

What Price Honour?

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No, she would not share this *chira* with anyone. If she kept the *chira* all for herself, she would be able to survive for fifteen to twenty days. By that time the clouds would surely disperse. The sun would start to shine. The flood waters would start to recede. Halimun would get work again. Her bad times would pass away.

Halimun spoke in a cold, firm voice. "No, I will not give you any." Ramiz was surprised. "Why not, Sister?"

"No."

Seeing Halimun's angry look, Ramiz flared up, "Give me some, Sister. Give me the pot. There's enough for both of us."

Halimun clutched the pot even more tightly to herself. She screamed violently, "No, I will not. Never."

Hungry and tired, Ramiz was too astounded for a moment to reply. Then he pounced upon Halimun. "Why won't you give me some? Why won't you? Didn't I see the pot first?"

Halimun was unmoved. She clutched the pot tighter to her bosom. Ramiz was thrashing the water. He shouted, "Give me the *chira*, give the *chira* to me. I have eaten nothing, I am hungry."

Ramiz's anger gave way to tears. Halimun held on to the pot with one hand; with the other she held Ramiz by the hair. She pushed his head under the water. Ramiz thrashed about in the water. Even then Halimun did not release his hair. She would not release her claim to the pot of *chira*. This was her only hope of

survival. Ramiz continued to struggle desperately under the water, flailing his arms and legs. Several times Halimun was on the verge of slipping into the water, but she managed to keep herself above the water. She kept a tight hold on Ramiz's hair. Suddenly Ramiz gave a violent kick to Halimun's stomach. Halimun's sari came undone at the waist. It floated away on the flood waters. Even now, had she reached out, she would have been able to catch hold of it. But one hand was clutching the pot of *chira*. The other was holding her prisoner fast. Halimun started to tire. What was she to do? She tried to push her head forward and draw the sari back with her teeth. Just then Ramiz kicked her again. Halimun swallowed water.

Lifting her head above the water, Halimun saw her sari floating beyond her reach. The only way to reach it now was by stretching out her arm. Her numb body was growing weaker. Halimun realised that she had to choose between the pot of *chira* and the sari. She could not save both. At the moment the pot of *chira* was more important than her sari. But the sari? With her earnings she could perhaps buy some food for herself, but, in these days of hardship and inflation, she would never be able to buy another sari to cover her shame. She had no other clothes. Just this one torn sari. Which was she to save? She stumbled. Her hold on the pot of *chira* grew weaker. She released her grip on Ramiz's head. Ramiz lifted his head above the water, gasping for breath. The pot of *chira* wobbled, filled with water, and sank.

Gasping for breath, Ramiz complained, "What have you done? You have let the *chira* sink."

Halimun was silent. She was aware of nothing at the moment but her naked body and her hungry stomach.

Ramiz shouted at her, "Why aren't you saying anything?"

Halimun moaned weakly, "I had just that one torn rag. I lost it because of you. How am I going to preserve my honour now?"

Ramiz screeched, "What honour? Once you leapt into the flames because of the soldiers. At that time you had food in your stomach. So honour had some meaning then. You have nothing to eat now, and you speak of honour? Go, hang yourself, you whore."

Halimun did not respond. She simply watched her ragged sari being whirled away by the flood waters. She could not drag her starved body through the waters to save it. Was she to drown and die? But she did not even have the strength to do that.

Halimun turned around and stood up. She pushed back the water and stood on the muddy slope, completely naked. She was tired and wet.

Standing in chest-deep water, Ramiz screamed, "Where are you going? Where, in the midst of all this water, are you going to find fire to set yourself alight?"

Ramiz flung his torn *gamchha* at Halimun. "Here, take my torn *gamchha*. Take it and go and hang yourself."

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. Her imperative need now was for something to fill her stomach, to get rid of the cramps in her stomach. The home of the contractor was at the end of the path. There was a sturdy home there, supported by strong wooden poles; there was hope of food there, of rice.

Halimun said, "Go home, Ramiz. I am going to the home of Contractor Shamsher. I will take up residence in the market-place."

Translated from "Izzat" by Niaz Zaman.

Born in 1939, Rizia Rahman is one of the most significant writers of Bangladesh to have enriched our fiction with her creative work. She has been writing in various genres - novels, short stories, essays, literary criticism, belles-lettres, and young adult literature - since the late sixties. Beginning her writing career with straightforward narratives, she has, over the years, moved on to magic realism and multilayered structures in her stories. A committed writer, she explores important human issues in a sympathetic and engaging manner. She received the Bangla Academy Award, the top literary award in Bangladesh, in 1978. She also won the Bangladesh Lekhika Shangha Gold Medal and the Ananya Literature Prize in 1987. *Rokter Okshor* (1978) and *Bong Theke Bangla* (1987) are two of her most acclaimed novels that have placed her permanently in the annals of Bangla fiction. Her other major novels include *Uttar Purush* (1977); *Alikhito Upakhyay* (1980), *Shilai Shilai Aagun* (1980), *Ghar Bhanga Ghar* (1984), *Ekal Chirokal* (1984), *Prem Aamar Prem* (1985), *Jharer Mukhomukhi* (1986), etc.

Niaz Zaman is an academic, writer and translator.

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Roaring Liberation

SHAMSUR RAHMAN

What would I do with the spring when mournfully cries the cuckoo, when flowers are not in bloom?

What would I do with the garden where birds never visit, where the soil is unwieldy and the skeleton-like trees are ghostly presences?

What would I do with the love forcing upon me a thorny-crown and offering a cup of poison?

What use is the path where no one walks, where the colourful ice-cream-seller goes missing and where the incessant waves of urban marches is absent?

My beloved, when we were marching towards the sun-rise, I had called you, the discreet charms of bourgeois life had enveloped you then—were you not keen to realise the power of the songs sung *en masse*?

You are a prisoner of anguish now, you do not see the carpeted rainbow anymore.

Walking the distance without you is difficult now,

as that dreadful monster demolishes the foundation of a new civilisation, and the sky gets darkened,

And the full moon is hung, an announcement forbids the blossoming of the lotus and the rose as well as stifles the magpie-robin's song,

to render unutterable my poetic illustration of your breath and the fragrance of your hair.

The hope for good days if delayed can turn a youthful body decrepit,

This excuse for aging

Is an excuse for Nelson Mandela's enduring imprisonment

Is also an excuse for Nur Hossain's heroic sacrifice,

As the freedom bell tolls like an anguished Titan, and

the hands in chain are freed of their manacles, there is tremor

in the distance, we hear our Liberation is roaring.

Translated by Asif Iqbal, PhD student in English, Michigan State University.



Born in 1929, Shamsur Rahman, was a Bangladeshi poet, journalist, and human rights advocate who earned the designation "unofficial poet laureate of Bangladesh" with more than 60 volumes of heartfelt, often fiercely patriotic poetry. His best-known poem, "Shadhinota tumi" (*My Liberation*), was composed in 1971 at the height of the war for independence from Pakistan. His poems on the war were so inspiring that they were recited at the camps of freedom fighters. In 1972, these poems were published in Bondi Shibir Theke. He continued to write poems in independent Bangladesh, reflecting the history of the nation. During the historical movement against Ershad he published his book *Buk Tar Bangladesher Hridoy* indicating the great sacrifice of Nur Hossain.

The legendary poet passed away in Aug. 17, 2006, Dhaka.