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## Why Should “We” ????

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I sat quietly; still in a shock .The day that had begun so well was soon turning to be the worst chapter of my life. As an uninterested student of Psychology, I had never understood what the term ‘ambivalent’ actually meant. Today I could speak volumes on this topic, including not just one but various perspectives and explanations.

The weather in the morning had given no premonitions of the horrors to follow. It was an ordinary September day, slightly sultry but a pleasant wind blew occasionally. Things had begun to take a turn and the events that followed were destined to change my life. I folded my legs on the settee and closed my eyes. I was waiting for my uncle, my aunt and my cousin, Neeru. *The day began to unwind once again.*

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I had got up quite early today, far ahead of my usual time. There was such a lot to be done. There was hardly any time to be wasted.

I had arrived from Mumbai to Pune, a week ago to spend three months with my uncle and his family. This was done at the behest of my father, who, desirous of seeing me pursue a career considered his brother, a renowned Professor of Mathematics as the perfect messiah to cruise me through the various entrance examinations held by banking as well as other private sector jobs. His own profession, of a creditable builder, held no value for him. He held uncle in a very high esteem and often described his achievements in highly glowing terms. “Academics matter !!! Yes, they do ! I wish I had spent as much time studying as Munna Bhaiyya did. Look how learned, how respected he is. Five books he has authored. And look at me !!! Somehow I managed to complete my graduation.” There was not a bit of jealousy in his tone, only respect. Respect for the academics and repentance for his own inability to have pursued it whole-heartedly.

Somewhere in my heart I had realized that my father wanted to see his dreams come true through me. He had tried his best to educate my mother but to his chagrin she had preferred the admonishments of my dadi maa and learnt to make excellent laddos and paranthas than to spent hours buried with course books that held no fascination for her. I must have inherited the more dominant genes of my mother, I always said to myself. Like her, I had little or no interest in academics. School was a routine affair followed by college, only because there was nothing else to do. The faint murmurs of my grandmother and my mother regarding my marriage at the quiet ‘considerable’ age were firmly quenched by my father who openly

declared that my marriage was possible only after I had secured my career. I would have given my eye and tooth to get married, settle down and have a blissfully peaceful 'dull' life. My father's adamant attitude held strong. Under his hawk-eyed presence, I continued my education, taking Economics as my major and Home Science [much to my father's fury] and Psychology as my options for the minor. My results always surprised me the most. Considering the disinterest I had towards my studies, I still managed to get fairly decent grades. Have my uncle's genes come to me or is it the result of good teachers and my regular attendance! Whatever the case maybe I thanked my lucky stars, enthused to continue with my studies only by the glow on my father's face every time he saw my grade card. But while I struggled with my notes my ears were glued to the recipe my daadi was teaching my mother. I loved watching all the tear-jerking Hindi serials. I could draw a beautiful rangoli within minutes and loved to sew, knit, embroider and crochet quite unlike other girls of my age who openly abhorred these skills. Flower arrangement and dress designing were my greatest delight. I put a voluntarily hold on these when my father suggested appearing for the entrance examination for NIFT and IIFT. However, thanks to the ladies of my house, I did manage to spend quality time in the kitchen and soon learnt to cook and invent mouth-watering dishes discovering an inborn ability to churn delicacies. This particular passion was not refuted by my father since it catered to his gastronomical delights. However; his suggestions for a course in either Nutrition or Hotel Management dampened my joy and dissuaded my frequent flights into the kitchen.

'Why doesn't he want to get me married?' This was something I asked myself almost every day after my graduation. And why is mother or daadi not pestering him to do so? The two ladies seemed to be in complete unison with my father; encouraging me to study well and aim for a job. I felt as if everyone was trying to relive his dreams and his life through me. What kind of a family had I been born into? Was I wrongly placed in this age? Had I been happier under the strong shackles of patriarchy? Being the only child and having crossed twenty years, my father *should have* started hunting for a groom for me; I argued with myself. But his reason for not doing so was very apt. How could he get his daughter married off before Munna bhaiyya finalised the marriage of Neeru didi who was three years elder to me.

