

That Woman

Translator's Note

One must remember that the play, *Shei Meye*, was written at a time when the Indian society was in the midst of trying times. What may seem as a cinch today wasn't so during those tempestuous days – from the 50's to the 70's—when political will and development weren't synonyms, and *vox populi* wasn't the mantra for change. While a hopeful race was striving for progress, a weak socio-economic structure was destabilising the very plinth from which change and improvement in quality of life were being sought. It was during these times that the play was written – a time when compassion and accepting the uncommon as part of life weren't too high on the list of human priorities. If Shanti, the protagonist of the piece, were born in the 21st century, this particular play with its many piquant turns might not have been written. For, despite being mentally scarred and hysteric, she would have been an integral part of society where emancipated humans and an advanced medical science were likely to lend her succour. But then, the unheard stories of the world's unfortunate children need to be told, even if they clash with time. That's because the ills that once besotted societies still remain in their residual slumber, waiting to be collectively awakened by false moves. The Bangla script of 'That Woman' has been supple in the use of the literary technique called Stream of Consciousness. There are portions that called for the technique to be pared to help express the purpose of some dialogues. Besides, certain Bangla words in the script required a whole sentence to be explained in English, such as *Ghomta*, *Tip* and *Sindur*. To bring the readers up to speed, only a married Hindu woman wears a *Ghomta*, which is about using the tail of a saree to cover the head as a mark of respect for the elderly.

A married woman from a traditional Hindu home would do so even in front of her husband. Similarly, when a Hindu woman uses *Sindur*, or the vermilion powder, on the centre-parting of her head, she is marking herself as one who is married. The 'Tip', however, is a cosmetic dot between the brows sported by many women in India – married or unmarried. Keeping this constraint in mind, I have retained *Ghomta*, *Sindur* and *Tip* in the translated script. In the same vein, I have retained *Manik* and *Khokon*. Both these words in Bangla are sometimes used affectionately for a child and need not necessarily be names given to children by their parents. In this script, *Manik* and *Khokon* are not names. There are also single-sentence dialogues in Bangla that needed to be broken down in parts to convey the punch the author desired to deliver.

[The curtain goes up—empty stage. Music starts. An overlay of black cloth hangs at the rear of the stage, flanked by two doors at the back. The one to the left is for entering the interiors and the one to the right is to be used for coming from outside. To the left of the stage is a pedestal, like a dais, aligned with steps. The entire pedestal is wrapped in white cloth with a blue border surrounding it at the bottom. In the middle of the stage is an ordinary table with a green cover. On either side of the table are two chairs facing each other. Some papers and records are kept on the table. To the left of the table is a black easel on which a diagram of a psychiatrist is affixed; it is white in colour and drawn in black backdrop... A wooden railing, as high as average human height, is placed to the left of the stage. The railing is not painted; it retains the original colour of the wood it is made of. In the middle of the railing is a door with a bolt and a padlock. The door, taller than the railing, is pale yellow in colour with patches of grime. This indicates that the door is a symbol and would be used for symbolic purposes. Behind the railing is a bed covered with a white sheet. Next to the bed is an ordinary, four-legged stool. During special moments in the course of the play, the railings will cast their shadow all over the stage. Along the black overlay at the rear of the stage is a row of flower pots in careless blossoms of white, off-white and red flowers. A long stick is being kept, leaning on the easel. It looks like the cue used in billiards. There is a predominance of dramatic white light on the entire stage. Amber and steel-blue lights

*are to be used only when the actors are near the bed. In the scenes depicting hallucination, there will be a clash of kaleidoscopic lights on the stage. When the lead actress appears in dream sequences, the stage will see a preponderance of the colour sky-blue. Lights will be used only for those sections of the stage where performance is taking place. During the course of play, the section or sections of the stage not in use will be in complete darkness. On one hand, these stage arrangements can co-exist; again on the other hand four patients can be shown wearing striped inmate clothes, fetching props, as and when required, from the greenrooms to the stage. A large international logo for mental and behavioural disorder, painted in black on a piece of white sheet of paper is stuck to the top-left corner of the black cloth at the rear of the stage. Shanti, a housewife from a struggling village-family, walks coyly into the stage. She is wearing a simple white saree with a red border. On her forehead is a big red dot of *Sindur*. She is also sporting a liberal dash of *Sindur* on the centre-parting on her head. She is wearing a nose ring. Her countenance reflects impression of rusticity. As she looks here and there, she notices the audience and she straight walks up to the top of the pedestal in the left hand side of the stage. Then she gave a gentle smile draws *ghomta* across her face and greets the audience with a *namaskar*.]*

