

Summary

Beauty Parlours, or salons in India house contradictions aplenty. They are sites of feminist resistance, and oppression. Through them folks express their preference but are also buried under the weight of societal expectations relating to body image, prominently but not exclusively, for those that present as female. One of the protagonists of this stage, are the employees- Parlour wali didis (usually those who present as females).

Parlour wali didi literally translates to that older sister at the parlour. Didi is colloquially used to address women who are perceived as older than the speaker, even though they may not necessarily be sisters. Parlour wali didis are sometimes also referred to as parlour wali aunty. These women have been caricatured as these horrible, savage, ruthless people, who usually don't converse in English, and play a pivotal role in enforcing normative body standards. They have been the subject of severe criticism (online, and in spaces where women come together to discuss their experiences of womanhood). For most of my life, I too believed that these parlour employees represented almost the worst of patriarchy. On one visit to a salon, I remember being told that there was something wrong with the keratin bonding in my hair, making it dry

Passage: Between rites and rights

Rohini Roy

and frizzy. It didn't offend me. But why, when a parlour employee, said to me, "aapke bal itne sookhe hain, aap care nahi karte?" (Don't you care for your hair, it's so dry), why did

I think of it as offensive?

I was forced to come to terms with an unconscious bias, which was caste-based. Privileges afforded to people in India are heavily determined even to this day by caste-status. These parlour employees who are usually very good at their jobs, are seen as untrained, informal workers, working for a more well-trained, English-speaking person.

Passage: Between rites and rights explores my coming-of-age through several parlour visits and interactions with these parlour employees. It explores the idea of multiple feminism sharing time and space, without infringing upon one another despite their seeming antagonism. It also touches upon, and this where I got the name, the idea of feminist realisations as a function of privilege.

At the outset, I must mention that this in no way condones the body-shaming that does occur at beauty parlours through its employees, it simply tries to break the creaseless narrative that exists about this space. It must also be noted that the poem recognises that calling parlour employees parlour wali didi/aunty is a conscious attempt to reduce their skilled labour to informal and unskilled, and the poem uses this term only to shed light on the existing caricature, not to further it.

PASSAGE: BETWEEN RITES AND RIGHTS

Beyond Caricatures of Parlour wali Didis

I remember my first time-

I was somewhere between six and nine.

The blinding brightness of the nail polish boxes, colours in every shade of wonder,

The smell of hope, like mud when it thunders,

The cold leather seat against my bare thighs,

Someone handing me a lollipop, I remember it was cherry pie,

Women screaming over hairdryer white noise, a Shah Rukh Khan¹ love song trying hard to be heard,

I was ecstatic, it was a **rite of passage**, from child to girl.

Three more lollipops were consumed within the hour,

I can't tell you whether it was the sugar rush, but I felt more power.

¹ A very famous Bollywood actor considered the King of romance, whatever that means.

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Parlour wali Didi was unimpressed, this wasn't her first experience of initiation,

But she smiled, told me stories, and showered appreciation.

My first time at a grown-up beauty parlour was one that I still remember.

Before we left, Didi told my mother, "She's chubby, forget the bangs, get a hairstyle that's better for her face when you come next, in December."

II

I remember I was fourteen-

Now, at fourteen, I was keen.

Keen-

To be that girl boys adored,

To be the girl that didn't study, but got high scores,

To be a natural at everything, the Midas of middle school if you will,

If only I knew that poor Midas died of starvation,

But facts weren't as cool as comebacks, and I needed to be ~chill~.

I remember-

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The blinding brightness of the nail polish boxes, colours in every shade of inadequacy,

The smell of perfume, on women I wish I could be.

Dexterous fingers running through my hair- ROUGH, ALL WRONG,

Someone handing me a flyer, listing the services that would make me better, perhaps, I wondered, strong?

Women screaming over hairdryer white noise, a Shah Rukh Khan love song trying hard to be heard

I was anxious, it was a **rite of passage**, from child to girl.

My body was careful ripped apart within the hour,

With words and implements unknown to my being,

Stay still, my heart, this is meant to be freeing.

Parlour wali Didi didn't hold back-

Too much hair, not enough on my head

My armpits were too dark, parlour wali didi said.

Is that even a thing?

I wondered as my skin bled.

Artwork: Adrija Sen (my cousin)

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My eyebrows she said, needed threading,

But as the thread scissored its way across my forehead,

I looked like a man she said,

My eyebrows were too faint, not bushy like a real woman.

Why remove the hair if what I had wasn't enough?

"Oh, don't worry, what will fix everything is a blackhead clean-up."

A pedicure, a manicure, whatever else was on that brochure,

"Come back next month, for another treatment", parlour didi said, would it fix me?

Unsure

III

I remember I was eighteen-

A feminist, entering the parlour with agency, it was my ~choice~ to preen.

I remember-

The blinding brightness of the nail polish boxes, colours in every shade of oppression,

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The smell of chemicals, bleaching female self-confidence, as was the timeless fashion,

Dexterous fingers running through my hair, rough, all wrong...

WAIT

Not this again, I am strong.

Not anymore, I reject this fate.

