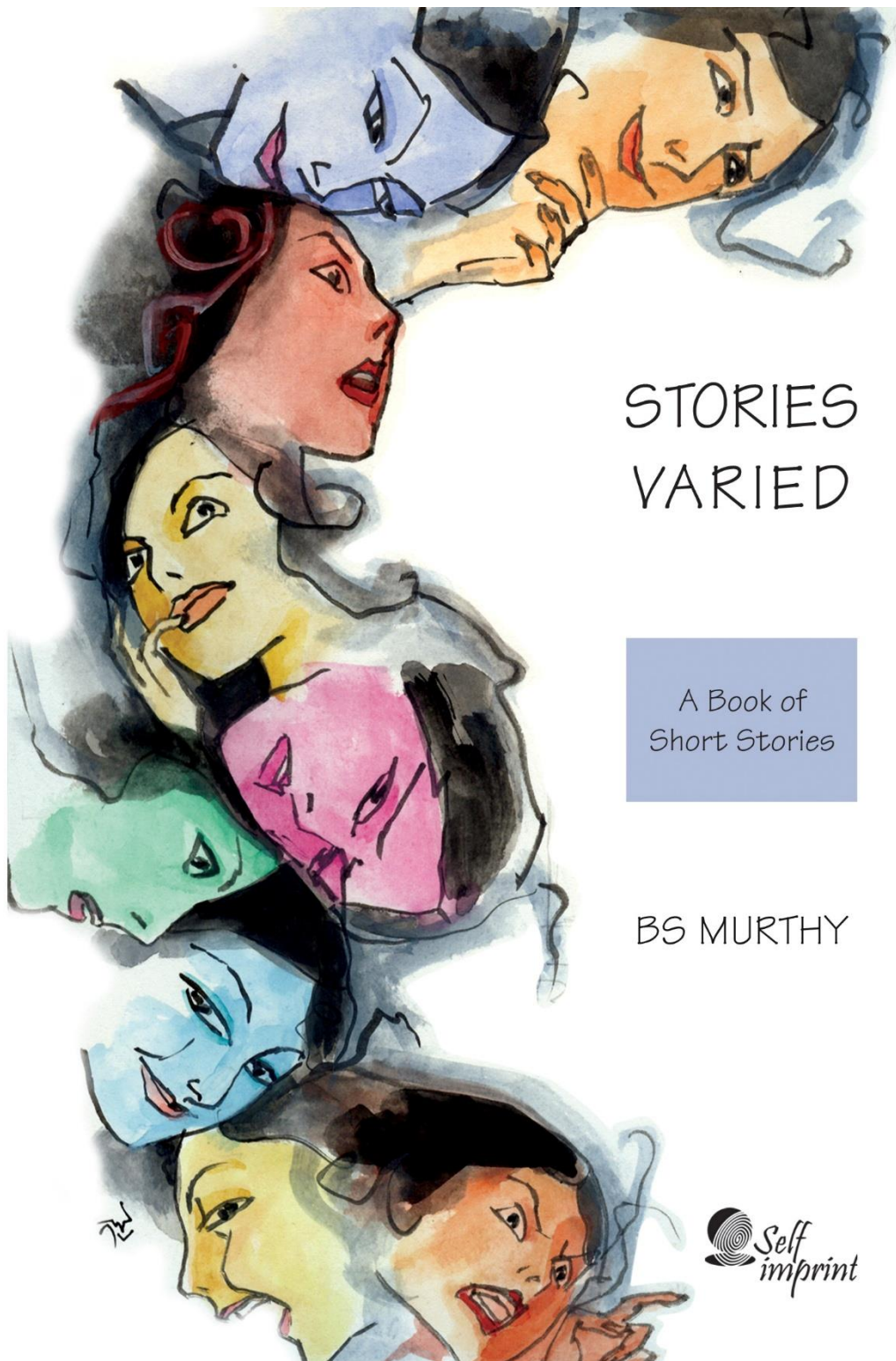




STORIES VARIED

A Book of
Short Stories

BS MURTHY



Love Jihad

By BS Murthy

Syed and Gayatri didn't mean to fall in love. But love happens when you least expect it. It creeps up suddenly. When someone needs attention, care, conversation, laughter and maybe intimacy. Love doesn't look at logic or at backgrounds and least of all religion.

