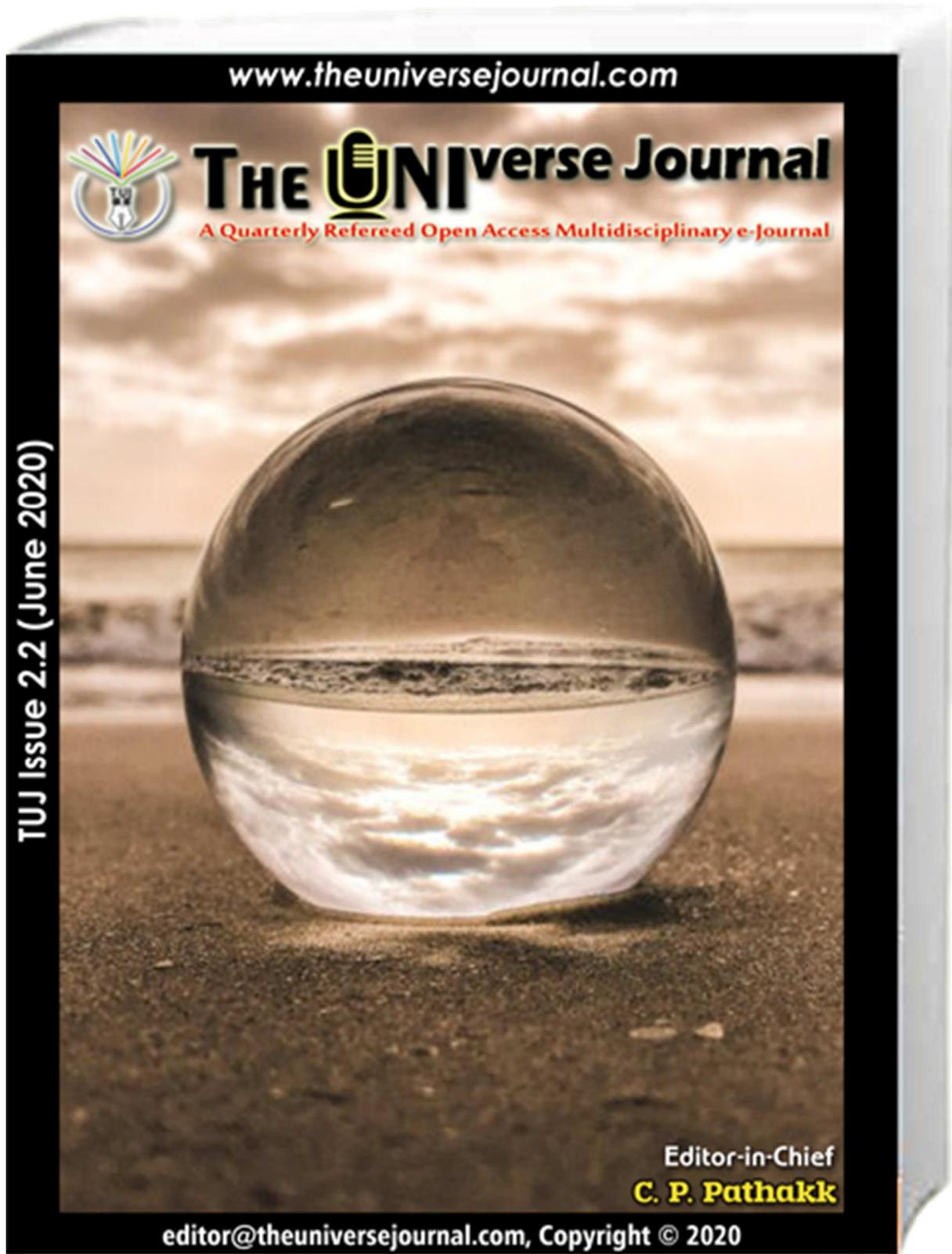


The UNiverse Journal
(A Quarterly Refereed Open Access Multidisciplinary e-Journal)



“I Was A Man”

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Bangalore was shimmering under the evening street lights as I drove back home. For anyone in the right frame of mind, that early January evening would have looked soothing but not for me. I was having an arduous day. A little bit of stress improves performance, I am well aware. I had lived through stress all my life. Perhaps it had helped me in a way to reach where I was. You see, I was migrating to England on a full scholarship at Oxford for PhD, indeed an achievement in the early nineties. But then, the reason for my distress that day was rather intangible.

What could possibly have been stressful about flying abroad? You may argue. Here’s the thing. I had my flight in less than five hours, I was going away for a minimum of four years and here were all the important women of my life, crying away to glory. Wasn’t it a man’s primary obligation to keep women in his life fine. Isn’t that a real measure of any man’s self worth? Gosh ,How I cringed to see them cry. I hated tears !

Amma had been sobbing for weeks and it had reached its peak today.

Wasn’t it amma who had constantly put that into my head in the first place?

‘Appa always wanted you to study abroad’

‘If Appa was alive, he would have been proud to see you do a PhD,’ the usual whining I had heard from childhood !

