

# What Price Honour?

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The floods devoured the paddy and the betel leaves, now they will destroy our homes, only then will the waters recede."

Halimun did not speak, just looked at the fronds of the tall plam.

Ramiz said, "I have brought something for you. Won't you eat it?"

Halimun was startled enough to draw back her glance from the palm tree. "What, what is it, Ramizza? Has Chachi sent some rice for me?"

Water plopped down from Ramize's wet hair. It rolled down his lips, bluish with the cold. Wiping off the water, Ramiz laughed minthlessly. "Where will she get rice from? Day before yesterday we had porridge made of broken rice grains. For two days we have quelled our hunger with all sorts of rubbish. Today elder Sister went to collect some greens from under the berry tree and found that a fat snake had twined itself around the tree."

Suddenly Ramiz stopped. He bent down and brought out a handful of roasted jackfruit seeds from the bottom of the bowl. Proffering them to Halimun, he laughed. "Here, Sister, eat. Mother roasted these yesterday. I saved some for you. You too have eaten nothing for the past few days."

Halimun's eyes sparkled. She almost snatched the seeds from Ramiz's grasp. She peeled off the white skin covering the seeds and stuffed them into her month. But it was as if *ghee* had been poured onto flames. On eating the seeds, Halimun's hunger increased. Her hunger turned into a hundred sharp knives and stabbed her stomach. Clutching her stomach, Halimun doubled over with pain. She groaned. "Ooh, I can't bear it any longer." Ramiz got frightened. He clambered up beside her.

He shook Halimun's doubled-up body and said, "Oh, Sister, what is it? Why are you behaving like this?"

Halimun groaned. "Hunger, hunger, my dear. I can't bear this any longer. Ramiz,

get me a handful of rice."

Ramiz thought for a moment and said, "Be patient, Sister. When I was coming, I saw two coconuts floating beside the chilli fields. I'll go get them."

Halimun sat up straight. "No, don't go alone. Who knows where snakes might be lurking. I'll go with you." Halimun stood up. They lifted up the bowl and set it on the roof, then waded through knee-deep water towards the chilli fields. The colour of the sky had become even more ominous. Had the sky ever been blue? It was impossible to believe that a bright sun had once shone in this sky. The wind was blowing even more strongly: the rain stung like sharp needles.

Suddenly both of them stopped in waist-deep water. Where were the coconuts? There was nothing. Just the water, churning by rapidly. Dead leaves and pieces of straw floated on the surface. Ramiz looked around him, then said dejectedly, "I saw them right here. Where did they go?"

Halimun started up angrily. "If you saw them, why didn't you get hold of them then? Were they going to wait for you? Where did they go?"

Ramiz shouted abruptly, "See, Sister, see. There's a pot floating by. Wait here. I'll swim and get hold of it."

Ramiz waded through chest-deep water towards the floating pot. Halimun looked at the red painted earthen pot floating by. It was pretty large. What was inside it? Like flashes of lightning, Halimun's imagination caught fire. Maybe there was gold inside it. Maybe rice and lentils and wheat. Ramiz was halfway to the pot when

Halimun paused for a moment. No, she had no need of a gamchha. The flood waters had not just swept away her sari; they had also swept away all shame. The only sense she had now was of hunger.

he cried out, "Sister, snake."

Halimun's happy fantasies slipped and fell. Halimun asked in fear and despair, "Where, dear? Where is the snake?"

Ramiz lifted his head above the water and pointed towards the pot. "There, next to the pot. It is swimming alongside it."

Halimun also saw the snake. Yes, there was no doubt about it, it truly was a snake. With its head slightly above the level of the water, the snake, its body stretched out straight, was swimming with the current, next to the pot. It seemed to be guarding the pot. Helplessly, Halimun watched it go by. It wasn't striped. There were circular markings on its forehead. Most likely it was a poisonous snake. If they tried to grab the pot, they could not help touching it. Both of them watched the pot, brimming with possibilities, float past their helpless eyes. It was going farther and farther away.

They had been standing in water for so long that by this time their bodies had become stiff. The cramps of hunger had faded into a dull pain. Halimun thought she would slip into the water any moment. She felt dejected. Then she threw caution to the winds and did something foolhardy. She dived into the water near the tail of the swimming snake. She reached out above the snake and caught hold of the pot.

Then, holding the pot with one arm, she swam towards the shallow water. Ramiz was astounded. Halimun laughed. She felt courageous, capable of doing anything. Maybe she remembered that in times of danger, snakes do not bite human beings. Or perhaps, not having eaten for four or five days, she was unable to resist grabbing a pot which might contain something valuable. At present Halimun was not thinking of anything. Her stomach cramps had turned into a raging fire.

Drawing the pot to the shallow water, Halimun opened the lid. She cried out in delight, "Ramizza, come quick and see what I have caught."

Ramiz swam to her side quickly, "What is it, Sister? What is it? Money?"

"No, dear, It's *chira*. A full pot of flattened rice."

"Let me see, let me see." Ramiz bent over the pot.

Seeing Ramiz's joyful face, Halimun's mood changed. She snatched the pot back quickly from Ramiz. She would not relinquish her one hope of sustenance. Clutching the pot close to her breast, Halimun glared at Ramiz.

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