

Talaaq by Chandrashekhar Sastry

She had been warned by her mother Asiyabi not to embark on such a foolish venture but love as always was blind. Akash was such a handsome boy and he seemed to be totally enamoured of her. Akash with his rotund figure and neatly circular face appeared to Tarranum like an oversized baby who needed to be protected and mothered. She had a longish intelligent face with large eyes and a near perfect nose. When Akash described her as 'stunningly beautiful' she revelled in his adoration. They looked forward to a lifelong relationship and readied themselves to weather the protestations of both families.

Abbajan the retired school teacher from Lucknow looked lovingly at his daughter and shaking his head said,

"Tarranum, we all love you and we want you to be happy for all time not just for the moment. Akash is a nice boy but not of our faith. Will his parents be able to take you in as their daughter-in-law?"

He put an aging hand upon her head smoothing her curls and repeated her name a couple of times. He was wondering, as any parents in such a situation would, 'Will two and a half decades of parental love prove futile in the face of a daughter's obsession with a young man?'

Akash too faced considerable opposition from his parents who lived in Kanpur when he spoke of his love for Tarranum. He had first revealed it to his mother and shown her some photographs on his phone. The pretty pictures delighted her but when she heard the name, so unmistakably Muslim, she was startled.

"Akash, what has happened to you, son? Are you joking?" She had known him to be a prankster from his school days. Akash was renowned for his clever April Fool's Day antics.

"No, *Amma*," he said, "this is real, this is serious."

Her brows furrowed and face fell into a saddened mien. "Tell this to your father when he comes home in the evening. Wait till he has had his evening bath and said his prayers." She knew it to be the best time for such a revelation when he was at peace after the turbulent day at work and the hard, nervous scooter ride returning home.

"Don't be carried away by her pretty face." The astonished father tried to tell his son of responsibilities to family, of a family that he would have in future, and how society would regard his actions.

"We do understand all that, Father. We too have apprehensions of the future but we are prepared to face it together." He bent down and touched his father's feet. "Bless us father," he said while the mother wept into her sari's *pallu*.

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It had become an impossible situation with both lovers facing a silent, sullen antipathy in their homes. They were employed with the branches of software companies having head offices in Bangalore. After a lot of discussion they applied to several consultants to their organisation for positions in software offices in Bangalore. They were greatly surprised to find attractive offers forthcoming and negotiated for their joining dates to take effect at

about the same time. On reaching the big technological capital that was the new Eldorado they decided against a formal marriage. Going with the new trend they opted for a live-in relationship in a small flat in the new environs of the Electronic City. They were both employed in good positions and their combined income enabled them to have a reasonably good living. Brought up in frugal families they planned to save adequately and soon afford a flat of their own. They had been told that the banks were quite helpful in loaning money to professionals.

To the neighbours in the huge condominium of small and medium sized flats they were Akash and Tara a newly married couple from Lucknow. Tara wore a *bindi* when she went to work but was reluctant to participate in the religious festivals that the association of residents celebrated. Akash was indifferent to religious affairs and did not go beyond making the occasional contribution solicited for a community puja. After a few months they felt they had melded well into the assembly of residents in the condominium who hailed from many parts of the country.

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Tarranum's parents in Lucknow had to face a blistering attack from the Maulvis for not having kept firm reins on their daughter. They asked him to file a case for kidnapping but Abbajan could not bring himself to do that.

"I will not face further ignominy with a court hearing in public and with lawyers asking me to utter perjury."

When they found him obdurate they went further and even threatened to bring her back from Bangalore by force but he put his foot down at that and refused to take part in any such scheme. He even said he would denounce them to the police if they attempted it. Finally he was unusually rude with them asking them not to visit him again if all they wanted was to pester him on this score. Asiya agreed with him; they should accept the inevitable and await a reunion when things cooled down in a while and time had healed the wounded mind. Secretly she hoped a grandchild would arrive and untangle the knotty situation.

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Tarranum could not remember when it had all started. She was greatly disturbed on the day he announced that he may move to a night shift.

"I've been offered a position to lead a team that works the late night shift," he said one evening. "Would it be alright with you?" I have to answer by the weekend. She put on a brave face as she sensed that he was eager to accept the promotion that came with it.

"Yes, yes. It's OK with me, but how long can you go on always on night shifts?"

Akash raising his large head to eye the ceiling, thought it best not to answer for he too did not know how long this would work out. They celebrated his promotion that weekend by dining at the newly opened Italian restaurant in Indiranagar. For the first time Tarranum tasted with a joy she had not expected, a celebratory red wine and for the first time Akash bit on a piece of steak that Tarranum was eating with a surprise at the pleasure he got. Neither felt any guilt for tasting what had been forbidden for them from their childhood.

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Both Tarranum and Akash felt a bleak loneliness on the nights they had to spend separated. After a few weeks Akash thought he would give it up and revert to his earlier position but his Manager threatened him with severe consequences that may lead to a pink slip. He was beaten down to continue without further remonstrance.

"I'm stuck with this," he told Tarranum on Sunday after his meeting with the Manager. "If I can't cope with this promotion I'll quit."

Tarranum was consoling, "You'll get used to this after a while and maybe so too will I."

She bravely went on to philosophise on how one gave up present conveniences for the sake of something better in future.

"We will buy our own flat a little sooner now with this. So don't give up too easily."