Gayatri was from a very conservative South Indian family that went to a temple every Saturday. Syed brought goats to his family every Eid. That said it all. Their paths would never

have crossed if it hadn't been for that fateful day. That day when he walked into the coffee shop. Gayatri wondered if destiny chose our loved ones for us. Did we have any role to play at all?

She looked at her watch. Syed was late. They met every Thursday at five pm to catch up. Their conversation lasted for hours. Sometimes in the café, sometimes in his car, sometimes in places that she could never tell her friends about. They would never understand. And yet Syed made her happy.

Suddenly her phone beeped. He had sent a message. "On my way. Have something important to tell you."

Gayatri stared at it and realized she had knots in her stomach. Thoughts flooded her mind. What did he want to tell her? [*] Will he propose? Or back out? Didn't he say his people are highly religious? Wouldn't they've put their foot down? She racked her brains at that, and bogged down by anxiety, her mind became numb. She sank into her seat and closed her eyes as though to crystal gaze. Soon, unable to cool her nerves in any which way she came of the café and waited for Syed at the gates. It's as if she was trying to cut short her anxiety. When she spotted his car, in time, she waved at him furiously, and jumped into it as he opened the door for her.

"Tell me," she said settling by his side.

"Let's first get into the café," he said.

"Tell me here and now," she insisted.

"It's at half-way," he said tentatively.

"Why talk in circles!" she said exasperated.

"Do you mind being Ayesha to be my bride?" he said hesitantly.

"Why, what's wrong with Gayatri?" she said tentatively.

"You know how I love your name but," he began apologetically.

"What ifs and buts of love?" she said cutting him short.

"Don't think its love jihad on the sly."

"Don't I know you're Syed Sikandar Mirza?"

"I'm for civil marriage but my father insists upon nikah."

"What does that mean?"

"You've to convert into Islam."

"What if I assume that pseudonym for nikah?" she said after reflecting for a while.

"I thought about it myself but they say nikah is for the believing couple," he said helplessly.

"So, I must become a Muslim to be your wife, right."

"That's what they say."

"What do you say?" she said looking into his eyes.

"I'm in a dilemma."

"I know about you but I don't know about Islam."

"You know I'm not a practicing type."

"But still, a bits and pieces Muslim, as I'm a bits and pieces Hindu."

"I can't put it any better and I'm sure we'll remain that way."

"So I believed, as Syed and Gayatri but not as Syed and Ayesha."

"Believe me; it won't make any difference," he said taking her hand.

"Let me think about it," she said withdrawing her hand.

As she sat beside him with eyes closed, he kept riveted his eyes on her in anxiety.

"Take me to the Higginbothams," she said at last. "I want to know what Islam is all about."

"That's my Gayatri," he said admiringly.

"Not Ayesha, as yet," she said smilingly.

When they reached the bookshop, she asked him to guide her but as he expressed his ignorance about things religious, she rummaged through the book shelves and picked up Marmaduke Pickthall's Holy Koran, Martin Ling's biography of Muhammad, Roland E Miller's Muslim Friends - Their faith and feeling, An introduction to Islam and Puppets of Faith: Theory of Communal Strife by BS Murthy. As though on cue, Syed followed suit and zeroed in on The Upanisads by Valerie J. Roebuck and Bhagvad-Gita: Treatise of Self-help by BS Murthy.

After a minor scuffle over footing the bill, and having agreed to make presents out of them to each other, they drove back to 'their' favourite café. While they sipped their coffee, seeing her leaf through the Quran, he saw the irony of the scripture he himself hadn't read held the key to his love-life, and that amused him. When the waiter brought the bill, showing an unusual eagerness to move out, she said smilingly that she would allow him to settle it 'out of turn'. Sensing her intent to pore over the books before all else, Syed said, in half-jest, that he was jealous of her 'bookish love'.

"Blame faith for poking its nose into love," she said in repartee.

"Wish we were born into the same faith, whatever it is."

"Then, instead of my lover's religious texts, I would be reading his love letters," she said smilingly.

