

Novel

TWO SISTERS

Rabindranath Tagore



CONTENTS

SHARMILA.....	2
NIROD.....	12

SHARMILA

Women fall into two distinct categories—or so I have heard some wise men say.

One kind is primarily the Mother, the other is the Lover.

If compared to the seasons, the mother is the monsoon. She bestows water, brings forth fruit, and soothes the scorching heat. Melting from the heavens above, she pours herself out to banish droughts and fill every void.

The lover, on the other hand, is the season of spring. Her mysteries run deep, her illusions are sweet enchantments. Her playfulness stirs waves in the blood, reaching that innermost sanctum of the heart where a solitary string on a golden lute rests in silence, waiting to be struck—a resonance that awakens an ineffable melody through the entire body and mind.

Shashanka's wife, Sharmila, belongs to the mother category.

Large, tranquil eyes; a calm, profound gaze; a plump, tender body like a rain-laden new cloud, soft and dusky; the dawn-red line of vermilion in the parting of her hair; the broad black border of her sari; the thick, makara-headed bangles on her wrists—the language of these adornments is not one of mere vanity, but of deep, auspicious devotion.

There is no remote corner in her husband's universe where the sway of her empire is weak. Coddled by his wife's overindulgence, the husband's mind has grown careless. If his fountain pen momentarily disappears under a minor storm of papers on the table, the burden of its rediscovery falls upon his wife. Shashanka often forgets where he left his wristwatch before going for a bath; his wife's eyes never miss it. When he prepares to go out, wearing one sock of one color and another of a different shade on each foot, his wife steps in to rectify the blunder. When he mixes up the dates between the Bengali and English calendars and mistakenly invites friends over, the sudden burden of hosting unexpected guests falls squarely on her. Shashanka knows for certain that any flaw in his daily routine will inevitably be mended by his wife's hands; consequently, committing blunders has become his second nature. With affectionate reproach, his wife says, "I can't take this anymore.

Will you never learn?" If he ever did learn, Sharmila's days would become like barren, uncultivated fields.

Perhaps Shashanka has gone to a friend's gathering. It strikes eleven, it approaches midnight, the bridge game is in full swing. Suddenly, his friends burst into laughter, "Look here, the bailiff is at the door with your summons. Your time is up."

It is Mahesh, the familiar old servant. Greying mustache, dark hair, wearing a vest, a colorful duster draped over his shoulder, and a bamboo staff tucked under his arm. The mistress has sent him to inquire if the master is still there. She fears some mishap might occur on the dark road during the journey back. She has even sent a lantern along with him.

Annoyed, Shashanka throws down his cards and gets up. His friends tease, "Alas, a lone, defenseless man!" Returning home, Shashanka's interaction with his wife is neither gentle in tone nor calm in demeanor. Sharmila silently accepts the scolding. What else can she do? She simply cannot help it. She can never shake off the dread that every possible, impossible calamity is waiting to ambush her husband in her absence.

Visitors arrive outside, perhaps for business. From time to time, little notes slip out from the inner quarters: "Remember you were unwell yesterday? Come eat early today." Shashanka gets angry, but eventually yields. In utter exasperation, he once told his wife, "For heaven's sake, adopt a household deity like the lady of the Chakrabarty family. Your undivided attention is too much for me to bear alone. If you could share it with a god, it would be easier. No matter how much you fuss over a god, he won't object, but man is fragile."

Sharmila replied, "Alas! Do you remember the state you were in when I went to Haridwar with uncle that one time?"

That his condition had been utterly pathetic was a tale Shashanka himself had once narrated to his wife, embellished with abundant exaggeration. He knew that this hyperbole would make Sharmila both remorseful and delighted. How could he now protest the very words of his own grand rhetoric? He had to accept it in silence. Not only that—feeling the slightest hint of a cold that very morning, Sharmila's imagination dictated that he consume ten grains of quinine, followed by tea infused with basil leaves. He had no voice to object. For previously, in a similar situation,

he had objected, skipped the quinine, and consequently suffered a fever—a historical event now indelibly etched into Shashanka's permanent record.

Just as Sharmila's affectionate anxiety ensures healing and comfort within the home, her vigilance in fiercely guarding his honor outside is equally robust. An instance comes to mind.

