

## **The Feminist**

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Laka received tumultuous applause for saving a grossly abused woman. She beamed with smiles at the audience, bowed, and blew kisses into the air. She wore a two-piece dress – a “jumper” and a long-sleeve blouse. The tie-died dark blue cotton carried folkloric motifs. A beaded queen attended by men at arms. Laka’s black long hair was jerry-curled. She wore silver earrings and a necklace. She was athletic and rather thin. She was proud of her five-feet-three-inch height and felt very comfortable with her stature.

To the thronged theatre, she was a savior, a modern-day heroine. She was a rat that defeated the elephant as in folktales; a David who beat Goliath hands down in the Bible. No superlative was too much to describe her feat in the new millennium that had dawned with new rights for all. Women now have their own defenders and do not have to wait for men to help them out of a crisis, the women in the audience believed. The stage lights shone on her face as the crowd rose to give her a tumultuous ovation. The hall vibrated with the applause.

Laka was neither a wrestler nor a kick-boxer. She was not a martial arts practitioner either. She was a different type of fighter. An unusual knight of sorts, she carried no weapon in her battles to free abused women from their male ogres.

Though unarmed, Laka possessed a type of power that was difficult to beat with ordinary weapons, mere hulk, or fighting skills. She had over the years acquired the reputation of a no-nonsense woman. She always came to the rescue of those women whose husbands or fathers thought they had slaves or servants who could be treated like chattel. Stories circulated that she had magic powers to appear at the right time when she was needed.

Many women dreamt of her rescuing them from cruel conditions. She had embarked on a crusade against men who mistreated women or believed they were superior to women. Young girls fled to her for refuge from being circumcised. She

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had assembled a group of sympathetic feminist lawyers to defend without any fees helpless divorcees and widows from being short-changed in property sharing and inheritance matters respectively.

On occasions like this night's, Laka believed she was winning the battles and it was a matter of time for her to win the war. Then the government would legislate against abusive men and the courts would treat such men as criminals that should spend their time in jail. Then female circumcision would not just be outlawed but the ban strictly enforced. She looked forward to castrating patriarchy and empowering women.

After Laka graduated from the university with a degree in Dramatic Arts, she married the poet Bongi, a professor at the state university, who had been dating her almost all her undergraduate years. She kept her family name, Dezi, and the poet did not care about what she was called if that pleased her. She used that concession or indifference on the part of her husband to talk to women about their rights – the need to keep their identities in a male-dominated world. “If men did not take women’s names after marriage, why should women take men’s names?” she often asked her fellow women who introduced themselves as Mrs. This or Mrs. That.

“I can’t be anybody’s slave or servant,” she would proclaim.

“I am Laka Dezi,” she would introduce herself to the women who already knew her in order to make the point about her identity.

She did not tell them that Dezi was her father’s and not her mother’s name.

Laka Dezi was here to read from her poetry work. She was not of the same level as her husband or partner, as she preferred to call him. However, she was known all over the country not as a poet but as a champion of oppressed women. She was the opposite of her husband who shunned public appearances. Even those who read his poetry and praised his lyrical talent had no idea of what he looked like as a person. On the contrary, Laka Dezi’s vibrant face graced many local newspaper pages, especially those of tabloids that reveled on scandals.

The long ovation this evening was for one of Laka’s feats, as she narrated it. In the twelve minutes she had to read from her poetry, she spent eight to introduce the poem, which lasted only three minutes. And the last minute was an invective against abusive men.

“I got him at the source of his so-called power!” she exclaimed.

She had kicked the abusive husband of a woman at his groins. The beast of a man was huge and often beat his wife whenever he returned home after drinking till late in the night. On this very day, the woman’s cries rent the air and Laka was passing by. She heard the howl and came to her rescue. She pushed and kicked the man so hard that he left his wife alone and did not respond to Laka. The kick must have caused him much pain but he bore it to cover his shattered ego, Laka told the audience. He had withdrawn into the house like a snail or tortoise into its shell.