What was that I heard? A comment about my weight?

Parlour wali didis, the agents of patriarchy,

The last nail in the coffin of feminist solidarity.

My body, my choice, I won't let them get to me, there's nothing to discuss,

I looked at didi, raised my eyebrows to a tilt and said '*bas*'.²

Women screaming over hairdryer white noise, a Shah Rukh Khan love song trying hard to be heard

I was triumphant, it was a **rite of passage**, from child to girl.

² It translates to "That's all." But it has to be imagined being said with the sass of Meryl Streep in Devil Wears Prada.

Passage: Between rites and rights

Rohini Roy

I settled into the stretcher, for pain of my choosing, feeling mighty pleased,

I showed her, took one for the team I believed

Just as I began to enjoy my recumbence,

I heard a voice so loud and triumphant,

“Unacceptable” it said,

“I need someone else completely,

I mean, just look at her, she’s just so dirty”

I jolted up and looked around,

For the source of this unfamiliar sound.

Black, dark, I couldn’t see,

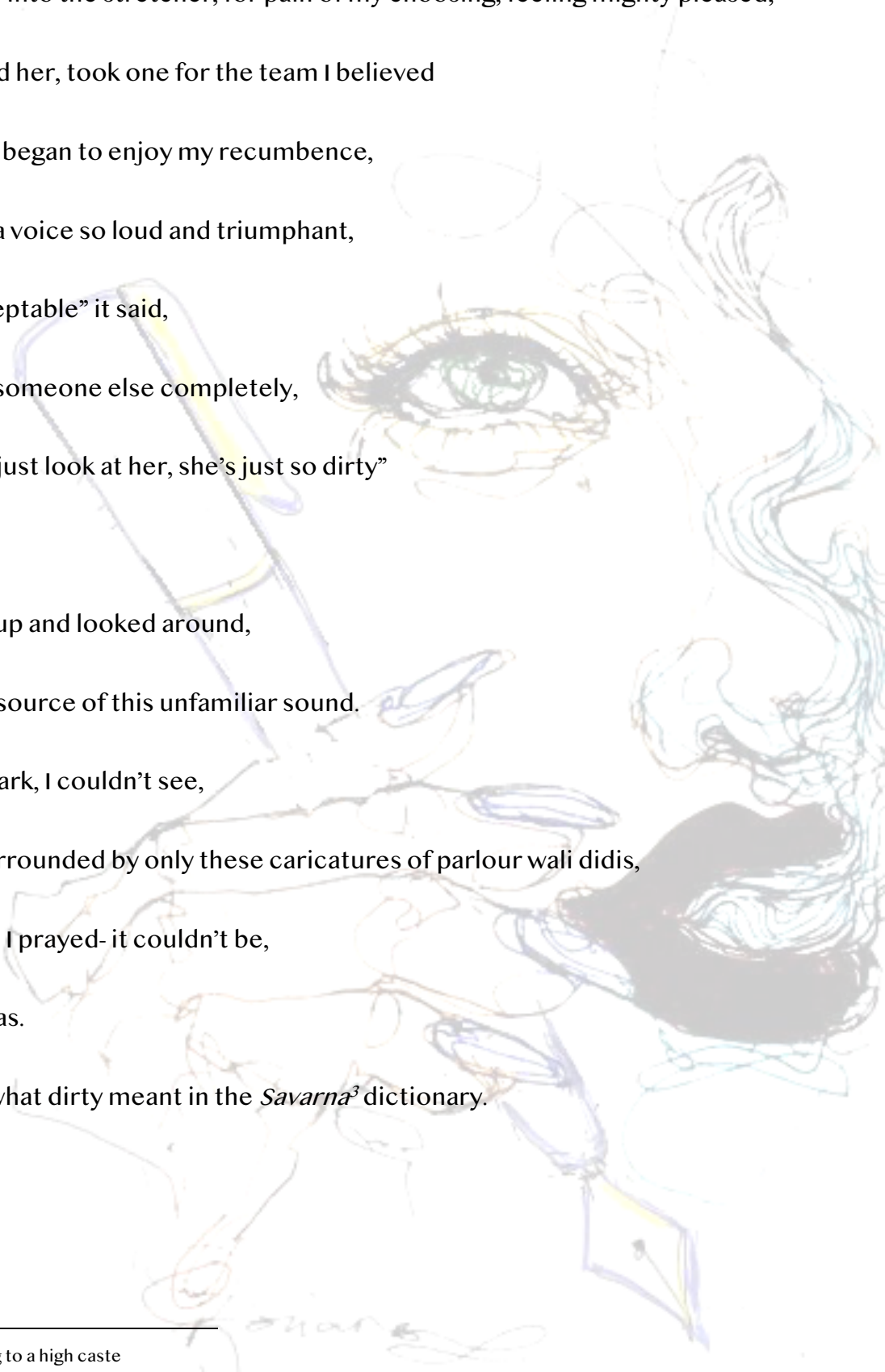
I was surrounded by only these caricatures of parlour wali didis,

I hoped, I prayed- it couldn’t be,

But it was.

I knew what dirty meant in the *Savarna*³ dictionary.

