

Colors

Sampada Wagle

Sarita loves the color white.

But do you know what she loves more? She loves scribbling over the white canvas with countless colors. She doesn't know that she loves art yet, but the pictures of the elephant, the details in the bold blue-colored sky, and a playground of grass with red roses she draws give a hint of her miraculous talent. She always draws red roses, red rhododendrons, a girl with red hair, red bangles, and oftentimes steals her mom's red lipstick and paints herself in red.

As she transitioned from loving the color white to the color red without even realizing it, she gave herself the utmost freedom to choose between those colors in her drawings. And, of course, the color red devoured every inch of the whites.

Little did 13-year-old Sarita know that there was a different red coming to her life. Her dad had agreed to her marriage to a 26-year-old man from a faraway city. She didn't know what was happening but was happy because now she could wear the red dress, red bangles, red shoes, and red ribbon. She was kept oblivious to the horrible life that was about to befall her. She painted on the canvas a portrait of the wedding, where she was wearing a red saree and her husband, who she presumed to be her age, her height, and her stature, in a white suit.

It was only on the day of her marriage that she saw a handsome gentleman nearly 7 feet from her angle, with a robust body that looked like he worked out every day and a beard that seemed to be cut with precision, sitting beside her while she did the rituals. She wanted to cry, scream, and

even step aside from everything that was happening, but her father looked at her with terrifying eyes the same way he did when she and her sister had once gone to school without completing their chores and he had locked them in the room. She didn't utter a single word, a little bit of hope still that maybe her mom would stop this, maybe her sister. She even looked at the person sitting beside her. He looked educated. Why is he agreeing to this? Questions lingered in her mind, but she could do nothing about them. Soon enough, she was taken to her husband's home—her mother and sister crying, her dad indifferent, and she herself, shocked and promising herself to never return to this house ever again.

After reaching the other home, the in-laws looked at her with love and pride, saying, "My love, go enjoy your special night."

The words pierced her heart, for even though their eyes suggested love, those words served as an embodiment of her presence, which was just a lusty desire. Was she here just to meet their son's needs? What was she to them? Isn't she just a kid?

Petrified now, she stood speechless where she was, not able to move a single step.

The gigantic man patted her from the back, called her smilingly, and asked her to enter the bedroom. She didn't want to. She wanted to go back to her own home now. She wanted to be far from the bedroom. But where would she run? Won't he catch her anyway? She walked into the room. The man kept smiling.

He locked the door as soon as they entered. Her breaths were getting scarcer due to fear as the sound of his footsteps approached. But he simply said, "The washroom is there. Freshen yourself up." She ran towards the washroom. She thought she would keep staying there, and nothing

would happen. She managed to stay there for more than an hour. Then, she heard a voice call her, “Are you all right?” She got scared. She didn’t want to answer. The voice continued, “You don’t have to be scared. I won’t do anything to you.”

She didn’t come out for another thirty minutes. Then the voice called again, “If you are going to spend the night in the bathroom, better take some blankets. You must be freezing.”

For some strange reason, she opened the door this time, only to find out that he was on a mattress on the floor, and the bed was empty. She looked at him with confusion. He didn’t utter a single word and pointed her toward the bed. She hesitantly walked. The bed was clean—a white bed sheet, two white pillows, and a blanket of ivory. She lurked inside the blanket and said nothing. There was a solid silence in the room for a couple of minutes, which was broken when she asked, “What’s your name?”

“Satish”, he answered. She was waiting for him to ask her, but he didn’t seem to care. So, she herself stated, “I’m Sarita.”

Satish chuckled, his back still facing the bed. They both didn’t say anything the entire night, but it felt like nobody slept either. The intensity of their sighs suggested battles of their own. Sarita wanted to speak but couldn’t. Satish wanted to listen but wouldn’t.

The next morning, Satish woke up Sarita and said, “Don’t say anything to anyone. Act normal. Okay?”

She nodded. She did exactly that for the entire day. She did all the chores, smiled her way through her in-laws, and had a shy demeanor that was asked for. Every night would be the same. And every day was soon turning out to be the same too.

But it was getting lonelier with every passing moment. She wanted to paint but couldn't say it to anyone. She thought of mentioning it to Satish that day. Habitual to the nights they spent together, Satish was startled when Sarita gently placed her hand on his back, which to Sarita felt like his waist. He looked at her and smiled. She said, "From today on, you sleep on the bed. I'll sleep on the floor." He chuckled and, in an instant, replied, "No."

"Why?" She asked.

"I like it." He suggested.

