

Mother Has Committed A Murder

THE moment I think of my mother, I remember some events in flashes which pierce my heart. Kalyani, my elder sister, was subject to fainting fits. I was four years old then, not the age to understand things.

I woke up early in the morning. I heard some drums beating. I went to the door to look out. Kalyani was seated on a wooden plank. Someone was standing near her with a bunch of leaves. My baby brother whose winning smile lasted only a few months, was in the cradle in my room.

“Neerajatchi”, called out someone, “You go and fetch it”.

I turned to look at my mother. I remember her dark blue sari, her hair connected and tied into a big knot at the back. She enters the small room adjoining mine. The sari falls down from her shoulders. She has a small cup in her hand, into which she squeezes out drops of milk from her breast. Tears drop from her eyes.

Daily in the early hours of the morning, while it was still dark, she would get up and go to the bathroom to light up the firewood under the large brass pot and heat some water.

I watch her one day, her hair hanging loose, freed of the knot. She is sitting, doubling her legs. Her locks spread out over her ears and cheeks. When the firewood catches fire, she lowers her face to look. Her face is red in the glow of the fire. She is wearing a red sari. While my gaze is fixed on her, she gets up abruptly. Her locks hang down to her knees. The pallav is not in its place and through the unhooked blouse, her breasts show the green veins running on them. She looks the daughter of Agni who has come flying down from somewhere. Is she my mother? My mother?

“Kali, Maha Kali, Maha Kali, Bhadrakali, namostute”. Why does the Sanskrit sloka come to my mind ?

“Mother”.

Mother turns to look. “What are you doing here ?” I could not speak. I sweat.

The sacred homa fire is lit in the house. Is it because of the pink of her lips or the brightness of the vermilion mark on her forehead, that she takes on the image of the glowing fire ?

“Agniya Swaahay...” They pour ghee into the fire with a long drawn out “Swaaaaahaaaaa” and with each “Swaaaaahaaaaa” my gaze swings between the fire and my mother.

Mother bathes me in oil. She has tucked up her sari above her knees. I see the smooth flow of her round white thighs. The green veins swell when she bends and stands straight alternately.

“Why are you so fair, Mother, and I so dark ? Why ?”

She laughs. She says, “Don’t be silly. Who is there to match you in beauty, my child ?”

There is no connection between the events that march through my mind. Except that mother reigns like a queen in all of them. She is the fire that burns up all dross and impurities with a single flash of her smile. I rest my head on her lap and she caresses me with soothing fingers. ‘I will send you to the dance school. You have to nice figure. What a thick growth of hair you have, my child’. She would say something ordinary, trivial, but her words would blossom out a flower in my heart.

I am not sure if such feelings are products of my own imagination or of my mother’s inspiration when she sowed the seeds of so many beauties in me. What was it that she meant to do? I don’t know.



I was 13 years old. Skirts were getting too short for me. She was unstitching them to re-do them to my size. When I rest on my mother’s lap, certain words I had read earlier come to mind. I ask my mother, “What is ‘coming of age’, mother?”

Silence.

A long silence. Suddenly she speaks out.

“Don’t grow up. Be as you are now, always, flaring your skirts, running around and playing.”

Someone who is looking for a bride, is coming to see my cousin sister Radhu. Mother goes there. Mother is not with me here on this day, eventful day for me.

It is my elder sister Kalyani who bathes me in oil, washes my hair. I see, beyond the window of the bathroom, the sky which is still dark.

“Kalloos, you woke me up too early.”

“I have to bathe you first and only then can I bathe. You’re 13 years old now, yet you can’t bathe yourself. Lower your head, stupid”.

Kalyani has no patience. She turns and twists my head as one would a coconut to get at the meat. Mother had

stitched a skirt in velvet satin for me to wear on the Divali day. I loved it and longed for it when it slipped down smoothly under the sewing machine. That time, mother had taken my measurements afresh.

“I have to take your measurements afresh this time. You have grown taller.” She noted the measurements and stood up. “This girl has grown taller by two inches.”

That velvet satin skirt is not short like other skirts. It glides down smoothly and touches the ground. Kalyani stands me up and dries my hair with a towel. I put on a chemise and run to the puja room.

Father picks out my new clothes from the pile placed on the wooden plank. “Hey darkie, here is yours”. That is how he calls me always. When he does that, sometimes I stand before the mirror hanging in the hall and look. “What a beauty you are”, I seem to hear my mother’s whispers in my ear.

Like the fish in the glass case in Sarla’s house, my skirt glides. And a velvet blouse too. I put a vermilion mark on my forehead and stand before my father. “Hey, that’s good”, says my father.

“Oh, so much”, mother would exclaim with eyes opening wide and caress them with her fingers. Her fingers would disappear in the flowers, would themselves be become flowers.

The satin skirt is slippery. I am not able to climb to the top of the tree. And it is dark all around. As I climb down, a cracker explodes in the house with a loud bang. Frightened, I jump down and run into the house, gasping for breath.

