

REFLECTION

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When I stand in front of the mirror and see the image in front of me, I feel: Could this face, any day, fall in love with somebody? The thought is nothing but a tragedy. There is no sign on the face of ever having taken a decision. The forty-year old face looks aged and bogged down with dilemma. There are dark circles round the eyes and the expression on the face does not indicate that it has ever smiled. But still, the face has acquired a look of maturity of a sage, essentially because; most of the material pleasures of life have been given up. This is a sacrifice led by scarcity. Sometimes I feel: Persons who are born and brought up like me and live single, can only pick up a conversation with the reflection in the mirror and none else.

There might be a reason for picking up a conversation with the reflection. How would one expect others to fall in love with a person having reflection, which does not evoke a feeling of love in himself? I know, there is no greater sin than self-pity. But a lonely man of my type would get all the love, appreciation and pity only from himself.

The cause for all misery might be in being an introvert. But, was there a way out? Having come here to Hyderabad, all the way from the village, and to have taken up an employment with an unknown girls school where the medium of instruction was Kannada, which was a minority language in this State, sitting here in a gloomy old room, on the first floor of a building in a bylane of Sultan Bazaar and being a lone forty year old man amongst several women teachers, I could have hardly been anything but an introvert. On this day, on a chilly Saturday morning, especially on a day the headmistress is on leave, being faced with the inevitability of occupying her chair, it is not surprising that the memory of that girl who had just come in like a flash and suddenly disappeared must have been the cause for misery.

In the school, there are women all around. Even the small girls being taught now, would grow up to be women. Working in such an environment for over a decade, it is natural for anybody to think that he has acquired a tremendous capability of understanding the fair sex. But, one needs to be made of a different material to be loved. A person being loved for just being an introvert was never heard of, nor read.

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It was early in the day. I was shivering from the chill outside. I wore a sleeveless sweater, got on to the bicycle to go to school. I had to take a class in Mathematics for the third standard and in Social

Studies for the fourth standard. The first session was free for me. But that did not mean that I could be late to the school. Since the headmistress was on a longish leave, I had to go early to ensure that the children recited the Morning Prayer. After I was through with these rituals, I occupied the headmistress' chair and had started flipping through the morning newspapers. It was then that she came. It was very rare that we got *burqa* clad women to visit our school. Moreover, I had a peculiar problem with such women: while they could read all the non-verbal signs of communication on my face, like the expression, the reaction, the flutter of the eyelashes or the creases on the forehead, I just could not fathom the face behind the *burqa*. You would not even know whether the woman was young or old and would not even see the face. This woman, who came clad in a *burqa* seemed to mean business and asked a straight question: Was it possible to get an admission for a girl in the fourth standard?

It was not usual for somebody to come in the month of December, when the annual examinations were just three months away - seeking an admission in the school. But it was not very surprising in my school either. It was well known that people used to come to our school, when every other school in the city turned down the request for accommodation to their wards. Such people who joined midway would somehow last till the end of the academic year and then would find an admission in some other school for the next year. It was therefore not surprising that somebody asked for an admission in the month of December.

But to explain the situation to the lady was difficult. This was a girls school run by the migrants speaking Kannada, who came from the neighbouring State of Karnataka. We do have an English medium section here, but it was full. It was not possible to accommodate a new student. However, the Kannada medium section of the fourth standard had a place to accommodate more students. Even then, I told the lady, that she would have to wait for the headmistress to return. I perhaps expected that she would not seek an admission in Kannada medium, under any circumstances, especially since she was a Muslim which was proved beyond doubt by her *burqa* and by the conversation she carried out in pure Hyderabad Urdu or *Dakhani*, as we used to call it. This prompted me to highlight the impossibility of obtaining a place in the English medium section, while keeping the possibility of an admission in Kannada medium open.

