Mahamaya and Rajeevlochan met at a dilapidated temple by the edge of the river.

Without saying a word, Mahamaya cast her inherently solemn gaze at Rajeev with a slight reproof. The essence of it was, ‘How dare you ask me to come here at this unearthly hour. You have become so bold only because I have obeyed your every word so far.’

Rajeev always saw Mahamaya with a little awe; her sombre glance made him even more nervous. He had thought of saying a few words that would be lucid and intelligible, but he had to forego that wish hastily. Being unable to avoid giving a reason for their meeting, he sputtered, ‘Let’s escape from this place and get married secretly.’ This no doubt conveyed what Rajeev had in mind, but the preamble he had so carefully planned for it remained unsaid. His words therefore came across as dry, bare, and even strange. He himself felt embarrassed by them; there was not even the possibility of repairing the words by some tweaking and padding. After summoning Mahamaya at high noon to this run-down temple by the riverside, all that this silly man could manage to say was, ‘Come, let’s get married.’

Mahamaya was an unmarried woman from an aristocratic family. She was twenty-four years old. Like her teeming age, she teemed with beauty; and like the autumn sunlight, she looked like an icon of pure gold. Similar to the luminous ray of autumn, she was bright but silent, and her eyes were open and unafraid like the daylight.

Her father had passed away, but she had an elder brother named Bhavanicharan Chatterjee. Brother and sister were alike; not a word from the mouth, but there was a glow about them that blazed silently like the midday sun. People were fearful of Bhavanicharan for no reason.

Rajeev was a stranger to the village. He was brought along by the British manager of the local silk factory. His father was an employee of this Englishman. After the father’s demise, the Englishman took responsibility for the young boy and brought him to this village when he was still a child. The boy’s only family was his aunt. They lived as neighbours of Bhavanicharan. Mahamaya grew up as a childhood companion of Rajeev and she shared a deep affectionate bonding with Rajeev’s aunt.

Rajeev crossed sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and even entered the threshold of nineteen, but he refused to get married despite his aunt’s repeated pleas. The Englishman felt very happy at this sign of good sense in the Bengali boy, and thought that the boy had taken after him as he had himself remained a bachelor. The boy’s aunt passed away in the meantime.

On the other hand, it was proving difficult to get a suitor for Mahamaya from an equally respectable family without spending more money than they could afford. She also continued to remain single.

But it needs to be said that although the god who overseas matrimonial relations was not particularly mindful of this young couple, the god of love had wasted no time.

‘Mahamaya.’ Rabindranath Tagore. Translated from the Bengali by Mohammad A. Quayum Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010.
While the ancient Prajapati, the lord of creatures, was in a drowsy state, the youthful Kamadeva, god of love, remained ever alert and vigilant.

The god Kamadeva exerts his influence on people in different ways. Instigated by him, Rajeev stayed alert for a leisure moment in which to express his secret thoughts to Mahamaya, but Mahamaya never allowed him that opportunity; her sombre, silent look created a tremor in Rajeev’s restless heart.

Rajeev had succeeded in bringing Mahamaya to this ruined temple by passionately urging her numerous times. So he thought he would divulge everything weighing on his mind, and either live happily thereafter or die eternally. On such a critical day of his life, all Rajeev could spurt out was, ‘Come, let’s get married.’ After that, he remained tongue-tied like a confused student who had forgotten his lesson. Mahamaya had never expected Rajeev to propose to her so hastily, so she also remained wordless for a long while.

The midday has many unspecified plaintive sounds of its own; they manifested in this silence. The partially attached door-panel of the temple went on swaying gently with the wind, occasionally giving out a low piteous cry. Pigeons kept cooing continually sitting at the temple’s windows; woodpeckers were pecking monotonously, perching on the branches of the Silk Cotton tree; a lizard ran through a heap of dry leaves making a rustling noise; a gusty tropical wind came suddenly from the open field shaking the leaves of the trees into a clatter; the roaring waves of water kept dashing against the collapsed river quay in a splashing sound. In the midst of such dull, dreary din, a shepherd playing a rustic tune on his flute sitting under the shade of a tree in the distance could be heard. Lacking the courage to look at Mahamaya’s face, Rajeev stood there leaning against the temple’s pillar, somewhat exhausted and in a dreamy state.

After a while, turning his face, Rajeev looked towards Mahamaya with pleading eyes. Mahamaya shook her head and said, ‘No, that is not possible.’

