“Name?”
“Shantobala Kuila."
“Husband’s name?”
Shantobala kept quiet. The man in front of her does not let it go. He asks again, “Come on, say, you cannot keep quiet. This is the government’s house; here you have to abide by the laws. What is your husband’s name?”
“Haridhan Kuila.”
“Say it clear and loud.”
Now Shantobala lifted up her head and looked at the man. “Haridhan Kuila,” she said.
“Place?”
Shantobala was now aware of what all these words meant. At first she could not understand anything. Amidst so many strangers, what they said or what they asked went into her head. Her eyes would only be filled with tears. Besides, what had she done her whole life except cry? When her father had come home after arranging a groom for her marriage, her mother had objected. “She is my small and loving youngest daughter, and you have settled for a widower groom who is old enough to be her father?”
The father wiped his hands and feet with the gamcha on his shoulders and replied, “But he is giving me a whole fistful of money. Moreover he'll give her gold ornaments to wear in her arms and neck. Do I have the ability to satisfy the dowry demands of a groom like Lord Krishna?"
Sitting across the bamboo-fenced wall and busy preparing paan, Shanto did not even have the time to become stiff as a log. Before that she had heard her mother speak again.
“You will get her married so far away, maybe I'll never be able to see her again. Will it ever be possible to take a train ride and go and meet my daughter? I will not know how they will treat my timid little daughter, nor will be able to bring her here.”
Now the father was quite annoyed. “Then go and keep on sitting with your lovable daughter in your lap forever. The girl will grow up as tall as a tree and then some handsome prince will come on horseback to take her away.”

“No, no, am I saying that? She is my only daughter, so I think of her a little more. Shanto is too good a girl. She does not protest even if you go on slapping her. So I am worried whether such a little girl would be able to live with such a strong, elderly man. Anyhow, whatever is in her destiny will happen. What is the point in both of us thinking about it?”
Now the father’s voice was a bit more mellow and understanding. “Didn’t I think of all these things as well? But what can you do, a girl child is not an object of pity. My mother would pick her up in her lap and tell us, “A daughter is always to be given away – whether to the devil or to the son-in-law – it is the same story.

What else could Shantobala do but hide herself in fear and cry? After marriage when she found out that the son in law selected for her by her parents and the devil were the same, she would keep her left hand hidden most of the time under the end of her saree to wipe her tears with. Her days and months would pass by in great pain. Even years elapsed, not one or two, but full thirteen. Out of the nine children born, five died and four survived. After marriage, Shanto was struck with fear of death when she found that huge man in her bed. What excruciating pain after that – the whole bed sheet had been filled with blood. With tears rolling down her eyes, she kept on repeating her entreaties—“Please let me go. I beg of you. I fall upon your feet.”

Did Haridhan Kuila let her go? Didn’t he slap her hard on her two cheeks? Didn’t he twist her arms towards her back? He had obtained ownership of those arms by making them wear gold bangles. Her first son had come out of that thirteen-year old body by literally tearing it into pieces. She did not love him at all. She would not even feel like looking at her son out of fear and shame. Why did her own parents knowingly lead her into such suffering? There was not even a mother in law, a brother in law, or sister in law in this family to save her. By that time she had come to gradually know from her neighbours that Haridhan’s earlier wife had twice run away from the house and died in the end. Shantobala heard a lot of these stories while fetching water from the pond. Though no one ever asked her anything directly, she often heard several comments.

“Can such a young girl satisfy the hunger of that chandaa?” “What kind of a worthless mother is she to put her daughter into the tiger’s den?”

The first son died after four months. Within two months Shanto realized that she was going to be a mother again. Several times she wanted to jump into the well, to hang herself from the ceiling of the cowshed by tying a knot around her neck. So many times she had to spend several nights at the cowshed. When she was weaning separately in another room, she had even seen someone else enter her husband’s room. With the child in her lap still not fully dried up, she watched her coming with quick footsteps in the darkness, enter her husband’s room, shut the door, and again come out quickly to disappear in the darkness. In those nights her husband would push her and throw Shanto out of the room.

At the beginning, on some occasions, she was thrown out of the room along with her child wrapped in a quilt. Later, sometimes she had to spend her
nights alone in one corner of the cowshed. At least there were some living
and breathing animals there and they moved about. On some such occasions
she would feel so dejected that she thought it would be better if a cow kicked
her in the chest or stomach in the darkness. It was better than going back to
that man once again.

