

## **'AYEESHA'**

### **( A forward written by author ERA. NATARAJAN)**

This scientific question - answer book and the next twelve such books that are to come one by one hereafter, are because of Ayeesha. My force and inspiration. Before entering into this book please get to know my Ayeesha. For, it is who lives in the form of words in the whole expanse of this book. What is there in telling you? While writing these lines, this very moment, my eyes weigh heavy with tears springing like whiplashes. What a vast difference between the skilled person of science who has written this book and she who is writing the story of Ayeesha. Only when I think of Ayeesha I turn into this vulnerable, utterly defenseless, feeling terribly sad and lost and weeping profusely like a child.

When I chanced to come across Ayeesha for the first time she was fifteen years of age. In the Christian Missionary school where I worked as a Science teacher she was one of the fifty - six Girl - students in X std., B Section. I who was staying in the students hostel itself as one of the young wardens was accustomed to the more or less frog in the well existence. Eight of us were thus appointed as the young wardens. Amidst those who would escape from this existence by way of marriage and those who would come to occupy their place and wait for the day of their marriage, one with ' asthma' and myself stayed on as almost permanent young wardens with marriage proving elusive.

It was when long morning hours and restive nights were devouring me that she came my way. Ayeesha was not an eye-catching person, so to say with teeth protruding and being indifferent to the strands of hair that kept falling over her face one who would be sitting in the fourth row, thin as a need couldn't have a chance of earning the attention or favour of the teacher. Moreover, I was not their class-teacher. Therefore, I had no chance for maintaining their attendance register and know each student at close quarters. So, initially Ayeesha was an absolute stranger to me.

I recollect the first incident which gave me the chance to know her. Even now I get goose-flesh all over. As like all other teachers who turn mere machines teaching the same lessons for years together I had also become one. Sometimes I would even go through the routine of teaching the lessons in a state of somnambulism. In all these years what great change had taken place in the tenth standard science text-book? Do we perform the daily act of brushing our teeth with vigour and enthusiasm? Occasionally, new brush or paste. Even that is not to be here. The same ohms law. The same division or multiplication of cells. With no desire to learn something new when I was going on screeching like a spent-out deviced Ayesha slapped me hard on my face with questions.

That day the lesson was about the theory of Magnetism. I was explaining how the earth was having the magnetic pull. A piece of magnet. That too, a rectangular - shaped one. Raising it high in my hands I showed it to the students. Not at all difficult. Can talk para after para on that. In the usual lifeless manner, in a tone which would turn everybody sleepy I was explaining mechanically about the northern turn of the magnet with some scribbles on the blackboard. God knows for how long.

“Miss,,,” There called a voice. I was turning away from the blackboard. With our usual disinterestedness eyeing her who stood there as if rose with a jerk, taken a back by something, I asked, ‘what, feel like vomiting?’. The whole class roared into laughter. Such a cursed soul I am. What a girl; And, I had responded to her in that fashion.

“No miss ..... a doubt....”

This was indeed a surprise, And, it is something that is bound to irritate any mediocre teacher. With a sudden frown and in an accusing voice, “What”? some one in the last row giggled. I could see the fragile body of the girl shivering. The girl by her side was pulling at her skirt. Last effort at saving her and making her sit. Then, once again I asked, “what”?

“Miss..... what would happens if the magnet is cut into two”?

I felt as if someone was waking me up from ages of slumber. She looked at me in an entirely new way. I all those six years since I had started as a science teacher the first challenge that was facing me as regards the theory of magnetism. Looking at the piece of magnet and taking time to ponder over it, after some three minutes there was a sort of a flash within.

“We will get two magnets”.

So, the answer's given. But, she didn't sit. With great difficulty she tried to smile.

“If we go on cutting the magnet into pieces? for instance, if the number of pieces that we get out of cutting this magnet is an infinite number....?”

Again silence. I could see her sweating slightly. I could see that the class had and there. Speaking this and that pretentiously, walking all the while criss-a-cross till the bell rang. I stepped out of the class in a brisk manner,. shamelessly.

I wouldn't have gone past the adjacent class-room. The shadow came followin. “Miss .... miss ..... those words. Then you wouldn't be able to ignore her plea at all.

