



## The Stain

*(Written by Mukul Goswami in Assamese titled 'Daag')*

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Alaka felt like a prisoner just out of the prison after walking out of the wedding hall. She walked fast to the bus stop and boarding the bus heaved a sigh of relief after getting into the bus. Alaka ruminated once more on the unexpected happenings in the wedding.

She started striding along to reach her home immediately after getting down from the bus. The distance to their rented house from the bus stop would be of two furlong. She did not realize when and how she walked that distance and reached the gate to their house. She saw light inside and it instantly came to her mind that keeping his promise Ajitesh is back home early. She opened the bamboo thatched gate and entered. She was caught by the familiar mesmerizing fragrance of *sewali* located just in front of their house. Usually she would have remained there for some time but not today. Standing on the veranda, she knocked at the door.

Opening the door Ajitesh reacted like a person who had seen a snake before him

“You are back so early?”

“Just like that.”

“You told me you would come only tomorrow morning after the wedding gets over.”

“I did— everything said cannot be done.”

“But its Rina’s wedding today! Your closest friend!”

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1. A flower with white petals and yellow stem which blossoms in autumn.



“Don’t ask unnecessary questions. I often say I will die; have I ever attempted to die? One is not compelled to do everything one says.” Alaka went inside. Ajitesh understood Alaka was not in a good mood; so it was better to remain silent.

Ajitesh had been writing something. Closing the front door he goes back to the room and continues writing. Hanging her vanity bag on the hook attached to the bamboo thatched wall Alaka stood near the clothe-stand. She looked at the *mekhela*<sup>2</sup> she was wearing and stopped with a start. She looked towards Ajitesh who was busy writing reclined on the bed. The anger she had for Mira and her friends in the wedding got assembled on Ajitesh now.

Clenching her teeth she was about to say something nasty but controlled herself.

Alaka changed into her old saree. She picked the crumbled *mekhela* from the clothe-stand to fold. Looking at the *mekhela* intently Alaka became red with emotion. She got this pair of silk dress after a long argument with Ajitesh and kept it untouched to be worn on Rina’s wedding. She wore the dress for the first time today with lots of excitement; but all her ardour was smashed by some comments. In an outrage she threw away the *mekhela* towards the clothe-stand.

She went to the bathroom to freshen up and returned to the room to dry herself. Ajitesh was still engrossed in writing. He looked up as his attention was diverted by Alaka’s footsteps. He was about to say something but observing Alaka’s face he stopped himself and went back to his work. Alaka looked at the watch on the table. It was past seven. She went inside the kitchen unwillingly to make some arrangements for meal. She lit the stove and placed the rice pan and started peeling some potatoes for curry.

She absentmindedly did her chores as her restless mind kept flying away again and again to the wedding though she was trying her best to calm it down. It must be a time of great hustle-bustle in the wedding now. She would have enjoyed it so much! However, the remembrance of the unexpected happening in the wedding made her dejected again. What a situation that was! What would Mira and her friends think about her unspoken and sudden departure? Wouldn’t Rina, in particular, be upset about her for leaving the wedding?

Rina and Alaka have been friends since their school days. Rina was an intelligent girl of a rich family who never had to experience poverty. Her own father, a clerk, thought of marrying her off in spite of her good performance in matriculation. She understood her father’s situation. Instead of accentuating the problems of the impoverished family she agreed to her father’s decision. Her father married her off to Ajitesh taking debts. Ajitesh Choudhury, a clerk, in the same office with Alaka’s father rescued him from a trouble.

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<sup>2</sup> The lower garment worn by Assamese women.



Alaka started a new life with Ajitesh with the dream of a bright and golden future with him. However, Alaka became disconcerted when Ajitesh's face mirrored the same anxiety and exhaustion at the end of the day as her father's. She saw Ajitesh, like her father, in the same row as those numerous men and women who are on the streets shouting slogans for their rights, to fulfill the daily needs for their survival. In her younger days, Alaka's father couldn't give her many of her desired things for the lack of money. After her marriage, Ajitesh too, could not. She is not ignorant of Ajitesh's problems either. She knows how difficult it must be to maintain a family in a city after managing a family in village with the meager salary he gets. However insignificant it may be, she like all other wives wants to get one or two things from her husband by demand.

