

THE RING

(Translation of ANGOOTHI)

Every one was saying that Meera had committed suicide. At least that's how it appeared. She left home after a quarrel, and didn't return.

Many people saw her leave, Ganesh, the *paanwala* being one. His shop was at the crossing, and a meeting point for boys of the neighbourhood. Meera usually went past with head bowed and quickened steps. She felt they were staring at her or talking about her. But, if enquiries are made pertaining to the day in question, Ganesh, with his mouth full of betel leaf, will slap his naked thigh and say, "Oh Sir, girls of today are totally unpredictable! They can indulge in sin, without giving anybody a clue. She was extremely simple, but can't say what she was up to. It was dark and she moved ahead dauntlessly. She kept looking back at God alone knows who! How was I to know that she was going to commit suicide otherwise I myself would..." and he laughed, exhibiting his betel-stained teeth.

At home, Meera's mother is not in her senses, and has gone berserk with grief. From time to time, when she regains consciousness, she screams. "She has killed my daughter! The witch has swallowed her up!"

Her father has not come out of his room for the last two days and no one has been able to meet him. However, her paternal aunt is seen sitting in the verandah, surrounded by women. She too doesn't reveal much. As she dries her tears she blurts out, "What is there to say, *Behenji!* One does err at this age. There are also differences with parents. But to lose a grown up daughter like this...!"

Her dismembered body had been found in the morning, on the railway track, near the boy's college. Her *dupatta* too was discovered there, entangled in the bushes. If all this circumstantial evidence is put together, the rumours floating around will not be doubted. As it is people, people are only too ready to lap up any gossip relating to the daughters and daughters-in-law of their locality; they get sadistic pleasure out of the discomfort of others.

Meera was an ordinary girl of seventeen or eighteen. At this age the beauty of every teenager has a different gauge. With youth and maturity come soaring aspirations, flights of imagination, new expectations. The entire universe manifests itself in different hues, and is seen in a new light. The chirping birds, the bright flowers, the blue sky and cumulus metamorphosing into varied forms with every passing second, all assume romantic significance. Extracts from poems and snatches from songs begin to convey new meanings every day. The world seems to offer innumerable possibilities. A new realization dawns with regard to the importance of one's life and identity.

Meera was like a river in spate after the monsoon rains. Her dusky complexion became radiant like morning flowers bathed in dew. Her expressive eyes sparkled with joy and laughter. She was vivacious and looked upon life as a land of dreams.

She belonged to an ordinary middle-class family. Her father worked as an

accountant with a private firm, and drew a decent salary. Meera had a brother, who was two years older than her. Her mother was a simple lady, like most women of her class. No doubt, they often had to manipulate things in order to make ends meet, but apparently things seemed to be going fine. Ofcourse, there are people who like to boast. After her appointment, when Meera's teacher, Suman *Behenji* began sitting in the Staff Room, she was embarrassed to learn that for everyone except her the job was a mere pastime. She had four siblings. One brother was doing M.Sc. and would take a couple of years to get settled, after-which perhaps she would get some respite. Her younger sister, Radha, was Meera's class-mate and friend.

It was the festival of *Teej*, and Meera and her friends had been invited to Suman ji's place. It was decided that she and Radha would first study together and then have fun; cooking, swinging, singing, and return home before dark.

Meera got ready wearing a new *salwar* suit. She made two plaits, applied *kajal*, wore a tiny star-like, glittering *bindi*, looked into the mirror on the dressing table and smiled.

While she was thus admiring herself, her attention was drawn to the floral ring lying there. It belonged to her paternal aunt, and had a big red stone encircled by small green ones. On impulse she put on the fiery stone, and kept turning it around in her finger, fascinated. She then took it off and placed it exactly where she had found it. Picking up her books and pen, she once again looked into the mirror, re-did her *bindi* and was about to move when her eye again fell on the ring. She slipped it on. There was no harm in wearing it to the party. Radha would think she had got engaged, and she would have fun keeping her in suspense. Radha's brother, Pradeep, would comment, "See, that just proves what I keep saying! There's no point in girls slogging with books. Parents give them education for the sole reason that may they get good husbands. That's all! Now that you're engaged, what's the use of taking down notes? You'd better prepare yourself for the kitchen!" He's extremely interesting, and teases his sister and her friends.

