PARTNERS IN EMPIRE

A Bengali short story by Esha Dey.
Translated by Somdatta Mandal

When William Smith got promoted as the manager of Mohanbari Tea Estate, a 250-acre property in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, he went for a vacation to his home in England. Watching the village pastor’s daughter Sylvia take out a big bundle of washed clothes from a wooden vat and spread them on the line in the unkempt garden at the back of the house, the selection of his spouse was complete. Though the bride was only twenty and the groom had crossed his mid-thirties, and though she had three elder sisters who were still unmarried, everyone was happy. The reason was that for such a huge pastor family at the beginning of the twentieth century, the fate of most of the daughters would be confined to either doing domestic chores at her father’s house, or giving voluntary labor at church welfare schemes, or teaching in primary schools. So, though a bit jealous, Sylvia’s family members were happy at her good fortune.

After the wedding celebrations, patiently undertaking the tiring and troublesome journey by ship, they arrived at Calcutta – the second city of the British Empire. When they boarded a room at the Great Eastern Hotel, the doors of Sylvia’s imaginative world opened wide in front of her. Her considerate husband had not worried about dowry and so the poor father-in-law had breathed a sigh of relief. Now it was his job to take her out and buy her clothes and accessories befitting a manager’s wife. Used to wearing darned and clothes stitched at home, Sylvia was stunned and totally overwhelmed. Now was her time to enter the social life of the colony.

Before leaving for her husband’s workplace in Assam, she attended the usual routine tea party arranged by the company’s boss and his wife. The elder Englishwoman gave her a tender piece of advice,
--- My dear, always remember we are British. Our men have built a worldwide empire. We wives are its shareholders. Your husband is the manager of a tea garden. Tea is the pride of the British. Beating the Chinese, Indian tea is now number one in the world, and the British make it. Your husband is an empire builder. Always preserve the prestige of our race in your behavior and manners.

Sylvia had nodded her head like an obedient girl. Back at home, she and her siblings had always read about the pride, the bravery, endurance, and work ethics of the British in all their colonies around the world from the newspapers and magazines that her father would bring home. In her childhood she had observed how the jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria was celebrated with gaiety. Even the people of her remote village knew about it. In the church her father had delivered so many lectures on how the British went to the colonies and brought the uncivilized barbarians under their fold and fulfilled their great duty. He said that civilizing these ‘others’ was the white man’s burden. On returning home, her well-read elder sister had asked her father at the dinner table,
--- Isn’t it Kipling’s poem, dad?
The straightforward second sister retorted instantly,
---Keep your Kipling. What relation do poor people like us have with the empire?
The father instantly got annoyed and pointing at the salt and pepper shaker and sugar
container kept on the table, said,
---Who said there is no relation? From where do these things come? Does pepper grow in
our garden or have you seen tea, coffee and sugar growing nearby?

After that all the seven brothers and sisters had to listen to his long lecture – what
were the things that came to Britain from the colonies; how everything was the work of
their men; how they risked their lives and sailed off to faraway lands; how they gradually
spread their domination; how they cultivated new crops in the new soil – cocoa, cotton,
jute, coffee, sugarcane, tea, indigo and so many other things. Apart from that, they even
searched for minerals under the soil and extracted them for use. It was a huge work
project. The colonies meant an idyllic world for the British, one where they got
everything they wanted. All the riff-raff of these British cities and towns, and all the
Tom, Dick and Harrys became kings in America, Africa and India. That was why an ugly
woman like Sylvia could also turn into a queen.

Raising her gloves-covered hand close to his lips, Bill or William had duly
proposed to her and said,
---This hand shall no longer be used for washing clothes or cleaning utensils. I have so
many people in India to work for me – cook, bearer, washerman, gardener, and the syce,
the stable keeper. You will be a memsahib and will not have to do a thing. The place is
also wonderful – no snow, no cold and shivering winter. It is green everywhere with
rivers, mountains and forests. It’s a new place, and you will be its queen.

