

THE FORGOTTEN CRY

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As soon as I arrived home, I heard it insistently.

The same feeble, monotonous muffled sobs quivering through the air, penetrating the aching chillness of winter. Not once or twice, I had already heard it and felt sympathised for those sobs caused due to Nature's fury or desertion by humans. Those sobs were of Jeya's. She was a lass of eight and had, once, been a priceless asset in the household of Joseph. Though born in poverty, she was a happy princess to her parents and brothers. But presently she had turned out a victim, a waif, accursed, her relatives said in chorus without constraint over their lips.

Nobody knows for sure when and what comes about to whom in the natural course of life. Had the calamity in the form of Tsunami that occurred on 26th December 2004 not occurred, Jeya would not have been deprived of her whole family consisting of her beloved parents and two elder brothers.

Rashmi looked morose on the threshold, an imprint of stress and tension across the expanse of her countenance. She cast a momentary glance about, dropped her chin towards me and whispered.

“That ogress has beaten up Jeya today as well. She has been crying aloud for a long while. Go and watch her posture, dear... Wearing a long face... sitting in a miserable position, face placed on both the knees and hands held up on the head... Intolerable to view, in fact ! “

“Do you know why..?” I asked.

“Of course not, but such a misfortune should not befall so even our foes”, said she with consternation and asked “ Is there nothing we can do... to put an end to her pangs?”

“There is a way ahead of us; we are to approach Jeya's aunt and advise her until she realizes her folly. But, it is not that much easy, you know !”, I said.

“She is a woman like me. Shall I take the responsibility of winning her over to me?”, She said gleefully.

“Don’t you know her grouchy temperament, darling? Have you forgotten she had made a fuss with you on several occasions? Always over petty matters. She is tetchy and pugnacious by nature. I am afraid she can be persuaded to do nothing against her disposition. Instead, it might worsen the present state, nothing else”.

“There is an amicable solution to every problem if approached in right angle, you used to say !”, she asserted.

“I don’t deny now too.... but the present one is a delicate issue... that’s why I am worried over its consequences ... because I, too, love Jeya !”, my voice was husky.

“If so”, she touched my wrist, “Shall I beckon to her? At least, I go and bring her in here”?, she asked me with the eyes exuding sympathy. I understood her sole intention was to relieve Jeya of her distress, for the fulfillment of which she minded no repercussions.

I looked at her reflectively” Why to take such risk, Rashmi? She may be searched out immediately. The moment she is not found about, her aunt may come straight against us and develop a tussle with us. Its aftermath will be reflected upon the innocent girl multifold, you know !”

Nothing she uttered thereafter and she hurried her paces in and vanished into the kitchen.

Just in two days after my arrival to this South Indian coastal hamlet on departmental transfer, I was informed. Jeya had been adopted by her maternal uncle, Ashtafan since her family were buried alive by the tsunami waves. With an exception of a few days initially, it had become an insistent routine for her to be driven out of the house at late hours, mostly for petty reasons, just outside the slammed door and be dragged in by her aunt or uncle after her lashes were dried up.

“We have since long undertaken fool’s errand to various worshipping places, anticipating His mercy to gift us with a single foetus. For the fulfillment of this steadfastness, we have fasted on many days; but He has forbidden thus benediction from our possession. Those people unlikely seem to have realised the indispensability of a child, the fulfillment of precious love of human beings.” Rashmi was cross and upset “ Dear ! Nothing in favour will be resulted in our being restless confined to these four walls. Unless her aunt alters her mind and gives up this sort of brutish treatment, Jeya’s hardship will keep on mounting up”. I tried to propitiate her.

“How naïve Jeya is! Why has she to suffer a wretched life in this way? How joyful and playful children of her age group are? The Almighty should not have allowed such a scourge in her life. She is denied both joy and peace”, said she, distressed.

I took her in my hands, the strategy I used to adopt to appease similar hot situations. She leaned on my bosom and looked up as if awaiting something from me to add more pep to her argumentation. Her eyes glimmered.

Heavy minutes slithered on. We had not yet dined though we were at the dining table for long. Meanwhile Rashmi had hurried to the window side and observed Jeya and returned time and time, sighing.

The wall clock struck eleven. Frogs croaked and dogs barked somewhere. This time on the front door was heard many a knock repeatedly. Rashmi made a dash for the door as if looking forward to some guest for a long time and unlatched it with alacrity. To our shock stuck to the door was Jeya standing, shuddering, whimpering in the dim light. There were lines of fear drawn across her face.

Rashmi threw her hands towards Jeya and clasped her hands tightly, shooting a glance about, led her in a hurry and bolted the door behind as a precaution.

She was seated on the sofa. After a while, my wife asked her, “What do you want? Something hot or cold?”.

“No please, aunt”, she said.

“Why so, Jeya?” She winked a tear away. “All my destiny...! What else could I say? I said or did no evil, deserving to be punished like this”, she rubbed her eyes. “While playing with Sunil, he tumbled down, hurt one of his toes and so whimpered a long time until he fell in a sleep”. She felt fidgety.

“I had not committed it on purpose, aunt. For that only ...for that ... my aunt had flogged me in cold blood. Are you able to see my body?”. She exposed her skin from side to side.

The skin on her limbs was embossed; red patches in two places; her cheeks were pinched; blood welling from right cheek; across her back were reddish lines as if tattooed; her tattered garment torn in several places and the torn piece was sagging on right forearm.

“In fact, you seem to have been mangled by a tigress”, said Rashmi sorrowfully, “Is your uncle at home?”.

