Anju never had enough of looking at herself in the new mirror, though. She would turn it this way and that to get the maximum light from the one small window set high in the wall. But then, Anju was pretty - her fair complexion, her straight nose ...
Pushing the bucket of dirty water away with her foot in an unconscious imitation of her mother, she swiped the floor in a final wide arc and thought of her mother’s words – after you’ve mopped the floor, you should be able to see your face in it. Can I, she wondered? No, there was nothing. That’s just Ai’s way of talking, she thought scornfully. And she didn’t want to see her face, anyway. She remembered the day she had looked at herself in Anju’s mirror - it was new then, Anju had just bought it with her first pay – and how startled she had been to see her face so dear in it. This square face with the thick eyebrows and frizzy hair – is this me? She much preferred the grey ghost the old mirror showed her. Anju never had enough of looking at herself in the new mirror, though. She would turn it this way and that to get the maximum light from the one small window set high in the wall. But then, Anju was pretty – her fair complexion, her straight nose...

‘Finished, Suman?’

She turned round startled. Her face changed, it took on a look of utter devotion. How silvery Tai looked standing there in the morning sunshine that poured in through the window. Even her voice was silvery.

‘Yes, Tai.’

‘Had your tea?’

‘No, Tai.’

‘Go in and have it, then. Have a good breakfast, mind.’

‘Yes, Tai.’

‘You’ll get a good breakfast,’ Ai had said when she was trying to persuade Suman to work in Tai’s house the two mornings a week she went to the temple.

‘Yes, yes, teach her to become like you - to work like a dog and then be grateful for the scraps they give you, this pigsty they allow you to live in.’

‘You be quiet. You don’t want to work yourself, and you don’t want this girl to do it, either. What’s wrong with her doing a little work and having something filling in her stomach before she goes to school? What can I give her, anyway?’

But for Suman it was not the breakfast. It was Tai – the way she looked, so light and airy in her saris that seemed to float around her, her soft voice, her smile, the way she spoke to her, called her Suman...
'Baby?' she had smiled when Ai said, 'Baby will do your work Mondays and Saturdays.' 'If she’s big enough to work, she’s too big to be called Baby. I will call her Suman.'

That was the beginning of a happiness she could not speak of to anyone. She had kept it locked within herself, guarding it jealously. At night she had lain awake, her eyes fixed on the light that came in through the small, high window from the veranda of Tai’s bedroom. Looking at it, she could imagine Tai reading, or listening to music, maybe. Sometimes, rarely, both of them sat outside on the veranda and then she could hear their voices. One still night she had heard Tai’s laughter and suddenly a kind of sob had welled up in her, taking her unawares so that she had not been able to stifle it.

'Baby?' Ai’s voice had come immediately out of the darkness. She had lain rigidly silent. ‘Anju? Anju?’

'What is it?'

'I thought I heard someone crying."

'I wasn't crying. But I feel like it all right. God, one can't even get a bit of sleep in this place."

With the four of them sleeping in the little room, it was a tight fit. Suman had the worst of it, actually, sandwiched between Anju, who was furious if she as much as moved a finger and the little fellow who wet himself every night. Why don’t you send him out with Suresh?’ Anju had complained.

'He’s big enough, nearly six now."

Ai had tried. But it was no use. He invariably came back, clambering over their bodies until he found the soft mound that was his mother. And, in a while, he would wet himself. That night, he had done it again. Suman, feeling the wetness, had woken up to Anju’s angry outburst, more vicious than usual.

'I’m going to get out of here, I’ve had enough."

'Not if I can stop you.'

It was then that Suman had come out of her dream world to realise the conflict raging between Ai and Anju. She had cowered in her blanket at the cruel hurting things they said to each other.

'Marriage? You think it’s a child’s game? A doll’s marriage? You meet a boy you know nothing of—neither his caste, his home nor his family and you want to go and put a garland round his neck?'

'I know why you’re trying to stop me. You don’t want to lose my pay.'