“What?”

“It is about magnet only Miss....”

“Come on, tell me, my girl. don't you see that it is already late?”

“It we are to place the magnetic pieces in infinite number in one straight line ..... what will happen to its nature of attracting opposite poles?”

“,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,”

“The north of one magnet will pull the south of another magnet. But the north of the magnet being pulled would've already been pulled by the next magnet. Isn't it?”

“Yes .....so what?”

“It is there that my doubt arises miss ..... if we are to accept that the pull of all magnets is a constant,,,,,,,,,,,,,, then there is no room at all for them to gey



entire cabin turn dense and heavy. I couldn't go through my usual chores. Couldn't do a thing. And for all that I didn't read the whole book also! Those lines underlined by her and her footnotes were enough to turn one wide - eyed and dumbstruck.

In the first period, having a leisure I was in the teacher's rest - room. The teachers were busy having a long discussion on the new designs of sarees, with great vigour. For Sarojini and Regina miss this was the very purpose of life. Or else, the dissimilarities of actresses. One day, eyebrow. Next day mole. Thus they would go on endlessly and turning utterly exhausted they would take rest in the class-room, meant for taking lessons. At first I was terribly irritated. But, as days passed I turned insensitive or rather, got accuastomed. Now, I have turned a new one. And, looking at them was making me feel sick.

Suddenly their discussion deviated towards their female wards. Regina was making fun of each student. She was doing that, giggling all over, relishing every moment. She had nicknamed those children as pony-faced, jackal - tail mouse - tail and a lot more. Sarojini was happily gulping all her unpalatable acts. The way she was laughing, shaking all over with the front portion of her saree almost coming off provided a ghastly sight. "Regi.....my dear Regi..... you are really marvelous! " - so there poured in praises too!

Schools have become sacrificial altars. Am I also one in their crowd. All are stage - managed, so to say. Readymade questions..... for them readymade answers in the notes. Teachers rest in their classrooms. Students have been metamorphosed into mere memorising contrivances. (That too by hearting the answers of important questions alone). Absolutely blind teaching and blind by hearting.

Numbers are allotted to all students. Classroom roll number. Examination numbers. The numbers by way of marks that the exams produce. Numbers everywhere, numbers alone rule the educational institutions; why, the very system of education. I could see that the teaching staff with no exception insult the intelligence of students in some way or other. Am I one among them? I

couldn't help disliking my own self. God, just one girl with her one intelligent query had made me sink in the sea of endless thinking and rethinking.

"One case was caught red-handed by me,,,,,, hei, have you heard of it?" - So lamenting Suguna miss approached me. She teaches maths for higher classes. One of the young wardens of our hostel. With no enthusiasm to know I asked; "what?"

"Strange case when I was correcting eleventh standard homework I caught hold of this with great difficulty. In more that half of the whole lot of homework notebooks the same handwriting. That too it was a logic sum. First I thought it to be a case of mere copying. Then I caught hold of one girl and gve her nicely. And she came out with the whole story".

I straightened myself, turning a little alert. She made me wait. Looked like she wanted me to feel started "Mmmm..... go on", said I.

"You won't believe ..... a tenth standard girl.... . has done the eleventh standard maths homework,"

"Tenth?" - I had risen and was standing up.

Yes..... with great effort I found it out ..... I took the issue to the sister".

I needed no more proof. 'What .... What did they do with the girl....?'

"It was a no father no mother case."

"Orphans Home?"

"Aunty's house or something..... they have asked the guardian to come. Mostly it would be a T.C.."

I cannot write here how agitated and suffocated I felt then. Unable to be in one place I kept walking up and down from restroom to principal's room, to and fro, back and forth. A tenth standard girl means, what an unbelievable super being she is... why should she have to be born here,,,,,,no father, no mother.....god, save our children from teachers.

At that time when I went to her class her seat was empty. I enquired.

“Got realbeatings miss,” her classmates informed, upsetting me to the core. Something deep had come over me. Not willing to teach anything I turned to sit in my chair.

