

THE GOOD WIFE AND OTHER TALES OF SEDUCTION

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THE GOOD WIFE AND OTHER TALES OF SEDUCTION

Razia Sultana Khan

University of Nebraska, 2007

Adviser: Jonis Agee

The Good Wife and Other Tales of Seduction is a collection of fourteen short stories based on the everyday lives of Bangladeshi characters whose roles are defined by gender, culture, tradition and religion. Though none of the stories are autobiographical, some of them have sprouted from seeds that the women in my family casually scattered in my path.

My grandmother was a born story teller and when I was a child she told me an anecdote about the British enticing the population of their colony in Bengal by offering free tea to the local residents. The British had discovered that the areas in the northeastern parts of India were conducive to tea plantation, and though the best tea was shipped away to Britain, it was economically prudent to have a flourishing local market. The story “Seduction” originated from that.

Stories of ghosts, djinns (also jinns, genies) and evil spirits abound in South Asia and to this day there are many who believe in them. Since djinns are part of the religious belief system, events and actions which defy logic or seem incomprehensible are often explained by the presence and actions of spirits and supernatural beings. Thus, there is a rich tradition of storytelling where magic realism plays a strong part and supernatural

beings like *bhoots* (ghosts), *petnis* (female evil spirits), and jinns merge with human kind. “The Tangawala’s Tale,” “Fried Fish,” and “Big Brother,” fall into this category.

Parables and moral stories are exploited shamelessly by elders as training material. I still remember my grandmother telling me about a “good wife” who made preparation for her husband’s return by making available all manner of torture instruments in case he should need them to punish her.

The stories in this collection are diverse, but many of them show the strong hold religion and culture have over a people and how economic dependency results in oppression.

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Seduction

The chimes of bells wafted over the narrow winding lanes of Aga Sadeque Road, slinking into houses soporific in the mid-afternoon heat. The notes made their way to the dark recesses of homes, creeping into the ears of drowsy residents fanning themselves into fitful naps.

The chimes were different from the jingle of the *chanachur* man's brisk stride as he passed by each evening with his basket of savories hanging from a strap round his neck, swaying rhythmically to the beat of his wide anklet of tiny bells. Little containers of crisp fried rice, steamed chickpeas bursting out of their skins, roasted peanuts and mouthwatering condiments jostled gaily in the basket. They were different from the jangle of rickshaw bells as the driver thumbed the metallic orb of the bell indiscriminately, reveling in his power while at the same time alerting pedestrians to his total lack of control.

The chimes ebbed and flowed, audible one moment, lost the next, an aural seduction that finally lured Halima to the window. Married just four months, Halima at sixteen was a new bride in the Mir household. Free for the first time from the protective cocoon of her parent's house, she was happy in her new life. Her days were spent acclimating to her new family, her nights to the discovery of physical pleasure in her husband's bed.

Each morning after a quick bath from the family well, she rushed to the kitchen where her mother-in-law would be preparing breakfast. Most days it was chapattis and *bhaji*, made of vegetables in season. Other days, especially holidays, there was *paratha*,

thick succulent layered bread fried in ghee, or the little round deep fried *puris*. No matter how early Halima woke her mother-in-law was always in the kitchen before her. After two months Halima was content to give a helping hand before the men trooped in for the first meal of the day.

After breakfast was over, the routine household chores took over till the arrival of the grocery for the day signaled another session in the kitchen. On set days there were other chores like pickle making and *murobba* making.

Halima's mother had told her she was lucky.

"We've found you an excellent husband. The Mirs are a respectable family," she'd said quietly. Halima had been playing with cowry shells, throwing them on the dull red cement floor and picking up one at a time with the single one she threw in the air.

"Listen!" her mother said tersely and Halima stopped.

"Remember you're the eldest daughter-in-law. He has no sisters, thank heavens for that, and his brothers are grown up. You will be respected and..." she looked deep into her daughter's eyes and turned away with a sigh, "you'll learn to adjust to your responsibilities. I pray that you do not shame us."

Her mother's words seemed a thing of the past as Halima sat in front of the window looking out. This was her favorite pastime in the afternoon when the men returned to their work and her mother-in-law retired to take a long nap. Halima was on her own.

Halima's room had a window overlooking Aga Sadeque Road, a dirt path about twelve feet wide lined with houses where the windows looked directly into the road. The large wooden window folded in half vertically and when shut completely blocked out the

light. There was, however, a fixed sheet with wooden slats that enabled the residents to control the ribboned view of the road.