There had been silence after that and the next morning Ai’s face had the same defeated look it had once had when Anju had said, ‘I don’t want to become like you—cleaning dirt out of other people’s homes all my life.’ Ai stopped speaking to Anju after that and one day Anju just went away and got married. Ai wouldn’t let them even mention her name. But when Anju had come back, in all her newly married glory—green bangles, silver toe-rings, black beads and a beautiful blue China silk sari—Ai had done
all the things that were done to a newly married daughter, her face stern and unsmiling. And when Anju had left she had stayed inside. It was Suman who had stood in the doorway, watching Anju walk daintily down the mud path in her high heeled slippers, as if she had never walked there before, her sari-end tucked round her waist, accentuating its slimmness, her hair clips glinting in her sleek dark hair. She had turned back when she reached the gate, waved casually to Suman and was gone. Suman, giving a faint sigh, had come in to find Ai sobbing, a terrible, rending kind of sobbing.

‘Ai, what is it? What’s happened?’

She had straightened up. ‘Nothing’ she had said and gone on with her work. She had said the same thing when Suman had come home and found Anju lying in a corner a few days back. ‘What has happened? Anju? Ai, what’s wrong with her?’

‘Nothing,’ Ai had said once again.

‘Nothing! How can Ai...? I will tell Tai...’

‘Finished, Suman?’ Tai was asking her.

‘Yes, Tai.’

‘All right, you can go. Tell your mother to come a little early today. I have to go out.’ As the girl hesitated, not making any move to go, the woman asked, ‘No school today?’

‘I can’t go, Anju is...’ She bit off her words.

‘Anju? Has she come? Why hasn’t she come to see me this time?’

She had visited Tai last time. Suman had followed Anju and she could remember Anju trying to look as if it was a casual thing for her to be talking to Tai so easily. And how Anju, who had seemed so beautifully dressed until then, had looked gaudy and loud. Her voice too – why was it so shrill, so loud? Suman had been suddenly angry – with Tai? with Anju? or with herself? She had not known.

‘Tell her to come and see me before she goes back.’ Seeing the girl’s face, Tai asked, ‘What is it, Suman?’

‘Tai, Anju says she is not going back.’

‘Why? Started fighting with her husband already?’ Tai’s smile faded. ‘Is anything wrong?’

‘She doesn’t say anything.’

Since her return, three days back, she had said nothing, except, once, ‘I’m not going back.’ It was Suman who had seen the marks on her back. Anju had been sleeping on her side, leaving her back uncovered. Seeing it, Suman had called out in a strangled voice, ‘Ai... Ai...’

‘What is it?’

The girl had just pointed to Anju’s back. Ai saw the scars - some of them still raw, oozing blood – and cried out so loudly that Anju had woken up with a start. She sat up, her hands held out before her, her eyes those of a frightened animal.

‘What did he do to you, Anju? What did he do? Tell me.’
Awareness had come slowly into Anju's face. Eyes fixed on them, she had moved backwards on her haunches - like an animal, Suman had thought, staring at her with fright, yes, she had even grunted like an animal - until her back had touched the wall. She had not moved from that spot since then.

'Tai, help us. Ai says Anju must go back, she says she's married and Anju...how can she? I saw her back. She's hurt.'

'Oh my God.'

'Tai, please come and talk to Ai.'

'All right,' Tai said finally. 'I'll come in the evening. I have a meeting. After it's over...'

'Tai, please don't tell Ai I told you,' she wanted to say, but lacking the courage walked away.

'No, I'm not going to tell her,' Ai had said angrily when Suman had suggested it.

'But why, Ai?'

Ai had been squatting as she cleaned the vessels, her large feet firmly gripping the squelchy mud under her feet. The fetid smell of left-over food came from the vessels.

'This is our business, we don't want anyone to interfere.'

'But Ai, Tai can do something, she can talk to Anju's husband...or...or she can do something.'