Shanti: I can see that you all are waiting for me here. You won't have to wait anymore. I'm going to tell you everything today. Maybe, someone somewhere will benefit from what I say. Maybe, my parable, someday, would make society think twice before shunning people like us. Maybe, it would not reinvent disease. Perhaps, women like me wouldn't be looked at with sleepless eyes anymore; perhaps people would not doubt our innocence of pouring our heart out and I hope simple, spontaneous stories of women like me would not undergo the scrutiny of suspicion. But is there really anyone who would accept us back when we return? I have much to say,

but am strapped for time. The germ of this disease was silently growing deep inside, waiting suddenly to break surface one day. You have no idea of the distance I have travelled; of the many obstacles I have crossed, to be able to speak to you with composure in place. Since this would take time, I would cut the long story short. Once there was a girl called Shanti—*[She steps off the pedestal to pace at the edge of the stage.]* I am not adept at organizing my words and structuring my sentences. After all, I am from village. Oh yes, I used to love skies, rivers and water as well as flowers. You know, white flowers, and white Lotuses, Nyctantheses, Tubarosas and Jasmines. There used to be so many of them. I can't remember all the names now. I used to like anything that which is white as much as I liked the colour sky blue. There used to be so many other flowers without names that I liked. I can't remember all at this moment. But then, something happened. I am losing cue here. Everything is getting jumbled up. I am getting confused. Wait a minute, let me call the doctor. He would be able to tell you the story succinctly and with clarity. Hey doctor, doctor, where are you?

Doctor: *[His voice in the background.]* Shanti, I am busy working.

Shanti: So many people are waiting. Could you please come over here for a while?

[The doctor enters.]

Shanti: See, there are so many of them.

Doctor: That's true. But it seems you are after me and would not let me work. How many times do you expect me to tell the same old story? Ask them to leave, please. Besides, your story is not of sadness. Instead, it is about harsh reality. Why do you think these people would love to hear about the brutal truth?

Shanti: *[Excitedly.]* Of course they would love to hear the story. They must get to know what I have to say.

Doctor: These people want a play. Really, life is so devoid of drama—

Shanti: No, they don't need drama. They want to know and comprehend what has happened to me and why, and what happened after that.

Doctor: Oh Shanti! *[Shakes his head.]* Ok, I give up. What can I do more, go inside now while I prepare them with a preamble.

Shanti: In that case, shall I go and put on the make-up with dark circles around my eyes, like I did the first time?

Doctor: Do whatever you have to, but leave now.

Shanti: You know Doctor, you hustle me a lot.

[Shanti exits the stage. The doctor, clutching his hands behind his back, climbs the pedestal and looks straight in the audience's eye.]

Doctor: Shanti will leave today. She is bidding you goodbye after three months and eight days. Shanti is a docile girl, who lives near Barasat. Perhaps, you would not like her story; you may feel tired as well. But, if you listen, you might just be able to pluck something meaningful out of it. You see, we treat cases of mental disorder here. I am a psychiatrist

as well as a social worker here. Generally such responsibilities are divided among different sets of people. Due to scarcity of time, Responsibilities I would play all the roles tonight. Shanti is my patient. *[Doctor steps off the pedestal to pick up the stick that was leaning on the easel. He would now use the stick to point out areas when he would be speaking next.]* Alright, before I start the story, let me explain the lay-out of this place. The pedestal I was standing upon a few minutes ago would be the place from where I would make comments as and when I am required to do so. Let's now divide the space behind this area with an imaginary diagram. For example, on the other side would be the patient's cabin with a door and a bed. Now draw a straight line in the front of the table, chairs and the bed that are behind me. Beyond that line is my chamber from where I inspect patients. The flower pots at the rear indicate the presence of a garden patients are taken out to for a stroll. As a matter of fact, I have to leave everything to your imagination and sympathy. Please do remember—that Shanti is a good girl. She had arrived here three months and eight days ago on a Thursday. The day was May the first and the year, 1969. I still remember the day. Shanti, however, is not extra-ordinary but there is an element of melancholy about her that may make you feel that she is different—Here she comes.

Shanti: *[Screaming from the wings.]* Where are you taking me, where? Let me go. You are conspiring to kill me. How ruthless could you get?

[Doctor quickly sits down on a chair. Shanti is being dragged by her husband, a nurse and a female attendant towards the doctor's chamber. Her hair is open and flowing like a meteor's tail, her eyes full of fear and her saree hanging loosely from her body. As she reaches the doctor's chamber, Shanti crashes face-first to the floor. She raises her face to touch her forehead where she apparently hurt herself. She wipes her hand across her forehead to see that her palm has been reddened by Sindur -- the vermilion powder a Hindu woman wears at the bottom of the mid-parting on the head, as a signal of her being married. Shanti cries out.]

Shanti: Blood! Blood! See, they are killing me. I am bleeding from the head.

Husband: No, Shanti. That's not blood. It's the sindur that's coming off.

Shanti: *[Raises her face.]* Sindur is used by married women. Tell me, when did I ever get married?

Husband: But Shanti, didn't you...

Shanti: What's all this? Why am I wearing bangles?

Husband: That's the iron bangle around your wrist. It marks you as a woman who is married.

Shanti: Marriage! Sindur! This is all a conspiracy! They want to mislead and kill me. To hell with your iron ring! Take this, take this!

[She throws the iron bangle on the floor, bangs it repeatedly and breaks it. She then rubs the mark of sindur off her forehead.]

[The doctor walks up slowly to Shanti and softly places an arm on her shoulders. Shanti looks at him.]

Doctor: Come and sit on this chair.

Shanti: Who are you?

Doctor: A friend.

Shanti: A friend? But you seem to be new to my village. Have you arrived here recently?

Doctor: Yes

Shanti: Alright then. Where should I sit? Here?

Doctor: Yes.

