

FALLEN LEAVES (DAAL SE TUTE PATTE)

There is a visible change in my son ever since he entered the University. Earlier, he was full of life and vitality, extremely demanding, having regular tiffs with his sister. Now it seems that he has suddenly grown up, and become grave and serious like an elderly person.

However, one trait that has persisted is the concern of his 'army of friends', as we call them, for the wretched. They used to assemble at the door of the house and try to solve the problems of the world. Now that he has a room of his own, they come and lock themselves in.

His father had said, "Our Sukant has grown up, and is in the University. He can no longer share a room with his sister. We have to arrange for them to have separate rooms".

The result was that friends would come to meet him and be locked up inside, leaving me extremely worried. What if they indulged in bad habits... cigarettes, alcohol, vulgar SMS messages, pornographic books... the entire milieu is polluted. These days children develop wings as soon as they are born. A friend tried to reassure me saying that such things are natural at that particular age. Secrecy... secrecy! That is an obsession with them. It is a latent awareness that they are growing up ... doing something of great importance ... and doing it on their own. I tried to follow her advice because she is a psychologist, after all.

She had suggested, "If you are all that worried, why don't you try to establish a rapport with your son's friends ...get to know them, spend some time with them. They are all in the hostel, yearning for a home away from home provide them with what they want. You are unnecessarily suspicious ... don't... worry, everything will be fine...

This time around an interesting situation has cropped up in Sukant's class. His Biotech course is so advanced that there are only fifteen students, and, for the first time, three of them are from Kashmir. They have formed their own Association. Our son has befriended other members of this so called 'Association' as well, and they have also started coming home.

I have become apprehensive. Kashmiri boys! Who can vouch for them... which is of upright character and which might turn out to be a terrorist? What if this friendship should lure the police to our doorstep someday?

The ten-twelve boys squeezed into my son's room have just returned after the *Holi* holidays, and are here to eat *gujhia*. This time *Idd* and *Holi* had coincided, so the boys had gone home, and have now returned to recompense what they missed. At Sukant's request I had to start 'project *gujhia*' once again with the result that my back is giving way.

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These boys sitting here with me, laughing and sharing jokes, have almost become a part of the family, and I feel as close to them as Sukant; after all, they are far away from home. Sometimes I berate myself for having thought so

negatively about them. But what could I do? These are unpredictable times, and can drive anyone crazy. It seems that tolerance is the greatest need of the hour. We are living in such a panic-stricken and tense environment that we just can't stop looking at people with suspicion; we are unable to remove the dark glasses of fear and doubt. If only we can get rid of such sun-shades, will our vision become clear, able to see the real human being.

This short and fair boy of eighteen-twenty years, sporting an unkempt beard, never says that his name is Feroz or Feroz Zia, as stated on all his documents.

When he came for the first time, Sukant was not at home, so he left a message saying, "Aunty, tell him that Feroz Kashmiri had called... Feroz Kashmiri". With his hand raised, it sounded more like a haughty proclamation.

I thought that there could be other boys of the same name in his class that was why he identified himself as 'Feroz Kashmiri'. What a presumptuous boy !

Besides, name-tags are a characteristic feature of this University. It is an interesting way of distinguishing people, be they students or teachers. Giving nicknames pertaining to somebody's personality, gait, mannerism, behaviour and so on is an old tradition e g Amir *ghora*, Amir *sookha*, Hamid *mota*, Hamid *lambu*, Arif *tez*. Nazim *bakra* was given the particular title because once he had had a serious dispute with a butcher selling goats on the occasion of *Bakhr ldd*, and the situation came down to fisticuffs, leaving him to be called Nazim *bakra* for all times. The curious case of Asif was most interesting: there was Asif *Gatta*, Asif *Assi* (because he lived in room no. 80), Asif *Mamu* (because his sister's son lived in the hostel too, and called him *mamu*), and Asif *Bihari*, leaving Asif Hussain who was something of politician but nothing specific could be identified with him, so he was not given a tag and came to be called Asif *khali*.

But Feroz's case was different for it was none other than Feroz who had given himself the title; it had become almost a pseudonym. I asked Sukant if there were others in his group bearing the same name.

He smiled. "That's his identity, Mummy. He says that he is proud to be a Kashmiri".

