

*Marry You Off,
My Darling Daughter?*



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Characters:



Teacher (schoolteacher) - a woman around 24-25 years old, wearing salwarkameez, carrying a tote bag slung across her shoulder, wearing glasses.



Amrita - a girl around 12-13 years old, wearing salwarkameez, head and face almost covered by a dupatta.



Amrita's father - a middle-aged man.



Amrita's mother - a middle-aged woman in a saree, ordinarily worn, head covered by the veil.





Does Amrita live here?

Who? Who are you looking for?

Amrita?

She's talking about Bulti.

Oh. And who might you be?



I'm her teacher at school.




Oh. So what brings you here?



Why hasn't Amrita been attending school?

She won't be going to school anymore. We're making arrangements for her marriage.




...marriage? Whose marriage? Surely you don't mean Amrita's marriage? What are you saying!?

She's all grown up now. It's about time we start thinking about her marriage, isn't it?

How old is she?


Thirteen going on fourteen.

You do know that it's against the law for girls under eighteen to be married, right?



What's the law to the poor? Besides, it's not like we can marry her off just like that, the discussions are going to take a while. Until then she's staying at home and learning housework. None of the girls around here stay unmarried till eighteen anyways.


But she shows such interest in studies! She's a good student, too. What's the hurry to get her married! Look at me, I'm so much older than her and I'm not married yet.



That's not how things work here. Besides, she has to travel so much distance alone. There are a lot of delinquent boys bothering and catcalling her on the way to school and back. She doesn't feel safe.

What! Could you call her here?


Of course. Do sit down, didi!
(calling) Bulti? Bulti!



Look, times are bad. Just the other day in the neighbouring village a couple of boys cornered a girl and... the poor thing was returning from school, too. If something happens it'll be bad for our reputation. We're just ordinary folk, and she's a girl child after all. We have to marry her off one day or another. The earlier it is, the more relieved we'll be.

But wouldn't it be even better if your daughter studied hard and stood on her own two feet? Think about it. Girls are doing so many things nowadays!

Look, all of that is well and good. But I've been scared and worried out of my mind ever since she got a little older. This isn't a civilised area didi, there's thugs and delinquents everywhere. Who knows what might happen on the streets? It's such a long way to her school, who's going to guard her all the way there?

A woman with glasses, wearing a red tunic with a yellow sash and green pants, stands on a green lawn. She is speaking to a man who is sitting on the ground, leaning against a stack of brown mats. The man is wearing a white tank top and light-colored pants. In the background, there is a large thatched-roof hut and a tree. A woman in a white sari is sitting on the ground to the left, working with a basket of straw.

How strange! Have you informed the police?


It's no use going to the police. They don't even let us file complaints, keep telling us to bring proof. What proof are we supposed to show them! In the end it's but loss of the girls' dignity. Am I ever going to be able to get her married if she's dishonoured like this?

It's not just us didi, you can ask about in this village, neighbouring villages - no one sends their girls to school anymore once they're grown up. How are they going to find the time to study with all the housework anyways?



There she is. You talk to her,
I have some work now.

Exit Amrita's father



Amrita! How have you been? Why's your face all covered? Come, move that dupatta out of the way and let me see your face.

Didi, it's custom here for girls to keep their faces covered before outsiders.

But they don't cover their faces at school. And why should they?


The girls don't maintain their modesty at school. They go about with their heads and faces uncovered in broad daylight. All this isn't good, didi. Society here is different. You wouldn't get it.

Amrita! Do you not wish to continue your studies?

Amrita stays silent and keeps standing quietly with her head down.

Didi, you'll have tea right? Let me go to the kitchen. Bulti, come and get the tea for your teacher after some time.

Exit Amrita's mother



Tell me, Amrita. You're such a good student! Won't you be studying any longer?

Amrita doesn't respond

The headmaster has been speaking about having you prepare for the eighth standard scholarship examinations. You'll have to regularly attend school for that! And study from a lot of books outside of your syllabus.



I won't be going to school anymore, Teacher.

How can that be? Convince your parents, Amrita. Tell them you want to keep studying. It's not time for you to get married yet!

Everyday on my way home from school, a boy on a bicycle keeps following me. A lot of my way home is through empty fields. It scares me so much Teacher.

Something like this isn't unusual, Amrita. As long as you don't say anything to him and don't reply if he addresses you, I'm sure everything will be fine.



A didi from the nearby village was surrounded by three guys on the streets... they even touched her body... I really want to study more, Teacher, but what do I even say to my parents! What they're afraid of is a legitimate cause for worry. It's better if I get married, Teacher. At least one of my parents' fears will go away.



Do you have any siblings?




I have a younger brother, he's going to study. He's a boy, there's no need to worry about these things in his case. There's so many benefits to being a boy! They don't have to veil their faces, they eat well, wear better clothes; we get what remains after they've had the lion's share.

No Amrita, that's not right. You're making a huge mistake here. You and your brother should have equal access to food, clothing, and education.

How can that be Teacher! Can boys and girls ever be equal

You'll have to break down these narrow boundaries and escape, Amrita. The world is a much larger place. There is no difference between girls and boys. When you study hard and reach an even higher place, you'll learn to understand this truth.

Education isn't for me, Teacher. There is no way my parents will ever let me go.



You'll have to explain to them, Amrita, and before that you need to understand it yourself. You have to believe in yourself. I'm leaving today Amrita, but I'll come again. If necessary I will bring the headmaster along to talk to your father. I'll go to the police, write letters to the newspapers. You just stay strong and don't lose hope, okay? This is your fight. And we're right here by your side.

Aren't you staying for the tea, Teacher?

The day you get the eighth standard scholarship, I'll come and have tea at your place. Not before that.



You mean it? I can really do it?

Of course you can. Let me go now. I'll come again.

Okay.

Amrita's face lights up with joy. Her dupatta has shifted away and her face is clearly visible. She looks on at the road as her teacher leaves.

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