

Nurse Nelly
(Based on a true story)
Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain
Translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum

Introduction

'Nurse Nelly' is one of Rokeya's best known short stories. It was first published in December 1919 (Bengali calendar: Agrahayan, 1326) in *Saogat*, a Bengali magazine; later, in 1922, it was included in the second volume of her book, *Motichur* (Sweet Globules). The story is set in colonial Bengal and narrates the tragic tale of a young Bengali Muslim woman, nineteen-year-old Nayeema, who is married into a wealthy family and has two children by her England-returned District Collector husband, but who is coaxed by a group of missionary women into converting to Christianity, resulting eventually not only in her own destruction and death but also in the destruction of her entire family. The author claims that the story is based on a true incident; however, it is not clear if it is related to members of her own immediate family. It is possible that the character of the uncle is based on Rokeya's own father, a fun-loving, extravagant man who lost his entire ancestral inheritance, a sprawling zamindari, long before his death, and subsequently spent the last years of his life in hardship and poverty, incurring huge debts.¹ Moreover, Rokeya's biographer and close associate, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, cites the passage in the story describing the narrator's ancestral home, as Rokeya's parental home in Pairaband, Rangpur, where the author was born and brought up.² Having said this, it should be pointed out that incidents of religious proselytisation by Christian missionaries were very commonplace during the colonial era, and it is possible that Rokeya wrote the story mixing fact with fiction in order to criticise the phenomenon.

The Christian missionaries began coming to India to seek 'salvation of heathen souls'³ towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. During the early years, however, they were seen as a threat to the profits of the East India Company and deemed so 'subversive a menace to tranquillity' that they were banned by company officials from entering Calcutta.⁴ But as time passed, the missionaries became more popular and influential and created an impact not only in the British Parliament but also on the company's directors, paving the way for a new Act in 1813. This removed the company's sweeping ban on 'missionary enterprise' and opened the colony to 'licensed' missionaries and their gospel of evangelicalism, thus allowing them to engage in activities of "'civilising' India's 'poor, benighted native souls'"⁵ Together with the introduction of English education in Indian schools through Macaulay's Minutes of 1835, this measure eventually became one of the most potent ways of perpetuating colonial rule in the subcontinent.

The story depicts the fatal consequences of this colonial practice on one Muslim family in the early years of the twentieth century. The story is told in flashback, and as the narrative progresses we are informed that Nayeema, a nineteen-year-old mother of two children, first became a victim of the missionary nuns when she was admitted in a woman's hospital for

¹ Motahar Hossain Sufi, *Begum Rokeya: Jiban O Sahitya* [Begum Rokeya: Life and Works] (Dhaka: Subarna, 2009) 18-19.

² Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, *Rokeya Jibani* [Life of Rokeya] (Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 2009) 13.

³ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 4th Ed. (New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 207.

⁴ Wolpert 207.

⁵ Wolpert 208.

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medical treatment. Nayeema comes from an affluent family but, having been brought up in a rural area by her uncle's family after the death of her parents, she didn't get an opportunity for education. This makes her gullible and vulnerable, as without education she lacks the skills to evaluate what is good and right for her and her loved ones. She is hardly aware of the values and teachings of her own religion or culture; therefore, it takes little effort for the evangelical nuns to instil doubts about her own religion in her impressionable mind, and convince her that the religion of the 'Other' is superior. After the conversion, she is re-named 'Nelly', and taken away from her family as well as her familiar surroundings in Bengal to a far-off Lucknow, so that her 'deliverance' will not be endangered through reconversion to Islam. This sets her on a path of slow destruction and subsequent death from her guilt and anxiety of abandoning her family as well as her faith, while her mother-in-law (also her aunt and de facto mother, who brought her up from the age of three after Nayeema's own mother passed away) and her two minor children also meet their end of life from the pain and trauma of Nayeema's inexplicable abnegation and betrayal of the family. The story ends with Nayeema's return to and 'reunion' with the family, not in life but in death, as her corpse is sent from Lucknow for burial in the family cemetery.

The story elucidates Rokeya's stock theme of the importance of women's education and empowerment, as she illustrates how women, when they are left ignorant, may act foolishly like Nayeema and become a source of blight rather than benediction for their families, and thus augur doom for an entire society. However, the author enriches the story by weaving into it the theme of anti-colonial nationalism, as part of her objective is to underscore the evil of conversion, which was used as a strategy by the colonisers to destabilise the local societies; it was a way of 'thingifying' the native subjects and reinforcing the colonial bastion. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.⁶

In 'Nurse Nelly' Rokeya gives an example of how this baleful colonial objective was accomplished through a deliberate intervention and subversion of the religion and family life of the colonised people.