Rina is getting married today to some engineer called Parag Barua, after completing her B.A. degree. Rina visited Alaka's place twice to invite both her and Ajitesh to her wedding. The lack of a pair of fine dress is something which stood as a barrier in her wish to attend Rina's wedding. She urged Ajitesh to give her a pair of silk dress. Ajitesh got angry at Alaka's obstinacy. Ajitesh said to her harshly: "I don't have a penny. How can I purchase a silk dress for you? I will need at least rupees 200/ to buy an ordinary silk mekhela sador, if not a good one."

Alaka said: "As if you have always given me new dress. Did I ask you for anything in the last three years since our marriage? This time I am demanding it from you because it is Rina's wedding. They are so rich! All the rich persons and dignitaries from the city will be coming to the wedding. How can I dare to go wearing a cheap old dress?"

Ajitesh did not answer. He too suffers from guilt for not being able to gift anything costly to Alaka since their marriage. So, it is quite natural on Alaka's part to ask for a new dress on the occasion of Rina's wedding; but for a person like Ajitesh there is nothing like natural-unnatural to put on a balance. He is still in debt for the money he borrowed for the treatment of Alaka after she gave birth to their first child who was stillborn. If he could give her the mekhela sador he will feel a significant part of his duty towards his wife as fulfilled! Their needs have no ends.

Ajitesh handed over a pair of dress to Alaka after two days and said, "This is a silk dress. I got it little cheap. The price is actually high; but I got it cheap because of some stain on the mekhela."

"You have brought an old dress." Alaka shouted.

"No, the dress was in the shop for too long. The stain is caused by that. Look at it; isn't it really beautiful! The actual price will be about rupees 500/."



The dress was really charming. There was nothing wrong in it except for the stain. Alaka kept the pair of dress very carefully in her box and did not argue with Ajitesh anymore.

Alaka replaced the saucepan of rice with cooking pan on the stove. Hearing the sound of the bathroom door she understood Ajitesh had gone in. Usually Ajitesh comes back home around this time. Today he came early because of Alaka's request. Alaka asked the office bound Ajitesh in the morning:

“Do you remember it is Rina's wedding today?”

“I do. What should I do?”

“Won't you go? Come back early.”

“No, I will not go; but I will come back early. As you will not be here I will have to take care of the house. Please don't wait for me.”

“Then give me fifty rupees.”

“Fifty rupees? Why?”

“Will I not give her something on her wedding?”

“Listen Alaka, we are not millionaire that we can spend fifty rupees on a gift. Fifty rupees means our fifteen days' expense. Alaka retorted- “But, how can I go empty handed?”. “Yes, you are right. You will have to give her something.” Saying this Ajitesh went inside and opening his drawer took out twenty rupees and gave it to Alaka. Taking the money Alaka said, “I will return only after the wedding gets over. So, I will return only tomorrow morning. You cook something for yourself for the night.”

“As you command my empress,” accepting Alaka's suggestion with this attitude Ajitesh went to the office. As Ajitesh did not reach home till 4pm Alaka locked the door and hiding the key in their mutually known place set out for the wedding. She bought a *sarais*<sup>3</sup> for the twenty rupees and wrapped it with a colourful gift paper. By the time she reached the wedding it was already crowded.

Alaka placed the vegetables on the pan and tried to keep herself occupied in the midst of that 'chenchen' sound made by the frying vegetables. However, it did not matter how much she tried the incidents from the wedding kept troubling her.

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<sup>3</sup> A tray with a stand. It holds a special place in every auspicious occasion in Assamese society.



Mira, Nina and all her other friends were sitting near the bride. Giving forth her gift to Rina Alaka wished her saying “Wish you a happy conjugal life.” Accepting the gift with smile Rina made some space beside her for Alaka to sit. Around that time Rina’s *pehi*<sup>4</sup> came into the room and inquired, “Rina, is there anyone left in the room who is yet to eat?”

Rina replied, “Yes *pehi*, only Alaka has just arrived.”

“OK. I will come back.” Saying that Rina’s aunt went out and came back again to take Alaka to the dining hall.

After she was done, Alaka relished on some *masalas* and was just about to enter into the room where Rina was sitting when she overheard ongoing conversation from inside which stunned her.

“Hey Mira, did you notice Alaka’s dress?”

“Yes, I was also thinking about it.”

“What is it?” Everyone in the room asked with lots of interest.

Mira said, “Our Pradip *dada*<sup>6</sup> got married last month. Manju *baideu*<sup>7</sup> lost a pair of new silk dress in the wedding. Alaka has worn that dress today.”

“But how did you identify that this is that dress?”

