

Sometimes, reality and fiction merge to reveal truth in its stark, unvarnished form. This is what happened a couple of days ago. I was reading *Lovely Bones*, a novel by Anna Sebold, which deals with the brutal rape and murder of a young American girl in a small town by her innocuous neighbour. The story is told in the girl's voice, as she watches life go on from her vantage point in the afterlife. The poignance is heartbreaking, and there is the very disturbing realisation of just how vulnerable girls and women are to sexual and other forms of violence. Even as I was turning over these pages, a macabre drama was playing out on one bank of the tranquil Dighalipukhuri. A single woman, college teacher Bibha Devi, hires two men for some repairs in her official quarters. Her mobile phone goes missing when these men are inside the flat. As she raises an alarm, she is brutally attacked and murdered. When television screens beam her inert form on the floor of her home, we are filled with horror and outrage. If this can happen in the heart of North East's premier city, what hope is there for the safety of people, especially women and children, in the less policed towns and villages?

But there was more to come. And this time, the crime is even more chilling, for it is perpetrated by one's own, the family. Twenty-two-year-old Nirupama Pathak had everything going for her. She was pretty, had a job as a journalist in a respected newspaper, was deeply in love and planning to marry a young man. But this man, a Brahmin, belonged to a sub-caste lower than hers. This was enough for her family to forbid the union. And when verbal threats did not work, the wheels were set in motion for a sinister plot. A plot that involved a false message to Nirupama that her mother had suffered a fall and that she was to come home. She did, and never returned. The family said she had ended her life, even producing a suicide note to show to the police. Claiming no one but her mother was in the house at that time. And yet, her brothers and father were absent from their offices at three different cities on those crucial days. In a letter to her a month previously, her father had written to Nirupama of the consequences of straying from faith, and how *dharma* was thousands of years old compared to the Indian Constitution, which was only sixty years old. Here was a family which had educated their daughter, but denied her free will and the dignity of making her own choices. This dichotomy is apparent in the case of the majority of young Indian women today, who are allowed to perceive the



PAINTINGS BY NILIMA SHEIKH



Buried lives

limitless shy, but not allowed to spread their wings. Now, in a twist to the case, her lover is being questioned for abetment to her alleged suicide. Legislation to protect women alone will do little unless there is a change in the mindset of the average Indians caught in a time warp. All this surface gloss of a resurgent India, these feel good images of a country on the move cannot hide the fact that in many ways, we are still very much in the thick of the Dark Ages, with honour killings having the tacit and silent consent of a bigoted community. If *Sati*, female infanticide, female circumcision, dowry deaths, human trafficking and rape were not enough, now honour killings occur with grim regularity.

These recent events brought to mind the work of Nilima Sheikh, a prominent Indian artist who derives motifs and inspiration from contemporary reality. In 1984, Sheikh created a set of twelve paintings, which she titled *When Champa Grew Up*. She had been struggling to depict the brutality of dowry deaths and was in search of a mode that would not reduce the theme to a cliché. Then, a neighbour's daughter died of burn wounds, allegedly killed by her husband's family, barely a year after her marriage. Champa was the daughter of a Class-IV employee of the University at Baroda and grew up in the campus. She was pretty, the darling of her indulgent parents, and had a quietly independent spirit. Yet, she

3rd eye Indrani Raimedhi

was married off when still a minor. Sheikh knew nothing more until one day, walking past the *chawl* where her parents lived, she saw a group of women keening in ritualised mourning. Champa was dead, she was told by a bystander, dead by the ubiquitous kerosene stove. A year later, Sheikh started her series, capturing with brush strokes the vignettes of Champa, her girlhood, the cycle she claimed her independence by, the swing, then how she must have got married, gone away to a small town, into a new home, the kitchen with its kerosene stove. Sheikh used traditional Gujarati oral traditions to work as texts to offset the effect of the paintings. The story of Champa encompasses within it countless invisible and forgotten stories of young lives snuffed out by barbaric tradition and human greed.

"The roots of violence against women can be traced to three areas – namely anthropological, psychological, and economic," explains a leading mental health professional. "In the anthropological area, there is territorial aggressiveness, seen also in sharks and other sea creatures, whereby its territory is marked and no one is allowed to trans-

gress its limits. This would explain the concept of *dannish* insularity and how women are considered as property belonging to the patriarchy. The very questioning of this dominion is often enough reason for retribution in any form. It also explains the personal space of each individual that not even the bond of marriage can intrude. There is a tragedy just waiting to happen when this private domain is intruded upon.

"In Freudian psychology, every human has ingrained in him the duality of Eros and Thanatos. Eros is defined in terms of libido, libidinal energy or love, which is the life instinct innate in all humans. It is the desire to create life, and favours productivity and construction. Eros is in constant conflict with the destructive death instinct of Thanatos. The Thanatos concept would explain the negativity and violence of interpersonal relations, as well as genocide. The other factor is economic. Man's economic activities have transformed from the agrarian to the industrial. The dividing lines between a man's work and a woman's work is getting increasingly blurred. But, instead of this being a unifying factor, it has tended to antagonise and divide the genders. The increasing freedom and economic self-sufficiency of woman has wreaked havoc on traditional institutions like marriage. The intense pressures of a competitive society and the punishing schedule of one's job re-

sults in both spouses being on a short fuse, and verbal and physical violence breaks out on the most trivial of issues. The old values of mutual respect, trust and faith still hold true and no relationship can survive without them."

For Bina Kakati, OC of the Women's Police Station at Pan Bazar, Guwahati, meeting battered women is a daily affair. This all-women police station was set up in 1993, and has helped hundreds of women raped, beaten or driven out of their homes. This year, there are already sixty cases registered against offenders who have committed crimes against women. "The cases we register fall under section 498(A) of the IPC. But we need at least four all women police stations in different zones of the city. It is not possible for all victims to travel such a long distance to seek help. We also need a counselling centre here because the victims are traumatised, and trained counsellors can help them calm down and reveal their problems. After all, our job is only to bring the culprits to book. We question the victim, find out all details, send her for medical examination. Sometimes, a woman requests us just to warn an abusive spouse. At other times, she is ready to file an FIR and move out of the home. When the FIR is registered, we prepare the charge sheet and issue an arrest warrant against the offender. If it is not safe for the woman to stay with her husband, we send her to the State Home."

Bina Kakati recalls her most shocking case. "One day, in 2006, I came to the station and found a young woman waiting for me. She had been beaten so badly by her husband that she could not even sit or stand properly. After her medical examination and treatment, I sent her to her parents' home in Baihata Chariali. She had two young sons and her brother's wife was very hostile, unwilling to let her live with them. Meanwhile, the husband, getting to know of the police case against him, staged a panchayat meeting, promised in public not to beat his wife, and got the police case withdrawn. Many months later, the woman telephoned me to say she had returned to her husband's house as she had nowhere else to live. Somehow, I still feel very sad when I remember that woman. She was a college graduate, and yet, had to make this bitter compromise just so that she and her children could survive. Her story reminds me that for us women, things have not really changed – even though we live in a new age."

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