

Sukanta Chaudhuri  
The Bengali 'Cardenio' Play

**Note: Italicised words in the dialogue indicate English words embedded in the original Bengali.**

#### ACT ONE

*[The garden of Sarojini's holiday house at Shyampahari in the Santhal Parganas. Late morning, nearly noon. Enter Nikhilesh and Sandip.]*

*Sandip.* Really, Nikhilesh, have you gone mad? When one gets married, one celebrates with one's friends and relatives. Instead of that, what kind of crazy plan is this?

*Nikhilesh.* Why, we've come here precisely to celebrate.

*Sandip.* Who are you trying to fool? How many people have you invited down here? You got married in a registry office with the minimum number of witnesses. And here, there's only the two of you, Amala's elder sister, Rabi and Shobhana, and me. You have a lot of relatives, quite as many friends, and all your colleagues at the office. They've all been robbed of a feast – they'll call you a miser.

*Nikhilesh.* They're none of them paupers. If they want a good meal, they can buy it at a restaurant. And as for being miserly, think of all the presents we might have got. Isn't that a sacrifice on our part?

*Sandip.* Why didn't you just write in the invitation, 'We want your blessings, not your gifts'?<sup>1</sup> That would have solved the problem.

*Nikhilesh.* That's enough foolery. Look here, Sandip, marriage is a personal matter between two people. At most, a few others very close to them might play a part. Why plague a horde of people with invitations?

*Sandip.* Talking of people close to you, you've even left your parents out. And they too fell in readily with their dear Khoka's<sup>2</sup> whim – even though they've arranged the match, and even though the house belongs to your mother. If you'd married for love and eloped with Amala, at least it would have made sense. I'd have said you had some spunk in you.

*Nikhilesh.* Arranging a marriage calls for judgment and maturity: you might say it's a parental duty, like putting their son to school or arranging his vaccinations. But once he gets married, it's time for the parents to stay clear. Married life is the last step to maturity: one's parents shouldn't loom over it any more than they should sit in the basar-chamber.<sup>3</sup> They've had their fun in their time – let them now drink neem juice and chant the Lord's name.<sup>4</sup>

*Sandip.* Your parents seem more busy chanting play-scripts than the Lord's name – and I'm sure their favourite tippie isn't neem juice. But you're avoiding the most important issue. You might be happy with a hole-in-the-corner marriage like this, but what about Amala? Her wedding day is the biggest day in a woman's life – they weave all their dreams and wishes round it. Haven't you seen those hoardings of a girl dressed up in her finery, saying 'My wedding day will belong to me alone'?<sup>5</sup>

*Nikhilesh.* Girls like that are quite shameless. The sari-sellers and jewellers teach them those ways, and the whole tribe of females lends support, from grandmothers and great-aunts to friends and servant-maids. That's how women have been fooled, and fooled themselves, down the ages.

*Sandip.* Bravo! What a wonderful combination of bitter patriarchal morality with a little sweet flavouring of progressive feminism.

*Nikhilesh.* It's not something to laugh about. Just think of it: a young woman sitting there, all painted and dolled up, among hundreds of people. Everyone's devouring her with their eyes, her friends are making sly remarks, and who knows what the men are thinking and

fantasising about. Society may accept the practice, but it's no less barbaric for that. I don't want to expose my wife to such humiliation.

*Sandip.* No wonder I say you're crazy. Why don't you just feast your eyes on your new bride, and to hell with what others might be thinking? In any case, what makes you think all men have such dirty minds? Come on, Nikhilesh, women get used to being looked at – they even enjoy it if it's done in a decent civilised way. And at a wedding, she's only on view under controlled conditions, so to speak. It's all fine as long as Amala doesn't make eyes at them in return. Why should she, with such a nice new husband?

*Nikhilesh.* How can I be sure of that?

*Sandip.* Ah! Now I know what's bugging you. Even in marrying a girl like Amala, you're eaten up by an absurd jealousy and suspicion. If you feel this way five years after marriage, it'll at least make sense, whether or not there's room for suspicion. But you haven't even bedded her yet – it's positively morbid to think like this already. You'd met Amala before the wedding – you'd even taken her out once or twice. Was there ever any hint that she was thinking about someone else, or trying to attract other men's attention?

*Nikhilesh.* You can't tell so easily. Her whole earlier life is a closed book to me – where she's been, whom she's been with. As for hints, I don't know her psychology – how can I tell what might be a hint? You can read the behaviour of people you know, but strangers remain strangers.

*Sandip.* Your wife won't remain a stranger to you for long: then you'll be able to read her all right. Look, Nikhilesh, even criminals are acquitted if there's a gap in the evidence. Will you sentence your own wife on no evidence at all?

*Nikhilesh.* It's illogical to think there's no evidence just because you don't know of any.

*Sandip.* You can't prove everything mathematically; you can't always find out the facts either. Are you planning to hire a detective to look into Amala's past life? If you carry on like this, your relations with your wife are doomed, and you'll lose all your friends as well. Just think: I drop in at your house for a chat, and you tell me, 'Trying to make love to my wife, are you, you bastard?'

*Nikhilesh.* Don't say such a thing, Sandip. You're as close to me as my own self – haven't we known each other since junior school? I might suspect myself, but never you. But tell me something: you too had met Amala before our marriage, and you've seen her since. What's your experience been like?

*Sandip.* It's crazy to think I could have had any experience at all. Do you think she would flirt with her husband's best friend the day she got married, or that the best friend would be so treacherous?

*Nikhilesh.* No, no, I know you wouldn't dream of such a thing. That's why I can ask something of you and you alone. I was afraid to bring up such a ticklish matter, but the conversation's turned that way in any case.

*Sandip.* What's biting you now?

*Nikhilesh.* Why don't you really try to think, as a kind of make-believe, what I've just said you wouldn't really dream of? Give Amala a bit of your company, whisper a few sweet nothings – try to seduce her just a little. If even you can't shake her, I'll know she's solid as a rock.

*Sandip.* Now I know you've really gone mad – plumb crazy mad. Nikhilesh, haven't you either shame or decency? You can't bear that other men should even look at Amala, yet here you are egging me on to damn her in this way. What do you think you're doing? How can you insult your new wife and your old friend by one stroke in this way?

*Nikhilesh.* Where's the insult? I know from the start that my friend is innocent. If I find my wife is too, I'll make her my own, I'll love her.

*Sandip.* How can you ever love someone whom you once insulted with such thoughts? And why should she accept such love? In that case, Sita would have gone back to Ayodhya instead of sinking into the earth.<sup>6</sup>

*Nikhilesh.* I understand your sentiment, but that can't be stronger than my reasons. You used to study science. Tell me, why do scientists carry out experiments to prove their ideas? What would you think of a scientist who said, 'I refuse to test my theories by experiment, but if you don't accept what I say, I'll take it as an insult'?

*Sandip.* I'm objecting to your stand on precisely that ground. What would you think of a scientist who said, 'I know the soil of Mars is squirming with earthworms. Either get a scoop of that soil and prove me wrong, or award me the Nobel Prize'?

*Nikhilesh.* You're all sympathy for Amala. But when it comes to helping out an old friend, it's one objection after another.

*Sandip.* Look, Nikhilesh, I've no quarrel with Amala. I'll try to behave with her in a natural way, and I'm sure she'll do the same. What I'm worried about is your reaction. But there she comes, just as we're talking about her.

*[Enter Amala, Rabi, Ramala and Shobhana]*

*Amala.* It's getting late. Shall I tell them to bring the food out here?

*Nikhilesh.* Food already? Won't there be enough of that this evening?

*Amala.* Do you mean everyone must starve till then? Really, Nikhilesh!

*Rabi.* Splendid! What a note of wifely authority you've picked up already! Who'd think you've had only a day and a half's practice? And a model hostess too – it's a wonderful idea having lunch out here in the garden: this lovely winter sun, with the forest beyond those fields and the hills in the distance – ideal! Nikhilesh, I hope there's some drink to go with the food?<sup>7</sup>

*Nikhilesh.* Of course. I know what you people like.

*Rabi.* I'm not thinking of myself, you idiot. The God of Libations should be witness to any holy vows – we've a Vedic tradition to uphold.<sup>8</sup> *We must drink a toast to the happy couple.*<sup>9</sup> Do you drink, Amala?

*Amala.* No, I'll just have fruit juice.

*Shobhana.* I too.

*Ramala.* But I want the real stuff. I'm not so sniffy as to give up on these pleasures *just* because I'm a woman. What's more, I'm going to propose a toast as well.

*Amala.* What are you saying, Didi<sup>10</sup>?

*Ramala.* I'll say it a hundred times over. It's such a happy day for me. I couldn't make my own marriage last, so let me get what pleasure I can from my sister's wedding. *[Ramala continues without pause. The others start fidgeting with embarrassment and look at each other, but Ramala pays no heed.]* Just think of it, you've been married twice in three days' time! And not after anything messy like a divorce – two marriages just between yourselves. How can such a bond not last? Once in the marriage registry, all sealed and signed, and now in this lovely setting in Chhotanagpur, having a nice relaxed time with just a few friends. Really, Nikhilesh, you deserve a prize for having thought this up. Such a lovely house, and the scenery's just like a picture – as romantic as you could wish, 'where the world of men seems false'.<sup>11</sup> Really, sister, you needn't even have bothered with the registry office: Nikhilesh and you could just have spent your time here together, billing and cooing like a pair of doves, and the rest of us joined you from time to time for a little free living.

*Amala.* Really, Didi, you're quite impossible. I'm leaving. *[Exit]*

*Ramala.* Now what's the matter? Is it something I said? That's the trouble with me – I can't keep a check on my tongue. But really, what's there to get upset about? If you don't care for common-law marriage, here's our friend Rabi, as good a Brahmin as you could wish.

Just let him reel off a few Sanskrit prayers, and you'll be hitched under the Hindu Marriage Act, as solidly coupled as Shiva and Parvati.<sup>12</sup>

*Rabi.* Good heavens, I gave up Sanskrit in middle school, and I've forgotten whatever I knew. At most, I can say like the master of ceremonies at a Brahmo wedding, 'O merciful Lord, let your mercy descend on this hapless couple!'<sup>13</sup>

*Ramala.* Mercy? You might at least have said 'blessings'. But really, Nikhilesh, let me congratulate you again for such a marvellous idea. And your mother too, of course – it's her house after all. Such a great actress – I'm sure she's a formidable lady, keeping your father on a tight leash, for all that he's such a famous actor too. *[Again, everyone gets restless and starts to fidget, but Ramala pays no heed.]* But look at her – ready to serve her son's bidding, making the house over to him without wanting to turn up herself, in case she spoils the fun. Just what you want – Mummy will get the wedding-chamber ready, but won't peep in when the fun starts.

