

JOYS AND WOES OF MARRIAGE IN INDIA

HEMALATHA GNANASEKAR



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The Fraud

Ganesh entered the room rather nervously. He had always been a shy person and dared not look a girl in the eye. There was an exception for his two sisters for whom he had toiled all his life, even sacrificing his own studies. After graduation, he had been interested in going to the United States to study software technology. Unfortunately, during his final year in college, his father passed away and being the eldest son in the family, Ganesh became responsible for arranging marriages for his sisters. He abandoned the idea of going to the States and he began hunting for a job. Since their mother had also passed away years earlier, he vowed to educate his sisters and arrange their marriages. It took nearly ten years for his vow to be fulfilled and now that he was settled in a job, one of his uncles arranged his marriage to Uma. And this was his wedding night.

As he opened the door and stepped inside, he was delighted to see his bed decked with flowers, but his pleasure was short-lived when he found his bride sitting on a corner of the bed sobbing. He pulled a chair close to hers and sat facing her. Trying to console her, he said, "I understand you are missing your family deeply. You may feel free to share your thoughts with me. I can't bear to see you crying." But the kind words only made matters worse.

Immediately, Uma got up and blurted out, "I don't like you; nor am I interested in this marriage. My parents forced me into this marriage without seeking my opinion." The sharp words pierced Ganesh's heart, but somehow he retained his composure.

Ganesh had witnessed many ups and downs in his life, but this turn of events floored him. He did not reply to her sharp words and calmly said, “Well if you don’t like me, I can’t help it. Whatever has happened to you, I am not responsible for that. You should have been bold and protested to your parents in the beginning. By being reticent, you have not only ruined your own life but mine as well. Now that the marriage is over, you are helpless and so am I. As you have bravely conveyed your feelings to me, I promise not to bother you in any manner. You can chart out a future plan for yourself and I will abide by your decision.”

The next day, his sisters left for their homes. Ganesh had not spoken a word to them about the previous night. He did not wish to wound the feelings of his happy sisters. After seeing them off at the station, Ganesh returned and cooked food for him and Uma. He asked her to join him for lunch and waited for her, but Uma was adamant and refused to eat. This provoked Ganesh. He told her firmly, “While you are free to take your own sweet time to chart out your life in my abode, I don’t like to see you sobbing and refusing to eat. You can’t die in my house starving like this. If you promise to eat something, you can stay here; otherwise, I will have to inform your aged parents.” Hearing this, Uma entered the kitchen and ate lunch.

Life had been cruel indeed to Ganesh. From childhood, he had faced one storm after another. His mother passed away when he was hardly five years old. His dreams of higher studies in the States had also been shattered by the death of his father, leaving him responsible for taking care of his sisters. He enjoyed bringing up his obedient sisters, but after their marriages, there was a great void in his life. To overcome his loneliness, he had agreed to the marriage proposal of his uncle, without even seeing the girl. He had dreamed of a wife

who would take loving care of him, but fate had dealt a severe blow. Somehow, Uma's statement, "I don't like you" had registered in his heart. Never did he feel the urge to ask her why she felt that way about him. To him, it did not matter anymore. Uma was now like another sister. She had cropped up from some remote corner of the earth, and it was his responsibility to at least keep her alive if he could not make her happy.

But God had been ruthless with Uma, too. She was born the fourth and youngest daughter in a middle class family. Her parents were strict and brought up their daughters in a disciplined manner. Her father was a government servant. By taking loans from his office, he had settled the marriages of his three daughters as soon as they completed their schooling. However, when he retired from the service, he had a large amount of money with him. He did not wish to hurry the marriage of Uma, who was hardly eighteen years old. He wanted to send her to college. That was how Uma had been lucky enough to step into a college and enjoy the privilege which was denied to her sisters. She had also got a good job immediately after graduation in a reputed multinational company. That was when the real problems started.

Barely a week after she joined the company, she chanced to meet a smart young man. He traveled on the same bus, which she boarded every day, and he exited two stops before hers. One evening Kumar introduced himself, saying that he worked in the organization where she worked and this was his first job. He had come all the way from Kanchipuram for this job, leaving his parents alone. He further told her that he was presently staying in a hostel and would be pleased if she could find him a house with low rent, as the rates were high in Chennai, and the owners demanded a huge advance. Uma promised to help him within a week's time, but that very day, she found time to telephone her college friend Arathi, whose

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father was in real estate. Arathi gave Uma the address of a single bedroom flat, which was near her office. Uma then passed on the message to Kumar and introduced him to her friend. Thus Uma's friendship with Kumar blossomed.

Every day, they chatted for an hour at the bus stop. The friendly relationship slowly turned to love. Some days, they would skip work and roam the marina or go to a movie. Uma had no reservations and spoke to him freely with an open heart. One Sunday morning, she lied to her mother that her boss had asked her to come to the office to finish some of her projects and went to Kumar's house. It was his birthday and he had invited her for a feast at Hotel Taj. After a sumptuous meal, they had gone out to a movie. When they parted, Kumar had expressed his wish to marry her.