It should be emphasised, however, that Rokeya's intention in the story is not to criticise Christianity as a religion, as she was respectful of all religions. Her invective is directed instead at the 'salvation-mongering' missionaries who used Christianity as a tool to empower themselves and to serve the colonial cause. In other words, in Rokeya's view, these evangelical missionaries were not sincere in their service to the religion or society; rather, they *used* the religion to 'enslave' the local people and to exert their cultural supremacy over them; although they spoke of redeeming 'benighted' and 'fallen' souls and helping the deprived and the dispossessed, their spirit was more akin to that of the 'hunter' than of the 'hunted'.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. C. Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 170.

Nurse Nelly

I

My younger sister-in-law, Khuki, had been suffering from a mysterious illness for three years. At last, on her doctor's advice, she went to Lucknow [capital of Uttar Pradesh] for a change of air. I, too, went with her. God willing, several of us travelled together – Khuki's husband, son and a few other family members.

A friend of ours, Mr Hem, was living in Lucknow. On hearing that his wife, Bimala Devi, was sick and had been admitted to a women's hospital, I went to see her. She was confined to her bed and had to depend on nurses to change her and to dress the ulcer wound on her arm. In short, she was wholly reliant on the nurses' supervision. I was there for about two hours and saw some five nurses attending to her various needs. But the one who took away the bucket full of discharges of blood and pus from her body ... her face struck me as somewhat familiar.

I used to visit Mr Hem's wife every alternate day but frankly, I was not so keen to see Bimala; I went there, rather, to take another look at that sad, haggard face of the nurse, this icon of sorrow. That face of hers, familiar yet unrecognisable, used to perturb me. One day Bimala asked, 'Well, why do you look at Nurse Nelly so intently?' Hiding my real reason, I said, 'Her haggard face makes me so sad.'

Bimala said, 'Yes she is very unlucky. I also feel for her. But what to do? It is impossible to help her with money. She gets only six rupees a month – not enough to feed herself. At first, I used to give her a quarter or a half a rupee coin but later I found out that Sister Riva would take it from her and divide it among all the hospital attendants – sometimes Sister Nelly would be lucky enough to get a fraction from it. How unfair of Sister Riva! All the dirty work is done by Nelly, but she gets barely enough to eat.'

I asked if Nelly was from the sweeper caste.

Bimala replied, 'No, she is a Bengali Christian. It is rumoured that she was a housewife in a middleclass Muslim family once. Some nuns coaxed her into converting to Christianity and leave home. They changed her name to "Nelly". She has been asked to look after us, I mean Bengali patients, because she knows Bengali.

'She is prohibited from visiting the Muslim quarters lest someone would convert her back to Islam. There is also a rumour that Nelly can even read the Qur'an.'

My misgivings multiplied when I heard that Nelly could read the Qur'an. God knew which Muslim family she had disgraced to become an outcast. Alas, such humiliation of the Qur'an! Christian Nelly – sweeper Nelly – she held the Qur'an with the same hands she used to clean the waste bucket, full of the detestable blood and pus. As a matter of fact, Nelly did the work of a sweeper at the hospital, but her superiors called her Nurse Nelly only to please her.

I continued to come to the hospital as usual on the pretext of visiting Bimala, but I never found the opportunity to speak with Nelly as I would have liked. Nelly also came to us frequently with the excuse of work – or otherwise she would gaze at me from a distance with her beautiful wide eyes. If our eyes ever met accidentally, she would look down and walk away with a show of reluctance. Though I made several

attempts, I didn't know how to get close to Nelly. On the rare occasion when I got the chance to ask her something, she would only weep uncontrollably. However, an opportune moment finally came for me to interact with Nelly.

At last it was decided that Khuki would undergo surgery on her festering wound. But I was determined not to let her be admitted to the hospital under any circumstance. I had a fierce argument with Khuki's husband on this; he tried in every way to make me understand the benefits of the hospital; he employed every art and science of reasoning, and even gave the example of Mr Hem's wife to emphasise his point. But the ruin once caused by the hospital had scorched me to the core. That wound hadn't healed yet. I didn't explain these details to Khuki's husband, but finally I won through sheer persistence. Exclaiming 'Long live women's whim,' Khuki's husband gave up all arguments and conceded that the surgery would be performed at home.