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She started spending her nights surfing on the television but the channels seemed uniformly uninteresting. Taking her neighbour Padma's advice she sat with her laptop and earnestly worked at Facebook collecting a large number of friends. Chatting and exchanging pictures and jokes were giving her a social status that she started enjoying. It made up for her lack of company in the late evenings when Akash was away at work.

Padma had been widowed early and was quite independent. Unencumbered by children she stayed in a one bedroom apartment on the same floor and had befriended the young couple when they first came in. She sympathised with Tarranum on hearing of Akash's change of shift and spent more time with her in the evenings, often staying back for dinner. One late night she related her problems hoping for a sympathetic ear.

"Tara, do you know, I tried a dating site? It was boring at first and was weird talking to two-three men at the same time. They all asked the same questions - 'What do you do? What are you interested in?' 'Where do you work?' Curiously none ventured to make a joke when commencing a chat. But there was sheer joy in rejecting men, after having been through the few boy-see-girl meetings that my parents had arranged and which resulted in humiliating rejections."

Tarranum heard Padma, eyes wide open and jaw dropping, in incredulity. She reacted with an explosive, loud, 'What?' that left Padma wondering if she had erred in opening out to Tara.

"Tara, how long have you been married?"

Tarranum now used to the question responded lying automatically. "Two years," she said.

"That's about two years less than the time I have been widowed. It's been a hard four years. I have struggled for and finally achieved an independence that I never thought would be possible."

Tarranum tried to empathise, "What makes you join a dating site?"

Padma was hard put to give a cogent reply. She talked about the men in her office. They were younger to her and mostly dull. She found the married men uptight and prim – some were insufferable. She needed to find some better more attractive men.

“My husband had a wonderful sense of humour. Perhaps I am looking for him in every man I meet.”

“Padma, we have to get on with life, to move on.” A wave of compassion flooded her and spontaneously she reached out to the older woman and gave her a big hug.

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They had come out on a double date. Like youngsters not sure of themselves and needing the reassurance of a friend. Padma refused to share her phone number and the email conversations with a man she picked out for his striking looks ended up with a request for a meeting. She was a bit frightened to go alone and so Tarranum agreed to accompany her. Besides the attractive face Padma had only the vaguest of ideas what her internet boy friend would be like. He mailed her that he would be in a red Tee shirt and black jeans. He would bring along a friend so they could make a foursome.

The men were waiting at a dimly lit corner of the restaurant. They rose as the ladies entered while an usher strode up to them with a smile and a ‘Good Evening, Madam,’ that enchanted them. Looking around Padma found the red shirt and jeans approaching and smiled a little hesitantly but Tarranum was shocked at what she saw. The man accompanying Padma’s friend was Akash who grimaced awkwardly and staring at her exploded, “You ... You ...”

Tarranum gasped with incomprehension and could only repeat awkwardly like a fading echo, “You ... You...”

Akash strode out of the restaurant without a word to his companion, while Tarranum staggered to the nearest chair small sobs erupting uncontrollably into heaver ones. A distraught Padma sought to console Tarranum when Red Shirt expressed his apologies for having ruined their evening and offered to escort the ladies home. They both said ‘No, thank you,’ repeatedly like in a chorus. After a while when Tarranum had stemmed her tears and composed herself Padma hailed a Uber cab on her mobile phone.

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Tarranum sat awake all night sorry at her foolishness and waiting for the clang of the lift door closing and his shuffling steps heralding the sound of the key in the lock of their flat. She did not want to call him as she would not be able to do anything but sob into the phone. After five in the morning she gave up and went on with the routines before she went to work.

The next night again she waited through the night with no avail. She chose to message him but Ashok denied her any reply. After her early morning desperate message Tarranum willed herself to not check her phone to see if he had replied. It had been two days now. She hated that she was constantly checking his ‘last seen at’ status and yes, he had logged in just five minutes ago. Yet she couldn’t stop herself. This sinking feeling to find absolutely no communication from him was becoming unbearable, almost torturous.

And then, just as she sat down on the bed, her phone vibrated. With her heart thudding in her ear, she unlocked her phone and stared at the screen. Finally! It was his message. But when she opened it and read it, she nearly stopped breathing. She didn't know if he was joking or not. What was this?

Talaaq! Talaaq!! Talaaq!!! The cryptic message shocked her. The escalating exclamation marks seemed ominous like a mounting ire that explodes into a rash outcome. She concluded that he was not joking and his message was in earnest for the usual emoticon at the end of the message was missing.

When Padma came in that morning she found Tarranum laughing hysterically.

"The irony of it," she said, "to be divorced without even being married." And again that hysterical laughter peeled out of her. Then she went quiet. Gravely she told Padma, "Only last week I read of a Maulvi who upheld talaaq on phone or through social media saying 'Talaaq is the husband's right and is valid thorough any means.' Indeed, what is a Talaaq without a Nikah." She could not stop her laughter.

As a slow comprehension dawned upon Padma they grinned at each other on hearing the lift stop at their floor, three shuffling steps and the key turning in the front door.

Chandrashekhara Sastry is a widely travelled engineer-scientist now retired and living in Bangalore. He has studied in Bombay, Germany and in the UK and worked in Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata and Bangalore.

C Sastry is a published author and has won several prizes for his short stories. His first book *The Non Resident Indian* – from Non-being to Being (Panther 1991) was a path breaking study on the Indian diaspora.

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