

Begum Syndrome

The poem 'Begum Syndrome' reflects on the ethical question of whether it is appropriate to use family members as interpreters in a clinical setting. The interaction between the GP, Zohra and her grandson highlights how sometimes communication can be lost in translation, even when meaning seems complete.

In the first consultation, Zohra struggles to describe her pain, the GP suggests an interpreter, but time pressure leads to a compromise. Zohra returns with her grandson, whose limited understanding leads to changes in the doctor's instructions.

Using family members as interpreters raises ethical concerns such as risk of miscommunication and breach of confidentiality. However, real world issues like time constraints, limited resources and cultural norms cannot be ignored. Through the structure of this poem, I hope to demonstrate how this misunderstanding can develop quietly and not through a single mistake. It highlights the ethical tension between practical constraints and accurate communication.

An uneasy quiet fills the room
disturbed only by a shuffle
or a cough
The clock ticks forward relentlessly

On the fluorescent screen, names appear
then reappear
as each one is summoned

He steps out with a smile on his face
shirt buttoned to the top,
sleeves rolled up neatly
Beneath his eyes
a faint shadow lingers

He glances down at the clipboard
'Za-ho-ra ... Bee-Gam'
syllables slipping slightly out of place

She looks up
adjusts her headscarf
rising slowly
bangles gently clink against each other
hand clutching her side
as if she might fall apart
if she moves too quickly

He gestures to the chair
as he had done so many times before
familiar, warm, rehearsed

‘How can I help today?’
the question lingers
longer than it should

She pauses for a moment,
as if the pain was crawling through her
refusing to stay still

‘I hurt here’ she mutters
hand sprawled across her abdomen

Not here
Not there
Not exactly
But everywhere

He waits patiently
searching for something to locate
something tangible

Instead, she offers
tiredness
weakness
a pain that can’t settle

Words that spill out
with nowhere to land

Exaggeration?
The thought flickers

A subtle glance at the time is all it takes.
He could ask her again
slowly, in a different manner
But the clock ticks forward relentlessly.

‘I’m sorry’ he says
‘I can’t understand you.
Can you bring someone who can translate?’

She looks at him, concerned,
as if the conversation had paused too
abruptly.

The next week
the same uneasy quiet fills the room
disturbed only by a cough or shuffle.

Her name is called up,
the familiar sound of bangles
answers before she does

But this time
she's not alone

A boy, no older than nine, standing slightly ahead
'She's been feeling very weak' he says
clutching on to his grandmother's hand
She nods in agreement, as if she understood.

The doctor speaks in measures
Timings, Numbers, Doses
the boy listens carefully
holding each word in his tiny hands
as much as he can carry

Some words are too heavy
they slip through and he drops them
but the boy picks them back up again
as something lighter this time
Something he can carry home

The doctor asks
'Do you understand?'
The boy nods, as he believed he did.

The question lingers and remembers who it really belongs to.

The doctor looks at her
He could ask again, differently this time.
But the clock ticks forward relentlessly.

At home
the instructions change shape
the meaning fractures

the boy has taken back what he can carry
but the rest is left behind.

Timings change
the spaces between medications
bend and soften

Morning becomes when you wake up
Night becomes when you remember to take it

She takes the tablets
as the boy tells her
because his voice
is the only one that can make sense

The instructions have shifted
and the difference between what was told

and what was done
starts to matter