We bargained on the issue of a seat for about half an hour. My argument was simple: It was not possible for her daughter to join our school from either English or Urdu medium, or for that matter from Telugu medium into Kannada medium. It was not desirable too. And, there was no place available in the English medium. If over and above this argument she insisted, then the only way out was to meet the headmistress soon after she came back from her leave. In any case, it was for the headmistress to take a decision.

The lady suddenly broke into Kannada and said: "Sorry master, even if it is going to be difficult, I want my daughter to study in this school." She opened the flap of her burqa and I could then see her face. I was naturally surprised at the dramatic turn that the conversation was taking.

"Master, believe me" She continued "I am a Hindu girl and a Kannada speaking one at that. I want my daughter to learn my language. Please accommodate her. It is quite okay if she loses a year, or fails in the examinations. Just let her study in your school." She continued pleading as I stared at the somewhat familiar face. Suddenly my eyes became foggy and I removed my thick glasses and put them on the table.

It was natural for me to ask the next question - "Where are you from?"

At this question, she quickly pulled the flap back and just said "Matamari". As she said that, she got up and abruptly left.

As soon as she said "Matamari" everything was clear in my mind. It was not necessary for her to utter anything more. I knew who she was, where I had seen her earlier, why her face was familiar, everything. I wondered if she had recognised this schoolmaster as soon as the thick glasses were taken off?

I remember having seen Sumati right from her childhood. In a small place like Matamari and that too in a small Brahmin community, it was difficult not to know anybody. It was not even surprising for people of Matamari to meet here in Hyderabad. But the circumstances of this particular meeting were really surprising. Or, was it that, a person like Sumati could be met only under such circumstances?

In Matamari, the Kulakarnis like me had rituals very similar to Telugus, as far as marriage was concerned. If a girl was to be married off, the uncle's or aunt's (mother's brother's or father's sister's) son always had the first right to marry the girl. And so, Srikantha, Sumati's uncle's son and the only eligible fellow in their family was the butt of all our jealousy. We would all wonder how this monopoly of Srikantha could be broken and we would collectively dream of the possibilities of the same. As we continued dreaming, one fine day, we got the news that Sumati had after all got married and that the groom was not Srikantha. We were all very happy at the fact that ultimately Srikantha had lost out in the race until we came to know of Sumati's story further. When ultimately the name of the person she had married was confirmed, we were all concerned, afraid, nervous and also grew sympathetic to

her.

There was an old maid called Husseinbi who used to work in (Sumati's father) Kulakarni's house. In fact as all the Brahmins that lived in the locality were Kulakarnis, all the maids were Husseinbis. We therefore never knew what her real name was. There was a rumour that Sumati had started a hush hush affair with this Husseinbi's son Khader. Very soon this talk spread from person to person and from house to house. Everybody in the village was talking about the adventures of Husseinbi's son. The Kulakarnis of the village found it difficult to hush up this talk and think of it as a fact. The greatest blow to the ego of Kulakarnis came when Sumati, who was more educated than Khader, who belonged to the upper caste walked away from home and started living in the Muslim locality of the same village with Khader.

This event triggered great anger and united the whole village against Husseinbi's family. Khader did not even have a job or a business going. Except for the fact that Khader was well built masculine and looked smart, he was nothing. How could Sumati fall in love with such a man? How could she walk into this trap? Nobody knew the details of the affair fully. There were several versions of this story floating around in the village. I now, do not remember all the details because it is fifteen years since all these happened. All I remember now is this: After this incident, the Kulakarnis of Matamari did not allow Husseinbi and her family to stay in the village for long. A few days later, the people even stopped talking about it.

A few days after Sumati entered Husseinbi's house, Husseinbi's husband was killed. I just cannot forget the grotesque scene. His head was cut off from the torso and blood seemed to have spilled all over the village. This has continued to remain as a nightmare for me. Even to this day, I cannot understand how the brahmins of my village could gather courage even to think of such an act, let alone implementing it.

