

## SALMA: TRACKING A PHILANDERING HUSBAND

Salma who works in a corporate hospital in Hyderabad, as an ayah, sometimes comes to help in my friend's house where she had worked earlier, that is prior to her marriage to Ilyas an auto rickshaw driver. She is in her late twenties. Slim, sallow skinned, an American diamond stud sparkles from the left side of her fine nose highlighting her sad eyes. She has led an unhappy life. She bites her thin lower lip as tears sting her dark eyes.

“Some are born unlucky and I am one of them.” She surmises after telling me her painful story which goes back nearly fifteen years ago when she lost her parents. First her father and then soon her mother. She was the youngest of eleven children – three boys and eight girls. Two brothers had died in infancy and at the time of her father's death only she and the sister older to her were unmarried. A year later her sister got married and she went to live with her brother and his family where she was made to do all the housework and other menial tasks. Despite this she was considered a burden and her sister –in- law often beat her up. One day her eldest sister while visiting noticed her plight and took her to her house where she stayed for a month and half. Her sister too found it difficult to look after her and got her a domestic job. There she worked for some time but when the lady went abroad for good, she got her a placement in a friend's house.

She spent about three years working there and then one day her employer felt her services were not required and brought her to my friend's house. This was more than a decade ago. She was about seventeen then. Working in the same house was another female servant - a cook – and she evinced interest in getting her married and took her to her house and introduced her to her cousin Ilyas. She consented and they got married.

The first year everything was fine and Ilyas looked after her well. At the end of the year she had her son and her husband pressurized her to undergo tubectomy. And then after a month or so life changed: the harassment started, her husband beat her often and also stopped giving her money. About her in-laws she had been given wrong information. She now learnt that that Ilyas was not Shamim's cousin but her real brother and the woman introduced as the aunt was actually his mother! Bigger shocks were in store. They had concealed the fact that he had two more wives and from each he had two children!

While she was trying to reconcile herself to this painful reality and trying to fend for herself and the child, by doing some domestic chores, her sister in -law i.e. her husband's elder brother's wife informed her that Ilyas was having an affair with a woman who came to the house in her absence and spent time inside her room. Since she was burqa clad, she was unable to describe her or provide any identification marks except she was short and fair.

When Salma confronted her husband he completely denied it .But her suspicions were aroused. Though after the incident , the burqa clad woman stopped coming to the house ,she started making inquiries on his whereabouts-the routes he took and the contracts he had for leaving school children. Then one day by chance, while cleaning his cupboard she saw a photograph: her husband and women in her thirties wearing a red gold sari and he dressed in his best clothes .It was clear that this was a wedding photograph. But she knew that this proof was not enough to confront her husband. In any case a man who had already had three wives would not stop at having a fourth .She could only put a stop to his philandering if she could reach the woman. But how was she to do in a populous and spread out city like Hyderabad?

Her persistent and discreet inquiries started yielding results : she now was aware of the school he frequented to leave the children .She went there during recess and showed the photo to some of the children, and one or two remembered that the woman came to leave two small children in an auto driven by the man in the photo. She first ascertained where the woman, a widow with grown up children lived . After that she complained to the police who went with her to the woman's house.

I was surprised to hear that the police took cognizance of her complaint: after all marrying another woman was not against the Muslim law. What prompted them to take such swift action...?

“It was not just the other woman I complained about, I also complained about harassment, physical abuse and of not maintaining me.” She asserted vehemently. I was impressed by the alacrity of Andhra Police in taking such prompt action. The appearance of Salma accompanied by the police in the woman's house had a salutary effect: the woman was terrified and her grown up children learnt for the first time of their mother's clandestine marriage. To have the police threatening her, to face Salma's upbraiding was disconcerting; it was a loss of face for her, not only in front of the children but also in the whole mohalla. These were sufficient deterrents for her husband to resist from contacting the woman again in her neighborhood.

I was astounded at Salma's courage, in so relentlessly pursuing her husband and tracking him down and then confronting the woman in her house. Narrating the incident, I noticed the gleam in her eyes. It had undoubtedly been a moment of triumph: she had been able to expose her husband .He may have tricked her into marrying him but she would not allow him to fool her again.

But what about the other woman, was it a shock for her to learn that he already had three wives? And why had she secretly married him? It seems that she was aware of his other marriages but they did not matter to her .She seems to have been swept away by his persistence and ardor.

My friend – Salma's erstwhile employer - knew her too as her son worked in her clinic as a laboratory assistant. When she had chided her for such scandalous behavior her only

explanations was to murmur “Dil hi to hai , bibiji” It seems , Salma’s husband , an ordinary looking puny man was a smooth and sweet talking lothario ,who showered such endearments and compliments on the love starved woman( she remembered only abuses of her late husband) that she couldn’t resist it .Well I suppose the human heart always yearns for love and acceptance and the poor woman was no exception.

But what about Salma? Had her life improved since that incident? Does her husband now look after her?

“Things haven’t changed much .He has not left the woman :he continues to go out with that woman though he lives with me .He takes all my earning and then doles out the money for expenses keeping one fourth for himself .”

“And what about his income? Does he give anything to his other wives?”

“That I am not aware .He does not tell me and I dare not ask.”She replied wearily

“Did you never think of leaving him?”I ask exasperated by her situation.

“Yes, many times but I have no one to fall back on, to support me. And he cares for the child, takes him out and indulges him .In any case now he is ill with tuberculosis.”

So this was the fallout of his Gutka addiction and intemperance and she had now to take care of him.

Her son is now nearly ten and she is keen to educate him: to make him a respectable man –a manager or teacher . She has very little financial security except her job and the provident fund. With so little in hand, she is still ready to face life’s challenges because of her son who is a bright child.

Watching her sad eyes, I pondered on her life and that of many like her. How can life be made less arduous for them . What can be done by society or the community? What support systems can be provided for them...? The Muslims community has a system of zakat for helping widows, divorcees and destitute women. Proper organizations of this system of charity , by taking care of the education of the child or extending financial assistance could enable a better life for them .

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