The relationship between the two families had always thrived on love and affection. I remembered the earlier visits made by my uncle, aunt and Neeru didi. My father's private job did not entail him any leave but uncle's did. So summer vacations and Durga Puja used to be days of fun and frolic. Neeru didi was a very sweet and caring loving sister who always parted with a lot of her belongings, voluntarily as the gifts, and happily if I laid a loving hand on any one of them, whichever caught my fancy, even her imported wristwatch. But Neeru' didi's gradual ascent into high school coupled with her self-interest to excel slowly cut down the visits and both the families had not spent quality time together for almost a decade. Neeru didi's excellent results throughout school and college had really been worth this self-imposed seclusion that uncle and aunt had imposed upon themselves to safeguard their daughter's undisturbed studies. And now she was busy preparing for her UPSC Mains having cleared her Prelims with excellent rank. 'She will surely make it!' I kept saying this and wished her

all the best in the little conversation we had: Neeru didi's active participation on social media would not have been anything less than the third world war.

Thankfully my father never compared me to Neeru didi. Perhaps he was happy with whatever honest endeavours I made notwithstanding the total disinterest I had in higher studies. His advice of going for a Post Graduate degree was quickly turned down by me. Instead I cheekily suggested accompanying him to his work so that I could learn the nuances and could handle his business, being his sole successor. His reply made me long to be swallowed by the earth ; had I possessed the same powers as goddess Sita.

“My work is done with great integrity and commitment. Only those who have the proper qualifications are hired for the specific technical jobs. If this was what you had in mind, you should have gone for a degree in engineering or at least an MBA. Please do not ever think that you will get the job only because you are my daughter. You will have to earn it. And if you are concerned with what will happen after I die, please be at peace. There already exists a Board of Directors which includes your mother and you will also be a part of it very soon. Money-wise you will be very happy. So keep enjoying your life as you are ; at present.”

This long scathing reply was enough to shut me up for one whole week. The truth, blurted so clearly hurt very badly. What kind of a father do I have? In the times where fathers are ready to go to any length to secure the future of their children, my father was pushing every obstacle in my way ; depriving me even of this smooth transition into family business as every third person was seen doing. Is he my step-father ? But I did not have the strength to put this question to my mother or my daadi and as I remembered so many instances of his abundant love, care and generosity, I felt greatly ashamed of myself. Never had my father put any harsh demand or posed any constrictions on me as faced by so many of my friends. He trusted me and loved me. It was indeed unfortunate also for him to have a child so much in opposition to his own line of thought. Such great dichotomy between two generations, I thought to myself. The elder generation was abandoning the patriarchal notions while I, the younger one was trying to actually reclaim them. As obtaining an engineering degree now was out of question, MBA was one good option to enter the family business to start my 'career'. But I also knew very well that my father would never shell out money to get me admitted to the private institutions offering MBA courses. One evening spent with the course material provided left me so drained that I preferred to sit in my hammock, dreaming of my own 'ashiyaana', choosing the décor and shopping for the food and beverages. Why I can't live in this world, I kept asking myself.

However, my 'attempts' to study were deeply appreciated by my father who decided to send me to Munna Bhaiyya so that I could get the best teacher to help me with my problems in mental ability and reasoning. I was pleasantly surprised to hear him saying that he had full faith in me regarding General English Comprehension and Current Affairs. Seizing this opportunity as a change of scenario in my current uneventful life ( most of my batch mates were either getting married or busy taking one up degree or the other ), I readily consented. Perhaps uncle's guidance would actually help me sail through the entrance examinations, either management or banking. If not anything, I will get a chance to meet Neeru didi and

spend some time with her. She was the only sibling I had, my mother being the only child and my father having only an elder brother. So I had landed in Pune and quickly enveloped in the warmth of my relatives, made myself a part of the household very quickly. Much to my amazement, I even began to not only understand but also enjoy the lessons I had with my uncle. My uncle only chuckled when I repeated father's words of praise for him and returned the compliment with equally generous words of praise for father's hard work, dedication and success.