Nobody knew who all were involved in this killing. The Police Patel of the village, who always hid himself during times of crisis had taken this occasion to flee to Hyderabad. By the time he returned the Raichur Police had taken up the case. They had come down to the village, investigated the affair and had registered a case. The way they conducted the *Mahazar* and carried the corpse was a very clear indication of the course the investigation would take. Everybody knew what the outcome of the case would be.

There was one more element that became amply clear to everybody after the incident. The message was loud and clear. There was no way anybody could continue living in Matamari after breaking the

traditions and customs of this place. Nobody, the Muslims, the Brahmins and the Harijans included, cooperated with the Police in their investigations. The reason possibly was that such a marriage was unacceptable to all these communities. After this incident, no other incident of a similar nature has ever occurred in Matamari till now. Nobody really knew what happened to that case. All that we knew was that, Husseinbi, Khader and Sumati had left for Hyderabad. I had now seen Sumati for the first time after that incident.

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Now, when I stand in front of the mirror and think of Sumati, I wonder: Was I in love with her? Otherwise, there was no reason for me, who was suffering from some frustration, a search and a dissatisfaction to suddenly feel nice, as if the problem that was haunting me all these years was solved. Was this the reason for this self-imposed look of a sage who had resigned and walked away from the facts of life? But then, it cannot be said that only Sumati was my point of interest and curiosity. What about Khader? I also wanted to know how Husseinbi was. I was also curious to know whether Sumati had converted herself. It is said that Muslims have a system of polygamy. Did that mean that Khader had three other wives? Several such questions ranging from sympathetic to curious ones continued to haunt me.

One could not do anything at all till she came to school on her own. Sumati, who appeared in my life after a long gap of fifteen years, had now suddenly disappeared again, even before I could fill my eyes with her face. She had dissolved into thin air, even before I could realise that she was Sumati. I did not have her address, I did not know if she had changed her name. I did not even know if she had recognised me. I thought for a moment that I now was venturing to look out for a totally different person. As I felt this, I also had a terrible sympathy for the reflection in front of me.

For me, to think about love, and sympathy; to be curious about a woman, seemed ridiculous, especially since I had not dared to look at myself closely in the mirror for the past fifteen years. There were tears in the edge of my eyes. I removed my glasses and spread the mat. I just collapsed on the mat and fell asleep.

I waited for another three days, expecting Sumati at the school. I thought that she might never come there, as she must have recognised me on that day. But, on the fourth day, when I had almost given up hope, I came to know that she had already given an application for the admission of her daughter. I was really surprised when one of the teachers showed me the application form. How did she manage to slip in when I was not around?

Curiosity made me open up the application. I started looking at the details that were given in the

form. Name of the applicant: Soumya. Age: 10 years. Name of the mother: Sumati. Name of the father: Khader. As I saw the form, I also learnt, by heart, the address that was given there. I thought that I should visit her house in Chappal Bazaar one of these days.

In the meanwhile, I went to the barber and got a nice haircut. I also got into the habit of wearing cleaner clothes. Was this an indication of my newfound love for life? Or was it the inner impulse that since I was in a position to give Sumati something that I should appear smart enough while giving? What would I give, after all - love, sympathy or a seat for her daughter? The other teachers in the school did observe these apparent changes and teased me for that.

I was expecting Sumati with her daughter at the school through the week. She did not turn up till Saturday. I wondered about the possible reasons. I thought that I could look them up and pay a visit. After all, they were all from my own village. While there were valid reasons to look up Sumati there were none to decide on the contrary. I sat in front of the mirror, wondering what to do.

Whenever I sit in front of the mirror, there is always a question that haunts me. Why is it that this face has not seen a wedding, even at the late age of forty? Even now, whenever I go back to my village, my parents pick up the topic. I on the contrary have not found enough reasons to argue for my continuing to remain a bachelor. Was Sumati some sort of a benchmark for me at the sub-conscious level? Sometimes I felt that what she represented was nothing but love - true love. To walk away to Khader who had absolutely nothing was an act that could not be explained by anything other than love. Now after having lived with myself for so long, I am so used to loneliness, that I do not feel like marrying at all. Staying with oneself could be a dangerous habit and I am now suffering the effects of such a habit. I think I have reached a stage where I am now incapable falling in love with anybody, including myself.