A senior doctor from the hospital, Miss Folly, arrived with her team at the appointed time. She had two or three nurses with her as well. We were Bengalis and didn't know a whit of Hindi; therefore, Nurse Nelly had to come along to act as a translator. Everyone left after the surgery; only two of the nurses, Nelly and Lizi, stayed behind to take care of the patient.

The next day, during a leisure time after lunch and Khuki's medication, I asked Nelly discreetly, 'Nurse, where are you from?' In reply, she fell at my feet and, somehow restraining her tears, said, 'Bubujan [Elder Sister], couldn't you recognise me?'

What! My head began to turn, and suddenly I felt utterly exhausted. Yes, alas, I recognised her! What a brutal truth, a dreadful truth, I had come upon. Nelly recounted her long, miserable story, and every word of that account was washed in tears.

II

My parental home was in the village of ...pur. After the death of my grandfather, my father and paternal uncle divided the inherited property between them in equal halves. With the exception of their servants and maids, there were only three people in my uncle's family – Uncle himself, his wife and their only daughter, Nayeema. In our family, with five siblings, we numbered seven in all. Yet all the time we used to hear Uncle didn't have enough money, he was in lots of debt, etcetera.

We were quite secure financially, and lived a happy life with plenty to eat and more than enough jewellery to wear. Where was the equal to our magnificent home? It was an immense dwelling standing in the middle of about one hundred acres of rent-free land and surrounded by a thick grove on all sides, with tigers, boars, jackals and all else harbouring in there. We didn't have a clock at home, but that didn't prevent us from keeping to our daily routine. In the morning, we got up from bed with the lilting calls of doves, Indian nightingales and other native birds. At sunset, the yelping of jackals alerted us that it was time for evening prayer. The loud cry of ospreys made us aware that it was three in the morning. Our childhood was spent in utmost happiness in a small village surrounded by lush nature.

After a period, my aunt passed away, leaving behind her only daughter of three years. My uncle was at his wit's end to cope with the situation. Bringing up his

daughter was his main problem. One day my mother said to reassure him, ‘Why are you so worried? Nayeema’s mother is no more, but I am still here. The same arms that have raised my three daughters, Jabeda, Hamida and Abida, won’t they be able to care for Nayeema as well?’ It was as if Uncle had found a sudden rescue in a boundless sea of danger. The next day he left Nayeema, with five maids, at our house.

Nayeema was the youngest of all our brothers and sisters, so we loved her immensely. Our parents also loved her more than all of us, I believe. In this way, Nayeema continued to grow up like a princess, showered with care and love.

We didn’t care much about higher education in the village, and whatever little training we got, Nayeema also received it. In the opinion of our friends and relatives, nothing was more counterproductive in this world than the education of women. Most of the time was devoted to learning things of practical, not academic value. Weaving reticulated bags, grooming hair, dicing areca nuts, shredding coconut, grinding cumin, making diapered bedcovers, etcetera, which were considered essential tasks to learn – Nayeema had gradually mastered them all.

Nayeema had been living with us since she was three years old. In the meantime, Uncle had passed away. He had squandered the entire share of his property, except Nayeema’s mother’s ornaments, which he had handed over to Father before his death.

After living away for eight or ten years, my eldest brother, Mr Jamal Ahmed, had returned home, being transferred and promoted to the post of District Magistrate. After a few days, I came from my in-laws’ house to see him, and so did several of our relatives. Our house was bustling with people.

One day, we four sisters were chitchatting when suddenly Bhaijan [Elder Brother] stepped into the room. Addressing us, he said, ‘Do you girls not study? How do you live with such obtuse minds? Oh, yes, Nayeema, what do you study?’

Nayeema replied, ‘I have read the Qur’an. Now I am learning its translation from our eldest sister.’

Brother snapped with a chuckle, ‘That’s all! Don’t you study anything else – a bit of Bengali or English?’

I narrated my life-experience of eighteen years and said, ‘Bhaijan, you have studied a lot of English and Bengali, gone to England, and have become a District Magistrate or a Collector, many years after returning home. What will Nayeema gain from studying English? Can she become a District Collector?’

Bhaijan replied, ‘If Nayeema gets a good education, she can become a Collector’s wife. She’ll get a good husband, be married to a good family.’

