



Zari-bordered White Sari

Raavi Sastri

Translated from Telegu by Aruna Bommareddi

Zari-bordered white sari!

Visalakshi wants to cry.

In the room where she lay in a crooked cot, she could see in the opposite room in the dim light of the hurricane lantern--- her brother studying some Physics lesson and her younger brother memorizing the thirteenth tables.

It's past nine o'clock in the evening.

In the back verandah, mother seemed to be tossing and turning trying to get some sleep. The infant brother is crying now and then. Father is pacing up and down the room, probably looking for a match box.

Zari-bordered white sari!

When do I buy it? When do I wear it?

Who knows! When!

When is this unfulfilled desire going to be fulfilled?

Who knows? When?

Sometime ago---she thought that desire won't remain unfulfilled. By this day she had thought that desire would be fulfilled.

But, even today...

Ten years before this...

The six-year old Visalakshi went for a film.

That's the first time she set foot in a cinema hall.

Visalakshi really became wide-eyed.



Surprise? Happiness? No;
daze.

The show hadn't begun.

Visalakshi rolled her six-year-old eyes all around the cinema hall- while her gaze stopped on
"Her" who had just entered the last row of the seats.

Who is She?

"She! That's all."

She entered like a lamp herself in to the hall filled with lights. A young lady with a luxurious
smile. Wearing a pearl-white sari.

As the fair lady walked in, her moon-like white sari shone brightly.

"Mother! Buy me a sari like that!"

"*Shh*. Keep quiet."

Meanwhile, lights went out and the images began to move on the screen.

Krishna's song and *gopikas*ⁱ dance.

The shining white saris of the *gopikas*.

The glitter of the bright white saris!

After the cinema, after coming out into the open

"Mother! Won't you buy me a sari like that!?"

"Girl, grand desires, you nurture from now on! We'll buy it, for your wedding day."

"When, when will you buy mother?"

Did mother and others laugh at her?

They laughed.

Visalakshi wants to cry.

The sixteen-year-old girl still nurtures the same desire that the six-year-old did.

The desire is ten years old now.

These desires grew and became bigger and bigger and finally...

Visalakshi wants to cry.



Zari-bordered white sari!

“We’ll buy” father would say!

Father would have a cigar in his mouth. There would be smoke in his heart. Does he have a job? Oh, job! That is something he doesn’t have.

“Sometime when I have money I’ll buy.”

Visalakshi has been waiting for that ‘sometime’.

For a long time, for a lot of things, this girl Visalakshi has been waiting.

This Visalakshi, is teary eyed; unnecessarily Visalakshi wants to cry now.

Zari-bordered white sari.

“There is so much expenditure ...don’t you know. Your father somehow...a few rupees...carefully spending on this and that...didn’t he struggle... just wait... this year if we don’t get you married off...if we don’t buy you saris you like...then blame us.”

With that mother ends her talk.

“I won’t ask anyone for anything.”

Visalakshi took a vow several times.

Whenever she asked for anything, invariably they recite their own troubles; listening to it, she feels all the more saddened.

But she can’t refrain from asking.

“Just see if you ask for anything again. You will be skinned to death.”

If they said these abusive words and beat her to pulp, she won’t feel that bad.

But if they recite their troubles she feels like crying, and just to console herself through her crying, Visalakshi would repeatedly ask for these things.

One *zari*-bordered white sari!

Visalakshi can only cry. If she listens to mother’s words and waits---

Unless a big event like marriage happens, Visalakshi can’t get a *zari*-bordered white sari!

---*Chi!* I won’t get married ever.



But for a piece of cloth to drape around; and for some food twice a day; for these things girls can't but have to get married.

Do I have to?

---even if I have to; I won't get married, even if I have to live by begging.

If you don't get married, you'll certainly have to live by begging. You neither have education; nor money.

---yes, indeed!!

She doesn't know how to sing. She isn't even blind. She has no energy either. So, the world doesn't have anything like pity for her.

Visalakshi wants to cry...but, but

---Come what may, I won't get married. I w...o...u...l...d...n...o...t

Visalakshi noisily bit her teeth.

---even then, all men are such idiots!