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Life soon settled into a peaceful routine. I loved helping my aunt in the kitchen. She was extremely glad of my company and my interest in cooking. My 'coaching' sessions were held in the late afternoon when uncle was fresh after his siesta. We also spent time discussing general matters and I was deeply impressed by his knowledge and opinions. My aunt kept busy with her sewing, leaving us interrupted or went to visit her friends. I could not spend much time with Neeru didi. She remained the same---loving, friendly and sweet-tempered. However, her vast syllabus did not allow her to indulge in any other activity. She spent almost the whole day sitting at her table, studying, and was very apologetic about neglecting me. I was totally in awe of my cousin who was always surrounded by voluminous books and journals and watched only 'Discovery Channel' sometimes and the news hour regularly on television. How could somebody study so much! With immense respect for her commitment, I assured her that she need not feel guilty and she tried to compensate by having her dinner with us : a relaxed and fun filled affair rather than the hurried bites at the table. She laughed loudest at my jokes and admitted that this brief sojourn was quite refreshing for her. Sometimes, we also shared sisterly gossip in the confines of her bedroom which I shared. It was always me who fell into a deep slumber while she kept to her books, sometimes till the early hours. And sometimes she broke into a song. What a lovely voice she had. Her songs were the lullaby I longed for as I retired for the night and sometimes, depending on her mood, I was richly rewarded.

The only problem that plagued her parents was Neeru's obstinacy with regards to marriage proposals. Uncle and aunt had always been very supportive of her studies but they were, after all, parents too. The responsibility of their daughter's marriage was a huge one. They wanted to at least look through the proposals and were not going to push Neeru into anything. But Neeru was completely career-oriented and wanted to settle down only after she had secured a good job. She did not want any deviations in her pursuit. Since her academic record was brilliant and she had actually cleared the UPSC mains, her non-compliance was not at all unjustified and her parents also realized it. But they were definitely caught in a Catch-22 situation. The desire to see their daughter achieve her goal could not let them ignore the societal constraints or the fear of missing a decent match for which they would repent later.

And for once, uncle had become somewhat stubborn. The young man he had heard about from his colleague was an M.Tech from IIT Madras who had obtained his Ph.D degree from IIT Mumbai and had joined Tata Steel. The boy was an only child and his father had also been a professor. Had the decision been left to my father, he would have surely finalised the marriage on the basis of only the academic qualifications. My uncle had almost similar thoughts too. Besides, there had been only favourable comments regarding the young man's character, family, relatives, background, acquaintances and work ethics. There was no demand for dowry ; they were just looking for a simple Indian girl who believed in traditions and culture and was ready to take over the responsibilities of the household.

“Uncle, you have done a lot of research. Our very own James Bond!” I teased him.

“This is not a joke. It is very difficult to find a decent boy these days.”

His reply was terse and tense. I had never seen him so agitated. Aunty's face wore a pinched look. It hurt to see them so troubled. I stole a glance towards Neeru. She looked very upset too.

“They want someone to look after their house; they want a housewife.” Neeru's misery was evident in her tone. Much as she pursued her aim, she was also a dutiful daughter and I could never think of her defying uncle's decision.

“This is what I have been told. There is nothing wrong with the idea of a bahu who will take over the responsibility,” uncle said to her.

“What if they ask me to give up my ambition? If they want a housewife they will never agree to an officer bahu,”

“I discussed your qualifications and your dedication with them. Had they been totally opposed to the idea of a working daughter-in-law and wanted only a housewife they would not have taken the pains to come all the way from Jamshedpur to meet us.”

I felt that this was definitely a very valid point made by my uncle.

“But I have to study....marriage...at this point will jeopardise everything.”

“I am not asking you to get married immediately. How could you ever forget that your happiness is the most important thing in our lives? Can we ever put a hindrance to your dreams? But I am also a father and I have a big responsibility. I want to get you married to the person most suited to you. Trust me Neeru, my instincts tell me that this boy and his family are really very good people. I am just asking you to meet them. And if you show any kind of disapproval, I will immediately forget the whole thing. And who knows, maybe we may reject him altogether. I am just asking you for three hours from one day of your life. Is it too much to ask?” Uncle was almost out of breath by the time he finished this long speech.

Frankly speaking I could find nothing objectionable in this idea. It was a very practical approach towards the requirements of the society. Both uncle and Neeru were justified in holding to their perspective. There was a long, odd silence. Suddenly uncle got up from his

seat and trudged towards Neeru. He sat beside her and took her hands in his. He put his hand on her head, fondled her hair and spoke very softly, almost in a whisper,

“Is there...is there anybody you like....Anyone else...Please tell me.....I wouldn't mind.....,” he cleared his throat clearly at a loss of words.

“Nooooo....no...! Papa ... how could you.....You think this is the reason I am refusing?”Neeru exclaimed loudly, clearly very upset.

I saw aunt giving a fairly contemptuous look to uncle. It seemed to convey the same reaction as Neeru had. I pitied uncle who was at a loss and obviously mortified.