Her aunt was bathing so Meera went to her mother who was in the kitchen. "Ma, may I wear this ring?"

"Go, keep it back. It isn't yours, and you shouldn't wear things that don't belong to you."

She ran towards the bathroom saying, "Let me ask *Buaji*". Then with the ring on her finger she called out to her mother, "Ma, Ma! I've got permission. I'm going and will return by four or five."

It was fun at Radha's place. Pradeep wasn't at home, but all her friends teased her about the ring as she had anticipated. When they passed comments, she just smiled and didn't reveal any thing; rather she too was having fun at their cost, "Its top secret. How can I tell you who the lucky man is? Try and find out the mystery behind the ring."

When she returned home, she decided to help her mother with the household chores. She went to the kitchen. "Have you returned the ring to your

Buaji?" her mother asked.

"The ring?" She looked at her finger. The ring was missing. It had been slightly loose, but couldn't have slipped off; she had been extremely careful. She was shocked.

Seeing her pale face, her mother also got upset and asked, "why, what happened? Where did You leave it?"

"Nowhere. I was wearing it. Where could it have gone?"

She ran to her room where she had just changed her clothes. She ransacked the place... bed, cupboard, dressing table; searched every nook and corner. But she couldn't find the ring.

Her mother began cursing, "Go and be damned! That is why I asked you not-to wear it. Now die! Your aunt will be mad. Go, run and check the road. Go to Radha's house. Be quick!"

Meera panicked and ran out, not bothering to even change. She frantically ferretted the road, and almost combed every room in Radha's house including the kitchen where she turned every pot, pan, and container upside down; she rummaged through into the drain. She foraged the bookshelves, table, almirah, even the bathroom and toilet. She felt lost and helpless. Her legs began trembling. She didn't know what to do. With what face could she return home? She wanted to stay back in Radha's house but that was not possible. Once again she scoured each patch of the road in torch-light as she retraced her steps home. It had been an exercise in futility because the ring could not be found.

As she entered the house, she became unnerved at the sight of her aunt panting and puffing, all geared up for an epic battle. She gazed at her like a terrified doe.

"Have you found it?" Her mother shouted the question, making it evident that she had had an argument with her sister-in-law, which was responsible also for the flush on her face.

Forsaken, Meera was tongue tied, and lowered her brimming eyes. Her lips were quivering. How could this have happened? She must have slipped the ring on at a most inauspicious hour. She prayed to God to soften the heart of her aunt and save her from humiliation.

Her silence and trembling revealed the worst, so picking up the broom lying nearby, her mother began thrashing her: "Wretched creature, that's why I asked you not to wear it! But you wanted to gratify your senses with things belonging to others. Having lost the ring, why didn't you die there as well...!"

"Look Bhabhi, don't enact all this drama for my sake! For me to lose jewellery' and that too at my parental home... How am I going to explain it to my in-laws?"

"Damned girl, its because of you that we have incurred this loss, and now, I have to put up with all this! If you were to die, then only would I get some relief!" *Ma* went on ranting as though *Buaji* hadn't spoken.

Meera was sobbing, and didn't once hold her mother's hand to resist the

thrashing. It seemed as if anguish and humiliation had numbed her senses. She tried to control herself in vain, and burst out crying. What could she do? Where could she hide?

"*Bua*, please have mercy. I'll save money and repay the value of your ring I'll be your slave for life"

Ma had thrown aside the broom, but her verbal lashing and swearing continued. She was wailing, and cursing both, her daughter and herself. *Bua* had gone to her room. Meera sat on her haunches, sniveling with her head between her knees.

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The door opened, and Papa was heard telling her brother, "Pramod, lock my bicycle as well."

"Oh! Meera, why are you sitting like this? What's the matter? Why are you weeping?"

Her sobs intensified and she buried her head further into her knees.

"What's happened? Why don't you tell me? Where's your mother?"

