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The Religion of Love

Nandini C Sen

She was a part of a human chain formed in front of the Jantar Mantar. They were marching in unison towards the Parliament house. As they pushed past the police barricade all hell broke loose. The water cannon hit her squarely on the face. She fell face downwards, soaked in mud and with blood soaked lips she got up only to raise slogans yet again.

Syed and Gayatri didn't mean to fall in love. But love happens when you least expect it. It creeps up suddenly. When someone needs attention, care, conversation, laughter and maybe even intimacy. Love doesn't look at logic or even backgrounds, and least of all religion.

Gayatri was from a conservative South Indian family that went to the temple every Saturday. Syed's father bought goats for his family every Eid. That said it all. Their paths would never have crossed were it not for that fateful day. That day when he walked into the coffee shop. Gayatri wondered if destiny had a role in choosing our loved ones for us. Did we have any role to play at all?

She looked at her watch. Syed was late. Their conversation lasted for hours sometimes in the cafe, sometimes in the car sometimes in places that she could never tell her friends about. They would never understand. Yet Syed made her happy.

Suddenly her phone beeped. He had sent her a message. "On my way. Have something important to tell you."

Gayatri looked at her phone nervously. What did he want to tell her?

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him. He was dressed in his trademark kurta and jeans. His face was boyish and clean shaven which lit up with an impish smile. Before walking towards her he stood at the counter to greet the cafe owner – a small gesture which Gayatri found extremely endearing.

Syed was smiling as he pulled something out of his pocket. "Here check this out!"

Gayatri opened the box and stared at the prettiest pair of ear rings that she had ever seen in her life. They looked expensive.

"These are your mother's?"

"Yes. She plans to pass it to her daughter in law as a family heirloom so thought I should ask you if you liked it."

"Syed Ahmed are you proposing marriage?"

"Yes Gayatri Pillai I am."

"Ammi gave me these earrings to put away in the locker. I thought I should ask you whether you like it or not. It will make life easier for her."

“God Syed is this the way you propose to a girl?”

“Oh I didn’t get it right, did I? You know this is my first time. You’ve probably gone through this before. Please give me pointers.”

Gayatri rolled her paper napkin into a ball and threw it at him. This man was infuriating! Seeing her hurt countenance Syed burst into laughter while Gayatri glared at him in mock annoyance.

Later in the evening Syed was driving her back home.

“Syed that piece of jewellery is expensive. Please be careful. I’m surprised Ammi gave it to you knowing how careless you are.”

“Don’t worry Jaan. I won’t lose them. Will wait for the day when Ammi gives it to you with her own hands.” His erstwhile playfulness had been replaced with seriousness as his eyes held hers and his mouth slowly brushed against hers.

He pulled up in the lane close to her apartment complex. They kissed briefly as Gayatri collected her bags and walked towards her home. Syed sighed inwardly as he watched her go. He drove off only when he had lost sight of her. Parting from each other was getting tougher by the day but as of now they had very little choice.

Gayatri and Syed had had a chance meeting in a cafe where a common friend had introduced the duo. Much later they were to meet again at a Pandit Jasraj recital at Siri Fort. The corporate house Gayatri worked for was sponsoring the event and Syed was an avid music lover. This time they exchanged pleasantries and even sat next to each other during the recital. Syed was taken aback at the ease with which he was able to converse with Gayatri. She in turn was surprised that she had talked at length to a stranger. Both of them being music lovers their ability to connect had been instant. Gayatri was surprised to know that this lanky young man was a Professor at the University. He in turn was adequately impressed to learn that this pretty girl held a managerial post with a corporate giant. On his drive back he thought of her dark expressive eyes. Soon an easy friendship was forged between the two and they continued to meet over cups of coffee, dinners, drives and movies. Outwardly they appeared like any regular urbane couple but in reality there was a huge wall which divided their worlds.