Sylvia was prepared to undergo suffering in order to become a queen in this
beautiful country. For instance, there was the painful experience of her first night with
her husband. Sylvia was not a coy woman and she was aware of the bloody experience of
the hymen being torn. Like all other women of her time, she knew that a woman’s
primary duty was to satisfy the physical hunger of men and bearing children was dictated
by religion. But still she failed to understand how as soon as the lights were turned off, an
unknown and aggressive animal would emerge from the well-behaved and civilized man
she knew – someone who would consider her only as a body, or rather a hole, a vessel
wherein to deposit all his lust and seeds for progeny. Decimating all her feelings, likes
and dislikes, he did it just to aggravate his carnal desires. But as soon as it was morning,
he would return to his known and polite self. He would then profoundly address her with
‘my dear,’ ‘my darling,’ ‘please,’ and ‘thank you’.

In an indirect manner Sylvia tried to inform her elder sister how she was hurt
more mentally than physically. The sister instantly retorted,
---It is common knowledge that in every man there resides a cruel animal. Religion,
family and society have been trying to tame him for thousands of years but have failed.
This is why I shall never marry.
Sylvia and everyone else knew that no man had ever looked at the consumptive, short-
sighted woman with a horse-like face and would never do so. So in her mind she said to
herself, ‘Well, grapes are sour.’ But from that time onwards, she never complained against Bill even by mistake.

Traveling by train from Calcutta and then by steamer to land at Singrijan, one of the innumerable jetties on the Brahmaputra River, Sylvia was thrilled as well as excited to arrive at a new country – her own territory. Tea garden workers, a few ponies and an ox-drawn carriage were waiting at the jetty to receive them along with their luggage. Bill smiled and said,

---What are you thinking? India is a savage country? Do you know that even this ox-cart was introduced in Assam after our arrival? Of course wheel carriages have been operating on the plains of India from ancient times. But Assam is a more backward place—it lies on the periphery of ancient Indian civilization. The population is sparse and that too most of it comprises of backward tribals.

--- How do people travel here then?
--- On elephant back.
Like a small child, Sylvia clapped her hands in delight.

---Oh, it’s just like the India we read in books! Elephants and snake charmers.

The syce helped her to sit up on a pony’s back and they traveled through thin jungles and occasional muddy tracks. After traveling for quite some time, she saw miles after miles of short bushes of the same size spread till the horizon. Occasionally tall thin trees stood in the middle of these bushes. The sky was blue overhead and the sunrays made the green bushes sparkle in various shades.

---These are the tea gardens.
The experience of entering her kingdom on that first day still floats across Sylvia’s mind. Salaamed by the security guards at the entrance gate of Mohanbari Tea Estate, she passed the huge sheds lining the road. Learning about how the tea was dried, processed, and finally packed, she reached her residence. It was a big bungalow with a garden on all sides and surrounded by a boundary wall. As soon as they entered, two dogs appeared from somewhere in front of them and then quickly ran away. Bill called,

---Chowkidaar, mali! Where are you? You see the sun hasn’t set yet and the wolves have already arrived.
---Wolves?
Sylvia sat motionless over her pony.
---Yes. Didn’t you see it chasing the dog?
---Do you have wolves here?
Sylvia asked in a frightened tone.

Within a couple of days she realized that her question was rather foolish. Apart from wolves, what other animals did they not have? The tea garden controlled two hundred and fifty acres of land. Out of that about half of it was cultivated. The rest of the land was covered with jungles. As soon as it was evening, packs of foxes and hyenas would come from there. In the adjacent deep forest were wild elephants, bisons and rhinoceros. Fearing snakes and venomous insects, no one usually ventured beyond the tea bushes. Despite her wearing socks and shoes, Sylvia was attacked by leeches when she went to work a little in the flower beds of the bungalow garden. She kept on wondering
whether Bill had turned so wild because he was always surrounded by such ferocious and uncivilized nature. Living here alone for quite a long time, maybe the local traits of nature had influenced him and made him so violent. The impact of the place had also influenced all the other people as well.

