

***Afsana of the Jehajin***<sup>1</sup>**Afshana Mehar Anzeg**

The *sahib*<sup>2</sup> takes a fancy and gives me light work  
 Sugars me with candy and cheap sweet talk  
 While I crouch in the scorching heat, sweating and burnt,  
 breaking the tattered earth with my hurried hoe  
 He gapes and feeds his erotic fantasy  
 Ogling, his hormones savagely go berserk  
 He moves me to a far way field  
 And wounds my soul beyond heal

Sometimes a sahib's cook, sometimes a laborer  
 Sometimes a wife, sometimes a daughter  
 Sometimes a 10 year old bride  
 No matter where I am, or what I do  
 My fate was sealed before I knew

They long forgot that I too am a woman  
 Burnt by the sun after a hard day's work  
 I, the concubine of Girmity, toil in several beds  
 For money, I am even rented to my man's friends  
 Who thrust and shove me at their will  
 My soul cries and my decorum reels  
 Has anyone wondered how I feel?

Some call me *Randi*<sup>3</sup>, some as amoral as a doe  
 Some marry me for sex, while some just bonk their way through

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<sup>1</sup> 'Afsana' = afsana or afaana means tale; Jehajin, from the word Jahaz, urdu/hindi for 'ship'; the word is used here to refer to ship-mate.

<sup>2</sup> White overseer in the sugar cane plantation during indenture system

<sup>3</sup> Derogatory Hindi word for a harlot

Shame, honour, dignity, adieu, adieu, adieu

They have their share of fun  
 But I carry their seeds in my womb  
 Sometimes a *Madrasi*<sup>4</sup>, sometimes a *Kurwi*<sup>5</sup>  
 Sometimes a Whiteman  
 My children of different fathers  
 Do not make a neat clan

I can't give you a father's name, my child  
 You were born from an act of shame  
 The prostitution of my gender  
 Was Girmity's<sup>6</sup> other name  
 To the laborer, sahibs and overseers  
 My sexual service I had to render  
 During Girmity, your mother was always up for tender  
 The highest bidder took me home  
 I couldn't complain nor escape  
 So I complied in body but never in soul

Up in the morning at four, I carried you on my back  
 The hoe and *sispaan*<sup>7</sup> lumbered in my hands  
 I dragged my feet with dead weight  
 And walked miles to my gruesome fate  
 I placed you on a sack near the field  
 And weeded the patch in the scorching heat  
 Your cries would break my heart and  
 Pull me towards you  
 Yet I would push myself to continue  
 As motherhood in the field was against the sahib's dictum

I did not have time to see you grow  
 To awe at your first smile  
 Or jump with joy with your first step  
 Not that I did not want to  
 But from the girmity regime

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<sup>4</sup> Term used by North Indians to refer to South Indians

<sup>5</sup> Term used by South Indians to refer to North Indians

<sup>6</sup> Indian version of the term agreement used to refer to the indenture system

<sup>7</sup> Metallic Lunch box used by indamines mostly in farms

This mother couldn't break through

My tales of misery would shake the Himalayas<sup>8</sup>

And all the water in the Ganges<sup>9</sup> cannot clean my soul  
I turn and twist in my grave, when you too believe  
What they told

I only wish if you really knew  
Who I was and how I lived?  
How I survived this miserable girit  
I wish you were there to write my tales  
My agony, my toil, my misery in details  
So that the *afsana* of the *Jehajin*<sup>10</sup> too unveils

Now when writers pen my life  
They forget my sorrows, my struggle, my strife  
They call me a woman of low caste and morals  
And walk away with audience, applause and laurels

I can't help it  
All those who wrote about me were men  
How they perceived me I don't understand  
I cannot justify, I could not make a stand  
Women's sorority was not in Gordon's plan  
But think for a minute, if I was amoral and so bad,  
Child of the Jehajin, who put the veil of honour on your head?

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<sup>8</sup> Range of mountains in the India – Mount Everest is part of this mountain range

<sup>9</sup> The sacred river Ganges in India. Indians believe that washing themselves with the holy water of Ganges cleans them.

<sup>10</sup> Feminine construct of Jehaji shipmates- a bond developed while on the ship to Fiji