*[Everyone stiff with embarrassment. A moment's silenc. then]*

*Shobhana.* It's getting late –poor Amala must be attending to everything on her own. Let's go and lend her a hand.

*Rabi.* Absolutely. Come along, Ramala – you talked a lot, it's time to work now.

*[Everyone leaves except Sandip. Enter Amala after a while.]*

*Sandip.* Hello, so you're back. I thought you were cooking fifty curries single-handed.

*Amala.* No no, Anima's doing all the cooking – and even that's for the evening. Now we're only having a couple of ready-made things: there's lots of people to carry them out. But why are you still calling me *apni*? Rabi Babu switched to *tumi* long ago, and you're a still older friend of Nikhilesh's.<sup>14</sup>

*Sandip.* Then why should you be calling me *tumi* either?

*Amala.* Oh, I don't know. Just convention, I suppose – women aren't supposed to make the first move. *[Realises the implication of her remark. Both a little embarrassed. Sandip tries to save the situation.]*

*Sandip.* Actually, I'm rather a formal person too. Let's stick to *apni* for the time being – I'm sure we'll get round to *tumi* in a day or two. Besides, I have to be careful what Nikhilesh might think.

*Amala.* What an idea! He's very lucky to have a friend like you. I'm hoping for a lot of support from you in the days to come.

*Sandip.* Oh, of course – you've only to say. Nikhilesh has a lot of bugs biting him. If you feel things are getting out of hand, just give me a call. But I'm not sure I'll always be able to help.

*Amala.* Oh, I'm used to that kind of thing. Haven't you seen my sister? To tell you the truth, I came out here because she went in. I'd better go back and see about things.

*[Exit. Enter Nikhilesh: he seems to have been prying.]*

*Nikhilesh.* I saw you talking to her. What do you think?

*Sandip.*.. Pure gold – refused even to change from *apni* to *tumi*. You can put an end to your madness now.

*Nikhilesh.* Not so fast. How long did you talk? Two minutes? You can't tell so soon.

*Sandip.* Do you want me to pay court to your wife for hours on end?

*Nikhilesh.* Did you really try hard? I mean, did you put some passion into it?

*Sandip.*.. Don't try a gentleman's patience too hard, Nikhilesh.

*Nikhilesh.* No. no, I'll be off now. Keep at it, Sandip – I'll ask you again later on.

*[Exuent. Anima keeps going in and out, carrying dishes. Enter Rabi with a tray of glasses.]*

*Rabi.* And who may you be, sister? I hadn't noticed you all this time.

*Anima.* Sir, my name's Anima. My husband and I stay here, look after the house and do the cooking.

*Rabi.* Really? I thought it was some minor goddess of the woods – or at least a Santhal woman from one of Nandalal Bose's paintings.<sup>15</sup> But there's a lot of difference between a picture and the real thing.

*Anima.* You shouldn't say such things, sir. I'll be off – the babus are coming.

*[Enter all, carrying dishes of food, plates, glasses etc. In the background, Anima continues bringing in more things, and her husband Kunja joins her.]*

*Rabi.* *[holding out a tray of drinks]* Well, Amala, what about another new experience to go with your new married state?

*Amala.* No thanks, I'm fine.

*Rabi.* Among this illustrious gathering, Sandip is Nikhilesh's oldest friend. He should have the honour of proposing the first toast.

*Sandip.* With pleasure. All together now – *Here's to the happy couple!*

*[They all drink.]*

*Ramala.* Is that all? That won't even last till they go to bed tonight. It's my turn now – I'll have to make up for it. *[Everyone apprehensive]* My toast is not only to this couple, but to the institution of marriage. No-one can deny that men and women must all eat to live: what's more, we like eating. But the men are much stronger: it's they who went hunting, and ate up everything they brought back – the women were left to starve. The human race was in danger of dying out. Thank God women have some brains, so they thought up the idea of marriage to keep the men under control. That way they could be sure the food would be brought home and shared, and the young ones have something too. It's all part of the struggle for survival. Why do you think we gorge ourselves at a wedding? It's a symbolic reminder of that history.

*Rabi.* Heavens, I never expected such a Palaeolithic discourse at a friend's wedding. What I'm going to say is very conventional, folks. Here we have our old friend Nikhilesh and our new friend Amala. We all wish that their marriage should be two hundred per cent happy. I have a right to say this, because my own marriage is of this sort. My relations with Shobhana are so unfathomable, so unvarying that we don't even bother to think whether we love each other – it's *taken for granted*.

*Shobhana.* That's quite enough nonsense. Stop it!

*Rabi.* *[pays no heed]* Shobhana might be thinking, 'I can't stand that man any more, my whole life's a waste', but I know she simply couldn't get along without me. Or perhaps I'm thinking of making a few passes at Miss Datta at the office, but Shobhana's confident I'd never even glance at another woman.

*Shobhana.* Do you think I'm such a fool? We weren't married yesterday.

*Rabi.* On the contrary, I'm the fool – I never even think of suspecting you. That's where women have the advantage over us. Isn't that so, Nikhilesh?

*Sandip.* Really, is this any way to talk in front of a newly-married couple? Shut up, the lot of you – let's concentrate on the food and drink.

*Nikhilesh.* *[to himself]* I might be an idea to spare the drink – we're seeing the effects already. *[aloud]* Why don't we have a few songs instead?

*Sandip.* Splendid – a *basar*<sup>16</sup> out of doors in broad daylight! But who's going to sing?

*Shobhana.* And what will they sing? I'm fed up of hearing the same old songs by Tagore.

*Nikhilesh.* I've got a better idea. Why don't Kunja and Anima sing us a few Santhal songs? I've been hearing them sing since my childhood, when I came here for the holidays. Anima's got a lovely voice, and Kunja's a wonderful dotara<sup>17</sup> player. Kunja, why don't you go and fetch your dotara?

*Kunja.* I've kept it right here, Dada Babu. Go and fetch it, Anima. In fact, even if you hadn't asked me, I'd have sung you a few songs after dinner. Here you are with your new bride – it's our social duty.

*[Anima brings the dotara, and the two of them sing. Just as they are ending, Nikhilesh's parents, Pramathesh and Sarojini, enter. They join the others in applauding the singers.]*

*All.* Wonderful! Encore! Bravo! *[etc]*

*Sarojini.* A perfect welcome!

*Nikhilesh.* What's this! Father! Mother!

*Sarojini.* Isn't it a surprise?

*Nikhilesh.* It is indeed.

*Shobhana.* We didn't know you were planning to come.

*Pramathesh.* Of course you didn't. I mightn't have kept it a secret, but I was under strict orders from Sarojini.

*Nikhilesh.* But Mother, we were thinking of having some time to ourselves, with just a few friends. We hadn't expected you to turn up suddenly like this.

*Sarojini.* What a thing to say! Do you want to shut me out from my own house? You've hardly got married, and you already want to have no truck with your parents! I must say Amala's cast quite a spell.

*Amala.* Really, Ma, you'll make me feel ashamed. Nikhilesh is speaking for himself alone, I assure you. I've been telling him from the start, 'You can't do things this way, Baba and Ma must be here with us.' I'm so happy you've come! *[Takes the dust of their feet; at her gesture, so does Nikhilesh.]*

*Pramathesh.* Our blessings on you, my girl. But don't be afraid – we know you won't take much pleasure in the company of old fogeys like us. The real surprise is something else. Mother will tell you about it.

*Sarojini.* You know, Khoka, we've never pandered to the crowd in our productions: we've always tried to be a little distinctive. Now this time we've really got hold of *something special*. Guess what it is?

*Nikhilesh.* How can I guess? Why don't you tell us?

*Shobhana.* A lost play by Rabindranath!

*Rabi.* You don't say!

*Shobhana.* I didn't know Rabindranath had lost any of his plays.

*Pramathesh.* Yes, the story we all know is about how he nearly lost the manuscript of his English *Gitanjali* on the London tube. Our play wasn't lost in quite that sense.

*Sarojini.* Let's say it disappeared from view after his death.

*Pramathesh.* His own manuscript hasn't yet been recovered.

*Sarojini.* But someone made a secret transcript during the only performance – that's what has suddenly come to light.

*Pramathesh.* So we can't be sure whether it exactly matches Rabindranath's own text.

*Sarojini.* Still, it's the *unique* witness to a *unique* performance.

*Shobhana.* What's the play called?

*Pramathesh.* Ah, that's the best part of it!

*Sarojini.* It's a dramatised version of *Nashtanir*.

*Pramathesh.* In other words, the grandfather of the screenplay of Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*.

*Sarojini.* That's a *male chauvinist* thing to say. Why not grandmother?

*Pramathesh.* Let's not bicker about it. The important thing is, we're going to produce the play – at the Academy, on the 25<sup>th</sup> Baishakh.<sup>18</sup> So we thought – *[Looks at Sarojini, smiles and stops short]*

*Sarojini.* We thought, why not have a little family performance first, to celebrate Khoka's wedding – right here at Shyampahari? We're theatre folk, what could be a better way for us to welcome Amala into the family than by staging a play?

*Rabi.* At least it's a very dramatic way. Mashima,<sup>19</sup> what a marvellous entrance you've made – we're looking forward to the climax!

*Sarojini.* Not only that, we've brought along the lead actress with us. It's your old friend, Khoka – Manjari!

*Shobhana.* You mean Manjari Bhoumik? You got her to come?

*Sarojini.* Well, she's playing Charulata in the Kolkata production. We've practically built her up, so she's very loyal to us, however famous she might have come to be. Besides, you probably know that she's just got through a very messy divorce – it's been a big *shock* for her. She was quite glad of the chance of a few quiet days.

*Pramathesh.* We were wondering, Sandip – why don't you play Amal opposite her?

*Sandip.* Really, Meshomashai!<sup>20</sup> How can I play the male lead opposite Manjari Bhoumik? All I've got to show are a few college plays –

*Pramathesh.* That's all you need. After all, that's how Manjari herself began. Didn't you act together in those days? We used to look out for *acting talent* among Khoka's friends. I remember your performance in *Shesh Raksha*.<sup>21</sup> It's a pity you didn't take up the profession – you could have played the male lead opposite Manjari in a regular way.