³ Belonging to a high caste



Passage: Between rites and rights

Rohini Roy

I feel... triumphant, I think?

I... took one for the team,

There's women screaming over hairdryer white noise, a Shah Rukh Khan love song...

WAIT

What was this team I was on?

I remember her first time,

She was somewhere between six and nine.

And oh, her eyes, how they shined!

I remember seeing her grow up, from a child to a girl,

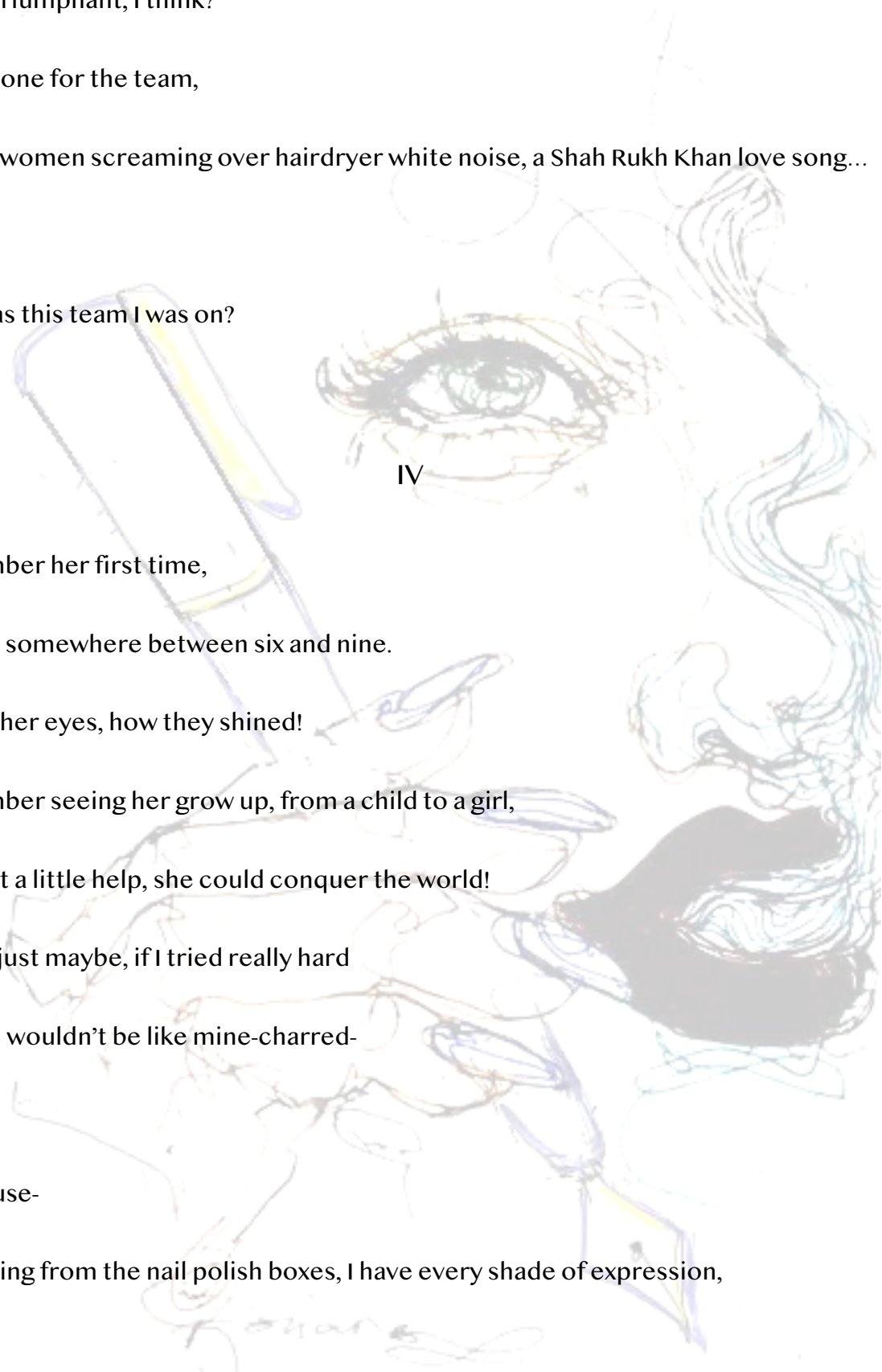
With just a little help, she could conquer the world!

Maybe, just maybe, if I tried really hard

Her fate wouldn't be like mine-charred-

I could use-

Something from the nail polish boxes, I have every shade of expression,



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She would go right out and conquer the world, and nobody would ask her a question.

The bleach, oh, I know it smells, I know she'll make a fuss,

But at least no one will mistake her for one of us.

Her rough hair, if only I could soften,

The world outside will be harsh, ever so often.

I don't know if she knows my name,

But just as well, maybe we're all the same.

I just wish this little girl, lives a life different from mine,

As the years go by, when she looks back in time,

She remembers-

Women screaming over hairdryer white noise, a Shah Rukh Khan love song trying hard to be heard,

How she felt holding my hand through her **right of passage**, from child to girl.