“Just remember that it is your decision that matters, at least to us. We will never let you parade in front of people. You will judge them just as they will judge us. There is no harm in this, is there beta? And since there is no one special in your life....let your parents be the match- makers ...in the old-fashioned way. Right ?

Aunt's words were definitely more effective than uncle's. Realizing the wisdom of the situation, Neeru consented to a 'formal' meeting. Everybody, even Radha the maid heaved a big sigh of relief. After a series of telephonic conversations the meeting was fixed for next Saturday; thankfully the boy had to attend a Conference in Pune and his parents could accompany him in his trip. Uncle looked very happy because he very well knew that if they would have had to make the trip to Jamshedpur then the meeting would have never taken place. Neeru would have never compromised with this disturbance in her schedule.

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And so.....today was that very important day. I glanced at Neeru who was snoring rather contentedly. How lucky she was to have the best of everything. It was really considerate of her to relent to meet the boy and his family. Besides, she also deserved a fair chance; to meet everyone and judge them before taking a decision. Her parents could have easily sent her picture and settled her marriage wherever they wanted. But they would never force her. Their request was indeed very fair. Nobody could predict what the future had in store but at present Neeru was agreeing readily to whatever her parents said, nodding to even the face pack that my aunt gingerly placed at her table.

Neeru was left completely undisturbed during the hectic preparations for the meeting. My aunt was extremely thankful to have me around as an enthusiastic helping hand and was relying on me for a number of important tasks: decorating the room, arranging the flowers, planning the menu, placating uncle and most importantly, keeping Neeru in good humour. And because the three of them were really beautiful people and had showered so much love and affection that I had vowed to help them as much as possible and had secretly prayed to

God to let this proposal reach the final agreement. Neeru smiled in her sleep and I could not help noticing how pretty she was.

“What a lucky girl she is! And what a contrast!” I said to myself. Her parents are so eager for her marriage although she is so focussed on her career while my parents have turned a blind eye and are forcing me to work towards a career while all I want is to get married as soon as possible.

“*I wish I was in her shoes.....!*” I said to myself and promptly chided my envious thoughts.

The alarm gave its second reminder and I was jostled out of my reverie. Pulling the sheet gently over Neeru, I trooped to the washroom. “No point in waking her up so early,” I thought.

Fresh after my shower, I entered the kitchen and was soon handing steaming cups of my special ginger tea to everyone. Radha had already cut the vegetables as instructed and was grinding the masalas. Matru, our driver had been sent to the farthest corner of the town to get the best quality of mutton so that I could prepare my special biryani. Both uncle and aunt had loved it and even Neeru who preferred vegetarian dishes had shown great liking for it. I had prepared and refrigerated two types of sweets the day before and had also marinated the batter for the cutlet. I was trying to give my best to every task I had voluntarily undertaken.

The tea seemed to have rejuvenated my aunt and she soon started changing the curtains, sofa-backs and cushion-covers in a frenzy. Uncle was busy cutting flowers and I was arranging them at different corners. Neeru was the coolest person around, sitting unperturbed on the swing with the newspaper. In fact, she kept laughing at our frantic efforts to excel in everything. Thankfully, by ten, everything had been done and even Neeru was dressed properly, refusing to wear a saree but settling for a beautiful salwar-kameez instead. She looked very pretty. I also changed into an embroidered white salwar-kameez, quite pleased by the cool, sophisticated image reflected in the mirror.

The door-bell chimed at exactly half past eleven. Uncle opened the door and welcomed the guests. The aged couple were extremely dignified and the boy was handsome and sober; one you could instantly trust. As the photographs had already been exchanged, they had no difficulty in recognizing Neeru but were puzzled by my appearance. Uncle responded quickly, explaining my relationship as well as my contributions towards the household work on that particular day. Since I had no inhibitions or reservations, I soon started an enjoyable conversation with Rajeev and his parents. It turned out to be great fun and I even shared some special recipes with Rajeev’s mother. I found the three of them possessing a perfect blend of traditional Indian values and progressive modern belief and again thought how lucky Neeru would be to have such good in-laws along with such a nice husband if she agreed to the proposal. Aunty came with tea and Neeru served everyone. The coconut laddoos and triangular sandwiches were appreciated by all and it was suddenly very amusing for me to catch aunt’s frown as uncle explained that these items were a few of my tasty preparations. I could understand her predicament fairly well. On the one hand she indeed loved me, whilst she could not bear the thought of her own daughter’s talents being overshadowed by me.