Sometimes it made me sick. You know, the burden of being the eldest son in a single parent family. I had to constantly struggle to be a source of gratification for Amma. Well behaved, disciplined, obedient. I was tired of being it all. Off late it had begun manifesting as pride. I walked holding my head high all the time, as though subconsciously. I never hesitated to brag about my achievements or my ability to achieve much more in future. You see, humility was a luxury I couldn’t afford. I had to feel good about myself to make Amma feel good about me.

I had a little sister too. Swara, a sister I doted on. And my only duty towards her, as Amma always reminded, was to get her married soon to a suitable boy with suitable dowry arranged. It was as though Amma had started saving for her dowry ever since her birth. Every Friday she kept a paltry sum of money in front of Goddess Lakshmi and turned the incense sticks around it with great reverence. Later she put away the money in a small aluminium box and carefully hid it in the pooja room drawer. On Diwali every year, she counted the amount saved and bought plain gold coins out of it.

‘It is for her marriage, we will have to give at least 25 tholas to any decent boy, you see.’ Amma would say, as though the only purpose of a girl child was to marry and wash dishes in another house. I always rolled my eyes at that, of course only when I was alone in my room. Amma was already too hurt to have a cynical son.

‘You are my only hope.’ She would repeat ever so often.

‘I am in no position to continue stitching anymore. The local tailor rejected all the blouses I stitched last month for him. He says there is no finesse in my workmanship now.’ She would sob.

Appa had succumbed to a heart ailment when I was barely in primary school. It had been sudden, had jolted Amma. Having eloped from home after a love marriage, she had nobody to fall back on. With incomplete education, she had resorted to odd jobs to fend for us, all along pinning her hopes on me.

Her dreams always weighed me down. ‘What if I didn't meet her expectations? What if I didn't prove to be a worthy supporter of the family ?

On some nights, I would suddenly wake up in the middle of the darkness, palpitating. I would rush to the window and take deep breaths .

Sheeba had come into my life like a breeze of fresh air, like that open window in my room that helped me breathe . The first day I saw her, she was wearing a light blue salwar with a plain white duppatta and had looked like an angel everyone talks about. Her long silky hair were left open. She was drawing that rangoli in front of the university auditorium on the kannada Rajyotsava day. It was a large intricate maze of lines with yellow and red colours sprinkled in splendid symmetry. If it was the charm in her face or the long strands of hair that were stroking it, that I liked more, I fail to remember but at that very instant I knew she was going to be my happy place. My haven of peace.

I had stolen secret glances of her graceful moves from behind the stage when she danced for the cultural fest, I had gulped down five plates of that spicy pani puri at her stall in the food fest and when she spoke for that debate on ‘Only child- a psychological dread’, at the university debate forum, I had clapped the hardest and the longest, so much that the grumpy judge with cratered cheeks had turned around to see what amused me so much.

She knew me already when I sheepishly spoke to her for the first time at the NSS field trip.

‘Economics ? Eww.’ She had made a face when I told her about my area of interest. Her expression was so cutely full of disgust that I had contemplated on specialising in psychology, her subject, instead .

‘I make plans for five years. Three years for masters and then a year of preparation of resume and applications and by the fifth year I will be in Oxford for a PhD .’ I had told her in the library where we had started studying together.

Her eyes had glistened and a sparkling smile had lit up her face. It had felt so warm, that look on her face, that I knew I would achieve anything if she could just sit beside me and smile like that all my life.

I went on long walks with her in the university campus, staying silent all along, simply feeling her presence. The back of our hands would stroke each other once in a while and we would just let the moment pass. She always insisted on having lunch together, sitting under the Gulmohar tree. I ate from her box while she often said she wasn’t hungry. On my birthday that year, she cooked my favourite gajar halwa and fed me like I was her child. She had made me feel so much like a child that I had felt like lying on her lap and sleeping while she sung a lullaby for me. It was my idea of absolute peace, my head on her lap and her soothing voice in the breeze.

‘Sheeba’ I often repeated to myself on random occasions like it was some secret spell that lifted my spirits and calmed me.

I never told her how I felt. It would have sounded silly. To say, ‘I love you’ or to give valentine cards. I mean, we were not teenagers after all. The fact that I spent all my leisure time with her, sometimes even skipping the university cricket match would very well tell her what she meant to me. And the way I listened to all her girly stories without blinking, looking deeply into her eyes was proof enough of my affection for her. Wasn’t it ? I listened to all kinds of stuff she said, like how she hurt her finger while cutting onions, how her heel broke when she went out shopping and she had to walk barefoot with the sandals in her hand, how she fought with her mother that morning even the thing she ate the previous night for dinner and what she longed to eat that night, I heard everything intently. In two years I knew every little detail about her like her favourite song, food, place, even the colour of the saree she wished to wear on her wedding and number of children she planned to have. She got so dangerously close to me that I sometimes wondered if my hand was hers and if her feet were mine ? Where I ended and where she began, had kind of begun to blur .

She never spoke about her feelings either until that sullen day in final year when she came running to the library where I was working on my scholarship application. I had been awake till late that previous night . My left eye had been twitching since morning and I was having a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when she barged in .