I calm down after a while and run to the front room and burst the crackers. Only then do I remember the flower basket. It is down now.

Lifting the skirt above my knees, I bend down to pick up the basket. Some flowers are scattered on the ground. I bend low to pick them up, my skirt fanning out around me. There are stains on the new skirt. Is it because I climbed the tree ?

“Kalloos”, I go in, calling to my sister. “I have stained my skirt. Will mother scold me?” I ask her, standing before her, with the flower basket in my hands.

Kalyani stares at me for a minute and runs into the house shouting : “Father”. Her stare and the fact that she ran into the house without caring to take the flowers basket from me, make me crawl into myself like a centipede. I throw a look at the satin skirt, run my hand on the velvet blouse. There is nothing wrong with them.

“On Lord, has anything happened to me?”

As I question myself, I realize that something has indeed happened to me. All around, crackers are exploding. With the flower basket in hand, I stand there, breathing heavily. I tremble, lips twitching.

I cry aloud.

I must go to see my mother and bury my head on her shoulder. “I am scared”, I must tell her and cry uninhibited by any sense of shame. Mother will caress my head.

Kalyani is fetching the widowed old woman with shaven head who occasionally visits our house to lend a helping hand. The widowed old woman comes near me.

“Why are you crying, stupid? What has happened after all? Is it something that that never happens to anyone in the world?”

I couldn’t follow what the old woman said. It was only my instinct that froze, sensing fear. Nothing struck my understanding. An unquenchable thirst welled up from the depth of my heart to cry out the only cry : “Mother...”

I remember I lost myself once when I was five years old. I was walking in a big park unaware the enveloping darkness. Suddenly the darkness, the trees, the noise and the stillness scare me. Father finds me. But only on seeing mother, do I burst out crying.

Mother lays me beside her and caresses me. “It is nothing, dear. You are all right now, safe”, she intones softly. Her pink lips glow like blades of fire.

There is a fear, an anguish in the heart as if I have lost myself once again. I sit down, burying my face on my folded knees. There has been an inexorable end or something. Like the end one sees on the theatre screen after which the audience disperses, and one comes out, leaving something behind. I appear to be the only soul in all human history who has been struck by tragedy.

I cry as though these little shoulders clad in a velvet blouse are singled out to be burdened with all the world’s sorrows. I think, why didn’t mother tell me about such things, when we were together in the evenings?

Fear fills my heart. Not the normal fear that grips one in new surroundings, in the company of strangers. It is like the terror that turns one speechless, struck by the scare of seeing a snake. In all corners of the mind, fear spreads out, weaving a web like poisonous giant spider.

The mind sees visions of large pale lips torn apart; a head smashing on a rock; a red bald head walking ahead of me, suddenly opens its mouth like cave and a stream of thick red blood gushes out: within minutes, the blood spreads on the ground and I stare at it. As it spreads out all around, it seems to stream into my eyes too. A cry bursts out from within, “Blood, it is all blood!” But not even a whisper comes from the mouth. Bed of blood. Old man opens his mouth. Deadly stare of the eyes. It pops out from the heart.

What a terror is blood... lips turn pale... limbs freeze. I want my mother. Like the time she took me in her protecting arms and consoled me when I was sacred of darkness, now my heart craves for my mother to free me from fear.

Should not mother place the warmth of her long hands on my shoulders and say, “Is it you doing all this, my child ?”

“Why don’t you get up, please? How much longer will you keep crying?” beseeched Kalyani, after a bout of weeping of her own, sitting beside me.

“Mother !”

“Mother will be here next week. Just

now, I have written a letter to her. She will come after the bride-seeing of Radhu is over. You get up now. You are proving such a headache." Kalyani is beginning to get annoyed.

"What has come over me?"

"How many times should I tell you, you stupid goose?"

"I shouldn't be climbing trees now? Is that it?"

Kalyani hits me on the head with her fist: "Idiot, for the last half an hour, I have been on my knees, coaxing you to change the skirt. You and your endless questions"

"Father, she is impossible, She won't listen", she tells father.

"Don't be obstinate. Do what Kalyani tells you", father comes in and tells me.

"How obstinate she is", says the widowed old woman after father leaves, "This is something that every woman is destined to experience."

Seven days. Seven days for mother to come. Seven days of groping in the dark.

The womenfolk from neighbouring houses came to visit us one day.

"Shouldn't she wear a half sari now, Kalyani?"

"She will be given that when mother comes back. She is willful. She obeys only her mother."

"She'll be all right now. She will learn to be reserved and to obey."

Why?

What would happen to me?

Why should I wear a half sari? Didn't mother remark that day, "Don't grow up. Be as you are now always, flaring your skirt, running about, playing..."

Why should I change?

Nobody explains that to me. They seat me like a doll here and they gossip. When father steps in, they draw the ends of their saris tight around them and talk in whispers.

On the fifth day, Kalyani brings me a cup of heated oil and tells me: "Now you bathe yourself." With the locks of hair flowing down to my hips, I bathe, weeping, and stand in front of the mirror

in the hall, wearing a chemise.

