

Yasmin Ladha / LAKSHMI OPENS AND CLOSES

*Largen me not with child or sober jewel
Nor husband, grace his turban, turn and touch
let me
slide between breasts my own
and
love
in leisure unrelated*

Lakshmi's husband gives her two coins for hair flowers. He likes to see her pretty but he also likes to make her happy. The coins lend to her wealth. When her husband goes to work, she has her business too.

Lakshmi sits in front of her mirror, the size of a photo frame. The mirror leans on a slanted plank of wood. Behind the plank is her *kumkum* in a yellow clay pot. In the middle of where her plait begins, she tucks a string of *asminis*. Then she unknots her blouse. They become full and pointed again. Lakshmi dips her fingers inside the yellow pot. In the middle of her hair parting she spills red *kumkum*. The second time, she filches the red powder and applies it between her breasts. In hair, *kumkum* is auspicious, guarding a husband's welfare. But the latter ritual is of Lakshmi's making. Now her husband will remain doubly protected. For the fires she wears will protect him.

I am a nomad-woman who shuttles between continents. There is no gun behind my back nor have I climbed a peril wall. But I am a modern immigrant who needfully retrieves in more than one continent. I nomad on land, in books and woman rooftops.

In *Sons and Lovers*, the wives rise early to kiss their husbands good-bye. In case they never return from the mines that day. The wives' *kumkum* kiss. When I read this, I, nomad-woman, nail a temporary post. In the presence of any Lakshmi, I nail a temporary post. Then the lotus goddess comes to me accompanied by her two snow elephants (they have turquoise lashes) who lift me to a rooftop. Here, goddess Lakshmi opens my shoulder pad and refills it with chants, stories and woman brouhaha.

For one coin, Lakshmi buys *asminis*. How does the song go? That song on the eve of a bride's henna. (Wet henna on her palms, feet and fingernails.)

beloved mine
if ever without you

then someone remove that dent
on our merry pillow
where beloved's head rests
now-on
I have forgotten
asmini, rose, dancing slipper

With the other coin, Lakshmi buys bananas for her father and makes a trip to her maiden home. Every day. As soon as she steps inside the courtyard, her father says, "Lakshmi has come home."

When a daughter is born, the house members say that Lakshmi has come home. And before a bride enters her new home, her mother-in-law bids her kick the pot of rice by the doorway. The bride walks on spilled rice. Her first steps are bounteous Lakshmi's.

Goddess Lakshmi sits on a lotus. Plentiful, ample. She is the Goddess of wealth. She surrenders to grabby devotees. Forever turns a blind eye, "Never mind," she says, even pats their cheeks with her lotus hands.



I call Mrs. Gola, *Didi*. Mother's sister. On Diwali, I light the lamps, one by one, behind Gola Market. Her sons, Bhima-tall, watch, shifting weight into feet and across the chest. How to behave toward a sudden woman? This stranger who does not address their mother respectfully as *mata-mai*-mother. Doesn't she know that paradise is at a mother's feet?

Grandmother would sway in company of such sons: "Such a *jum* display of males!" she would say, stretching her hand, way above her head. My Grandmother of drama would unlock her fist in the air and

spread out her fingers, an instant star. "Height, you ask? A baobab tree! These glorious pillars," then furling her hand, "unbudded, steady as death."

Grandmother's faith in the Aryan specimen who stormed into India is untarnished. Broad shouldered *jum* warriors with their swastikas and fire. Her faith in such male properties more instinctive than her faith in the Koran. To translate Grandmother's language, a *jum* man is unshook: like death, he does not retrack. When he throws a stone decision, one hears it whizz across the sky. For her, like Lakshmi's father, such maleness protects a tribe and provides endless bread on the table. Lakshmi's father knows that his daughter is under a thick jute shelter, forever.

Mother widows at thirty-four. Father, a Bhima centrefold. What happened? Though her daughter is widowed, Grandmother does not cry, she says, "Call it lump disease or shrinking disease, but when his time is up, even a dog will piss in the mosque." But Grandmother stops wearing lipstick. Now when my tall brother snatches her and lifts her in the sky, Grandmother grabs his cheeks, "*Munna-laddie*, on your wedding, I will drape on Southern silk and rouge my mouth."

On one of my nomadic journeys home, after Grandfather dies, I ask Grandmother about my unspoken Aunt of many, many years ago. This is the first time she steps out of her prescribed circle by weeping openly, "A man knows nine months only but when a mother conceives, her child pricks and pricks right under her heart, damn pricking never goes out again." Now I tell her of dreams I made up when I was little. That my kind Bhima-father marries my Aunt though she isn't dead like him but good as dead, I knew even then. He carries my unspoken Aunt on a white elephant to his new home in heaven. Grandmother touches my cheek with a wane palm, "Even a girl-Lakshmi gives like a flood."