I must have got into this habit about a decade ago. Now, I needed a very strong incentive to get out of this habit. Possibly I had never found this incentive in the any of the Kulakarni girls, whom my parents proposed. I looked into the mirror again. I was now fed up with studying the reflection over and over again. I turned my face away out of sheer boredom.

When I turned away from the mirror, for the first time, I did not know what to do, on this December evening. The feeling was frustrating. This was the first time, in several years, that I seemed to suffer from loneliness. What was I doing after school in the evening everyday, all these years? I do not remember. I just remember the routine: I used to come back from school and cook *Kichadi* for myself. Today, I did not feel like cooking *Kichadi* even. I thought of eating in a restaurant outside. When I thought of what it would cost me every month if I were to eat in the restaurant everyday, I

realised that I could afford only one meal a day in the salary I got. I then felt that if I were not in a mood to cook *Kichadi* I would be better off giving up my evening meal. Suddenly I felt that the possible reason for all this frustration seemed to be in the curiosity named "Sumati". I then wore a sweater, got on to my bicycle and went straight to Chappal Bazaar.

Sumati's house was in the Muslim *mohalla* in a lane behind the Chappal Bazaar mosque. It was not easy to find a house in Hyderabad with just the address. One had to ask somebody for directions. At this time in the evening, somebody looking for Khader's house in a suspicious manner must have come to the notice of several people. I was for a moment, nervous to continue this search and just roamed around in Kacheguda once. Ultimately, I realised that Husseinbi, Khader and Sumati were all from my village and there was no reason for me to be nervous. This thought gave me a stupid courage to get back to Chappal Bazaar again.

When I saw the surroundings of Sumati's house, I did feel bad for her. I felt sorry for the pathetic state to which a "Kulakarni" girl had come down to. But suddenly, I remembered that even I who was from the same clan was not any better.

Several difficult questions arose in my mind from time to time. For instance, a question like, did all my contemporaries leave the village just for the fancy of taking up a job and not really because we needed it or was this because the overall economic strength of the clan itself was deteriorating? I then easily found an answer for these quickly: "I left my village for a job. I now have a job on hand. The salary I receive is the only income I have got and my standards of living must seek an adjustment with the level of income."

Finally I did trace Sumati's house. I put the bicycle on its stand and knocked on the door. Husseinbi opened the door. I could recognise her instantly. She had not changed at all in the past fifteen years. As soon as she saw me she opened her mouth wide and said "*Kya?*"

"Do you remember me Hushambi? I am Kulakarni's" I said in Kannada.

"Oh, come come Babu, come in. Sumati was telling me about you" Husseinbi said and ushered me in. There seemed to be no other soul in the house. The house was filled with all sorts of implements - pick axes, crowbars, shovels and knives. 'So, ultimately Khader got down to be a blacksmith' I thought. The job seemed to befit a well-built man like him. Then the thoughts of Khader seemed to flow.

Husseinbi was in a mood to talk. She talked about Matamari, about the murder of her husband and

what not. She choked as she talked about her husband. She wiped the tears off her eyes and told me that even Khader died last year in a ghastly way in a communal riot, here at Hyderabad. She said that from then on it was Sumati who was carrying on the family.

It was quite possible that Sumati took over the reins of the family from the very day Khader's father died. A girl, who had the nerve to marry Khader and live with him in the Muslim locality right in the village, would be subservient to none. Now, the inimitable fool that I was, I took up the topic of Sumati's future with Husseinbi. My concern doubled just because she was now a widow:

Don't you think Sumati needs some support, Hushambi?" I asked.