We all began to giggle. I immediately informed mother of Bhaijan’s strange remark. With a grin, I said, ‘Bhaijan thinks if Nayeema gets a good education she can become a Collector’s wife.’ Listening to me, Mother’s face grew solemn and she said, ‘Okay, right, so will it be.’

III

Our house was in a flurry. Bhaijan was getting married to Nayeema. We were ecstatic that our ‘baby doll’ Nayeema was becoming our Bhabijan [Elder Sister-in-law]. Our youngest sister Abida was in a huff; she was utterly adamant not to touch Nayeema’s feet in obeisance, because Nayeema was two years younger than her. Everyone

taunted her about it to madness. In the meantime, Bhaijan was also extremely annoyed, livid with rage, to be truthful. He was England-returned, strictly opposed to child-marriage; how could he marry a ten-year old girl and make a clown of himself? How would he show his face to Bengal's cultured community? He put all the blame on me and said, 'Jabeda is the source of all mischief. I said something playfully the other day and she went and informed Mother about it, and now this horror.'

Whether Bhaijan was angry or whatever else, his chief virtue was that he was never disobedient to our parents or relatives. A few pleasing words from Mother and some words of advice from Father made him yield easily. Mother protested that she had brought up the orphan girl with utmost love and care and wouldn't allow her to be married to a stranger, and so on. Bhaijan didn't object any more. Like an obliging, obedient boy, he prepared himself for the wedding.

A distant sister-in-law of ours said to me, teasing Bhaijan, 'Well, aren't we going to paste henna on the England-returned gentleman's hands?' Bhaijan replied in a suppressed anger, 'Do whatever you please! If smearing henna or something worse makes you happy, I have no objection. I have decided to bear everything without a fuss – torment me as much as you wish!'

I immediately made some henna paste and put it on his two hands. I didn't intend to keep it there for too long, but I got involved in something else and forgot about it altogether. When I returned after a long stretch, I saw poor Bhaijan still sitting there indifferently, resting his hands on the two arms of the easy chair. I quickly brought some water and began to wash his hands. Seeing deep red marks on his palms, Bhaijan became furious. He had acquired a lot of knowledge and had even studied Botany, but he was not aware of the peculiar efficacy of henna. In a flash, he pulled his hands away, went to the toilet and made generous use of soap and sponge on the marks. But the henna proved to be stubbornly unyielding.

IV

In a woman's hospital in ... city, a Muslim woman from a privileged background had been staying for two months. Her six-year-old son, Jafar, was also with her. There was no lack of care for her at the hospital. All the senior and junior lady doctors and nurses looked after her by turns. In short, she was getting a royal treatment there. Her husband and younger brother-in-law came to see her every day. Her mother-in-law also visited her from time to time, with the woman's five year old daughter, Jamila. The patient was my sister-in-law Nayeema.

Mother was not willing to send Nayeema to the hospital. But when her health gradually continued to deteriorate, as a last resort Bhaijan said to mother, 'Mother, I have never disobeyed you so far, but now since somebody's life depends on getting treatment at the hospital, please do not oppose it. I'll not be able to honour your word today.' Bhaijan regretted transgressing maternal advice that day for the rest of his life.

In the next room, some missionary women were chattering and laughing. One of them bragged, 'We'll see this time! Our damned critics won't be able to ridicule us any more that we convert only the famine-stricken, hungry, homeless people.'

Second woman: 'With a kill like this, even our Lord Bishop in Calcutta would be gratified.'

Third woman: 'Gee, you brag too much! How challenging can it be to lure a nineteen year old girl (even if she is a mother of two, she is still a juvenile) and convert to Christianity?'

First woman: 'May not be difficult ... but it will create a ripple – the whole of Bengal will be in a clamour. It's no joke to cajole a Collector's wife.'

Second woman: 'Come, it's getting dark. Today I'll sing devotional songs in Madam Nayeema's room. She'll be in the hospital for another month, so there is enough time for us.'

A few missionary women visited Nayeema all the time. Attending and nursing patients was their highest doctrine, and Nayeema was easily charmed by their seemingly selfless, unassuming love. In the evening, they sang devotional songs in praise of Jesus's grace and mercy and thus convinced her of the way for her to save herself from hellfire. Nayeema didn't know anything about the philosophy, science and history of her own religion – thus the glory of Christ created a deep mark on her impressionable mind easily. Her body began to recuperate, but her soul began to grow poisoned. To one who has never seen light, the glow of a firefly seems as luminous as the sun. Such was Nayeema's case.