Since then, Kumar started giving her a ride on his motorbike, and he dropped her near her residence every day. Uma, too, deluded her parents and visited his house almost every Sunday. On one particular Sunday, she told Kumar that she was feeling very unhappy drifting along like this and asked him to come home and meet her parents. But Kumar was reluctant and he promised to first inform his parents about their love affair. Generally, Uma would leave by afternoon to join her parents for lunch, but that day, she lingered around his house. Pleasant weather prevailed that day, but the sun had suddenly disappeared, and the weather turned cool. The dry leaves fell from the trees and the breeze blew up the sand. Very soon, the clouds began to gather and produce a light drizzle. Within a few minutes the drizzle became a heavy downpour, and small puddles of water formed everywhere.

Uma began to feel chilled. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders to keep from shivering. Noticing it, Kumar switched off the fan in the hall, but she was still cold and Uma's teeth

began chattering. Immediately, he took her inside the bedroom, where it was warmer compared to the hall and he asked her to relax a little. When her whole body was trembling, he decided to soothe her. He massaged the soles of her feet and her palms and slowly her body warmed up and she stopped shivering. His touch sent tiny ripples down her spine and she wanted him to continue. She lay there numb like a lifeless doll trying not to disturb him from what he was doing. Slowly, he was massaging her whole body and she never bothered to protest. Suddenly, when thunder blasted, she clung to him, as if he were her life savior, and he lay beside her soothing her fears. Just then the power went out, and the place was in total darkness. Instead of lighting a candle, they remained in darkness. The power returned within a few minutes, and the room was filled with a flood of light, but by then, Uma had darkened her life forever.

Later, she felt ashamed of herself for being unable to resist temptation. When she expressed her feelings to Kumar, he simply brushed it aside by saying, “After all, we are going to be married shortly, so what is wrong? Tomorrow, I am going to talk with my parents and bring them with me to arrange the marriage.” Uma was thrilled to hear the words.

On Monday morning, Uma was anxious to know Kumar’s parents’ decision. But Kumar had not turned up at the office that day. In the evening, she left early and went straight to his flat. Kumar was sitting on the sofa with a heavy book in his hand and was deeply engrossed in it. On seeing Uma, he closed the book and apologized to her, “I was not able to go home yesterday. Just after you left that day, I received a letter by courier. It was from a company in the States, asking me to attend an interview at Hotel Park Sheraton on the fifteenth of this month. I had, in fact, applied for a job in the States a few months back, and now I have received a response from them. That is why I have taken a week’s leave to attend the

interview.” On hearing this, Uma was dumbfounded. But Kumar quickly pacified her, “Very soon the two of us will be flying to the States.”

From that moment, Kumar got busy with preparations. He had no time for Uma. She did not want to disturb his studies. After a fortnight, Kumar showed up at the office and Uma was happy to see him. He informed her that he had been selected in the interview, and he was going to resign from his job. He invited Uma to his house the next day to help him pack. The following day, Uma had gone to his house and offered her service. At the time of his leaving, Uma’s eyes welled up and Kumar promised her that once he got settled in his new place, he would inform her of his address and phone number. He also told her that he would appraise his parents about their love affair before leaving for the States and they would come to meet her shortly. Also, when he came to India for his vacation, he would marry her and take her back with him. Her friend Arathi had come to give him a send off and Kumar, while handing over the keys to Arathi, said, “I shall send you a check next month toward the rent.” Then he took leave of them.

More than a month had passed and there was no word from Kumar. Life was miserable for Uma at home. In the meantime, her parents had consulted an astrologer as to when it was the right time to celebrate her marriage. After reviewing the horoscope, the astrologer said, “The auspicious time for her marriage is right away. If you don’t conduct her marriage within a month, it will invariably get delayed for another three years.” The words of the astrologer worried them. Uma’s father quickly registered her name in all the matchmaking centers and advertised in the newspapers, seeking a good bridegroom. Uma was depressed about the way her parents were hurrying her marriage, but she dared not tell them about her love affair. She kept telling her mother that she was not

interested in marriage right now. But her mother only said, “All your sisters said the same thing in the beginning, but after marriage, they hardly have time for their aged parents.”

On the other hand, Ganesh’s uncle had found the details regarding Uma appropriate for Ganesh. Immediately, he noted the address and came to Uma’s house. On seeing the girl, he was pleased with her and attempted to arrange the marriage. Uma had not told her mother about her missing periods and this was what made her panicky. She became sulky and never spoke. She hated everyone. Without even saying goodbye to her parents, she followed Ganesh to his house. And Ganesh was the victim of her pent up emotions.

