



## Words Of Fire

### The Writings Of Sara Shagufta

*These extracts from the writings and verse of Sara Shagufta, a Pakistani poet, have been taken from a letter she wrote to Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam. Sara Shagufta was born in Gujranwala on 31 October, 1954. She writes in both Punjabi and Urdu.*

“...I write with great difficulty. I have no resources so I dip the nib of my pen in my heart and write poetry...”

“...How did I start writing poetry? Five years ago, I was employed in the family planning department, and one of my colleagues was a so-called poet. I didn't know much about poets—all I knew was they are supposed to be great people. One day, this great poet said to me: 'I have something important to say to you.' So we met that evening in a restaurant.

And he said: 'Will you marry me?' At our second meeting, it was decided that we would get married.

We didn't have the money to pay the Qazi. I told him: 'You borrow half the money and I'll borrow the other half. Since my family will not participate, you will have to bring my witnesses as well.' We borrowed clothes from a friend, met at the appointed place, and got married. The Qazi Saheb took his fees and also ordered a box of sweets at our expense. We were left with four rupees. By the time we reached our hut, only two rupees were left.

The poet said: 'In my family, women don't take up jobs,' so I had to leave my job. Every day, 10 or 15 poets would come to the house and engage in lengthy conversations. I did have a thirst for knowledge yet at times I found it difficult to bear the more earthy hunger pangs. Every day, philosophy was cooked in our house and we dined on learning. One day we were thrown out of the hut because it belonged to someone else. We managed to rent another kind of half-dwelling in which I would lie on the floor, counting the four walls. I was seven months' pregnant. When the pains began, I said to the poet: 'The pain is increasing. Don't go out today.' But he, flushed with the pride of learning, set off in search of learning without blinking an eyelid. The landlady heard my screams and took me to the hospital. I had a crisp five rupee note clenched in my fist.

In a little while, a boy was born. It was extremely cold, and I didn't have even a towel in which to wrap the baby. The doctor laid the baby by my side. After five minutes, the child opened its eyes, and departed in search of a shroud. Ever since, my whole body seems to be full of eyes.

Now I had five rupees and a dead child. I said to the nurse: 'I want to go home.' She looked at me and replied: 'Look, there is a danger of poison spreading through your body. You'd better not get up from bed.'

Now there was no rest for me anywhere. I said to the nurse: 'I don't have money to pay the fees. My dead child is with you as security. I am going to get the money. Don't worry. I won't run away.'

And I ran down the stairs. I had 105 degrees temperature. I got into a bus and reached home. Milk was oozing from my breasts. I filled a glass with the milk and kept it aside. The poet and the other gentlemen arrived. I told them: 'A boy was born and he died.' For two minutes, there was silence in the room. The third minute, conversation flowed once more:

'...What do you think of Freud...?'

'Shaikh Saadi said...'

'Varis Shah is definitely the greatest poet...'

I was used to hearing all this every day. But today I was hearing each word more clearly. I felt as if all these great people had stood for a moment in my blood, as if Freud and Saadi were tearing my child from my body. After an hour's talk, these people went away, still afloat on rivers of learning. I descended the stairs like a shriek. Now I had three rupees in my hand. I went to a friend's house and borrowed Rs 300. She looked at me and asked: 'Are you unwell?' I answered: 'I've got fever, that's all. I can't stay long, I have to repay a debt to someone. He is waiting for me.'

I reached the hospital and got the bill made. It added up to Rs 295. Now I had left with me five rupees and a dead child. I said to the doctor: 'You will have to collect donations and buy a shroud for this child, and bury it. I am going.' The child's real grave had already been built in my heart.

I descended the stairs and ran on the street with bare, torn feet. I got onto a bus. The nurse thought I had lost my mental balance. People on the street also looked at me as though I was crazy. The conductor didn't ask me for a ticket. I pressed the five rupee note into his hand, got down from the bus, and ran towards home.

Home ? Home !!! I reached home.

The milk was there in the glass. Whiter than a shroud. I swore by my milk—I will write, I will write poems, I will be called a poet. And I wrote my first poem before the milk became stale.

But the third vow was a lie. Let no one call me a poet. I am not a poet. Perhaps this way I may some day be able to give my child a shroud. Today, cries of 'Poet' resound around me. But I have not yet been able to collect the price of a shroud..."

### Today

...We have been threaded onto this necklace of closed rooms—

What sorrow impels us to sell our houses ?  
Sharp points of loneliness have been driven into my veins,  
Still they say to me : 'Come, let us walk in the garden.'

I am alive only in my eyes,  
My lips have turned to stone...  
My shroud is being stitched with poisoned threads

And they say : 'How nice you look in white!'

...When you dig up this grave  
You will find a bird buried in it...

I will look slowly that I may count the wrinkles  
On the brow of time,

I will sleep lightly that sleep may not run away  
with my life,

I will laugh softly that tears may not cheat me,  
I will step lightly on the soil that my sorrows may  
not be buried,

Build my house of waters,  
That my spirit may wander—

Today a mad dog has bitten the winds—

Today I will speak to you naked,  
Because my childhood garments have grown  
small for me.

And my eyes are now able to breathe.

### Words of Fire

Every critic and non-critic  
wants to bark in my body  
and prepares a shroud for me with his breath.

My greatest crime—that I am a woman.

When I refuse to laugh with them, they grow  
hostile

and queue up to tell me about their thirsty cups,

What is more they wash out the cups with the  
leavings of shame.

I cannot be abused in this way,  
and they cannot look beyond a circumcision.

### Woman And Salt

...The smallest and the biggest measure of  
honour is woman.

The nails of imprisonment  
have been, driven into the coffin of honour.  
This colour is not on one wall

It is on all four walls.

Honour is a matter of our comings and goings  
so we cannot go anywhere at all...

We have been impaled on this lance called  
honour,

We are tongue-tied by honour

If our salt is tasted one night,  
We are called tasteless bread for the rest of our lives.....

You ! You give birth to children in fear

so today you belong to no race ;

You are addressed by one part of your body,

Named by one organ,

Your status—defined by your gait, your manner—  
a beautiful manner—

A false smile has been plastered on your lips

For centuries you have not laughed

For centuries you have not wept

Are you a mother

Or the ornamentation of a tomb ?.....

Today your sons rape you, imprison you,

In the market place your daughters knead hunger  
with their blood

And eat their own flesh...

But today, mother, your daughter says to her  
children :

'I will brand my daughter's tongue  
that beauty, poisonous beauty  
be not her religion.

We— we— are not just one organ

Our bodies have other organs as well...

A flower is an insult to me

And a glowing coal my desire...."

### Purdah

Is there no country wider than a woman's body ?

Many houses have spat on me for my writings

But I cannot write according to their taste,

I am filling my skirts with broken-off knockings  
on many doors

I feel as if I am hammering nails into water.

Everything will be washed away—

My words, my womanhood.

The sea needs waves, and woman needs a  
country.

I revolted, I alone, I live alone in a courtyard.

Once I was immured within four walls, now I am  
immured in bed.

I who can measure any man by one part of my  
body

How can I put my whole body in the balances ?

Birds do not twitter around bunches of flowers.

Today I have told the sun

To stay at a distance.

Today I will wear the anklets of darkness, and  
dance

Today I have dressed myself

In wandering pathways...

Today I have made lances from my bangles

And written with them a story.

*(translated from Urdu by Manushi)*