



The Challenges of Being a Woman in Bangladesh: Rehnuma's Story

Description

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I think the need to tell a story for me started at a young age when I would sit with my grandfather and hear tales of old Bengal, life before the partition between Pakistan and India, how the formation of Bangladesh came to be and all the myths and legends of a time long gone.

Author's Memo

I think the need to tell a story for me started at a young age when I would sit with my grandfather and hear tales of old Bengal, life before the partition between Pakistan and India, how the formation of Bangladesh came to be and all the myths and legends of a time long gone. When I realized that I could use my words to express my thoughts and observations, I felt I had a responsibility to give voice to some of the issues I saw or felt were wrong or needed to be addressed. One of my earliest publications was of a young girl who I saw on the streets and how it affected me as a child who did not have to worry about food or shelter. As I grew older, I realized more and more that I wanted to use my words to speak about my feelings of injustice, inequality and the human struggles that we all face on a daily. I needed to use autoethnography to make what I was reading and writing about to create a relation and to feel that my ethnicity, gender or background did not isolate me from English literature, rather it made me a part of it.

"Ami Tau Ami," Rehnuma's story, is very dear to me. It is to a certain degree about my mother. She grew up in the shadow of the 1940's where women had a very distinctive role of domesticity. Her father was a famous politician and although he admired her intelligence and educated her, gave her all the freedom, he did not allow her to work. At the time my father too was of the same mind, although

eventually he changed his opinion. But it was a powerful blow for my mother. She was, she told me later on, so eager to find out who she could become outside of her home. She wanted to study law or perhaps go into politics. She was amazing with people, had such a strength of character. She had so many dreams, but she was swallowed like Rehnuma because of her gender.

Rehnuma's story is about her letting go of her own dreams but passing it to her daughter, as my mother did for me. Rehnuma, like my mother, decided to give her daughter the freedom to choose and make her own decisions, to work or do whatever she wanted to do and find out who she was. Rehnuma's fear for her daughter and how she would be treated because of her skin color is also symbolic of how women are so often judged by their appearance. Rehnuma feared that her daughter would be seen not for the intelligent and kind woman she was becoming but rather the focus would be on her looks. Like Rehnuma, my mother would always try to reassure me that it did not matter if society thought I was too fat or too short or too something or the other. She would always remind me of my inner strength and how my true worth was not in the way I was seen by others but how much I believed in myself.

The AutoEthnographer





CHAPTER 1

She was in university and hoped someday of traveling to all the places her *Abbu* had been to – someday. Her mother, however, believed that a daughter's place was behind the scenes, making sure the kitchen was being supervised properly, the guests were getting proper treats and the relatives who often visited from the

villages, were finding space in the four-bedroom house.

Rehnuma was round in shape and small in size. She wore her hair back in the old-fashioned way, a small bun neatly combed and kept in place by a single clip. Her face was devoid of make-up, she did not believe in it, too expensive and time consuming. Her sari was, however, a bright saffron yellow with red flowers. A sharp contrast to Rehnuma's dusky skin. She was almost sixty-eight and most people called her Mrs. Hasan, after her husband.

She was confident and when she walked into a room and fixed her gaze upon someone, they would have to take notice either squirming out of discomfort or keeping their gaze on the ground in order not to offend her. She had been an only child and pampered by her father. He had been a famous journalist and from him Rehnuma had learnt the importance of vocalizing her thoughts, to stand up for her beliefs, even if they were too forward for a woman of her times. But her father was always there; encouraging her and giving her the support she needed. Rehnuma sighed as she thought about her father and sat down on the chair. She gazed out of the window and looked at the hustle and bustle of the road below. Everyone was busy with something or the other. The heat did not seem to bother these people as they bustled, argued, haggled, laughed and fought, stopping from time to time to mop their drenched foreheads or throwing water on their heads. Rehnuma wondered if she should change her sari into her long, flowing nighties/kaftans; they were cool for the summer. But she wanted to sit on the verandah.

The heat brought with it the smell of overripe mangoes and yet Rehnuma felt no pleasure at the smell. Her heart was fluttering, memories were gliding in her head like ghosts waiting to tell her their stories. She closed her eyes and tried to settle her heart, which had already begun to trouble her, or so the doctor said.

She remembered her father; she could still see him sitting in his chamber, a tall dark handsome man. He always smelt of the rose oil he put on his hair and sandalwood soap he liked to use. He loved Bangladesh, he had fought for its birth and cherished her people. Sometimes his articles created uproars in many nooks of the political world, but he cared, as he always said in the truth and for those who were struggling to eat even one meal a day and for those who were suffering from oppression. He was passionate and his voice would at those moments take on the smoothness of the wave while the dinghy of thoughts traveled on its surface.