Irrespective of her mental condition, uncle once again broke into a detailed explanation of my culinary interests, hobbies, and my reluctance to pursue a career, my father's wishes and my own desire to settle down as a housewife. My aunt was certainly very uncomfortable by now and I also began to feel uneasy at such voluminous descriptions of my own self with hardly any mention of Neeru. I caught Rajeev's mother staring at me intently and I turned towards Neeru in consternation. She was also staring at me. I felt very uncomfortable. I pretended to be interested in the conversation between uncle and Rajeev's father who were discussing the prospective dates. Suddenly there was a strange, odd silence in the room; everyone stopped talking at the same time. Radha's voice, announcing lunch came as a great relief.

Rajeev's mother requested us to join them at the table, shunning all formalities and ultimately even aunt had to give in. Soon everyone was enjoying the biryani, cutlets, steamed fish and fried rice. Much to his mother's surprise Rajeev took three helpings of the biryani and enjoyed the fish too, something that was not always agreeable to his palate. The final touch came in the form of the pineapple sundae which demanded a second helping from everyone. Uncle was once again on his 'praise' trip and by now I *had ardently begun to wish that this proposal should have been for me*, so well it fit into my plans. I had to shrug my thoughts very vehemently, "stop dreaming!" I said to myself and went to prepare coffee.

As I kept the tray on the table, Rajeev's mother caught my hand and pulled me beside her.

"Well, Asha dear, will you marry Rajeev?"

My eyes almost popped out and my mouth opened wide. Was she able to read my mind?

"But...but ...this ...this...pro..pro..proposal is not for me ! It is for Neeru!" I stammered.

"Yes...I know that. But you are also a daughter of the family. We had indeed come with Neeru in our mind but you seem to be a perfect match for my Rajeev. He wants a girl like you; someone who is ready to settle as a homemaker and take care of him and the house. I have observed you. You are the best match for Rajeev. And beta, you do not have any set plans either, your uncle told us everything."

"But...Neeru ..."

"Neeru is really committed to her career. Let her excel in her field and achieve her goal. I am sure she will find somebody as nice as my son. Will *you* accept my proposal?"

"Does he...I mean Rajeev... agree...I mean... is he willing?" I asked shyly.

"Yes, of course dear. In fact, it was he who made this suggestion," came the immediate reply.

I turned towards uncle. There was a strange expression on his face as if he had realized his faux pas. My aunt looked as if she would burst into tears any minute. Only Neeru's face showed no change. Even Radha and Matru seemed stunned. I felt numb. My rosy dreams were being pulled down by weights of guilt. I did not know what to say!!!!

There was total silence once again. Everybody stared at me. I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up. It was Neeru, with the familiar sweet smile. She handed me a big wrapped package.

“What is this?” I managed to voice a question all wanted to ask.

“Open it.” She gestured.

With trembling fingers I pulled off the wrappings.

“Oh no!!! No di, why this?”

“Because you deserve it,” she replied and draped the gorgeous dupatta around my shoulders.

She had brought down a part of her trousseau; the golden yellow lehenga that aunt had so lovingly got stitched for her engagement ceremony. It was a very valuable item since it was one of the few outfits Neeru had really liked. Handing it over to me was not only a truly magnanimous but also a symbolic gesture. She was clearly showing that she had no objection being replaced by me or being side-lined by the preference showed to me. And there was not a single bit of affected generosity; Neeru was every bit the person that she was at this crucial moment. There was genuine love and warmth in her eyes.

I felt so humbled. She sat beside me and took my hands in hers. I could see aunt blinking her tears but I could also read in her eyes the pride and adoration that she had for her daughter. My uncle also had a bemused smile; perhaps their daughter’s decision had made them more controlled. Rajeev looked happy and his mother ecstatic. Rajeev’s father looked at me speculatively.

I wanted to pinch myself. I was actually getting what I had asked for. God had listened to my prayers. The atmosphere suddenly relaxed. I became conscious of Rajeev’s eyes on me. My aunt beckoned Radha to serve the coffee. Amidst the general buzz of conversation, even in my languid state, I heard Rajeev’s mother’s loud, happy voice, “Finally, we got the type of girl we wanted.”

