

## A SORE IN THE CROW'S NECK

Dr. R. Sheela Banu

Ramu came on promotion to Valasaiyur as a Secondary School teacher. The village school consisted of only two teachers—one for primary and one for secondary class. Ramu stayed as a paying guest in a one-roomed garret of the Postmaster's house. Like most men, he depended on hotel food.

Among the few hotels in that hamlet, Moorthi Mess enjoyed some prestige. That was the only place which offered fairly good meals. There were a handful of regular customers to the mess. Ramu became a regular customer of it. The proprietor of the mess showed a special fondness for Ramu as he would promptly settle his accounts. Everyday, when Ramu entered the mess, Naicker, the proprietor, would rise from his seat and greet him cheerily and place a large plantain leaf specially for him.

One day, when Ramu visited the mess, as usual, for lunch, Naicker pretended not to notice him. Apparently puzzled by Naicker's behaviour, Ramu sat on a bench and asked for a leaf. "Wait for a while, the lunch is getting ready..." said Naicker in an airy tone.

Ramu wondered what was wrong with Naicker. In the past six months, he had never been so indifferent towards him. However, he continued to have his meals, preoccupied with mixed thoughts. One by one, customers were leaving the mess after their meals. When the mess was almost free, Naicker bellowed, "Boy, serve meals to Sir".

Wiping his dirty nose with the corner of his sweaty shirt, the servant boy laid a leaf for Ramu. Ramu's face shrank at the sight of the boy. He was used to the privileged serving of the proprietor himself. As Naicker served the meals with his own hands, both of them used to indulge in a hearty chat too.

Naicker watched the boy serving the dishes as well as Ramu's sober face.

Ramu was busy gobbling his morsels owing to his burning appetite. Naicker walked towards him. He cleared his throat and said to Ramu in a mild strict voice, "Please do not come here from tomorrow".

Quite shocked, Ramu emitted a cough. When Naicker repeated what he said, Ramu looked into his eyes and said, "What have I done to you? I'm paying the mess fees regularly, ain't I?"

Naicker said, "I don't deny that . . . . But you have been deceiving me all these days in one matter. Carried away by your skin colour, I mistook you to belonging to a particular caste. Had your colleague didn't tell

me about it, I wouldn't have known the truth..."

Ramu stood petrified as if he were struck by thunderbolt.

He was baffled by Naicker's words. Then, he said, "Without playing riddles, could you be clear?"

"It's all about the caste matter. You never mentioned your caste all these days...!"

Ramu felt as if a heavy load had rolled down from his head.

"...Is this the matter? My colleague Murali must have mentioned that I belong to the underprivileged class. Believing his words, Naicker is treating me with such contempt. If I disclose my real identity that I am a member of privileged caste, he would calm down", said Ramu to himself.

Then, Ramu spoke in a clear and confident voice. "All these days, you never asked me about it, hence I never mentioned it. Let me tell you now...!"

An unusual pride beamed in Ramu's voice. But Naicker hastily cut in and said, "You needn't tell anything. I know you hail from a high caste..."

Then why d'ye forbid me from having meals in your mess?

It's because you belong to the privileged caste.

Ramu was nonplussed.

Naicker continued, "In my mess, only Harijans are served. All those who come here belong to that class. Since they are forbidden from entry in hotels, I opened this mess especially for them. Therefore, non-Harijans are not served here. Hence, you may look for some other place for your meals..."

Lost in thought, Ramu stood like a statue.

Naicker retired to his seat.

A crow cannot understand the pain of the bull. If that crow has a sore in its neck and a sparrow begins to peck it...?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Dr. R. Sheela Banu** is an Assistant Professor of English at Government Arts College, Salem. She has published a dozen research articles in various national and international literary journals. Besides, she has translated eight short stories from Tamil to English. Literature is her passion. Having specialized in African American literature, she is currently concentrating on Dalit literature and Tribal literature. A fun-loving person with varied interests, teaching is her first love.