Since Laka was smallish, the man could have squeezed her to death, if he had wanted. He could have thrown her like a ball into the street, if he wanted. But fortunately, her moral presence was so strong that it paralyzed the man. The huge man must have been shocked by her sudden appearance and the unexpected push and kick. Laka demonstrated what she did to the audience. She posed as a kung fu artist. Some cameras clicked. Her voice was very strong and boomed loud as if from a big-frame person.

After completing her presentation, there was further applause for her heroic deeds.

“You are a heroine,” someone from the audience proclaimed.

“You are our savior,” came from a young woman in the front row.

“We want more of our educated women to be like you,” an older woman shouted.

“You are a great woman,” came from another corner.

Laka saved the abused! She beat men! She brought justice to mistreated ones! She brought dignity to womanhood! She restored respect to housewives! She was the refuge of girls threatened with obnoxious traditional practices. There was no end to the litany of her heroic deeds. As she still stood before the audience, a middle-aged tall woman stepped from a side of the stage and threw a garland over her neck. Laka bowed and waved; she was the acknowledged new heroine of the patriarchal society of the twenty-first century.

“Whenever a woman can beat a man, let her do it,” one elderly woman counseled to the delight of the women.

“Not just beat him, but do so mercilessly,” the same elderly woman added.

Though married for ten years now, Laka Dezi had no kids. It was her decision not to carry more than her share of a relationship. She could not be pregnant, she said, when her husband was not going to be pregnant. The partnership had to be maintained on an equal basis. She was very pretty and though in her early forties, she could pass for a lady in her early thirties; one in her prime. Her eyes glittered, the eyelashes long and penciled. She knew how to smile to show her dazzling white teeth. Warmth radiated from her smile.

She had told the gathering how she had a give-and-take relationship with her husband, who had no problem with her travels to conferences, as she also had no problem with his going to his conferences. They were both artists of course. The man wrote poetry and children’s stories in addition to his teaching literature; the woman currently did not teach but wrote poetry that for the most part she kept from her husband. She said she wanted to protect him from being jealous or having wrong ideas about the people, things, and ideas she wrote poems about. The husband gave her his poetry and the children’s stories to read. She said that was his choice but she would not change her mind to give him her own writings. If her partner wanted to hear her poetry, he should attend one of her public reading sessions if he could withstand the passion of her words, she told him and others.

Laka Dezi smoked and drank wine. It was her right, she said, to do what men did with impunity. She spoke against a different set of rules for men and women because of their gender. "They have their weapon and we also have ours which is even more potent," she told the women in the audience. She exhaled clouds of smoke and even blew fumes into men's faces if they stared at her or stood too close. She guarded her space by any means possible and responded robustly to any violation of what she considered her sovereignty. She drank expensive red wine, which was good for her system, she said.

After the day's proceedings in the artists' conference, all the poets went back to their hotel rooms. This was their private time; unlike most of the daytime when they had to do so many things together. The organizers of the conference expected each of the poets to recoup and have time and space to reflect on the day's work and prepare for the next day's. Tomorrow, from the schedule, promised to be another busy day. The poets would visit several secondary schools and not only perform their works but also do creative writing workshops.

Laka Dezi had insisted on going to only girls' secondary schools, and the organizers had obliged. According to her, she wanted to raise a generation of female warriors who would protect themselves and the earlier they started learning her offensive and defensive skills, the better for the young women. Poetry, according to her, was useless if it was not a potent weapon. She wanted the girls she taught writing to imbibe her philosophy of literature.

Late that same night of the rousing performance that made Laka Dezi a heroine of the new millennium, she called the dreadlocked young man, Nuva, who had performed his poetry just before she did hers. He had sat on the front row. She had gazed at him even as she did her performance and fancied him from the podium. "How well-sculpted some men are!" she had told herself. Now was her private time. She picked the phone and called Nuva to invite him to her room.

"I don't think you have anything doing. Please come immediately," she said on the phone.

"Can I come later?" Nuva asked.

"No; now," she said. "Come right away," she said.