Whenever she remembers the white sari, mother's words about marriage would come to her mind.

Whenever she recalls the thought of marriage, she can't help think of that blockhead.

That fellow Kanakarao. Brother's classmate.

Idiot!

Brother won't listen to anyone how much everyone tells him- Is that fellow a friend to you? That fellow is the one who buys him coffee and takes him to cinemas.

Then, why would brother listen to anyone, how much ever one advises him not to loaf around with that fellow?

But, who could Visalakshi express her angst with and how could Visalakshi do so?

One evening,

In the twilight of six o'clock;

when brother was not at home, when father hadn't reached home yet, when younger brother had gone somewhere, when mother was cooking meals in the kitchen,



Kanakarao who came like a thief,

“Is your brother at home?” he asked in a low tone.

“He’s not” Visalakshi replied loudly.

“Oh, what to do then? My books have remained in his room!”

“You can take them after brother returns.”

He was smiling at her with the determination to make her also smile.

“I should never smile at this fellow” was Visalakshi’s resolution since the first day she saw him.

While that fellow was retreating without being able to do anything,

Mother screamed from somewhere!

“Who is that Visalakshi?”

“Brother’s friend”

While saying that, she expressed as much resentment as she could in her words.

“Who? Is that Kanakarao? Then make him seated in the front room. Brother will be here any moment.”

With that, the departing *sanigraha*ⁱⁱ swung around and turned back.

Oh mother won’t understand. An old fashioned simpleton!

“A fellow from the same community, has property, is well educated. If he can marry our daughter...” these are mother’s thoughts.

With that intention and with this anxiety, she made Visalakshi serve him coffee kept for father.

---Ayyo, what does mother know?!

Visalakshi can’t control her anger nor her tears.

Maybe he’ll marry the girl –mother hopes.

Eventually-

---am I to marry Kanakarao?!

Eventually---

Kanakarao will marry me?

Those kind of rogues don’t marry.



They write love letters. They will be outrageous behind the curtains.

Mother won't understand.

Visalakshi feels the fire in her body at the mere thought of all this.

He's a rogue who had caught her sari in the dark.

Why doesn't someone sever her left shoulder!!

Ho, why doesn't someone tear this right shoulder off!!

This burning sensation can't be healed with sobs.

Yet this burning sensation won't let Visalakshi cry.

But Visalakshi wants to cry.

I am not even married. I don't even have five husbands, then at least one could have come to help.

Who's around to slay this Kīcaka?

None?

Who should be approached for help?

Oh, no one!

Why doesn't at least a lightning fall on all these sinners!

A woman doesn't have the right to talk of her humiliation. Even if she does, there is not a single strong man around.

Behind the curtains, showing his machismo in the dark with a girl.

Kanakarao is walking with his head high,

as if nothing has happened, and it's all fine even if something happens to some girl.

Brother is still drinking the coffee that fellow buys him and watching the films he takes him to.

Visalakshi wants to cry.

Zari-bordered white sari!

That rogue Kanakarao!

---will never think of that fellow.



But this burning sensation won't be cooled.

What is the connection between that fellow and the white sari?

Visalakshi doesn't know.

Yet, there is some link.

It's all so vague like figures in the air.

For Visalakshi's situation, for the despicable condition, for her poverty---what is the reason?

Reason?

There are several reasons. Visalakshi doesn't know all those.

She doesn't even realize that she has made Kanakarao a *symbol* for all these troubles.

If she had a sari, white one, with a *zari* border at least one?

Won't I drown Kanakarao in blood!

Won't I conquer the whole world?

Just one, only one, oh one is enough!

Visalakshi would never then cry.

But she only wants to cry now. Where is that lady who came to the cinema hall that day? Where are the *gopikas* on the screen? Where are all the *zari* borders sleeping? Where are the white saris gone? What is this angst of Visalakshi?

Visalakshi thought of getting up from the rickety old cot but plunked herself there helplessly.

The hurricane lamp was blinking dimly from the room in which her brothers were studying.

How can they study in the dim light? How could I go about without one good piece of clothing to wear? Why does mother spend sleepless nights? Why does father never find his match box? Why is this cot so wobbly? Why am I like this in this cot?

