

WHY WAS SHE FORCED TO LOSE HER LONG, FLOWING, DARK HAIR?
(A YOUNG SOUTH INDIAN BRAHMIN WIDOW) by Satyam S. Moorty

It was more than sixty odd years ago,
in a remote Brahmin hamlet on the east coast of South India,
where the sacred Godavary river joins the Bay of Bengal,
of about thirteen cheerful households,
nestled amidst coconut, mango groves, and lush paddy fields,
kissed by the stale green waters of the nearby pond,
not too far from the shimmering river.

Her red brick house at the village's edge
seemed robust, healthy, and joyous
guarded by the friendly breeze of her neighbors.

One sultry summer morning as the tropical sun's rays pierced,
loud cries blasted my sleepy tender ears;
waves of crying battered the still houses.
I streamed out of my grandfather's ancient house
and rushed toward the source of those cries.
Other neighbors had already gathered there.

II

That young woman's lord had died.
That fair woman in crumpled red saree
With long, dark, curly flowing hair cried and cried.

I thought she would finally remain still
like her husband's cold still body.
Now she smashed her jingling glass bangles
that adorned her stiff wrists;
she swept away her red dot from her fair forehead.
Suddenly bland widowhood embraced her.

III

And on that tenth mournful day,
a heartless village barber would fulfill his ritualistic duty—
would shave her dark, long, flowing hair.

And it was the long-held tradition
that she would unwillingly perpetuate:
sans joy, sans bliss, sans sex, sans hopeful fate,
only to exist, to dream, and to mourn

IV

I then vaguely learnt the cruelty
of traditions that hold no promise of hope
of lovely and blissful life.

V

Later I recalled that I had played
with her thirteen-year old son without then recognizing
his pent up grief agonizingly locked in his heart and mind.
Childhood play can only erase grief for the moment.

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