She was making a very general statement but something inside me suddenly snapped. What did she mean by ‘type’? And what did she mean by ‘we wanted’? Had I been so transparent in my desire that she had been able to easily and very conveniently opt for a replacement? Were we mere commodities? Was I not giving in to the demands of the patriarchal society, allowing the groom to choose a girl of his choice? *Was it not very convenient for him to shunt Neeru didi so fast when he had a more eligible candidate available, eager and waiting?* I felt terribly ashamed of myself.

“My brother will have to be told. I do not know how he will react.” I heard my uncle telling Rajeev’s father.

“I am sure he will have no objections,” the gentleman said.

“Why should there be any objection? He will be overjoyed. He is getting such a worthy bridegroom without taking any pains. He will call it destiny, his good fortune,” Rajeev’s mother added her bit.

“But ...he may not agree.” My uncle murmured knowing very well my father’s plans for me.

“Don’t worry, we will convince him.” Guffaws of laughter broke out and my uncle joined in feebly.

I decided I had to act before things went out of control. I did not want my father to be dragged into it. I had decided what had to be done. *My father could be made to change his mind by these persuasive people but the decision that I had taken, much to my own surprise, could not be changed at any cost.* I looked around the room. My uncle and Rajeev’s father were now discussing the high interest of housing loans. Rajeev kept flicking through the magazines and newspapers, pretending to be uninterested. My aunt, showing extreme dignity and self-control was trying to keep normal conversation with Rajeev’s mother who seemed to be so animated on getting her ‘type’ that she kept praising aunt’s simple kota saree and the even the ordinary Fabindia side tables. Neeru sat beside me quietly simply holding my hand.

“Excuse me.” I said loudly.

The conversation all around ceased immediately and all eyes were on me.

“There is no need to consult father. I am not ready for marriage right now,” I spoke loudly, very proud of the unwavering, firm tone of my voice.

The silence in the room hung heavy; deadly and oppressive. All were stumped. I had beaten Rajeev’s mother in the ‘springing surprises’ session. The shock was so deep that even Rajeev’s father, a gentleman with a calm disposition seemed to choke on his biscuit and had a violent coughing spree. The momentary distraction and the subsequent attention given to him gave Neeru the opportunity to squeeze my fingers: her way of asking ‘why’. I turned my face towards her. She seemed genuinely puzzled. I smiled at her and hugged her.

Suddenly I felt mature. My father’s words began ringing in my ears. My mother and my granny’s faces swam in front of my eyes. They were not the ordinary, ‘run-of-mill’ kind of parents but I was a stupid daughter, failing to take advantage of the opportunities in front of me. Things became very clear to me.

As expected, Rajeev’s mother was the first to pose a question.

“Why do you refuse dear? You seemed so happy.....”

I fumed; not at her statement but at my own transparency.

Taking my silence as my nervousness, she posed the next question, the audience eager for my reply.

“You do not have any other specific aim....so...why this ‘no’?”

Once again I kept quiet. My blood boiled, not at her audacity but at my own weakness; which she had so well comprehended.

My silence had perhaps convinced her that my reaction was simply a sign of momentary nervousness caused due to the shock. Her tone changed to that of placation, “I think this is a perfect match. You want to be a housewife and to tell you the truth, we also wanted Rajeev’s bride to be a homemaker. We came to meet Neeru because we were very impressed by her academic record and all that we had heard about her and this family...And then, we met you...”

She seemed to be holding a monologue. Others preferred to be silent listeners.

“Why are you refusing? ...Don’t you think it was destiny? And Neeru has also given her approval. What a wonderfully brought up child!” She looked towards aunt expecting a smile of gratitude but my aunt’s face remained impassive. I knew my aunt better than this lady did. She was also shocked at my words, more than Rajeev’s family was: and was perhaps struggling to find a plausible reason for my behaviour.

Rajeev’s mother looked towards her son and his father, expecting some support in her lone crusade but her husband busied himself with more water and Rajeev seemed extra interested in his own shoes.

“You seemed so happy.” She made another feeble attempt. “Your sister sacrificed her own happiness for you.”

This was getting too much now. Neeru looked decidedly disturbed. There was no such thing as ‘sacrifice’ in our family; we made ‘choices’. I felt like giggling. This lady really liked me. She was actually begging for the alliance. I felt bad too. I wanted to tell her that she would get girls better than me. ; I was someone very ordinary. Not really worth this much importance. But at this precise moment, she suddenly turned nasty and personal.

