

Price

Himanshi Shelat

Translated from Gujarati by Nandini Bhadra¹ and Pratixa Parekh²

Himanshi Shelat (b.1947) is a prolific Gujarati writer of short stories and novels and lives in Valsad, Gujarat. Winner of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad (1987) and Sahitya Academy Award (1996), Shelat's stories are born out of her first hand experience with sex workers and destitute women. The two stories being published in the volume "Price" and "The Seventh Month" are from the collection "Garbhgatha" and "Eloko".

The news rapidly spread like wild fire in the entire neighbourhood—from the crossroads to the narrow lanes and by-lanes of the road reaching towards the station into the slums which were housed in a row. The great news created ripples in the whole area. Of course it was not any ordinary news.

The flesh workers had their thriving business since ages in these lanes, if Jamnabai goes, Kalabai comes; Chandrika leaves and Monika arrives, otherwise everything remains the same. In some of the *kholis*, the *mausis* either had shifted to the bank of the Ganges or had gone for pilgrimage, and inmates like Champakali, Sona or Rupa who were trained under their tutelage, were running the business briskly and would unfailingly send regular money-orders to them. However, such stunning news had hardly reached their way. One of the inmates called Mohana who often would stroll here and there, peeping out of the window, buying cheap cosmetic items like cream, lipstick etc. from vendors, savouring mutton-samosas from Abdul's roadside stall twice a week, was about to be seen on the movie screen. And this is not a rumour but hardcore fact.

Mausi was almost swelling with pride these days. She knew that such sensational news should be revealed in a dramatic and passionate manner while putting *paan* in her mouth. Mohana's photo

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clicked in Munni's bash was seen by the film people close to Gani. They were bowled over by her curvaceous body and mentioned that Mohana and their leading lady's heights were similar. One of the inmates commented, "It's rather a surprise! I am in this profession for almost fifteen years and my body has been almost depleted. Mohana is only a novice. She is in the learning process. How come she straight away got a break in films...it's a matter of luck..."

Another inmate told Mohana, "Now you'll have to throw a party."

From morning to night, Mohana, beaming with smile and happiness, swirled her hips, and pressing her *dupatta* between her lips, pushed a lock of hair behind her ears. Though the news about the offer for film was not yet confirmed, it was true nevertheless that someone had sent a message to *mausi* through Lalji and Gani. The offer was at an initiative stage. Some queries were being made as of now. The filmwallas had taken a few photographs of Mohana. They promised to contact them after couple of days and then will discuss the details. Meanwhile the heroine will also be previewing her photographs. Mohana was overwhelmed with joy.

"What role will they assign you? Perhaps the heroine's friend or..."

"How can they offer you such roles as it includes delivery of dialogues. The leading lady's friend cannot be deaf and dumb for sure..."

"Quite possible, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but not in films..."

While looking at her face in the hazy stained glass, Mohana gloried in the thought that may be the entire nation will see this face one day. She reflected to herself that now that rascal will realize his mistake...had sold her for a paltry sum of ten thousand rupees,...perhaps that much salary she will give to her maids. Once you enter the film world, you will get some work at least. She decided not to keep any ego hassles. Even extras in the movies earn a few thousands. She will keep doing some small roles...but will have to maintain her beauty and charm. Must have regular massages and apply creams. Will have to instruct *mausi* to regulate her diet – fresh veggies like carrot, tomato should be a part of the diet. If not milk, at least yogurt has to be taken on a daily basis. Tomorrow when the filmwallas come, she will wear the green sari. The fitting of the blouse is not perfect but will have to manage tomorrow. And make a new one later. Once the deal is struck, can ask *mausi* for extra money for clothes. *Mausi* seemed to be quite happy and she has already started pampering her by calling her 'Mohana *beti*.' Once you earn money within a few years, fortune will smile, who will stay here...

As the filmwallas were about to come, so excited were the inmates of the *kholis* that they could not get a wink of sleep. However, day or night didn't matter much to them. People were coming and going continuously. The *paan* shop had a thriving business till midnight and again started next day early morning. Customers were constantly asking for cigarettes and *paan*. Almost all the porticos and walls in this area were stained with the spit of *paan* – crimson and orange. To add to this there was the spicy news of the film offer to which everybody was adding their own masalas, "That bitch Mohana is extremely lucky ...she has no charm and her face also doesn't seem much attractive. Look at Sundari from Nepal who is undoubtedly better looking..." tongues started wagging.

"Yes, you are right. Sundari is very pretty, and has rosy cheeks too. She already looks like a film star."

"But she is short and plump."

"So what, she looks much better than that slut..."

"How does it bother us? She will soon realize that filmwallas are not honest people. Hope she will get her payments properly..."