Pramod stood by her side for barely a second before he followed Papa into the room where he was talking to *Ma*. Suddenly, she began hearing the loud voices of *Ma* and *Buaji*. Then Papa called her in, but she didn't go. She would keep sitting there all her life, hiding her face like that.

Pramod came out after awhile and said, "Come on in. Papa is calling you."

When she didn't respond, he held her arm and said, "You better get up or I'll whack you? We've come to know everything."

Meera tried to free herself, "Let go of me! Leave me." What right does he have to behave this way? Does he not remember what's he been up to?

These questions had barely raised themselves in her mind when Pramod hit her hard on the back, caught hold of her arm, and dragging her into the room, presented her before Papa, *Ma* and *Bua*. How long would this trial continue? Was there never going to be an end to this fiery ordeal? Time seemed to have come to a standstill, and her moment of shame had become interminable.

Papa looked crestfallen and tired as he questioned Meera: "Look Meera, in the first instance why did you have to wear your aunt's ring? Then, even if you had worn it, you should have been more careful. Now tell me, where did you drop it?"

"Papa, I don't know. Believe me, I didn't intend to lose it. I'm sorry, Papa. Please forgive me." Her voice trembled as she apologized with folded hands. Her legs were shaking, and she leant against the wall for support.

"You are the one who has spoiled her, *Bhaiyya*, otherwise how can such a big girl be so careless! Grown up girls like her manage entire households! You were reluctant to let me complete Intermediate, whereas your beloved daughter is studying in College. She is free to follow all kinds of fashion, roam around as she pleases, and this is the result."

Ma had always sensed her sister-in-law's envy of Meera, so couldn't help retaliating, "What is it that you want, *Bibi*? You can go ahead and kill her, if it will

satisfy you? Just ask your brother to get you another ring."

Papa's tone was conciliatory when he said, "It's not that simple. No doubt, it is a loss. Besides, she'll be returning to her in-laws this month, and we'll have to give a proper send off which will entail a lot of expenditure. How can I afford another ring? It will cost nothing less than a thousand."

"That's the point, *Bhaiyya*! *Bhabhi* is least concerned about such matters. She does not have to worry about appeasing others. If she had to live in the midst of in-laws, she would know! You can't imagine how they ridiculed the things you people gave at the time of the wedding. They keep taunting me about it to this day. Did you ever bother to come and find out how I was faring? Then, on the occasion of Karvachauth, you just sent two hundred rupees, without clothes and other accessories. And now there will be allegations that I'm forever giving things to my people, and this time I've even presented them with my jewellery."

"That's enough, Usha! Nothing is secret. You are aware how things were managed. What did *Pitaji* leave except debts? Moreover, I don't supplement my income with bribes? I did whatever was possible. You needn't be so anxious, Usha. If it can't be arranged, I'll sell her mother's jewellery and replace your ring. That's it!" Seeing that Papa had lost his temper, *Bua* became nonplused.

Bua had hurt Papa. His eyes fell on Meera standing timidly against the wall. She was getting cramps, and was worn out. But the hatred in Papa's eyes petrified her. "You too have lost your senses! You can fulfill your desires when you have your own home! Why did you have to put on the ring? Would you have died without it?"

Bua became aggravated and had to intervene. "I think she may have given it to someone. *Hey* Meera, I hope you didn't present it to anyone? Maybe you thought of being generous at the cost of someone else...!"

"The things that you come up with, *Bibi*! Who could she give it to? It was sheer carelessness that she dropped it somewhere, and will now suffer for it"

Bua wanted to give vent to her frustration and get the better of *Ma* so ignored her, and continued, "Who was it that came to drop you that day, Meera? You were talking to him as if you had known him for long... Look *Bhabhi*, I know you get easily offended, but you have given her a lot of liberty. *Bhaiyya* never allowed us to move out of the house like this; neither were we permitted to gallivant around with friends. Anyway, what did I stand to lose? Everything worked out fine. Now, you better keep an eye on your daughter. Today a mere ring is lost, tomorrow you may lose your girl!"