They had gone to Nainital for a trip. An entire train compartment had been reserved in advance. Arriving at the junction, they changed trains and went to grab a meal. Upon returning, they found a menacing figure in a uniform about to commandeer their compartment. The stationmaster arrived, invoking the name of a world-renowned General, claiming the compartment was his and another name had been put up by mistake. Shashanka, his eyes wide with awe, respectfully began preparing to find space elsewhere. At that very moment, Sharmila stepped into the train, blocked the door, and declared, "Let me see who dares make me get down. Go call your General." Shashanka was still a government employee then, well accustomed to safely stepping aside for the kith and kin of his superiors. He anxiously pleaded, "Come on, what's the point? There are other trains." Sharmila turned a deaf ear! Eventually, having finished his meal in the refreshment room, the General observed the fierce stance of the female figure from a distance, cigar in mouth, and decided to retreat. Shashanka asked his wife, "Do you have any idea how important that man is?" His wife replied, "I have no need to know. In a compartment that belongs to us, he is no greater than you."

Shashanka asked, "What if he had insulted us?"

Sharmila retorted, "What are you here for, then?"

Shashanka is an engineer, graduated from Shibpur. No matter how lax he might be in his domestic life, he is highly competent at his job. The primary reason is that the relentless gaze of the dominant planet in his workplace belongs to the burra sahib (the big boss)—not the planetary influence of his wife. Shashanka was acting as the District Engineer when the promising trajectory of his impending promotion suddenly reversed. Bypassing merit, despite raw inexperience, a young British man with barely a shadow of a mustache claimed the seat, his unexpected arrival propelled by the relations and recommendations of top-level officials.

Shashanka understood: he would have to run the show from the lower tier while this novice sat above him. The authorities patted his back and said, "Very sorry, Majumdar, we'll find a suitable post for you as soon as we can." Both were members of the same Freemason lodge.

Yet, despite the reassurances and consolations, the whole affair tasted incredibly bitter to Majumdar. Returning home, he began snapping over trivial things. Suddenly, he noticed a cobweb in the corner of his study; suddenly, he felt he couldn't stand the sight of the green cover on his chair. A servant was sweeping the veranda; Shashanka gave him a massive scolding because dust was flying. Inevitable dust flew there every day, but the scolding was brand new.

He didn't share the news of his humiliation with his wife. He thought if it reached her ears, it would only knot the threads of his job further—perhaps she might march straight to the authorities and quarrel with them in less-than-sweet words. Especially since she already harbored a grudge against that man, Donaldson. Once, while trying to scare away a monkey in the circuit house garden, Donaldson's buckshot had pierced Shashanka's solar topi. No harm was done, but it certainly could have been. People said it was Shashanka's own fault, which only fueled her anger toward Donaldson even more. The biggest reason for her rage was that the enemy camp had equated the monkey being the target with the shot landing on Shashanka, turning the whole incident into a loud joke.

The news of Shashanka's demotion was discovered by his wife herself. Just by observing her husband's demeanor, she knew a thorn had stuck somewhere in his world. It didn't take her long to unearth the cause. She didn't take the route of constitutional agitation; she headed straight for self-determination. She told her husband, "No more of this. Resign from your job right now."

If he could, the leech of humiliation would fall right off his chest. But before his meditative gaze lay the boundless, secure pastures of a salaried livelihood, and on its western horizon gleamed the unwavering, golden line of a pension.

The very year Shashankamouli newly ascended the highest peak of his MSc degree, his father-in-law wasted no time in executing the auspicious deed—Shashanka was married to Sharmila. He completed his engineering degree with the financial backing of his wealthy father-in-law. Later, noticing the signs of rapid progression in his job, Rajaram babu felt reassured, calculating the steady evolution of his son-

in-law's future prosperity. Even today, the daughter hasn't felt any change in her circumstances. It is not just that there is no scarcity in the household, but the lifestyle of her paternal home has been fully maintained here. The reason is that, in this domestic diarchy, the legislative power rests entirely in Sharmila's hands. She has had no children, and has perhaps given up hope for any. Her husband's entire earnings flow unbroken directly into her hands. If a special need arises, Shashanka has no choice but to return as a beggar to the Goddess of Abundance in his own home. If the demand is unreasonable, it is rejected; he scratches his head and accepts it. Any disappointment from that front is compensated with sweet affection.

Shashanka said, "Quitting the job is nothing to me. I worry for you; you are the one who will suffer."

Sharmila replied, "The suffering will be far worse when you try to swallow an injustice and it chokes you."

Shashanka said, "But one must work. Leaving certainty behind, which neighborhood will I wander into seeking the uncertain?"

"You never notice that neighborhood. The world beyond what you jokingly call your 'realm of puris'—across the deserts of Balochistan—you don't even consider it."

"Good heavens! That universe is massively vast. Who will go out to survey those roads and alleys? Which market sells a telescope large enough?"

"You won't have to squint through a massive telescope. My cousin Mathur-dada is a prominent contractor in Calcutta. If you partner with him, we'll get by just fine."

"The shares would be unequal in weight. Our side of the scale lacks the weights. Limping into a partnership means losing one's dignity."