Visalakshi wants to cry.

One white sari- even if handwoven- even if a cotton one- but *azari*-bordered one!

"In that case why don't you just buy an ordinary white sari girl" mother would say.

"I don't want. I am not desperate for it. There are some saris at home! I'll wear them. They are enough."



“Don’t just be so egoistical for every small thing, don’t I know that you long for a white sari!
Let me at least buy you a white *voile* sari! You can get it dyed with anycolour of your choice.
Alright?”

“I don’t want”

“Then let it be. I don’t understand your thinking”

Visalakshi has been wearing saris of differentcolours.

However-

if at all she wears a white sari it must a *zari*-bordered one.

That’s a sweet desire.

Won’t it be fulfilled?

Then!

That’s it-

Kora cotton! White *voile*! Dyed border!

That is like---

getting married to a fellow who is already married thrice, for fear of not getting married at all.

With this thought of a third time bride groom, Visalakshi rejects the *voile* and *kora* cotton saris.

No one can understand her;it is not possible.

Even if one breaks one’s head, no one can understand her.

Visalakshi wants to ---break her head against the wooden cot, shatter her head against the wall,

wants to kill everyone, wants to burn the whole world down.

She would like to live without crying.

But, Visalakshi can’t help crying when she recollects this evening’s incident.

In the evening father had said---

“Girl! Come, let’s go out to the bazaar”

“Why father?”

“Don’t you want a white sari!”

“Father”



“Get ready”

“I was not serious father! I don’t need it.”

“Come on, you fool! Later on I won’t have even a single cowry in my hand”

When he spoke like that Visalakshi wanted to cry all the more. She was reminded of all the sorrowful stories she had heard sometime, somewhere. All the sad visuals that had slipped away from her memory lane stood as hurdles today in front of her.

One afternoon, the dead body of a young girl found in front of the hospital; under the tree, one evening before lighting lamps, the crumpled letter that brought the news of the bride who jumped into the well; the lady who cried for a mason who fell and died from the upper floor of a house; the neighbour’s boy who died of a piece of wood in his stomach; all the dark hills seen from a train while returning from Anakapalli; rainy and dull days and dark nights, why should all these things come to her mind now?!

This evening---

The reason for her crying now, alone facing the wall, is not just the memory of these incidents.

There is another one.

Because of that, all those events came to her mind.

That is-

Blood!

What someone- who intends to go to the bazaar- offers is not money; but his blood.

That is clearly visible on his face.

I don’t want these desires that can’t be fulfilled, unless paid in blood.

Visalakshi wants to cry.

“I just used to talk like that. Really, I don’t want that kind of a sari” even when she says these words, they wouldn’t believe her.

“Come, come! We should go and buy, while there is still light.”

Does anyone know that Visalakshi- who wore a clean, washed sari to go and buy a new sari-has cried before getting ready?



Both of them got ready. And went out.

This was the first in a long time that he was taking his daughter out.

In the dim light of the night, just as one can't see yellow colour unless placed next to white colour, the household poverty doesn't become visible unless we come out into the street.

Visalakshi found herself in tears.

She couldn't understand why her father looked so fragile in the streets, while he looked so dignified at home.

Why is he so frail? Where did all this scarcity come from? How could he walk like this, like a cadaver?

Because she was in the streets, she didn't even have the luxury of tears.

Why don't these people believe me when I say, "I don't want this *zari*-bordered white sari?"

I want it; but honestly I don't want it.

He was walking. A little behind, Visalakshi was following.

Probably he had twelve rupees with him, not more than that.

In any shop they enquired, the least cost of the sari they wanted was twenty.

They went up the stairs of shops, and came down the stairs.

Visalakshi had suppressed the flood gates of her tears, suppressed a volcano inside, for fear of bursting forth in the middle of the streets or inside a shop or at any moment and was walking ahead.

When she thinks of the evening, Visalakshi wants to go and die, she feels the fire in her body.

And that too, that last shop keeper was another Kanakarao.

Visalakshi can sense all the Kanakaraos in the world effortlessly. That fellow was a Kanakarao, and it was visible from his face.

But why did he look, as if on fire for a long time?