“Yes, he is... but he can neither pronounce in my favour nor against my aunt. This evening too, uncle upbraided her and said something in support of me whereupon aunt made a hue and cry against his face hysterically. At length, he stared at her for a while and walked aside on his way. He is in all not defiant before her..” She paused for a while. “It is nothing but fate. I have to put up with since escape out of it seems hardly possible...”

“You haven’t been to school nowadays ... why, Jeya...? You don’t long for study?”

“I do “, she said hurriedly. “But, aunt’s health doesn’t permit me to carry it on.”

“Tell me in detail. What’s wrong with her health? She seems healthy”, Rashmi affirmed frowningly.

“As seemed outside, she is not hale and, most often, she becomes ill-off and suffers from rheumatism very acutely at times. Those times, she is unable to attend to the usual household activities too. Lying on the mat, she groans all night twisting her body left and right without a wink of sleep. A pathetic sight to view at such times in fact !”

“Before you arrived there, who did all that you do presently? “ I asked her. With a little pause to think over, she said, “There was a maid servant”.

“What happened to her? Was she dropped? “

“It seems so.”, her voice dropped.

“If they had really interested to send you to school, they would have employed a servant in your place”. Rashmi screamed.

“Now a days servants have no real devotion or love towards their masters, aunt used to say so “, said she “If I go to school, who will take care of her and Sunil? To fetch water from a long distance, to clean the vessels, to sweep the floor and around the house, and to go for marketing and so on as I am engaged in presently. “.

“If you go on executing your domestic duties, it is well and good for them at present. What about your future? Who will brood it over?” I raised the doubt.

“Uncle ! I am now under their wings. They will care for my future, I am sure.!”.

“Not yet cared for you. Then, when...? What a stupid girl you are !” I was about to yell at her thunderously but imprisoned the thought...

Both God and child are one I had overheard people say. For the first time, I began to comprehend its very meaning out of her attitude and fortitude. What a crystal clear heart !

“ I suppose you have no other garment except the one on you everyday. No other one we have seen since our arrival here”, Rashmi highlighted.

Her eyebrows drew together. Perhaps, she had disliked the question.

“As you know, I have been shut in at home round the clock. No outing away this home. Then say what for variety of dresses. !”, she said in the same breath. Her voice was whistling.

We goggled at her riposte for every question in amazement.

To tell the truth, a few days back, we bought a fancy frock for her and had been in dilemma as to how to hand it to her personally as we had no mettle to face her aunt in the stern trust that she might pay no need to acknowledge it.

Rashmi went in like a typhoon and reappeared with the frock in her hands. “This is for you, Jeya! Receive it, please.”

She threw a glance over it. Her face sparkled but it turned ashen the next moment. Her eyes were full of tears of joy, grateful joy.

“I understand well this is the reflection and demonstration of your affection upon me. In reality, I stoop before your frenzy of affinity and compassion. But ...“

“But what...? Be frank with us, Jeya”

“ Having acknowledged it, what am I going to tell aunt about it? Tens of queries, she may rise and collect a large crowd even in front of the house. You may have become aware of her. She is the one who does not like these kinds of proceedings”.

“What do you intend to say?” Rashmi asked, nonplussed, her eyes fixed on Jeya’s. I looked up to Jeya, having assessed what answer she would give then.

“I am really sorry. I don’t intend to receive it at this time. Perhaps I take it now, my aunt will certainly be displeased.” Becalmed, she said jauntily. “In future, things may turn propitious and we’ll see then. Or else, you hand it to me through aunt. That’s the right way, I think”.

“Suppose she declines.?” Rashmi asked her about the likelihood.

A ray of sorrow flashed across her face at this probability. She paused for moments. “For Heaven’s sake, it should not be so.”

“If so...?” , Rashmi asked.

“If so...”, she faltered. “If so, what to do aunt?”

At this time, her aunt’s voice so rumbling and threatening was heard outside. To be frank, I had known earlier that this situation might come to pass in a short while.

“Where are you lounging in the dark, girl? Wherever you are out, stand before me at once. If failed to appear, you will be no more ... never examine my patience, you pucker !”

She was groping for Jeya, her steps hurrying, her voice intensifying as seconds progressed. Her whole attention was drawn towards our house.

Jeya quivered just like a trapped rat on hearing the awful shouts, racing towards her like sharp arrows.

“Don’t lose heart, child... don’t ... let me accompany you to her...”, her voice was whistling because a tinge of horror grasped her quickly though she said so stringently.

Rashmi put her hands around Jeya’s in stupor and ushered her to her aunt. I followed them both a little behind being aware of something ominous was going to take place right now. Timidly, Jeya slunk behind Rashmi, losing strength to face her aunt. In a jiff, her aunt curled her hair around and pounced upon Jeya and gripped her tuft, saying nothing except flinging a scorching look towards us.

“You are a girl and you should not run door to door”, she burst into a raucous voice.

“We only have taken her to our residence, for being alone she was weeping, sitting on the steps in the dead of night”, I poured oil on troubled waters.

“I know her every inch... better than you do ! She is arrogant and disobedient.”, she said with a booming tone.

“In this matter, she is at no fault, I assure you”, I assured her “Well... it seems she has won you to her side in a few minutes’ time. Really she is gifted with such eloquence and flair beyond her age and experience...”, said she, her tone wild.

She is scarred off too much ... deal with her in a soft manner, please”. I interrupted in a tender voice with her...”.

“I am her guardian ... I know what to do with her...”, her eyes shrank.

Having noticed our intervention, she kept on tightening her grip more and more. And she started moving off. Jeya was wriggling on to release her aunt’s hold and up her head, sobbing.

She was trailed along at last as if an innocent lamb by a bloody butcher.