“May”... I ,, , come,,,,in,,, miss” - Ayeesha stood there. As a shattered dream. with white veil two Muslim ladies were with her. One of them greeted me,  
“I am Ayeesha’s aunty”.

“Please come,,,,,”

“See, how she troubles me ,,,, she is my sister’s daughter. Curse her... nothing has gone right since her birth... who prayed for such a damned thing... a good - for - nothing bitch....”

Right in front of my eyes she almost hit Ayeesha.

“Please ... have an eye on her... give her sound advice. My husband is also not here... he is in Dubai. All alone I’m struggling here.... I can make her discontinue her studies. But, afterall she has studied this much let her complete atleast S.S.L.C. think I”.

That day when I was leaving the classroom I told her:

“Ayeesha” ,, , come and see me in the hostel this evening...”

“Yes, miss,,,,”

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I need not tell that I had a very enriching relationship with Ayeesha. True, in the beginning her visits irked my colleagues. But, as days passed it ebbed. Queries poured out of her non-stop. Afterall she had been waiting for years to get someone to unload her questions... the moment she got me she clung to me. Every day she began to stay in my hostel - room from evening four O’ clock till it turned dark outside.

There were two traits in Ayeesha which I liked most. First, her speed. That was extra - ordinary. She would finish reading ten to twelve pages in lightning

speed. Second, her hunger for knowledge that revealed itself in the form of numerous questions. She wouldn't rest with half-knowledge. If she had a question or doubt unless she understood it thoroughly she wouldn't leave it. In the short span of time that I had the opportunity of spending in her company, it was her hunger for knowledge that had made her come out with all these queries that I have compiled in this book.

When I taught "Heat" the question that she put forth was a fabulous one. "Miss,,, the candle burns and a gas stove also. In candle the glow is more and the heat is less. But, it is the other way round in the case of a gas stove,,, why so miss?" (This question appears in the 12th page of this book). I asked myself: 'Where from she has learnt this astounding skill of asking questions? Is it in her very blood?'.

Not just the classroom. One day when I was washing my clothes she came out with the question, " what difference exists between a washing soap and a toilet - soap in removing dust and dirt?" God...this girl... she came into being for shaking the Universe with queries..."

One day she came with, ' The Most Dangerous Man in America,' a biographical work on Benjamin Franklin. Surprisingly she was turning me also into a veritable bookworm. 'The kite of Franklin which provided that there is electricity in lightning, was made of a silk handkerchief miss,' Giving rise to a question and searching nonstop till an adequate answer is arrived at, this distinct quality of an able scientist was inherent in Ayesha.

"Miss,,, when Newton began to conduct scientific experiments his age was twelve. Franklin started his first experiment at the age of 40. Age is not at all a problem. Both of them are scientists after all".

“,,,”

"Miss,,, in this book some pages are easily understandable. Some pages are not."

"In course of time they will become comprehensible,,, the age factor is there for each thing."



“What miss... even you say like this... For me it is English that stands in the way.”

“True, that is also a problem.”

“It is very difficult miss. They ought to come in our tongue miss...”

“Who writes,,,,?”

“You can write miss”.

“The way you come stealing these books,,,,, suppose you get caught...”

“After going through them I do keep them back in their place, safe and intact”.

“It is wrong, my girl”

”Tell me miss...”

” What to tell?”

”Why don’t you write all these in Tamil?”

”let’s see... to undertake such project one should know a lot. A lot more.”

”Why not write that which you know... can’t you?”

Then, with her usual haste she asked, the query that appears in page number 32 of this book.

”Miss, from lightning current would lit the earth, no... sometimes even trees would fall... How does this current differ from the current that passes through the wire? How does electricity spread in the air?”

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My Ayesha was one such exceptional lass. My old rexine bag contained those equipments of her small lab. A piece of lense - glass; a round - shaped magnet. Doctors injection syringe and transistor radio, faulty and disfunctioning. Many holidays were spent in the effort of setting it right.