*Nikhilesh.* You seem to have planned everything, but I had a few plans of my own. I'd wanted to spend the time with my friends, just eating and chatting, perhaps making a few short trips here and there. Have we got to forget about all that to act in some old play?

*Sarojini.* Really, Khoka! What do you mean, 'some old play'? Don't you see this is going to be a historic production?

*Amala.* Of course! I must say I'm quite *excited*. When other people get married, their in-laws give them saris and jewels – but what you've done is absolutely *unique*, something only you would have thought of. No-one's ever had such a wedding gift. Do you know, I used to act at college too. Our neighbour Satin-da had an amateur acting group, and I joined them as well. The United Theatre Group – you might have heard of them. Of course, it's nothing compared to you.

*Pramathesh.* We know all about it, my girl. Do you think we didn't make a few enquiries before we fixed the match? We know you'll appreciate the gift. And so will Nikhilesh, whatever he might say. After all, acting's in his blood, even if he didn't take it up himself. And a script like this – a lost play of Rabindranath's!

*Nikhilesh.* But here are you all gabbling away – what's happened to Manjari? Is she sitting by herself on the road?

*Sarojini.* Good heavens, I'd quite forgotten. Of course she isn't out on the road – she's in the next room. Come along, Manjari – you're meeting after a long time.

[Enter Manjari.]

*Shobhana.* Hello, Manjari. I see you on stage and on TV, but it's the first time we've met since college.

*Nikhilesh.* What news, Manjari?

*Manjari.* It's you that's got good news, Nikhilesh. Congratulations.

*Nikhilesh.* Let me introduce you to Amala. And this is her sister Ramala. You'll remember everyone else, I'm sure.

*Manjari.* I didn't want to break into your *private gathering*, but Saroj-di insiste

*Nikhilesh.* Nonsense, it's great to have you here. I'm not saying this because you're a *celebrity*, but because you're an old friend.

*Sandip.* Can't you recognise me, Manjari?

*Manjari.* How can that be? And Rabi too!

*Sarojini.* Now listen, everyone: putting on a play is a serious business. You'll have to rehearse. And before that, we've got to fix the cast.

*Pramathesh.* You've more or less decided already – just tell them what you'd like.

*Sarojini.* I've already told you that Sandip will play Amal.

*Sandip.* Are you sure I can pull it off?

*Sarojini.* Nonsense, of course you can. Do you think I haven't thought about it? And Rabi will play Bhupati. We needn't worry about the other roles. These are the three chief ones after all – Sandip, Rabi and Manjari.

*Nikhilesh.* But I feel Amala should play Charulata.

*Pramathesh.* How can that be, Khoka? We've brought Manjari down specially to play the part.

*Nikhilesh.* We've seen Manjari act often enough, and we'll do so in future as well. What'll she get out of this rustic production anyway? But we've just found out about Amala's interest in the theatre. Won't you give her a chance? Think about it, Mother – please!

*Amala.* Really, what will Manjari think?

*Manjari.* I assure you I won't think anything at all – I'll be deeply relieved. You know how it stands with me – one has no private life when one takes to the stage. I've just survived a storm. Now I only want rest – lots of rest and peace. If you do the hard work for me, I'll stroll about the countryside in perfect peace, or sit in this garden and watch the hills and forests.

*Nikhilesh.* Do you know, Manjari, there's a little stream nearby called the Panchhi River. Deer come to drink there. I'll drive you down to see it.

*Manjari.* You mustn't put yourself out, Nikhilesh. I'll look after myself.

*Nikhilesh.* Nonsense – we've brought you out all this way, we must give you something to show for it. Besides, what will you do while everyone else is at rehearsal?

*Pramathesh.* You can sort all this out later – let's get ourselves in order first. Kunja, have you taken the bags out of the car? Put Manjari Didi's things in the other wing.

*Shobhana.* Shall I make you some tea?

*Amala.* Did you have something to eat on the way? I didn't get a chance to ask before.

*Rabi.* We've got to find a place for the rehearsals. Come along, Nikhilesh, you know the geography here.

*[Everyone goes off on some errand or other. Finally, only Sarojini and Sandip are left.]*

*Sarojini.* Sandip, there's something I wanted to tell you.

*Sandip.* Go ahead, Mashima.

*Sarojini.* I didn't bring Manjari down here just to act in the play. In fact, I also had a purpose in casting you opposite her. You know how she's just been through this hellish divorce – but honestly, you won't find another girl like her. You'll be able to appreciate her situation, and also to value her talent at its true worth. There aren't many young men like you either – you alone know why you haven't made some girl happy already. So I was wondering whether, if the two of you had a chance to see something of each other, perhaps...

*Sandip.* Really, Mashima, I'd no idea you were an accomplished marriage broker! But I'm not such a fool as to turn down such an attractive proposition. Let me think about it a little. But tell me something: while we're at rehearsal, supposing your Khoka drives Manjari down to the Panchhi River and ...

*Sarojini.* I've given Khoka a nice new wife to play with – he won't be in the mood for other toys just now. As you can tell from my tone, I have no illusions about my son; but I honestly think he won't be up to any mischief that way. Jealous, are you? That's a hopeful sign. Anyway, I've said my piece – now it's up to you and up to her.

*Sandip.* Let's see. I'll be off now. *[Exit]*



*Sarojini. [Speaks to herself]* I've been coming to this house since I was a child – I know each corner, each wall. I was a baby, then a girl, then a young woman: I got married, I went on stage and even became famous. At every point, I wove my thoughts and dreams around this house. My life at Kolkata was shared with other people, but this place was all my own – like a doll's house, which I could stuff with dolls and furniture as I chose. I've even managed to make my play-acting seem real so far. But now I feel things changing. All these young men and women – they're not dolls. Even Khoka isn't the Khoka he once was. Everything seems to be topsy-turvy – I don't think I can hold it all together by putting up a play. Even that's rather like playing with dolls.

I need to sit down somewhere. My old body can't take it any more after such a long drive.

*[Exit. Enter Sandip and Amala.]*

*Amala.* No, no, please don't speak to him about it. If I hadn't known you were his oldest friend, I wouldn't have mentioned the matter at all. But really, what does he think he's doing? Today's practically our true wedding day, and he goes off on a drive with another woman the minute she arrives. I know it doesn't mean anything, but just imagine how I feel.

*Sandip.* I don't know what to say. I'm relieved you feel it doesn't mean anything. It really doesn't, you know. He was put out at seeing his parents here, then Manjari's arrival threw him off balance. All in all, just a little *upset*, you know.

*Amala.* He should have realised that other people might have cause to feel *upset* as well. Can I ask you something?

*Sandip.* Go ahead.

*Amala.* When you were all at college, was there anything on between Nikhilesh and Manjari?

*Sandip.* Not at all. Of course they knew each other. There was a group of us – we used to keep together, and Rabi and Shobhana even went on to get married. But Nikhilesh and Manjari were *just good friends* – nothing more. Going on a short trip somewhere with other friends, or acting together in college plays – that's all. And as you see, they haven't been in touch at all since then.

*Amala.* I see. *[After a silence]* Even so, it seems rather strange somehow. I feel completely alone, as though I've been abandoned in the middle of an empty plain. I've come to the Santhal Parganas quite often: when I arrived this time, I felt the streams and hills and mahua trees were my old friends. But now I see that's nonsense. You can't form relationships with trees and rocks, you can only see human relationships reflected in them. If you miss out there, there's no compensation anywhere else.

*Sandip.* You make me feel guilty. I should have stopped Nikhilesh from going off.

*Amala.* You can't hold back a grown-up man like that. Don't blame yourself for nothing.

*Sandip.* But what else could I have done?

*Amala.* There's one thing you can do which would be a great help to me.

*Sandip.* What's that?

*Amala.* Just stay here. Your presence is a kind of support for me. I was talking about human relationships; I think you appreciate their worth.

*Sandip.* You mean to say Nikhilesh doesn't?

*Amala.* I don't know. On present evidence, I rather doubt it. Shall I tell you something? *[Smiling a little, conquering her reticence]* Just after we got here, Nikhilesh and I went for a walk in the woods behind the house. Do you know what he did? He began pointing out the trees and telling me their scientific names – what manure each one needs, which ones have poisonous fruit, that kind of thing – just like a botany lecture. Then he started telling me how he was planning to reclaim the waste land. Just imagine!

*Sandip.* You don't say! How would you have liked him to behave?

*[Needless to say, Amala doesn't answer this question. She sits down on a chair, Sandip on another, rather embarrassedly aware of each other's presence. Amala looks at Sandip from time to time, while he turns his eyes away. Finally Amala breaks the silence.]*

Amala. You're a software specialist, aren't you?

Sandip. Yes.

Amala. What fun to be a man – they teach you science and maths properly at school.

Sandip. Yes, they practically beat it into you. Women don't want to marry us otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

Amala. But I'll be training in software too. I've paid the fees for a course – I'll join it as soon as this tiresome wedding is over.

Sandip. Is a wedding such tiresome business?

Amala. Of course it is, even at the best of times. And your friend's doing all he can to make it specially tiresome for me.

*[Again an embarrassed silence, finally broken by Sandip.]*

Sandip. Amala, I feel I should tell you something. Nikhilesh has forbidden me – you'll see why the minute I tell you – but I won't have any peace till I've told you.

Amala. Go ahead, then.

Sandip. Nikhilesh has asked me to seduce you.

Amala. *[Her voice changes]* What did you say? Say it again, if you have the nerve.

Sandip. Why do you want me to say it again? It was hard enough the first time.

Amala. *[changing to the more informal, here contemptuous pronoun 'tumi']* I thought you were a decent man. Now I see you're the lowest kind of beast. If you want to be filthy, do it on your own – don't drag Nikhilesh into it.

Sandip. So we're on *tumi* terms at last, though I'd rather it hadn't happened quite this way. But believe me, Amala, I'm telling the truth. Can't you tell from my expression, my voice? If I'd wanted to be filthy of my own accord, I'd have done it on my own; it would have hurt my male ego otherwise.

Amala. All right, I believe you. My God, how low can Nikhilesh sink – how low? And is he crazy as well? How could he imagine I'd get involved with another man the very day after my marriage? But of course he'd think so – he's proved his own inclinations that way; otherwise how could he have gone off with Manjari? I might have put up with that insult; but after what you've just said, I don't know what to do.

