

You Have Changed, Sadia

(Translation of the story Badli Tum Ho Sadia)

I can't even lie down in bed and here Avinash is already snoring. It's strange that the moment he gets into bed he's transported into another world. Tonight I won't be able to sleep. It seems as if I'm the only one responsible for the entire household. He's just not bothered about anything. Avinash, if you can't share my problem atleast don't aggravate it. Please, turn the other side and sleep. How can anyone possibly get any sleep in the midst of such loud snores!

My eyes fell on the big, thick, envelope lying on the table. In the focused light of the lamp, it assumed larger proportions, and seemed to mock my confused state of mind. It contained a letter from Sadia and many coloured photographs. One featured my whole family, Avinash, Neha, and me. Another had Sadia, her son Arif, Neha, and me. Yes, Avinash had taken that photo. There was another one in which Sadia and me were giggling; we two friends had arms around each other's necks. There were four other photograph, all of our Neha, that Sadia herself had clicked.

And ... our roses! She had photographed them too. Both mother and son were crazy about them. No wonder, because it's a labour of love. I take pains and can identify each flower and leaf in my garden. They are the incarnations of my very soul. I water each plant myself ... tend it, caress, it. A kind of dialogue goes on with it at the same time... every plant has something to convey through its respective movement. One laughs and giggles, another complains their world is extraordinary and their companionship exceptional. My extreme dedication lies behind every flower that proudly dances and proclaims its individuality.

Sadia simply adored the splendour of my roses, "Look, Arif such lovely roses! Oh Aloka! They are simply terrific!"

Arif stood there smiling. He was observing the roses and their beauty, his mother... her happiness and ecstasy. "Yes Mama. They are indeed lovely. Fantastic!"

I felt complimented and broke in. "You know Sadia, I'm a lover of nature. And these roses ... they are my life."

"I know, I'm aware of everything." Then she softly whispered in my ear. "All my roses withered and died, didn't they." And looking at me, hoping that I would understand, she began giggling.

"Saddo!" I exclaimed. I couldn't wrench my hand from her tight grip and just stared at her. Sadia, you haven't forgotten anything. You are still the same old Saddo.

I wanted to embrace her again; give her a tight hug; but I couldn't do either. I'm not a carefree adolescent any longer, but a responsible housewife. Sadia too had a family. We had our respective homes and lives. My young daughter, Neha, was there. Besides, Sadia's tall, handsome son, a computer engineer in America, was also with us. We had to keep up appearances...

propriety and ethics also mattered. The long river of time now flowed between us, and it had made us mature, somber, and balanced.

I looked at Sadia once again ...curly hair falling to her shoulders; finely made eyebrows; heavy make-up; sparkling diamond dangles with necklace to match a perfect representative of an American NRI ... the glamorous lady stood smiling. For a moment I envied her. Not that we were badly off, only that Sadia has undergone a complete transformation after going to America. After all, why shouldn't she with her husband's flourishing business, the American life style, climate, amenities and luxuries? She looked younger than she was, and no one could guess that she was the mother of this twenty-five years old man; she seemed to be his older sister.

I tried to withdraw into myself, but with Sadia around that sort of thing was never possible. "Come on Akku, let's go indoors. Leave the children outside.... Let's talk. Now tell me, does your hubby always remain out of the house the whole day?" She sprawled on the sofa and began to chat.

"Let's get some tea..."

"All right." I called Rakesh and asked him to make tea. "Which sort of tea will you have, Saddo? Without cream and sugar or the special cardamom flavored, strong one, with a lot of milk and sugar?" I teased. This tea had many associations. It was Ranjit's prop phrase. 'Ranjit's tea' implied cardamom flavoured and strong with a lot of milk and sugar... he would give directions in one breath which seemed like some formula in Chemistry, and we had learnt it by heart. No sooner had he asked me to make a cup of tea, than I repeated the entire process before he could utter anything further. Later Sadia too followed suit; she used to spend the afternoon with me in my room, and would go to the kitchen to make the special tea for my brother.

"Sadia, do you really like my roses'? I'll just present one to Queen Nur Jehan." I said trying to get up and lighten the atmosphere .

"No Akku. No more roses for me. I don't treasure anything now... except memories..." she said abstractedly and forced me to sit down.

