

# Hero, Villain, Clown

WITHOUT having stirred from his chair, Amit knew that right now, Parul, in the inner room, must be mercilessly running a comb through the tangles in her hair. After that, she would wrap the hair around her hand, knot it tightly behind her head and hastily stab eight or ten pins into it — as if the hair was not her own but someone else's, and she was revenging herself upon it. He knew very well that he was the real cause and object of the exasperation and anger ceaselessly boiling in her, night and day, and that Parul wanted to reveal it to him, but he had assumed an impenetrable armor of rhinoceros hide from which all her shots rebounded to pierce her, while he, filled with the unspoken delight of victory, enjoyed the pleasure of taking the other down a peg or two.

After wearing her sari, Parul would carefully put on a mask of normalcy, would apply layer upon layer of sweetness and smiles, so that no one, looking at her, could ever dream of the many battles that were raging within her. All this not because she was a good actress, but rather because of the strong dose of good breeding and decency that had been



poured down her throat at birth. She was simply unable to do anything so coarse and vulgar as to allow her heart's sorrow to spill over. She might fool outsiders but Amit knew her inside out. Amit alone knew and could, if he wished, put into words, the vulgar abuses and curses that she constantly showered on him in her heart even while melodious words of love and tenderness, dripping with sweetness, fell from her lips, before everyone. Politeness and decency—the trivial tomfoolery of a wretchedly artificial, fraudulent existence...He had done well to upset and undo all the fandangle and flummery of this tedious, stifling sophistication. He had put the whole set of bastards in their place. Once again, his breast

swelled with the pride of victory.

He quickly picked up his chart paper and sat down to complete the sketch of the set of a play—with an air of absorption, as if, at that moment, he was concerned with nothing in the world besides that paper and himself—certainly not with Parul, at any rate. His eyes were fixed on the paper but his back could clearly see Parul move aside the curtain and stand in the doorway, uncertain whether she should leave without saying a word.

Even if she didn't in the least feel like speaking, wifely dutifulness would compel her to say : "OK, I'm going." Never would she, even inadvertently, let the word "office" escape her. Conditioned as she was to guard her husband's honour, how

could she stoop to mention her office going in the presence of a good for nothing husband?

“Will you be at home today around four o’clock?”

This unexpected question made him look up, against his will. Wow! Perfect! Could anyone, looking at this neat, fresh, girlish woman, guess that she had spent the night restlessly tossing and turning? Though he had kept his back turned to her, he knew that all night long, she had been shedding silent tears, without a sob. Hats off to you, madam! Surely there must be a training one undergoes to hide one’s feelings, otherwise why should it be, that even though he was so skilled an actor, each of his thoughts was always straining to shout aloud not only from his face but from every part of his body? Well, after all, my parents sent me to a municipal school where I learnt the alphabet and no more—how I was to develop this conventy super sophistication?

“Ammaji will come over. If you are at home, she would like to meet you.”

He felt like saying: “Thank you for the honour bestowed on me in the word ‘if’. Otherwise, you could have said straight out: ‘Where can an idle fellow like you have to go? Mother will come at four. Sit and talk to her.’ But, forgive me, this crude and coarse vocabulary can never be yours — even if worse thoughts are fermenting in your head.”

“You don’t have to go out of your way to change your schedule for the day. Amma is, in any case, coming this side of town on some errand of her own. If you aren’t in, she’ll go home.”

“What does she want to talk to me about?”

“Don’t know. I didn’t ask, neither did she say. On the phone, she just asked: ‘Will Amit be home at four? If he will, tell him I’ll come and see him.’ Then, very casually, “Couldn’t be anything special. Since she’s coming

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this side, she must have felt like a chat with you.”

O that wonderfully casual tone! Try it on somebody else. Why don’t you say straight out that she’s coming to read me a lecture. To say that this absolutely irresponsible life I am continuing to lead even after marrying her beloved only daughter cannot be allowed to go on any longer.

“Breakfast is ready. You can have it whenever you feel like— while working or after work. (Because you will never learn to eat sensibly, at the proper time). OK, I’m off.” And a delicate whiff of perfume wafted past him. She and her kind could never shed their haughty demeanour, not even when ground into the dust.

Exit the heroine. Now he was quite free until the villainess should make her appearance. Free, liberated!