I remember my small Grandmother and huge father making *rotis*. Father's *rotis* aren't circles. They have chins drooping out of them. Grandmother sides her face and roars. She reaches below his shoulder. She reveals details like how his left pupil is slightly off centre, his eyelids turning mauve in sleep, how he forces her to eat his drooping chin *rotis*, all this, she tells in the present. Always. And when she talks about his cheeks, the side of her mouth rises Clinton soft, "Allah, the

opulence on this city-lad's cheeks! From breakfast red merriment to mysterious dark like a dusky-*Magrib* evening. Not even the beckoning azan from the minaret holds such allure."

Father tells her of Elvis who swaggers his hips like a *ngoma* dancer. My father is from Dar es Salaam. City-lad. My Grandmother is from Mombasa, an international port. She loves him from the start.

"She has picked it from your Father," Mother says, when Grandmother talks from the side of her mouth, especially when she is excited. Zarin *Didi* says the same thing. Zarin *Didi* is Mother's real sister. (My Mrs. Gola is trans-related to all women I know. I call her *Didi*.) Father dies in 1964. It is a thin grave, huddled.

When I stand at her doorstep, first thing *Didi* tells me is, "I know who you are." I know her too because Asoka Travels has arranged this for me. When I tell her that I am grateful to her for allowing me to celebrate Lakshmi *Pooja* with her, *Didi* looks at me sadly, "Daughter, you have not recognized me."

Didi fumbles with the *gajra* of *asminis* in her hands. Shy to touch my hair because I am so wretchedly new, she ties the thicket on my wrist. I know she had favoured me with an indulgence customarily bestowed on men.

"After the last of the lush mangoes, the gentlemen would dip their fingers in crystal bowls circled by the white garlands. Slipping them casually around their wrists they would walk away carrying the fragrance of an enclosed garden." (Anees Jung, *Unveiling India — A Woman's Journey*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1987, p. 13.)

Didi insists on washing my plate before I leave her threshold, "Daughter, if I wash your plate, keep it ready and waiting, maybe you will never want to leave. Lakshmi at my door, finally! I have waited so long."

Since Father's death, I am unstinting on sisterly superstition: I never wash my hair on Wednesdays because this day hangs heavy on brothers. On onerous Wednesdays, I am *kumkum* alert.

Whenever mother moves us to a new house, she prepares a silver tray which has some wick, oil and rice. First I get out of the car with the silver tray and place it in the spooky doorway, then walk inside. I feel the house's ghosts fading away. Then my brother and mother

follow. A daughter enters with Lakshmi steps. She drives away spirits, changes a house into a home.

During *Diwali*, everyone leaves doors, shutters and windows wide open because on this auspicious night, goddess Lakshmi visits homes. My tourist brochure translates *Diwali* as the Festival of Lights. But *Didi* tells me the story of how Ram defeated the many headed Ravan of Lanka. Ram would slash one head and another would suck out in its place. But good always overcomes evil. Ram rescues his wife Sita, abducted by the mighty Ravan when she unwittingly steps out of the protection circle drawn around her by Ram and his faithful brother. There is never any question of who will win, "After all, Ram is Vishnu and Sita is Lakshmi," *Didi* says. Upon the royal pair's triumphant return to Ayodhya, the Ayodhyans light the way with *diyas*.

Only on Lakshmi *Pooja*, the watchman does not beat the walls with his *danda*-stick. On this night, *Lakshmi Mata* will protect anyone, even thieves. Normally, before falling into a red vault sleep, the watchman prepares a grand show of beating his *danda* on the walls of the house, "Whack! Mistress of the Household, I am awake!" As a finale, the watchman's stick becomes thunderous, as if to say, "Beware Mistress, I am alert as a cheetah so let me be spared of abuse from your unwashed mouth!" Many times the mistress catches him dead to the world and her anger is so noisy that the watchman runs out of the gate.

Lakshmi, the Goddess of fortune and abundance, sits on a lotus. Plentiful, ample. Forever turns a blind eye. Never mind. She is Barwa-rag. The raga which soothes the bird and the serpent. Feathery kind. She always says, "Never mind." bp Nichol kind. But no one knows that her back burns because it is being eaten away by so much giving. There is a spread of ash on her cheeks. The worshippers leave her festive red saris, puff powder. They also leave cunning rice before her with imprints of rice steps leading up to her, but no steps leading away. This way they lock in Lakshmi.