Ai had laughed at that. 'Something! No, no one can do anything. Move aside, don't just stand there. You can pour out the water for me while I wash. No,' she had gone on, throwing the clean vessels into the wicker basket with bad-tempered clangs, 'this is our business. Keep your mouth shut, I'm warning you.'

If she knows now what I've done, the girl thought fearfully, imagining the weight of her mother's hard hand. But I know Tai will do something and then Ai won't be angry any more.

As soon as Ai went out in the afternoon, Suman frantically cleaned the house. She pushed everything that was lying about into the large steel trunk and then looked at Anju, sitting in her unwashed clothes, her uncombed hair. There was a dark spot on the wall behind her where she had been resting her head. The room reeked of sweat - and something else. What was it?

'Anju,' she said gently, 'Tai is coming. She'll help you.'

There was no reply. Anju's face was blank as if she hadn't heard Suman, no, worse, as if Suman hadn't spoken. 'Anju,' she repeated. 'Tai is coming. Shall I comb your hair?'

Anju was still silent. Nevertheless, Suman got out the comb and mirror, the old one Anju had despised so much, and gently removed one of the clips from the ugly tangle of Anju's hair. Immediately, like a puppet whose strings had been pulled, Anju began to twist about, moaning, 'No' over and over again. Suman watched her helplessly. The cries went on
and on. Finally she got up, put the clip and comb away and went out. She plucked all the washed clothes off the bushes, folded them, put them away and sat down from where she could see Tai’s house. Hasn’t she come as yet? She must have come. In a while it became dark. She did say she had a meeting and she would be coming late. Has she forgotten? No, she told me she would come. I’ll count to a hundred. She counted hundred, two hundred, three hundred, and gave up. She sat trailing a stick on the ground, drawing meaningless patterns in the dust, feeling a kind of pain inside her. Ai came in through the small gate, Barkya clinging to her as usual. She went straight in, without looking at Suman. Soon Suman heard the Primus hissing. Suresh vaulted over the wall and went in calling out, ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Baby, Baby ...’ she could hear Ai calling. She felt the pain grow inside her; she crouched, trying to find a position which would give her some relief. She said she would come, she told me... Ai came out. ‘Baby, didn’t you hear me? What’s wrong with you?’ ‘I have a pain.’ ‘Where?’ Ai’s face was suddenly suspicious. ‘Here.’ Suman pointed to her stomach.

‘Is it...? Get up, let me see...God knows I have enough without having you too... Thank God. Come inside, anyway and get the plates. And stop crying. A big girl like you crying like a baby! After you’ve had your food, we’ll see about your pain.’ She went in and got out the plates. She picked up Anju’s and was about to take it to her, when Ai said, ‘No, leave it here. Let her come and eat with us.’ Suman, plate still in hand, looked hesitantly at Ai.

‘Put it down, didn’t you hear me Anju, come and have your food here. Anju, did you hear me? Anju...Anju, look at me!’ The cry was so compelling that Anju looked straight into her mother’s face. The mother and daughter stared at each other for what seemed to Suman a long time. Then Anju’s eyes went blank again. Ai began to cry, hitting herself on the forehead with the back of her palm, the serving ladle still in her hand.

It seemed strange to Suman, when they went to bed, that it could be a night like any other, that the same night sounds could be going on outside. They were all as usual - the croaking of frogs in the garden pond, the howling of a dog and a snapping, barking reply from far away, footsteps and voices on the road, someone coughing. She lay still watching the window. It was still dark. She has not come back. That’s why she didn’t come. Once she moved and felt a quick convulsive movement of Anju’s body. ‘Anju, it’s me, Baby,’ she said and Anju’s body became still.