He tossed his pencil up into the air, stretched, sighed three or four times, and called loudly: “Murari, a cup of coffee, steaming hot.” Then, with a feeling of relief, he fell flat on the bed. How curbed and stifled he had been feeling. Despite all his efforts, these two women were managing to fragment his identity, nay, were becoming his destiny. A sharp wave of pain ran through him. He remembered his room. Untidy though it always used to be, he had felt like a king, living in it, even in times of penury. The alley that was visible from its one window had seemed to him no less than a royal highway.

Now that all the daughter’s stratagems for reducing him to a sheep had failed, the mother was coming to try her hand. Fine, let her come. Today, he would deal with her. Once and for all, he would show both

mother and daughter their place and would also ensure that they understood his place. The end of the matter, once and for all. No doubt she imagined that she would strike so sweetly, wrapping her weapon in a silken shawl, that he, a helpless creature, awed by the softness of the silk and by the consciousness of all her favours to him, would be unable to utter a word, and she, after dispersing all his fancy ideas with a few well chosen words, could retire, waving the pennant of victory.

The daughter who unashamedly thought herself an artist merely because, thanks to him, she had acted in a few plays, and because she could deck up a house with cushions and curtains, had now understood what the pride, the ego and the self respect of a real artist are. She now knew that the liberty of a real artist is not to be bartered for the greatest luxuries on earth, paltry as they are in his eyes. Today the mother too should be vouchsafed a glimpse of this truth. He was a born actor—who could beat him in dialogue delivery? For that, what is needed is not good breeding, but art and skill, of which he, not mother dear, was master.

The anticipation of victory filled Amitosh with a new self confidence. He felt as if he was being infused with a mystical strength—a strength which elevated him, made him weighty. For many days now, he had been leading the life of a hollow man. This new self confidence that came flooding into him broke open the windows of his mind. Without having heard them, he anticipated all of Ammaji’s weighty accusations, and not only prepared yet weightier replies but even rehearsed them several times over. Let the drama be staged today. Let the cold war which was constantly being waged around the questions of his lifestyle, his habits and, particularly, his liberty (which, if their unspoken allegations were to be put into words,

would be termed that of an untethered bull), he concluded once and for all—let the final curtain fall.

In his longing for the curtain to fall, he began restlessly to wait for it to rise. To pass the time that now hung heavy on his hands, he picked up a book. Every day, when he lay down to sleep after a hearty meal, one of Parul's unspoken speeches would resound in his ears. "Only good for nothings have the good fortune to be able to sleep in the afternoon...."

He had left the door open. So, when there was a soft knock and he said "Come in", the villainess came onstage immediately, but she was dressed in as dignified a manner as usual, was smiling as sweetly as ever—in every respect her daughter's mother. Her eyes seemed like moulded balls, not made of live tissue. No wonder she had no idea what a personality, a definite and full personality, is.

"Good, you're at home. I was afraid you might have gone off for some rehearsal or other. I'd sent a message through Parul but I wasn't sure I'd find you. Still, I had to take the chance." Amitosh was silent.

"You two haven't come over forever so long." A reproach dripping with honey. "I know you're very busy but you could find some time for me. You know how uneasy I feel when I don't get to see you two."

Amit was silent but words were bubbling in his mind: "Forgive my impertinence if I spell out your real meaning in my own words, the meaning that has remained unspoken amidst your slippery soft, polite remarks: 'Unemployed fellows have plenty of time but why would you come—you're scared of me. And, because of you, poor Parul too can't come. All day long, she toils in the office, and if she comes to see me in the evening, you fly into a temper.' Pray don't hesitate to say what you mean."

*Ammaji* looked round the room and her face glowed with pleasure. "So Parul has put up the new curtains. How the room has blossomed! Parul has always been fond of making the house look nice."

And, overflowing with appreciation of her daughter, she went on: "Even though she is my own daughter, I can't help saying that she has very artistic tastes. The things she selects—a real artist."

God! What an insult to real art. Putting up curtains and decking a



table with cutlery and crockery may seem like real art to someone who does not know the ABC of art. This time, some bitter words were taking shape when *Ammaji* rounded off her remarks with finesse.

"And she best demonstrated it in choosing you—one of the three or four best artists in the theatre world today—in fact, I'd say the best of them all."

Although his hands did not stir, Amitosh inwardly clenched his fists—these tactics designed to dissolve the opponent's anger were not going to cool the boiling rage in him.

Both were silent. As if sizing each other up before coming to the point.

"Amit, I have come to talk to you about something." Her tone was no longer happy, proud, playful and affectionate as it had been.