Didi tells me, "I cannot ask Lakshmi for anything more. I, nestled among such *jum* men, am already so wealthy, how can I?"

(A bride carries a pot of honey and milk. As she bends, the groom covers her like the spine of a sickle. Her head is tucked in his chest, forever protected. He tilts her hand. Together they pour the sacred

offering into the fire. *Didi* has an army of such protectors.)

But *Didi* has a wish. She has kept it still, out of the reach of Buddha or Shiva, or any other sneerer of her wish. In the fleshy recess of her zenana sex, an obvious place (is it?), her dull protein wish glints. But in the bazaari republic, she moves about transparently, a mother who slid out splendid *jum* sons from her buttery thighs. Then unexpectedly this *Diwali* her fugitive desire granted. Her bottom lip slips, "My Lakshmi has finally come home," this time, *Didi* touches my hair.

"How could I burden Lakshmi, say to her, I want a daughter, then give me talk of sons." Like me, the goddess has never shaken her head. Both of us have given first to *Shiva-Rabba-Buddha*, that power in the sky.

On the rooftop, I pile on *Didi's* cot. We drink *chai* out of steel tumblers. In this woman place, *Didi* tells me about the woman who gives her all to the Power in the sky. When the *zaminder* on whose land this woman works rapes her, her husband leaves her because the son she is heavy with isn't his. This woman, a Sita suffer and Lakshmi giver, raises her son alone. Twenty years later, the husband returns. The woman (she has gone very thin) only blinks and calls out to her son. She clasps his hand. In the other, her husband's, and lifts these hands to her breasts. Only asks the mighty Rabba in the sky, this:

In my one hand, my son

In my other, my husband

O *Raba*

If I forfeit You today

will you forgive me, just this day?

When a bride enters a door's entrance, she is schooled to become like *Didi*, forced to lick the power of *Raba* in the sky. First she is halted in the doorway, where she raises her arms, and her youth is pulled out of her body. (Lakshmi who buys her father bananas is lucky, no one has taken away the musky sheen from her breasts.) Beside the rice ceremony, the arch in a bride's limbs is slackened. Now henna and sandalwood paste are wanton heat, unsuited to motherhood. One day, the throbbing bride hands over her magazine desires and black silk to her approving mother-in-law, who piles her with keys, rice, money and turbans. Only Lakshmi/*Didi* can fill the tribe's turbans, stretched out like alm bowls. She properly fills them with honour. No one knows

that the *poto*-clan's worshipping saliva turns acidic on her back. Makes holes in her meat. All the clan sees is gourd-like Lakshmi with puff power cheeks. That she has an ozone back, only another Lakshmi knows. This is why I call Mrs. Gola, *Didi*. If I call her mother, I refine her complexity. Everyone has a mother, instant satisfaction. But mother's sister allows "who are you, may I get to know you?" time to a woman. Now Lakshmi is no longer that transparent. No Lakshmi is.

I am also Lakshmi who wears *kumkum* for her brother, who would rather tell the story of her brave Zarin *Didi* and not the other Aunt (we never utter her name. She is *haraam*-forbidden in our tribe, by Grandfather. On this matter, he has roped Grandmother's milkless breasts. She does not complain that she is in pain.) My Aunt who gets pregnant by a married man. When my breasts begin to grow, Grandmother wallops my shoulder, "You become like her and we will throw you in the well." Besides utter fear of shame history repetition, this is the only way Grandmother can remember her daughter out loud in Grandfather's prescribed circle. I like to think if Father were alive, my unspoken Aunt would not have been banished. That his prankish nature would not have allowed it. Once Father sends Zarin *Didi* a large parcel. She opens the parcel and finds an empty box but there is another gift-wrapped box underneath. Empty. Boxes and boxes, like Draupadi's never ending sari. Finally, in a velvet ring case lies a single Benson's almond toffee. Zarin *Didi*'s favourite.

Zarin *Didi* is beautiful like Sophia Loren. Sometimes she looks so beautiful that Grandfather gives her money not to go to mosque. What if someone looks at her witchcraft eyes. He wants to protect her like *kumkum* between the breasts. She marries a doctor. But an evil eye must have sucked on her. One night, thieves break in. She pushes her two daughters inside a room. When one of the thieves moves toward her husband, she stops him by jumping on his back. But the other thief pops out her eye.

Until today, the larger gods did not know. Buddha did not know nor Shiv of *Didi*'s dull glint of protein life. That *Didi*'s daughter has grown in her womb for thirty-four years. This Lakshmi *pooja*, the daughter lights the lamps, one by one, behind Gola Market. Lakshmi is resting.