"This side lacks nothing in any aspect. You know the money my father left in the bank under my name has been growing with interest. You won't have to demean yourself before a partner."

"How can that be? That money is yours." Saying this, Shashanka got up. People were waiting outside.

Sharmila pulled her husband down by his clothes, made him sit, and said, "But I am yours, too."

Then she said, "Take your fountain pen out of your pocket, here is the letter paper, write your resignation. I won't have a moment of peace until it's mailed."

"I feel like I won't have any peace either."

He wrote the resignation letter.

The very next day, Sharmila left for Calcutta and stayed at Mathur-dada's house. Feigning hurt, she said, "You never even check on your sister for a single day."

Had it been a female rival, she might have retorted, "You don't either." That response didn't occur to a man's brain. He admitted his guilt. He said, "Is there even time to breathe? I forget if I even exist myself. Besides, you folks also wander far and wide."

Sharmila said, "I saw in the papers that you've landed a bridge-building contract somewhere in Mayurbhanj or Mathurbhanj. I was so delighted reading it. I felt I must go and congratulate Mathur-dada in person right away."

"Hold on a bit, little one. The time hasn't come yet."

The matter was this: Hard cash needed to be invested. There was talk of partnering with a wealthy Marwari merchant. In the end, it turned out that under the proposed terms, the Marwari would get the cream while he would be left with the scraps. Hence, his attempt to back out.

Sharmila urgently stood up and said, "That can never happen. If you must partner, do it with us. It would be a grave injustice if such a project slipped through your fingers. As long as I am here, I won't let it happen, say what you will."

After this, the paperwork didn't take long; Mathur-dada's heart melted too.

The business took off with tremendous speed. Previously, Shashanka worked under the obligations of a job; those responsibilities had set boundaries. The master was someone outside himself, the demands and deliveries perfectly weighed against each other. Now, his own authority drives him. The demand and the delivery have merged into one. His days are no longer nets woven with work and holidays; time has become a solid block. The very fact that he can shed the responsibility pressing

on his mind anytime he wishes is what gives it such an iron grip. Nothing else mattered—he had to repay his wife's debt first, and only then would he find time to walk at a leisurely pace. A watch on his left wrist, a solar topi on his head, sleeves rolled up, wearing khaki pants, a tight leather belt, thick-soled shoes, and tinted glasses to ward off the sun—Shashanka threw himself into the work. Even when he reached the brink of repaying his wife's debt, he didn't lower the steam; by then, his mind was running hot.

Previously, the stream of income and expenditure in the household flowed through a single channel; now it split into two branches. One headed toward the bank, the other toward the house. Sharmila's allowance remains the same as before; the mysteries of those transactions remain unknown to Shashanka. At the same time, the leather-bound ledger of the business is a formidable, impenetrable fortress for Sharmila. No matter. But because her husband's professional orbit has shifted outside her domestic wheel, her rules and regulations on that front are increasingly ignored. She pleads, "Don't overdo it, your health will break." It yields no result. Amazingly, his health doesn't break either. Swiftly disregarding all kinds of marital anxieties—worries over health, laments over lack of rest, fussing over the minutiae of comfort—Shashanka drives off early in the morning in his second-hand Ford, honking the horn himself. Returning around two or half-past two, he takes a scolding and rapidly finishes his lunch with hurried hands.

One day, his motorcar collided with someone else's. He survived unhurt, but the car was damaged; he sent it off for repairs. Sharmila was beside herself with worry. In a voice choked with tears, she said, "You must not drive the car yourself."

Shashanka laughed it off, saying, "A hazard in another's hands is an enemy of the same breed."

One day, while inspecting some repair work, a rusty nail from a broken packing crate pierced right through his shoe and into his foot. He went to the hospital, got it bandaged, and took a tetanus shot. Sharmila wept and wailed that day, pleading, "Stay in bed for a few days."

Shashanka replied with extreme brevity, "Work." A sentence couldn't be shortened any further.

Sharmila started, "But—" this time, bandage and all, he left for work without another word.

She dared not exert force anymore. The man's strength had manifested in his own domain. Beyond all logic, arguments, and tearful pleas stood a single phrase: "There is work." Sharmila sits anxiously without reason. If he is late, she imagines a motor accident. If she sees her husband's face flushed from the sun, she is certain it's influenza. Fearfully, she hints at calling a doctor—but stops right there, seeing her husband's expression. Lately, she doesn't even dare to openly express her anxiety.

