

# HUNGER

WHEN SHE CAME UP. I ASKED HER TO SHOW ME WHAT SHE WAS CARRYING. FOR A WHILE SHE STARED AT ME AS IF I WANTED TO ROB HER OF HER TREASURE. THEN SHE PUT THE BUNDLE DOWN AND UNTIED IT.

Urdu short story by SHAMA KHALID rendered into English  
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EVEN today I could not write a single word.

I was overjoyed when my publisher paid me the return fare and expenses for stay at the Rest House. I was all praise for him although I had earlier always considered him to be a parasite one who ran his air-conditioned car on the seat and toil of writers. We used to shun him, we thought it was below our dignity to talk to him. We always had the feeling that one who sold books could not necessarily appreciate the beauties of language or the choice of words.

That day, however, when he was talking to me about current trends in literature, I saw more weight in his words than in those of established critics. "There was a time", he said, "when every theme revolved round sex. You may not consider those stories part of literature but you have to accept that sex has had a direct and deep influence on it. Its impace on writings of that period is self evident. But now I want that whatever you write should not reflect sex. Produce something new, something fresh, something top class..."

And I was thinking .... Can a businessman like him talk about trends in literature in spite of his limited education? But how could I tell him this. How could I say all this to one who had given me such a lot of money in advance?

Getting to the Rest House, I felt so every happy. This was the place, I though, which would break the monotony of my routine life. Here I would be able to relax and also do some creative work.

It has been three days that I have been living in the Rest House, listening to the roar of the water flowing down the Neelum River in picturesque Azad Kashmir deserted fort from the Mughal era is right across from the Rest House. The whole area is aglow with flowers. Don't know how many times a day I have visited that fort hoping to come across the ghost of some Mughal princess wandering about so that I could weave a story round it. It has been a sterile effort. Even the wild fragrance of flaming flowers at the foot of those towering mountains in front only incites me to make a sketch of the landscape but does not offer any fresh idea or a plot for a story.

Ignoring the rushing waters of the Neelum, I start to look at the woman who stands on a rock in the river from morning to evening holding a long bamboo stick with a sieve tied to its end. Does she come there every day to catch fish? I wonder. But then why the bamboo and sieve? And what if she slips off the rock?

I was still thinking about it when the Rest House watchman brought in tea for me. On arrival I had immediately warned him not to disturb me as I had come to do some writing work. He, therefore, quietly put the tray on the table and turned round to leave. I called out, "Hey there, what's your name?"

This question after three days surprised him, but it also made him feel happy.

"They call me Fazal", he replied."

"How long have you been here?"

"Ever since this Rest House was built."

"Alright, now tell me what is that woman doing out there?"

Fazal smiled at my ignorance "Ma'am, she's collecting firewood" he said.

"From the river?"

"You probably don't know ma'am, he clarified", "but we transport our timber to the cities through the river."

It was a huge galley floating down.

"You see, those big logs, ma'am", he pointed out, "the sieve manages to retrieve their chips and splinters and they make firewood for her."

"And what if she slips, what if she loses balance?"

"Well", he replied calmly "that also happens at times. But then what can you do if it is so destined."

"But I am told the river is very deep: even a truck falling in would disappear."

"That's right. There are so many rocks and boulders under the water. After all, it is a hill torrent."

I could not say anything further. In the face of naked truth, words become sterile.

In the evening, I kept watching that woman. After some time, I saw her place a small bundle on her head and move out of the river. I quickly went up the stairs to reach the road above before she got there. When she came up. I asked her to show me what she was carrying. For a while she stared at me as if I wanted to rob her of her treasure. Then she put the bundle down and untied it.

"That's all", I asked, "only this much wood?"

"Ma'am, collecting this much every day adds up to enough for the winter", she replied.