[As she turns around to sit, Shanti notices her husband and the nurse. She is visibly frightened.]

Shanti: [Addressing the doctor.] Please send off that man and that woman. They are plotting to kill me. Did you think that I wouldn't be able to lay bare your conspiracy? [Says to the husband.] I know, you want me away so that the two of you can have a happy life together. Isn't that true? Please turn them out now, or else I will run away.

Doctor: Sister, please take the gentleman with you and wait outside. The nurse, the husband and the attendant exit the stage. Shanti heaves a sigh of relief and sits down.

Shanti: Ah, what a relief!! You are a nice man. I have begun to like you. You know, they keep beating me up. I hope you are not going to mete out the same treatment to me.

Doctor: No, never. We are friends.

Shanti: In that case, would you always be by my side?

Doctor: Yes. [looks at the piece of paper.] You are Sreemati Shantimoyee Dasi, right?

Shanti: Yes.

Doctor: Do you know why you have been brought here?

Shanti: Why wouldn't I? This is our home, but—

Doctor: But?

Shanti: What's all this stuff you have gathered around in this place? How come you call it a hospital?

Doctor: Any idea what a hospital does?

Shanti: No.

Doctor: Alright. What's the day today?

Shanti: Perhaps, Sunday.

Doctor: Are you sure it's not a Thursday?

Shanti: Had it been a Thursday, there would have been arrangements made for Lakshmi Puja. But I see no signs of any such arrangements having been made.

Doctor: What's the date today?

Shanti: Is this a court of law? Why are you continuously asking me questions? I don't remember anything. I have forgotten everything, even myself. By the way doctor—

Doctor: How do you know that I am a doctor?

Shanti: He whispered to my ear.

Doctor: Who is he?

Shanti: My Manik, doctor. He is my Khokonshona, my small, cute child.

Doctor: Oh! I see. What else did he say to you?

Shanti: He tells me a lot of things. He says: Mother—

[Shanti is almost in tears.]

Doctor: Where is he now?

Shanti: [Excitedly.] He has been snatched away from me.

Doctor: Who did that?

Shanti: Who else but that goddamned, diseased, man!

Doctor: When was Manik taken?

Shanti: Ummm, let me remember. That was probably a long time ago. No, not really. That was not too long ago. Manik was just one-and-half month old and he was taken away from my cradled arms.

Doctor: What else does Manik whisper to you?

- Shanti: He says, kill that father before he kills you.
- Doctor: Does he say these things clearly to you?
- Shanti: Absolutely clearly. It is Khokon who makes me aware of my surroundings.
- Doctor: Khokon is not with you anymore. How does he talk to you then?
- Shanti: How could you be so naïve? He speaks to me from the radio. He speaks only to me.
- Doctor: Is there anyone else who speaks to you as well?
- Shanti: You bet! All over the neighbourhood, Khyantadi would talk, *[starts counting on her fingertips.]* so would Maya auntie and then Anjali. There are many more of them. They all say that I have lost my mental balance. They don't believe a word of what I say. They only push me away. I know that they are in league with my husband, like that woman in the white saree. All of them want me out of their way so that they can take slices off my husband. Each one of them is my enemy. I don't have any friend except you.
- Doctor: Do they also whisper to you from the radio?
- Shanti: What kind of a person are you? Don't you realize that they have no clue to what a radio is? The radio is only for Khokon and me. You know, when I would breastfeed Khokon, he would draw in short bursts. His red infant hands used to be rolled up like soft woollen balls. He hadn't grown any teeth. He was just an infant. Sometimes, he would suddenly bite me with his tender gum. I still hold that feeling in my bosom. Would you take me to Khokon, please?
- Doctor: But why?

- Shanti: I used to have a dream from my childhood. That dream would leave me in complete disarray and I would not feel like talking to anyone. Let me tell you about that dream. I used to see a house painted in light-blue. The forecourt of the house was full with white flowers beyond which lay an unending green pasture with saffron-coloured slopes. I also used to see Khokon and the sky dotted with flitting white clouds. Only Khokon and I would be there in that place where the narrow Anjana river curved away from beyond the rows of the tall palm trees. That picture-frame frozen in my heart still keeps me confused. Oh! Why am I hurting so much inside, Doctor?

Doctor: You'll be alright. Sister!

Shanti: Who are you calling?

Doctor: I am calling your friend. Another friend like me. She would take you to your bedroom where you would find some rest.

[The nurse enters. Seeing her, Shanti get up from her chair, frightened and startled.]

Nurse: Yes, Doctor?

Doctor: Take her to cabin number 5. Where's her husband?

Nurse: He is waiting outside.

Doctor: Send him in, and take this lady along with you.

[Shanti runs to the left of the stage.]

Shanti: You, too, Doctor. You, too, have joined my enemies? You are leaving me at the mercy of this witch?

[The nurse tries to grab Shanti but Shanti grapples and pushes her away with extra-ordinary force.]

Nurse: Kamla, Kamla, come and help me.

[The attendant enters. Shanti is being flanked and held from either side by the nurse and the attendant. They start to take her away. Shanti begins to curse the doctor.]