Husseinbi laughed loudly. She said that one would have to look into the effects of such a thought. "As if the complications in the family are not enough, do you want to add in more Babu?" She asked. And who would marry a woman like her? When such questions arose, Husseinbi just said this: If at all somebody marries Sumati, the possibility is that the man would need the marriage much more than Sumati herself. She elaborated and said that, there were people who needed Sumati's support rather than the other way round. When Husseinbi repeated this twice, somewhere down below there arose a doubt that she was talking of me and that made me terribly uncomfortable.

As I got more and more convinced that she was talking about me, I also found it was necessary to get away from the topic. I started talking about Soumya instead. I talked about the difficulties of school education. Ultimately, I realised that I had landed myself in a peculiar situation, trying to prove to Husseinbi that the object of my visit was actually Soumya and not Sumati.

As soon as I started talking about Soumya, Husseinbi started explaining why it was important for Soumya to get an admission in my school. It seemed, both of them were worried about the girl, right from the day of Khader's death. They were constantly afraid of Soumya's return from school in time, her safety and so on. They thought that a different school would lessen their anxiety a bit and so decided to put Soumya into my school.

When Husseinbi was narrating this, the crowbars and pickaxes in her house assumed new meaning for me and I shuddered thinking of other possibilities. I came back home and sat staring at the roof while my stomach continued lodging its protests of hunger.

I decided to make some *Kichadi*. I put some rice and *dal* on the stove for cooking. Once it was ready, I just spread out the *Kichadi* on my plate for it to cool down, picked up a book and relaxed on

the bed.

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Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door. I do not remember having seen the time, but I guess it was past 9:30 in the evening. My body was gripped with fear. I slowly opened the door. There was a girl about 10-12 years of age standing outside. Even she seemed to be terribly shaken up. She just walked in and said that she would like to sit down for about five minutes.

I was surprised that a small girl could come at this time of the day and ask for shelter. I also shuddered at the possibility of a larger conspiracy behind her. But I could not think further on those lines. I was not in a frame of mind to think at all. I just called her in. She asked for water. I gave her some. She just gulped it down and started narrating her predicament. She had come to Bagh Lingampally for private tutitions. As it was getting late for her, she decided to take a cycle rickshaw home. The richshawallah, instead of taking her home, started pedalling in a different direction. She just could not think of anything or gather herself to do anything until he pedalled away up to Malakpet. It was only here that she suddenly got the presence of mind to jump off the rickshaw, when he slowed down. She started running. She just ran till she was breathless and then knocked on the first door that she found, which happened to be mine.

When she narrated this, I first opened the door and peeped outside. Then I wondered why she knocked my door, of all the doors that were available. I then thought it was best - the safest bet - to hand her over to the nearest Police Station. I told her so. The girl became more nervous at that offer.

I could not think of asking her anything else. I just turned around once. The face in the mirror appeared totally different. I wiped the sweat off the face and gulped down some water. I thought I could drop her home on the bicycle. Somehow, the memory of that evening, the picture of crowbars and pickaxes in Chappal Bazaar, the conversation with Husseinbi, the memory of Khader, Communal riots, everything began to haunt me and it made me nervous. I thought that this girl also could be part of a larger conspiracy. I was becoming paranoid. I just stammered to her:

"Now the richshawallah would have gone, you may go home."

The girl did not utter a word. She just got up and started walking out. As she stepped out of the doorway I gathered myself to ask her:

"By the way, where do you live?"

"Chappal Bazaar, Kacheguda" She said.

When she said this, I was taken aback for a moment. I just stood there, thoroughly dazed. Suddenly, as if I had woken up from a slumber, I blurted out another question:

"What is your name?"

She was not there to give me an answer. She had dissolved into the darkness. Before I could try and take stock of the infinite possibilities of her future, she had disappeared, out of my reach. I looked at my body, which was soaked with fear. I had a long look at my face in the mirror.

5

When I woke up in the morning, I was not sure of the events last night. I was not even sure if it was a dream. I suddenly found the *Kichadi* left in the plate yesterday evening. I mixed it well and started swallowing it in big lumps.