Sandip. Nikhilesh has always been a little odd.

Amala. 'A little odd'! That sounds almost affectionate. And here am I wondering, who's this man whom I've given up everything to marry? Is he human? How do you people deal with him? You're his oldest friend – how could you agree to a proposal like this? Didn't you try to reason with him?

Sandip. It's because I didn't agree that I'm telling you all this.

*[Enter Ramala.]*

Ramala. Have you heard? Meshomashai's fused all the lights in the house.

Sandip. Really? How?

Ramala. By trying to test the wiring for the stage lights. Could you go and lend a hand, Sandip?

*[Exit Sandip]*

Ramala. So Nikhilesh has left on a little jaunt. I must say I praise the lad's *honesty*. If this is how you are, it's best to make it clear at the outset. Much better than what happened to me – finding out bit by bit, in a state of torment, from snide little hints thrown out by every mean-minded gossip in town. But what I say is, why should you take it lying down? Why don't you team up with another man and have a bit of fun yourself, giving Nikhilesh a good slap in the face?

*Amala.* Your high-minded revenge seems quite despicable to me. I think it should seem that way to all women. And it's also despicable to work up fifty kinds of suspicion just because your husband's gone out one day with someone else.

*Ramala.* Darling, you're being rather too high-minded yourself, if you ask me. You'll land in even more grief this way. Just listen to Big Sister's plain words. Do you know what I think? People don't like what I say because I echo their own fears and suspicions, which they don't want to admit to themselves. Isn't that so? Don't fool yourself, and think twice before you abuse me. All my life, I've kept hearing I'm malicious, I'm a liar, I poison people's minds. Actually, my only fault is that I don't tell lies: I warn people against others and against themselves, in their own best interest. If only someone had touched my lips with a little honey when I was born! I'd have dished out sweet little fibs, told people what they want to hear, smiled to win their hearts while doing everything I could to ruin them – and everyone would have said there never was a girl as nice as Ramala. *[Agitated, close to tears]*

*[Enter Shobhana]*

*Shobhana.* Am I disturbing?

*Ramala.* *[back to normal]* Not at all. We two sisters were just having a little chat about things. Amala's man isn't at home, you see. When you're just married, that makes you feel a little lonely.

*Shobhana.* Oh, she'll soon get over it. Then instead of pining for him to be back, she'll start hoping he never will be.

*Ramala.* My feelings exactly! We three fellow-wives all seem to be in the same boat.

*Shobhana.* What do you mean – fellow-wives?

*Ramala.* Oh, in a manner of speaking. All men are the same after all – only the names vary. You can just change one for another. But I didn't know you felt this way.

*Shobhana.* I never told you. Some talk about these things, others don't.

*Ramala.* Come, Shobhana – once you've said that, you've said all. But I'm not so niggardly with words. Let me give you the same advice I gave Amala: don't take it lying down, start something of your own. As I said, you can just change one for another. Haven't you read *Othello*? *[Sings]* 'If you couch with more women, I'll lie with more men...'

*Shobhana.* But in the end, it was Desdemona who got killed by her man. It's not so easy to change and chop, Ramala. Don't question me too hard, but I'm speaking from experience.

*[Enter Sandip]*

*Sandip.* The lines haven't blown a fuse at all – everything's fine! I was wondering – there's Nikhilesh and Rabi, why should I be sent off to play the electrician? Did you want me out of the way?

*Ramala.* Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't want to talk about your childhood friend's exploits in front of you.

*Amala.* You might have felt the same way in front of me too. I've had as much of all this as I can take – I'll be off. *[Exit, followed by Shobhana]*

*Ramala.* My poor sister! You may not believe me, but I really feel quite sorry for her. What good luck she's found a friend like you.

*Sandip.* What do you mean?

*Ramala.* At a time like this, one needs someone for *support*. A sister won't do – it must be a kindred spirit. Do see if you can lighten her spirits a little. Let me find out where she's gone.

*[Exit. Enter Banbihari, followed by two porters with bamboo poles, planks and other material.]*

*Banbihari.* Where should we put down all this stuff, sir?

*Sandip.* What's it for?

*Banbihari.* Why, sir, to make a stage. Jamai Babu<sup>23</sup> told me to bring it. Shall we keep it here?

*Sandip.* No, we're going to have a dinner party there this evening.

*Banbihari.* Doesn't matter, we're not going to set up the stage right now. We'll keep all the stuff to one side, so it won't get in the way.

*Sandip.* Very well. Shall I lend a hand?

*Banbihari.* No, sir, there's no need. There, it's all done. This is nothing – there's plenty more to come. [*Exeunt porters*] All the big stars are going to act – we must have a stage fit for them.

*Sandip.* Of course.

*Banbihari.* I'm not an educated man, sir – you might think I'm talking out of turn. But I've grown old setting up stages and marquees – I've begun to think there's something special about them. Jamai Babu told me some sahib says all the world's a stage. That's just stupid. What I say is, it would be better if it was. Just think of a stage: plain, smooth, no ups and downs anywhere – of course, if you know how to set it up. And then think of the world: one man's rich and another's poor, one's clever and another's stupid, no-one knows when he might stumble or land in the ditch. Everyone's trying to trip up everyone else, everyone's a crook. Just tell me, sir, can you compare the two? Rubbish!

*Sandip.* You're quite a philosopher, my friend.

*Banbihari.* You'll make me ashamed, sir – I haven't studied beyond Class Three. That's why I have to make it up in my work. I set up a stage as though I were setting up a character: I don't mean a character in a play, but a real person: someone who won't break or keel over, as it may be a woman you can rely on. In fact, sir, I tell people I've married the stage, and this marriage won't pack up – we've been round the holy fire seven times, heh, heh!

[*Enter Sarojini*]

*Sarojini.* Oh, good, so you're here, Banbihari. Let me tell you what the stage will be like.

*Banbihari.* Go ahead, Didi. It's a treat working for you.

*Sarojini.* The stage will be like a room – the wife's bedroom in a rich man's home. But it's closed all around, like a prison.

*Banbihari.* Really, Didi, how can that be? A home's a home, a prison's a prison. Tell me which you want.

*Sarojini.* I want a home.

*Banbihari.* Good. Then?

[*Enter Pramathesh.*]

*Pramathesh.* Good to see you, Banbihari. You're very punctual. Now look here, I heard your Didi telling you to make the stage like a room. But you've got to make this room so as to suggest there's a big open space just outside – a free space, into which the characters want to escape but can't.

*Banbihari.* Now that's even tougher, Jamai Babu. A room's a room, an open space is a open space. How can I show both at the same time? Didi here told me it should be closed, now you're saying it should be open all around. Make up your mind for certain.

*Pramathesh.* Actually, the whole point of this play is that nothing is certain.

*Banbihari.* You shouldn't be putting on such a play. Think of my stage, how straight and firm it's going to be. The moral of the play should be the same.

*Pramathesh.* I've no hope left of teaching anyone anything through plays, Banbihari. You're the one who values education.

*Banbihari.* You'll make me ashamed, sir – I haven't studied beyond Class Three.

*Sarojini.* No more talk, please. Banbihari, just move these tables and chairs, will you? We're going to start rehearsing. Sandip, would you mind going and calling everyone? I've told them to be ready.

*[Exuent Sandip. Everyone enters one by one. Meanwhile, Banbihari shifts the furniture, with some assistance from Sarojini and Pramathesh.]*

Sarojini. Now listen, everyone – I’ve a few things to tell you first. You’re all *amateurs*, and you haven’t acted for a while, so I hope you won’t mind if I begin with some very elementary matters.

The important thing to remember is that we’re acting a play. We are not trying to express our own personalities but that of imaginary characters. The people and events you’re acting out have no connexion with your own lives. You have to enter the characters’ lives and turn them into your own – at least as long as you’re on stage. Amala and Sandip will become Charu and Amal. But Amal mustn’t become Sandip.<sup>24</sup>

Pramathesh. You’re making things very complicated, Saroj. Let me rather tell you something much simpler, but just as *essential*. You must speak the dialogue absolutely clearly – it must be firmly and fully intoned. There mustn’t be any doubt or hesitation anywhere. Even if you have to express doubt, there should be no doubt that you’re in doubt, if you see what I mean.

Sarojini. Now who’s complicating things, I’d like to know? But we’ve lectured you long enough, let’s start business now.

Sandip. Mashima, do we have to learn the lines by heart? We can’t spend spoil a friend’s wedding party with poring over a play-book.

Sarojini. Oh no, not at all. This is just a homely performance, only for ourselves – you can read from the script. We’ve brought along a lot of copies. Would you like to try a scene? Why not this one between Amal and Charu – scene 5, page 20? Just take a quick glance at the script. You know the short story, of course, but you won’t find this particular scene there. See how you like it. It’s where Amal has printed his own pieces as well as Charu’s in a magazine without telling her about it, and Charu has just found out.

*[They act the play: Sandip as Amal, Amala as Charulata.]*

Charu. Thakurpo,<sup>25</sup> what’s this you’ve done?

Amal. I do all kinds of things, Bouthan<sup>26</sup> – which one do you mean?

Charu. I’m talking about this magazine. How they did come to print these pieces? Where did they get them from?

Amal. Oh, that. Well now, Bouthan, language is a means of expression. If you keep it hidden, you destroy its sanctity.

Charu. Didn’t it destroy any sanctity to publish these pieces? Didn’t you feel any pain? These writings were meant to be shared by just the two of us – not published for other people.

Amal. Look, Bouthan, even if you want to keep something for yourself, you have to show it round and tell them you have it. If a rich man hides his wealth and goes about in rags, we call him a curmudgeonly old miser.

Charu. Do you mean to say these writings are worth a lot?

Amal. Mine are worth nothing, yours a lot more. But it’s not the worth of the writings I’m talking about.

Charu. What then?

Amal. The worth of the relationship between us brought out through the writings.

Charu. I don’t follow you. That relationship’s special to us. How could you lay it open in the marketplace, for people to stare at?