Rehnuma remembered countless times that she had sneaked into his chamber and would watch him write and discuss politics or world affairs with a visitor. He had traveled the world and met many people; pictures and souvenirs hung loosely or cluttered the long desk at the back. Rehnuma liked to touch them and gaze at them with awe. She was in university and hoped someday of traveling to all the places her *Abbu* had been to – someday. Her mother, however, believed that a daughter's place was behind the scenes, making sure the kitchen was being supervised properly, the guests were getting proper treats and the relatives who often visited from the villages, were finding space in the four-bedroom house. Rehnuma knew her father was not rich, but he was generous and his generosity meant that he spent every *paisa* to help some needy villager or relative, hence the continuous stream of people in their home. Perhaps that was the reason her mother had fallen ill. Her name was Khadija and as Rehnuma was dark in complexion, so was she fair. Her hair was soft and wavy with the hint of grey. She was small and stout and had light grayish eyes. Illnesses and arthritis had slowed her, so that most of the time she would sit and tell the servants and Rehnuma what to do. Her temper could

escalate and at those times she would throw whatever she had in her hands. Other times she would just doze off on her chair.

Her father, too, depended on her and maybe for that reason supported her whenever she would be vocal and voiced her opinions. Her mother, though, got irritated and wanted her to get married. Rehnuma had no such desires.

Rehnuma had learnt, at a young age, to look after the affairs of the house, or *shongshar*. Her mother's failing health and her father's demanding schedule meant that Rehnuma was studying or working around the house. Her father, too, depended on her and maybe for that reason supported her whenever she would be vocal and voiced her opinions. Her mother, though, got irritated and wanted her to get married. Rehnuma had no such desires. She could clearly see the conversation between her mother and father. Her mother would sit on her chair, putting cream on her hands. Her father would be sitting on his separate bed, they had two twin beds in the room. One time she had entered their room. She stopped as she heard her name, "She is not a child; you have to start treating her like a woman whose place is in the kitchen and home. You need to find a husband for her."

"She is a human being who deserves to explore the life outside this house. She is an intelligent person and I want her to find her own husband."

Rehnuma saw her mother turn red with anger. Rehnuma took a step back from the door, scared that she might be spotted, but also wanting to listen in on the rest of the conversation.

"*Hai hai*, how can you say something like this. This sort of talk and attitude is wrong and will bring only misery in your daughter's life. You talk about so much independence, but I am sure that when you will see your own daughter breaking the rules of society, you will not support her either."

Rehnuma withdrew and went to her room, confused about the conversation. A part of her wanted a home of her own, to be away from her mother, who still dictated her house with an iron fist. Nothing was right, until it was done her way. Yet at the same time she wanted to travel and do something that would make her Abbu happy.

As Rehnuma sat on the verandah, she recalled how she had felt that there was no reason for her parents to argue. She did not intend to get married. But alas her world was about to change. She met Hasan, one of her father's fans, who would often come to the house. He worked in the Ministry of Education. He was not tall but of average height, and very thin. He was not handsome looking, but his helpless expression made her want to take care of him. So it happened that shy glances, a few whispers and Hasan was asking for her hand in marriage. Rehnuma remembered, how she had felt indecisive but because her mother forbade it, she became adamant about marrying him.

She recalled standing in front of the mirror and telling herself, "You want to get married. You know you will be able to get along with him."

Khadija forbade the marriage for several reasons: Hasan had no parents, he lived in a small flat and he was still new at his job. He came from a good family, Rehnuma's father argued, having caught the look that had passed between the two. He did not want to hurt Rehnuma's feelings and was not sure

himself if his opinionated daughter would do well with someone else, someone who would be as strong in personality, as her. She needed someone who would be mellow and would let her have her own way.

Whenever she would bring up her need or desire to work, Hasan would conveniently change the topic. Frustrated and unsure what to do she had gone to her father. When she went to her father he agreed, "Women from good families do not work."

So, they were married. Rehnuma finished her education but Hasan did not want her to work. At first, she thought it was just a temporary objection. But as time passed whenever she would bring up her need or desire to work, Hasan would conveniently change the topic. Frustrated and unsure what to do she had gone to her father. When she went to her father he agreed, "Women from good families do not work."

"Abbu how you can say this, you believe in the liberation of women and you who have supported me. How then can you say it's wrong for a woman to work?"

"It's not wrong, but the timing is wrong, perhaps your daughter will be able to work."

"But you always encouraged me to speak my mind. To be who I am."

"I still believe that women are individuals, but in my line of work I have seen what happens to women who step out of the box, they are bullied, thrown into jail, molested and the list is endless. I have interviewed women in the workforce and we as a country do not treat them properly. They are viewed as ornamentations rather than individuals, who are not capable of thought and work. No, I do not want my daughter to work."

