

## **The Crying Game**

### ***Trial By Error : The Aarushi Files***

Years ago, I was flipping channels on a hot, boring Sunday. I wrote scripts for TV at the time and so I paused when I came upon what I thought was a soap opera at its melodramatic best. And then I double-taked. This was no fictional scene with glycerine tears. What was underway was a real funeral, with the dead person (a corpse in white), a hundred pain-stricken onlookers (an ocean of white), and the widow (a vision in blinding, dazzling white). She was a former actress – and hence the news coverage – giving a Razzie award-winning performance of a lifetime. The camera spotlight was right on the lady as she wept in torrents, threw herself at the feet of the dead body, swirled about it as if she would faint, and then poured a whole bottle of water over her own head. Mercifully, she was led away, before she could beat her chest or break her bangles, or somebody else's.

I'm being mean. Forgive the sarcasm. Death is no joke, and the pain it creates for those who survive the loss of a love one, is a slow death in itself. But this piece is not about grief. It's about the expression of it, and the compulsion that we feel, in India, as a culture, to be so utterly public about it.

When Nupur Talwar gave her first interview on national television, just days after her daughter Aarushi's murder in May 2008, she looked exhausted and, given the lurid controversy the case had already generated, appeared to be in a numbed state of emotional shock. But she did not cry, she did not wail, she did not collapse in tears and helplessness. When the interview aired, not too many believed in her innocence, leave

alone felt any pity or support for her. The common viewer's reaction was : What kind of mother isn't hysterical at a time like this?. She's guilty, she's hiding something, she's some kind of monster. There's something very wrong with the woman. For sure.

Who decides how and in what way a person – be it a parent, child, sibling, lover, spouse, friend, acquaintance, stranger – must grieve? As individuals, with our own specific histories and emotional capacities, the deep personal trauma of loss is dealt with at many different levels, and for long after condolence callers have gone back home to their own lives. But in the immediate days and weeks that follow a death, the individual has a larger responsibility, it would appear – a duty to represent what is the **cultural** expression of their grief, almost like a role to perform to the expectations of others.

In collectivist cultures – China and Korea for instance – and in countries of Latin America and Southern Europe (Greece, Italy), as well as right here in India, the sense of family and community has traditionally taken precedence over the needs of the individual. Death is a ritual, and often enough, a stage for theatrics (a sidenote : I've seen plenty Sicilian mafia movies, where the burial of a dreaded gangster or innocent villager is accompanied by hysterical Mamas and cries for justice).

Last week in Delhi, I met a friend whose elderly uncle had recently died. They lived together with other family members in a small railway colony flat. For days and weeks, families, friends and neighbours gathered, lingered, some even moved in for a while. A few strangers turned up too. Food was produced on the hour. Endless cups of tea were served. Mourning was sometimes loud or sometimes silent, but it was always performed

amongst others. More food was served and more tea. My friend, who was very close to her uncle, went on to say : To ask to be alone with your grief is unheard of. You are literally surrounded every second of the day.

My friend laughs now. She adds, there was a lot of unnecessary drama that erupted – a cousin who my uncle hated most turned up and talked incessantly of the journey of the departed soul, aunties dropped in, looking sympathetic but cattily checking out the attire of the others present, a long-lost college friend of his showed up from nowhere after 30 years and took over the spare room and bathroom. And then there were the “Professional Mourners” – a few people none of us really knew but who looked vaguely familiar from a million other community funerals, the do-gooder slash busybody types who turn up, take charge, manage three cell phones, make endless arrangements, hug everyone, smile philosophically, share endless tragic anecdotes about other deaths, and basically, just, won't go home until they are literally shown the door.

And yet, she felt, there can be a strange comfort in numbers, in the sea of people that descend at times like this. Well-meaning acquaintances become life-long friends, petty differences are forgotten, and small kindnesses can mean the world. Someone brings extra bottles of water, someone else makes a practical call to arrange transport, someone else shares a memory, there is always help and unexpected support to be found. In all these trivialities, my friend's uncle's life acquired a new dimension, almost as if its purpose was to create a spirit of unity amongst those left behind.

In traditional cultures, where superstitions and deep-rooted beliefs dominate, even irritate, there also runs a parallel : a calm acceptance of it all, a faith in the afterlife of the

soul that has merely passed into the next stage of existence, and a comfort felt by those left behind in following age-old rites and customs, even in modern times.

For example, in China, female mourners wail. If the wailing is loud, it means the deceased has left behind a lot of money. No one cuts their hair during the 49 days of mourning and no one wears red, as the colour signifies happiness in Chinese culture. As is also believed in India, improper funeral arrangements and rituals will cause ill-fortune and disaster for the families of the dead. And in extreme orthodox cultures, menstruating women have restricted access to religious death ceremonies.

Yet in many instances, these cultures throw up examples of incredible love and humanity. A Chinese-American woman wrote a story about her grandmother who was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She had six months to live. The entire family came together to care for her. They also decided to stage an elaborate pretence : that there was no such diagnosis, there was no cancer. Two years on, the author's grandmother is still alive, happy and seemingly healthy, although her medical diagnosis hasn't changed. A miracle? This story is remarkable in revealing the power of positive thought over physical illness, and in the bonds of love and duty that have tied this family together.

Modern India remains as much a paradox as it ever was. With urbanization and nuclear families on the rise, not too many folks have the time or money to care for dying relatives, or to expect more than customary condolences from friends when they mourn a death personal to them. And in a country of poverty, corruption and very little value for human life, the death of strangers hardly affects us at all. There are too many road accidents, bad hospitals, crimes and murders, illnesses and bodies. Death is just death,

a natural, physical event, a soul's transition to a different plane of existence. Varanasi and its stoic ghats of burning, anonymous flesh and bone appear to make a joke out of grief itself.

My German granny Oma, a war widow and a tough woman, never saw Varanasi, but she had a practical view of death herself. Death was a Formal Event, she felt, so if you knew someone who died, you went by the book. You dressed simply in dark colours, attended the ceremony, went to prayers, sent a card and flowers, paid your condolences. You kept quiet and dignified and then you went home. Crying and letting it all hang out in public was vulgar and immature and weak. Grief was a fiercely private affair.

Two years ago, I experienced a loss. Not a death in a literal sense, but a loss of a person who I valued. Life went on, but I mourned for a whole year, through stages of extreme sadness, anger, hatred, acceptance and finally indifference. Sometimes I cried, sometimes I laughed, but my grief was real, no matter how I expressed it on a given day.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, I read an interview with the widowed actress I'd seen on the TV news. I remembered her histrionics at the funeral of her husband, and winced. But her interview was touching. She talked of love and loss and loneliness and how hard it was to carry on after losing her soulmate of 20 years. I felt stupid for judging her.

There's no escaping grief. It touches everyone. So we might as well express it as we like, and in the way that is natural to us.

**Selina Sheth**