Amal. I’ve done no such thing. Will the readers of the magazine ever guess that I know you or you know me? That secret is locked away in our secret room. If everyone hadn’t read the pieces, the relationship behind them would never have become to intimately our own. As long as we kept it secret, we appeared to be afraid of the world. We were paying it a respect

*it didn't deserve. Today we're standing before the world and saying 'Look at us', but the pack of fools can't see a thing.*

*Charu. Thakurpo, your words bewilder me and also frighten me. I don't have the courage to stand up before the world – my heart quakes at the idea. I'm a person of inner spaces – I think and write about what goes on within.*

*Amal. There's something even within that within – our innermost soul. Only the God who is within us knows of it.*

*Charu. That makes me even more afraid.*

*Amal. Why?*

*Charu. Today my heart quakes even if I look within myself. I can't stand up either before the world or within my innermost space. What's to become of me, Thakurpo?*

*[Everyone startled and scared at the intensity of their acting. Sarojini is specially distraught. Sandip and Amala are themselves embarrassed and a little alarmed.]*

*Sarojini. Wonderful!*

*Ramala. You'd think they were apeaking for real.*

*Amala. Let's stop here for today.*

*Sarojini. Yes, we'll try again later, when everyone's a little more relaxed.*

*[Enter Nikhilesh and Manjari]*

*Nikhilesh. We're back! Don't stop, carry on rehearsing.*

*Sandip. The rehearsal's over. How did you enjoy your trip?*

*Nikhilesh. Oh, it was delightful.*

*Manjari. This place is so pretty, and the little stream's quite out of this world. All those trees and wild flowers – I could hardly tell any of them, but Nikhilesh seems to know all about them, even their botanical names. When did you learn it all, Nikhilesh? You did Arts at college. And you think so much about forest culture too. Really, Mashima, you mustn't feel sad that he hasn't joined the theatre. When we were at college, I used to think he was a little stupid, but now I see he is – he is –*

*Ramala. A genius? Out with it, don't feel shy.*

*Manjari. [suddenly embarrassed] Oh, I don't know. If I praise him too much, it'll go to his head.*

*[Enter Anima]*

*Anima. Would you like to take a look at the food? It's time to put everything by.*

*Amala. [glad of a chance to escape] I'll be right along.*

*Shobhana. No, no, you mustn't do all the work. Let me go.*

*Ramala. Let's all go.*

*Rabi. Why should the men stay behind either? We have a stake in the eating if not the cooking.*

*[Exeunt omnes. While leaving, Amala looks closely at Nikhilesh for a moment. At the end, only Nikhilesh and Manjari are left on stage. Curtain.]*

*End of Act One*

## ACT TWO

*[The same setting, but it's now nearly evening. The light is changing: everything looks a little unclear and unreal. All through this act, the use of lighting is quite different from that in the first scene, and full of significance. Various sequences of dialogue, action and character are defined and articulated through the lighting.]*

*Enter first Sarojini and Pramathesh, then the others one by one, including Banbihari.]*

Sarojini. Come on, everyone – let's start the rehearsal.

Banbihari. Do you know, gentlemen, Didi's given me a part in the play.

Rabi. Really? What kind of a part?

Banbihari. You'd better ask Didi – she hasn't told me yet.

Sarojini. He'll be playing a man in Bhupati's household. An absolutely indispensable man who does all the work – brings the food, fetches letters, moves things about. Bhupati simply can't get on without him. Just one entrance after another.

Rabi. Oh, I see. Quite indispensable for the play.

Banbihari. So where's my costume? I'll go and try it on. And what about my lines?

Sarojini. I haven't actually given you any lines. You're so busy with the props, when would you find time to learn them?

Banbihari.. Oh, I'll manage. Just give them to me and see. And what about my costume?

Sarojini. This isn't a historical play, no-one's wearing any special costume. You can just come on in what you're wearing.

Banbihari. No lines, no costume – what kind of a play is this? *[After a pause]* Oh, I see. Someone to fetch things and move the furniture – that's to say, give old Banbihari a servant's part and let him do all the heavy work in the play. No, thank you very much – I don't want a part like that. I'll be off. You can move the furniture round yourselves.

Sarojini. Banbihari, don't go away like that, there's a dear. Just let me explain things.

Banbihari. There's nothing to explain, Didi. I've been setting up stages for you all my life –I've never asked to act myself. It's you who suggested it. Was it just to make a fool of me? *[Begins to leave]*

Pramathesh. Don't get so upset, Banbihari. You Didi keeps telling me this and that too, foists all kinds of work on me – I don't take it to heart.

All. Don't go away like that, Banbihari. Come back, come back. How can we do the play without you? *[etc.]*

Sarojini. *[leading Banbihari back by the hand]* Don't act crazy, Banbihari. Sit down here and calm yourself. I'll call you when it's time for your entrance.

Banbihari. All right, I'll sit down if you want me to. If there's a play being acted in this house, I won't be at ease either if I don't get to see it. But don't ask me to act. With a part like that, what does it matter whether I come on or not?

Pramathesh. *[to himself]* Phew, thank God that's over. *[To the company]* Let's not lose any more time – we'd better start right away.

*[They act the play. Rabi as Bhupati, Amala as Charubala]*

Bhupati. Charu, what's the matter with you? You look depressed all the time – there's no sparkle in your eye, you hardly look me in the face. Are you ill?

Charu. I'm in perfect health.

Bhupati. Then have you got something on your mind? What is it, Charu?

Charu. What could I have on my mind?

Bhupati. How should I know? That's why I'm asking you. I feel so worried about you.

Charu. Do you really?

*Bhupati. Of course – I can't tell you how much. Sometimes I feel so worried it affects my work. Do you know, Charu, last night, when you were asleep, I sat beside you for a long time, looking at you and worrying my head off.*

*Charu. Now you're beginning to make me worried. Honestly, there's no reason to worry about me – you'd better look after yourself instead. You sit in your office all day – I don't get a chance to look after you. If on top of that you don't sleep at night, you'll fall ill.*

*Bhupati. Then why don't you start feeling a little more cheerful? That'll stop me from worrying, I'll snore soundly all night.*

*Rabi. Can this really be Rabindranath's work? It isn't his style at all.*

*Pramathesh. I told you – his own manuscript hasn't been found, we only have a copy made by someone else as he heard it performed.*

*Ramala. He must have been hard of hearing.*

*Sandip. Or else he failed his dictations tests at school.*

*Pramathesh. Just listen patiently for some time. Carry on, folks.*

*[Acting resumes.]*

*Charu. I'm perfectly cheerful. Why should I hide anything from you?*

*Bhupati. Do you really tell me everything?*

*Charu. What do I have to tell you? I'm rather worried that I don't know anything about your work – what problems there might be, what hurts you might be suffering. If I knew about such things, I might have been able to give you a little support.*

*Bhupati. Good heavens, Charu, it's enough that I should worry about such things, without my bringing my troubles to you. You dwell in a separate chamber of my life, in a special jewelled room. I come to you to forget my troubles.*

*Charu. Do you ever manage to forget them?*

*Bhupati. I admit it's difficult. They seep into my head like flood water. Perhaps it would have helped if I could have come to you more often.*

*Charu. Why, do I stop you from doing so?*

*Bhupati. Of course not – what a thought! The block's in my own mind. Tell me, Charu, do you feel very lonely all day?*

*Charu. From what you've just told me, it seems you're lonely too.*

*Bhupati. It's quite true, I am. But you see, I have so much work to do – so many people coming, so many articles to look at and letters to answer – the time passes by without my even realising it. I don't have the leisure to register how lonely I really feel.*

*Charu. Will you let me look at a few of those articles from time to time?*

*Bhupati. There you go again, Charu! They aren't the kind of thing for a woman to read – just dry stuff about politics and economics. They're not like my clever cousin's effusions on 'A summer night's fog' or 'Sunset at dawn'.*

*Ramala. Goodness, so there was fog even on a summer night. On this winter evening it's positively a blind fog, one can't see a thing.*

*Pramathesh. Must you keep interrupting all the time?*

*Nikhilesh. Honestly, Baba, the play deserves no better. Are you sure the transcript is authentic? It wasn't forged six months ago by someone sitting in Kolkata?*

*Sarojini. Don't you dare say that, Khoka. Do you know how much trouble we've taken to check the facts? It's absolutely the real stuff. Of course, there might have been mistakes in the copy.*

*Pramathesh. Let's try another scene. Why not that stunning bit of dialogue between Charu and Amal? Just see this scene, everyone. You remember that point in the story where*



Amal goes to Charu's room – but Charu's sitting in a reverie with her back to the door, she doesn't even see Amal coming, and he goes back. So he's forced to visit Mandakini instead and read her his writings. While he's doing so, Charu tiptoes to the door, feels upset at what she sees and goes back again. Amal realises this, and he too walks past Charu's door afterwards without going in. It's all silent – the narrator describes the events directly, and even describes what the characters are feeling. But you can't do that in a play, so here Rabindranath has had to bring them face to face and make them talk. What they say is quite electrifying. Just look at this.

*Sandip.* I won't need the script for this scene – I've got it by heart already.

*Amala.* Me too.

*[They act: Sandip as Amal, Amala as Charubala]*

*Amal.* How now, Bouthan! You seemed very distracted today, not in any mood to talk – so I've had to cast my pearls among thorn-bushes.<sup>27</sup>

*Charu.* If your steps lead you among thorn-bushes, what am I to do?

*Amal.* My steps were leading me up the royal road to the queen's palace, but I found her doors shut, so I had to go elsewhere.

*Charu.* Nonsense – when were my doors shut?

*Amal.* No, not literally, but the doors of your mind were shut all right. I came in and went out again – you were looking the other way, you didn't even turn round.

*Charu.* Really, Thakurpo! Even if I were looking elsewhere for a minute, couldn't you have called me?

*Amal.* You see, Bouthan, I'm calling to you silently, in my heart, day and night. That's why I assume my call must have reached your ears – I don't always remember to call out loud.

*Charu.* The mind has ears just as it has a voice. If you know how to call, you can be heard.

*Amal.* Does that means I don't know how? And what about my writings – do you think I mean them as fodder for the readers of 'Saroruha' magazine? They're a kind of call too – I alone know whom I'm calling.

*Charu..* So do I. It's you who taught me how to write. As soon as one takes up the pen, one sees how many meanings lie beneath the surface.

*Amal.* What a clear brain you have! The classical rhetoricians have thought up long, hard terms to tell us this – irony, periphrasis, antonomasia, blah blah – but here are you, making it plain as plain in a few simple words.

*Charu.* Plain words aren't always simple. Your Dada<sup>28</sup> and you both get excited about the great happenings in the world outside. You think they're very complicated. I don't understand such matters, so it seems to me they're nothing but toys for grown-up children. When will you have the wit to understand how much can happen inside a little room?