When her husband took her to their room after the marriage, he said casually, “We always have the slats pointing downwards. Otherwise there’s no privacy in this room.”

After a pause he continued, “Mother’s very particular about this.”

As the days passed Halima did notice that whenever her mother-in-law came to her room her eyes invariably went to the slats while she talked to her.

The first couple of weeks Halima stayed away from the window. Gradually, however, the quiet of the afternoon seduced her to it. She noticed that with the slits pointed downwards so that only the dirt road was visible, she could see the legs of people moving to and fro. Some wore loose cotton trousers, others were wrapped in *lungis* furling and unfurling as they passed. When a rickshaw passed she would catch the sight of the bottom half of wheels with the driver’s feet rotating round and round, repeating an incomplete circle.

There were afternoons which offered Halima a visual feast, from a horse drawn tanga squeezing through to the grey moving wall of an elephant’s body as it lumbered past with its ropelike tail switching this way and that. One day she heard the undulating notes of a bamboo flute as they coiled and uncoiled around what must have been a snake charmer. Another day the bioscope-man passed with his box on wheels of exotic pictures waiting to be viewed through a peephole. As he pushed his cart he chanted, “Come and see! Come and See! The Taj of Agra, the minaret of Kutub, the Palace of Air. Sights you have never seen nor will you ever see. One paisa, only one paisa!”

On such days her eyes sparkled and her body rippled with excitement as she tilted the slats for a better view. Halima sat entranced to think such places existed and only at the price of one paisa. She promised herself that someday she would get into that box, no matter what the cost.

That's how her mother-in-law found her one day, Halima's eyes glued to the world outside, oblivious to the sounds inside. The older woman gently adjusted the slats and said, "It works both ways, you know. When we look out they look in."

The following day before going for her midday nap she brought Halima a piece of white cotton, a pair of hoops and yellow and green skeins of embroidery thread.

"Your mother said you're very good with a needle and thread," she smiled.

Halima lowered her eyes and nodded.

"Well, would you like to do this embroidery? We can frame it and put in on your wall when you're done. Would you like that?"

Halima accepted the objects and nodded again. An outline of a parrot with a large envelope in its beak was penciled onto the piece of cotton. On the envelope were the words "Forget Me Not" in uneven letters.

After that every afternoon, she sat with the embroidery carefully taking small and even stitches like a woman's stride, trying to keep within the boundary. When her mother had first shown her the basic stitches, she'd said, "Stitches are like women's steps. Small and neat, careful but steady, not crossing boundaries, keeping within its space". Halima looked wistfully at the two colors she had. She wished she had some red for the beak.

Now, at the sound of the bells she raised the slats a little and was soon rewarded with the sight of an open pushcart coming into view. The man pushing the cart maneuvered it into a little alcove formed by two adjacent buildings just opposite Halima's window.

There was a mobile gas cooker on the cart and on top of that a large kettle. Little clay bowls and other kitchen paraphernalia surrounded the kettle. Halima folded her embroidery and gave in to the novel sight.

A horde of children were pressed around the cart. A few of the younger boys were naked except for a black thread around their waist warding off the evil eye. One boy had a little bell attached to the string to echo his movements, a mother's vain attempt to keep track of her boy. The children laughed as they jostled each other to get a better view of what the man was doing.

An uncanny feeling of herself being watched made Halima look up. The man was staring right at her. He was a big man, dark and sinewy with a thick drooping moustache. There was a twinkle in his eyes and a smile lurking on his lips.

The slats dropped with a snap. Heart pounding, Halima moved away from the window. She waited a minute or two, but all was quiet. The house slept.

Halima arranged her *ghumta* so that it covered not only her head but most of her face and tiptoed back to the window. Cautiously she slanted the slats to their original position pointing downwards. A fraction at a time, she angled the slats till the cart was once more visible. She stopped when the man's neck came into view. He was wearing a blue safari shirt with the top part unbuttoned so that a mat of black curls rose in little swirls. Halima wound the *ghumta* tighter with only her dark, kohl outlined eyes showing.

The large aluminum kettle was on the stove and she could see his hands moving little clay bowls and shuffling items about on the cart. The kettle was soon spitting out vapor. The man put a long handled ladle into it and made a motion of touching the brim of one clay bowl, then reached up and poured from up high, so that the mud colored liquid cascaded down in a smooth swirl, forming a thin layer of delicate foam. A jaunty smile touched his lips as he sneaked a look at Halima's window, then looked away. His eyes roamed the little group of scantily clad children and a number of brown scrawny limbs shot up. Obviously this was not new to them. The man's eyes picked up those of a thin boy of eleven or twelve, and he gave the bowl to the boy and pointed in her direction.

