



# S.F. Signettes

Edited by  
Manju Jaidka

**VIGNETTES:** English translation by various translators from Hindi of selected short stories of Vol. III of *Beesvi Sadi Ka Hindi Mahila Lekhan* at a translation workshop organised by Sahitya Akademi in 2017 at Chandigarh. Edited by Manju Jaidka. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (2018) Rs. 170.

© Sahitya Akademi

First published: 2018

**Head Office**

Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110001  
Website: <http://www.sahitya-akademi.gov.in>

**Sales Section**

'Swati' Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110001  
Email: [sales@sahitya-akademi.gov.in](mailto:sales@sahitya-akademi.gov.in)

**Regional Offices**

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar  
Mumbai 400014

Central College Campus, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Veedhi,  
Bengaluru 560001

4, D.L. Khan Road, Kolkata 700025

**Chennai Office**

Main Guna Building Complex (Second Floor), 443(304) Anna Salai,  
Teynampet, Chennai 600018

ISBN: 978-93-87989-31-3

Rs. 170

Cover Design : Geetali Baruah

Pagesetting by Quick Offset, Delhi

Printed at Vikas Computer and Printers, Delhi

# CONTENTS

<i>Editor's Note</i>	vii
1. Queen of the Hearth <i>Ushadevi Mitr</i> <i>Translated by Parminder Singh</i>	1
2. Encircling Clouds <i>Krishna Sobti</i> <i>Translated by Pratibha Nagpal</i>	5
3. A Manual for Women <i>Mannu Bhandari</i> <i>Translated by Pratibha Nagpal</i>	27
4. Retreat <i>Usha Priyamvada</i> <i>Translated by Chander Kiran</i>	38
5. Liberated <i>Rajee Seth</i> <i>Translated by Chander Kiran</i>	50
6. Rubble <i>Manjul Bhagat</i> <i>Translated by Roshan Lal Sharma</i>	71
7. The Little Girl who Weighed Three Kilos <i>Mridula Garg</i> <i>Translated by Roshan Lal Sharma</i>	84
8. Boys <i>Mamta Kalia</i> <i>Translated by Suneeta Patnayak</i>	98

# Rubble

▪ *Manjul Bhagat*

---

With eyes like boiled eggs, a gaunt, hunched old man appears sunk sitting on a stringy charpoy stuck in the rubble—a pulverized heap of his own house. We wouldn't have called his dwelling a house but its mossy broken brick walls were still erect, as was the pantiled roof and the rusty swinging tin door. Peering through a hole made by a few missing bricks, one would see a niche where a brightly lit candle in a brass bowl threw patterns of light on the walls. A *sigrhi*<sup>1</sup> smouldered on the raised earthen platform outside.

Of late, the old man remains sunk on his decrepit charpoy, so called merely because of its four legs. Jute and cotton ropes and even pajama strings have been tied to the charpoy's worn nylon straps, giving it a patchwork feel. Close by is a seat made of about ten bricks fixed one atop the other, on which the old woman would place a glass of tea, covered with a bowl. The old man would spend hours pouring tea into the bowl, blowing on it, slurping it sip by sip.

Some papers lay scattered on the charpoy like leaves; the old man would bring them close to his nose and smell, peering at them until his head reeled in the sun. He couldn't see the shape of any letter properly without glasses; but he didn't have a pair—perhaps they lay buried in the rubble. He remembered everything written on the yellowed papers.

He has a map as well. The old woman removes the rubble and pulls out a crushed and squeezed tin can. She holds it in her hand, turns it all around and looks at it intently. Then she places it in her ramshackle household, which has been pushed on to the road

by this manly request. This time Baawla nudged her a little and pushed his demand with a little desperation, "Roti!" Who was this, ordering things so rightfully? The old woman wondered and got into action.

"Roti?" she whispered.

"Roti!" Baawla emphasized categorically without offering any choice to the old woman. She got up staggering, stopped near a can of flour, took out a container, put the flour in it and started kneading it with water. Her mind was also churning. Tears that she had repressed welled up and she started howling placing her head on her knees. Wiping her nose and tears with her salwar, she resumed kneading until it shone bright like the circle around the rising sun. Hunger had completely confused Baawla. Meanwhile he tried haphazardly to place the *tawa*<sup>25</sup> atop the hearth.

Suddenly, the old woman started laughing in the midst of crying.

"Wait *moye!*<sup>26</sup> You are impatient."

