

A Bride As Beautiful As A Parrot

“ You will have a bride as beautiful as the parrot”. That was how Letchumi blessed me on the very first day we happened to see each other. And as a seven year old I could only laugh a shy laughter, I wasn’t expecting such a blessing. She had come to sell vegetables and mother asked the three of us, my two sisters and myself, to look into her basket and see if there were vegetables that we were fond of. My sisters, both of them, declared that there was nothing there that they liked. I did not want to turn her away, it must have been quite a walk to get to our house in the hot sun, and so I told my mother that I would eat the banana flowers Letchumi had brought. It was for that decision that Letchumi chose to bless me, in her own inimitable style. I should confess that I took to a liking to her from that very first day and from then on she came regularly to our house to sell her vegetables. Very quickly she learnt what each of us liked and would loudly announce that beforehand, even as she lowered the basket from her head. Our house had a verandah in the front and Letchumi would sit there and weigh her vegetables in that peculiar single pan balance of hers. She was a real old timer and that was a balance, which already was outdated. She must have been sixty or sixty five then. I would watch with much interest everything she did in the course of her selling. She would use that balance of hers so deftly and then after the calculations are made would pull her well worn cloth string purse from her hip slowly and would put money into it and if need take change out from it. She would carefully arrange the remaining vegetables and occasionally ask for a glass of water or buttermilk. Our house perhaps was the last house in her circuit and as there were quite a few large trees in front of our house she would sit for an extra minute on the verandah and muse over the changing times. And some times when the selling for the day is over with our house, she would even settle down for a betel leaf and arecanut chewing session.

It was on one such day, amidst her chewing, that she posed the three of us with a riddle and asked us to try answering it. These old Tamil riddles were composed as rhymes and were rich in imagination. These riddles were about things that you encountered in everyday life, about trees, fruits, animals, etc – references to these would be so carefully concealed in those elusive verses and you are supposed to unravel the mystery and say what the riddle is talking about. Letchumi had a wonderful way of saying them and she knew so many of these. When we shook our heads in failure, she would give the answer that would then look so obvious and we would burst out laughing. We would commit to heart these riddles and would then ask every one else for the answers. We grew fond of Letchumi as days passed and her presence became a source of joy. We soon learnt that her husband had died a long time ago that she had a son who now worked in a textile mill. She would always talk about her son to my mother when they were at the business of vegetable buying. She would lament that she has still not found a bride for him. “How long will I go on looking after him, it is time that he had a wife”, she would say. The lines on her face would get pronounced when she spoke about these worldly cares. When either of them did not have exact change the balance would be carried forward, to be settled another day. Once the transaction of the day was over and when she was alone with us, the children, she would become light hearted and would proceed to engage us with a lot of creativity. I would tease her for the red in her mouth, she would have started chewing betels from the morning. And laughing she would spontaneously throw a riddle on the arecanut. We would admire her phenomenal memory and my sisters

even started writing down these riddles. It was while going through a riddle on the floating lily that she broke into another song. She first recited the verse and we pleaded that she sing it. That was from an ancient tamil lullaby. The child would be in the cloth cradle crying before sleep overcomes it and the rocking mother would so tenderly console her young one. She would ask in the song, why her young one should cry at all;

Did your uncle beat you with the soft lilly stalk?
Did your Aunt beat you with the jasmine bud?

When Letchumi did sing it, it sounded even more tender and soft and the tune itself had a very consoling ring about it. Those were times when even such soft voices were left to float in the air. The Diesel horn did not drown everything in its wake. As a young mother, she would have rocked her son in a cradle improvised with her own sari. Could an infant have felt more secure? Perhaps the years had melted and she was once again a cradle rocking mother when she sang that song. In the days that followed we learnt more lullabies and not just lullabies but songs for all occasions; those sung in marriages, at festivities, while playing games (the games girls played invariably had songs that went with it- we will talk about that some day). There were songs sung at death too and Letchumi would never sing them, I knew the tune would be pregnant with sorrow. We went through the happy ones, the joyous ones and Letchumi could easily forget what little worries she had and made merry in the company of us children.

Looking back, Tamil life was inundated with this rich oral tradition. Leaving aside serious literature-every day life was rich in imageries and tunes that quaintly set the atmosphere for the occasion. I would like to imagine that lives of girls were one whole song. They hear mothers sing , with their play mates they sing to play and songs are sung at their marriages, as young mothers they sing to their babies and with songs the tragedy of death is soothed. Men largely remained sane in such societies. Letchumi must have grown through all these. I would wonder what a great playmate she would have made. That became evident when we joined her in collecting the fallen neem fruits. We would help her collect these and she would sing those fast paced songs sung when one played with the shells. She would help us collect the Naaval fruits that we were so fond of. She would then sell the neem seeds to buy a vessel for her kitchen.

During the month of Aadi when the strong winds blew, Letchumi went missing for several days. We would wonder whatever kept her away. The worry would cross our minds if something had happened to her. Then one day when the winds were more fierce than usual we heard her call out from the verandah. Happy to see her again, we asked her as to where she had gone. She said that she had gone looking for a bride for her son to a village near the mountains. I asked her, “did you find a bride as beautiful as the parrot”. She laughed and said that the one she had undertaken was not a successful trip and that she would have to again. Tucked below the vegetables was a half jack-fruit and she gave it to my mother and told her, ”I brought these for the children, please cut it and give it to them I don’t have the strength to cut this now ”. We were so happy to see the jack fruit. Jack fruits from those mountainside villages were indeed tasty. We heard her tell mother about the loan her son had taken to buy

his new bicycle. "He needs a cycle now, some times he has to do the night shifts" she said. It was back to riddle and song days. However school and other matters were taking a lot of my time and I was seeing less of Letchumi. It was a holiday and Letchumi had sold all her vegetables and had brought a vessel of wet rice along. She sat under the neem tree telling us some difficult riddles and these were particularly long and called for lot of memorisation. That noon she taught us the songs that one sang while playing with the tamarind seeds in small pits. After a while she sat there for a whole hour as we played about under the trees. She had her lunch, drank a glass of buttermilk and set off along the railway line, she was taking a short cut to her village.

For more than two weeks we never saw her after that. We were sure that she had found a bride and that she was busy arranging the marriage of her son. One afternoon a young man on a cycle rode up to the front of our house and then introduced himself as Letchumi's son. My mother hurried to enquire after Letchumi's welfare and the young man lowered his head and said that she had passed away a week ago. We were shocked and felt very sad. He explained that she had undertaken a journey to a certain village but had returned with a fever. "Despite all treatment the fever worsened and she died early one morning" he mentioned. And from his pocket he took out three rupees and gave it to my mother. It seems Letchumi had mentioned to him, when very ill, that she owed this money following her last transaction at our home.

The son left and we all fell silent for some time. I wondered what songs her near and dear ones sang while mourning her loss. I am sure that Letchumi had a riddle on death too though, I gather, death itself may not have been a big riddle to her.