Halima turned pink under her *ghumta*, sure now that he had seen her behind the wooden slats. Her heart skipped a couple of beats as she imagined the boy coming with some message from the stranger.

She pulled her chair away from the window and directed her attention to the parrot's yellow beak. Soon she heard the paddle of soft feet coming closer and even when they stopped she didn't look up.

"Ehm! Ehm!" An imitation of adult throat clearing though a little high was followed with a, "May I come in?"

"Yes, come in."

When the boy entered, Halima saw that it was Ahsan, Bilqis's nine-year-old son. Bilqis often stopped by to chat with Halima's mother-in-law and sometimes she had him in tow.

“Bhabi, the Chaiwallah Bhai said to give this to you.” He stood cradling the clay bowl between his small hands.

“What is it?” Halima said in a flat tone, engrossed in the embroidery.

“It’s a drink...sherbet.”

“What?”

“It’s called ‘*chai*.’ ”

“Well?”

“He’s giving it to everyone.” Ahsan looked at her, a little puzzled at her attitude.

“But what is it?”

“I told you, ‘*chai*.’”

Halima still made no move to relieve him of the bowl.

“It’s really good. It’s something new they’re trying out.” As the bearer of the special drink, Ahsan felt bound to defend the concoction.

“How much?” Halima finally ventured in a low voice.

Ahsan’s face cleared. “It’s free, Bhabi! It’s free!”

As if that clinched matters, he parked the container, sloshing a few drops on her dresser, and hurried out of the room, back to the cart.

Halima didn’t move till the last tinkle of the bell died down. Then she pushed the slats down and sat frowning at the ‘*chai*’. A thin skin, a shade darker than the liquid, was beginning to form on top. A distinctive aroma swirled up lazily. Milky with the touch of something else, neither flower nor fruit. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, comparing it to fragrances she was familiar with, but nothing matched.

The shuffle of Shahina's slippers brought Halima back to the present but before she could act, Shahina had drawn the curtain aside and pushed her head in. Halima looked up ruefully, but didn't say anything.

Shahina was a widow in her forties who lived with her brother's family and lacking the privilege of the rich made up by availing some degree of physical mobility. Her black burka clad figure weaving its way in and out of houses was a familiar sight in the neighborhood. When she visited the Mir house she was happy to share bits of "local news" and gossip in exchange for tokens of sweets or pan. From the tidbit of what the Professor's wife had cooked for lunch that day to the hot topic of who the mullah was planning on marrying next, nothing seemed a secret to her and she generously padded the stories depending on who her audience was.

She now burst in with, "You'll never believe what's happening." Her eyes lighted on the clay bowl with its stagnant liquid and some of her exuberance left her. "Aha! You got one too."

Shahina waited then said, "Well, what do you think?"

"What do I think of what?" Halima held her work at some distance and examined the effect of the yellow beak on the green parrot.

"The *chai*!"

Halima followed the direction of Shahina's eyes and frowned.

"You mean you haven't tasted it yet?" Shahina was incredulous. "Take a sip," she coaxed, "It has a funny sort of taste, but hey, it's free."

Halima looked at the small bowl, but still hesitated.

“They’re sending these bowls of drinks to each and every house!” Shahina continued conversationally.

“To all houses?” Halima looked up.

“Yes. And it’s all free!”

“You mean we don’t have to pay at all?” Halima hesitated. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

“What am I telling you?” Shahina’s voice rose with excitement. “They’re giving it to whoever wants it, old and young, boy or girl...”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.” Shahina paused, and gave the question some consideration. Then she shrugged. “Who cares? As long as we don’t have to pay for it.”

“So how does it taste?”

“I don’t know. Different. Try it.”

“I don’t know.” Halima hesitated.

“Aunt is fast asleep. I heard her snoring as I came in.” She gave Halima a speaking look. Halima still hesitated and Shahina understood that she didn’t want to try it in front of her.

“Don’t mind me,” she said and pulled out a *piri* which was half hidden under the bed.

“Allah,” she continued with a long sigh and fiddled with her sari till she had untangled one corner. She undid the knot and looked at the scraps of beetle nut peeping from within the folds. She grimaced and in the act of putting one into her mouth, stopped.