Sylvia also thought of the Arakanese cook and waiter. They were Christians and because they had worked in the army, they could speak a language jumbled with English and Hindi words. But in spite of that, their slanted, Mongoloid, flat and stone-face appearance made Sylvia shiver with fear. In the dark features of the sweeper, the dhobi, the gardener and the syce, she was reminded of the uncivilized Africans. The Indian princes and nawabs were so beautiful in the pictures, so totally different. Again, the bare-bodied bald-headed Brahmans were different too. She had heard from Bill that there were thousands of castes in India. In the tea gardens all the laborers were brought from outside. The locals did not want to work. Sylvia could not understand anything—who was an outsider and who was a local. She only understood that everyone watched her, kept an eye on her, on what she did. Thus everything she ate, wherever she went took place in the presence of their unseen eyes. There was no privacy for her. Sometimes she got tired of sitting in the bungalow. How much could she sit? So she went out and watched the tribal laborers stand in rows plucking the two leaves and a bud. Their manner had some sort of independence—fixed jobs, fixed salaries. Of course there was no way out. With the sound of the siren early in the morning, Bill would dress up in half pants, half sleeve shirt and a hat and go to the garden. Everything would go on under his direct supervision. He checked the correct weight of the leaves, the correct density of humidity, the accuracy of the color of the tea. He was hawk-eyed in all these meticulous details. Really, could an empire be built without such dedication and untiring labor? One day Sylvia told him, --- Bill, you work so hard, keep your eyes on everything. You are a suitable manager of your company.

--- Really, there is no way out. Building the empire is not child’s play. Only today I heard that someone has composed a song that goes like this:

*Sardar bole kaam kaam*
*Babu bole bendhe aan*
*Saheb bole ithe pither chaam!*

[The headman only says work work,
The babu asks to bring us in chains
The sahib says he’ll take off the skin from our backs.]

This must have come from some Bengali brains. They are a very wicked race. Sylvia had shuddered listening to the English translation of the song.

--- Oh my God! The coolies are beaten?
--- Of course. In order to extract labor from the natives, you always need the whip.
--- But this is not Christian behavior at all.
--- My dear, you are no longer a pastor’s daughter, but the wife of a tea garden manager.
Yes, she was a wife. But what was the role of a wife? Throughout her life at home she had seen her mother act as the mistress of the house. She controlled everything including the purchase of clothes for her father, her siblings. She directed the family about its whereabouts, social relations, friends and acquaintances. And here Sylvia did not even know how the household was run. Bill controlled all the money. Her presence was surplus because domesticity was unnecessary here. No friends or relations ever visited them. There were no shops or marketplaces. All necessary requirements like rice, pulses, oil, salt, and even furniture came from Calcutta by steamer. All the domestic workers—the cook, the waiter, the gardener, the dhobi and the sweeper—supplied Bill with the necessary items required for their work.

The office clerks compiled those lists together and sent it to the steamer jetty. One set of goods that came from Calcutta was released from the steamer and it went back with another list of requirements. Sylvia only received some pocket money—something she had never seen her mother get. Now she too sent small lists of trivial items to be brought from Calcutta and that too through the office. Every morning and evening the cook would formally ask her about the day’s menu but he would suggest all the items. In the beginning Sylvia was very enthusiastic and tried to cook different sorts of roasts and puddings by herself. She stopped when the cook warned her in a serious tone that memsahibs never cooked with their own hands. If she ordered something special that she wanted to eat, she would be told that several ingredients required for that was not at home and neither available locally. In one word, Sylvia and her life style was totally controlled by the company and the empire. Bill used to drink plenty of rum before lunch and once when she had raised a mild objection, she got this reply, ---Do you want me to return the company’s money? It supplies this rum absolutely free.

Hence Sylvia, the empire-builder tea garden manager’s wife spent her whole day aimlessly—sitting down here and there and sometimes walking up and down. As long as there was daylight, she would read the old, stale newspapers and magazines that came from London and Calcutta by steamer. In winter she knitted wool and in other seasons, lace. The memsahibs had eternal retirement, undisturbed loneliness. Though this place was huge and open on all sides, Sylvia sometimes felt claustrophobic. Walking down the steps of the back verandah she proceeded towards the kitchen which was a bit far off. She could at least speak something to someone. One day she saw a woman standing at the kitchen door. On hearing Sylvia’s footsteps she turned back and their eyes met one another directly. She was dark like a coolie woman but there was a shine even in that darkness. The short sari and blouse that she wore was better and cleaner than the others. The woman kept looking at Sylvia from head to toe. The white part of her large eyes revealed hatred, the edges of her thick lips on both sides of her flat nose showed definite signs of anger. Within a few seconds she took the narrow path through the kitchen garden and slowly moved away. Her gait resembled that of a tigress in the forest—powerful in her own territory.