It seemed as if riding a very high wave, she had suddenly sunk very low. I wished to rescue her. I wanted to reassure her and tell her, "Saddo. time is like a tsunami which takes everything dearest to us and flings it far-far away on some rock or deserted field. I don't even know whether the memories that you cherish have any significance now. What matters is the present and that is the only reality on which rests our happiness ... yours, mine, and everyone else's."

The drawing room window was open, and the fragrance of yellow and orange roses, fluttering and dancing in the cool breeze, came wafting in. We could also see Neha and Arif walking in the lawns. She was trying to explain something. and he was listening carefully.

Can Sadia read my thoughts? Suddenly our glances met. Her dark eyes were shining and reflected my image. I smiled. She was passive. Silence! With Sadia around , was such silence possible? This was indeed a strange phenomenon

for me. Sadia, speak! Say something atleast! Tell me things about yourself, Pervez, America. What do you do the whole day? I've heard that you are working. Won't you say anything? Then, I'll have to do the talking. "Sadia, we are meeting after ages, isn't it!"

"Yes. After a very long time," she replied'

I began calculating. It must be after about twenty-seven years'

"Why, Sadia, didn't you come to India all these years? Didn't you feel like seeing us?"

'Aloka, I came after every two years, but couldn't pick up the courage to come here. I just visited Lucknow and returned."

Now it was my turn to be silent. I couldn't understand why we were playing hide-and seek like this. She has come across the seas only to meet me. I'm aware of what she wants to know and say.

"Sadia, Don't you want to know about Ranjit. Where is he? How is he?"

"Ranjit" She turned towards me, her whole being looked at me, and her eyes pierced my very soul.

Sadia and I were childhood friends, parts of our respective families, but I only came to know about her and Ranjit exchanging roses when Papa started blaming all and sundry for the theft of his beloved flowers.

Meanwhile Sadia Begum began coming to College like Queen Nur Jehan. ostentatiously holding a rose in her hand. Later, the flower would get lost between the pages of some book. As her books became heavier with the weight of dried flowers, she and Ranjit drew closer to each other. I was aware of everything, and enjoyed being their confidante. It became my prime duty and proud privilege to protect them from the wrath of their families.

Then Ranjit went to Roorkee to study Engineering. It seemed ironic that though he was my brother, he was writing letters to Sadia. No doubt, in those envelopes there used to be a little note for me, but I was contented that he was loyal and straight forward. Had he written to me and ignored her, I would have felt humiliated that he was being disloyal and letting her down. Those days I felt that I was the most fortunate person on earth. I often used to tell Ranjit, "Sadia is so wonderful! That's why you are crazy about her." Conversely, I would tell Sadia, "My brother is one in a million! That's why a girl like you has fallen for him."

Outside this dream world of romance reality was harsh and bitter; a terrible storm with dark threatening clouds and raging gusty winds was brewing. Sadia and I were in B.A. Final. Her parents wanted her to marry her paternal uncle's son. That's when she had to reveal everything. The consequences were far-reaching and devastating. Her father's coming to our house and misbehaving with family members, and vice versa. Threats and counter threats! Search for *goondas* who could carry out the threats. Search for Ranjit who insisted that he would

marry nobody but Sadia else

Else... Everyone was upset. It was like an earthquake... an unexpected calamity. Both families were astounded. A love marriage and that too inter-religious! For one family it implied the loss of faith, for the other it meant the desecration of everything with the intrusion of an untouchable. It was not just a matter between two families; it involved both communities. The lives and honour of innumerable people came to be at stake.

I was helpless and could see my world of dreams collapsing around me. We were all helpless –Sadia, Ranjit, our families.

Sadia was forcefully sent to some close relatives in Bombay where she was married to Pervez and pushed off to America. Don't know what happened to the many roses pressed between the pages of her books. Maybe they were dusted away like trash.

The travelogue spanning over twenty-seven years swam before Sadia the reminiscences brought tears to her eyes.

"Ranjit is now in Bangalore, Sadia. He is a Chief Engineer in some reputed firm. He earns a fabulous lot, and spends it extravagantly on eating and drinking."

Sadia's eyes lighted up. I continued speaking. This was a good opportunity to speak out-reveal everything: only then would the carcass of memories be shed giving her the much needed liberation. How could she be doing justice to Pervez with this secret cross that she was carrying around. Maybe, he was deceived by her gaiety and laughter, Apparently all rivers flow according to a set pattern. However, a women's heart cannot be fathomed easily. Only love and trust can penetrate it.