Gayatri was the daughter of a retired Keralite Civil Servant who lived in an upmarket apartment complex in Gurgaon. Gayatri’s parents were strict disciplinarians. They had set high standards for their children and the entire family was achievement driven. So Gayatri had continued to top her classes through school and college, making it to a premier Management institute. She had landed herself a plum corporate job. Currently her parents were solely focussed on finding the right match for her. The prospective groom would have to be from the same caste and would have to match Gayatri’s qualification and better her pay check.

Syed, on the other hand, had grown up in Jamia Nagar in a lower middle class joint family set up. An exceptionally brilliant student he had managed most of his education through scholarships. His Doctoral work had been greatly appreciated in the academia and now he was one of the youngest Professors of his department. The University being largely residential he had been allocated an accommodation on

campus where he lived all by himself. Syed's taciturn ways and his lack of interest in the garment shop run by his father and uncles had alienated him from his family. His visits to the family house were erratic. In that large family Ammi was his sole oasis. He had wanted her to live with him in his quarters but she had not agreed. He would visit her quietly in the afternoons when his father would be in the shop. The mother and son shared a special bond.

Gayatri and Syed hit it off like a house on fire. Gayatri was mesmerized by Syed. He was an extremely well read person and could talk about the most complex issues with complete ease. There was a pleasant laid back attitude about him. It was as if time waited for him rather than the other way round. Gayatri's constant war against deadlines in her high pressure job had almost reduced her to an automaton. She felt alive in Syed's company. In order to spend more time with him Gayatri cooked up stories about long meetings and off site visits. Their special time together was spent in Syed's house. Within the University set up she found easy acceptance. Syed's colleagues treated her as one of their own. Surprisingly here their religious identities didn't seem to bother anyone.

Time spent in Syed's house was idyllic. He pampered and spoilt her. She would sit on the kitchen slab watching him cook as the soulful music of Bach wafted through the house. They would sip their wine talking all the time. Their love making caught her unawares each time and she wanted to savour every minute of it. Syed was as gentle as he was forceful and Gayatri could never have enough of him.

Syed was a hugely popular teacher and his students visited him quite frequently. They would discuss history philosophy, literature and contemporary politics. Initially she had been shy to participate in these discussions but he had drawn her out. Gayatri was touched by the respect that was accorded to her. In her house it was clear that women did not discuss politics. So her father and brothers talked while she and her mother were expected to be silent listeners. The mother and daughter would crack jokes on the men when they were alone but were careful not to mess up with the status quo in the house.

The couple had fallen in love at a time when communal tensions were rife. There was an air of mistrust for people belonging to the other religion and this rift seemed to be increasing more and more. A person's attire and food habits were under scanner. There had been some unfortunate incidents of human lynching based on religious lines. Though outwardly things seemed normal but under the surface there was a lot of hate bubbling waiting to burst forth in some form or the other. In the charged atmosphere of mistrust both Gayatri and Syed felt trapped. Was their time together limited and their days numbered?

Meanwhile trouble was brewing in Syed's backyard though at that time he never thought it would affect him the way it did. As per the new University regulation certain subsidies meant for students had been withdrawn and the student community had risen as one condemning this. The students boycotted classes and held a peaceful protest march. Some students also sat on a hunger strike. Things came to a boil when a student from a marginal community committed suicide. Instead of sitting on the negotiating table the University officials called in the police. The protestors were beaten up and some of them were put behind bars. Syed was vocal in his protest. He addressed the student gatherings and urged them to continue with their peaceful

agitation. However the peaceful ambience of the University had now been replaced by sloganeering students and there was an ominous police presence all around. The larger world seemed to be apathetic to the student's concerns. They were perceived as intolerant parasitical creatures feeding on public money and contributing nothing to the society at large. The tolerance versus intolerance debate became the prime time story on the television and suddenly the society found itself polarised like it had never been before.

Syed was concerned about Gayatri. He had warned her against visiting him till things died down at his end. Gayatri was extremely worried. Again and again she warned him to stay away from all this but Syed felt that he was duty bound to stand by his students particularly when their demand were legitimate. Over time he got sucked into the momentum of protest and his communication with Gayatri grew thinner. And then during one of the police raids Syed was arrested. He had been charged with sedition against the State and the case looked bad for him.