Shanti: You will burn in hell, doctor, you will burn in hell! Your family and your progeny will be wiped out. You will die a painful death. You are a deadly, venomous snake. With your seemingly comforting words, you are actually enticing me to tell you everything. *[She laughs out in squeals.]* Thank God, I haven't yet told you the main story. You would never get to know about it. If I had, you would have summarily dismissed me and sent me to the gallows.

Doctor: Sister, send her husband in.

Nurse: Yes Sir.

[They drag Shanti away. Before being taken away, Shanti was clutching onto a table. In the process, the papers lying on the table fell off, cluttering the floor. Doctor begins to collect the papers and rearrange them on the table. Looking morose, the husband enters. The doctor looks at him and asks him to take a seat.]

Doctor: Sit here, please. *[A little frightened, the husband sits down slowly. The doctor opens a register.]* Are you Nakurchandra Das? You stay at Shimuldaha near Barasat?

Husband: Yes Sir.

Doctor: Who else you have in your family other than your wife?

Husband: I have nobody else.

Doctor: How come?

Husband: Absolutely nobody. Like me, she had only her mother. We have been married for two years.

A little after we got married, my mother-in-law passed away. She had no blood-relations left after her death. Then, suddenly, over the past few months – Oh, I am at the end of my wits! Doctor, Shanti is the only one I can call family. I have nobody else but her.

[He begins to cry.]

Doctor: Please regain your composure. Unless you tell me the whole story, how would I be able to bring her under treatment?

Husband: I am going to lose my job now. I am an ordinary clerk. On the one hand, I cannot leave Shanti home alone in her present state. On the other, how can I manage home and work simultaneously? Some neighbours used to come once in a while to look after her while I used to be away at work. But I can't expect them to do it everyday. Why would they continue to take upon themselves the burden of someone else? On top of it, she gets so violent at times that it becomes impossible to bring her under control.

Doctor: She can't stand the sight of you.

Husband: I know. I am the one she is the most scornful of. No matter what, it's me who has to take care of her because I can't afford a maid or an attendant. If the situation doesn't improve, I will lose my job. I had to battle many odds to find a place for her in this hospital. Please help me Doctor. I beg you. You are my only salvation.

[He kneels to wrap his arms around the doctor's feet, as if he is seeking mercy.]

Doctor: Come on now, get up. If you break down, no doctor in the world would be able to help you. Control your emotions and answer my questions.

[Husband Regains his composure and returns to his seat. The doctor walks away slowly, unseen by the husband, and reaches the top of the pedestal. The husband keeps looking at the chair, vacated by the doctor, as if he is not aware of the doctor's presence on the pedestal.]

Doctor: *[Addressing the audience.]* This is how Shanti arrived here. At present, I am not just a physician but a psychiatric as well. That's the reason why my calling is to travel into the deepest recesses of the human mind to extract the pain trapped within. But more than that, I endeavour to be a social-scientist and a social worker. This is the story of the forgotten, the dismissed. The inhumanity of treating such unfortunate people as refuse and leaving them to rot in segregation is a malaise. Society ostracizes such people and offers them only disdain. They are never accepted back as fellow-human beings. Whatever the little chances of recovery these people have are blighted by the sin of untouchability because inhumanity only deepens the woes of those ruthlessly shunned. My quest is for returning these people to normal life and help shape their dreams. Let's start with Shanti's husband.

[The doctor returns to his seat. The husband was sitting with his head bowed. Seeing the doctor, he looks up.]

Doctor: What really happened? You should start from the very beginning. One must not keep any information from a doctor.

[The husband tries to control himself but couldn't hold back the tears. He covers his face with his hands.]

Husband: Doctor!

Doctor: *[Admonishing.]* Sit straight and look up. Don't expect me to treat you like a patient. Just keep answering my questions.

[The husband controls himself.]

Husband: Ok, ask.

Doctor: How long have you been married?

Husband: According to the Roman calendar, it would be two years on the eighth of this month. As per the Bangla calendar, it would be 25th of Baisakh, first month of Bangla calendar.

Doctor: Did you know your wife from before?

Husband: No. They used to live in Birbhum. Her mother knew someone. As a matter of fact, I own some pieces of land and am a clerk at Harenbabu's shop. So...

Doctor: ...you were deemed a decent and a landed man whom they could give their daughter's hand to.

Husband: Yes, sort of.

Doctor: Have you ever noticed any abnormalities in your wife before?

Husband: No. But I came to know later that her only sister took her own life when she was fourteen or fifteen. I was told that this sister of hers used to appear somewhat lost in something or the other. All she did was to engage in worshipping Goddess Kali and Goddess Lakshmi. As for Shanti, she often used to talk about a house painted light-blue, especially after our son was born. She always appeared

caught in her own thoughts. Neither could I figure out what was going on in her mind, nor did I try too hard. After a tiring day at work, I would only want some rest. But yes, Shanti was very docile and the neighbours loved her.

Doctor: Then?

Husband: Khokon came into our lives after that. Carrying Khokon in her lap, she used to sing songs. These were songs she herself had written.

[Silence prevails on the stage as both the doctor and the husband stop speaking. The light above them dims to complete darkness, through which a very sharp ray of light leads Shanti into the stage. She is singing in a manner as if she is putting her son to sleep with a lullaby.]

[Song.]