I laughed saying, "He's extremely courageous".

Almost regularly newspapers carry politically motivated arguments and counter arguments highlighting the issue of these Kashmiri students who have been given special concessions by the University for admission. Everyone is aware of the fact that education has suffered a great setback in the valley considering the conditions there. When one is not even sure about the next morning, can he visualize aught else? Trying to maintain one's identity in the encircling gloom gives one the strength to survive. Feroz often comes and proclaims his name and identity in the same fashion.

The boy sitting at the back with his head resting on the back of the chair and his eyes closed is Iqbal. I'm very fond of him. He's like a Greek God, tall and broad-shouldered with blue-brown eyes, a fair complexion, and light brown hair.

But, he seems strangely detached... drooping shoulders, gazing into the distance, lost in deep thought. He looks ill, and is never left on his own; there is always someone to give him company. If he wants to come home, Sukant usually brings him along.

Actually, our house is located on the University campus. Except for two or three boys, all the students in Sukant's outsiders, and live in the hostel. They face peculiar problems ... often the money sent from home doesn't arrive on time; by the end of the month they have nothing left for even breakfast or tea, and have to manage somehow; once the money reaches them, it's pay off time; the next two-three days they enjoy life; the circle of friends, like crows and vultures, tries to exploit the situation ... perchance they need to go home suddenly, they have to first arrange for funds.

Sukant has such a vast circle of friends that it seems he has the capacity to embrace the entire world. I call him *Khalifa Haroon Al-Rashid*. He loves to bring friends over, and there are usually one or two of them dining with us. There is no greater source of joy for him. Actually, ever since he was a child, there has been a problem with him. Life would have been wonderful if there were no such thing as lunch ... a packet of biscuits here or there, a handful of *daalmote* or *matri* now and then ... even a Frooti or some cold drink in lieu of snacks... but never a proper meal. He just could never swallow *daal*, rice, vegetables, and *roti*.

While he uncovers the bowls making faces, complaining, "Again the same vegetables", his friends relish the meal.

I think it was Nadeem who once said, "Aunty, you put up with his tantrums, that is why he's so spoilt...."

"Shut up, my foreign friend", growled Sukant.

"Of course! Aunty, just send him to the hostel for a year. That will set him right", Nadeem chuckled.

These children tried to cross-check and keep a tag on one another with the result that in spite of Sukant's tight lips and locked room, I had up-to-date information about who had gone home and got betrothed, whose engagement had broken off, who was not able to establish a relationship; they also dropped hints if Sukant was interested in a particular girl. We got along well, and they never went home during the vacations without meeting me.

Yes, I was talking about Iqbal. This six-foot tall young man is fleeing the shadow of death. He has not been able to overcome the trauma of his sister's death at the hands of his own brother. The elder brother had joined a terrorist organization, the leader of which had eyes on his sister. She refused to marry him, and because her honour was at stake, she married a man of her choice. It was betrayal worst confounded; a serious provocation for the leader who now wanted only revenge. I wonder what oath the brother had been made to take that when the newly wedded bride came with her husband to visit the family, he suddenly materialized after two years, and gifted the couple with martyrdom.

The parents had already lost him, and now to have their daughter and son-

in-law murdered right in front of their eyes ! The younger son, Iqbal was so traumatized that he began losing his mental balance, and was sent here for a change of environment. It hardly made any difference whether he studied or not, as long as he was out of danger's way. One of Iqbal's friends told me that his father, himself an Superintendent of Police arrested his killer son and put him behind bars. Who can understand the pain he must have gone through? His entire family was ruined, but still there are many who question his devotion to duty.

Be they neighbours, friends, relatives or members of political parties, all think that every Kashmiri Muslim is a terrorist and carries an AK-47. However, reality becomes apparent only when observed from close quarters.

Nadeem hails from Doda. Jameel was also from there. May God grant Jameel's family the fortitude to bear the great loss, and may no one face such a horrific accident ever again.

Nadeem and Jameel joined the University during the peak of summer. The general elections were round the corner, and the entire state was in the grip political frenzy. Every party was trying to stake its claim by projecting the issues of patriotism and unity in its own way. The Students' Union happened to organise a Students' Parliament on the question of national unity and integrity at the same time. Though Sukant and his friends were members of a different students' organization, they were taking active part in this function as well. At the moment they were busy putting up posters in the Science Faculty.