*Amal.* All right, so I'm a dunce, but is Dada one too?

*Charu.* Your Dada is your respected elder, and mine too. Let's not talk about him.

*Amal.* Objection, Your Honour! There can't be two different sentences for the same offence.

*Charu.* Who says the offence is the same?

*Amal.* Oh, good, so at least you know what's special about me. Really, can there be any comparison? Dada sits the whole day in his office and writes down dry theories: he never thinks there's a judicious reader at home to whom he can show them for her opinion. But look at me: it isn't enough to say I show you my writings, I dedicate them to you.

*Charu.* [her tone changes] Thakurpo, I don't understand the full meaning of what you write. Today, I've started thinking it's just as well I don't.

*Amal. You shouldn't express everything in what you write, Bouthan – it impairs your art. An English poet has written, 'Words, like nature, half reveal / And half conceal the soul within.' But you know what, Bouthan? If you keep your words stoppered up in that way, they might preserve their fragrance longer, but their essence dries up. I sometimes think I'll forget about art and express everything that's swelling up and thrashing about inside me.*

*Charu. Why don't you?*

*Amal. I've told you why. All my writings are dedicated to you. How can a Thakurpo dedicate such sentiments to his Bouthan?*

*Charu. Very well, if it satisfies your deepest spirit, I'll stop calling you Thakurpo.*

*Amal. [Startled] What will you call me then?*

*Charu. Amal!*

*Rabi. Bravo!*

*Shobhana. This isn't a terribly good scene either, but the acting brought it to life.*

*Ramala. Absolutely. The acting was so lifelike that people might mistake it for the real thing. The imaginary Amal and our real Amala – what a pair!*

*Pramathesh. You're making the usual mistake. Think of what Saroj said: when you're acting a play, the imaginary becomes the real. Even seasoned actors sometimes get things wrong that way. And love-scenes, of course, are specially ticklish.*

*Ramala. I'm sure you're right, Meshomashai. But you see, I'm not an actor, so my brain's rather dull.*

*[Sandip and Nikhilesh speak to each other, to one side of the stage]*

*Nikhilesh. [changing from the familiar 'tui' to the more formal 'tumi'<sup>29</sup>] Sandip, I'd asked a favour of you because I thought you were a friend. I didn't realise you would take advantage of me to compromise my wife in this way.*

*Sandip. What an honour – to be addressed formally as tumi instead of the tui you've used since our childhood! But honestly, Nikhilesh, I haven't done anything at all. If anyone's compromised Amala, it's you with your absurd suggestion to me.*

*Nilhilesh. I made the suggestion with the best of intentions. If you'd co-operated, there wouldn't have been any problem.*

*Sandip. Very true: you could have promenaded with Manjari beside the river without any problem at all. I'm sorry I've scuttled your high-minded plans.*

*Nilhilesh. I can't match you in words, Sandip. Nor does it seem likely that you'll come to your senses on your own. There's no point in talking any longer. I'd best be going. [Exit]*

*[Rabi and Shobhana speak to each other, on the other side of the stage]*

*Rabi. Did you hear Ramala?*

*Shobhana. Oh, she always talks that way. I don't worry any more about other people's marriage problems – I'm too used to my own.*

*Rabi. What do you mean?*

*Shobhana. You'll know better than I do – you're the principal party. I only find out afterwards, from hints and rumours.*

*Rabi. You like making these wild made-up charges, don't you? It's you who egged on Ramala with some remark or other. Poor Sandip!*

*Shobhana. Here's some fine male bonding for you. You might just as fairly have said 'Poor Amala'. You can see how her husband's carrying on. Of course, I've no doubt he attracts your full sympathy.*

*Rabi. If I'd been that kind of person, I'd really have expressed sympathy for Shobhana. That would have made you even more mad. This is a two-edged saw – it cuts both ways. I've had enough of these theatricals – ten pieces of drama on the same stage at the same time is too much for me to take. I'll be off.*

*[Exit, followed after a while by Shobhana. Sarojini is silently observing these exchanges and exits. Pramathesh is growing more and more bewildered and distraught.]*

Pramathesh. What's the matter? Why is everyone going off like this? Nikhilesh, Rabi, what's the matter with you? *[Exit after them]*

Manjari. *[coming up to Sarojini and addressing her aside]* Saroj-di, I think it would be best if I didn't stay here. I'm going to my room, then I'll return to Kolkata as soon as possible. That may prove a quieter place. *[Exit]*

Sarojini. Banbihari, you'd better go home. I'll call you when we have a rehearsal again. *[Exit Banbihari]* I think I'll go and sit down in my room. *[Ramala tries to say something. Sarojini stops her firmly.]* Ramala, why don't you come with me? Let's talk about something else.

*[Exit Sarojini, taking a reluctant Ramala with her. Only Amala and Sandip are left on stage.]*

Sandip. I think I should ask your pardon, Amala.

Amala. Why, what have you done?

Sandip. Nothing, nor have you; but we're caught up in an ugly situation all the same.

Amala. We can't be blamed for other people's false ideas or bad behaviour.

Sandip. But that's the way things are – we're the ones who're getting hurt, and you much more than me. It really doesn't matter so much for me, but your life and happiness are *at stake*.

Amala. You mean to say you have nothing *at stake*? You're entirely free?

Sandip. Far from it. Can't you see I'm bound hand and foot? But because I was free all this time, no-one can blame me, except that dolt Nikhilesh. But your position really is *compromising*. That's why I feel such sympathy for you. There's no reason for you to feel sympathy for me.

Amala. I might feel something else, if not sympathy.

Sandip. What can it be? Anger? Contempt? Pity?

Amala. *[smiling]* None of those.

Sandip. Perhaps the idea was put into our heads the moment we were cast as Charu and Amal – I mean, a kind of *auto-suggestion*. In fact, I'm coming to feel my lot was cast even earlier, when Nikhilesh first made me that *preposterous* proposal. That too meant a kind of play-acting. I was shocked, I protested, but I also admitted the possibility. When I first told you about it, who knows what my intentions really were? Was I only trying to warn you, or did I have another purpose, unknown to myself?

Amala. It was also Nikhilesh's idea that I should play Charu.

Sandip. Absolutely. Was he following up his proposal to me, or trying to clear the path for his own affair with Manjari?

Amala. Perhaps he hadn't worked things out so finely.

Sandip. Probably not. We play ducks and drakes across the surface of our lives: we pitch stones and think they'll hop far away, out of sight, and not plague us by the consequences. But they plop into the water somewhere, and the ripples spread farther and farther. Do you know, Amala, Mashima too had a purpose in casting me as Amal opposite Manjari? She wanted to fix me up with Manjari. She'd already taken care of her own son. I don't think her match-making will go to waste, but I wonder which Jack will team up with which Jill.

Amala. But it's Nikhilesh that's to blame most of all.

Sandip. No doubt. But somehow I can't blame him as much as I should be doing.

Amala. Here they come, the two of them. I don't think I can face them right away.

Sandip. I don't suppose they're anxious to face us either. Let's draw off a bit.

*[Exeunt. Nikhilesh and Manjari enter from different directions. It's hard to tell whether they knew of each other's approach.]*

*Manjari.* Oh – I was looking for Amala. I thought I saw her here – I wanted to say good-bye.

*Nikhilesh.* Good-bye! Why, where are you going?

*Manjari.* Back to Kolkata. I don't have to act, and I've had a lovely time seeing the place, so it's time to go home.

*Nikhilesh.* What do you mean, seeing the place? You've just had one short trip in one direction. You haven't seen anything else.

*Manjari.* Thank you, Nikhilesh. Look, I've suffered a lot of hurt recently, so I think it's best to speak plainly. The longer I stay here, the more complications I'll create. Why should I mess things up for other people? And as for me, I simply can't take any more. It seems a selfish thing to say, but it's absolutely true.

*Nikhilesh.* Of course it's selfish. Has it struck you that some people might feel sorry you're going away?

*Manjari.* They'd feel still more sorry if I stayed. You've only been married two days, Nikhilesh. Let some more time go by, then think of a change if you like. I don't suppose anyone talks of *lifelong loyalty* any more.

*Nikhilesh.* I'm sure they can, if they're truly matched.

*Manjari.* I don't believe in true matches any longer. Your experience covers only two days, mine seven and a half years; but don't you see they're exactly the same?

*Nikhilesh.* Very well then. But even if it isn't *lifelong*, it can be precious while it lasts.

*Manjari.* Precious indeed! Think how fragile a piece of Ming porcelain is, but it costs a king's ransom. I haven't the means to bid for something so precious, Nikhilesh – I've paupered myself, given away all I had. My heart's drained dry, and my bank balance nearly so.

*Nikhilesh.* Then shouldn't you start to think of saving again?

*Manjari.* Excuse me, Nikhilesh. You're the one that's being selfish now. Just think of my state. I've been through a lot – now I want to be free for some time. My wound's still raw: it might be soothed by a little forest air on a drive, but if someone lays a hand on it, it'll start smarting again.

*Nikhilesh.* I get the message. I suppose you had best be going. I'm not even sure of the person I tried to bind not seven but twenty-seven fold; <sup>30</sup> how can I hope to hold you back?

*Manjari.* If you've learnt the lesson that you can't tie anyone down, at least that'll be one good result of this *mess*. I'll be off, then. Perhaps we'll meet in Kolkata.

[*Exuent, in different directions. Enter Sandip and Amala separately, clearly looking for each other. They meet.*]

*Sandip.* It's good that I've met you. Amala, have you thought about our *next step*?

*Amala.* No. Have you?

*Sandip.* How could I not? I don't know how to put it to you, Amala, but we can't really keep this up. Are you going to *walk out* of your married home the day after the wedding? Or are you going to admit an embodiment of evil like me into your home?

*Amala.* That needn't bother us: you can see how much value my husband's placed on the marriage bond. But it's true I'm afraid of *scandal*. I'll have to think about what to do.

*Sandip.* I don't think I have the moral right to blame Nikhilesh any more. At least he trusted me if not you – I've failed his trust. He might be a fool, but I've sinned in full knowledge.

*Amala.* Don't blame yourself for nothing. Tell me what we should do.

*Sandip.* I certainly shouldn't stay here any longer. I'll make some excuse and go back to Kolkata. Then we'll see.

*Amala.* What do you mean, 'we'll see'? Is that any solution?