Nuva answered Laka's urgent call. She was not the sort of person who called you and you delayed a minute. Nuva felt he could not withstand the verbal assault of Laka if he delayed going to see her. She was one of those few women whose orders must be obeyed by men even if they were generals. He easily remembered how she had praised his poetry as the best in the group of writers. Poets, he knew from experience, are very egotistical human beings. So, when a fellow poet tells you that your poetry is better than the other poets', including her own, he reflected, it must be a sign. That sign he could not interpret. But he had to go to see one of his admirers. Will she ask for my autograph? he asked himself. Maybe she will ask me to read or chant one of my new poems, he suspected.

Laka's hotel room was plush and smelt fresh. The lights were on. The bed was made. She was in the bed, her legs stretched as if reading leisurely. She placed Arundhati Roy's *The Gods of Small Things* beside her. She was dressed in light and rather transparent linen that exposed her female contours. Her breasts could be seen moving with her breath.

"Sit down," she told Nuva in the tone of an order.

"You had a brilliant performance today," he complimented.

"That's my work every day to stop the abuse of women," she told him.

"We need more women like you to stand up to abusive men," Nuva told her.

"Thanks for understanding. I wish all men would say the same."

She raised herself halfway and beckoned on Nuva.

"Are you scared to sit close to me? Do you think I am going to knock you down like the man I talked about?" she asked.

"Of course I'm not scared. You don't go about just knocking down men," he said.

"If you're a good man, come and sit near me," she told him.

Nuva hesitated a while but went to sit by her.

Laka's eyes were excited.

"I like your dreadlocks," she complimented.

"Thank you."

"Can I touch them?" she asked.

Nuva was confused. She did not wait for his answer and went straight to touch the dreadlocks.

"They are so beautiful. You are so attractive in them," she complimented.

"Thank you," Nuva replied.

There was a minute or so of silence during which their eyes fell on each other. Laka dropped her hands from the dreadlocks and held Nuva's right hand. She clasped their hands.

"Do you have that plastic thing?" she asked.

After she called Nuva, she realized that she had not brought a packet of condom as she normally did when she traveled out to give talks or read from her poetry.

"Damn it!" she had exclaimed before Nuva knocked at her door.

The young man was taken aback by her question.

"I mean condom," she explained.

"No."

She drew him to her and began kissing him. Nuva was hesitant but went along with the kissing and subsequent play. They started rubbing each other intimately.

"Can you get one?" she demanded.

Unknown to her, Nuva had left his girlfriend in his room when she called.

"Is it not too late to get one?" he asked.

"You won't know whether stores are still open without trying," she told him.

"Let me go and buy the thing," he said.

“Be fast and come back before I melt down,” she said.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Nuva said, and left.

Laka Dezi waited and waited for Nuva to return but to no avail. She could not bring herself to call him in his room again. Men should not be too arrogant about what they and women were going to share and enjoy equally. She was not sure whether the enjoyment would be equal because some psychologists said men enjoyed sex more than women. She did not believe them because she knew she enjoyed sex more than any man she made love with. It was her pleasure to always beat men in whatever men and women did together.

The melt-down she foresaw started in anticipation of Nuva’s return. As the night progressed past midnight and there was no knock on the door, she became more excited. She had to take care of herself, because she would not leave herself helpless before any man. She massaged her own breasts and later fingered herself into an orgasm.

After regaining herself, she smoked a cigarette before falling asleep.

The following morning Laka and Nuva met. They looked at each other and walked to some corner where they could talk without others hearing what they talked about. They did not want anybody else to know their secret.

“Why did you not come back?” she shouted at him.

“All the stores were closed and I couldn’t get the thing,” he explained.

“Why did you not come back to tell me?” she asked.

“I couldn’t come back without it,” Nuva lamely explained.

“You’re a coward!” she accused him.

She would not allow him to defend himself.

“Didn’t you know the state I was in when you went out? Do you know what it would have been for me without helping myself?”

Nuva did not quite understand how she helped herself. He could only say “Sorry, Madam.”

“Sorry for yourself,” she said, as she blew cigarette smoke into his face.

Nuva walked away. He was happy they were not going to the same secondary schools for the day’s assignments. She stayed behind by the trimmed flower relishing the new brand of cigarette she was trying for the first time.

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