“You really cannot trust the girls these days! I’m sure she is having an affair back home! Why would she refuse otherwise? How could a girl refuse marrying my Rajeev ? Oh! She was so much the type we wanted!!!”

My ears heard the same word repeated the second time; with the same arrogance and authority.

“‘...Type!’ ‘... So much the type!’ ‘...The type we wanted!’ ”

I was appalled. Was it only their ‘type’ that mattered? What gave them the right to view girls as only a commodity; pretending to be progressive under the cloak of patriarchy. And how could she be so sure that no girl could refuse her son? But then *I realized that this over-confidence was a result of the mindset of girls like me; the ones who were ready to merge their identity with the prospective husband, even in the present age. I felt terribly ashamed of myself. This shame gave me more strength.*

“I am sorry but I as I said, I am not ready for marriage now.” I replied, once again proud of my firm, clear tone.

“We can wait, take your time.” The father also piped in. I marvelled at their persistence. I shall have a major superiority complex at this rate, I thought.

“I think we should take your leave now,” I finally heard Rajeev’s voice.

“Thank God he has some common sense left,” I muttered but Neeru’s sharp ears caught my words. She looked completely lost. I got up. As I moved towards my room I could not help catching words and phrases such as ‘nervous’, ‘shocked’, ‘innocent’, ‘feeling bad’, ‘will talk later’ : all meant for me. I knew that I an explanation or rather a justification was needed and I had to give it. I waited for the guests to depart.

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It seemed ages before I heard a gentle cough; my ever discreet uncle was at the door and aunt was beside him.

I got up from my bed and went towards them. Aunt hugged me. She had always been a really affectionate, caring person but today there was extra gentleness in her behaviour. It was, as if she wanted me to tell her why I had taken this step. Neeru was behind them and Radha and Matru comprised the entourage. I could not blame them; my decision had been really shocking and most unexpected, aware as all were about my future plans and my desires.

“Please don’t feel guilty dear; I am sure this will be a very good match for you. We have always treated you as our daughter. There is no difference between you and Neeru. Your happiness will give us great happiness.” Aunt said, leading me gently to sit at the edge of the bed. Neeru came and sat beside me.

“There was no need to refuse them my child. I will make Bauaa change his mind. He dare not refuse me; I am sure he still remembers my danda!!!” My uncle tried to crack a feeble joke.

“You actually saved me sweetheart ...I had agreed to this meeting *only* to keep mama and papa happy.” Neeru said. “You never know, I might have refused later. They were lucky to meet you .You make a great pair, by the way.” She added mischievously.

What a truly wonderful family I had! They really meant every word they uttered. Tears rolled down my eyes.

“Don’t cry dear, please don’t! Everyone is born with his own destiny. It was destiny that brought you here Ashee.” My aunt spoke soothingly, her fingers running through my hair lovingly. I could see Radha nodding vehemently to her words.

I wiped my tears and raised my head. I kissed my aunt. As if on cue, Neeru came closer and I clutched her fingers tightly. I suddenly felt very light and very clear.

“Uncle, it is not a matter of convincing Papa. Neither is it connected to destiny aunty; it is just my decision. I did not like their behaviour. ***I hated the way they put their choice, their need, and their ‘type’ in front of everything.*** *They had not come to a swayamvara, had they? A place where they could easily choose another available girl if the one they had come for was not their ‘type’. What made them feel that it was they who had the right to make their appropriate choices and take the ultimate decisions ? Just because I was talking to them and discussing everything, they assumed that I was ready for matrimony. Did they, especially the mother, even for a moment give any consideration to Neeru’s feelings, how would a girl feel when she is so directly and blatantly rejected for some other ‘better’ choice? I know my sister very well, I know she will never be jealous of my happiness but I would always remain unhappy being a part of a family of such greedy, such self-centred, selfish people.”* My voice cracked at the last syllable.

I could see bewilderment, distress and confusion written on the faces before me.

“And please don’t forget, uncle, Neeru didi had agreed *only* for this meeting. She was not in any hurry to get married. *They knew* this very well. They is the kind who cannot see beyond their own son. What if di had said ‘no’ to their ‘great’ son? What if she had refused to compromise and had risen higher in status, which I am sure she will! ***My presence was a godsend opportunity for them not for me.*** This decision was two-pronged, aunty. To teach di a lesson that a female dare not put down her own rules and principles as far marriage is concerned. And pretending to do a great favour to the other daughter, the one who had no career plans. According to them, this meant that she was born dumb and destined to be a housewife. Getting married to a boy as ‘wonderful’ boy as Rajeev would obviously be the greatest boon for someone as ‘worthless’ as me. Destiny, indeed ! But they overlooked one thing. We sisters are the part of one big united family. The family that has strived on correct values and principles. How could they ever think that I could be happy at the cost of didi’s unhappiness?”