Sweet boy, lovely boy
Cry no more
Sleep fairy is on her way
Let's open the door
Sleep well my little one
She is on the way
Cry no more and close your eyes
Wake up when it's day

[Shanti leaves the stage, singing. The light then begins to brighten on the Doctor and the husband again.]

Doctor: What happened next?

Husband: Khokon fell ill. He started suffering from acute convulsion. He became too sick and too weak. At first, we tried some herbal medicines but they did not work on him. Later, we had to call a doctor from Barasat, but Khokon's condition did not turn around. Then *[becomes tearful but controls himself*

quickly.] Khokon died. But Shanti would not let Khokon go. He was only one-and-half month old. She kept holding Khokon in her cradled arms for three consecutive days before I had to use force to take him away. When I returned home after cremating Khokon, Shanti looked at me with fear visible in her eyes. Since then, it is embedded in her mind that I am responsible for Khokon's disappearance. Doctor, my life has become unbearable now. I, too, had dreams like anyone else. But all my aspirations have been washed away.

Doctor: Alright. You may leave now. I must let you know that this hospital doesn't allow relatives to meet patients during the first seven days. Considering her violent reactions towards you, you must not be here until we want you to. If we feel that the time is right for you to see her, only then shall you come. By the way, I hope you have brought things for her daily needs?

Husband: Yes.

Doctor: Very well. You may go now.

[The nurse enters.]

Husband: Sister, please give her these medicines. *[He hands over the prescription.]* Please also take her out on evening rounds in the garden. She may say to you what she may not say to us because you are a woman, too. But make sure that she is not excited or agitated. *[Speaks to the doctor.]*—Doctor, would she be cured?

Doctor: What are you still doing here? Didn't I ask you to leave?

Husband: But...

Doctor: No ifs and buts. You must go now and leave the rest to us.

[Looking sullen, the husband leaves.]

Doctor: This case is quite common.

Nurse: Yes, very ordinary case.

Doctor: But you know, such cases really get me going. I don't know why. These patients/ patients like Shanti are more important.

Sister: Sir, the patient is suddenly showing signs of excitement. Delusion is high. It is becoming difficult to keep her restricted to her cabin. She is screaming at the top of her voice.

[The doctor stands up.]

Doctor: Sterilise the needle and bring it to me, now!

[The audience can hear a sharp cry from Shanti. The doctor and the nurse leave the stage. Shanti appears on the pedestal.]

Shanti: [To the audience.] Let me tell you what was happening to me while these people were busy discussing. I do not watch movies but things began to reel off one after the other, as if it was a movie. That woman in white clothes and some others pushed me into a small room that has iron bars. There was an ominous noise when they locked the bolt to the door. I could sense a strike of lightning passing through my head. I felt like a prisoner. I rushed to the door and started shaking it. But none of them turned back. Suddenly, I saw my Khokon come out of the padlock. Initially, he appeared obscure but

slowly I could see him clearly. He slipped through the door smiling and stood next to me. I was so surprised to see him walk and slip through the door, for he is an infant. How could he manage to do that? Then I remembered he used to talk to me from the radio. I have never heard him speak before. Why didn't it strike me as odd? Anyway, Khokon can perform miracles. He was standing next to me and smiling. Suddenly, I saw snakes coil up his body, slithering and hissing. The iron bars on the door also turned into serpents. The padlock began shaking to metamorphose into a statue of Goddess Kali. I could see Kali push her malevolent red tongue out and raise her hatchet. My eyes full with tears, I began to wonder why Kali would want to kill my Khokon! I placed myself as a shield in front of Khokon and screamed at her. I told her, Mother Goddess, if you are a mother, you should know that I was born in the same time as you. I am a mother, too. Beware! She began to laugh out. The snakes on the iron bars started moving their forked tongues. Red, blue, green, yellow and black apparitions began circling the walls of room before exiting. I ran towards the snakes and held them in my fist. Goddess Kali said: 'Chant the mother hymn.' But how could I? I told her that I didn't know the hymn. I am an illiterate woman. Nobody ever taught me anything. She ordered me to come close. She asked me to come near her and as I went near her, she said: 'I will whisper the hymn to you for good'. With a full voice, she whispered into my ears:

'Om Swaha, Om hring, Om Kling, Om Kring; chant this mantra for hundred and eight times'. I thought, if by chanting this mantra Khokon is spared, so be it. I kept chanting the mantra and banging my head on the wall.

*[Shanti runs into the cabin and starts banging her head on the wall. *Please note: Her dash to the cabin must be accompanied by music*. The doctor and the nurse enter the stage. Shanti is still banging her head on the wall. Her looks change the moment she spots them. A devilish smile breaks out on her face.]*

Shanti: So you think you have won by imprisoning me? I haven't yet told you the real; secret.. I have killed him.

Doctor: Who have you killed? Khokon?

Shanti: How could you even imagine that? What rubbish! I killed that man, the one who had snatched Khokon from me, and the one who had kept Khokon hidden from me. I am not supposed to wear a colourful Saree anymore. Give me a plain and white of saree like the one that you are wearing! I had once played the game of marriage with that man. *[Shanti looks at her own saree and is frightened.]* O my God! The border of my saree has turned into a snake. It is climbing my body. *[She bangs the door with her fists loudly.]* Open the door, Doctor. Please open the door. This room will throttle me to death. Outside this room are the skies, the white flowers and Khokon. Waiting for me outside are my sweet little home and my small family. Oh, not again! What's this? Now the snake has coiled around my whole body. Is this happening to me because I have killed that man?