Mahamaya’s shake of head shattered Rajeev’s dream. Rajeev knew that Mahamaya’s head moved according to her own laws, and no one could sway it in a different way. With her deep-seated pride of family, how could she agree to marry a low-class Brahmo like Rajeev? Love is one thing but marriage is another. Mahamaya knew that Rajeev had grown so daring only because of her own rash conduct. She prepared to leave the temple immediately.

Rajeev grasped the situation fully and hastily said, ‘I will leave the village tomorrow.’

Mahamaya’s first reaction was to pretend she could care little. But she failed to fake that emotion. She tried to move her leg to take a stride but could not. Calmly, she asked, ‘Why?’

Rajeev replied, ‘My manager is moving to the factory at Sonapur and wants to take me with him.’

Mahamaya kept silent for some time. She reckoned that their lives were moving in different directions – it was not possible to have charm over someone forever. So opening her tightly pressed lips a little, she mumbled, ‘Very well.’ It sounded almost like a sigh.

Following that brief exchange, Mahamaya was yet again about to leave the temple when Rajeev exclaimed in utter bewilderment, ‘Mr. Chatterjee!’

Mahamaya saw that her brother Bhavanicharan was coming towards the temple.

She instantly knew that he had found them out. Sensing Mahamaya’s imminent danger, Rajeev tried to jump through the temple’s broken wall. But Mahamaya restrained him by holding on to his hands with all her strength. Bhavanicharan stepped into the temple and took one hushed, collected look at the two of them.

Mahamaya turned her eyes on Rajeev and said in a calm voice, ‘Rajeev, I’ll become your wife one day. You wait for me.’

Bhavanicharan stepped out of the temple without a word and Mahamaya followed him in silence. Rajeev stood there dumbfounded, as if he had just been handed a death sentence.

II

That same night Bhavanicharan brought a red wedding sari and called up Mahamaya, ‘Go, put this on.’ She came back wearing it.

He then said, ‘Come with me.’

No one had ever even hinted at disobeying Bhavanicharan’s orders, and so with Mahamaya.

The two started walking towards the cemetery near the river. It was not far from the house. An old Brahmin was lying there biding for death. They came and stood by him. A priest was also waiting nearby and Bhavanicharan gestured at him. Immediately the priest made arrangements for the auspicious occasion and stood ready. Mahamaya knew instantly that she was going to be married to the dying man. She didn’t raise even the faintest of objections to it. In a dark house, dimly lighted by the fire from two near-by funeral pyres, the wedding ceremony was carried out with unintelligible religious incantations mixed with distressful cries of the dying.

Mahamaya became a widow the next day. She was not gravely distressed by it. Rajeev was also not shocked by the misfortune like he was by the sudden news of Mahamaya’s marriage. In fact, he even felt somewhat delighted by it. But that feeling did not last long as a second piece of news followed which bowled him over completely. He heard that there was a lot of pomp and pageantry at the cemetery as Mahamaya was to be cremated alive with her dead husband.

Rajeev’s first reaction was to call up his English manager and ask for his help to forcefully stop the dreadful incident. Then he remembered that his employer had left for his new posting at Sonapur that morning. He wanted Rajeev to come with him as well but Rajeev had stayed behind with leave for one month.

Mahamaya had advised him, ‘You wait for me.’ No way could he defy those words. He had applied for one month’s leave for the time being. If need be, he would extend it to two, and then three months; eventually he was prepared to quit his job and live by begging but never give up the wait for Mahamaya.

While Rajeev was running frantically about and thinking of suicide or something equally crazy, a torrential downpour with a cataclysmic storm arrived in the evening. The storm was so fierce that Rajeev felt the whole house would crumble down on him. When he saw nature being lashed by the fury of his own heart, he felt somewhat appeased. It seemed as if the whole universe was acting on his behalf to redress the horrific situation. The same force that he would like to marshal, but could not, was being wielded by nature from heaven to earth to accomplish his mission.

Just then, someone pushed the door from the outside with full force. Rajeev
opened it and saw a woman in wet clothes walk in. Her face was covered with a long veil. Rajeev knew instantly it was Mahamaya.

Ecstatically he asked, ‘Mahamaya, you have escaped from the funeral pyre!’

Mahamaya replied, ‘Yes. I promised I would become your wife. I am here to fulfil that pledge. But Rajeev, I am not the same me anymore, everything about me has changed. I am Mahamaya only in my thoughts. Now tell me… I could still return to the funeral pyre. If you promise never to open my veil and see my face, only then I could live with you.’

