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Editor-in-Chief : Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



NOORI

Sumitra Singh

Assistant Professor of English

Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

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I came to settle down in Delhi with a so called satisfying job and with wild imaginations of a metro city. I deliberately needed a maid who could be of some domestic help to me. I talked about it to my landlady who promised to get me one with an affordable amount that I could pay her monthly.

Noori stepped in hurriedly right in the morning and knocked the door. I heard her shouting "Is there someone inside?"

"Do I leave?"

I came out, hurriedly too! "Oh yes!"

"Aunty must have sent you?"

"Yes, she replied

"Ok, let's talk business !", she whispered.

I said "Of course, otherwise why would you be here?"

"Hmm OK. I will work for 25 days, I have four official leaves and one earned leave out of my services."

"Oh my god, I thought, at least work for a day!"

I had no choices to make. And she was finalized. Her 'salary' was announced .She was happy with everything. Although she looked a bit weary.

Times passed by and Noori kept working at my place. Often with more leaves and frequent interruptions by her daughter. I never liked Noori. I was mainly because; she lied often and also asked me about my job, my home and all. She was very rude. She used to complete all the work within no time. And yes she needed morning tea and 'Parantha' which I rarely ever had, much because I had to rush to office every day. And also, as times passed by, she started coming with a young lady with a child.

Once I asked her “This is your daughter and her son?”

“She looks too young to get married and also to bear a child”.

Noori asked me if she could prepare tea for her daughter. I affirmed and asked her to give tea and snacks to everyone in the house. As such Noori also prepared breakfast and dinner for us. Slowly she started becoming more calm and compassionate towards me. She was always very dominant and apprehensive towards me and I tolerated her because I was helpless. She managed my house when it came to cleaning and cooking. I could see that Noori was too good at her work. I could understand that she deserved an applause for her work, which I didn’t know how to do!

One fine day, Noori came to me, while it was raining heavily. As she entered the room, I could see tears rolling down her cheeks and she was all drenched.

I asked her sit and also prepared tea for her. She cried more and her throat choked. Teas brought her little respite only.

She bursted out. “Do you know I can’t trust men. They are so non trustworthy and non supportive”!

I was surprised to see all that. I wondered how a stone hearted person like her can be so tender ?

She continued.

“Can I share something with you?”

“Yes”, I replied.

I belong to Bangladesh and my name is Noorjahan. But I call myself as Noori and sometimes as “Maya”.

“Hmm... Ok”

She wanted to see the expression on my face. And I was just normal.

“If I tell my name is Noorjahan, many people don’t hire me for work.”

I don’t know why but for the first time, I felt connected with her. I said” It’s Ok for me. I am a teacher and I understand that nothing lies in a name. It’s the work and character of a person that matters”

She felt some relief and now started talking freely.

“I am married and have three children. Two sons and a daughter. You have seen my daughter. She got married at the age of 16 to a Punjabi boy , who is an auto rickshaw driver. It was her choice. After marriage, her name is Simran now. So, see what lies in a name. My name remains Noorjahan in all official documents but her identity has changed. One son of mine is in a Tobacco rehab camp and the other works in pantry with hotels and restaurants to cater to marriage parties and similar things.”

“OK, who cooks food at home?” I wondered

She said,” I cook or my son cooks at night. In the morning, I eat anything that I get at any place where I work an eat nothing till evening. I go home and then eat. Food is not a problem It’s just that I get mentally tensed about any things”

"I can see that your life is settled with marriage and children. It is just that your children are grown up now and they need a direction to go on."

"This is not the only thing" she continued.

"This is my second marriage. And my present husband thinks that I am still linked with my ex husband. My ex husband already got married. My children are from my first husband. And have no children from my present husband. He beats me occasionally and quarrels with me for money. I pay the rent and manage every financial concerns of the house. The problem got aggravated when my daughter came back from her in laws house. She now doesn't want to live with her husband." "Why?" I enquired "she chose him?" "That's the entire story. Now after four years of marriage, after having a son, her husband wants her to stay back at home. Do nothing. Just sit back and cook and take care of her child. He doesn't allow her even to go out for buying vegetables. She was caged in that house. Now she realized that it was too suffocating for her to stay with him. She told me that if I sent her back, she would consume poison!"

"Oh my god! That's terrible.

"Yes and with that my responsibility has increased manifold. Often, her husband comes to our place and harasses her and me too. Often, he is drunk. I think, we should file a case of divorce?"

"Hmmm....I reacted."

I didn't know why Noori was speaking her heart out to me that day. She also asked about my interest and trust in "Buddha". I started liking her for the first time.

She continued "My life was a big struggle. I belong to Bangladesh and have a house there. Thirty years back, I came to Delhi with my parents. That time I was too young and my parents had come here for a job. We stayed in utter poverty but eventually they got me married to my ex husband in Jharkhand. Of course, it was an arranged marriage. We stayed there for sometime and had to come to Delhi for work. We could find a little space in a nearby Jhuggi. We worked together day and night and were happy together only for sometime. One fine day, I saw that the man I married to was an Epilepsy patient. I didn't know how to handle the situation. But life had to go on. I had three children in a shorter time. One fine day, he said that he does not want to stay with me because he was interested in another woman in a nearby town. I was so stunned to listen to this. That was the day; I decided not to stay with him forever. I used to leave my very small children with my parents and decided to work. What work could I do? It was just the domestic help that I could manage. So, my work began some 20 years back in Delhi. I didn't even know how to speak Hindi. I eventually learned this.

"You are a self made woman, Noori!"

She felt honored to listen to that.

She continued." It was my decision for second marriage. As my children were small. Ever since, I have been working and taking care of my children and my present husband.

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"It is not like that. It is just that you develop a bond with your husband"

"Do you know what?"She asked

Hmmm?

"My ex husband died a week back. I got the message from someone. I don't know how to react?"

Now, that was it. I could not take it further. "Do people have such problems in life. Are the people so depressed and dismantled in life?" I kept on thinking.

Noori said, "Tomorrow, I will be on leave as there is a marriage nearby and they have asked me to cook food. They will pay me some 4000/ rupees for the same. Thank you for your company. At least, I had a shoulder where I could lean on."

I had nothing to say, just tears rolled down my eyes.