V

After three months, Nayeema – no, my revered sister-in-law – returned from the hospital. But she had changed a lot; she was no longer the soft-spoken, sweet-smiling Nayeema. She was not affable with anyone any more. Everyone thought that her long bout of illness had made her peevish. Hoping that the fresh air of the countryside would bring back her affectionate, cheerful self, Bhaijan sent her to our village home with Mother. But it didn't work. She failed to forget her companions at the hospital and loathed the open air of the farmland.

One day, Nayeema demanded from her mother-in-law, why had she not been given higher education? What did they lack? What prevented them? Mother kept staring at her daughter-in-law in bewilderment. With an uncertain smile, she said, 'What does the foolish girl say?'

Nayeema: 'I am saying baloney! You have kept me in the state of a pure brute. You didn't give me a shred of education that would allow me to mingle with decent people. My husband asked that I be given education, but hearing it, you rushed into our matrimonial bondage.'

Mother: 'You were never such a harpy before, my child. Where did you learn such language? I brought you up since you were three years old. You were so precious to us; that's why we have kept you in the family, instead of marrying you to a stranger. And you call it bondage?'

Nayeema: 'What do the illiterate know about the value of education? That's why you didn't think it important. All you knew was marriage.'

Mother: 'Child, we'll see how you give education to your daughter and turn her into a memsahib. I am not against education, but living in the countryside we didn't have the right facilities. There was no religious school, primary school or school for girls. Even good female teachers were not available to tutor at home. Now having lived in the city, if you can arrange for good education, that should be fine.'

That's exactly what happened. There were hardly any facilities for women's education in the countryside, and even if there were some schools for Muslim girls like an oasis in the desert, why would the privileged class send their daughters there? What else could they do in the provincial areas? Therefore, several missionary women were appointed by turn for Jamila's education. In their customary way, they began their lessons by telling stories from the Bible.

Nayeema didn't seem satisfied with that. Eventually, a European governess was appointed for her daughter. By gradually spreading her influence, the governess became my Bhabijan's companion, Jamila's instructor and the guardian of the family, all at once. Miss Lawrence was now indispensable in the household; she had lured everyone in the family with her genial ways.

VI

There was a huge uproar in the area. The local court house was teeming with a vast multitude of people. Almost everyone living in the neighbourhood had gathered there. Why? What was the matter? District Collector Mr Jamal Ahmed's wife, Mrs Nayeema Khatun, had run away to the colonial mission house with 25,000 rupees worth of jewellery and 17,000 rupees in cash. A complex lawsuit had been going on over it for a month. Both parties had engaged renowned lawyers. Nayeema had come to the courtroom in a palanquin. It was the day for the verdict.

Many newspaper journalists had gathered there; publishing such a sensational story would make their paper extremely appealing to readers.

Some came to watch the fun and cheer. Some came to mock and jeer. Some took the opportunity to give a pep talk against woman's education. A few others slammed the sheer notion of women's education. To add insult to injury, some congratulated the England-returned Mr Jamal Ahmed on his daughter having attained the height of education.

Some, saddened by the incident, came to show genuine sympathy. Some came to console and express pity.

Some were terrified that if it were to continue it would be difficult to protect their own women. If a prominent Collector's wife could run away from home enticed by the missionary ladies, what could stop it from happening to them?

Nayeema herself acknowledged that she had embraced Christianity of her own free will. She had no desire to leave home, because she had nothing against her mother-in-law and her husband. But the lack of facilities for baptism at home had forced her to take refuge at the mission house. She had renounced her husband, daughter, son, home – in a word, everything – for the sake of religion, for the love of Jesus only.

The judge wanted to settle the case amicably by saying that now that Nayeema had been baptised she could return home. But Miss Lawrence stunned everyone in the courtroom by giving a long lecture on the inimical environment in the zenana generally and the adverse condition in the inner quarters of Nayeema's home in particular. She had become intimately aware of the secrets of the zenana by having frequented several private quarters in Bihar and Calcutta over the last ten years.

The final decree was that whatever money and jewellery Nayeema had brought with her would remain with her, but the son and the daughter would remain in the

custody of the father. Nayeema tried really hard to win the custody of her son, but she didn't succeed.