Well...so the train had come on to the track. He was on the alert. Another halt. Perhaps the point was being sharpened. He knew that her words would be well weighed and measured but perfectly honed to pierce him through and through. "I don't know how to begin."

For heaven's sake, don't enact this drama before a dramatist. Reel off the list of my misdeeds that your daughter must have given you, and that you must have been committing to memory over the last four days. Why are you finding it so difficult to start? I see, you have no words in your respectable vocabulary for my base deeds. Tch, tch...a real problem, poor *Amma*!

"Parul strictly forbade me to say a word to you about this, even inadvertently..."

Thank god, the daughter at least realises that I am not one of those spineless lumps of flesh who get reduced to a cipher by the "magnanimity" of you and your kind.

"But I couldn't stop myself."

Compelled by motherhood, no doubt. Unable to see your poor daughter's suffering.

"What can happen? At most, you will get angry with me. Who takes offence when children get angry?"

That is to be seen.

"What's the matter, Amit? Why are you so quiet? You haven't said a word since I've come."

What can I say? First, have done with your gilt edged, bejewelled carving, and then I'll deliver a single blow with my blacksmith's hammer.

"I heard that your new play is stuck halfway through."

Quit worrying about my play and start our own. This prefatory chorus has been prolonged to the point of tedium.

"I know you have tremendous self respect and, to tell the truth, I'm proud of your self respect..."

Forgive my impertinence, but why don't you have the courage to use words accurately? Don't say "proud", say "sorely troubled". You folks may be wealthy but how poor you are in courage. I really feel sorry for you.

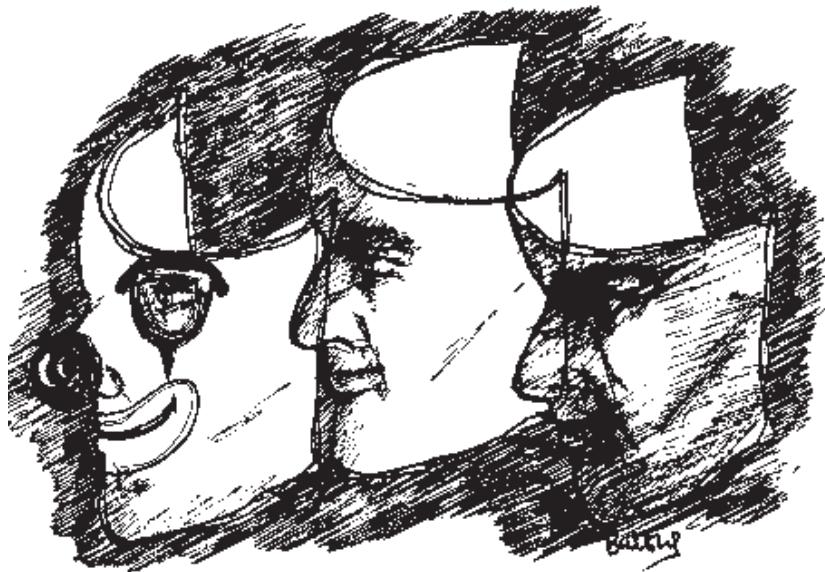
"But, son, self respect too has limits."

Which you have come to lay down, perhaps.

"The biggest problem is that Parul is equally self respecting." O! So you have come to hold a brief for Parul's self respect. Go ahead. As a mother, you have every right.

But why have you fallen silent? Has your courage failed you or is that good old good breeding coming in your way? Allow me to speak for you, and don't hesitate to correct me if I go wrong. The message will be yours but the words mine: "You married Parul after working with her for two years and getting to know her well. No one pushed you into it. You chose for yourself." Well, isn't that a good beginning? What kind of actor would I be if I couldn't hit you off to perfection? "How well she has set up the house and with what dedication she has taken on all the financial and domestic responsibilities, merely so that you may be free to devote yourself wholly to drama." Well, madam, if that doesn't deserve applause, it surely calls for at least a nod of approval. Perhaps your daughter's sorrow is inhibiting you? Let me sum up matters briefly.

"The least that you can be expected to do after being showered with all these boons, is to spend your life singing my daughter's praises and acknowledging her goodness. But you are such a thankless, ungrateful (shall I say 'mean' too?) creature that you are giving the heroine's role in your play to another woman and, what is worse, are openly flirting with her



and other cheap actresses like her, so as to humiliate my daughter. How dare you behave in this fashion?"

