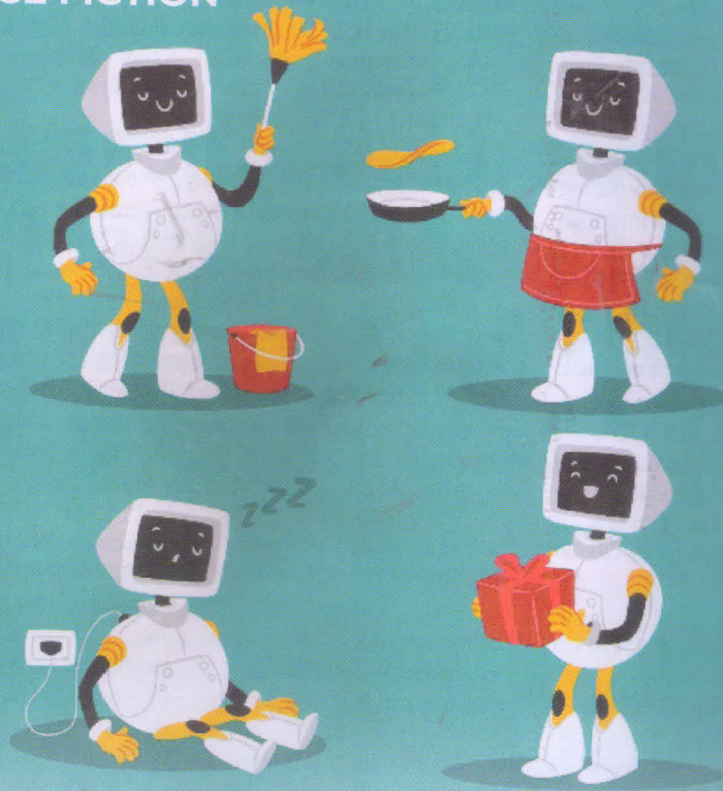


SCIENCE FICTION



Ramatai's Dilemma

Revathi

RAMATAI shook her hands. The wet hands sprayed water around. She shook again as if the already washed hands were still dirty. It felt so to her.

This is not the first time that she felt her hand very dirty. It has been a frequent happening these days. Something that began only recently.

Ramatai remembers clearly when it all started. It was four and a half years ago when Malkin brought home the Cybertai. It was a hate at first sight for Ramatai. She hated it because someone else was being trusted more than her.

Yes. Ramatai was the most trusted member of that household. And that was why she was there for almost two decades. She had grown up with the kids in the house, married while working as a maid here, and brought her kids also to adulthood.

She called it the house, Ghar, and her home as the shanty. But nowadays the Ghar was feeling like a prison, and her Shanty the home.

It was all because of Cybertai. When Cybertai first stepped into the house — na she wheeled in — unloaded from Ekart truck, Ramatai was happy. She felt that she had got a toy to play with. And she told so to Mrs Sitara, her Malkin. Who does not know that happiness that comes without effort is always shortlived?!

It took just four or five months for Ramatai to realise this. The first time she felt unhappy was when Cybertai spilt tea all over the dining table, and Ramatai had to clean it up. Malkin

has brushed away the incident saying that some 'Saftavara' malfunctioned. Ramatai felt bad, *saftawara* or *baftawara*, a mistake is a mistake. Would Malkin have condoned Ramatai's mistake also like that?

That was the beginning of the sadness. And all the fault was the Cybertai's.

They called her Yureka. Malkin told her that it was a Robot maid that used AI. The latest in the market, and future proof. It would learn whatever is taught, and improve.

She asked what future proof meant. Malkin had explained that the Robot will change if the circumstances also change, and one need not change the Cybertai as often as the neighbours did their maidservant. "It is almost like you. Adapts to everything, and is helpful." Malkin had explained.

Ramatai had felt happy that Malkin trusted her to be a maid forever.

Cybertai was brought home to help Ramatai, Malkin had explained. But Ramatai had

her own doubts. It is common to change maids or even do without them when children grow up. Malkin's children had grown and were now going to college. They no more came to Ramatai, nagging her for trifles. Nowadays, she would see them only once or twice a week. Most of the time they stayed in their rooms, reading, browsing or playing loud music.

Loud music hurts. But Ramatai can't complain. And Cybertai is not bothered. She can't hear the way Ramatai did. And even if it is very loud, she can tune her ears to make it pleasant. Humans can't. Neighbours are too far off to complain about this farmhouse, a house built away from the bustle of the city. Malkin is a big boss in one of the banks, and Malik is most of the time out of the country. That is why four years ago when Malkin's daughter turned thirteen, she thought of bringing Cybertai.

"Look. The kids have got used to you so much, they won't treat you as a friend," she had told Ramatai the reason why Cybertai was bought. "It is just a machine. It will do what we tell," she said. "We need someone to take care of the laundry, arrange things in the right places and talk to Meety whenever she feels like it. You are also getting old. How much can you do?" Malkin had explained. It looked good to Ramatai too.

Certainly. It was good in the beginning. Cybertai would wash clothes, put vessels for washing, put clothes on line for drying, clean the corners and under the sofa and talk to the daughter endlessly! Most of the time it was listening, though!

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