Sylvia walked forward and saw the cook chopping onions inside the kitchen. She asked, ---O kaun hai? Who is she?
--- Ji, Memsahib, koi nehi. Yes memsahib, nobody.
--- Saaf dekha ektho coolie aurat. I clearly saw a coolie woman.
--- Ohi to baat, ek mamuli coolie. That’s the thing. She’s an ordinary coolie.
-- Idhar kyon? Why is she here?
--- Malum nehi. I don’t know.

Then he hurriedly placed the frying pan on the oven and started to cook in such a manner to make Sylvia understand that nothing else could be gathered from him. Was he flirting with her then? Was she the wife of some coolie? Maybe so. Women were much less in number here. But the manners of this woman didn’t seem at par with that of the cook; neither did they seem close to each other. Sylvia tried to locate the woman in her daily rounds of the tea garden. There were coolies bringing baskets full of tealeaves on their backs, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. Sylvia went on riding her pony to the coolie lines, the rows of shacks where they lived. Dirty men, women and children filled the place. Some were squatting on the courtyard picking lice from their hair, some breastfeeding their babies, and some drunkards were shouting at the top of their voices. But she could not locate that woman. On the day of the weekly market she even went there. Dressed up in colorful clothes, the coolies were busy shopping. Some were buying pork, others ant eggs. Tonight there would be a feast. It seemed strange that the woman did not even need food supplies. Later she had seen her a couple of times around the kitchen but never met her face to face. As usual she did not get proper reply from the cook or the bearer.

One evening, she gathered courage and approached Bill with the topic. Busy consuming his fourth peg in his daily quota of five pegs of whisky, Bill was in a pleasant mood.
--- You know, a coolie woman often comes to the kitchen and speaks something…
Suddenly annoyed, Bill threw out his glass full of whisky.
--- Why do you interfere in their affairs? Everyday you go to the gardens and watch them work. You have even visited the coolie lines several times. You have also been seen in the weekly market. What does all this mean? Why can’t you stay within your boundaries? Don’t you remember how fortunate you are being my wife? If you stayed at home, you would have still remained a spinster like your sisters. You would get blisters in your hands after washing clothes and would not even get a new dress in five years. Here you sit on the top of an elephant and run the household and yet you’re dissatisfied. Why do you have to constantly peek here and there?

Bill’s attitude was that of a stern master – just as he presented himself before the coolies, their leaders and the babus. Sylvia was cold with fright, her senses turned numb. She could not tell him that though she suffered and lived in poverty in Britain, yet she was a human being there. Here she was just a female body.

That was not all. That night Bill was more fearful and aggressive in bed. When at last the shattered and injured Sylvia went to sleep, she dreamt the same thing again. She felt that she was no longer a human being but was slowly turning into a cave, a hole. The secret door between her thighs opened, but the source of her desires was lost forever. It was only a hole, a passage for depositing seeds. That same hole gradually turned bigger
and bigger and was moving upwards beyond her tummy. Her body had no backbone, nerves or muscles; she had turned hollow, empty.

--- Sylvia darling, won’t you wake up? I’ve brought bed tea for you.

Sylvia opened her eyes. Bill was bending towards her. How normal and well-behaved he was. What loving look in his eyes! He kissed her lightly on the forehead and wished her ‘Good Morning.’

--- Hope you remember that we are going to Jorhat tomorrow. Everything is packed. I am thinking of looking for a maid for you. She will do all your personal work.

--- No, no. There are so many people. Besides, what work do I have?

--- You’ll need it later. After the children are born. Why don’t you keep one from now?

--- We’ll see when the children are born.

Sylvia turned her face coyly. She had not yet given the news to Bill. She thought that she was pregnant for two months. Even before she could ascertain it herself, all the servants knew about it. This was clear from the sudden change in their attitude towards her. They behaved in a more respectful and considerate manner.


