

Short Story
Tambasini

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It was Annual Day at Shashkiya Snatkottar Mahavidyalaya and the principal, Dr Santosh Srivastava, in a saffron shirt and khaki trousers – that he had been wearing at the occasion for thirty years – had decreed that the students must be weaned off the Western culture. So they were going to perform the *Ramayana*, which dismayed the drama teacher, Dr Deepti Joshi, who believed only Shakespearean tragedies were worthy of attention.

Tambasini was relieved. Despite years of mugging up English grammar and a couple of summer holidays spent learning spoken English at the Speak Easy English classes, she had never managed to get her pronunciations right. The *Ramayana* would be performed in Hindi, with a smattering of Sanskrit and Oudhi words.

‘You should take slightly better care of your appearance,’ Mrs Joshi said kindly when Tambasini auditioned for the role of Sita.

In the end, Tambasini landed the role of Surpanakha, Ravana’s sister and the lusty widow who dared to yearn for the love of Sri Rama and was rewarded for her brazenness by having her nose cut off. The announcement was met with a hoot of derision from her classmates, who said, ‘Your ugly looks have finally come to your aid.’

Tambasini studied the character and felt strangely drawn to this woman mutilated so brutally for expressing her love. *Her only crime was ugliness, she*

thought. If she had been beautiful, her advances might have been welcomed. It reminded her of the way her beautiful younger sister was feted and pampered at home.

‘Come and sit by me,’ her father would call out in the evenings when they were young children. Lakshmi would toss her curls in the air and sit on his lap, prattling and giggling. Tambasini lurked in the shadows, envying their easy bond. Lakshmi had been named after the Goddess of Prosperity. Her birth had been followed by her father’s promotion to the most coveted position of assistant engineer in the irrigation department. Her birthdays were celebrated with coloured balloons and parties.

‘Why don’t you celebrate my birthday?’ she had raged at her mother once.

‘Hush. Your grandfather passed away on one of your birthdays. Your father has never been able to forget that. Lakshmi is generous and shares her gifts with you. You should not be jealous of her.’

How could she not be jealous? She was A-Lakshmi, the opposite of Lakshmi – the one who had brought death and misfortune.

The younger girl is so fair, so beautiful, and full of grace. But they will have to find a match for the older girl first, and that will be difficult. Where did she inherit her complexion from? the relatives wondered. *Nobody in our family has ever been so dark.*

How could Surpanakha not be jealous of the frail and beautiful Sita, protected so tenderly by two princes?

'Cast your wife aside and come and live with me,' she said to Rama. 'You are not safe here in this jungle filled with demons. I will protect you and look after you. I have strong and wise brothers, but I am stronger and wiser. I am a suitable wife for you.' Could he not see that delicate beauty was a liability in these dangerous times of war between men and the asuras?

The two brothers mocked her hideousness and ridiculed her in front of each other. Was she not a woman too? Was there no chivalry due to her? Or was it only the beautiful who deserved courtesy?

The lights swung to the back of the stage. Janaki appeared, bathed in saffron. She stood with her eyes cast down and her hands clasped together. The contrast between the dark woman with the large nose and the small, fair beauty was complete. The audience cheered and whistled its approval of this Sita. Mad with rage Surpanakha jumped at her, aching to tear off her skin with her claws, drag her to the ground and sully her with mud.

Lakshman leapt forward and slashed off her nose. Droplets of blood fell down. Didn't Maryada Purshottam Rama deem it necessary to reprimand his brother for such treatment of a woman? Surpanakha groaned and wept as the audience jeered at her pain. Sita cowered behind her husband and his brother.

'You are a great actress, Tambasini,' Mrs Joshi said to her after the show. 'You lived up to your name. I don't think the audience will forget this Surpanakha in a hurry.'

Janaki won the best actress award in school that year for her role as Sita in the *Ramayana*.

Peddar Road, Nariman Point, Bandra, Tambasini chanted the magic words to herself. Shah Rukh Khan lived in a bungalow called Mannat, facing the sea.

Amitabh Bachchan had two houses, Jalsa and Prateeksha. Tambasini could reel off such little details with aplomb. 'Come, join us,' the great actors invited her from the covers of glossy magazines. They had once stood in lines and auditioned for roles in films. She would need to do the same. Hadn't Rekha, the dusky seductress, once been called an ugly duckling? The female stars swore by yoga and sprouts for breakfast. Tambasini was starving herself so that she could also flaunt her zero figure soon.

The town was abuzz with rumours that some scenes for Prakash Jha's next production would be shot there. Tambasini heard they were constructing a set in the midst of the squatters' colony. They were scouting for local talent for some of the minor roles in the film. Auditions would take place just before the shooting began and would be conducted by the assistant casting director. You had to hand in a resume, take a slip and wait for your turn.