Before her eyes, Shashanka has become sun-baked and toughened. Short, tight clothes, short, tight leisure time; swift movements, conversations as brief as sparks. Sharmila's acts of service try to keep pace with this rapid tempo. Some food must always be kept warm near the stove—who knows when her husband might suddenly announce at an odd hour, "I'm off, I'll be late." Soda water and a small tin box of dry snacks are always packed in the car. A bottle of Eau de Cologne is kept conspicuously in sight, just in case he gets a headache. When the car returns, she inspects it and finds none of it has been touched. Her heart sinks. Clean clothes are visibly laid out in the bedroom every day; yet, at least four days a week, there is no time to change into them. Domestic consultations have had to be drastically curtailed, adopting the staccato language of urgent telegrams—and even that, while he is on the move, calling after him from behind, saying, "Dear, just listen to this one thing." The little connection Sharmila had with their business is also severed; her money was repaid with interest. Even the interest was calculated to the exact penny, with a formal receipt provided. Sharmila says to herself, "My goodness! Even in love, a man cannot merge himself entirely. He leaves a space vacant; that is where the pride of their manhood resides."

From his profits, Shashanka built a house in Bhowanipore exactly to his liking. It is his passion project. New plans for health, comfort, and order constantly pop into his head. An effort to astonish Sharmila. And Sharmila never fails to be duly astonished. The engineer installed a clothes-washing machine; Sharmila walked around it, observed it, and praised it highly. Secretly she thought, 'The clothes will go to the laundryman tomorrow just as they do today. I understand the donkey-vehicle for dirty clothes, but I don't understand this science-vehicle.' The potato peeler left her awestruck; she said, "This will wipe away three-quarters of the

hassle of making aloor dum." Later, it was heard that the machine had attained nirvana on a bed of oblivion alongside leaky pots and broken kettles.

When the house was finally complete, Sharmila's pent-up affection found an outlet in this immovable object. The advantage is that a body of brick and wood has unshakeable patience. Under her massive endeavor of arranging, organizing, and decorating, two servants lost their breath, and one quit. The furnishing of the rooms is being done keeping Shashanka in mind. He rarely sits in the drawing-room these days, yet cushions of various fashions are constantly dedicated to his weary spine; not just one or two vases, but fringed, embroidered covers on the teapoys and tables. Shashanka's daytime visits to the bedroom are banned nowadays, as Sunday is simply Monday's twin brother in his modern calendar. Even when work is paused on other holidays, he finds odd jobs from somewhere, sitting in his study with tracing paper or ledgers to draw plans. Still, the old customs endure. A pair of woolen slippers sits ready before the thickly cushioned sofa. In the betel-leaf box there, prepared paan awaits just like before; on the rack hangs a thin silk panjabi and a neatly pleated dhoti. One needs courage to interfere in that study, yet Sharmila enters with a duster during Shashanka's absence. Her perseverance in harmonizing decor and order amidst the labyrinth of things to be kept and things to be discarded is unyielding.

Sharmila serves him, but much of that service happens out of sight these days. Her former self-dedication, which used to be so direct and visible, is now applied in symbols—in decorating the house, tending to the garden, the silk cover of the very chair Shashanka sits on, the floral embroidery on his pillowcases, the bunch of tuberose in the blue crystal vase at the corner of his office desk.

She had to place her offerings far from the altar of worship, and with much sorrow. The blow she received just a few days ago had to be erased in secret, shedding quiet tears. That day was the 29th of Kartik, Shashanka's birthday. The biggest festival in Sharmila's life. As per custom, friends were invited, and the whole house was specially decorated with flowers and foliage.

Returning home after his morning chores, Shashanka asked, "What's all this fuss? A doll's wedding or what?"

"Oh, my luck! It's your birthday today, have you forgotten even that? Say what you will, you cannot go out this afternoon."

"Business bows its head to no day other than the day of death."

"I'll never ask again. I've already invited people for today."

"Look, Sharmila, don't turn me into a toy and invite the whole world to play with it," saying this, Shashanka quickly walked away. Sharmila locked the bedroom door and wept for a while.

In the afternoon, the guests arrived. They readily accepted the supreme demand of Business. If it had been Kalidasa's birthday, everyone would have certainly dismissed the excuse of writing the third act of Shakuntala as utterly lame. But Business! There was plenty of merrymaking. Nalu-babu made everyone laugh heartily by mimicking theater actors; Sharmila joined in the laughter too. A Shashanka-less birthday of Shashanka prostrated itself in complete surrender before the Shashanka-occupied Business.

