

Selfless acts in classic tales and modern literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

While being selfless is often thought of as a good personality trait, sometimes selflessness can bring unexpected consequences in our own lives as well as in the lives of those around us. In both the collection of stories known as *The Thousand and One Nights* and in K. Saraswathi Amma's "The Subordinate," a trivial role is played by a character who is portrayed as being selfless. Paru Amma in "The Subordinate" and Shahrazad in *The Thousand and One Nights* are selfless in many aspects of their lives. Paru Amma murders her daughter so that her daughter, Lakshmikutty, will not have to endure the hardships and heartbreak that she had to face as a child and as a teenager. On the other hand, Shahrazad volunteers herself to be married to King Shahrayar so that he will not marry another prince's daughter. All of the previous wives that the king has married have been murdered after one night of marriage, but Shahrazad is determined to save these girls by putting her own life in danger. Both of these characters believe they are committing a selfless act, but in all actuality, they are causing harm and heartache to themselves and to those who are close to them. The selfless and limited point of view that each of these women embody results in neither of them fully understanding or considering the consequences that they may bring about upon the other people involved in the events that are taking place.

Paru Amma felt as though killing her daughter in "The Subordinate" was a selfless act because she did not want her daughter to go through the same things that she went through as a child. She considered only one thing when she decided to kill her daughter: her daughter would be freed from this life that she inevitably had inherited. Paru Amma is living vicariously through her daughter because according to her, "Death and prison are preferable to

wayward living” (Iglesias, Mays, and Allen 159). Paru Amma wishes that she would have been killed or imprisoned instead of having to deal with the situations that she was faced with when she was young. Paru Amma says, “Poor girl! How could she know the helplessness of being born a woman in a poor family!”(Iglesias, Mays, and Allen 158). Paru Amma considered her own experiences and assumed that her daughter would feel the same way that she did about their social status and the tasks that they were required to complete. Lakshmikutty, her daughter, was never given an option or a chance. She was not told of the horrible things that had happened to her mother and did not have a say so in how her life played out. She was killed without any other options being considered. Essentially, Lakshmikutty suffered and was murdered because of her mother. Paru Amma committed the act thinking that she was being selfless and giving Lakshmikutty a better life than she had, but she did not consider how Lakshmikutty would feel about the situation.

Shahrazad also believed that she was committing a selfless act by putting her own life at risk to potentially save others; however, she too did not consider all consequences when making the decision to marry King Shahrayar. While Shahrazad acknowledged that she would either “succeed in saving the people or perish and die like the rest”(The Thousand and One Nights 448), she did not acknowledge that people in her family would suffer because of her decision. Shahrazad’s father was distraught when told of the situation that Shahrazad wanted to put him in saying “he will sleep with you for one night and will ask me to put you to death the next morning, and I shall have to do it, since I cannot disobey him”(The Thousand and One

Nights 448). Not only would Shahrazad's father lose a child, but he would also have to be the one that killed her. However, Shahrazad completely ignored her father's comment solidifying the fact that she did not consider his part in the entire situation or what he would go through because of her. Again, someone else would suffer because of a "selfless" act that was being done. Not only does Shahrazad's father suffer because of her decisions, but her sister Dinarzad suffers from her choice as well. Dinarzad plays an important role in Shahrazad's plan to save the women from King Shahrayar. Shahrazad includes Dinarzad as part of the plan and potentially puts Dinarzad's life in danger as well as her own.

Shahrazad decided to be a hero and try to save the lives of the princes' daughters, but she put her own sister in harms way trying to do so. Shahrazad said to Dinarzad, "When I go to the king, I will send for you, and when you come..."(The Thousand and One Nights 452). Shahrazad said this as a statement, not as a question. Shahrazad did not ask Dinarzad if she would be part of her plan, nor did she ask Dinarzad of her opinion. Shahrazad did not know her fate, and she could not be certain that the king would not kill Dinarzad just as he planned to kill Shahrazad. Shahrazad also had no endgame. She did not know how long she would have to tell stories until the king broke his habit. She potentially included Dinarzad in a plan that could dictate Dinarzad's entire life. Dinarzad was not given the option of being part of her sister's plan, just as Lakshmikutty did not have a say so in her mother's plan. This continues to prove that neither character had a full understanding of the consequences that other people would face because of their own actions. The commissioner also suffers from the "selfless" act of

Paru Amma murdering her daughter. He had no idea that he even had a child by Paru Amma, and she did not give him a chance to know his daughter. When the king started to put the pieces together and realize that the murdered girl was his daughter, “ His voice shook a little, but he covered it up hastily” suggesting that he was saddened by the thought that his daughter was killed (Iglesias, Mays, and Allen 159). Therefore, Paru Amma had no regard for how her daughter’s father would react or how he would feel. This proves that Paru Amma did not fully understand and weigh the consequences of her actions relevant to those around her.

While selflessness is a trait that is normally considered a fantastic part of someone’s personality, for these two characters selflessness clouded their judgement. Each of them thought of only one consequence of their selfless action. Paru Amma thought only that her daughter would not have to endure what she did as a child. Whereas Shahrazad thought only that if she made a sacrifice and put her life in danger, the lives of some princes’ daughters could be spared. While on the surface both of these acts seem selfless, both of these women regretted to consider all of the consequences that could come about because of their actions. They believed that they were supposed to do the selfless thing and suffer so that other lives could be saved; however, because they have limited points of view, they were not able to understand that their selfless acts created many unintended consequences for other people in their lives.