Is this happening because I have strangled him to death with my own hands?

[Shanti attempts to strangle herself with her hands.]

[The doctor opens the door and enters, followed by the nurse and the attendant.]

Shanti: *[Laughs out impishly.]* That man has run away. You imbecile! Do as you wish. I care a damn about what I have done. If need be, I will do it again. But sister, the border of the saree has become a snake. It's coiling around me and changing colours. It has a pale yellow body with white eyes. Give me your white saree while I tear up mine.

[Shanti tries to tear up her saree. The nurse and the attendant use force to make Shanti lie down on the bed, with her face towards the audience. The doctor picks up the syringe to give Shanti a shot. The attendant stands to shield the part of Shanti's body where the injection would be administered. With her eyes gaping, Shanti looks at the hypodermic syringe.]

Shanti: Are you going to drive that long needle into my body? It was so painful! the last time when they gave me a shot for TBC or something. Now it's your turn to inflict that pain, right? Is this a punishment? Are you punishing me for telling the truth? Am I being punished for killing him? Aah!

[The doctor administers the injection. Shanti cries out in pain. Once Shanti stops being hysteric and becomes quiet, the doctor hands over the syringe and the accessories to the nurse and returns to the pedestal. The nurse and the attendant leave as the doctor begins to speak.]

Doctor: *[To the audience.]* Like this, Shanti was in the grip of delirium over three days and three nights. While in

delirium, the number of times Shanti's son visited her is countless. We also lost count of the number of times she killed her husband or spoke of her dreams about a house painted light-blue. She was sleepless, too. But she finally got sleep to wake up 24 hours later. As she woke up, I called the nurse.

[The doctor leaves the pedestal and returns to his chamber. Shanti wakes up and sits on her bed, slowly, as if she is tired. The nurse walks up to the doctor.]

Doctor: What's the latest on the patient in cabin number five?

Nurse: She is taking her food and medicines properly. She is no longer hysteric and is not even hallucinating. But she appears very sad. Besides, she has lost weight and become weak.

Doctor: Please call her.

Nurse: I have asked the attendant to bring her here.

[The attendant walks Shanti slowly out of her cabin and towards the doctor's table.]

Doctor: Sister, now it's your turn. Take her to the garden and try to make her talk. See if we can find something more about her life. Hello Shanti, how are you now?

Shanti: The head is heavy and my limbs have become sloth.

Doctor: Don't worry. You will be alright after you walk in the open. Are you getting to hear the sound of radio anymore? Or, are you watching movies?

Shanti: No. I only feel sleepy and sluggish. What medicine did you give me?

Doctor: The medicine I have given you is meant to induce sleep. Sleep is your best medicine now. I hope you are eating well.

Shanti: Yes, I am.

Doctor: Do you want to eat something special?

Shanti: Something that cools my head, probably.

Doctor: No problem. Sister, please add a curd-based soft drink to her diet.

Sister: Alright, Sir.

Doctor: Shanti, Sister will take you to the garden now. Go with her. I have to go out on some work now. I hope you don't see the Sister as your enemy anymore.

Shanti: *[Embarrassed.]* No.

Doctor: Very well. I will leave now.

*[The doctor picks up his bag and walks away. The nurse gesticulates to the attendant to leave. After the attendant leaves, the nurse holds Shanti by the hand and goes behind the flower pots. *Please note, the nurse and Shanti will walk around the stage while they talk but all important conversation will take place near the flower pots.*]*

Shanti: What's your name?

Nurse: Suchitra.

Shanti: *[Plucks a white flower from a flower pot. The nurse is noticing her. Shanti raises her face and says.]* A white flower.

Nurse: White is really so soothing and nice, isn't it?

Shanti: White and sky-blue.

Nurse: Your house is painted white and sky-blue.

Shanti: Not yet, but it would be.

Nurse: Where would you build your house?

Shanti: It would come up next to my maternal uncle's place at Bhubandanga in Bolpur. I went to his place once when I was a child. Close to his place flows the river Anjana. I fell for that place. It had rows of palm trees, reddish slopes and one narrow river.

Nurse: When would that house come up?

Shanti: Once Khokon returns.

[The nurse stops in his tracks for a moment and then resumes her walk.]

Nurse: Do you know why you are here?

Shanti: Yes.

Nurse: What do you think has happened to you?

Shanti: I am no longer mentally stable.

Nurse: Do you realize that?

Shanti: Yes, I do, from time to time.

Nurse: It's been quite a few days that you are here. It's true that you don't keep mum these days. But don't you wish to be cured completely?

Shanti: Of course, I do. But they keep me away saying I am a lunatic. The way they look at me, it seems as if my eyes are going to devour them.

Nurse: Why care about what they think of you?

Shanti: Why shouldn't I? There is a whisper campaign against me. The moment I get close to them, they stop. The kids in the neighbourhood throw stones at me. They make passes at me. They call me lunatic. I don't understand why all of them have teamed up against me. They don't understand that I am a human being and I, too, want to lead a normal life.