Professor Amitranjan, one of Syed's senior colleagues called up Gayatri to inform her. He reiterated Syed's concern, "We will do everything to get him back. We will keep you informed. Gayatri we are all there with him. Please don't panic."

Gayatri was numb with shock. It was as if a limb had been hacked off from her body. She locked herself in her room and sobbed uncontrollably. Once she sobered up she realised that she had a Herculean task to perform. Her need for Syed was enormous and in this time of crisis she could not abandon him. She steeled herself to look at the matter clinically and started to chalk out a plan of action.

Finding Syed's house wasn't difficult as their garment shop was famous in that area. Ammi was exactly how he had described her – a fair plump lady with a shy smile. If Ammi was surprised to see Gayatri she didn't seem to show it. In a soft voice she asked after her son. Gayatri held her hands as her tears began to flow. The two women held each other and tried to draw comfort from each other.

"He has talked about you so often. I feel I know you." Ammi said.

"Did he tell you that I am a Hindu?"

"No he didn't. But now that I know you care for him so deeply it really doesn't matter.

Gayatri bowed her head in respect. She would fight to save Syed for Ammi's sake. It was clear that he was her lifeline.

Her next stop was the University campus. Here she was greeted by Syed's colleagues and students who promised her that they would fight till he was back on campus. She met his lawyer and a plan of action was chalked out. She left promising to come back again soon.

"Achan, Amma I need to talk to you."

Gayatri's parents were confused. She had never dared to talk to her father like this but they sat across the table listening to her.

They were horrified with what she was telling them.

What! Their daughter was mixing around with those hooligans and wanting to support a Muslim jail convict! Mr. Pillai was convinced that this was some kind of joke but Gayatri looked dead serious. She also told them about her visit to Jamia Nagar.

“Go to your room and don’t dare to come out till I give you permission.” Mr. Pillai’s face was crimson with anger. Mrs. Pillai was breathing fire. But Gayatri remained calm.

“And you will marry this this ...” Her mother couldn’t complete her sentence.

“Amma I don’t know about marriage. It will take a lot of thinking through and we haven’t reached there yet. Right now I want to get him out of the jail. I am going on a long leave from office from tomorrow onwards. I will fight alongside his friends.”

Her voice was calm and suddenly she felt at peace. Her parents were in shock but they would come round. They would have to.

Gayatri packed her bag and drove to the University. She would stay in Syed’s University accommodation till such time that he was released. Staying in his quarters made her feel nearer to him.

This time the students were gathering for a march to the Parliament from Jantar Mantar. It was a huge gathering where students from all colleges and universities were participating. There was great excitement when she reached the venue and hands were clenched and raised in solidarity. Holding hands and standing as a part of a large human chain filled her with a strange sense of courage that she had never known before.

With a shock she realised that her fight was not merely for Syed. It was for a larger cause - for democracy and freedom of speech. Syed used to talk about it and only now could she understand the true import of his words.

They started to march. The police tried to stop them but they walked past ignoring the barricades.

Gayatri realised that finally she had broken free of the shackles which bound her. She felt light and free and her heart was one with the surging crowd which moved as one. The songs they sung were of peace, unity and freedom. The water canon hit her with full force. She fell only to rise again as a phoenix and the hands that held her from both sides were firm.

BIO-NOTE

Nandini C Sen is Associate Professor of English in Bharati College, University of Delhi. She was Post-Doctoral Fellow at IAS Shimla and also served at the Cluster innovation Centre at the University of Delhi. She has been the recipient of the Charles Wallace Fellowship to London in 2001 and 2009 respectively. She has also been the Asia Representative at the African Literature Conference in 2003 and 2009 respectively. Her recent Publications include *Mahasweta Devi: Critical Perspectives* (2012) and *Africa and India in the 21st Century: Contexts, Comparisons and Cooperation* (2015). She has also co-Edited the journals *The Oriental Anthropologist* (2015) and *Alternations* (2016) in collaboration with the University of Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa.

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