Well, isn't this what you came to say? And perhaps you have also come to issue an ultimatum to the effect that such conduct will not be tolerated a day longer. Start behaving yourself

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**Everything I say is gospel truth to her. Respect and reverence for me drip from her every pore. She is ready to sacrifice herself completely at the slightest sign from me.**

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immediately or I will take my daughter back with due respect. She is no girl of the streets, she has a home to go to.

All right and now listen to me ! Nanda will be the heroine of my new play because I think she has great potential and I intend to develop it. As a director, it is my duty to bring forward fresh talent. If Parul, despite her connection with the stage, doesn't know what a director's duties and requirements are, and chooses to suffer needlessly, so much the worse

for her. How devotedly and tirelessly Nanda rehearses her part. Everything I say is gospel truth to her. Respect and reverence for me drip from her every pore. She is ready to sacrifice herself completely at the slightest sign from me.

Why should I not take her?

Why do you look so tense?

O, I see, you are comparing the bumbling small town girl, Nanda, with Parul. In every respect— appearance, talent, characteristics —Parul leaves her far behind. You can call to mind King Cophetua and the beggar maid, if you like. Feel free to do so. How shallow she is, in every way, compared to Parul.

You are quite right. But you must know that the company of the shallow Nanda adds weight to my personality. I become firm and weighty, I overflow with self confidence. As for Parul's company- forget it, it's intolerable.

Amitosh kept waiting for some bitter taunt to be flung at him so that he could give his lengthy welcome speech but after a long silence, when Amma spoke, it was in altogether incongruous tones. "Look, you married Parul...."

Only married—I didn't sign a bond

of lifelong slavery to her.

“And Parul became yours. Now the two of you are one. My only regret is that....”

Your precious daughter’s life is ruined.

“You, and Parul too, are treating me like a stranger. Think of it like this. Now that Parul’s Papa is no more, these four flats, two offices and all the rest are yours and Parul’s. But Parul doesn’t take a penny from me, apart from her salary for working in the office. She saves Rs 200 a month from her salary towards making a terrace theatre for you.”

Terrace theatre! Wonderful! But I have decided to work only in street theatre.

“Your play is held up for the want of a few rupees and you two didn’t even tell me this. And when I got to know, Parul made me swear not to talk to you. True, she’s very concerned about your self respect but, after all, this is your own money. Why should you feel embarrassed to take it? Enough. I’m not going to say any more nor will I listen to any arguments. Start work on your play again.”

Amma rattled off this speech without taking breath, put on the table

a bundle of notes tied up in a handkerchief, got up and went down the stairs, leaving Amitosh completely taken by surprise.

For a moment, he was badly shaken up and his blood boiled. So he was to be struck at with this cheap villainous gesture, parading as decency. She had immersed him head to foot in the waters of humiliation while she rose like a stainless lotus above the surface. He felt like tearing the bundle of notes to pieces and throwing them at the departing woman but, after coming to the boil, his blood suddenly turned to water. His identity, his rightness, his manhood and masculinity suddenly dissolved and flowed away, leaving him like a boneless, disabled, lifeless lump of flesh.

He felt that if he was not immediately rescued from this wordless, hellish torture, he would be destroyed, even as he sat here—utterly destroyed, for ever and ever.

Rescue! Nanda flashed before his eyes. Over the last few months Nanda had been not a person to him, but a synonym for salvation. Whenever Parul’s unspoken words flayed him and soaked up his identity, each

mannerism of the ever eager to please Nanda would act as balm to his invisible wounds. He would come to life again as a complete man. Right now, Nanda, only Nanda, could save him from this agony. The bare thought of her sent lightning coursing through his lifeless body.

How had he so long overlooked the truth that in the eyes of these two women, his role was that of a mere clown—pathetic and ridiculous. But now he would play the hero’s part.

Fired with a cruel and vindictive resolve, he swiftly pocketed the bundle of notes. Today, he would break all the restraints of embarrassment, and, with his money (at least, in Nanda’s eyes, he was the master of this money), would book a room in a fancy hotel. In his most dominating style, he would order the fanciest, most expensive dishes. Then, with complete mastery, he would enjoy Nanda, and would feel that “he” existed—existed, with the full force of his manhood. How necessary this had become for him today. Otherwise...

And he clattered his way down the stairs to play the part of a hero.

*(translated by Ruth Vanita from Hindi; from “Hans”, August 1986)*