Nadeem was also asked to help, but he told them off saying, "How am I concerned with India's integration and unity when my people are being killed".

"Why doesn't it concern you, *yaar*? Are you not living in India?"

"I am Kashmiri, you know".

"Oh, forget it !" Someone slapped his back and mimicked, "I am Kashmiri! Come on, take this poster and put it up in front of the faculty".

"This too much, *yaar*", said Nadeem, making faces.

"Fine, you can form your homeland later, but at the moment this is our responsibility, and these posters have to be up by the evening."

Nadeem looked at all of them and smiled. He then picked up the bundle of posters and asked, "So who's coming with me... "

"I'll come with you", someone mimicked his dialect, and the room resounded with laughter.

Nadeem is one of the best students in Sukant's class. He is very diligent. He is obsessed with the idea of leaving India as soon as possible, and going to America, England or any other place where he can complete his studies and finally settle down. This is the mindset of educated youth today who are fascinated by glamorous life styles abroad .

When I tried to reason with him, he said, 'Aunty, what is there in India? Death! Police ... military ... encounters ... killings! Nothing ... there is nothing here! I don't want to die, Aunty. I just have to get out of here.'

"But son, going abroad is no longer as easy ".

"My *Mamu* is in Canada. He said that he would call me there. I will qualify the TOEFL I will qualify the GRE examinations; I'm preparing for them".

He was very happy that day. But a few days later all his happiness turned sour when he heard of his *khala's* demise. He rushed to Srinagar. She was a widow, teaching in a school. She lost her life in the cross-fire between militants and security forces.

He had said that he would return after a week but came after two months. We were hardly able to recognize him. He looked very frail and lost. He didn't even come to visit us. I asked Sukant and learnt that he was not well. When he did finally come, he kept to Sukant's room so I went to meet him, and enquired about his aunt. He was not the same person, and looked distraught and detached. I thought that he had been terribly affected by the incident.

The boy who had once been studious, smart, and garrulous was now struggling with studies, and had lost interest in everything. His plans of going abroad had also been shelved for the time being because his *Mamu* had taken on the responsibility of his late aunt's two orphaned sons. He had turned reticent, and when he spoke, it didn't make any sense.

Then one day, in the midst of his sympathetic friends, his pent up feelings burst forth. It was good for him. Clouds of black smoke arose and began to dissolve. No... it was not his aunt's death... that was nothing new... they had got used to such tragic incidents... it was either this or that ...there was nothing extraordinary about such happenings now... But, it was a personal tragedy that had shaken him to the core.

A beautiful little hamlet near Srinagar... news of militants hiding there... skirmish with the army... a blast by the militants resulting in a soldier's death ... the army cordoned off the area.

People between the age group of ten to fifty were rounded up and assembled in a *maidan*. The primary inspection resulted in the dismissal of the very young, weak, and ill. At the end of the final inspection twenty to twenty-two were detained for questioning, Nadeem being one. He tried his level best to explain that he didn't live there... had come only a week ago... was forced to come on account of a bereavement in the family ... but they paid no heed. Rather, in order to extract the truth from him and others like him, they tried to so physically and mentally break them that it became the most terrifying experience of his life, and left an indelible scar on his psyche. "For two whole days, we were made to crouch in front of their vehicles imitating the posture of cockerels. As they got into their vehicles, each one of them made it a point to stomp on our backs and back-kick us as if we were not human beings but inanimate stones ... planks of wood ... bricks... He was howling. "Such humiliation ! No self-respecting person can dare to face anyone after all that! It's as if my life has been snuffed out... my very soul has been crushed... all this education... these degrees... everything is futile... we are worse than animals or even insects... ."

All were disillusioned, and in a state of shock. Nadeem, a topper, always

seen in the seminar, extremely focussed about his career, was falling apart. We couldn't even console him. He went on, "Jameel was better off ... at least he died at one go and didn't live to face these never ending affronts".

"No, No my son. The stains of Jameel's blood will never be washed away. What those fanatics did to him and his companions left them exposed, and they will never be forgiven. Such incidents are not recorded anywhere. Crimes committed during riots in the frenzy of communalism, become acts of bravery, but history has to pay the price for their bestiality. They are a disgrace to God and humanity.