Nurse: Ok. By the way, do you realize that your husband is still alive and that you haven't killed him?

Shanti: Yes, I know.

Nurse: Then?

Shanti: At times I feel it would have been better had I killed him. After all, he is...

Nurse: ...but he didn't do anything to Khokon. Khokon was suffering from a disease and... and... he died.

[Shanti tries to seal the mouth of the nurse with her hand in an obvious attempt to prevent her from speaking any further on that topic.]

Shanti: *[Screaming.]* You terrible witch! I am definitely going to kill you today. You are using that same old lie again to drive me mad. You are also a part of that conspiracy. I know you want to have a good time with my husband. Alright, I gift him to you, but if you say one more word about Khokon, you will face terrible consequences. I warn you. You get my point? I am going to kill you if you say one more word about him. Kill you! Kill you! Kill you!

[In blinding rage, Shanti is set to physically harm the nurse. Hearing the nurse's screams for help, the attendant comes running. Both of them forcibly drag Shanti away but her whimper of protests continues. They exit the stage. The doctor arrives and keeps his bag on the table. He stands atop the pedestal and uses a handkerchief to wipe the beads of sweat off his forehead.]

Doctor: *[Addressing the audience.]* When I heard about the incident after I returned to the hospital, I made arrangements for new medicines. Shanti was not against being treated. Her mind was always drawn towards the open air and the green pasture. She was mentally quite stable as long as nobody mentioned anything about Khokon. She later set her mind on knitting, especially socks and sweaters for children. But problems erupted the day we had called her husband over to the hospital.

[The doctor got off the pedestal and took his seat. Shanti and the nurse present themselves in front of the doctor.]

Doctor: Sit down. *[Shanti takes a seat.]* It's been some days you are here. How are you feeling now?

Shanti: Much better. But doctor, when would you release me from here? The head is no longer heavy and much of the weakness is gone. I have begun to like work. Besides, I feel great when I walk in the garden.

Doctor: Very well. Somebody is coming to meet you today.

[*Shanti, joyful and excited to hear the news.*]

Shanti: Who? Who's coming to meet me?

Doctor: Yes, someone is coming today.

Shanti: Really? Is he coming here? How could he stay away from me for such a long time?

[*Tears roll down her cheeks.*]

Doctor: Please don't cry. He will be here anytime soon.

Shanti: How big has he grown? How does he look these days? What about his health?

Nurse: [*Signals to the doctor.*] Sir—

Doctor: Yes, I know. She needs to be jarred out of her thoughts.

[*The attendant enters.*]

Attendant: Mr. Nakur Das has come.

[*A startled Shanti stares at the attendant. Her eyes portray shock and disbelief. Nakur Das enters. There has been no change in his countenance or appearance.*]

Doctor: Come Nakur. Take Shanti along with you to the garden.

[*In one swift movement, Shanti reaches one corner of the stage, from where she tries to run away. But the nurse and the attendant hold her back.*]

Shanti: Leave me alone. Let me go. He has come here to kill me. Don't you have compassion? Have mercy on me. Let me go. Oh God! Take this murderer away. Take him away.

Doctor: Sister, take her to the cabin please.

[*The nurse and the attendant use force to take Shanti away to her cabin. Nakur covers his face and starts crying.*]

Doctor: This disease is not easy to be cured of. It's not like a play or a novel where miracles happen overnight.

Nakur: But it has been almost three months. My home looks so barren, like an endless desert.

Doctor: I don't think the day is far for her to be fully cured. Her condition has improved a lot. It is possible that you are not being able to notice the improvement. She is much better and normal now except in terms of one issue. Shanti is in better health. She has also gained weight.

[*During the course of this conversation, the nurse and the attendant make Shanti lie down on her bed in the cabin. Thereafter, the nurse comes out and stands in front of the doctor.*]

Doctor: Well Nakur, you have to leave now. We will call you again.

Nakur: Here are some fruits and clothes for her.

Doctor: Leave them here. Sister, take those things from him.

[*Quietly, with folded hands, Nakur bows and leaves.*]

Doctor: [*With a worried look on his face.*] Sister, let me see the bed ticket. [*The doctor starts scribbling as the nurse lifts it for him to read.*] Give her eight ECTs and two shots

of insulin a week. Keep a strict watch on her after the first ECT.

[The nurse writes down the prescription and the doctor walks up slowly to the top of the pedestal.]

Doctor: *[Addressing the audience.]* ECT is the abbreviation of Electric Convulsion Therapy. It is about a wave of electric shocks run through the head to help untie the knots inside the brain. There are times when the brain gets entangled in knots. We could have used injections, too, but that process is expensive and often painful. I consider the use of ECT to be the right move at this point of time. However, I would like to show you what happened during and after the last ECT because you would not like to watch the many repeats of this process.

[The doctor turns around and steps off the pedestal. He reappears along with the nurse, the female attendant and three other attendants. Carrying the ECT equipment, all of them enter the cabin. Shanti sits up on her bed.]

Shanti: What are these? Oh, that pain again! All of you suspect me of still being mentally unstable. Don't you? Please doctor, I beg of you. I am alright now. Don't punish me anymore. Please spare me the pain. I promise not to be insolent again. I will do whatever you want me to do. Oh Doctor, how cruel could you be?