Reshma and Salma were regretting why they didn't attend Munni's party. They both are quite good looking and one never knows when fortune blesses you. Many had told them that they looked better than Mohana. She has a squint; you can see it only if you look at her carefully. The other *mausis* have already started saying that Savitabai will lose control over Mohana who will soon dominate over her.

"Savitabai seems to have lost her mind in greed and imagines piles of money near her feet. The fat *mausi* will soon regret. Mohana will not look back. Once she is gone, will go forever..."

On the scheduled day *mausi* had made proper hospitality arrangement for those high fliers. All the food items had been ordered from Farook's shop, order for ice-cream had also been placed, not plain but special kesar-pista flavour; *mausi* hanged new curtains stored away in the boxes on the shelves. The other unused and unnecessary stuff were stacked under the bed which was covered with a big new bed-sheet in such a way that it touched the carpet on the floor hiding the stuff. This was the preparation for just a casual meeting, the contract will be signed in some big hotel. This kind of show off is required, rarely do such affluent people visit these lanes.

Mohana wanted to give a makeover to her looks by visiting the parlour near the bridge. Chandrika and Sunita used to go there on certain special occasions and spoke highly of their

services. It would make a difference if she herself took charge of her make-up, she thought to herself. But *mausi* prevented her from going there as they may be late. The gentlemen may arrive before she came back and then it will be a problem. Mohana did her make up at home only looking into the stained mirror. Kali offered her a foreign made lipstick. It took her a long time to wear the sari, the silk material was slippery and kept off slipping repeatedly as if it wasn't made to remain on her body. All the inmates were given strict instructions to remain seated near the stair-case, no one should come unless called for, neither should they peep from behind the curtains.

There was quite an excitement in the air and the inmates were loitering here and there, laughing and cracking jokes. It was a totally new experience for them, so they were quite thrilled. By the afternoon, Savitabai started looking impatiently through the window at the crossroads as the expected guests were yet to arrive. Mohana was also quite disappointed. It was not proper that her make-up was fading out and she hated to sport a tired look. Almost two hours have passed. She thought that maybe they had already found someone better looking than her, – she knew that there was a long queue of girls waiting to work in films. Perhaps Lalji and Gani were joking about this movie offer...but then why have they taken so many of her photographs...would anyone do so without any rhyme or reason?

Mausi gently chided her for spoiling her hairdo. Mohana put her locks behind her ear. At that moment, a white car stopped on the crossroads. Two gentlemen, wearing sun glasses, came out of the car along with Lalji and walked straight towards *mausi's* house. Mohana started flying in the air. They spoke to Mohana directly, Lalji interrupted only when the need arose.

They asked her to work according to their instructions, no excuses would be accepted. They thought it better to make things clear from the beginning. She has to perform according to the requirement of the scene. In spite of agreeing to their offer, Mohana was repeatedly asked by them the same questions over and over again in different ways. So Mohana whispered to Savitabai to enquire about what kind of work they would offer her.

Savitabai said, “Mohana is enquiring about the role,...aren't you Mohana? Don't hesitate...ask whatever you want to ask.”

“It is the role of an extra, just understand that. You'll get good money for sure, depending on the nature of the work. You can ask Lalji if you have any doubt.”

The *mausi* answered back, “Ya, that is alright. We have understood. Mohana is intelligent. You don’t have to repeat instructions. Still its better she knows what exactly she has to do from now only...”

“Look, Mohana’s height and figure is exactly similar to that of the heroine’s...so much similarity from behind that no one can distinguish between them...just carbon copies...”

“So what?”

“In a scene of the film, the hooligans of the village harass the heroine...they are after her. In the open market place they take off her clothes one by one. This is nothing new for you...the whole of it will be shot from the back...who will be able to recognise you?”

“The heroine is not ready for the shot under any circumstances. Fortunately Mohana’s height and figure happens to match with her...”

Savitabai looked at Mohana who was making a gesture of fiddling with her bangles, eyes downcast.

“You will get whatever money you demand. Nothing to worry. You have to go in the crowd, it will be a back shot, the hair swaying in the wind, the body will be absolutely naked...only a matter of five minutes...”

Lalji and Gani in trying to pursue Mohana, slowly initiated some sweet talk,— they will be with Mohana, there will be no trouble for her, she can travel by cab, will get to see a lot of new things, she will enjoy the experience. Mohana listened in silence, without speaking a single word.

“So is the deal final? Tomorrow you will get the entire amount, decide upon how much you want. Please tell us because we also need you...its a very important scene for us too...”

As Mohana sat looking blankly at the curtain, *mausi* literally shook her up, “See, the work doesn’t look appealing, but you will get good money. There is also a good future prospect. Need not be disheartened. Will go for it, no...?”

Mohana just sat still without replying.

Mausi, putting her hand on her shoulder, whispered into her ears, “Will you do it for ten thousand or should we ask for more? You please quote your ‘price’...”