Rehnuma sat on one of the single sofas, as her father sat on his desk and started writing. Her world felt like it was collapsing. How could her father who always supported her be against her working? He had let her marry someone she liked; how could he then stand against her need to be financially independent? She recalled that she had sat in her father's study and looked at all the framed articles and souvenirs and felt that she had never truly known her father; that all her believes had been false, wrong for her times.

Rehnuma had gone home feeling defeated. A part of her had felt lost and a part of her wanted to be molded into who her father wanted her to be. She spent the next twenty years building a family, forgetting about herself, her identity, her love of travel and knowledge and all her desires. She squashed them behind bazaar, *shongshar*, child, illness, deaths and financial struggles. The times she could not afford a new sari or a present for a loved one, she pointed it to her husband that if she worked, they would not have any financial problems, but Hasan was adamant and a rift was created between them. Rehnuma resented him for not being like her father, expressive and indulgent, she wanted to always cling to that image of him and not the man who had not believed in women working. She resented Hasan for not having the courage to go against society and let her work, and he became tired of not living up to her father's image.

The distance between them became even greater after their daughter was born. Hasan immersed

himself in work and then became very religious, while Rehnuma spent her free time with the child or at her father's house. After the death of her parents, Rehnuma felt lost and lonely. She gave herself zealously to the household work. Everything had to be perfect. Out of *jid* (stubbornness) she stopped reading. She lost touch with the world she had loved as a child and focused only on that of her home and daughter.

Hasan did not understand her. He did not understand her need to make sure her daughter had the tools to stand on her own feet, to have the knowledge and strength to work and not settle down quickly.

CHAPTER 2

She came back to the present and sighed. She missed her mother's caustic comments and her father's patient explanation of a poem or a story. She had a few good friends she could talk to and meet with, but during her struggles with life, she did not want them to know too much about her; she could not stand to be pitied. Rehnuma absently rubbed her chest. It had been her father's death anniversary and memories had flooded her. A dull ache had crept up on her every time she thought of them, and today was especially hard.

She sighed and went inside to take a bath and change into her nightie. She sat at the dining table for lunch. As she moved the rice around her plate and tried to pick the flesh out of the fish, she called for her daughter to come to lunch. Hasan was away at a meeting and would not be in for lunch. He had retired but still did some consultancy work. "What did it matter?" thought Rehnuma; her life had passed by with a stranger, whether he had retired, had time or not, they had very little to say to one another.

Mehreen, her daughter walked to the table and sat down to eat. Rehnuma placed rice on her plate and gave her a loving look, which she hid quickly; to show too much emotion towards children meant spoiling them and so she always tried to be firm with Mehreen.

"How was class?"

"Good, I got the highest score in Maths. The professor was happy and said I should have no problem getting a scholarship to go to the States."

Rehnuma smiled. She felt relieved. She had pushed Mehreen to excel in her studies. She had stayed up nights and sat for hours at her school during her exam. Hasan did not understand her. He did not understand her need to make sure her daughter had the tools to stand on her own feet, to have the knowledge and strength to work and not settle down quickly. So she had pushed; luckily for her, Mehreen had an aptitude for Maths and had excelled at it from a very young age. Now, her dream for Mehreen was close. If she got the scholarship, then the rest Hasan would be able to give her from his retirement money. Finally, at least one of her dreams would be coming true. She squashed the feeling of loneliness that she would feel once Mehreen would leave and instead concentrated on trying to give Mehreen the vegetables from the *bhaji*.

Mehreen smiled, chatted and joked with her mother. She was dark like her mother and small. But her face was heart-shaped and dimpled on the sides. She had inherited her father's brown eyes and they always danced with merriment. Her bones were delicate and yet her overall appearance was of a healthy girl. Her hair was short and dark. She had streaked it in places much to her mother's disgust. But Mehreen loved it. She enjoyed life in general and pushed away her mother's constant reminder, "Life is hard; no one gives you anything on a platter; you have to sacrifice yourself and then when you feel you have nothing else to give, Allah takes mercy and shows you the way." To Mehreen, this was all too boring. She knew her mother was always depressed. Life had been hard what with her grandparent's death, their financial struggles and of course the constant bickering between her mother and father. But Mehreen wanted her mother to come out of this depression and she didn't know what to do. She tried to invent new ways to rattle her. She would pull her out in the pouring rain, make her go to eat *fuchka* from the street vendor, go window shopping in the busy *Chandi Chawk* and chatter constantly, till her mother had to participate. She showered her with kisses knowing her mother did not like to show too much physical affection. She did all this because deep down she knew that her mother had never known what it truly was like to be young and carefree.

"You can tell those old cackles that my daughter might not be fair, but she is a kind person and a brilliant student. She will make something of herself and not have to worry about getting married to some man, who will never realize her value." She banged the phone down and told herself that this was the reason she liked to keep to herself.