[The nurse places a pipe inside her mouth and straps the headgear on. The female attendant and the others pin Shanti down on the bed. The doctor switches the machine on. Convulsion begins. Shanti collapses on the bed, groaning. Darkness descends on the stage. Music and Shanti's

screams begin to reverberate. Then complete silence prevails. Thereafter, from the depths of the darkness, can be heard the conversation between Shanti and the doctor.]

Doctor: How do you feel, Shanti?

Shanti: I feel light. Breathing is... umm...

Doctor: ...laboured?

Shanti: No. It's a feeling of being unhurried, a sense of relief rather. I wish to sleep now.

Doctor: Go to sleep.

[The audience can hear Shanti sing melodiously—Sweet boy, lovely boy, cry no more.]

Doctor: *[His voice rises from depths of the darkness.]* An island suddenly rises in the middle of the river through the silt that gathered in layers for ages. The faint light of the dawn can be seen at the end of the dark hours. The long treatment has slowly shown signs of success and seems not too far. After many days, I have called Nakur over to the hospital today.

[The lights reappear on the stage. Nakur and the doctor could be seen sitting next to each other.]

Doctor: Have you readied yourself?

Nakur: Yes, but...

Doctor: Leave the rest to me. Take her home. Your real test lies ahead. She has to blend with the normal societal life. It is you who have to shield her from ridicule and scorn that surround her. That, incidentally, is the most onerous task in our country.

Nakur: But she hates me.

[Shanti arrives with the nurse. Nakur leaves his seat and stands up. Nakur and Shanti lock eyes. Nakur appears tense. Shanti suddenly pulls a 'ghomta' across her head.]

Doctor: Shanti, you are going home today. Your husband is here to take you home.

[No response from Shanti.]

Doctor: Why aren't you speaking? Come, sit here.

[Shanti doesn't utter a word. Instead, she touches the feet of Nakur first and then, of the doctor, as a mark of respect for elders. Surprised, Nakur pulls away and Shanti steps closer to the doctor.]

Doctor: What's this? Shanti, why are you crying?

Shanti: How do I present myself in front of him? He is like my God and the kinds of names I have called him...

Doctor: Do you remember all that?

Shanti: Yes. I remember everything. I am melting in embarrassment.

Doctor: No Shanti, you were not the one who said all those bad things about him. It was the disease that was speaking. You were unwell because you have the soft mind of a mother. It was a mother that was crying, far removed as she was from rationality. I hope you realize now that Khokon is gone forever.

[Shanti nods her head in agreement.]

Doctor: Don't cry, Shanti. Your Khokon will come back in a new avatar. Yes, we all feel sad when love is shorn of its fruits. But the tree that bears fruit doesn't die. It would blossom again. Go home, Shanti, go home. Rise to your calling now.

Shanti: Are you releasing me?

Nurse: Yes. You are completely cured. It's time for you to shake off the ridicule and mistrust of the people and be at the palm grove on the banks of Anjana to

build a garden of white flowers and a house painted light-blue. Another Khokon will come. Build him a home.

[Shanti walks away from everyone and stands atop the pedestal.]

Shanti: This is my story. No matter the pain, there is cure for every suffering. I used to think that these people were punishing me for no reason. But today, I realize that they always wished me well. They have done me a good turn. I will now return to the great sweep of humanity. Before I begin that journey, I will say adieu to as many people as I can. Sister Suchitra, could you please put some sindur powder on my head? [Smilingly, Suchitra, the nurse, does that.] Please don't mind. I am still a little girl.

[Shanti holds Nakur by one hand, picks up her luggage by the other, and exits the stage with quick steps. The nurse smiles. And the doctor reaches the top of the pedestal again.]

Doctor: Even though the story ends here, we have to keep waiting for those who have been rejected by society. We must wait for those destroyed by poverty and for those who are never counted as human beings. We wait only for the dismissed. [The nurse leaves the stage.] People are continuing to hurt. Weakened by waves of pain, we think of death. But new life tears open the camouflage of death to launch a fresh beginning. Every birth is like that. Shanti has left for her home today. But, much as I want the chapter closed, Shanti may return one day suffering from the same mental disorder. So what? Tuberculosis can be cured but it can strike back. Even if it

strikes back, it can be weeded out once again and, probably, forever. What Shanti was suffering from is like tuberculosis. If not in one attempt, mental disorder could be cured with repeated and sustained treatment over a certain period of time. To be cured, all that they need are compassion, kindness, affection, cooperation and an ability on our part to consider them to be as human as we are. There is no reason why we should keep them at a distance. Unfortunately, that environment has not come into being yet. True treatment is all about love and care that deeply troubled people like Shanti deserve. Would they get it? This is my last incisive question. I need answers. When do I get them? When?

[The doctor thrusts both his arms into the air, and the nurse walks in rapidly.]

Nurse: Sir, we have a new patient.

[A married woman, accompanied by a man, collapses on the floor.]

New woman: *[Raises her face.]* Where have you brought me? Is this a prison?

[Everybody on the stage looks quietly at her. The curtain drops. A song plays.]



*The music of the song used in the Bangla play was scored by the Late Pandit Ravi Shankar.