And, I was changing in essence. What a shameful guy I had been with no care and concern what so ever in my own faculty. I had spent a good full six years as an insensitive handle of flesh, worse than vegetating. It was through my association, with Ayeesha that I had started realising how very poorly we teach science to our children, in a thoroughly unscientific manner. We never give them to stop and stae, to grasp a particular issue, get at its bottom and then raise questions? Before they could even open their mouths we inundate them with our questions that ae all pre-conceived. Where is the room for intelligence or knowledge to sprout and grow? What do the techers say most in Schools? "Fold your hands keep your finger on your lips". Soon I realised that for my Ayeesha hurdles surfaced from all sides. But, the stupid goose I was I didn't try to see what they would do to her,,, do to her intelligence.

One day all on a sudden that assailed my eyes. At the backside of Ayeesha's leg thick lines of swellings. She had suffered beating that almost turned her inside out.

Now she was being very close to me. You cannot talk to her without touching her affectionately. She had made herself that much lovable to me. Calling her near I enquired.

"Chemistry miss bet me". said she.

"But why? why Ayeesha?"

"Just paper came. The marks were not proper. I asked her. No marks for all that we write on our own, it seems. Whatever is there in the "guide", that alone should be written, as it is, this is how it should be in the tenth... So she frightened me... miss.. what to do if the answers are given wrongly in the guide itself? asked I"" - she couldn't speak. With lips quivering and her whole body shaking the way she wept noiselessly was a hard sight to bear. When in tears she would look an all too vulnerable kid.

Earlier she had it from Sarojini. The same 'notes issue. Alas... why don't they let use our own intelligence...? what a brilliant girl. How could they bring

themselves to raising hands against the lovely girl. Very personification of devils, they are.

Further, there other difficulties too, tuition. Almost all the teachers were conducting tuition - classes separately in their homes. Money all because of its abusive grip. Cut - throat competitions, fatal fights. Special favours for those who come home for tuition classes. Separate rules to be applied in their case. Five-star reception for them. Right to know the question - papers before hand. How nauseating it is... but, with no sense of shame and guilt they keep doing it. Income that doesn't come under the purview of income - tax. Who would be ready to lose it?'

Because Ayesha was not for tuition under any one of them she was bitterly punished. What is more, she happened to be one who unsettled them with her endless questions. Who would like a lass who was bent on making their profession difficult. Soon my friend-philosopher and guide started getting beatings and more beatings everyday.

Even in history class. What did Jersey miss do?"

"Who converted king Ashoka to the religion of Buddha miss?"

"One Buddhist why?"

"No, his name?"

"....."

"His name is Upaguptha. Am I correct?"

"Are you testing me, knowing that - ? Come here, you goddamn bitch."

Making her stand on one leg she had beaten her black and blue. Thus, in the case of Ayesha all the teachers had begun to establish their intelligence with the help of their rods-play. "Is there any medicine which would turn these thrashings from teachers painless?" - So Ayesha asks me.

"God,,,, my gullible girl!" - If that time when I hugged her with these words I couldn't smell any riddle. What a cursed fool I had been.....

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One night when she started for her home in a hurry she had left her small note-book. It was on that day that I could get a glimpse of the other side of Ayeesha. More than the necessity and significance of hundreds of questions this Ayeesha of mine is indeed an unusual one. Initially when my eyes fell on the note-book, picking it up and placing it on the table I started doing my routine work of correcting the examination - papers. Afterwards, on an impulse I took hold of it and glanced through the pages. First page, second, third. In the fourth page I had my first dose of shock. All over the page Ayeesha had written my name hundreds of times. Staring at the page for a long time tears welled in my eyes. Then, for some pages the English song written in the classroom, three times. The page that came next shocked me further and I almost swooned.

Ayeesha had written my name there and underneath she had written in blood, 'My Mother, My very first teacher, My very Life". Yes, it was indeed blood. God, what is this, my darling girl... what after all have I given you .... except lending my ears to some of your queries, and is it for this small act of mine that you are showering me with so much of love? My god.... you are a magnanimous soul.... whom do you search for in me...? your father and mother whom you have not seen? Or, who else, my precious friend? What would I have been if you were not to come my way...., I who was rotting as a worthless teacher, worse than a machine, as a living corpse,,,, and it was you who had retrieved me, my treasure - house - where were you all these days? I was getting gooseflesh all over. I told myself repeatedly; I should do something to her, to my dearest Ayeesha.... just wait and see my girl.... I am going to help, you reach, great heights.... surely, I will.... my god ,,,' It was then that the incident took place.