She felt immense sorrow, yet from afar, Sharmila's mind also bowed down to the banner of Shashanka's speeding chariot of work. To her, it is an unfathomable task that cares for no one—not a wife's pleas, not friends' invitations, not even his own comfort. A man respects himself through his reverence for this work; it is his submission to his own power. Standing on the shores of her daily domestic chores, Sharmila watches with awe as Shashanka's work unfolds on the other shore. Its existence is all-encompassing, transcending the boundaries of the home, traveling to distant lands, across far-off oceans, pulling countless known and unknown people into its web of dominion. A man's daily struggle is with his own destiny; if the soft embrace of women's arms tries to hinder him on his rugged journey, the man will ruthlessly tear it away, indeed. Sharmila accepted this ruthlessness with devotion. Sometimes she cannot help herself; even where she has no rightful claim by the pull of the heart, she brings her sorrowful anxiety, gets hurt, and accepting that hurt as her due, tells the deity, "Keep an eye on him," right there where her own movements are barred.

NIROD

Riding on the money accumulating in the bank, just as the family's prosperity was racing toward the six-figure mark, Sharmila was struck by some mysterious, incomprehensible illness; she lost all strength to even get out of bed. The reason this caused such profound anxiety needs to be explained.

Rajaram Babu was Sharmila's father. He owned vast estates in the Barisal region, near the mouth of the Ganges. Furthermore, he held shares in the shipbuilding business at Shalimar Ghat. He was born on the threshold of the old era, just as the new one was beginning. He was a master of wrestling, hunting, and the martial art of lathi (stick-fighting). He was also highly renowned for his skill on the pakhawaj drum. He could effortlessly recite pages from *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet* from memory. Lord Macaulay's English was his ultimate ideal, he was mesmerized by Edmund Burke's eloquence, and his reverence for Bengali literature ended squarely with the epic *Meghnad Badh Kavya*. In his middle age, he considered alcohol and forbidden meats to be essential elements of modern intellectual refinement, though he abandoned them in his later years. He dressed with meticulous care; his features were handsome and grave, his physique tall and robust. He possessed a jovial, sociable temperament and did not know how to say "no" to anyone who came seeking a favor. He had no personal devotion to religious rituals, yet they were celebrated with great pomp in his household. This grandeur was a display of aristocratic prestige, while the actual worship was left to the women and others. He could have easily acquired the title of "Raja" had he so wished; when asked why he was indifferent to it, Rajaram would laugh and say that he already enjoyed the royal title bestowed upon him by his father—Raja-ram—and accepting another would only diminish that honor. He enjoyed the privilege of entering Government House through a special, honored gate. High-ranking British officials would happily consume copious amounts of "consecrated" champagne at the traditional Jagaddhatri Puja held annually at his residence.

After Sharmila's marriage, his widower household was left with his eldest son, Hemanta, and his youngest daughter, Urmimala. Professors called the boy

radiant—or "brilliant," as they say in English. His appearance was striking enough to make people turn and stare. There was no subject in which his intellect did not soar to the highest pinnacle of academic success. Furthermore, his athletic prowess showed every sign that he would uphold his father's formidable legacy. Needless to say, a frantic orbit of anxious prospective brides constantly circled him, but his mind remained entirely indifferent to marriage. His current ambition was focused on acquiring degrees from European universities. With that goal in mind, he had begun learning French and German.

When, for want of anything else to do, he began studying law—unnecessary as it was—some mysterious affliction seized Hemanta's intestines, or perhaps some other organ; the doctors could not make head or tail of it. The elusive disease seemed to have found an impenetrable fortress within his strong body; tracking it down proved as difficult as attacking it. Rajaram had unwavering faith in an old English doctor from the colonial days. The man was renowned in surgery. He decided to operate on the patient. Driven by surgical habit, he presumed that a deep-rooted danger lurked in the inaccessible caverns of the body, one that could be excised. Guided by the skillful blade, when the layers were pierced and the supposed battleground exposed, neither the imagined enemy nor any trace of its ravages could be found. There was no way to reverse the fatal error; the boy died. The father's agonizing grief refused to be consoled. It was not merely the death that devastated him, but the memory of that vibrant, beautiful, robust body being carved up so brutally that clawed at his mind day and night, like a dark, vicious bird with sharp talons. Sucking the very marrow of his soul, it dragged him toward the jaws of death.

A newly graduated doctor and Hemanta's former classmate, Nirod Mukherjee, had been assisting with the nursing and care. From the very beginning, he had vehemently insisted that a mistake was being made. He had independently diagnosed the true nature of the illness and advised a long convalescence in a dry climate. But Rajaram's mind was firmly anchored to the prejudices of his ancestral era. He believed that if a grim battle against the God of Death were to ensue, the only worthy adversary was an English doctor. In the aftermath of this tragedy, his affection and respect for Nirod grew to an unmerited degree. His youngest daughter, Urmi, suddenly felt that this man possessed extraordinary genius. She told her father, "Look, Baba, he is so young, yet he has such firm faith in himself.

He has the unflinching courage to confidently preach his own opinion against that of such a towering, broad-shouldered British doctor."