The smog resulting from the demolition of the Babri Masjid had turned into a terrible storm ... every home and courtyard, lane and square was pervaded with choking air. The University had been closed, and the terrified boys wanted to return home as quickly as possible. Jameel too was going with his friends the same day. I warned him that it was not safe to travel under such circumstances, but he was very tense. The University bus was deployed to take students to the railway station.

Unfortunately, Jameel and five of his friends boarded a coach that was teeming with the saffron-clad. Returning from Ayodhya, intoxicated with a sense of victory, they were boasting about their exploits.

By the evening one of the boys rang the University officials informing them about a fight between the students and the saffron-clad. There was an altercation about seats which snowballed into fisticuffs. The accent of the boys gave them away, revealing their identity. Public opinion coupled with a volatile bloody atmosphere... as it is people look upon every Kashmiri as a terrorist... such a horrific incident occurred and no one had the guts to say a word.

Two of the boys escaped with injuries, and managed to jump off the train; they furtively reached Delhi in a couple of days. Another kept sitting with the crowd, concealing his identity, and later revealed all that had happened. Three others were missing, and it was believed that they had been murdered and their bodies dumped somewhere along the way.

The University officials, accompanied by the Police and District Administration, launched a search for the missing boys. They found the mutilated bodies within a radius of about 20-25 kms. Whilst two of them were still alive, Jameel had breathed his last.

Jameel's parents are doctors and have a flourishing private practice in Srinagar. Their prosperity is apparent and has made life difficult for them because terrorists keep making frequent demands for huge sums of money; excuses earn them titles of traitors or enemies of Islam. After some time, when they felt that their only son's life was in danger, they sent him here. As it is Srinagar is no longer conducive for studies... strikes, murders, kidnappings, arson... then the encounters and terror unleashed by militants. They had managed to save their beloved child from home-grown terrorists, but what did they know about these other terrorists. Their son was snatched from them forever.

A Kashmiri carrying an AK-47 was arrested in our city. Subsequently, the political party exercising sole claim to patriotism with its coalition partners, began protesting. Their demand was that the University expel Kashmiri students because they were all terrorists. Sukant and his friends became apprehensive; for days they discussed nothing else except what was to happen next... would they be singled out and expelled from the University ... would they be sent back to the valley again from where they had escaped with their lives?

Jameel's friend, the one with blue eyes... I forget his name... asked a very pertinent question, "Aunty, why is it only in Universities that Kashmiri students become the subject of politics? Our boys are studying in many new private colleges as well. Will they kick us out from the whole of India?"

We really did not have any answer to his question. On the outskirts of our city itself, innumerable private colleges have cropped up that like demonic giants of mythology are forever demanding more. These children on the run give huge amounts of money to get admission not into *Saraswati's* temples of learning but into *Lakshmi's* corporate houses. If not proper education, at least they will get a degree.

In this era of commercialization, education is evolving into a full-fledged form of business, and everyone is benefiting. If one has the money, he will get admission ... and a degree to boot.

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When Feroz Kashmiri called the other day, I was extremely happy. He was accompanied by another boy of about the same age. Incidentally, that day too Sukant was not at home, as he had gone to the library to study for his sessional test. I thought that he would simply give his name and leave. But when he hesitated, I felt he wanted to say something. I asked him in; he came and sat in the drawing room with his friend.

"How are you Feroz Kashmiri? How are you feeling now?" He had been down with typhoid.

"I am all right, Aunty". He seemed slightly uncomfortable. "Aunty, meet my childhood friend, Atul Pandit. I also call him Atul Kashmiri. He had gone to Delhi but has now come to study in this University."

He seemed elated and a little excited as well.

Atul was tall, lanky, fair, and a bit shy. He was conscious of his height so had developed the habit of drooping his shoulders. He was looking at Feroz and smiling as he was being introduced.

It looked as if leaves fallen from the same branch had met, turning the entire tree lush green, and the Kashmir valley had once again begun spreading its fragrance. There are countless Ferozes and Atuls who ... like tall mountain peaks stretching into space... like serene dingles... like melodious, sparkling springs... like fresh green valleys ... also want their own environment of friendship and harmony. They want to live. How long will these youths be at the mercy of the winds ... driven along like seared, fallen leaves

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