A month had passed since her marriage. She started appreciating Ganesh for his gentlemanly behavior. The world did not know their secret and believed them to be a good husband and wife. But inside, Uma was taking her time to decide about her future; Ganesh was permitting that. Now, she realized that it was high time that she made a decision. There was no point in leading a life without direction. She prayed to God to save her from this tragedy. Suddenly, she remembered something and was filled with a surge of hope. The time to resolve her life was nearing after all. After Ganesh left for the office, she dialed Arathi’s number.

At the time of leaving, Kumar had promised Arathi that he would send the rent payment within a month. Although, she was a close friend, Arathi knew nothing of the developments in Uma’s life. Uma asked her if Kumar had sent the promised check. Arathi told her that she had received the payment just two days ago. Uma then requested that she read the address on the envelope. Arathi rummaged through a drawer for the envelope and read the address to her.

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After noting the address, Uma thanked Arathi profusely. On reaching home, she took out a paper and pen and began writing to Kumar. Since, Ganesh had promised to abide by her decision, a divorce would not be difficult and thus she avoided the news of her marriage in the letter. She wished to know about the steps he was taking for their marriage and she revealed the fact that she was carrying his baby and requested that he rush a reply advising the future course of action.

Uma anxiously waited at the doorstep for his reply. She would return dejected after the postman passed by her house without handing her a letter. But one day, she received an airmail envelope. On seeing the address, her confidence was bolstered, and she tore open the letter and started reading it. Kumar had written:

I am really shocked to read your letter, but very much helpless right now. Here, there is plenty of opportunity for one's career growth, and I wish to utilize the same to my utmost. This leaves me with no time for marriage and family. I just can't think of a committed life for at least another five years and it would indeed be very wise of you to get married to someone else, instead of waiting for me. As for the baby, please abort it immediately.

She felt humiliated upon reading the letter and tore it into shreds. How easily had he skydived from responsibility. God had indeed punished her enough for giving in to temptation. Though she was aware of the consequences of getting involved with a man and had read and heard pathetic stories of how women suffered by men who had abandoned them, she was briefly unable to listen to the rules of her mind and had listened to her heart. No one was going to find fault with Kumar because he was a man. How easily, he had asked her to abort the baby, without being aware of the physical pain she

had to undergo. She cursed herself for behaving in such a manner. She was now the helpless victim of a fraud.

That day, when Ganesh returned from office, Uma told him that she wished to go and stay with her parents for a while. The next day, instead of going to her parents' place, she went to the nearby hospital, and got admitted for an abortion. After two days, she returned home. Well. The final curtain had at last descended on her life. Her mind was cleared of all the confusion. She had been duped by God for no fault of her own. She had gotten carried away by the soft and kind words of Kumar.

During her one-month stay with Ganesh, she realized that he was a kind man who cared for the feelings of others. Such a man should not be deceived, and so she decided to divulge the truth to him. She was prepared to face the storm. If Ganesh was willing to accept her for what she was, she would start a new life with him and, on the other hand, if he refused, she would leave him peacefully. At least, then she would be satisfied that she had not betrayed him.

That evening, when Ganesh returned home, he was in for a surprise. The lamps in the prayer room were brightly lit and the fragrance of incense sticks wafted in the air. Uma was wearing her wedding *saree* and on seeing him, she said, "Today, I am going to decide about my life. However, it fully depends on your decision after listening to my confession." She led him to the *puja* room and narrated the story of her life, without skipping a point. While Ganesh sat there dismayed, she concluded, "Now it is your turn to decide about your life. As for me, I am prepared for anything. If you can't accept me for what I am, you can very well divorce me. On the other hand, if you so desire, we can begin our life afresh. Now, it is up to you."

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Ganesh was sitting silently without commenting. Though Uma had told him that she was prepared to accept his decision, whatever it was, his silence filled her with tension. She felt the heavy pounding of her heart and her fingers began to tremble.

Ganesh was an invincible and optimistic man, one who was prepared to take the good with gratitude and the bad without self-pity, as they chanced to come his way. Clearing his throat, he slowly got up and began, "I was never given an opportunity in this life to make a decision. From a very young age, I have learned to accept my fate. Like others, I never had big dreams or goals set for my life, and I grew up with a feeling that God had his plans for me. I have learned to resign myself to my destiny. I have also grown up the hard way and I can feel the pangs of suffering undergone by others. I always make it a point to ease the sufferings of others in whatever way I can. And if I can ease your sufferings and make you feel happy in any manner, I would be willing to accept you wholeheartedly. If you wish to forget the past, and start life afresh with me, I am willing to accept you as my wife without regrets."

Uma felt genuinely honored by Ganesh. She was moved by his touching words. Unable to control herself, she fell down at his feet. Very soon, Ganesh felt his feet turn wet. He stood there, letting her cry her grief away, for he knew that crying with a loved one soothes the mind, and he wished to give her that comfort so that they could start a new life.

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