All these feelings would creep into her mind during the first two or three years.
Later she would not feel anything at all. She understood that her life would go
on in this same manner. Often she would not even think of life at all. Over the
years the dread of night had somehow made her feelings blunt throughout the
day. She would no longer feel extra scared when her husband would kick the
cooking pot of rice and throw it away, or tie her up against a post in the
verandah and beat her with the thick rope that was used to tie up the cow’s
neck. Endlessly conceiving, bearing the birth pangs of one child after another,
overcoming death – Shantobala could not remember for how many years she
had been continuously carrying the load of a child either in her breasts or in
her stomach. Was it for her whole life? While boiling paddy, while serving rice
to the daily labourers, while cleaning the cowshed and feeding the animals,
her body would feel heavy, her back, waist and thighs would become stiff with
pain.

After spending so many years, she had ultimately turned twenty-five. By that
time she was able to speak a few words with her neighbours but could not
find the time to do so. She no longer went to fetch water. Her elder daughter
Jamini did it. Occasionally one or two people came to her house to speak to
her. Those days when Rohini would secretly come in the dark and shut the
door of her husband’s room and would again briskly walk and leave about an
hour later to disappear in the darkness are now long over.

Nowadays Rohini would come to the house even when Haridhan Kuila was
not at home. She would even come during the daytime. Sitting with Shanto,
she would talk about her whereabouts, her sad plight. Rohini neither had
children, nor a family. Widowed at the age of fifteen, she did not even clearly
remember when she had got married. Her strong and young husband had
died of snakebite. Even after the sorrow and the shedding of tears, she kept
on staying at her in-law’s place. There she would soon fall asleep after
working very hard throughout the day. On one particular night in her sixteenth
year, she had gone out to the toilet at night when her elder brother-in-law got
hold of her in one corner of the courtyard. He admitted that he could not keep
his eyes off this young sister in law of his. He threatened her that if she
uttered a single word; she would be thrown out of the house forever. Rohini
was initially scared but it was also true that she did not dislike it either. That is
how things went on. Whenever she realized that her mother in law was in
deep slumber, she would come out of her door and go to the courtyard. But in
spite of that, she was thrown out of the house when the physical symptoms of
pregnancy became clearly visible. She had neither the place nor the courage
to go far away. She begged at the feet of her brother in law and her mother in law. The man kicked her hard and said, “You spoilt woman! Ask her to take a room in the bazaar area of the town.” He strutted about impatiently in the courtyard fearing that his household and his family’s reputation would be maligned.

In spite of all this, her mother in law did allow her to stay on – not at home but in a separate hut at the end of their compound. She had inherited this land from her father. Rohini relieved herself by taking some medicines from the barber’s wife. Twice her mother in law sent her a pitcher full of water through her eldest granddaughter. Once she fully recovered, Rohini started doing all the menial work outside the house. She chopped huge quantities of hay, cleaned the cowshed, fetched buckets full of water, washed clothes – everything. But, in spite of working so hard, she could not even keep her residence. Her brother in law was unmarried for all these years and he would spend his time singing *kirtan* here and there. Before her death, his mother’s insistence and tears made him agree to marriage, but before everything else he saw that Rohini was thrown out of from the boundaries of the house.

So Rohini started working as a part-time amid in several houses. She had one big asset and that was she could massage expecting and newly delivered mothers very well. No one had to call her. She would be present herself once the news reached her. She would rejuvenate both the mother and the child by massaging them and giving them hot compress. Of course, she also went on another kind of an errand at night. She went even now whenever people called her. She still possessed a kind of yearning in her body. And anger too. If society did not bother about her dwelling, her life, why should she be afraid of anybody?

But somehow she felt a kind of pity for Haridhan Kuila’s wife. If her child were alive, would it be as big as hers? Maybe not. Nevertheless, whenever she saw Shantobala’s face, her huge bun of hair, the slightly high cheekbones over her wide face, and her large, black, cow-like eyes, Rohini felt a different kind of suffering within her. This woman was enduring the tortures of that *rakshas*! And people kept on saying that for a woman serving her husband was the greatest religion of her life. Let such a religion go to the dogs!