Meera's father was stunned. He stared at his sister in disbelief. Then he looked at his wife whose face had turned pallid. What could be more humiliating than this! Her sister-in-law had avenged herself.

"Who was he, Pramod's mother? You didn't tell me anything. Where does she go? And why? Did she really give the ring to anyone?"

Meera got the shock of her life. She had seen a ray of hope, but was again plunged into the slough of despondency. What grudges was *Bua* trying to avenge?

Who was she referring to? And Papa believed such a great lie! Oh, she now remembered that day there had been a drama in the College. It was 9:00 O'clock and she had been waiting for Pramod *Bhaiyya* to come and pick her up. When everyone had gone and she was left alone, Suman *Behenji* sent Pradeep to escort her home saying that the girls were her responsibility and she couldn't allow her to go all by herself.

"Papa! *Bua* is referring to the day of the drama. It was Pradeep, the brother of Radha and Suman Behenji. Nobody had come to pick me up so she sent me with Pradeep *Bhaiyya*...." Meera tried to explain quickly and burst into tears. "*Bua* is lying, Papa ... Please ask her not to..."

"Shut up! She's lying and you are speaking the truth!" Papa felt that Usha would again commence her harangue, and expose them all."

"Damned girl, why did you wear the ring in the first place? Then, where did you drop it. Who did you give it to?"

Looking at the anger of his father, Pramod too was encouraged: "Are you going to speak up or should I give you two slaps?"

"You better leave, Pramod. You have to be at Vermaji's place." Hearing the firmness in Papa's tone, he left grumbling and stamping his feet.

Meera's sobbing intensified. Nobody seemed to pity her. Papa could have helped her, but he was also angry.

Her father was confused and didn't know what to do. He had just realized the bitterness of Usha. Her barbs had touched the innermost core of his heart. This month she would be returning to her in-laws, and that would involve a lot of money. This loss would make the burden heavier. Maybe she was right? Meera could have given the ring to someone out of naivety. It's natural at this age. They pick it up from stories, books and films. We can't understand all this. Or else, how could she just have lost it? But that is not what I expected of Meera. Usha is right, she may get out of hand.

"No Meera, you go and get the ring back. Tell me the truth, who did you give it to. I won't say anything; rather I'll go and fetch it myself."

"No Papa, no. I didn't give it to anyone. Papa, please believe me..."

Bua looked at her sister-in-law. What did she want to convey? A challenge? No! The spite and mockery of a female snake. *Ma* writhed in agony. Meera was holding her father's feet and crying. "Just this once... please forgive me. I'll never wear any thing again, Pa... Pa...!"

She was bawling like an animal being slaughtered. Her youth and her enthusiasm had become the cause of her doom. Papa was her last bastion... the only prop in a vast billowing ocean and that too was slipping.

"No Meera, you have to get the ring. Go, and bring it back."

This icy cold voice pierced despondent Meera to the core.

"Don't return home till you've found! the ring! Now go..." he suddenly shouted, shattering the uneasy calm. It seemed he was having fits; 'Go.... Just get out...".

Hearing Papa's unexpected explosion, not only Meera, but *Ma* and *Bua* also

began trembling. *Bua* got up and retired to another room. Meera ceased weeping and was rooted to the spot. Her eyes were open, but she could not focus clearly and the faces of papa and *Ma* appeared hazy. Her mind was becoming numb as if she has been administered an anaesthetic. Papa's voice no longer sounded terrifying. From some latent layer of her fading consciousness and image arose pretty, little. Fairy Hope fluttering, her wings.

She laughed, and opened her palm on which lay the ring of fire. "Meera Rani, I was only testing you. Take! Isn't this your ring. It was a little drama enacted during childhood."

No doubt it was a drama, but when would it end? She had had enough, and was drowsy.

And then Meera felt that her father had taken her by the hand and pushed her out of the house. Struck dumb, in a state of semi consciousness, it can't be surmised whether Meera noticed her mother who was controlling her sobs and wiping her tears with the *pallu* of her sari. Meera's senses had become torpid, and she couldn't hear anything either. With blank eyes she stared at the door which had been banged into her face, and staggered forward somnolently, in search of the ring.

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