Her father replied, "Medical science isn't just about reading textbooks. Some possess a rare, divine intuition for it. I see that in Nirod."

Their devotion to him began with this small piece of evidence, born out of the shock of grief and the agony of regret. Afterwards, it continued to grow on its own, needing no further proof.

One day, Rajaram said to his daughter, "You know, Urmi, I feel as if Hemanta is constantly calling out to me, saying, 'Alleviate the suffering of human illness.' I have decided to establish a hospital in his name."

Overflowing with her characteristic enthusiasm, Urmi said, "That would be wonderful. Send me to Europe, Baba; I will study medicine and return to take charge of the hospital."

The words touched Rajaram's heart deeply. He said, "That hospital will be a dedicated religious endowment, and you will be its chief caretaker. Hemanta suffered greatly, and he loved you very much; through your noble work, his soul will find peace in the afterlife. You nursed him day and night on his sickbed; that very act of serving will take on a grander form in your hands."

The old man did not find it bizarre or unnatural for a girl from an aristocratic family to practice medicine. Today, in his heart of hearts, he truly understood what it meant to save a human life from the clutches of disease. His own son had not survived, but if the sons of others lived, it might feel like a compensation, perhaps easing the burden of his grief. He told his daughter, "First, finish your science education at the university here, and then you can go to Europe."

From then on, a particular thought kept swirling in Rajaram's mind. It was about that young man, Nirod. An absolute gem of a boy. The more he observed him, the more remarkable he seemed. True, he had passed his exams, but having crossed the vast, barren plains of examinations, he was now swimming day and night in the boundless oceans of medical science. He was young, yet his mind never wavered toward entertainment or frivolous amusements. He spent his time turning over all the latest discoveries, analyzing and testing them, all to the detriment of his own medical practice. He held utter contempt for those who had amassed a lucrative

clientele. He used to say, "Fools achieve success, while worthy men achieve glory." He had picked up that quote from some book.

Finally, one day, Rajaram told Urmi, "I've been thinking—the hospital project will only be truly complete if you work as Nirod's partner, and I would finally have peace of mind. Where else could I find a boy like him?"

Rajaram could ignore almost anything, but never Hemanta's opinions. Hemanta used to say that arranging a marriage based solely on the parents' choice while ignoring the girl's preference was sheer barbarism. Rajaram had once argued that marriage was not merely a personal matter; it was tied to the larger family, so it needed to be guided by experience, not just desire. But no matter how he argued or what his own inclinations were, his affection for Hemanta was so profound that it was always his son's will that prevailed in the family.

Nirod Mukherjee was a frequent visitor to the house. Hemanta had nicknamed him 'Owl'. When asked to explain, he would say, "That man is mythological. He has no age, only sheer intellect. That's why I call him the mount of Minerva."

Nirod occasionally had tea at their house, engaged in fierce debates with Hemanta, and surely took notice of Urmi in his mind, though his outward behavior betrayed nothing. The reason was simply that displaying the appropriate social graces was entirely absent from his nature. He could debate, but he didn't know how to converse. Even if the heat of youth existed within him, it lacked its radiant light. Because of this, he derived a sense of self-satisfaction by looking down upon young men whose youth was vibrantly apparent. For these very reasons, no one had dared to categorize him among Urmi's suitors. Yet, it was precisely this apparent aloofness, combined with recent events, that had elevated Urmi's respect for him to the level of reverence.

When Rajaram explicitly told his daughter that he would be delighted if she had no hesitations about marrying Nirod, she nodded in favorable assent. However, she added a condition: the marriage would only take place after she had completed her education, both here and in England. Her father said, "That is perfectly fine. But if the alliance is formalized with mutual consent now, there will be nothing left to worry about."

Nirod's consent was not delayed, although his demeanor suggested that matrimony was a profound sacrifice for a scientist, verging almost on self-destruction. Perhaps as a means to somewhat mitigate this 'calamity,' a condition was laid down: Nirod would direct Urmi in her studies and in all other matters; essentially, he would slowly mold his future wife with his own hands. And this, too, would be done scientifically, under strictly controlled rules, much like the infallible processes of a laboratory.

Nirod told Urmi, "Animals and birds emerge from nature's factory as finished products. But a human being is raw material. The burden of shaping a human lies with the human himself."

Urmi replied humbly, "Very well, you may experiment on me. You will meet no resistance."

Nirod said, "You possess various kinds of energies. They must be bound together around a single, unified goal in your life. Only then will your life gain meaning. The scattered elements must be condensed by the gravitational pull of a single purpose; they must become tight, dynamic. Only then can that unity be called a moral organism."