"You know I'm not much into reading but love seems to have other ideas," he said picking up his pack of books as the waiter brought the balance amount.

"Don't they say love is god, let's see if it's true," she said getting up.

Having agreed upon a hiatus till she had a grasp of Islam, he dropped her near her Ladies' Hostel.

Over the next two months, reading those books she made notes, and having made up her mind in the end, she called up Syed for a meet. When she set out to the coffee shop, even as she was conscious that she may not be as excited at seeing him as before, nevertheless, she

was eager to see how he would react upon seeing her. As they met, both found each other in a reflective mood, and as they settled down at a corner table, she thought it fit not to beat around the bush.

“Being a Muslim, you tend to take Islam for granted but it’s natural for me to weigh it on merits,” she said pulling out her notes from her valet. “You may know Hinduism was in existence much before Allah revealed the straight path to Muhammad but nowhere in the Quran is there a reference to Hindus. That is, even as He exhorts Muslims to be wary of the Jews, the Christians (peoples of the Book fallen afoul of Him) and the idolaters; don’t tell me the idolaters Allah meant in the Quran were Hindus for in the context of Muhammad’s life and times, they were Meccans who worshiped idols at Kaba. It’s evident that what Allah had revealed to your prophet was meant for the idolatrous Arabs of that time, more or less on the same lines of the Torah and the Gospel that He earlier gave to the Jews and the Christians. And that too was in the nearby land. If you gaze at Islam through the Hindu prism, it would not seem a universal religion but something like a Shaivism or a Vaishnavism, both cults of Hinduism. Surely, Quran’s sectarianism precludes Islam to be labeled a world religion (she read from her notes)

“O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk.”

“They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be upon a level (with them). So choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them.”

“I suppose, there can’t be any intellectual disagreement over it,” he said overwhelmed.

“I’m glad you’ve agreed; had you differed, I couldn’t have faulted,” she said and continued. “You may know that Hindus proclaim Lord Rama as maryada purushottama, an ideal man, and leave it at that but I understand that Muslim men not only consider Muhammad an exemplary man but also strive to emulate him. And from woman’s point of view that bothers me. Rama was not only monogamous but also vouched by the sanctity of marriage but Muhammad, besides being polygamous was not wedded to the idea of marriage. His dalliance with Mariyah in spite of a dozen living wives, including Ayesha the young thing, is illustrative of that.”

“No denying it from a woman’s POV,” he said admiringly.

“That’s not all,” she continued spiritedly, “my dharma and culture, never mind the aberrations, grant women social freedoms that I’ve come to enjoy. What’s more, the Hindu winds of social change are going to pick up by the year. But with burka and all, same is not the case with Islam, and what’s worse, Salafism is at pushing the umma into medieval Islamic times. Who knows, once I convert, if I’m compelled to move in the tent of a burka, where I would go then? Besides, my Muslim daughter would be a poor cousin of her otherwise Hindu sibling. Don’t I owe modernity to my posterity?”

“Of course, we do,” he said.

“So, you’re agreeing to disagree.”

“No, I’ve disagreed to agree with my religion,” he said smilingly, and continued in a serious tone. “I was struck by what I’ve read in Brihadaaranyaka Upanishad and by hearted some of the same, ‘since man created gods who are better than he: and also, because, being mortal, he created immortals, it is his higher creation. Whoever knows this, comes to be in this, his higher creation’. After completing The Upanisads and Bhagvad-Gita, as I began reading the books you were reading, I could see my prophet in a new light and the Koran in its true context. Now I see Islam as an Arabic sectarian cult but not an egalitarian religion of the world, and that made me help my family to shed much of their Muslim overburden.”

“So,” she said.

“Gayatri weds Syed,” he said extending his hand.

“If Islam is another ‘ism’ of Hinduism in our sweet home,” she said holding back her hand.

“Imbibing the ideals of *maryada purushottama*,” he said taking her hand.

“And that will be our love jihad,” she said pressing his hand.

Madhuri Banerjee’s prompt [*]

Excerpt of the eponymous story in the author’s ‘Stories Varied – A Book of Short Stories’ a free ebook in the public domain.