Setting the *tawa* right on the hearth, she started rolling a *roti*. She abruptly crushed the first, *billi-roti*<sup>27</sup> and leapt up quickly. Bewildered, Baawla watched her. She could find a little container in which she used to keep ajwain. She used to mix it with *Baauji's rotis*. She sprinkled ajwain on the kneaded flour and taking a little portion, started rolling it. Baawla giggled observing the *roti's* changing shape.

As it grew in size, a loving smile started to appear on the old woman's lips. With the *roti* attaining a ripened glow, her face started softening like a blob of butter melting over a corncob. Before the first *roti* could get cooked, she rolled the second one, and throwing aside the first, placed the second on the *tawa*, and started rolling a third. Baawla got bored in the process. Realizing it at once, the old woman served him the second *roti*.

"*Re Baawle!* Impatient! Why don't you understand that first *roti* is for the *tawa*. See how hard it has become. Ok, eat it now."

Casually indifferent, Baawla, bit into a morsel of the *roti*, rolled it around with his tongue, and mixing it with his saliva, relished its sweetness.

*Translated by Roshan Lal Sharma*

# The Little Girl who Weighed Three Kilos

▪ *Mridula Garg*

Shardaben pulled out the crumpled dhoti stuck between her legs and stood up. She wrapped the wet, naked child in a tattered cloth and leaped towards the balance. It was her routine nowadays. After delivering the child, it would be necessary to bathe it; but thereafter she used to rush to the balance to weigh the child before showing it to the mother. For the masters, weighing the child was more important than delivering it. Not a joke it was: her job was worth hundred rupees a month.

There was a distinct, hitherto unknown bounce in her leap towards the balance today. The baby girl in her lap was quite different from other babies she had helped deliver. Holding the child, it was after many days that she had felt: yes! there is something in my lap, apart from the bundle of tattered clothes. Her arms had felt the weight; else, she had nearly forgotten the weight of flesh on tiny skeletal frames.

The cloth wrapped around the freshly-bathed baby girl's body was moist. She unwrapped it; put it on her shoulders thinking it would dry within a few minutes.

Then, with an effort, she placed the infant girl in the balance carefully. That was what she had been taught. A new-born must be weighed like this—naked; otherwise, clothes would add to the weight. What would a tattered rag weigh? Not even ten grams. But Shardaben suppresses her smile till she unwraps the rag, and places the naked child in the balance. That's why she is considered best amongst all *gramsevikas*.<sup>1</sup> While on duty, no fun and frolic,

"Give *Ba* some water, Bhai, and these tablets"—she said to the boy. The sick and scared *Ben* turned towards her instantly, caught hold of her hand and screamed: "My head would burst *Ben*, I'll die."

"*Hain ... hain!* What do you do?" Hesitant, Shardaben tried to break free of her hold, and tried to say, "I am a *vankar*;<sup>26</sup> if you touch me, you may have to bathe. While ill, you...." But Master Bhai's wife didn't give her any chance. She held both her hands tightly, and started to strike her head on them. She implored and asked for medicine. Shardaben couldn't free her hands. On their own, her hands started comforting the sick *Ben*, who was young like her daughter. So, are there such people who've forgotten that Shardaben is *vankar* by caste, and for whom she's just a *Ben* who provides medicine?

The boy had brought water. She helped the sick *Ben* get up and gave her tablets. Master Bhai's wife didn't loosen her grip on her hands. Perforce, Shardaben sat by her side and started caressing her forehead. As *Ben's* groaning and restlessness subsided, Shardaben was overwhelmed with emotion as if she had risen after gobbling many *rotalas* with a pitcher of buttermilk. Her physical fatigue vanished. She felt as if her monthly hundred rupees had swollen to five hundred. Bound up in sweetness of touch, her hands moved with more dexterity and the determination to get the little girl of three kilos brought up like a boy was further strengthened.

Translated by Roshan Lal Sharma

## Notes

1. *Gramsevika*: A woman who does social work in a village.
2. *Chhoree*: Baby girl.
3. *Arre*: an informal way of addressing a person.
4. *Mem(s)*: Madam(s).
5. *Rotala*: A large size flat round Indian bread cooked on a griddle.
6. *Saala*: Literally wife's brother; *Saali*: wife's sister (used abusively).
7. *Sookadi*: A Gujarati sweet like burfi made of flour and jaggery.
8. *Bigha*: A term used to measure land area; roughly a quarter of an acre.
9. *Kamzaat*: A person of low caste.
10. *Karamjali/ Karamjala*: One who has done bad deeds (karmas).