‘Take me away Sumanth. You know I cannot marry anyone else.’ She had whispered though it had sounded like a scream in my head. Her wedding was being fixed. She had clutched my hands tight and had held them near her forehead, hitting it occasionally on it, in sync with her escalating sobs. A few of her tears had fallen on my application, smudging it. That was when reality had dawned on me. Like a thunder on a silent night, jolting me from my dream. I had forgotten that I could not marry her. Not anytime soon. Amma would be shattered if I did. I had my goals to chase.

The air hunger had worsened that night, the tightness in the chest became unrelenting. I had gone to Amma’s room and looked at her wrinkled face to steady myself.

The next day, sitting near the deserted flag post, bringing my eyebrows to frown, I had said curtly, ‘I think we should move on. We can be good friends. I have other goals in life, you know very well. Please forget me and live happily.’

I had put the onus on her, to forget me, to live happily . It had sounded so funny for a while that I had felt like laughing out loud. I mean, forget each other? And live happily after that ? It was a ROFL range of joke. Just that it brought in tears in her eyes rather than laugh.

Her wedding was fixed with a man I knew. That was worse. I could now imagine her with not just a faceless husband but with a actual man with features, with a personality. Every time I imagined him looking fondly at her, a smouldering rod of iron singed my heart. I always stopped myself from imagining any further, it would have been suicidal if I did.

Sheeba’s wedding was in less than a week. I had planned to leave the country before that. It was safer that way you see. There would be no threat of me gate crashing the wedding and sulking in a corner watching her decked up for someone else. Far away from it all, I would at the most bang my head on a wall couple of times or hit my fist upon some table and ease my pain. Hopefully.

I went to meet her one last time before leaving .

She was crying relentlessly with puffed up eyes and crumpled hair, pleading me to not let her go. Ah, how I hated tears ! Tears never solved anything? Did they ?

She was blaming me for not standing up for her. I knew she would hate me forever. May be I secretly wanted her to do so. You see, hatred can be the best motivation to move on, to live better. It insulates the heart from all the pain of a break up.

She was hitting her fisted hands on my chest repeatedly as though it would move my heart. 'You are heartless,' she kept saying. I was surprised she did not understand . Could there have been anything more disparaging to manhood than having to give away his girl to some other man? I was doing just that and it was breaking me. I was hoping the earth underneath would devour me or a lightning would strike and char me, before I said it to her. Neither happened.

'I think, you should go ahead and marry him' I uttered in one breath, the words refusing to stop echoing in my head.

She dropped my cold hands abruptly and ran away. She neither noticed my neck muscles that got taut nor the slow swallowing movements that I failed to hide. She did not turn around , not one sideward glance to say a final good bye. I had stood mortified, my legs turning into numb pillars of stone till one of my friends had come and shook me hard.

When I drove back home after letting her go, a part me had left with her. That part which had kept me alive. I felt like a walking corpse . I found it futile to breathe, to move, to exist.

My eyes had reddened. I was hoping to hide it when I saw Amma sobbing silently and Swara wiping tears from the corner of her eyes, both avoiding my gaze.

I walked into my room and slammed on the bed. My pass port and tickets lay in the pouch next to me, the black long jacket I had newly bought at China bazaar sat on the pillow and the half packed large suitcase lay open next to it. I was staring at the ceiling when Swara came in .

'I know it must have been hard for you Anna, to see Sheeba go.' Swara squeezed my arm gently and when I did not move, she silently walked away crying.

How easy it was for women to cry and pour out their feelings . If only I could express that easily, I would have embraced Sheeba and cried and asked her to live happily where ever she would be.

I would have told Swara to take care of Amma and be brave . I would have assured Amma that I was going to solve all her problems . I would have been unburdened.

Instead, I had stood in front of them with a mask face, feigning arrogance .

‘I am strong enough to leave everyone behind and go after my goals ...’ I had pasted a poster on my face. I had added some intense gaze, a rough voice and fast moves to make it appear authentic. It had worked . With Sheeba and with Swara but not with Amma .

When it was finally time to leave, my friend took my suitcases to place in the taxi and Swara rushed to check on my passport and tickets in my pouch. That was when Amma pulled me to the pooja room. She was small built and had wilted further with all the hardships that she had endured. I bent down and touched her feet. She caressed my hair. Applying vermilion on my forehead and lighting the lamp, she did a small aarti. I remained silent. She came closer and holding my cheeks with her cupped hands, forced me to look into her eyes. It was unlike her . She never did much of touching. No placing on lap, no kissing on foreheads. That day she did, like I was a small kid, a child that I had always longed to be. It was tough for me to meet her eyes.

She held my cheeks firmly and steadied my face, my gaze and my tumbling heart in a way.

I was blinking hard.

‘Swara told me about her. I am sorry. I heard she is getting married in a week.’ She sniffed. I looked away and tried to free myself from her hands.

She refused to let go of my cheeks and I failed to hold back my tears any longer. When she hugged me, I think I cried harder than Sheeba had.

Damn ! I hated tears.