Sarita didn't know how to respond. Satish placed his hand on her head and stroked her hair. Her dad had never, in her entire life, stroked her hair. She didn't know how it felt to have that secure feeling. In fact, this stranger had been more kind to her than her dad had ever been. She let go of tears. Silently.

"Hey, now, are you crying because you have to sleep on the bed?" He laughingly asked, sitting on his knees, lowering his eye level to finally meet Sarita's.

This must be the first time she has seen him up close. The poignant smile, the big brown eyes, the long lashes, the sharp jawline—and through the white Kurta he wore, one could peek at his collar bones. He looked like a model.

"Why did you marry me?" She finally asked.

Satish let go of a sigh. "Because I had to."

"Why?" She continued questioning.

“If I hadn’t married you, someone else would have. Who knows what they would have done to you?”

“You are different?” She asked with tears in her eyes.

“No *kanna*. I married you. How can I be different?” He shed a tear after a painful battle with himself inside his mind.

“You are.” He heard a soft voice in his ears. Sarita was mumbling, “You are.”

Satish didn’t say anything and stood up. Sarita held his hands and asked, “Why do you always wear white?”

This must have been a very hard truth for Satish, for he could barely stand and collapsed on the bed, sobbing. Sarita didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what answer she expected. Did she want him to say that it was his favorite color and that they would bond over it? Did she want him to say that it suits him the best, and maybe she could compliment him? She didn’t know what response she wanted, but she couldn’t comprehend the current one.

After some moments, Satish could finally grab the courage to speak up. “You know, I had a sister. She was like you. Perhaps you both would have been of the same age by now. She was made to marry young. Very young. I tried to stop it a million times, but my parents never agreed. She was made to marry. She was—”, he sobbed. Sarita’s hands were trembling, for she knew what was about to come now.

“But then her husband died”, he continued, “and the family blamed her for it”. Sarita was praying, hoping it wasn’t the thing she was told so many times as a child. She was hoping his sister was alive. But what would her praying do now? Bring her back to life.

“They killed her”, he said. Plainly. Blatantly. Emotionless. Maybe that’s how a person becomes after losing someone so important to them. Maybe they take away all the colors, and the person is left with a plain white, colorless life. Was that what happened to Satish?

He didn’t bother explaining further, and he got up. He questioned himself about what he was doing. Why did he have to say all of this to a 13-year-old? But the question that haunted him the most was: If anything happened to him in the days to come, wouldn’t this little girl also be killed like his sister in the name of a cursed woman? How ironic, he thought, marrying girls who have never once experienced womanhood and terming them cursed women and killing them! What difference did it make in the long run for him to show love and care to Sarita? In his absence, the world is going to force those same claims and arguments to haunt her and kill her.

He held both of Sarita’s hands and said, “Do you trust me?”

Sarita replied with a nod.

“What do you love the most in the world?” He asked.

“Painting”, she shouted with excitement.

“We’ll get them tomorrow”, he assured her.

He headed towards his drawer, but midway turned towards Sarita and said, “Would you do something for me in return?”

Sarita nodded, but Satish didn’t ask for anything. Sarita didn’t question further either.

In the coming days, Sarita started painting in the room, hidden from her in-laws, after she did all her household chores. She showed all her paintings to Satish except for the one she drew of him

wearing a red shirt. At night, Satish would teach her a lot of things ranging from arithmetic to politics, which she didn't necessarily enjoy, but Satish made her study, saying you'll need it in life. He always said, "Be smarter than society, so that society cannot fool you."

Seven years passed the same way. Sarita didn't miss her family. She didn't ever bother visiting them. But when the news of her sister's wedding was announced, she felt a strong attachment to her. She was just 12, and she was getting married. Sarita knew she had to do something. She turned to Satish and asked for his help.

Satish looked at her with admiration and said, "Remember I asked for you to do something in return?"

She understood. It had to be this way, indeed. It had to be her. All those teachings and rebellious paintings—everything concentrated at this moment. She felt powerful, brave, and capable.

The next day, she would go to her home and prevent the marriage for the first time ever in her life, raising her voice against her father and for herself and her sister.

Satish, for the first time in years, would wear a red shirt and accompany Sarita on the journey, standing beside her, with her, but not for her. He knew he stood for her when he taught her and strengthened the voice she has today. It's high time that women support women and men support women.

Did Sarita love the color white because it was pure? Did she love the color red because it was rebellious? You see, every color can have the value you interpret in it. But, as long as the person who wears it is good, every color is pure, and every color is rebellious.