Rehnuma, secretly loved these moments with her daughter. They were mindless moments, making her feel young and reckless. Even while growing up, she did not have the chance to be just a foolish girl; she was too busy helping with house work. But she would never admit this to her daughter. After lunch she decided to call her friend Tabassum, whose daughter was about to get married. After a lengthy discussion, Tabassum said "Rehnuma, listen I heard Nera and Hena talking the other day. They were saying you would have a hard time getting your daughter married as she is quite dark in complexion. It's sad that you and your daughter did not inherit your mother's complexion. You were lucky that Hasan is not very fair himself and also, he realized what a good catch you are. HAHAHA! But seriously, you know how important skin colour is."

"Hmmm." A pain clutched at Rehnuma's heart and she felt breathless, "You can tell those old cackles that my daughter might not be fair, but she is a kind person and a brilliant student. She will make something of herself and not have to worry about getting married to some man, who will never realize her value." She banged the phone down and told herself that this was the reason she liked to keep to herself.

She went to her room and lay down. Her heart stopped hurting and racing, and she felt a moistness in her eyes. She was angry with herself for feeling sad. They were gossiping hens who liked nothing more than dissecting the lives of other people. But they were the mothers of the sons who would eventually be of the marrying age for Mehreen. Rehnuma blocked out the thoughts as she reminded herself that she wanted a life of learning and accomplishment for Mehreen, not the burdens and bindings of a traditional marriage. She sighed and tried to take a nap. Her dreams were always the

same, a truck or snake pursued her and she was always running away from it. Again, and again the same dream returned to haunt her. She lay down as she always did after her lunch and tried to close her eyes. Thoughts chased inside her head as she worried about Mehreen and the money that had already been spent on Mehreen's tuition. She would have to cut the grocery budget, buy only vegetables for the next three weeks. If Hasan got something from the consultancy maybe they would be okay, but sometimes her impractical husband did the consultancy for free; another issue which frustrated her about him. She closed her eyes and tried to will herself to sleep.

When Hasan came back home, she noticed that he was limping. His hair was completely white and he looked frail. His always thin body was simply bony now. The suit he wore hung on him. The eyes behind the frames were tired and old. Rehnuma realized with a flutter that he looked very old.

"Is something wrong? Why are you limping?"

"My head was spinning today and I knocked my knee against a desk."

"Ooof really you should learn to be more careful." She called the servant girl and asked for some ice. She gave them to Hasan to press on his knees. He applied the ice and went to take a shower. Rehnuma wanted to tell him about the phone conversation. But what was the point? One thing she had found about Hasan is the shyness she had mistaken was actually his habit of not talking too much. Nowadays he was better, but after her marriage his lack of conversation and controlled show of emotions tore at her until she too learnt to block her feelings and display very little of how she felt. Today she felt like talking to him because she knew he loved Mehreen as much as she loved her. She decided to wait till he was less tired and so she went in search of her daughter to inform her that her father was feeling out of sorts. She knew that Mehreen would be able to reach her father more than she would be able to.

She didn't know what she wanted to hear from him, anything that would take away worrying about Mehreen and her future, worrying about money, keeping all her wishes always at bay, squashing her sadness when she saw something nice at a store but was unable to buy it. She wanted him to ease her sorrows, yet she blamed him for most of her sorrow. It was a vicious cycle.

Later on in the day, when Hasan was sitting on the balcony and sipping a cup of tea, Rehnuma told him about the conversation. Hasan looked out at the road thoughtfully. It infuriated Rehnuma, "I should have known it was useless telling you anything. You are hopeless."

"Please Rehnuma there is no need to get into a fight. I was merely keeping quiet because I was thinking that there should be some kind of law against malicious gossip. How can they even speak of Mehreen. Do they know her? Do they understand her?"

Rehnuma didn't know what she wanted to hear but she felt frustrated. She wanted him to say something that was going to make her feel better. She didn't know what she wanted to hear from him, anything that would take away worrying about Mehreen and her future, worrying about money, keeping all her wishes always at bay, squashing her sadness when she saw something nice at a store but was

unable to buy it. She wanted him to ease her sorrows, yet she blamed him for most of her sorrow. It was a vicious cycle.

She kept quiet and looked outside watching the wind blow the leaves around and wishing the wind could carry her like it did anything in its path. She prayed for a miracle; she prayed for fortune to smile on her and help out her Mehreen. Soon they heard about Mehreen's scholarship and Rehnuma felt appeased. Finally, her dream for her daughter would be realized. She would be able to make a life for herself, a life of learning and accomplishing her dreams: A steady job, a nice house, the ability to buy whatever she desired, to travel the world and be able to make her own choices. So far, they had been unable to buy Mehreen anything of value, everything was secondhand or bought on bargain from the footpath vendors. She wanted better for Mehreen. Maybe Mehreen would never get married. What was so terrible about that? At least she would not have to live with someone she did not get along with or deal with in-laws who resented her for her skin colour. No, a life of learning and achievement was far better.

