

THE STRANGERS

Goings – on at a do.

The party was in full swing. Ladies appeared to vie with one another in exhibiting their carefully cultivated feminine graces. The glitter of the Jewellery, the sparkle of their mascaraed eyes, the well-practised flash of polite smiles and their dazzlingly rich clothes added colour to the show.

It was the wedding reception thrown by the Patil couple.

“Did she know anything about him? Will there be a meeting ground for their tastes, likes and dislikes? Will she know enough of him even after living with him for 20 years?” Maneka brooded.

“Hello, here you are. I was frantically searching for you lest I get terribly bored in this artificial atmosphere.” Maneka was jolted out of here reverie by the jovial voice of Rajesh.

Maneka looked up and smiled at him.

Rajesh was tall for Indian standards. His small, dark eyes had a strange sparkle which was construed as a mischievous glint by some and as brilliance by others.

“Are you trying to size me up?” Rajesh twitched his nose, suppressing his amusement.

It was a puzzle for Maneka how he could always maintain that cheerful countenance. She knew that his wife despised his absorbing interest in studies and research work. She lived in her own world of women and was ever busy with meetings where richly clad ladies pompously deliberated on the problems of the poor and the starving.

Maneka laughed and said, “Oh, no... By the way, what happened to the paper you were writing for the seminar to be held in Australia?”

His eyes brightened at her enquiry. He looked into her clear eyes and smiled gratefully.

Maneka involuntarily averted her eyes. In doing so, she caught sight of Mr Dharia standing in a corner surrounded by a bevy of made-up beauties.

She quickly turned her eyes away before they met his.

“Come on, let us sit in that quiet corner, then I will let you know of the fate of my paper,” Rajesh conducted her to another corner.

While Maneka was trying to sit without crumpling her crisp cotton sari with a gold border, Rajesh was scrutinizing her with an unconcealed admiration.

Maneka read his unspoken observation.

“Do I look odd in this show world? I mean... outdated like a visitor from an old-fashioned planet?” she asked.

“It is refreshing to see originality in the world of made-up beauties decked out with the in-things,” Rajesh replied coolly.

Maneka’s attention was distracted by the loud guffaw of Mr Dharia.

She wondered what witty and amusing things were said by the lady standing very close to him looking into his face.

It was strange to see him so friendly, communicative, ready to entertain and willing to give company.

Maneka tried to guess what he was thinking of the lady whom he was trying to humour. She felt it was difficult to gauge his mind.

The lady was the wife of his partner – a powerful one who commanded more than half the shares in the business. It was an open secret that the man owed his status and success to his wife.

She was known to be a very arrogant lady. She took pride in making men stare at her. Her dress revealed more than it concealed. She seemed to be enjoying Mr Dharia’s surreptitious glances at her curvaceous body.

Maneka could hear Mr Dharia complimenting her taste in clothes as he filled her goblet along with his own.

Maneka turned her face away in distaste.

‘Could he really appreciate her?’ she asked herself unbelievably.

“Society ladies are supposed to keep company, you see...” Rajesh said soothingly.

Maneka coloured at the thought that he had read her mind.

It was at this moment that Mr Dharia looked at Maneka.

He produced a charming smile and turned back to the lady.

Within that split second, he observed Rajesh sitting by her side, talking to her so intently as if he was exploring his own self.

There was an amused look in his eyes, to see Maneka, the most simply dressed lady closeted with an equally serious man whose passion was research.

‘He must be smiling at my stupidity,’ thought Maneka with a sigh.

She knew Mr Dharia would never be able to see anything of interest in academic pursuits.

Maneka was a postgraduate in botany; Mr Dharia could never think of her taking an interest in marine biology – that was the subject of Rajesh.

“So, that is how my paper was shelved and Sohan’s was cleared. It is not enough if you are brilliant and hard-working. You should have good connections too, ma’am,” Rajesh tried to brush aside his disappointment with a smile.

Maneka knew Mr Sohan well enough to guess how he had got his trip to Australia approved.

He was more interested in organizing conferences, inviting people from abroad, hosting them and establishing necessary connections than in serious research work.

“How come you are here, Maneka? Mr Dharia came out with a sensational proposal. He suggested an opinion poll to decide who would be a suitable match to whom among the ladies and gentlemen there. The best couple would be given a big hand,” the hostess Mrs Patil came to Maneka and pulled her up for being aloof from the exciting things happening there.

Maneka smiled reluctantly. She looked for Mr Patil and found him busy distributing papers to people.

Mr Patil had a tough time in moulding his wife to suit him. It required both tact and toughness to wean her away from her bigoted and dogmatic ideas of prayers and fastings. Here she was a perfect shadow of him with no traces of her original self.

Maneka saw Mr Dharia talking to Mrs. Sohan. He looked charming in his coffee- brown safari suit. He knew the attraction he held for ladies and utilized it fully.

Maneka suppressed a sigh.

“I always see you in light – coloured saris. You are fair, and bright-coloured dresses enhance your complexion. But I think you prefer lighter shades. Don’t you?” Rajesh observed.

Maneka accepted his observation without any comment.

‘Did Mr Dharia ever observe my dress?’ Maneka wondered. He never said anything either by way of compliment or comment.

She heard him admire ladies who used heavy make-up and also the most simple ones.

He would wax eloquent on gaudy dresses on some occasions and would praise sobriety on others.

She was not sure of his tastes. ‘Who would be his choice for her?’ Maneka found the very thought bitter.

She tried to focus her attention on what Rajesh was saying.

“Who would be suitable for Mr Dharia?” said Rajesh as he was combing through the group of ladies with his eyes.

Maneka looked at him sharply. “Take it easy. I guess people would vote for Mr Dharia and Mrs Sohan’s match. Both of them look inscrutable,” Rajesh tried to lighten the situation.

Apart from playing her part as hostess as and when required, Mrs Sohan had nothing to do with Mr Sohan’s busy social life. She never took any interest in his pursuits nor did she object to his wanderings. She seemed to have been reconciled to the irrevocable situation and was trying to appease her longings by being ‘friendly’ with people like Mr Dharia.

“I forgot to ask. Have you completed the painting you were working on? I remember you were in a dilemma, whether to use a lighter shade for the background,” Rajesh suddenly switched over to another topic.

Maneka looked at him gratefully. Once, she had asked Mr Dharia for his suggestion regarding the background for the painting, and the answer was typical of him, “Which painting?”

When she patiently explained to him, he only said, "Why bother about silly things?"

Mrs Sohan came to Maneka and said "Come dear, let us participate in the game. I am dying to see whom Mr Dharia would choose for you."

Through the mask of her vivaciousness, Maneka could see her real intentions. Strangely, she did not get angry with Mrs Sohan.

'What did she know of Mr Dharia whom she was craving?' thought Maneka morosely.

The din and bustle reached its peak with the announcement of the poll result.

Maneka lost interest in it and retreated into her own.

Rajesh slipped off quietly. The party came to an end. Everyone was taking leave of the Patils.

Mr Dharia came to Maneka and asked, "Shall we make a move?"

"I was waiting for you to come," said Maneka.

While he was driving the car, she was immersed in her own thoughts.

"Minu will soon be in her teens and would join us in such parties," he observed matter-of-factly.

"She would be home for holidays. It is one more month for her to finish her exams..." Maneka smiled at the thought of their only daughter.

The car sped on carrying the two strangers to their home.

- Woman's Era July (First) 2010