Neeru gave a gasp.

“You are mistaken Ashee, I have told you....I really don’t want to marry.” She seemed so apologetic, as if she was the reason for my refusal.

“I know...I know that you don’t want to marry. But think for a moment, didi: Rajeev is a handsome, well-settled man. Suppose you liked him...you could really consider... I mean, they had come to meet *you* and maybe, you were ready to bend your rules...”

The faint blush that suffused Neeru’s face betrayed her hidden thoughts and emotions. Her parents looked aghast. They had never considered this angle.

“Did they, even for a moment, think of *your* feelings? *Your* sentiments? But I do. I love you didi. You are a part of me.” I sobbed and Neeru pulled me closer to her.

“I won’t lie. I liked Rajeev. Had the proposal come in a different manner, I would have been very happy. And I was talking to then so freely, so openly only because I was hoping to be the sister-in-law...if the marriage took place.”

There was a long silence. Everyone was lost in thought; even the ever jovial Matru seemed to be going through a lot of mental strain.

“I still think this marriage would have suited you very much Asheer. You had never been in favour of a career. You are so happy doing the household work. You really enjoy doing them. I have seen you. And I don’t think they will have any objection to your perusal of dress designing or opening a boutique.” Uncle seemed to be at his persuasive best.

“No uncle....you don’t understand!”

“If it’s your father disapproval or anger that is holding you...we promise we will make him understand. Being a housewife is not something to be ashamed of.” There was genuine concern in aunt’s voice.

*“That is not the point. I want to be a housewife because I choose to be so: not because some other person sticks to that particular category for my selection, for ‘choosing’ me. I cook because I love to cook not when I am presumed to be the cook. Marriage to Rajeev was surely going to stifle me. This family expects the girl to fit into their parameters. That is not fair!!!! Their ‘type’ of girl no longer exists. I am only twenty years old. I may have a change of heart! What if I want to pursue a career and not make puddings and paranthas for them? Then what?? Would they allow me to do so??”* I cried in anger.

I could feel the pressure of Neeru didi’s fingers. This was her way of saying ‘I understand’. This is how she used to communicate when she was vulnerable or unsettled.

“You cannot simply pick one girl and simply discard the other, choosing ‘your type’. What if she refuses to remain ‘your type’. I may decide to follow didi’s footsteps. I am sure she will guide me.” Neeru’s face shone at my words. I could realize that though it was only my father who had been most vocal in his disapproval; everybody in the family disliked my complacent attitude towards my own empowerment although they had never expressed it.

“And let me confess something, uncle. I had indeed started my coaching under pressure from papa but I have actually begun to enjoy the verbal ability exercises and the current affairs quiz with you. You truly are a wonderful teacher.” My words brought a strange glow also on his face.

“Don’t you understand aunty, “I said turning towards her, *“the sole criterion of selection by them was based on my choice to become a housewife, which suited them. Otherwise, Neeru didi is far better than me in every aspect.”* I continued, enthused and more confident by Neeru’s silent support.

I could see that everyone, even Matru, the illiterate driver had finally understood what I was trying to convey. I was very glad. Judging by my uncle’s face, I realised that uncle had made

up his mind. Now those people could not even ask for Neeru's hand. My uncle and aunt had too much self respect. This was a result of the haste and perhaps also the greed of Rajeev and his parents.

"This is like a Hindi film saahab", Radha ,the great movie buff, quipped.

All of us started laughing together. The laughter acted as a great balm to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

"Another interesting option Ashee, you must go for the auditions." Neeru didi teased me, her eyes twinkling. I was so relieved to see the familiar, sweet smile back on her face.

"But saahabji, if those people come again, asking for Neeru bitiya's hand, then what will you say ?" Matru put forth a very pertinent question.

Surprisingly, it was Neeru who gave him the answer.

"Papa needn't bother Matru.....we have our heroine here. Don't we ? Ashee will go and tell them, " *'Sorry,' but 'you' are not 'our' type !!!!!'*"

*And both of us burst out laughing.*

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