During the months of January and February, tea is not produced in the gardens. Cleaning the place and trimming the tea bushes are the only work done. New leaves sprout only around March. So this period always brings in a sort of holiday mood. Jorhat was the tea capital of Assam and all the tea planters assembled there at the Gymkhana Club. There were lots of activities – wining, dining, dancing, and merrymaking. So all the British managers and assistant managers from around the Surama Valley went there with their families. For these English people who lived scattered in the various tea gardens, like tiny islands entirely to themselves, it was a renewal of ties. Discussions took place during the break in the games and parties, and they ranged from who brought back a wife, whose child was born, who went back home. All the ladies came in their new or best dresses. If they did not wear them here, where else could they wear them? Wearing her latest dress from Calcutta, Sylvia also presented herself among these people in a happy mood. The women held glasses of sherry, the men, sitting on high bar stools, went on drinking pegs and pegs of whisky. The rest of the people were scattered here and there with wine glasses in their hands. Suddenly Mr. Jimson from the Panitala Tea Estate announced,

--- Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please! Spending more than a quarter of a century in Assam, our old friend Jenkins from the Bingmari Tea Estate has at last ended his bachelorhood last month by entering into wedlock. The fortunate lady is no other than Miss Mary of the Khasia tribe, the mother of Jenkins’s five children. I think you all know that Miss Mary was a coolie at Bingmari. Let’s have a toast for the couple.

--- What a scandal! — Shame, shame. A coolie woman!

--- The old Jenkins has lost his head. --- How is the Company going to take this? --- And the government?

Listening to these comments by the men, Sylvia was surprised to see the nonchalant way in which the women went on discussing designs for pullovers and cardigans, or about the foreign flowers and vegetables growing in their gardens. She asked Mrs. Wilkins, the wife of the manager of Bokhola Tea Estate, who was sitting next to her,

--- Is it a common practice for British managers to marry native women?
Mrs. Wilkins shook her head fiercely to mean ‘no’ and started chatting with Mrs. Hunter about the wickedness of native servants. Though it was quite cold, Sylvia suddenly started feeling hot, her ears and head radiating heat. The place was stuffy – filled with the heat from the burning fireplace, the smoke of cheroots and tobacco pipes along with the smell of different kinds of drinks. Feeling giddy she got up and went out in search of the wash room. The verandah was nearly dark. Splashing some cold water on her face, she did up her makeup. On her way back she overheard a drunken conversation between two men.

--- Did you see Bill’s wife? She’s like a piece of wood. Poor Bill. All fun and frolic gone.
--- Come on. She’s an English woman. She’ll give birth to pure British children. What more does one want? So, when are you tying the buckles on your neck? You cannot spend your whole life with that black beauty.
--- I know that. But whatever you say, these black women are much better in bed. Just like this Indian earth. Warm, soft and fleshy. The most important thing is that they are willing. My woman even threatens me that if I marry a memsahib, she’ll use voodoo magic on her. She nearly devours me whenever I am near her. A real bitch!
--- Don’t they think what will happen to the children? All of them are bastards.
--- Come on. Once you are on the east of the Suez Canal, all your civilization is unmasked. Moreover, do you think they are less cunning? Having children from male coolies will make them either coolies or laborers. But even illegitimate sons of Englishmen will get better work in the railways, the police force or in the military. Also the mother will be a half-memsahib.
--- Really, the empire means profit for both the parties, a little more or less. Funny.

Sylvia returned to the lounge. The police band was playing and a few couples were dancing slowly to its music. Jimson had already announced that one could not dance more than one number with one’s wife. The reason was clear. The men outnumbered the women. So Sylvia had to agree to the “Can I dance with you?” request several times rather mechanically. She came close to so many men, endured the strong smell of tobacco and whisky, a little politeness, a little flirting, and meaningless conversation. Suddenly the ceiling above her head started reeling. So did the wooden floor. She saw darkness in front of her, sheer darkness.

On regaining her senses she found herself lying on the sofa in the lounge with women all around her. The music had stopped. The men were speaking in hushed voices. Full of anxiety, Bill was sitting right in front of her. Sylvia felt ashamed.

--- How are you feeling now? – A little better? – What happened?
Everyone asked in unison.
--- My head had just reeled. Nothing much. Please do not get so concerned. Let them start the music. Why did you stop dancing? I’ll sit here for a while and then everything will be all right.
--- Poor thing! Probably not used to drinking sherry. Has just come to the colony.
--- A totally rustic woman. Relax. Do you want some lime juice?
Caressing her politely one by one, all the women went back to the dance floor. After sitting down for a while, Sylvia suddenly felt wet inside. She kept quiet. She did not want to tell Bill and spoil his fun. How beautifully he danced. Women were toys in his arms—
he twisted them, bent them, lifted them as he wished. If only she could also dance like that!