What does Visalakshi know that the fellow was angry, because the Europeans have not been visiting his shop, and have left for their country?!



That shop keeper would have passed an ordinance had he the power, that except Europeans, IPS officers and *maharajas* no one else should visit his shop.

That matter, Visalakshi did not know. Nor did her father. They didn't feel like stepping in, just by looking at the shop.

"No father! It's a rich shop."

"Anyway we have come this far! Let's go in and see."

Not just the shop owner, but his staff are also Kanakaraos.

Visalakshi understood that they looked at her father like a dust bin that had just acquired two legs and walked into their shop.

Visalakshi also knew the way they all looked at her.

Visalakshi didn't even have the energy to bear the humiliation.

Even then she had to bear with it.

Visalakshi was burning.

"Do you want silk saris?" asked the shop keeper.

She would have plucked the eyes off, had anyone said there was no sarcasm in his words.

Visalakshi's father replied---

No no...it's enough if you just show hand woven saris... white ones...with a little *zari*...

No no let's go away.

How could she tell him?

She felt as if she was standing stiff on top of thorny bushes, on the tip of sharp needles.

In the meanwhile, that fellow took out from the stack of saris

Zari! Zari! The *zari*-bordered white sari.

Visalakshi was frightened as if she saw a cobra.

Far away, far away, take this sorrow far away.

"How much is this sari?"

Twenty two.

After hesitating, and fearing...



“A little ...at least a little... won’t you reduce?” when he uttered
“This is not the Friday market for bargaining,” the shop keeper hit him with words.
Father was scared even to move after being hit;
Before he could mutter “at least ...another variety...with a little less cost...”
“No sir no we don’t have” the shop keeper replied with a humiliatingly excessive courtesy.
There was total silence in the shop!
That fellow didn’t even smile sarcastically.
Kanakaraos can humiliate without smiling.
When do I see the blood of these Kanakaraos?!
When do I soak my white sari in that?
Visalakshi was burning up in the fires of her fury.
Outside the shop---
Who is this old man who resembles a beaten up buffalo?
Why didn’t you listen to me father, when I said we won’t go in.
“I had no idea the costs would be so high.”
Commodities that can’t be bought, even when paid in blood!
To drown in the burning Visalakshi, the flood was approaching.
One *zari*-bordered white sari!
Visalakshi was saddled in the crooked cot and looked around in desperate pain.
In the house-
The flickering light that gives light with great difficulty, brother who is caught in the web of the
Physics text, younger brother who struggles with the ups and downs of the thirteenth table, mother
who suffers sleepless nights, father who won’t find his match box, the infant brother who cries
nonstop...
Visalakshi wants to cry.



Brother will never understand his Physics. Younger brother will never learn up his thirteenth tables. Mother would never get sleep. Father would be searching for the match box forever. Infant brother would never stop crying. This weak lamp won't give light for too long.

Visalakshi who thought "I would never cry" is crying now incessantly.

This sixteen-year-old girl lying in the wobbly cot, this Visalakshi is sobbing like a stream, like a flood.

This is rain without thunder. This is monsoon without a clear sky. This is scorching heat. An unending dark night. This is summer. This is harsh winter. This is the volcanic fluid. This is the heart wrenching despair.

Just one! Only one! One

zari-bordered w...h...i...t...e...s...a...r...I!

Bionote of Translator

Aruna Bommareddi has a Ph.D from University of Hyderabad. Her area of research interest and specialisation is Indian Literatures in English particularly the Regional Novel. Currently she teaches in the School of Humanities at IIT Mandi, Himachal Pradesh.

Bionote of Author

Raavi Sastri is one of the eminent Telugu writers in the twentieth Century. His writings are noted for their sense of irony and sarcasm on the hypocrisy of the social life of the Telugus. At times they bear a bitterness that arises from a sense of helplessness of the underdog. His collection of stories *Aaru Saara Kathalu*, *Aaru Sarrow Kathalu* and *Rathalu*, *Rambabu* are widely read. Sastri



is an advocate by profession, but a writer by choice. He lived in Vizag. The present translation is from his collection *Aaru Sarrow Kathalu*.

ⁱ Krishna's devotees

ⁱⁱThe planet Saturn