That morning, Tambasini debated whether she should wear her pink lehariya Chameli saree or her Priyanka Chopra outfit for the event. Some of the boys of her college, gathered at the venue in their best tight jeans, bright T-shirts and jazzy haircuts, tittered.

'You are not heroine material,' they told her.

'Oh? But you are hero material, eh?' she retorted.

She had chosen a short black dress, which made her feel like a lap dancer. But she wanted to flaunt the body she was carefully sculpting.

'You look hot,' said Nitin. He had a straggly beard and wore a cap and glasses now. He had left her town for Mumbai five years ago to become a star and was now doing freelance work as a film editor for TV serials. He waved at the gang of boys but did not join them.

Tambasini was grateful for the compliment. She wore her hair loose around her face and had painted her lips

red. 'What are you doing here?' she enquired casually.

'The man designing the sets is a friend of mine from my theatre days in Bhopal. I thought I would drop in and say hello.'

'Can I come with you?' she begged.

He looked uncomfortable. 'It's been many years since I met him last. He may not remember me.'

'Let's look for him anyway.'

So they slipped into the grounds.

'Is that him?' she gestured towards a tall man with silvery hair talking to someone.

Nitin nodded and waved at the man who looked at him and then looked away.

'Heh heh, it must be the beard. He doesn't recognize me. He is busy now. Maybe I will come back later,' Nitin said and melted away sheepishly into the crowd.

Tambasini went back and elbowed her way in to reach the front of the line of strugglers.

'Have you signed in?' the man in a faded shirt and torn jeans grunted.

She nodded.

He gestured to her to move to the sign of X on the floor.

'Start!' he yelled.

Tambasini looked around the room in desperation. There were some bored-looking men with beards and oily ponytails. None of them seemed least interested in what she could do.

'Is there a script?' she asked.

The man sighed. 'They must have told you all that when you registered. Just do anything. Sing. Dance....'

Could she even be certain this was a genuine Prakash Jha production? She took a deep breath and began to recite lines from Rabindranath Tagore's poetry. These poems had helped him win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

As the words flowed, she was lifted far above the damp, dark room into blue

skies and white clouds with the sun streaming through.

'Not what we are looking for,' a querulous voice spoke up and a man with a goatee appeared next to her.

'No! Please! Give me another chance. I really can act, you know.' She launched into a dialogue from a popular film.

'Go away,' the man barked. 'There are hundreds of people waiting. We have your number. We will call you if you're selected.'

'I can do anything. I can sing and dance. I will work very hard. Just give me a chance.' Tambasini hoped he would relent. She had been preparing hard for two weeks.

The man turned impatient instead. 'Madam, frankly we are looking for a face that will set the screen aflame. You are not her.'

Everybody loves rudeness as long as it is directed at somebody else. People gathered around inadvertently to enjoy her discomfort in silence. She stumbled to the exit, trying not to sink under the humiliation.

'Navroze, is anybody screening these girls or are you sending them all to me directly? Must I suffer the uglies?' Prashant, the director, stalked back to his chair angrily.

This is what it feels like to hate somebody so intensely, you want to kill them, Tambasini thought. It was as if she had been split into two. A part of her glared at Prashant, feeling the blood pound inside her head so loudly that she was afraid a vein would burst. Who was this man that he could insult her? She could imagine how it would feel to aim a gun at the centre of his forehead, pull the trigger and experience the cruel satisfaction of watching the blood spurt forward. There was no right or wrong about it. It was a pity she did not have a revolver, did not know how to shoot, and did not want to create a mess of her life.

The actress inside her watched dispassionately, taking notes, aware that someday she would have to portray such murderous rage. She needed to feel the full force of this emotion to be able to portray it well.

Tambasini urgently needed a break in the film industry. Her parents were scouting around for a match for her. She knew it was only a matter of time before some man, deadly dull and plagued with acidity problems, deigned to approve of her as his wife. That would end her dreams.

She rose unsteadily to her feet outside the door and, mustering courage, returned to the audition room to speak to Prashant again.

'I am willing to do *anything* to get a chance,' she whispered to him hoarsely.

He beckoned her to him. She leaned forward till their faces were really close. 'Then take my advice,' he replied. 'Get your whole face broken and reconstructed.'

Prashant leaned back in his chair then and laughed like a drunken villain in a B-grade film.

'When you cannot afford the best, try the rest,' Dr Anand Desai joked when she enquired about corrective surgery.

Tambasini smiled weakly. She had always known she would land up here, at a plastic surgery clinic, someday. To make her acting ambitions come true, some drastic steps had to be taken. Hadn't Shah Rukh promised her in a film that if you wanted anything badly enough, it would be drawn towards you?

Dr Desai, a cosmetic surgeon, was visiting Pipariya. She had never expected it could be a possibility. When she went into his makeshift clinic, she saw diplomas from distance-education courses and evening classes all over the walls. His voice had the nasal twang of an NRI.