“You don’t happen to have a wisp of a pan leaf, do you? Even a withered corner would do. I seem to be out of it.” She gave a big smile, displaying teeth stained red with pan juice.

Halima reached for her *pandan* from the top of her dresser. The casket shaped container in brass filigree had a lid with a large horse shaped handle attached to it. She moved the latch and raised the lid disclosing six little brass lids with tiny knobs. In the centre lay dark green pan quarters. Halima picked one up and as her fingers hovered over the *pandan*, Shahina let out a long “Oooo...” She accompanied her words with an exaggerated sniff, dragging in the fragrances wafting around the *pandan* and said, “What a heavenly smell! What do you have in there?”

Halima smiled, unable to hide a look of pride. She matched Shahina’s sniff with a dainty one of her own and smiled at the sweet aroma of fried condiments that floated in the air. Halima raised the lids one by one taking a pinch from each container. Soon there was a small pyramid of coriander seeds, cardamom, clove, asafetida and toasted coconut shreds. The different browns and greens blended well together and the shredded coconut flaunted its candy pink color. Halima stopped and her eyes sparkled as she noted Shahina drooling. She gave a satisfied smile and rolled the pan into a cone. It barely held the filling and she did not bother to tuck the top in but came up to Shahina and held it out to her.

Shahina promptly popped it into her mouth, rolled her eyes then closed them entirely as she let out a long sigh. She stayed like that for a full minute, lost in the gustatory sensations. Then she got up slowly and fixed her burka top, leaving the loose

flap off her face, and with the words, “Let me know what you think of the *chai*,” shuffled out of the room.

Halima eyed her bowl, then slowly picked it up. She took a tentative sip. It was cold. She took a bigger sip and a sweet herbal taste filled her mouth. She grimaced. *Why would anyone want to drink that?* Slowly she poured the rest down the drain.

The following afternoon Halima had quite forgotten the episode of the previous day as she sat working on her embroidery. The parrot’s beak was done and she was ready to move on to the feet. She wondered what color they should be. She’d only seen pictures of parrots and either of the colors seemed debatable. As she contemplated, the clock inside the house chimed 4:00 pm. Before the last notes had died down the Chaiwallah’s chimes insinuated themselves into it.

Just like on the previous afternoons, the cart stopped in front of the house, and the man set about his task of making *chai*. Halima hesitated for a few seconds, then gave in and moved to the window. She adjusted the slats just a fraction, so that the children’s feet and bodies came into view. I just need to see how he’s making the *chai*, she reasoned with herself as she adjusted the slats to show the wheels of the cart, and then the chest of the man. He was holding a clay bowl steaming with *chai*.

The man handed the bowl to Ahsan.

Halima turned back to her embroidery, and fiddled with the stitches.

“Bhabi, can I come in?”

“What is it, Ahsan?” she said softly.

“Your *chai*.” His voice had a lilt of pride in it as if he alone was responsible for the making of it. He set it on the table and scooted out.

Halima approached the bowl. Perhaps it tasted different hot. As she held the cup between her curved hands she thought of the Chaiwallah's fingers touching the same places, and felt her body turning warm. *It's the heat from the cup*, she told herself. She looked at the muddy liquid with the wisp of white curly smoke. She let her lungs fill in with the new aroma. It was hot, sweet and herbal. *Another sip*, she thought, *before I pour it down the drain*. She kept taking little sips until, to her surprise, it was all gone.

After the first week, Halima accepted that the Chaiwallah with his cart of *chai* would come daily. She hastened with her embroidery without questioning her motives. With each passing day she became a little less timid and adjusted the slats as soon as the Chaiwallah came into view. She noticed how his eyes turned to her window and the corner of his mouth turned up in a smile while one eyebrow shot up. She thought of her husband and realized suddenly that he seldom smiled. And when he did she never thought to wonder at it. There were other ways that they differed. Her husband, though fair, was thinner and less.... she wondered what was less as she focused on the Chaiwallah's biceps. They bulged through the half sleeve of his bush-shirt as he stood poised over the small bowl of tea with the heavy kettle in midair. She wondered how they would feel to the touch. She closed her eyes and felt a stillness come over her and when she opened her eyes the stillness was mirrored in the eyes of the Chaiwallah as if he had read her thoughts. His left brow shot up and he gave his quirky smile. Halima's heart thundered and she lowered her eyes.

