

Mother Poems

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(1) Beautiful Butterfly

Lying on my mother's bed
I watch her
begin her Sunday morning ritual.

She opens her cupboard
and before her lie
shelves of neatly arranged sarees.
A splendid array of red, blue and green
calling out to be worn.

I never know how she chooses
I pick my favourite blue.
She smiles and pays no heed.

Freshly bathed
with quaint modesty
she rushes into her bedroom.

Now with immaculate precision
she drapes her body
with yards of cloth.
Within minutes she emerges
a beautiful butterfly.

I stare with wonder
at the tall fair lovely woman.
My mother.

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I no longer go into my mother's bedroom,
a childhood moment
now lost.

She no longer wears sarees.
Now she's dressed in cotton kaftans.
It's all very practical now.

My mother's sarees sit quietly
on the shelves of her cupboard
Are they still calling out to be worn?

I know the next time I see her in a saree
she will not be that tall lovely lady.
She will be small and shrivelled
in her final bed.

(2) Maternal Moments

My mother must have loved me
despite what I was and had done.

At twenty, she would still feed me
handfuls of hot curried rice.
She'd try to sneak veggies in them.
I'd oblige.

Midday lunches. Hurrying to work.
No one else home.
Except for Pati somewhere in the house.
Amma would laugh and tease...
I delighted completely in these moments.

I, despite myself, love Amma.
I watch her now.
The Indonesian maid is spooning her meal.
She now is cheating mum with her veggies.

But Amma is in no hurry.
She is going nowhere.
She sits and stares,
opens her mouth as the spoon
gently pries it open.

A stranger feeds the mother who once fed me.
I can't bring myself to hold the spoon
to put food in my mother's mouth.

As if to apologise, I touch her arm
but pull away quickly.
She feels shrivelled and shrunken.
Somewhere there is the mother
who once fed me
not just as a child
but a grown man
and I cannot repay that love.

(3) Mother Doll

Another Sunday visit
to Amma's house.

Powdered and dressed.
(My sister fusses over Amma)
There she sits on her chair.

Her eyes see something.
It's not me
Hers is a distant gaze.

Every Sunday
I see my mother freshly bathed and dressed
awaiting my brother to take her to church.

Amma yawns.
She is tired of sitting up.
Is she tired playing my sister's mother doll?
My sister does not seem to tire.

I look away.

(4) Loss

As I stare at this sad state building
I say to myself:
It's such a *kudisai*.

Kudisai kudisai kudisai

The word rings in my ears.

The last time I heard it
probably came from my mother's lips.
These days we hear nothing.

We once lived in what some would have called a *kudisai*
My fondest childhood memories are there at that *kudisai*
My fiercest of nightmares, I reckon, are there at that *kudisai* too.

Kudisai kudisai kudisai

I have not heard that word for years
yet it returns today.
Why did it return to me today?
Some sense of foreboding to hear my mother speak again?
An answer to my brother's fervent prayers?

Kudisai kudisai kudisai

I think to myself:
lost is the *kudisai* we once called home.
lost is my mother we lovingly call *Amma*.

(5) Wicked Thoughts

I strike up a conversation with my mother
or at least I try.
It's not always easy.

Today I fare better.
I tell her of my sons.
She makes the right responsive sounds.
I am happy.
We seemed to have talked.

Then she asks:
What is Vincent doing?
My heart sinks.
I don't want to repeat.

I tell her of my impending travels.
I finish. She says nothing.
I don't want to know if she has heard me.

I often fear she may die while I'm away somewhere,
And wonder if I'd return.
She is dead and she won't know anyway.

Wicked thoughts...
unbecoming of a son.

(6) Not Someone... but Me

Amma, how are you?

How are you, Amma?

Amma, it's me.

It's Eddie, Amma.

Who am I, Amma?

A reply: *Yaarob*

Say Eddie, Amma.

A reply: *Yaarob*

Our little greeting game is soon over.
We are both suddenly tired,
though I've just arrived
and Amma is elsewhere.

My sister says—
at least she said something.

I wonder which is less painful.
Silence
or *Yaarob*?

We've both become *Yaarob* to each other,
I tell myself.

(7) Spotted Tongue

I seem to have forgotten
the loving words
my mother must have once spoken.

Now only her harshest words return to me—
both in day and night dreams.

Her words flowed out
with remarkable eloquence
laced with lacerating venom.

When my mother could speak
her humour was rib-tickling.
her spontaneity for Tamil proverbs
legendary.

When my mother could speak
I sometimes wished she wouldn't.

Her words could sear and scar,
cut through you and make you bleed.

Her silence now
makes me wonder...
Has my wish come true?

Or is this the price of having said
just a little too much?

Did she offend someone with a spotted tongue?

(8) Our Prayers

My mother looks on.
It is unclear what she sees.

We are gathered around her
children
grandchildren
great grandchildren.

Each of us has
greeted
touched
all pleaded for some recognition.

Her face seems to relax.
A hint of a smile?
We see what we want...

Her look is blank.
There is only silence.

Dear Lord, thank you for Amma, my brother prays.
Thank you for keeping her in our midst.

Dear Lord, take Amma away from all her suffering, I pray.
Take her away from her pain and our pain.

Is she holding on because of us?
Are we not ready to let her go?
Does she stay for the sake of our selfishness?

If my brother knew my thoughts
he might not forgive me.