"From now on, you must dress yourself in the bathroom. Do you hear?" says father.

After father leaves the hall, I lock the door. I take off the chemise. The mirror reflects my dark figure. The shoulders and arms are darker than my face, my breasts, waist and hands that caress the soft things. Am I not the same girl then? What is mother going to say? I put on my school uniform.

When I open the door. Kalyani steps in. "What will you say if they question about your absence at the school?" I stare at her. I was setting out for school with the sprightly gaiety of a bird freed from its cage and I feel my spirits dampened.

"Don't say anything. Keep mum."

I don't play during the games period. I hide behind the broad trunk of a tree, once I have withdrawn from the



playground. The next morning, Miss Leela Anand shouted in the classroom, "Who were the fools that didn't play yesterday?"

I didn't stand up. "Why didn't you stand up?" she asked.

"I am not a fool, Miss," I replied. She remarked in my progress report that I was impertinent. That day I was not scared even of Miss Leela Anand's abuses. I felt that nothing could ever affect me more seriously than what had happened to me.

I don't sit down under the tree and read Enid Blyton as I used to. I ask the dry, withered leaves that lie scattered on the ground, "What the hell has happened to me?" Like an accused in the dock, anxiously awaiting the judge's pronouncement, my mind looks forward to what mother will say.

Lowering her eyes, will mother say:

"What has now happened to you is also a beautiful thing"? That old widowed woman who scared me and this Kalyani, all of them would disappear in one flash of mother's smile. Mother is different. Where she stands, all unwanted things perish. Only beauty will remain and reign supreme. Everything is beautiful to her.

Mother is what I need most now. A mysterious something remains to be explained to me. At the very thought of the pink satin skirt, my limbs sweat, tremble; my tongue goes numb like a wooden piece; darkness envelops me before I turn round to look; I hear a bang. Gushing blood, frozen blood, appears from nowhere in the darkness. Someone must explain all that in soft, soothing words.

I feel I am left all alone.

The gardener wakes me up. I go to the house.

"Why are you so late? Where did you go?"

"Didn't go anywhere. I was sitting under the tree."

"Alone?"

"Hmm."

"Look, do you think you are still a little girl? Should some thing happen to you..."

I throw the satchel down. My face turn red with fury. Closing my ears with the palms of my hands, I shriek out: "Yes, I will. I will sit like that. Nothing is wrong with me."

Every word comes out with emphasis, drawn out in shrieks. Father and Kalyani are stunned.

I run on to the open terrace in anger. There, the sweet fragrance of the champak tree fills the air. That will keep me company. No one should come up here, neither father nor Kalyani. We shall be together, I and the fragrance of the champak. It does not speak to me, doesn't touch me; that way it feels more intimate than these humans. If only these humans could also be silent. Only the smile that flows from mother's open eyelids can be as calm.

When mother looks at me with that smile in her eyes, something is kindled

in the heart. I feel like laughing. A free, uninhibited laughter. I feel like singing. Mother is a creator. She just turns round a little to smile, and there is magic, joyousness, beauty, all that.

Kalyani comes up. "Come down to eat, your little Highness. Mother has made an ass of you with all her indulgence." Nonchalant, I purse my lips and get up.

Mother arrives the next morning. The taxi door opens. Mother comes out, the dark green silk sari all wrinkled.

"So, what is the news?" father enquires.

"That rascal says No, says the girl is dark."

"What does your sister say?"

"She is all grief, poor creature."

"We also have a dark girl in our house."

I dash out, to stand before my mother.

I feel like explaining it all in more detail than Kalyani had done in her letter. Burying my head under her chin, lips trembling, I want to cry out everything in soft whispers: Craving in the heart to speak out the crawling fear within.

She is going to tell me what it is, this mysterious thing that has happened to me, a sensation that chokes my throat when I lie down at night, the pain born of my own body becoming an alien to me. I raise my head slowly to look her in the face. She is going to take me in her tender arms, sinuous like the peeled plantain trunk. I am going to burst out. Combing her hair with my fingers buried in it, I want to cry in long spasms.

Mother stares at me. Have I changed into a Radhu in her eyes at that moment?

I don't know.

'Hell, where was the hurry now for this cursed thing to happen to you? Now

you are an added burden."

The question shoots out in a streak. Whom is she blaming? Inarticulate spasms of sobs well up inside me.

Mother's lips, nostrils, the vermilion on her forehead, the nose-ring and eyes, all seem to spit-fire, glowing in bloody red.

The divine image wrapped around her falls down and burns in the fire. She is naked now, stripped to a mere mother. Her cold, unfeeling words rise up like a sword unsheathed, strike at all the beauties that had sprouted and butcher them in a blind fury. Fears unvarnished stick to the walls of the mind like figures drawn in black.

"Agniye Swaha...aaaa". It is not the impurities alone that are burnt. Buds are also burnt.

Translated from Tamil by Venkat Swaminathan.