It was enough to have someone return from the jaws of death; everything else seemed trivial. At once Rajeev said, ‘You live with me as you wish. I’ll die if you ever desert me.’

Mahamaya replied, ‘Okay then, let’s flee right now to the village where your employer has relocated.’

Leaving behind his domestic possessions, Rajeev stepped out of the house in that storm taking Mahamaya with him. The storm was so fierce that it was difficult to stand still; the velocity of the wind lifted coarse grains of stone from the ground and blew them against their bodies like piercing raindrops. Lest uprooted trees came crashing on their heads, they travelled through an open field, avoiding the main road. The torrential wind pelted them from behind. They appeared as two human beings blown away from the village towards some universal dissolution.

III

Readers should not dismiss the story as occult or absurd. When sati was still in practice, similar incidents were believed to have occurred on some rare occasions.

Tied hand and foot, Mahamaya was consigned to the funeral pyre, and it was duly set on fire. The fire started blazing, but soon a violent storm and torrential downpour began. Those who came to cremate them quickly ran into the nearby house for dying people. The fire blew out rapidly. In the meantime, the rope that tied Mahamaya’s two hands had burnt and set the hands free. Groaning in pain from the burns, Mahamaya sat up and quietly unfastened her two legs. Then she stood up, wrapped her body in her partially burnt sari and, almost naked, first went to her own home. Nobody was there, as all the family members had gone to the cemetery. She lit a lamp, changed her sari, and then took one look at her face in the mirror. Violently throwing the mirror away, she thought for a second. Then covering her face with the end of her sari, she went to Rajeev’s house. Readers would already know what followed after that.

Mahamaya was now living with Rajeev but there was no happiness in his heart. Nothing but a veil stood between them. Like death, it remained as a permanent feature in their life and tortured them even more than death. Despair slowly numbs the anguish of separation from death, but the veil that separated them continued to vex their dreams.

There was already a kind of reserve and reticence in Mahamaya’s personality, the repressive silence caused by the veil made that doubly insufferable. It felt like Rajeev was living within death’s embrace. Trapped in its fatal clasp, he started to grow haggard every day. The Mahamaya he knew previously was lost, and any desire to nurture their beautiful childhood memories also became impossible because of the recurrent presence of this veiled form in his life. Rajeev thought, everyone was...
different, especially Mahamaya who, like Karna in the Hindu mythology, seemed to have been born with a natural coat of mail. She always had a protective layer around her personality, but now born again it looked like she had returned with yet another covering. Living in the same house, she was still so far away that Rajeev didn’t know how to reach her. Waiting outside a magic circle, he was only trying to solve a delicate but powerful riddle with an insatiable thirst, like the way the stars keep awake with steadfast eyes for the whole night to penetrate the nocturnal darkness in vain.

The two lonely creatures lived together in that way for several months.

On a monsoon evening, on the tenth day of the brighter half of the lunar month, the clouds dispersed for the first time and exposed the moonbeams. The hushed moonlit night kept waiting at the head of the sleeping earth’s bed. Sleepless, Rajeev went and sat by his window. An odour from the nearby forest scorched by summer’s heat and wearied songs of crickets were floating into the house. Rajeev saw a large motionless pond at the end of a row of trees shining in the dark like a silver plate. It is difficult to say if a human being could think straight at that hour. Rajeev’s mind kept on wandering aimlessly. Like the forest, it reeked of some smell and produced faint sounds like the humming crickets in the distance. No one knew what exactly went through Rajeev’s mind but he suddenly felt defiant of all rules. The monsoon night without the clouds looked tranquil, unruffled, and beautiful, like the Mahamaya of earlier days. His soul rushed headlong for that woman.

Rajeev got up in a dreamy state and walked into Mahamaya’s bedroom. She was sleeping.

Rajeev came close to Mahamaya’s bed, leaned down and saw a strip of moonbeam covering her face. But, alas, what was this! Where was that familiar face he had known all his life. The brutal flames of the funeral pyre had licked away a part of her beautiful left cheek and left behind a mark of its vicious appetite there.

Perhaps Rajeev was startled by the sight and made a whimpering noise. Mahamaya woke up in alarm and saw Rajeev standing by her bed. In a flash she pulled the veil over her face and stood up. Rajeev realised he was about to be hit by lightning. He fell on his knees and begged, ‘Please forgive me.’

Mahamaya dashed out of the house without a word or looking back and never returned again. No one could find a trace of her anywhere. The mute anger created by this heartless goodbye left a bruise on Rajeev’s life forever.