*Sandip.* At least we'll have warded off the immediate danger. Kolkata's a big place. If we so wish, we can spend months there without seeing each other – even our whole lives. On the other hand, if I so want, I can go at any time to Nikhilesh's house – that's to say, your house. Meanwhile, you can find out a little more about Nikhilesh's intentions and your own. I'm not going to flee the country – neither to obtain you nor to escape you.

*Amala.* I'm not sure I can work out my own intentions. And Nikhilesh's are quite unfathomable. You were right, Sandip: you really are free, while I'm tied for life to an impossible person.

*Sandip.* Yet you still feel you can't snap the bond?

*Amala.* It isn't so easy, Sandip. You'd understand if you were in the same situation.

*Sandip.* I do understand. That's what I started out by saying. And that's why I feel I should leave.

*[Exeunt. Manjari enters slowly and sits down. Nikhilesh enters to her after some time.]*

*Nikhilesh.* Oh, so you're still here? When are you leaving?

*Manjari.* I decided against taking the night train – I haven't even booked a berth.

*Nikhilesh.* Will you be taking the morning train then?

*Manjari.* Are you really so anxious for me to leave?

*Nikhilesh.* You wouldn't say that if you remembered our last words. It's you that's determined to go.

*Manjari.* So I was. I'm having second thoughts.

*Nikhilesh.* So you might stay on after all? Really?

*Manjari.* I don't know. Sometimes I feel that to stay on means falling into a new trap. Then again I feel that to leave means running away – it wouldn't really be a release. Rather than that, why don't I let the forest air blow over my body for a few days? Perhaps that will heal my wound after all.

*Nikhilesh.* Excellent!

*Manjari.* But do think of something, Nikhilesh – and so must I. Whatever might have been my condition in the past, today I'm free but you're not. I haven't forgotten what I've been through. *I don't want another woman to go through that hell.*

*Nikhilesh.* Then tell me what you want.

*Manjari.* I've just told you, I don't know. Leave me alone for a while. If I need you, I'll call you.

*[Exit Nikhilesh. Enter Sandip after a while.]*

*Sandip.* So there you are, Manjari. I was wondering where I'd find you. I have to go back to Kolkata at once – I've been summoned on my cell-phone. I'm saying my good-byes.

*Manjari.* When are you leaving?

*Sandip.* By the night train. Didn't I hear you were going back too? Are you taking the same train?

*Manjari.* I haven't decided. I have been called back, but I've only just arrived. I don't think I'll leave till tomorrow.

*Sandip.* I see. Otherwise we might have gone back together. Let me see where the others are.

*[Exit. Enter Amala. She and Manjari are somewhat embarrassed at facing each other.]*

*Amala.* Oh, it's you. I heard Sandip was looking for us.

*Manjari.* He was here a minute ago – he's just gone off that way. I'm leaving too.

*Amala.* Really? Does Nikhilesh know?

*Manjari.* I don't need his permission. I came here without his knowledge, and I can leave the same way. It's more important that you should know.

*Amala.* Why, you were getting along fine, and Nikhilesh was happy too. Why do you suddenly want to leave?

*Manjari.* Amala, I don't have the breath left to talk in riddles. Your sister goes in for plain speaking by force of character, but I because I've had enough of beating about the bush. At least I try not to hurt anyone. My mind's in a terrible dilemma. Sometimes I think I've suffered enough: now I'll just please myself and everyone else can go to hell. Then again I think, do I have the right to make someone else suffer just so that I can have what I want? When all's said, I don't even know what I want. So let me at least try not to harm anyone else. It's best that I should go.

*[Exit Manjari. Enter Sandip.]*

*Sandip.* I've said good-bye to everyone I could find. I'll be off now, Amala.

*Amala.* Yes, I think that's the best course.

*Sandip.* You really think so?

*Amala.* Do you want me to ask you to stay? Would you listen to me if I did?

*Sandip.* I don't know. If you asked me, I'd find out.

*Amala.* Sandip, what kind of *musical chairs* is this? Both you and Manjari – now you say you'll go, then again you say you'll stay. Do what you want, but don't act in this childish way.

*Sandip.* So you won't really tell me to stay, from the bottom of your heart?

*Amala.* *[after a pause, looking down at the ground]* No, I won't. If I could have done, it would have been bliss beyond measure, but it's not given to people to be so happy. Go, Sandip.

*[She leaves quickly. Sandip leaves in another direction. Rabi and Shobhana enter separately.]*

*Shobhana.* Who're you looking for?

*Rabi.* Would you believe me if I said it's for you?

*Shobhana.* Of course I would, if you went on to say 'Make me a cup of tea, will you?' or 'What's this stain on my shirt?'

*Rabi.* Nothing of the sort. This is a *romantic errand*.

*Shobhana.* Then what do you need me for? There's all sorts in ready supply – the glamorous actress, the shy new bride, the unspoilt Santhal wench.

*Rabi.* Tell me, Shobhana – people make up stories because they enjoy them. Why should you concoct such stories to make you miserable? As you say, there's all sorts on tap – if I wanted a flutter, I'd make use of the facilities. But I have eyes only for one person. *[Sings with comic affectation]* 'First of all, I want you – second of all, I want you...' <sup>31</sup>

*Shobhana.* *[pleased, though pretending to be angry]* That's enough – you're not very convincing when you're affectionate. Why don't you tell me plainly what you want?

*Rabi.* I've just said it – I want you. To be more precise, here we are in Chhota Nagpur. I've got another week's leave. Why waste it by going back to Kolkata? Why don't we go on a bit further to Palamau, just the two of us?

*Shobhana.* Shall we? It's not a bad idea.

*Rabi.* What do you mean, not a bad idea? It's a bloody good idea. You can see how things are here – everyone's going away, it's really getting rather grim. Sandip is leaving, so I think is Manjari. Why don't we leave along with them?

*Shobhana.* You're right, I'm not enjoying my stay here one little bit. But won't they be offended if we go off so suddenly?

*Rabi.* Why should they be? They'll simply think this ideal couple has been roused to romance in these delightful surroundings. We'll set an example to the other couples whose relations are on the rocks. No, no – let's start packing straight away.

*[Enter Anima, carrying an axe.]*

*Anima.* So there you are, Rabi Babu. It's I that's come to you this time – now let's see who runs away and who gives chase.

*Rabi.* What's the matter, Anima? Have you gone mad?

*Anima.* No, Babu, I'm not mad – rather you're a scoundrel. Shall I tell your wife what you were about? I will, but first I'll land this axe on your back.

*Rabi.* Why, what did I do? Oh, I remember. You were looking rather stunning this morning, so I said you were like something out of Nandalal Bose's paintings. That was a compliment – why should you feel angry? You haven't seen Nandalal's paintings, so you don't know what I meant.

*Anima.* Don't talk to me about your pintings and mintings. Babu-folk say all kinds of stupid things to us – what can we do, we put up with it. But let's hear what you were trying to do just now, in the orchard behind the house? I'm a Santhal's daughter, I know how to take care of myself. So I ran away, and at first I thought I'd tell my man. Then I thought, why should I bother him for nothing? If I'm to teach the bastard a lesson, I'll do it myself. Just see, Boudi, this is how you deal with such men: you fine ladies don't know how, you can only scream and cry. – You rascal, you bastard, I'll make your blood flow!

*[Attacks Rabi with the axe. Rabi retreats, tries to defend himself with a fallen branch. Anima keeps up her tirade. Shobhana starts screaming 'Murder – she'll kill him! Quick, everyone!' etc. Everyone rushes in. Anima stops in her tracks.]*

*Sarojini.* What's going on here? We've seen pretty well everything else, now things look set for a murder. What's wrong with you, Anima?

*Anima.* Nothing, Didi. I was just teaching a rascal a lesson.

*Sarojini.* Oh, I see. If the police had arrested you for murder, it's you that would have been taught a lesson. Why didn't you come to me? You know we wouldn't let you come to harm. Go home, Anima – I'll deal with him.

*Anima.* I won't leave him all to you, Didi – I'm a Santhal's daughter after all. You can do what you like, turn the bastard out of doors, but first I'll give him a good drubbing with my own hands. *[Before the others realise what she is doing, she falls on Rabi and gives him a few cuffs and blows. Then, as though suddenly alarmed at her own temerity, she turns and rushes off.]*

*Sarojini.* Rabi, I needn't read you a long lecture. You understand as well as I do that the sooner you return to Kolkata, the better. Come along, everyone – there's no point in standing around.

*[Everyone leaves, except Rabi and Shobhana.]*

*Shobhana.* Really, the shame of it! If it had happened to someone else, I'd have said a randy little clown had got what he deserved. But what's one to do if it happens in one's own home? I thought it funny the way you wanted to take me on a holiday – it's never happened before. So you knew you'd got into trouble, and wanted to go while the going was good. But things moved too fast for you.

*Rabi.* Believe me, Shobhana, I really didn't do a thing. She was walking past, so I just said 'How's things, Anima?' or something of the sort. Whom are you going to trust? Me, or that uneducated bitch with an eye to the main chance?

*Shobhana.* Don't even talk of trust. I might be fool enough to marry you, but I'm not fool enough to trust you. *[Breaks down in tears and leaves. Rabi leaves by a different exit. Enter Sandip and Manjari, separately. Sandip is carrying a bag: he is ready to leave.]*

*Sandip.* I'm off to the station. It's best to leave in good time. So long, Manjari. I see your plays in any case, I hope I'll get to see you as well.

*Manjari.* Of course. Just come backstage one night after the show. *In fact*, seeing you leave makes me wonder whether I'll go with you. I hadn't wanted to take the night train all on my own, but if you're coming as well, there's no problem.

*Sandip.* Excellent! There's a bit of time still – why don't you pack and come along?

*Manjari.* I'll see Saroj-di first. To tell you the truth, Sandip, whatever one might say, one can't live all by oneself. It feels good to have someone with you. Once I'm home, it'll be silent and lonely again. At least we can talk a bit on the train – about the old college days, perhaps? *[She smiles a little and leaves.]*

*Sandip.* Mashima seems to be a wise old match-maker – maybe things will fall out the way she'd planned. But what'll happen to Amala?

*[Exit. Enter Shobhana, followed by Rabi.]*

*Rabi.* Got over your anger? If so, I've something to tell you.