Days passed into months and then it was time for Mehreen to leave. The night before the flight Rehnuma went to her room. Mehreen was sitting and packing her bags. She sat on her bed. Her hand fidgeted with a bracelet. It was silver with *ayatul kursi* (a prayer for safety) written on it. Rehnuma cleared her throat. "Mehreen, come here I want to place this on your hands so you will never forget your faith, your roots and all the principles we have taught you. I want to tell you something today, never worry about your looks or color. You are who you are, you are special and if a man and his family doesn't want to marry you because of your skin color, then you will be better off never getting married. For marriage brings only disappointment and disillusion." A tear slowly curled its way down Rehnuma's cheek, unsure of its destiny and new to its surrounding. Mehreen hugged her mother and when Rehnuma would have pulled away, she held on to her.

"I know your life has not been easy. I wish I could change it and give you a life you deserve. I know you and Abbu have your problems, but he has always loved you and I know deep down you also love him. Maybe once I am gone you and him can become friends – something neither of you learnt to be. As far as the cackling women and their stupid sons I don't care. I know what they say about me, but I am going to make something of myself not only for myself *Ammu*, but for you. Don't worry about me. *Ami tau ami*, I am who I am."

Hasan put his hands on top of her and for the first time in years she did not pull back. She heard the sniffing and realized that he had also been crying. For the first time she felt she could share her feelings with him. They shared something in common; both of them loved Mehreen. Both of them missed her. She held on to the hand that was now gnarled and rough with age and realized that they had come a long way.

Rehnuma looked up at her daughter and felt suddenly old. A burden had been lifted, she felt like the ox whose yoke had been lifted for the first time and her heart was fluttering with joy. “How did you learn to be so confident and who told you that your father loves me? Does he ever show any emotions? Has he ever even bothered to give me a present? Nothing is celebrated by him no birthdays, anniversary, nothing. It’s like living with a non-entity.”

“You taught me to be confident. I watch you and see how you carry yourself, with pride and dignity. People respect you. You do countless charities; even when you have nothing. You never tried to change me, you pushed me true but I wanted to be pushed. You never told me you loved me, but I could see it in your expression in the way you would bite your lips when I would cry or get hurt. I always knew. As for Abbu I know he isn’t emotional or loving; not the way you want him to be but he is kind and he told me that he loves you.”

“He said what? HA, you are quite mistaken.”

“No, he did, and he said that you didn’t want to hear it for you should have married someone else, someone more like your father.”

Rehnuma kept quiet and wondered when her role had reversed. Now her daughter was giving her advice, truly the world had changed. She sat on Mehreen’s bed and watched her pack her few belongings. She wished she had more to give her, like nice warm clothes for she had heard that Boston could be cold. But they had barely been able to pay for her ticket and tuition. Even with the scholarship, the little they would be paying had stretched them. She sighed and tried to ignore the disappointment that neither she nor Hasan could afford to go with their daughter. She decided she would pray instead. She left Mehreen after a while and decided to close her mind and heart to anything else. She started praying. Finally, when it was late, she stumbled to her room and her bed. But she spent the night tossing and turning, wondering how the rest of her days would pass without Mehreen’s presence.

Mehreen’s departure brought a quietness. Gone was the laughter, the spontaneity, the endless giggles. The whole house was shrouded in loss and gloom. Rehnuma stood on the balcony and cried softly.

A gentle voice called from the dark, “Sit down Rehnuma, share your grief with me. Let’s at least share the grief of our daughter’s departure together. Now there is only me and you.” Rehnuma was surprised to hear Hasan’s voice, but her grief was too vast for her to pull it back. She sat down and continued to cry softly. Hasan put his hands on top of her and for the first time in years she did not pull back. She heard the sniffing and realized that he had also been crying. For the first time she felt she could share her feelings with him. They shared something in common; both of them loved Mehreen. Both of them missed her. She held on to the hand that was now gnarled and rough with age and realized that they had come a long way.

Mehreen’s departure brought with it a change in the household that even he noticed. Rehnuma needed him as he needed her. In the evening just before the

Magrib prayers he would often find Rehnuma sitting in the balcony sipping tea and looking at the confusion below. He decided one day to start joining her, hoping that finally their common loneliness would enable them to talk together.