VII

Nayeema was now living with the missionary women in the official residence of the British administrators in the area. There was no limit to pampering her. Where should they keep their proselytised memsahib – if they carry her on the head, lice attack her; if she is put on the ground, she is beaten by ants? It's astounding to have such piety, such extraordinary self-denial, in a nineteen year old girl. She became the icon for the British missionaries; the jewel in their coronet and a cherished treasure. Such extreme indulgence and adoration bewildered Nayeema. But why was the jolly memsahib so distressed despite all the love?

Abdication from everything for the sake of Jesus seemed blissful only so long as she had not been separated from her cherished family. Gradually, as the lawsuit took an unfavourable turn and the glimmer of seeing her husband and children again vanished, Nayeema's exultation dissipated also. She began to feel contrite on her way back from the court with the pride of victory on her shoulders. Stepping out of the palanquin, Nayeema fainted. The missionary sisters murmured 'too hot', and began to fan her, enclosing her in a circle. It was hot no doubt, like a heart-scorching heat!

On regaining consciousness, Nayeema confessed her sin, recited the basic article of faith in Islam again and again, and kept invoking Allah's name. But now it was all in vain. Late at night, she would think of escaping from the place to go and seek her husband's forgiveness. But, alas, she didn't know the way to return home. How far was the Collector Saheb's residence from the missionary house, and in which direction? Who would show her the way? Alas, oh alas! No one!

Eventually, feeding Nayeema also became a problem for the missionary women. Everyone worked here for a livelihood, went from house to house to teach or to preach. Why should Nayeema sit idly? At last, they asked her to work as a nurse at the hospital, but knowing that it would be unsafe to keep her in Bengal, they sent her to far-away Lucknow.

While leaving home, Nayeema had brought along a copy of the Qur'an to show to the world, by rebutting every verse in it, that Islam was a hollow religion that bred fanaticism and orthodoxy. But now she had given up on such foolish ideas, and that very copy of the Qur'an was now her only companion in sorrow. When everyone went to bed at night, she would get up, take her ablution, and sit down with the Qur'an reverentially. But she could barely recite – the continuous flow of tears from her eyes wetted the pages, so that she had to keep some blotting papers handy to wipe them. Brought up in the lap of joy, Nayeema never knew before that crying in penance could bring such solace.

Thinking of her husband was Nayeema's main preoccupation now. He became the subject of her meditation, cogitation, and her rosary. She would pray, 'Oh Allah, lead this miserable woman once more, just once, to the feet of her husband. You are omnipotent, capable of doing everything! Can't you do this little favour for me? The door of atonement hasn't shut yet; take me back, oh God, the most beneficent, the most merciful.'

Nayeema became Nurse Nelly on arrival at the Lucknow hospital. During the day, she was busy taking care of patients and had little time for prayer or recitation of the Qur'an. There were only the irrepressible tears! In the beginning, other nurses and even the lady doctors had tried to comfort her with various words of hope. But one who has lost both her religion and worldly possessions, in this life and the next; who has relinquished a free commonwealth to become a detestable sweeper; who has in her own hands set fire to a happy and prosperous home, where is the comfort for her? Therefore, at last, no one tried to console her any more.

In this way, seven long years had passed. Nelly hadn't spent a single day during this time without crying. She somehow continued to spend her days in her emaciated body, eagerly looking forward to the night. Her only solace was that at night she had more time to pray and recite the Holy Qur'an. But on the day she was called for night duty, Nelly was deprived even of the bliss of prayer. Sobahan Allah, Glory be to Allah! There was so much peace in sitting up and praying late at night and in soaking the prayer mat with a flood of tears!

At first I couldn't recognise Nelly in her skeletal body, but when she said, 'Bubujan, can't you remember me?' I was left with no more doubt. I felt as though I had been struck by a fire bolt, and instantly slumped to the ground. How could I not recognise my own cousin-sister who had grown up in my maternal care? No wonder she could recite the Qur'an; how many Bengali Christians were capable of that? But alas! Who would have wanted to see the paradisiacal nymph Nayeema in the form of an infernal worm, in Nelly? The Nayeema, who came to our house in childhood with five maids, had now become a nursemaid to others.

Alack, o destiny! The many tricks you play,
You take us to the crest of happiness
Only to push us into the pit of sorrow!

VIII

I couldn't restrain my tears while listening to Nelly's story. I reminded myself repeatedly that Nayeema's suffering was the result of her own sin; it was her due, and there was no reason for me to feel sad about it. But the story of Nelly's disgrace, told in a distressful tone, would have splintered even a stone to pieces; what more a human being?