“Did you see the stain on the *mekhela*? I could identify it from the stain that the dress belonged to Manju *baideu* and it was stained by Rintu. *Baideu* had gone inside when Rintu came in looking for something, his stretched hands brushed the paint container they had got to colour the gate; the paint fell on the *mekhela* and that’s how the stain happened.

“Oh! Such a costly dress got spoiled.”

“Manju *baideu* went insane with grief. She could be calmed only when *bhindeu*<sup>8</sup> bought another new dress for her. Manju *baideu* said that her stained dress was lost two-three days later.”

“Lost?”

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<sup>4</sup> A vocative word used for an aunt who is the sister of addresser’s father.

<sup>5</sup> A mixture of dried betel nuts, fennel seeds etc used as a mouth freshener after food.

<sup>6</sup> A vocative word used to address an elder brother.

<sup>7</sup> A vocative word used to address an elder sister.

<sup>8</sup> A vocative word used to address an elder brother in law.



“That meant someone stole it on the wedding day. There was such a crowd in Pradipda’s wedding!”

“Is it so? That is what I am thinking too. Her husband is a clerk earning some 300 rupees per month. How could she afford to wear 500 rupees worth expensive *mekhela*.”

“But Miraba, Alaka was not invited to Pradipda’s wedding.”

“Silly! Don’t you know her husband is a clerk in Rupam’s office?”

“Who is this Rupam Miraba?”

“He is our cook. He cooks in our place and works as a peon as well in Ajitesh Choudhury’s office. Rupam was asked to invite a few people from his office as well as it was a large wedding. Initially, he showed reluctance but perhaps he must have invited Ajitesh and others later. Those people are opportunists. Once inside the wedding venue he must have pocketed the dress without being noticed by anyone.”

“Today, he dresses his wife as a fairy in that *mekhela* set and sends to this wedding.”

“Please be silent. She will come back anytime now and if she hears...”

“Let her hear. We should be more vocal about all these. God knows what she is planning to steal today.”

Alaka was left with no patience to listen any further. She took no heed of the fact that someone might comment on her seeing her standing at the corner of the door outside the room. She gave a timid look towards the stain on the *mekhela*. She blushed remembering how despite repeatedly trying she had failed miserably to hide the stain while wearing the dress. She had already lost the courage to enter the room and face the bride. As if she lost her physical balance too in shame and rage. Drops of sweat oozed out on her face. She left the wedding wiping the sweat without greeting anyone.

Alaka arranged the dinner and called for Ajitesh. Serving some curry on his plate Alaka said controlling and restraining her perturbed mind:

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“From which shop did you buy the pair of silk dress that day?”

“What dress?” Ajitesh looked up.



“From where and how did you bring that dress?”

“Wait, why are you so agitated? Let me speak. Actually, I did not buy the dress from a shop.”

“What...?” The ground slipped beneath Alaka’s feet.

“If you didn’t get it from a shop where did you steal it from? Tell me the truth...” Alaka screamed.

“Uh! Why are you raving? Why will I go to steal? Listen, the day when you raved and prated for a new dress, I too thought of buying a new-piece; but I did not have the required money. I asked some colleagues in my office to borrow money; no one could lend me as it was the end of the month. While I was discussing about this with Akan, Rupam, our peon was nearby. He met me after the office hours and asked, “Sir, do you need a silk dress for *baideu*? I have one if you need.” I asked in surprise, “How do you have?” He replied, “Sir, our Manju *baideu* bought a silk dress for rupees 500/; but she wants to sell it off because of a stain on the dress. I can get you that *mekhela* for about rupees 200/.” I told him “I want to have a look at it” and he brought it the next day. The dress was appealing and in spite of the stain, as I was getting the dress for quite a low price, it looked like a good bargain to me. Rupam told I could give him the money after I received my monthly salary. So I gave you the dress that very day. You were so furious after seeing the stain that I did not get a chance to tell you any of these. Hence, I replied that I bought it from a shop. I paid off Rupam only yesterday.” Having washed his hands, Ajitesh left the kitchen.

Alaka remained looking towards Ajitesh silently. An incomprehensible uneasiness overpowered her whole being. The intense blue stain and the scene of an unable Ajitesh handing her over the dress floated before her as a blurred vision. She got startled remembering the overheard conversation of Mira and her friends. Alaka trembled.

Through the kitchen’s door left ajar by Ajitesh, she could see the stain in the night’s darkness as if it was approaching her growing large as it drew nearer. Her eyes larged, she remained like a person struck with thunderbolt and amidst all these she saw innumerable Ajitesh lined up walking towards the stain through a mist.

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