Shanto did not even think of these things any more. She only thought of her two daughters. She did not think so much about her sons – they could at least somehow survive – and their father had the ability to feed them. But what about Jamini and Kamini? They would get married. Where would they get married and how far away? Will it be as far as she had come? In all these twenty-four years she could visit her mother’s place only once – that too just for a couple of days when her father passed away. She was a daughter and on the ceremony of *chaturthi* on the fourth day, she had to come back to her in-laws place. Otherwise who would do the cooking? Who would serve her
husband? She had decided upon one thing and that was in whatever ways possible, she would educate her two daughters. They should learn that much at least to enable them to write letters to their mother. Over the years she had been accumulating money little by little in the casket of the Goddess Lakshmi. Now there was a primary school in the village. The mistress who came to teach there came by bus from the city. But first the daughters had to be moved away from the attention of their father -- at least in the beginning. What would happen after that if he found out? Would he force them to leave school? But did Shanto get to think over the pros and cons of this arrangement at all? Even before that, one day Jamini’s father brought home a rough-looking man, even older than her. He entertained him very cordially. He called Shanto and asked her to make arrangements for some food. After that when the man left, he came back and sat on the verandah with a satisfied and happy face and said, “I have finalized Jamini’s marriage, do you understand?’ “What?” Instantly the world shook around Shanto’s head and blood accumulated in her eyes. Jamini had not yet crossed eleven years. “He has a lot of landed property and has no one at home apart from a sickly old mother. He had decided not to get married at all but he cannot manage all his property alone. So I advised him to marry – to bring home a wife. What will he do with so much of land and property if he does not have any children? In old age he would find other people just enjoying his property. He could guess our daughter’s appearance partly by seeing you. Shanto was shocked. Her husband had already discussed about young Jamini’s marriage and her prospect of delivering children! After that nothing else reached her ears. “This marriage will not take place.” Haridhan looked at her in surprise. He had never heard such a tone in Shanto’s voice before. “Tell me why. What bad did you see in him?” “I won’t get such a young girl married. I will send Jamini and Kamini to school. I will educate them.” Shanto did not know how she could speak so many words in such a loud voice. For some time a bewildered Haridhan just kept on staring at Shanto’s face. Then he walked away towards the cowshed. As soon as Shanto entered the room, Haridhan followed her instantly and clutching her hair from the back said, “you swine – you have exceeded your limits so much that just to send your daughters to school you dare to speak up to my face. Now go and send your daughters to school.” Saying this he kept on beating her with the thick chord that was used to tie the cow’s neck till Shanto fell down on the floor. After a long time, the tired out Haridhan threw the rope away on the floor of the courtyard. Before leaving the room he came back in front of the senseless body and said, “Open your ears clearly and listen. Within a month I shall get Kamini also married along with Jamini. I shall spoil your plans of sending them to school, you wench…….”
She does not remember the exact moment she thought about it, but Shanto’s forehead revelled in acute pain. She regained her placidity only after she managed to hit the sleeping Haridhan as strongly as she could with the wood-chopping axe that had been lying in front of her eyes for so many years. After taking a dip in the pond and changing her clothes, she woke up Jamini and Kamini. Depositing four bangles and a thin chain in the hands of a bewildered Jamini she said, “I am going somewhere. You wake up your brothers from their sleep and quickly go over to Rohini mashis' house. Give her these ornaments and tell her to admit you all into the school. Then you keep on staying there. Listen to whatever mashi says till I come back.”

Then she hid the axe within the folds of her saree and walked for seven miles in the hot afternoon sun and reached the police station. “I have killed the man of my house. Do whatever you want to do with me.” She laid down the axe upon the big table in front of the officer and felt relieved. “Place?” Shantobala stared at the man’s face. He pointed out to the jailor sitting in the adjacent room. “Ghosepara, Midnapore.”

Rohini had come to the court one day. Her eyes filled with tears she desperately said, “Why didn’t you come to my house that very night? Both of us could have buried him in the earth.” Shanto shook her head very slowly. “No, dear. How can that be done? If you kill God’s children, you commit a sin. Don’t I have to bear the punishment for that? Then swallowing her words, she said, “Didi, the children....”

The duration of the five rupees that Rohini had handed to the sepoy was over. They hurried her to go out, “Come on, and hurry up. The sahib will see you.” After turning her back Rohini had replied, “Don’t worry, they’re fine.”

After the whole case was heard and recorded, the jailor sitting behind the huge table said, “Shantobala Kuila, you have been sentenced to twenty years of imprisonment for killing your husband. If you want to appeal to the high court then the government will employ a lawyer for you at its own expense.”

The matron in a white dress who was standing next to Shantobala said, “Come.” The door of the female ward of Baharampore Jail was shut behind Shantobala.
About the Author

JOYA MITRA is a full-time writer and environmental activist. Author of several novels and collections of poems in Bengali, her involvement with politics began while she was a college student in the late 1960s. Her poetry collections include Pratnoprasther Gaan (Song of the Ancient Stones), and Deergha Ektara (The Long String Instrument). Among her novels is Swarna Kamaler Cinha (The Sign of the Golden Lotus). Her award-winning prison memoir Hanyaman (1990) translated as Killing Days in 2004, is lucid and intensely moving account of her four-year incarceration (1970-1974) in the prisons of West Bengal, India. She has translated the works of Amrita Pritam, Bhisham Sahni, Vaidehi and Ajeet Caur into Bengali.

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