After finishing her own account, Nelly kept quiet for a moment and then asked about the well-being of her family. I explained to her everything as briefly and calmly as I could. I said, 'The day Bhaijan returned home with a defeated face, having lost the lawsuit, mother heaved a sigh, 'Ah, Nayeema,' and instantly became bedridden. Her constant refrain to express her unbearable sorrow and anguish was 'Ah, Nayeema.' Bhaijan was a man and didn't show his grief outwardly, but like a wounded lion he bore all the humiliation, shame, resentment and anger in silence.

'Mother passed away after two months. Soon after that, poor Jamila fell ill. She didn't dare to go close to her father, noticing his solemn face. Her only refuge was her grandmother, and having lost her, the motherless child almost began to crumble.

'In the frenzy of high fever, Jamila would moan incoherently for her mother. She would whine, 'Mother, why have you gone to the hospital again? Come back!

Jafar cries for you all the time. Grandmother is also not there.’ Jamila didn’t suffer for long; death took her up in its placid lap within a few days.

‘Bhaijan was devastated by the death of Mother and Jamila in the space of days. He couldn’t take it any more. Poor Jafar also began to cry a lot. Bhaijan kept a watchful eye on him, but how long could a motherless child of one year remain healthy? He too met his death within a month.

‘Bhaijan never married again. His blissful family was reduced to names on a tomb, and his only surviving blood-relative was me. Imagine for once that graveyard of your own making, Nayeema, and picture your husband living in that cemetery.’ Before I could finish my words, Nayeema fainted and fell to the ground.

As I was planning to splash some water on Nelly’s face, Khuki’s husband knocked on the door and his grown-up daughter, Siddiqa, rushed into the room. I couldn’t tend to Nelly any more in their presence. Siddiqa then led me to her mother by the hand.

IX

By God’s grace, we returned home after Khuki regained her health. Before returning, we visited a few more cities in the north, especially Delhi, Agra and Lahore. The sight of Anarkali’s tomb in Lahore evoked the images of Emperor Akbar’s might and splendour on the one hand, and Prince Selim’s unadulterated love on the other – and I saw both simultaneously in my mind’s eye.¹

The sight of the Taj Mahal in Agra made me aware of something else. No matter how much the misogynists rage against woman’s education, the triumph of truth is inevitable. Education is vital for both men and women. Just because fire has the potential to burn down a house, can any householder do without fire?

The monument of Taj Mahal is renowned worldwide and it is considered one of the seven wonders on earth. There are very few people who haven’t heard about the Taj Mahal. Yet, how many have heard about Mumtaz Mahal, the woman who lies buried in that far-famed mausoleum? Even the exquisite Taj Mahal, built with the most beautiful marble stones, has not made the queen buried in its womb unforgettable. And what about Nurjahan Begum?² Virtually nothing has been done to

¹ Prince Selim’s beloved, Anarkali, was buried alive at the behest of Emperor Akbar. [Translator’s note: This is Rokeya’s footnote, in which she is making a reference to the legendary story of Akbar, his concubine Nadira Begum (dubbed ‘Anarkali’ for her rare beauty), and her incestuous relationship with Akbar’s son Salim, who later ascended the throne as Emperor Jahangir. Historical information is scarce on the incident. However, according to the British tourist and traveller William Finch, who came to Lahore during 1608 to 1611, when Akbar became suspicious that Anarkali, who was also the mother of his son Daniyal Shah, was having a secret relationship with Salim (Jahangir), he ordered her to be buried alive in the wall of Lahore Fort. It is believed that Jahangir built a splendid tomb in memory of his beloved, at the place where she was buried, after ascending the throne. The tomb survives till today and a couplet by Jahangir written on the grave in Persian reads, ‘If I could behold my beloved only once, I would remain thankful to Allah till doomsday.’ For details on the story, see <http://dawn.com/2012/02/12/legend-anarkali-myth-mystery-and-history/> and <http://www.wichaa.com/news/315/ARTICLE/16056/2009-09-01.html>.]

² Nur Jahan, meaning ‘Light of the World’, was born of Persian parents, as Mehr-un-Nisaa, in 1577. She became the twelfth wife of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (who was her second husband). It is believed that Jahangir had problems in running the affairs of the empire, owing to his addiction to

immortalise her; her humble, ordinary tomb lies neglected and covered with trees and shrubs in a little known place in Lahore. Many even don't know about its existence, yet Nurjahan Begum's memory has become timeless. What is it that has made her immortal? Education! It is the grace of education which has made her a radiant and renowned figure. God forbid, the Taj Mahal can be destroyed by an earthquake or by war, but Nurjahan's glory will last forever.