"Saddo, Ranjit has put on so much weight that you may find it difficult to recognize him."

"Is that so?" She seemed interested. "It may be possible.... I might not recognize him. And... What about his fascination for roses?" She asked at last.

"Roses?" I burst out laughing. "Bhai Saheb has forgotten all about them. They don't exist any longer. As far as he is concerned, they belong to some previous incarnated existence. He has no time for such things. He leaves home in the morning only to return late at night. Whatever the gardener does is all right with him. As for his wife, she is busy with her parties and meetings."

"Is that so?" She again began ruminating.

Sadia was with us for three days. Avinash suddenly became garrulous. Neha forgot all about her college Picnic and evening club. Sadia counselled Avinash about health-related matters. She gave me suggestions about cosmetics, make-up and decorating the house. Her tips to Neha ranged from hair styles to career prospects. She also invited her to America. As if not satisfied with that, she had a lot of stories about herself. Arif was exactly the opposite. Most of the time he just listened and smiled or answered questions that were put to him. He had

problems with speaking Hindustani, but Sadia insisted that he speak nothing else. "If you don't practice your mother tongue in your own country, where are you going to get an opportunity in America to do so!" That is why he kept silent, and we teased him about it.

The whole atmosphere was affected by her vivacious personality. There was another photo session before her departure. But this time the focus was Neha on whom she showered all her love and affection. She had to attend a niece's wedding so had brought heavily *tinselled ghararas* and *shararas*. She made Neha wear one of them, and, adorning her with heavy traditional jewellery, clicked innumerable photographs.

When leaving, she became very emotional. She hugged Neha and me. As for Neha, in three days she had become so attached to her Sadia Aunty, that she too was sobbing. I was slightly annoyed at this show of emotion. Besides, it seemed uncalled for.

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But now, reading this letter, I am depressed, and feel like crying.

"Avinash! Avinash!" I tried waking him up in vain. When I shook him up, he turned the other side and again slept off. What should I do? I'll talk to him in the morning. Just as well that Neha is not here these days. Had this letter fallen into her hands, it would have been disastrous. As it is she was pining for her Sadia Aunty.

Sadia, you are wonderful! I know you are interested in Neha and Arif getting married. No doubt you will shower her with love and affection. But, I know that behind all this lies Ranjit.... your wilted roses.... your unrealized dreams. How can you keep that niche concealed? You write: "we were helpless. Akku, because we were living in India. Had we lived in any other country- here in America -those roses would not have withered. We all would have lived happily amidst those blushing flowers. Yes, we all! But now times have changed. Perhaps such relations do not breed hatred and violence. I sincerely wish that our friendship should become a trendsetter with the marriage of Neha and Arif. We can realize our dreams in our children. Once again roses can bloom and fill our lives with fragrance. I like Neha. Afterall, she is your daughter. You have seen Arif. He is free of the vices associated with American youth. I hope you will approve this match...."

"Sadia, my beloved Sadia. How can I tell you that we live in a society where we move one step forward and two steps backward. We are all wearing masks, my dear Saddo. Your Arif is one in a million, and his greatest asset is that he is the son of my dearest friend. But we all bear dual identities. We are in mid air, suspended by such twines of modernity that we can neither break free and touch the skies, nor can we collapse back to earth. We are a weak people, cowards.

Why have you got involved with dwarfs like us.... Neha and Arif in wedlock? How can that be possible? What will people say..."

I was exhausted, and felt that Sadia was before me, waiting for a reply. I had been the confidante of Sadia and Ranjit.... how could I say no? what should I say? what excuse should I make?

"Avinash, please get up! Avinash!! Avinash!!!" I shook him up frantically. I could no longer put up with it. I seemed to be going crazy.

Avinash got up with a start, "What's wrong? What's happened? Why don't you tell me? What's the matter?"

I began crying, "I want you to get Neha married within the next fortnight. You must hurry, Avinash."

He kept staring at me in disbelief. "Are you all right? Are you feeling..."

"No Avinash, we have to expedite this matter. Last week I met Colonel Anand's wife at the Club; she again mentioned her nephew. Your Aunt in Meerut also referred to some boy who is a doctor...."

"Madam, its almost twelve. Did you wake me up in the middle of the night only to tell me this?" He had become slightly attentive which was very encouraging.

"No Avinash. Just get Neha betrothed as quickly as possible. Only then will I reply to Sadia. I'll write..."

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