Both of them went to bed in the guest wing in the early hours of the morning. Bill woke up at eleven o’clock and found the bed next to him flooded with blood. Thank goodness the place was Jorhat and there was an English doctor available. The mother’s life was saved but not the unborn child’s. The next time she should not feel shy and tell her husband right at the beginning so that necessary precautions can be taken. When Bill was advised to be a little more considerate, he replied in a serious tone,
--- The coolie women work easily in the gardens and at home even when they are expecting.
--- Wild vegetation grows up even in an uncared state. A good breed of a plant does not live without care. Now complete rest for one month is essential. Will you return by steamer? Go back to the tea garden a week later. Do you sleep well? No? Well, here’s a mixture prescribed for you. Buy two bottles from here. Take one doze when you can’t sleep. Don’t take more than that. Well, better luck next time. Don’t worry about this anymore. So much gets wasted in nature.

The doctor left with his bag. In a disgusted tone Bill said,
--- The season this time is spoilt.
Rather embarrassed, Sylvia quickly replied,
--- No, no, you stay on. There are so many programs here. Why will you miss them just for me?
For the first time Bill did not object to her wish in a loud voice. Rejecting his mild hesitation, Sylvia returned alone by steamer. She could not tolerate the sympathy, discussion and concern of the women at Jorhat – “strange,” “didn’t tell her husband,” “a little rustic type,” and so on. The syce had come to the jetty with her pony and the Bengali doctor of the tea garden accompanied him. After the usual greetings she took time to ride slowly. Just before reaching the garden, at the edge of the cultivated land beyond the boundary wall, she suddenly saw a small house standing amid tall trees. All these days she had not noticed it.
--- Whose house is this Dr. Bose?
--- No one in particular, madam. Come let’s move forward. The bungalow is still quite far away.
--- Chaliye memsahib, aage badhiye. Kuch nehi idhar. Come on memsahib, move forward. There is nothing here.
Sylvia got irritated. What was the hurry? She stopped the pony. The syce came forward and slapped the pony on his stomach.
--- Chal, chal. Hiya rokna nehi. Come on, move. Must not stop here.
Suddenly Sylvia became terribly angry. She was a memsahib, belonging to the king’s race. Why would she have to dance to the tunes of these native servants? Refusing to listen to the syce, she speeded up the pony towards the house. There was a gate in front of the small little cottage. On hearing the sound of the horse’s hooves and their conversation, the curious inmates of the house came out on the front verandah.
Sylvia startled and stopped the pony. That woman. Standing at the open door she was staring at her. Her looks had the same hatred and anger. From behind her, three children aged from ten to about a year and a half, also came out. All of them were fair complexioned; one had golden hair, the other two brown. They wore good clothes. The woman spread out her arms and drew the three children close to her as if there was danger waiting in front of her. With the garden in between them, she was still quite far away from Sylvia. For a few moments both kept on staring at each other. Sylvia then asked her in a loud voice,
--- *Tumlog kaun ho?* Who are you?
The woman’s reply was even louder.
--- *Apna sahab se pucho*. Go and ask your husband.
From behind, Dr. Bose reprimanded in a hushed tone,
--- *Madam, please come away. It doesn’t look good for you to come here.*
Sylvia turned the pony’s direction and in a slow pace returned to the bungalow, totally silent. She sat down quietly. The cook, the bearer, the gardener, the washerman all came to visit her one by one and enquired about her health. Nothing could be kept a secret here. Her failed motherhood and the dramatic encounter would soon travel from person to person in a more exaggerated manner. Sylvia did not feel like eating. The cook and the bearer politely brought in many items to help her regain her strength. Everything remained untouched. Sylvia entered her bedroom and shut down the lantern. Lying down on the bed she kept staring at the ceiling in the darkness. That hole in her body was getting enlarged again and crossing her chest moved towards her neck. She was nothing else but a sensationless, discarded shell. The mixture for insomnia was kept on the bedside table. She grappled in the dark and got hold of it.

In the end, a new name of a British woman was added to the list of all those who had dedicated their lives for the British Empire -- the empire where the sun never set.

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