CHAPTER 3

The next four years passed slowly for Rehnuma. She would wait patiently every Friday to hear her daughter's voice. She would hear all her excited news or gossip, all the while keeping quiet and saying only in the end, "Be careful always, and stay well." There was too much to say, so she did not know what to say to Mehreen. How could she tell her grown daughter that she missed her terribly, that she felt lonely and that there was no one she could seek solace in. Hasan understood her loneliness, he too felt it every time he came home and did not hear his daughter's music playing softly in the background or her endless chatter with the servants or his wife. He had always been a quiet man and his marriage to Rehnuma was volatile. He sensed her hidden resentments, he had seen her temper increase over the years, her directness had become hostile and intimidating. He didn't know what to do. He had been raised by his aunts and uncles. He could not remember birthdays or anniversaries. They were meaningless to him. He was not well off when he married her and so he couldn't buy her anything nice. He felt there was no need for such things. The fact that he was married to her and had remained faithful should have made it clear that he loved her. He had become religious over the years and spent his free time reading the Koran or other texts related to religion. It was a time for meditation and cleansing of the soul and he preferred being alone at those times. Rehnuma usually visited her parents in the evenings anyway. After their death she would spend her time watching soap operas which he found despicable.

Mehreen's departure brought with it a change in the household that even he noticed. Rehnuma needed him as he needed her. In the evening just before the Magrib prayers he would often find Rehnuma sitting in the balcony sipping tea and looking at the confusion below. He decided one day to start joining her, hoping that finally their common loneliness would enable them to talk together, instead of locking himself away in his study. Sometimes they talked about nothing and sometimes they let the silence talk in their stead.

When he had bought this small house, he never realized that the surrounding would develop so quickly. He had been able to take out a loan and buy the two-story house at a very reasonable cost as there was nothing around. But now things were different, slowly the surroundings had gathered momentum and people began to build, grow, live, sell and buy. But the house had become old and Rehnuma often grumbled about its problems.

"What are you thinking about Rehnuma?"

"I am thinking that I am a failure. I have done nothing in life. I have spent my life only doing housework and that's it. When I look back, I have no sense of achievement. I had so many dreams. I was supposed to go to so many places, do so much."

“You have done a lot of charity work and you raised a daughter, looked after your family. Are those not achievements?”

“Whose achievements, are they? They are a normal part of life; nothing is there to say that Rehnuma did this and that makes her unique.”

Hasan sighed. He didn't know what to say. He knew she resented him for not letting her work. But even her father had agreed, a woman from a good background does not work. What kind of a reflection would it have been on him? He hoped that maybe he could reach out to her now.

In this manner they would pass the days. At least in the evenings they would sit together in silence. At night, Hasan would go to sleep by 9:00 p.m. as he liked to wake up by 4:00 a.m. for prayers and meditation. Rehnuma would watch TV and come to bed around 12:00 a.m.. She would wake up at 8:00 a.m. and then become busy with household work or guiding the servants, making shopping lists, going to the bazaar or talking on the phone. Hasan would go to his consultancy and would come back by 12:00 p.m., take a shower, have lunch, take a nap and then in the evenings after Magrib prayers, sit and read the newspaper, or recite from the Koran, meditate, watch the news and go to sleep after a light dinner. Days passed by, and his routine did not change.

How could she tell her daughter she missed her and wanted her to come back to her? How could she tell her she loved her? These were not things that one said to their children. Instead, she tried to encourage Mehreen to look for a job. A part of her wanted Mehreen to work and start her life, a part of her wanted to enfold her within herself and never let her go.

Rehnuma's routine, also hardly varied. She would keep herself busy with household chores, watch some TV and then at night watch some more TV and finally go to sleep. The only variation would be when she would have Meera the girl who worked for her sometimes come and knead her aching feet and listen to her gossip about the neighbors. When Mehreen had been home, she had often gone out with her or sat with her listening to her endless chatter, but now she hardly felt like going outside and her heart was once again fluttering from time to time.

When the four years were almost over it was with anxiety that she waited to hear from Mehreen. Would she, like other children who went to the West, stay on and make a life there? How would she see her again? They would be able to visit once a year at the most. Finally, the day came and Mehreen called, “Ammu I will be graduating soon, are you and Abbu going to come?”

“I don't know yet, I don't feel up to traveling. The visa process I have heard has become very complicated.”

“But I want you and Abbu to come; you have to help me pack for going back home.”

“You don't want to stay there?”

“No, I want to come home work for a while and maybe go back later for higher degrees. Don't you want

me to come home?”

“Well, if you feel it’s the right decision, I don’t see why not.” She wanted to say so much more, but was unable to voice her feelings. How could she tell her daughter she missed her and wanted her to come back to her? How could she tell her she loved her? These were not things that one said to their children. Instead, she tried to encourage Mehreen to look for a job. A part of her wanted Mehreen to work and start her life, a part of her wanted to enfold her within herself and never let her go. But Mehreen was a force of her own and made her own decisions.