Halima looked at the new design that her mother-in-law had made for her. It was the outline of a rosebud starting to bloom. A bee, somewhat large in comparison to the

rose, was on top of it, or hovering over the flower. A month had passed since that first cup of tea. Her ears were alert to the sound of the Chaiwallah. The clock chimed four then five without any cart passing her window. She heard her mother-in-law stirring in the house and folded her embroidery, and left for the kitchen. Perhaps something had happened to him.

There was no sign of the cart the following day or the day after that. On the fourth day she heard the tinkling chimes and flew to the window. She left it ajar as she watched the cart snake into her line of vision. The Chaiwallah parked it opposite her house, as he had done on previous occasions.

“One paisa a cup. Hot *chai*. One paisa a cup.” He did not look up from his *chai* preparation. She raised the slats so that they allowed anyone interested to look in, a partial view. Most people walked by without noticing. And neither did he. She saw cups of tea going forth to different houses, carried by little willing hands.

“One paisa a cup. Hot *chai*. One paisa a cup.” The Chaiwallah’s voice sent tentacles of awareness up her skin.

“He wants one paisa a cup.” Ahsan’s squeak broke into her thoughts.

“Oh!” Halima turned, startled at Ahsan’s silent approach and slowly moved away from the window.

“He wants one paisa a cup.” Ahsan repeated. “He didn’t give any tea to us today. He wanted one paisa.” He paused then continued, “I asked Ma for one paisa, but she said ‘No.’”

His eyes held a silent plea and after a moment’s hesitation, Halima went up to the tin cupboard and took the single key knotted to one end of her sari and opened the

wardrobe. She took out a circular can marked XXX cigarette, where Abdul deposited the change at the end of the day. Halima took out two of the large copper coins. Ahsan grabbed the coins and loped away. She took the few quick steps to the window and peeped out. She saw Ahsan run up to the man and give him the money. As the man pocketed the money he raised to fingers in a little salute and though he did not look at her, she knew it was for her. Even though she was annoyed at him she felt her face go warm.

Three weeks later only one coin remained at the bottom of the tin. Her husband hadn't said anything and she wondered if he had noticed. It was just as well because the next day the cart did not show up.

The price is going to go up again she thought as she worked the yellow thread into the body of the bee. The stitches were uneven and the wings had merged into the body. The boundaries were blurred.

She looked up as Shahina's slippers shuffled into view. She was in the middle of a sentence before she entered the room.

"I've spent the whole morning doing errands for Bilquis's mother. Her daughter is visiting and I had to go to the market. She wanted tongue. So I got two, two large cow tongues. So fresh you could smell the grass on them." She paused and sat down on her haunches to probe under the bed for the low legged *piri* that was kept there. She pulled it out and moved it closer to the wall. She let herself down on it and leaned against the wall.

"You know that Munshi's *bakharkhani* shop? The one that was next to that bakery? He'd been saying for months that he was going to move elsewhere. Well, I guess

he was serious.” Shahina’s eyes met Halima’s and she said, “My throat feels so dry. What about a little pan eh?”

Halima had started doing her hair, pulling the comb through the strands before plaiting it. She seemed not to have heard Shahina.

“There’s a new owner and he’s opening a restaurant. They’ve already set it up with plastic chairs and tables and guess what they’re serving?” She paused for full effect and when no response came said, “*Chai!*”

She looked at Halima, who returned her look but said nothing.

“Who’s going to pay money to buy the drained water from some leaf, I ask you?”

Halima still said nothing as she worked out a knot with the large teeth of the comb. Shahina closed her eyes and leaned against the wall.

Halima finished plaiting her hair and leisurely reached for the *pandan*.

Shahina’s eyes flicked open and she was back on track.

“So I said who’ll pay money to get one of those drinks. But you know what, even as I passed by I saw Manju, the one who lives across from the school, pick up a small kettle and head home. Now what do you think is in that kettle, I asked myself; tea, of course. And guess who’d got a job at the shop? Mizan. My sister’s son. So I went up to him and asked him what he was doing there. ‘I work here,’ he said. He looked good, too, in his blue dress. So I said, ‘Where did you get that dress?’ ‘Why, the owner gave it to me,’ he replies, ‘Told me to wear it whenever I was on the job. Ma was awfully pleased.’”

When the pan was done, Shahina made herself comfortable, popped the pan into her mouth and lost herself to the enjoyment. She seemed to have fallen asleep.

“Then as I was passing Hasina’s place her daughter beckoned me inside.” Shahina opened her eyes and picked up her thread of conversation. “She asked me if I could get her two cups of the *chai* and gave me a five paisa coin. And well she might. When I asked Mizan how much I should pay he said four paisa. That’s two paisa a cup. Can you believe that? You can get four bananas for that!”