Thrilled, Urmi thought to herself: many young men had visited their tea tables and tennis courts, but they never spoke a word worth pondering over; if anyone else had said such things, she would have stifled a yawn. Indeed, Nirod had a remarkably profound way of speaking. Whatever he said, Urmi felt it carried an astonishing significance. He was incredibly intellectual.

Rajaram also invited his elder son-in-law over. On occasion, through dinner invitations, he tried to foster a better acquaintance between the two men. Shashanka would tell Sharmila, "That boy is unbearably pompous; he thinks we are all his students, and that too, sitting in the darkest corner of the back bench!"

Sharmila would laugh and say, "That's just your jealousy. Why, I quite like him."

Shashanka would reply, "How about swapping places with your younger sister?"

"Then you'd probably breathe a sigh of relief," Sharmila would retort, "but I am a different matter altogether."

It didn't seem as though Nirod was developing much brotherly affection for Shashanka either. In his mind, he would think, 'He's just a manual laborer, is he a scientist? He has hands, but where is the brain?'

Shashanka often teased his sister-in-law about Nirod. He would say, "The time has come to change your old name."

"To an English one?"

"No, a pure Sanskrit one."

"Let's hear the new name, then."

"Bidyut-lata—the Lightning Vine. Nirod will love it! He's already familiar with that element in his laboratory; now he'll have it securely tethered at home."

Inwardly, he thought, 'Truthfully, that name suits her perfectly.' But deep down, it stung him. 'Alas, such a wonderful girl falling into the hands of such a massive prig!' Who exactly she should have fallen into the hands of to fully satisfy and console Shashanka's tastes was difficult to say.

Shortly after, Rajaram passed away. Urmi's future proprietor, Nirodnath, took up the task of molding her evolution with single-minded devotion.

Urmimala was not only beautiful, but her vivacity made her appear even more attractive. The brilliance of her mind sparkled through her restless body. She was curious about everything. Her interest in literature was no less than her passion for science. She had boundless enthusiasm for watching football matches on the Maidan, and she didn't look down upon going to the cinema. If a foreign physicist came to lecture at Presidency College, she would be present in the audience. She would eagerly listen to the radio; she might scoff at it and say "Ugh," but her curiosity was insatiable. If a bridegroom's procession passed by the street with loud music, she would rush to the balcony. She frequented the Zoological Gardens, finding immense amusement, especially standing before the monkey cages. When her father used to go fishing with his rod, she would sit right beside him. She was an expert at tennis and badminton. She had learned all these things from her elder brother. Slender as a wandering vine, she would sway at the slightest breeze. Her attire was simple yet immaculate. She knew exactly how to drape her sari—tugging a little here, loosening a bit there, wrapping it tightly elsewhere—to create an

elegant silhouette, yet the secret to her style remained an unsolved mystery. She couldn't sing well, but she played the sitar. Whether that music was meant to be seen or heard, who knows. It felt as though her restless fingers were causing a joyful commotion. She never ran out of topics to discuss, nor did she wait for a logical reason to laugh. She had an endless capacity for companionship; wherever she went, she filled the empty spaces and dispelled the loneliness. Only around Nirod did she become a completely different person. It was as if the wind in her sails suddenly died down, and she moved with a meek, sluggish pace, pulled only by the towline of duty.

Everyone said Urmi's nature was brimming with life, just like her brother's. Urmi knew it was her brother who had liberated her mind. Hemanta used to say, "Our homes are nothing but molds, built to churn out clay figures. That is why foreign magicians have been able to make three hundred and thirty million puppets dance to their tunes so easily for so long." He would declare, "When my time comes, I will go out like Kalapahar, the great iconoclast, to smash this social idolatry." His time never came, but he had left Urmi's mind profoundly vibrant and alive.

This is exactly where the trouble began. Nirod's methodology was exceedingly rigid. He set up a strict, inflexible routine for Urmi's studies. He admonished her, saying, "Look, Urmi, do not keep spilling the contents of your mind as you walk along the path; when you finally reach the end, what will be left in the pitcher?"

He would say, "You flutter about restlessly like a butterfly, bringing nothing back. You must be like the honeybee. Every moment must be accounted for. Life is not a luxury."

Nirod had recently started borrowing and reading books on educational theory from the Imperial Library, and such phrases filled their pages. His language was the language of books, for he had no natural, spontaneous voice of his own. Urmi harbored no doubt that she was the guilty one. Her mission was a noble one, yet her mind wandered hither and thither at the slightest provocation! She constantly berated herself. Right before her was Nirod's example—what astonishing resolve, what unwavering focus, what severe aversion to all forms of amusement! If he spotted a novel or any light literature on Urmi's desk, he would confiscate it immediately.