*Shobhana.* I got over my anger long ago, Rabi. When people are angry, they cool down sooner or later; then they can love and be friends again. I've nothing left but a bitterness, an emptiness. I keep thinking, what have I got to live with?

*Rabi.* I know perfectly well whom I have got to live with.

*Shobhana.* You keep giving more and more evidence of that, don't you? What you call living is no more than staying alive: eating, looking after the house, one or two other animal needs-- nothing else. For *emotional involvement* you look elsewhere.

*Rabi.* You've thought it out all right, but turned the whole thing inside out. If I've ever looked elsewhere, there was absolutely no *emotional involvement*. My *involvement* is in one place and one only.

*Shobhana.* I'm asking you again, do these exploits of yours go to prove it?

*Rabi.* Look, Shobha, no need to go far afield – just think of what's happening in this house. There's a positive flood of *emotional involvement*. Is it making anyone any happier? Are their relationships any firmer? What you call *emotional involvement* is nothing but a kind of romantic drudgery. When you realise it's worthless, your troubles begin. Real *involvement* takes place much deeper down: it lets you come back where you started from.

*Shobhana.* You're never a loss for words, are you? I can talk about a deep involvement; but how can you do so?

*Rabi.* *[His voice changes.]* Can you really, Shobha? Really?

*Shobhana.* *[With a faint smile, looking away]* It seems I have no option.

*Rabi.* Then why were you talking about emptiness?

*Shobhana.* That's there too. It always will be. It's best not to ask too much of life.

*Rabi.* Why not ask for a little more? You might get it. It'll make you feel less empty and less resentful. Look at me: I want a lot of things, and I try to get what I want. It makes me happy, but you *resent* that too. *Can't we enjoy life together?*

*Shobhana.* *Together?* Don't promise what you can't deliver, Rabi.

*Rabi.* I know what you're driving at, and I won't deny the charge. But I need you all the time – I couldn't live otherwise.

*Shobhana.* *[with a half-amused sigh]* I understand why you need me; what I can't understand is why I need you so.

*Rabi.* You don't have to understand, as long as you feel the need.

*[They come together briefly, then Shobhana releases herself and leaves. Rabi follows. Pramathesh calls from off-stage]*

*Pramathesh.* Come along, everyone – Manjari and Sandip are leaving.

*[Everyone enters. Kunja brings up the rear with some luggage.]*

*Sandip.* *[a little too quickly and cheerfully, to hide his embarrassment]* Good-bye Mashima, good-bye Meshomashai. Good-bye, Ramala. There's nothing I can tell the others – all happy married couples, they don't need my good wishes. Good-bye, Nikhilesh – good-bye, Amala. Stay well – both of you. We'll meet again in Kolkata.

*Manjari.* Saroj-di – Pramathesh-da – there's nothing I can add. Good-bye, everyone. *[Nikhilesh thrusts himself forward a little.]* Good-bye, Nikhilesh. *[Deliberately turning to*



*Amala, as though to balance things.] Good-bye, Amala. Stay well – that’s what I want most of all. We’ll meet again in Kolkata.*

*[Exeunt Manjari and Sandip, followed by Kunja. Rabi, Shobhana and Ramala go into the house.]*

*Pramathesh.* We’ll leave you here. Saroj and I had better go rest a little. We’re feeling our years – we’ve come a long way since morning.

*[Exeunt Sarojini and Pramathesh. Only Nikhilesh and Amala left on stage. Amala stands to one side, diffidently and uncomfortably, as though she wants no truck with Nikhilesh but can’t bring herself to leave.]*

*Nikhilesh.* Can I say something, Amala?

*Amala. [after a long pause, very softly]* All right.

*Nikhilesh.* I don’t know how to begin. It’ll make you still more angry and resentful, but I’ll have no peace till I tell you. Otherwise there would be a distance between us right through our lives, and that’ll be something I couldn’t bear.

Do you remember Naren Babu, who used to teach us English at college? He never taught by the book, but he’d tell us all kinds of interesting things, and we’d listen open-mouthed. One day he told us that old Spanish story – you know, the one they made into many plays. It’s about a man who tries to test his wife’s chastity by asking his friend to pay court to her.

*[He pauses and looks enquiringly at Amala, as though expecting a response, but she says nothing. In this entire sequence, Amala’s silences are substantial, expressive, like one side of a dialogue: they carry weight and meaning.]*

I’d forgotten the story, but it must have stuck in my unconscious mind. Perhaps that’s why – *[looks at Amala again]* – I don’t know how to get this out, Amala, but I babbled something of the kind to Sandip, and I suspect he put his own interpretation on it.

*[Amala is still silent.]*

You must be shocked to hear this. I’m sure you never imagined anything of the sort. Sandip would hardly have talked about it to you, but I must. We have our whole life to spend together. Don’t we, Amala?

*[Amala still silent.]*

I’m not defending Sandip’s behaviour, but perhaps he was led on by what I’d said. I simply had to tell you this. Whatever might have happened between Sandip and you after that, I take full blame for it. If you’re feeling any stress or remorse over the matter, you can wipe it away right now.

*[Amala still silent.]*

The end of the old story couldn’t have registered on me at all. It ended as you’d expect – in hatred, violence, death.

*Amala. [speaks at last]* These dramatic things happen in dramas.

*Nikhilesh.* And in life?

*Amala.* Nothing happens. Nothing at all.

*Nikhilesh.* Don’t they live on at the end? Don’t they come together?

*Amala.* Maybe, if it was meant to end that way. Otherwise not.

*Nikhilesh. [with a faint smile]* Yes, like the ending of *Nashtaneer*, I suppose. We don’t know what happened to them afterwards. The dramatist only needs to work out the play, not the relationship. But real people must look beyond the drama and find a solution. How’s our play going to end, Amala? Have you thought about it?

*Amala.* No. Have you?

*Nikhilesh.* I always think too much. So I try to force the ending, and that makes for trouble. That’s why I’m afraid to think..

*Amala.* But you must think. So will I. Then we must get together and think.

Nikhilesh. When are we going to get together, Amala? Will we too meet in Calcutta?  
 Amala. I don't know. There are lots of places to meet, but very few to go to.  
 [Curtain]

<sup>1</sup> A standard sentence in Bengali wedding invitations, usually not meant to be taken at face value.

<sup>2</sup> A pet-name for a small boy, often surviving as a nickname into adult life. It can convey the sense of a spoilt or indulged son.

<sup>3</sup> A room where the bride and groom make merry through the wedding night with their friends and younger relatives, chiefly on the bride's side. Older persons do not intrude here.

<sup>4</sup> The standard prescription for the last, renunciatory stage of life as laid down in the Hindu scriptures. The medicinal neem or margosa tree has a bitter flavour.

<sup>5</sup> A caption currently appearing in a jeweller's hoardings across Kolkata.

<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the epic *Ramayana*, Rama, restored to the throne of Ayodhya, tests his queen Sita's chastity to allay the false suspicions of his subjects. Sita proves her chastity, but her shame and indignation at being put to the test drive her to sink into the bosom of the Earth, her mother.

<sup>7</sup> Although drinking is now common among upper-middle-class Bengalis, there is a residual sense of guilt, social defiance or adventure attached to it. It cannot be assumed that drink will always be served at such a gathering. In particular, many women will not drink alcohol.

<sup>8</sup> Reference to the Soma or Sama Veda, consisting of libation hymns.

<sup>9</sup> An English expression, proposing a Western practice, would be quite usual in such circles.

<sup>10</sup> Elder sister

<sup>11</sup> A line from a poem by Rabindranath Tagore.

<sup>12</sup> The apparently ill-matched but ideal union in the Hindu pantheon.

<sup>13</sup> The Brahmos are a sect of reformed Hindus, who conduct their rites in Bengali (or other current language) rather than Sanskrit, to make them intelligible to the community.

<sup>14</sup> *Apni, tumi*: Two of the three levels of Bengali personal pronouns. The drop from *apni* to *tumi* suggests a greater degree of intimacy. However, Amala is not ready to be entirely informal herself – she refers to Rabi formally, as 'Rabi Babu'.

<sup>15</sup> *Nandalal Bose*: Famous painter attached to Rabindranath Tagore's school and retreat at Santiniketan. Much of his work presented nature and rural life, in a quasi-folk style.

<sup>16</sup> See note 3 above

<sup>17</sup> *dotara*: a two-stringed folk instrument

<sup>18</sup> *Academy*: The Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, housing one of Kolkata's chief art theatres as well as art galleries. The 25th *Baishakh* is Rabindranath Tagore's birthday, *Baishakh* being the first month of the Bengali year.

<sup>19</sup> *Mashima*: 'Aunt': the usual way for a person to address his friend's mother.

<sup>20</sup> *Meshomashai*: 'Uncle' – the similar address for a friend's father.

<sup>21</sup> *Shesh Raksha*: 'Saved at the End' – a well-known romantic comedy by Rabindranath.

<sup>22</sup> A dig at the excessive valuing of technologists, computer specialists in particular, in the Indian educational, job and marriage markets.

<sup>23</sup> *Jamai* means 'son-in-law'. The house belongs to Sarojini through her family, so Pramathesh is the 'son-in-law' of the house.

<sup>24</sup> For a Bengali audience, this will carry a meaningful double allusion, to Amal the young and likeable character in *Nashtanir* (who attracts Charulata's love, but in an innocent, almost unconscious way), and Sandip, the older, more worldly-wise and deliberate philanderer in *Home and the World*.

<sup>25</sup> *Thakurpo*: The conventional way for a wife to address her husband's younger brother.

<sup>26</sup> *Bouthan*: Short for *bouthakrun*, the brother-in-law's conventional way of addressing his elder brother's wife.

<sup>27</sup> Obviously, the equivalent Bengali idiom for casting pearls before swine.

<sup>28</sup> *Dada*: Elder brother, but can also be applied to a cousin (as here, to Bhupati)

<sup>29</sup> *Tui* and *tumi*: the two 'lower' or more informal of the three levels of Bengali second-person pronouns. (Earlier, Sandip and Amala had hesitated between *tumi* and *apni*, the two 'upper' levels.) As old friends, Nikhilesh and Sandip had always addressed each other as *tui*; their strained relation now makes them shift to the relatively formal *tumi*.

<sup>30</sup> During the Hindu marriage, bride and groom go seven times round the sacred fire. Hence they are said to be 'bound by a sevenfold tie'.

<sup>31</sup> The opening of a song by the popular Bengali singer Suman Chatterjee or Kabir Suman.