'In America, they charge ten thousand dollars for this kind of surgery. In England, they charge four thousand pounds. In Mumbai, Pune, and Gurgaon ...

you could not hope to pay for such services. In Pipariya, you are lucky. I wish to build a clientele. I will charge whatever you can pay me. But you must pay *before* the operation.'

Tambasini nodded. Some of her fixed deposits had matured as she reached adulthood.

'No family or visitors,' Dr Desai warned her strictly. 'In America, we know the matter stays between the doctor and the patient. We send the family members home.'

She nodded again. She did not plan to tell them about the operation anyway. They would not approve. It had been her own decision.

That night she stared into her face in the mirror for one last time. They would start with the nose, narrow down the nostrils, crushing the bones and the cartilage so that they could create a sharp little structure. Then collagen would be injected into her lips to give them a full, luscious effect. Piece by piece, feature by feature, her entire face would be transformed. She felt a tremor inside her. There would be blood, broken tissue and pain. All creation was preceded by destruction. Tambasini would be reborn. Perhaps she would take a new name, call herself Sita.

The next morning she went to the clinic. She was led to a small white room and asked to change into a green robe. The nurse pointed at a small metallic cot and asked her to lie down.

'Do you have any medical problems?'

'None at all,' Tambasini replied.

She lay down on the hard cot staring up at the ceiling. Dr Desai slid into the room. The nurse pushed in a contraption with plastic tubes and glass bottles to her bedside.

The doctor slipped a mask over her face, smiling down at her. 'Do you trust me?' he said. 'I insist on a patient's trust.'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Then I am willing to operate. Count down from twenty. You will not feel a thing.' He clamped down a plastic mask on her nose.

Tambasini was aware of her voice dipping down to a mumble 'Ten...nine...eight...five...four....' Then she was flying through the dark seas, light as a cloud.

She awoke at the sound of a loud scream in her ears. There was blood all over her face. The nurse was pushing down cotton wool on what used to be her nostrils.

'She is going to tear the stitches open with her thrashing about. Give her more anaesthesia,' Dr Desai barked.

The next time Tambasini awoke she was alone in the empty room. She swung her head from side to side, feeling nausea and unease inside her. Where was everyone? She tried to struggle to sit up in bed, but there was no strength in her body. She lay limp and bleeding, feeling the darkness of the night creep over her. Then she slipped into sleep again. Next, she heard the shattering of glass, the hollering of abuses, and was aware of her mother wailing behind her.

'Call the police! Call the ambulance!' she was shouting. 'My daughter is bleeding to death.'

Tambasini slipped in and out of consciousness, vaguely aware of being jostled onto a stretcher, the shrill siren waiting, and the bustle of the government hospital where needles were thrust into her arms and pipes shoved down her throat.

'Do I look beautiful?' she whispered to her mother, but the words were trapped within the labyrinth of her vocal cords, tongue and lips.

'The anaesthesia may have affected the brain,' the doctor on emergency duty said to her family gravely. 'I am afraid it might cause permanent damage.'

Tambasini's face became contorted with partial paralysis. When the bandages were peeled off her nose, it revealed itself as a red, ugly stub. Though not completely ugly, it made her face look queer – as though something was out of place.

Dr Desai was charged under section 326 of the Indian Penal Code for negligence and causing grievous harm. He would have served seven years in jail if the police could have found him. Investigations revealed that there was no registered medical practitioner specialized in cosmetic surgery under that name.

Tambasini received this piece of news with apathy. She stayed in her room and only emerged when she was hungry. Sometimes she did not bathe for weeks on end. Sometimes she bathed six times a day.

'She was always an unfortunate girl. Everything turned out so well for our Lakshmi,' her mother wept. Their younger daughter had married a banker and lived in Dallas with her two children.

Tambasini stood in her room with her ears pressed to the door. Why were they always speaking of her? Didn't they have other things to discuss?

'I have asked Punditji to do a paath of Akhand Ramayana at the temple,' her mother continued. 'I will pay him eleven thousand rupees and gift him a shawl and a sripthal.'

'Oh mother, you are a fool' Tambasini laughed from behind the door. 'Sri Rama has no sympathy for ugly women!'

Tambasini looked out of the window into the streets where cows jostled with rickshaws and scooters for the right of way. In the distance, she could see the green forests and the grand ranges. At this moment, with the sun trapped in the waters of the pond, Pipariya seems like the most beautiful place in the world. Then she flopped down on her bed and leafed through her beloved copy of Natya Shastra.

The section she was reading that day was on Hasya Rasa. Laughter could have a full range of expressions starting from a slight smile (Smita), to a full smile (hasita), gentle laughter (vihasita), the laughter of ridicule (upahasita), crude laughter (apahasita), and excessive laughter (atihhasita).

Atihhasita was the laughter of Kali, the goddess who needed to impress no one with her looks and wore a garland of skulls around her neck. Kali did not care about grace or beauty. Today, Tambasini would practise the laughter of Kali.

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