One afternoon, coming to check on Urmi, he learned she had gone to an English theatre to watch a matinee performance of Sullivan's *The Mikado*. When her brother was alive, she almost never missed such opportunities. That day, Nirod gave her a proper dressing-down. In an exceedingly grave tone, he said to her in English, "Look here, you have taken upon yourself the responsibility of validating your brother's death through your life's work. Have you begun to forget that already?"

Hearing this, Urmi was struck with deep remorse. She thought, 'What extraordinary insight this man possesses! The intensity of my grief truly is fading—I didn't even realize it myself. Shame on me, there is so much frivolity in my character.' She began to be excessively cautious, stripping away all hints of glamour, right down to her clothes. Her saris became coarse, their bright colors banished. Even though chocolates were hoarded in her drawer, she gave up the temptation to eat them. She began binding her rebellious mind tightly within narrow confines, tethering it to the dry stake of duty. Her elder sister scolded her for this, and the fierce adjectives Shashanka rained down upon Nirod were harsh, foreign words completely outside the polite dictionary, not at all pleasant to the ears.

There was only one commonality between Shashanka and Nirod. When Shashanka's urge to hurl abuses reached its peak, his medium of choice was English; similarly, when Nirod's subject matter involved high-minded preaching, high-class English became his vehicle. What Nirod despised most were Urmi's visits to her elder sister's house upon invitation. It wasn't just that she went; it was her intense eagerness to go. Urmi's familial bond with them somehow fractured Nirod's own connection with her.

One day, with a somber face, Nirod told Urmi, "Look, Urmi, please don't mind what I say. What else can I do? I have a responsibility toward you, so out of a sense of duty, I must say unpleasant things. I am warning you, constantly mixing with Shashanka-babu and his household is unhealthy for the development of your character. You are blinded by the illusion of kinship, but I can clearly see the potential for disaster."

At least the primary mortgage deed to that substance known as Urmi's 'character' lay securely locked in Nirod's safe; if anything went awry with that character, the loss would be entirely Nirod's. As a result of his prohibition, Urmi's visits to the

Bhowanipore neighborhood became increasingly rare nowadays, using various excuses. For Urmi, this self-discipline felt like the repayment of a massive debt. By taking charge of her life, Nirod had burdened his own ascetic pursuits forever; for a scientist-sage like him, what greater self-sacrifice could there be?

Urmi was somehow getting accustomed to the pain of withdrawing her mind from life's manifold attractions. Yet, every now and then, an irrepressible ache would swell within her heart; she couldn't entirely suppress it by simply dismissing it as mere restlessness. Nirod merely steered and governed her, but why didn't he ever, even for a single moment, try to court her? Her mind constantly waited for this devotion—and in its absence, the sweetness of her heart failed to reach its full bloom, rendering all her duties lifeless and dry. Some days, she would suddenly feel as if a trancelike passion had appeared in Nirod's eyes, as though the deepest mystery of his heart was on the verge of revealing itself at any moment. But the Omniscient One knew that even if the agony of those depths existed somewhere within him, Nirod simply lacked the language for it. Because he couldn't express it, he found fault with the very desire to do so. He took immense pride in keeping his agitated heart mute and walking away, viewing it as a testament to his inner strength. He would declare, 'Indulging in sentimentality is not my job.' On those days, Urmi wanted to weep, but such was her condition that she, too, reverently believed this was true heroism. She would then relentlessly and cruelly torture her own weak mind. No matter how hard she tried, however, it occasionally became glaringly obvious to her that the arduous duty she had voluntarily embraced in the wake of profound grief was now, with the passage of time, sustained only by clinging to the sheer willpower of another, as her own resolve weakened.

Nirod told her plainly, "Look, Urmi, do not expect from me the kind of flattery and adulation that ordinary women expect from men; let this be known to you. What I will give you is truer and far more valuable than all those fabricated sweet words."

Urmi would keep her head bowed in silence. In her mind, she would say, 'Will nothing ever remain hidden from him?'

She couldn't anchor her mind to anything. She would go up to the terrace to pace around alone. The afternoon light would turn gray. Beyond the uneven silhouettes and various shapes of the city's rooftops, the sun would set behind the masts of the ships docked at the distant Ganges riverbanks. Long streaks of multicolored clouds

would erect a fence at the edge of the day. Gradually, the fence would vanish. The moon would rise above the church spire; in the faint light, the city would appear dreamlike, like a realm of supernatural illusions. A question would rise in her mind: Is life truly so unyieldingly harsh? And is it really so miserly? Will it grant no respite, offer no joy? Suddenly, her mind would turn fiercely rebellious, making her want to do something incredibly mischievous, to scream at the top of her lungs, "I refuse to obey anything!"