Halima kept quiet. When Ahsan came that afternoon, she handed him four paisa.

PREVIEW

Alms

Kanta poked her head through the kitchen door and said to the shadow moving inside, “*Adab Amma*. How are you today?” Salma, busy with her after-lunch routine, glanced at the beggar woman and nodded. Kanta took this as an invitation and sat down on her haunches, just outside the wooden jamb of the kitchen door. A smile played around her dark leathery face with its mesh of fine wrinkles, as she watched Salma, the mistress of the house. Kanta had worried that Salma would be resting and she’d have to go away empty-handed. It wasn’t always the case that she arrived at such an opportune moment, when the lady of the house was able to exchange a few words with her. Eyes half shut, she took a deep breath. There was no suggestion of any earlier cooking: only the spicy smell that pervaded most Bangladeshi kitchens. She released her breath slowly, a little vexed.

“What does it matter? For a woman it’s all the same. Beggar woman or queen.” Salma’s voice was low, but Kanta caught the words. She took this as a very congenial beginning to conversation and let her sharp, bony bottom slide to the floor. An “Aaaaaaah...” escaped her lips as the door jamb took some of the pressure off her sore back. Cradling the sole of her left foot in both her hands, she massaged it, the bones of her fingers rolling up and down, as if coaxing a tune from an off-key harmonium. A layer of dirt and dust caked the calloused sole, the heel edged with vertical cracks, some as long as three fourths of an inch. One, deeper than the others, showed a thin red line as Kanta gently squeezed it. There were few lanes in the old part of Dhaka city that these feet had missed in the last few years.

But Kanta had seen better days.

“I wasn’t born a beggar, you know,” she would say to anyone who listened. “I was a housewife. Yes, a farmer’s wife, with cows in the shed, a barn brimming with rice and yellow lentils, and fields golden with grain.” Her voice would fade, the light in her eyes dim. At other times it would be, “Fate! It’s all written on this four-fingered width of space.” She would join the four fingers of her right hand and cover her forehead with it, “Just four fingers.” A few sharp taps to the forehead to emphasize the point, and a wise nod or two. “If it’s written in your forehead, nothing you do will erase it.”

Most people are familiar with the story. It’s a common one in Bangladesh. A flood that washes away the land from under your feet, taking everything that stands on it—fields of rich soil, barns full of animals, babies sleeping beside their mothers. You’re left thrashing in a quagmire.

“Not satisfied, it then took my husband . . . and my three beautiful children.” At times a wail broke out of her cracked lips; at other times, she sat oblivious to her surroundings until someone with a kind heart brought her back from her refuge to the real world.

After losing her family, she turned to the reality of her life: no education, no skills, no money, no one to support her. There was nothing to do but go to work as a farmhand for her neighbors. People who knew her lowered their eyes and nodded when she joined the able bodied men queuing for seasonal jobs. And if planting the little shoots of paddy at sowing time took longer, or if the buckets of water she carried to the thirsting plants were smaller than the others, the land owners turned a blind eye, knowing she

would complete the work even if it meant working late into the evening, long after the other farmhands were home and in bed.

She watched with surprise and pleasure as the little plants turned into lush green fields rippling in the summer breeze. As a farmer's wife she had mostly stayed on the homestead, keeping an eye on things. She stored the surplus grain to ensure there would be enough for the rest of the year, entertained relatives and friends, and, of course, looked after the needs of her family. What had she to do with a farmhand's job? Now she was in direct contact with the land and the grain.

She liked winnowing the best. Holding the bamboo *kula* high up in the air to one side of her head, tapping it, letting it create its own music, adjusting to the rhythm of the other five or six women who stood in a semicircle. The rhythmic motion lifted the chaff, making it dance in the wind before it snuggled down on the rectangular cement floor in the yard. So what if the paddy did not belong to her and she was not the one giving orders? She was content being one among others, content to come to her empty hovel at night, too exhausted for the ghosts of the past to torment her.

Once the winnowing season was over and the grain stored or sold, there wasn't much left for Kanta to do. The farmers settled down to live off the surplus and she was out once again looking for work. The only available work now was in the houses of those who could afford hired help—washing, cleaning and scrubbing. She never said no to any work, not even when Munni's mother tentatively asked her if she wouldn't mind carpeting the kitchen floor with a water-and-clay paste, to return the sooty floor to its original freshness.