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One day, prior to the incident, in the classroom I was briefing my students about Sir Humphrey Davy with some hints and anecdotes. I took class on his invention of Nitrous Oxide gas which is used as anesthetic in surgery.

"Does this Nitrous Oxide dissolve in water.... miss?"

"Not just water alone. It gets dissolved in ethenol and sulphuric acid also".

This is how I brought in my own burial. How can I forget? that day children's day, was being celebrated in our school. The district collectors was to come. As we had the function in the afternoon we were not working in the morning, during holidays whatever work she had to finish my Ayeesha would come running to me before eleven O'Clock. But she was not to be seen that day.

While I was engrossed in my personal chores, in the scorching midday sun a student came to my room and called me out. She informed that Ayeesha had sent her and that she was at the backside of the chemical - lab.

"Why, she can very well come here?"

"I don't know miss".

Sending her away I started. An uneasy feeling had come to prevail within. I realised that something somewhere had gone wrong. God... even in this particular moment when I pen if the whole of my being trembles uncontrollably.

Ayeesha appeared as if she was a little exhausted

"Today ... experiment success miss..."

"What .... what experiment?"

"Here, have this scale... beat me, come on...."

"Why,,,, Ayeesha" what is it you are telling"?

"Medicine miss,, anesthetic,, hereafter whoever beats me I won't feel the pain,,,, let them beat me in whatever way they want,,,,"

"Ayeesha,,,, are you mad,,,/"

"From the lab I got Nitrus - ethenol solution miss.... first I administered it to this frog. Even after making it lie flat on its back for two hours it doesn't stir. That means it has gone numb..."

"....."

"Then I administered the same to me injecting it,, how is... my...i.. dea...?"

"Why, my dear... why do such things...?"

"See... this frog only..."

In the spot where I looked, in a bucketful of water a frog was floating upside down.

"Ayeesha.... no....."

"Oh no, the frog has died,,,, miss,,,,"

God,,,, what more is there to write? At the backside of chemical Laboratory Ayeesha was lying down. Like a garland she was lying there. A small crowd had gathered. Peon Govindhan ran to get an auto. Sister was informed. Carrying her, carrying Ayeesha, my very life I ran towards the main road. The whole of my being was thunderously vibrating with the wish to save her somehow.... somehow...

"But, before we could reach the hospital in the auto my Ayeesha left me. Unable to bear it all I cried and cried like an orphaned child rolling over her lifeless body. 'What now... you are all satisfied, No? greatly satisfied,,,,,, you goddamned two-legged animals... you have murdered my Ayeesha... , my invaluable torch of intelligence. go.... forth your classes would be simple.... no room for brain there.. anymore".

"Ayeesha... my darling... opening my eyes wide why did you run away so soon, leaving me in the lurch... see, for you I have searched and seached and found out the answers for all your queries. See, I've written them all for you, As you wished I have written them all in Tamil,,"

Like you how many Ayeesha we would have lost. You are dead and gone. those who ran out of school since the day they attained puberty they who are

cooking, washing and begetting children for some men in some remote conrers; those who well themselves to satiale men's sexual appetite; those sweeping the house and cleaning with themselves to satiale men's sexual appetite; those sweeping the house and cleaning with cow-dung solution for a meager thirty rupees; those who sweat in the fields as regardless agricultural labourers; the women who break stones for construction work... god knows how many Ayeeshas are there among them. To all those hundreds of Ayeeshas who burn their scientific dreams in their kitchenette fire everyday I dedicate this book with tearsin my eyes."

'Will there by an Ayeesha among them? My invaluable gem, Ayeesha... In all the question's you put forth there one that shoot me to the core. It is only fitting that I conclude my foreword with placing the query before you"...

"Miss"" why is it that no womanin our land can emerge as an able and significant scientist like a carolin Hershel, or Mary Curie?"

No need or me to provide the answer to this query. Let my readers go search forit in the dark kitchens of their own households.