Anyway, I should not deviate from the story too far. Even after returning home, I couldn't bring up Nelly's story with anyone. She had cried and begged at my feet, urging that I request Bhaijan to ask her to return home. She would be happy to spend the rest of her life as a humble maidservant or an abominable sweeper in her husband's home. Excessive crying had caused her consumption, and I knew that the poor woman wouldn't live for much longer. I went for a visit to my paternal – no, since Father is no more – fraternal home during the puja holidays.

One day, I saw Bhaijan in a somewhat jovial mood. Taking this opportunity, I sat by his feet and asked gently, 'Bhaijan, let me press your feet.' Pleased, he said, 'Okay, but is there a motive?' This brought back memories of our happy childhood. In my girlhood days, I used to press Bhaijan's feet or snap his fingers to get his favour. That's why he asked me today if there was a motive. I revealed my purpose with considerable difficulty and in as direct and uncluttered a language as I could. Narrating Nayeema's heart-scorching story of sorrow, I said, 'Tormented by guilt, Nayeema's love for you has now become like pure gold.'

After hearing everything, Bhaijan replied, 'Can I then expect to see Nayeema again? I have not died so far only because I wish to see her just one more time. I remember everything; I haven't forgotten a single bit of it in the long seven-and-half years. I remember the day Mother fell ill with a sigh, 'Oh, Nayeema,' and never recovered again. I remember the way Jamila used to cry for her mother, hiding her face in my arms; unable to mention her mother to me from fear, the poor girl used to whine in an untold sorrow in the pretext of one thing or another. Eventually, she died in my lap rambling incoherently about her mother. Moreover, I remember the day my blind man's prop and last recourse for support in life, Jafar, breathed his last while resting his head on my bosom. He never slept except in my arms, and it is in my arms too where he slept his last.

'After so much humiliation, I am still shamelessly alive, only because I wanted to see Nayeema just one more time. If I had given up my job, I would probably have been consumed by memory in my lonely life. I would probably have lost my health in a short while and died. The day Jafar died, I loaded this pistol because I wanted to commit suicide ...'

opium and alcohol, and it is Nur Jahan who became the de-facto ruler behind the throne. After Jahangir's death, she fell from grace, as one of her stepsons, Khurram, ascended the throne assuming the title Shah Jahan ('Ruler of the World'). Shah Jahan confined her to house arrest, and during this period, Nur Jahan spent her time in artistic activities, including composing Persian poems under the pen name Makhfi.

Mumtaz Mahal ('Jewel of the Palace') was Nur Jahan's niece, who became Shah Jahan's third and most favourite wife. She was born in 1593 as Arjumand Banu Begum. Shah Jahan built the world's richest mausoleum, Taj Mahal, to commemorate his love for his 'Jewel', after her death in 1631. (Translator's note)

Bhaijan took out a six-barrel pistol from his pocket and showed it to me. He then continued, 'But I didn't kill myself. I am still alive, enduring memory's scorpion sting and suffering all the affliction and humiliation, only in the hope of seeing Nayeema one more time ...'

I looked up at Bhaijan's face with a bit of encouragement and hope. I thought Nayeema was lucky again, and perhaps would find shelter at the feet of her husband once more. But I became disappointed by the look on his face. He looked fierce; sparks of fire were emitting from his eyes. Holding the pistol firmly in his fist, he said, 'Can you somehow bring Nayeema just for once in front of me? Then I'll settle my last score of life with her. That's my last wish in life. I want nothing else. I'll kill Nayeema – no, did you say she is now 'Nelly' – okay then, I'll kill Nelly by shooting her with this pistol. I'll kill Nelly with this pistol, firing six bullets one at a time, and then I'll hang in the gallows. But no, well, I can't do that! Nayeema has reaffirmed her faith in Islam and become a Muslim again. Then she cannot be subjected to homicide. It is forbidden to kill a fellow Muslim.' With that, he put the pistol down on the floor.

Right then his servant boy brought in an urgent telegram. Bhaijan opened and read it.

The hospital authorities in Lucknow had written, 'Keep a grave ready, Nurse Nelly's dead body has been sent.'