True to her words, Mehreen did come back. Rehnuma was not able to go to her graduation. Hasan had to travel alone. Rehnuma’s anxiety had brought on a new bout of flutters and the doctor had advised her not to travel. Rehnuma was disappointed but told herself to make preparations for Mehreen’s arrival. So, she fussed and made changes, here and there, whatever she was able to keep within her budget. The night before Mehreen was to arrive she cooked a roast, *biryani* and snacks that Mehreen liked to eat. She spent hours in the kitchen and by the end she was completely drenched in sweat. After taking a shower, she felt tired and lay down. She opened her eyes and it was morning. Hasan had said they would come home by taxi so there was no need to send the car. Rehnuma got up and started fussing with her hair. There wasn’t much she did with it. She combed it and put it up in a bun. She wore a new sari, something she had been keeping in the closet for a special occasion and she wore lipstick; the only one that stood on her dresser.

She headed to Mehreen’s room and fussed with the flowers she had bought yesterday and went to the kitchen to make sure everything was okay. When the doorbell rang Rehnuma felt her heart flutter. How would Mehreen look? Would she still be the same? Would she cuddle her and kiss her and talk incessantly?

When Mehreen walked through the door, Rehnuma felt that time had stopped. Her heart thundered and beat without any rhythm or control. She no longer had any feelings in her limbs. She felt her daughter embrace her and she stood still unable to express herself or show Mehreen how she felt. Her feelings were overwhelming her, and like a tidal wave she felt that her emotions were reaching a peak and would be crashing any minute. Mehreen looked the same. She had gained a little weight but Rehnuma liked it. Her face was still dimpled and her hair streaks were still there. Rehnuma came out of her stupor and took Mehreen by the hands and made her sit on one of the chairs. She held on to the soft and yet strong hands, looking them over and over again, telling herself that this was the same little girl whose hands she had held while Mehreen had learnt to walk. Now those hands were holding her own dry and rough ones with strength and tenderness. She saw Hasan and realized that she had forgotten about him. He was busy bringing in the luggage.

“How was it?”

“Very nice, very nice ceremony. We missed you.”

“Ammu I don’t want you to freak out. I want to tell you something.” At Rehnuma’s indrawn breath Mehreen rushed on, “I have met someone at the University. He teaches there part time and runs his IT business the other times. I

really like him and he seems to like me. He wants to ask his parents to come and talk to you and Abbu, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

Rehnuma tried not to think about the ceremony, as it saddened her that she had not been able to go. She spent the rest of the day fussing with Mehreen and stealing glances at her to make sure she was really there with her. The day passed in a breeze and Rehnuma listened to Mehreen’s endless chatter about her college, her friends and her professors. She tried to listen carefully to make sure there was no man in Mehreen’s life, but she picked up no such vibes from her conversation. Soon it was night time and Rehnuma sent a silent prayer while falling asleep for having Mehreen back again. Her heart steadied its rhythm and beat in one harmonious melody.

Days passed and Mehreen was busy sending her resume to different places. Finally, she found a job at one of the Universities as a teaching assistant. Mehreen was thrilled and so was Rehnuma. The day she got her first paycheck, Mehreen took her parents out to dinner. After they came back home Mehreen called her mother to her room. Rehnuma sat down and wondered why Mehreen was calling her now.

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Rehnuma felt betrayed, distressed and lonely all at once. Why hadn’t Mehreen mentioned anything earlier? She had hoped Mehreen would complete her higher degrees and then get married. Didn’t she realize that being married was so difficult; it drains one out? She kept quiet.

“Ammu if you feel upset, I won’t see him. It’s just that he is really nice and liberal. I want you to meet him before his parents come over. Please Ammu, for my sake.”

Rehnuma kept quiet. She felt sad and kept telling herself she should feel happy as Mehreen was happy. A part of her told her it was only natural that Mehreen would like someone, but another part of her wished she had waited and let Rehnuma find her a suitable groom. She kept quiet and waited. Hasan also heard the news from Mehreen and tried to convince Rehnuma it was for the best, “She is not a child, Rehnuma. She is a grown woman and of course she has the right to choose her own companion.” Rehnuma recalled a very similar conversation between her parents and sighed. She wished she could control fate and delay the inevitable.

When Mehreen walked over and gave her *salaams*, Rehnuma tensed as she saw the mother’s face tighten. She could tell what she was thinking, that Mehreen was darker than her husband to be. Rehnuma started to fiddle with her sari and wished she could take Mehreen aside and tell her how she felt.

CHAPTER 4

Rehnuma wanted to say that she was afraid that Mehreen would face the same problems she had and she was scared for her. But she continued to hold her silence. She gave Mehreen the permission to ask the boy, whose name was Reshad, to come and visit them. The day they were to arrive, Rehnuma fussed and prepared and tried to make sure everything was in order.