She woke up suddenly to a jumble of sounds - shouts, cries, thuds, a clatter of things falling. She felt a blow – there was something, someone on her. She felt a small, trembling arm. It was Barkya – what was he doing? And then it penetrated, a sound that chilled her, a thin scream that
seemed scarcely human. It was Anju, Anju screaming as if she had been saving up her voice all these days just for this. Suman got up, wrenching the little fellow off her. Now she could see the man who was holding Anju with one hand and with dull rhythmic thuds hitting her with the other, anywhere, everywhere, banging her head against the wall at the same time. Each time he moved her head, she could see Anju’s face in the squares of light on the wall, her eyes blank, mouth open. Suresh – yes, that was Suresh throwing himself at the man, trying to drag him off Anju. And Ai too. She joined them. She could feel blows on her body, but she ignored them until a hand – or was it someone’s leg? – smashed into her chest. She gasped with the pain, stood back trying to recover her breath and suddenly realised what the light on the wall meant. Tai was back. She ran out of the door, down the mud path. For the first time she went to the front door and threw herself against it, hammering at it, her body heaving. She could still hear the tumult she had left behind her, as if she had brought it with herself. She realised with surprise that part of the noise was her own loud sobbing. She hammered again. The door opened. It was him, not Tai.

‘Tai,’ she gasped, ‘I want Tai.’

‘What is it?’ he asked and it was echoed from within by Tai.

‘Tai, please come, he’s here, he’s killing Anju, he’ll kill her, Tai, please come...’

The sounds were louder now. She looked back and saw that he had brought Anju out and was dragging her along the path she had walked so proudly on, while Ai and Suresh tried to stop him.

‘Oh my God!’ the woman gasped, shrinking back into the house. Suman didn’t hear her, she didn’t see her terrified face as she took in the scene of utter violence. She ran back, stumbling, frantic; perhaps she heard a cry, a voice calling out ‘Suman, Suman...’ but she didn’t stop. As she got to them, the man pushed Anju through the small gate, giving Suresh a final blow that flung him against the wall. The boy fell down, lay still. Ai ran to him crying out his name. He got up, looking dazed, his face bleeding.

‘Suresh, are you all right?’

‘Leave me alone.’

They helped him back into the house, Barkya clinging so tightly to Ai’s legs that she could scarcely walk. It was Suman who cleaned Suresh’s face, though he kept brushing her hand away, pushing her of saying, ‘Leave me alone.’ When it was done, he turned his back on them and lay still, occasionally his body shuddered as if he was crying. She went in to Ai. The little fellow, head pillowed on her lap, was crying in hiccups. Ai’s tattooed hand mechanically stroked his head. Suman stood and stared. The room looked like the scene of a battle.

‘Ai, shall I clean the room?’

She waited a moment for a reply, then began cleaning the room methodically while her mother watched her with lack-lustre eyes. As she
shook the sheets, something fell down with a dull clink. She picked it up and stared at it.

'What is it?'

Instinctively her fingers closed on it. Then she opened her hand and showed it to Ai. It was Anju's clip, a hank of her hair entangled in it. Ai's face worked. The tears came.

'Ai, don't...'

Throw it away,' Ai said suddenly, fiercely. As the girl hesitated, she repeated, 'Throw it out. She's gone, she won't come back, she'll never come back here.'

Suman stood staring at the pin in her hand.

'What is the matter? Are you hurt?'

Yes, she felt bruised all over, but it was not that. It was the picture she saw as she looked at the clip - Anju walking, her head held high, the clips gleaming in her dark hair. Suddenly she made up her mind. Carefully she removed the screw of hair from the clip.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm keeping it.' She put it carefully in the box with the other clip she'd removed in the afternoon. Then she turned back to Ai.

'She'll come back. We'll bring her back, Ai.'

'Bring her back? How? You're talking big. Big girl, huh?'

Suman said nothing but looked back, unflinching, at her mother. It was the woman who spoke finally. 'All right, keep it,' she said, her body slumping. Her hands went back to their soothing patting. Suman tidied up the room and lay down in her place. For the first time in months she did not notice the light streaming in through the window.

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A brief note about the title: A daughter coming to her parent's home after her marriage is an event of importance and a number of rituals are associated with it.

'Ai' is 'mother' in Marathi. 'Tai' is literally 'elder sister', but is also used as a respectful form of address.