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Pariksha: Test

by

Prem Chand

Translated by:
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The army of Nadirshah has begun a massacre in Delhi. Rivers of blood flow through the streets. There is chaos breaking out in every direction. The bazaar is closed. The people of Delhi closed their doors, hoping for peace. Nobody was at peace. Houses are on fire, bazaars are being robbed; nobody is listening to the complaints of anyone else. The women of the aristocrats are being taken out of the palaces and disgraced. The blood-thirst of the Iranian soldiers cannot be extinguished by any means. The human heart was taking on its cruel, harsh, and demonic form. At this time Nadirshah entered the Badshahi Mahal.

In those days Delhi was a center of sinful activity. The houses of the aristocrats were filled with decorations and formal items. There were never women without their make-up. The men were always taking part in pleasure. Poetry had taken the place of politics. The wealth of all the parts [of Hindustan] were dragged into Delhi and flowed there like water. Prostitution was rampant. In some places there were pairs of partridges; in some places the quails and nightingales would compete. The whole city was engaged in sinful pleasure. When Nadirshah entered the Shahi Mahal and saw the things inside his eyes opened. He was born in a poor-house. His whole life was spent on the battlefield. He was not in the habit of sinful pleasure. Where the battlefield was this happy empire was somewhere else. Wherever he set his eyes, he could not remove his sight from there.

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M. J. Warsi, Ph.D. (Translator)
Pariksha: Test by Prem Chand

It was the evening and he and his chiefs walked around the Mahal. They gathered the things they liked and went into the special room, and sat on the comfortable round pillow. Then he commanded his chiefs to leave the room. He put down all his weapons and called over the caretaker of the Mahal, giving him the order: I want to see the dance of the royal ladies. Dress them up well and bring them in front of me right now. Take care that there should be no delay! I will not hear any excuse or refusal.

The watchman heard this and became very fearful. How could these women, upon whom not even a ray of sunlight had fallen, enter into the general assembly, let alone dance? The royal ladies had never been subject to such indignity. Beast! You have painted Delhi red with blood, and still your heart is not satisfied! But even a single word slipping from one's mouth before Nadir Shah meant death by jumping into the mouth of a roaring fire. Bowing his head, he saluted the emperor and upon arriving in the women's quarters he told all of the ladies of Nadir Shah's command. He added that they should be sure to present themselves in a timely manner, for Nadir Shah would accept no excuse or deception. A disaster of this scale had never befallen the royal family before, but at the moment there was no other option to save their lives but to obey the order of the victorious emperor.

The ladies heard the order and became panicked. Throughout the women's quarters grief spread. The lightheartedness disappeared. From hundreds of hearts came a curse against this tyrant. Someone looked toward the sky with eyes pleading for salvation. Someone thought of God and the Prophet. But there was not one woman whose gaze went in the direction of a knife or sword. Although there were among them many ladies in whose veins ran the blood of Rajput warriors, lustful indulgences had cooled the fire of jauhar in their hearts. Their craving for sumptuousness had destroyed their self respect. They counseled one another in an attempt to find a way to preserve their modesty, but there was no time to think of any other option. This one moment would decide their destiny. Helpless, all of the women decided to go before the despot. Tears streamed from their eyes, and their hearts were heavy with grief, but pearl-embroidered clothes were worn. Collyrium was applied to tear-brimmed eyes, and perfume was sprayed upon sorrowful hearts. Hair was braided, pearls were strung through parts. There was not even one clear-intentioned woman who, on the strength of either God or her own conviction, would dare to disobey the order.

Not even one hour passed before the group of women, dressed in shimmering clothes, modest perfumes of jasmine and rose billowing forth from the make-up of their mouths, and jingling with jewelry entered into the royal quarters and stood before Nadir Shah. Nadir Shah once saw looking out of the corner of his eye a group of fairies (wives) and then leaning against his pillow he laid down. He lay down his sword and dagger in front of him. In a moment he started feeling sleepy. He stretched once and rolled over on his side. In a little while the sound of his snoring could be heard. It seemed like he was lost in deep sleep. For half an hour he lay there sleeping and the wives stood as they were with their heads bowed and looking like pictures on the wall. Among them the one or two

who were bold, from underneath the veil were looking at Nadir Shah as well as whispering to each other in soft voices -- what a scary image! What bloodshot eyes! What a strong body! He's not a man, he's a god!

Suddenly Nadir Shah's eyes opened. The group of fairies (wives) was standing there as before. When they saw that he was awake the wives lowered their heads and like sheep gathered their bodies close together. Everyone's hearts were pounding that this oppressor would now tell them to dance and sing, then what would happen! God help me understand this oppressor! But we will not be able to dance. Even if we lose our lives. We cannot suffer such indignities any more.

Suddenly Nadir Shah spoke in harsh words -- hey friends of god, I had called you to test you and I say with great disappointment that your behavior was exactly as I had presumed to be true. When any community's women do not maintain their honor then that community dies.

I wanted to see if you all had any self-respect left or not. I had called you here for this reason. I did not want to ridicule you. I am not that much of a desirer otherwise I would have fed a group of dogs. I am not that lustful otherwise, today I am listening to the strings of the sarod and sitar from Persia; I enjoy these songs more than even Indian songs. I only had to take your examination. After seeing this, the true sorrow is that the beauty of self-respect is no longer left in you. Was it not possible for you to disobey my command to save your self-respect? When you came here I gave you one more freedom. I was pretending. Was it not possible for one of you captives to take this dagger and thrust it into my heart? I swear by the Kuran that if I would have seen one of you take a dagger in your hand, I would have been very happy; I would have bowed my neck in front of those delicate hands! I feel sorry that today there is not even one daughter of your dynasty who raised a hand against the insults to their self-respect. Now this kingdom cannot remain alive. The days of its glory are limited. It's mark will vanish from this earth quickly. Go now and if possible save your king otherwise in this way you will depart from this world as immorality's slaves.

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