When they walked in, Rehnuma kept herself busy in the kitchen until Hasan called her and told her their guests had arrived. The parents were average looking Bengalis. The father had retired recently. He had worked in banking for many years and the mother was a housewife. She was quiet and slim. But her eyes worried Rehnuma as she had seen too many women with those eyes. Her face was slim and sand coloured but there was no softness. Her mouth was stretched out to a thin line and although she spoke politely, her mind, Rehnuma sensed was elsewhere. Reshad, she realized, was quite fair in complexion. He was tall, pleasant looking and spoke with a warmth and kindness that Rehnuma appreciated.

When Mehreen walked over and gave her *salaams*, Rehnuma tensed as she saw the mother's face tighten. She could tell what she was thinking, that Mehreen was darker than her husband to be. Rehnuma started to fiddle with her sari and wished she could take Mehreen aside and tell her how she felt. Reshad's mother kept quiet throughout the conversation and Rehnuma began to wonder when they would leave. After the tea was served, Reshad's mother made an excuse that she had an appointment and needed to leave. Rehnuma saw the look of surprise on Reshad's face. He slowly got up and his father followed. After they exited, Rehnuma went to the kitchen and started to bang the pots and pans out of frustration.

"What's wrong Ammu, why are you upset?"

"I am not upset."

"Yes, you are. Didn't you like Reshad?"

"I liked him but his mother, she will make your life miserable. She is one of those cackling hens. She does not like you."

"Mehreen I am so proud of you. I always thought that I had done nothing right in life. But I have done the right thing in raising you. If you love Reshad and feel you can work around his mother I have no objection, but I don't want you to sell yourself to a marriage or a mother-in-law who will not respect you. I want you to be happy and to live your life your way."

"Why? What makes you think so?"

Rehnuma kept quiet.

“Tell me Ammu why, why do you think she doesn’t like me?”

Rehnuma did not answer. Her heart fluttered uncontrollable and she wished Mehreen was back in America. She wished Mehreen was somewhere far away where she would not be hurt by others’ prejudices.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Mehreen was upset and did not come out of her room. Rehnuma sent the servant several times to call her but she did not open her door. Finally at night while Rehnuma was watching one of her soaps and Hasan had gone to sleep, Mehreen came to her. Rehnuma switched off the television as she saw that Mehreen was crying. “Ammu you were right Reshad called and said that his mother was upset because she thought I was dark. Reshad is very upset with her and he tried to make me understand that his mother was old fashioned. I told him and his mother to go to hell.”

Rehnuma held her daughter tightly and kissed her loudly on the forehead. She felt proud of her daughter and said so, “Mehreen I am so proud of you. I always thought that I had done nothing right in life. But I have done the right thing in raising you. If you love Reshad and feel you can work around his mother I have no objection, but I don’t want you to sell yourself to a marriage or a mother-in-law who will not respect you. I want you to be happy and to live your life your way.”

Mehreen looked at her mother through her tear-stained eyes, blinked and went back to hugging her mother. From then on Mehreen and her mother became closer than before. They spent countless days going to the street vendors, standing and eating the spicy dishes. They went to fairs and looked at silly things like fans made of jute, small rolling pins, steel pans that were flat in shape. Mehreen would come back and tell Rehnuma about her day at college and it made Rehnuma learn about the world outside her home. Reshad kept calling and came by often. Rehnuma did not worry or pay attention. She knew her daughter would be able to handle herself. She paid no attention to malicious comments or snickers when she and Mehreen went to any dinners or weddings. Nothing or no one could say anything that would make her worry about her dark-complexioned daughter.

Perhaps one was never too old to live or find oneself.

Mehreen had decided to pay attention to her mother and concentrated on her work. She decided to get to know Reshad better see if a future together was possible. Rehnuma was old-fashioned and did not like the idea of the two getting to know each other before getting married, but she kept reminding herself that if she had been given a chance to know her husband better maybe her choices would be different. Hasan was practical as ever and did not have any objections. He was just happy to have his daughter back. He continued to urge Rehnuma to sit with him in the evenings and talk. At least this way they were having some sort of communication with each other.

Mehreen did get married to Reshad eventually, without his mother’s attendance, but Rehnuma did not care. She paid no heed to the gossip of her friends and relatives. She felt happy when Reshad and Mehreen moved to the States together. She decided to visit them after Mehreen sent her a ticket and the doctor said it was alright to travel. After coming back Rehnuma decided to take some law courses

and for the first time in years felt a spark within herself and looked forward to mornings. Hasan said he would not stand in her way; both of them were too old to worry about society anymore. So Rehnuma joined students who were old enough to be her children and realized that sometimes the conventions needed to be set aside. That perhaps one was never too old to live or find oneself.

3 BANGLADESHI WOMEN

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