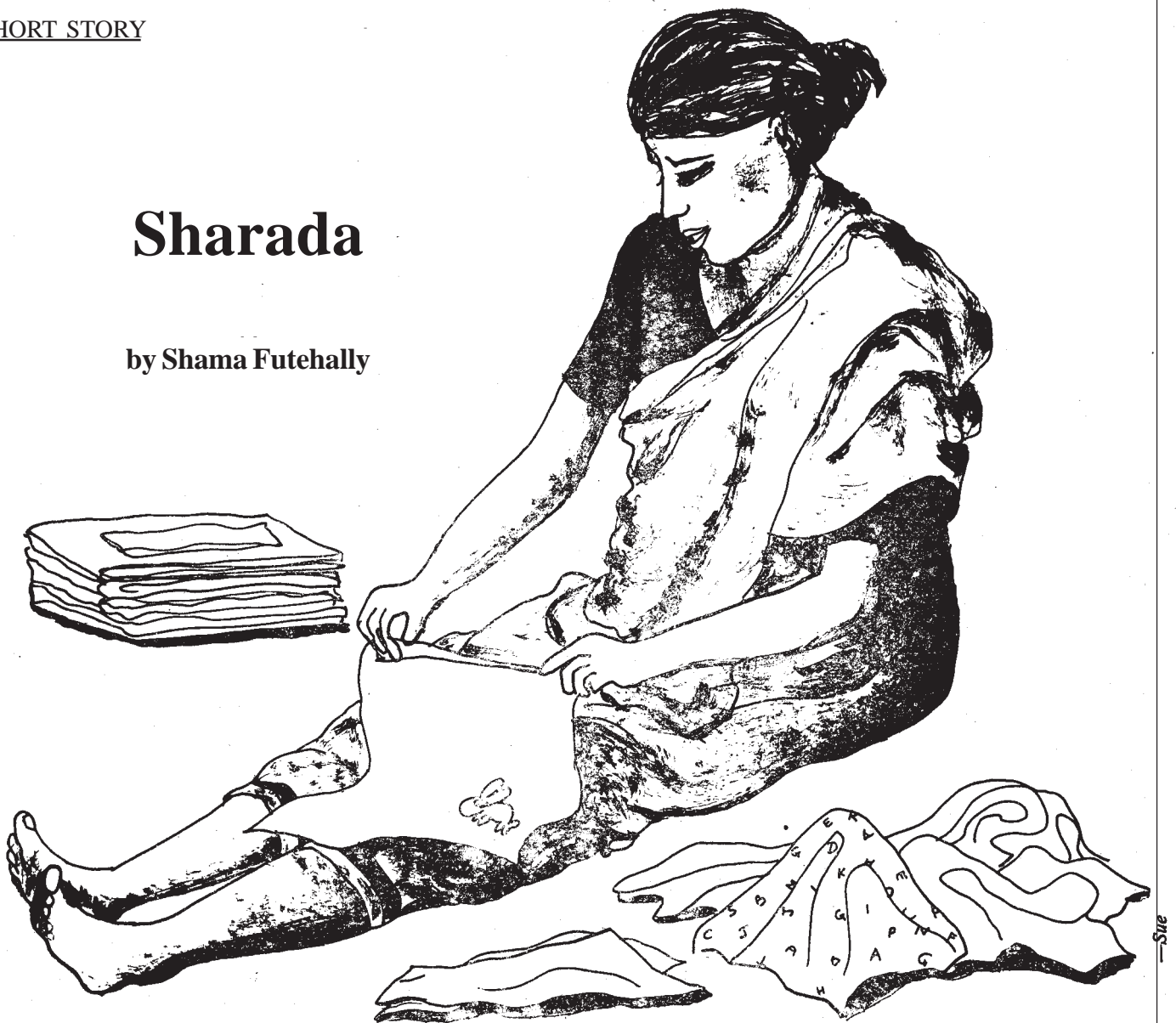


Sharada

by Shama Futehally



SHARADA sat on a *chattai* in the middle of the darkening room, with a pile of freshly laundered clothes in front of her. She was folding the baby's nappies with slow, wary movements. When folding the clothes she worked even slower than usual, to make it all last. Sitting on the *chattai* she felt she was in a kind of protected circle. And her mind was closed in dull peace.

Then a mosquito! A split second sting through her *sari*, just where it felt worst, on the inside of the calf. With an ungainly movement she jabbed at the place with her

elbow. "Aa-aa-ah!" she cried, resentfully, angrily. A mosquito sting always brought the tears to her eyes. The fan would have driven the mosquitoes away, but the fan stood superciliously still, because *memsahab* had not switched it on. Sharada darted her large black eyes speculatively at the switchboard. She glanced through the open door. Then with a quick movement she stood up and made an equally quick but sliding movement towards the wall. In another moment the fan was on, and Sharada was at her work again, and guilt hung in the air.

And then, as if to compound that guilt, came a low whimper from the next room. The baby was waking. Her clothes folding interval was all spoilt. With tense movements Sharada continued with the nappies, looking intently at the white squares in her hand. But no. Inexorably the whimper became a wail. Reluctantly she unfolded herself from the floor and moved towards the baby's room, glancing again at *memsahab's* door as she did so.

The baby's cries had reached a crescendo. Under its sheet full of pink rabbits it was kicking and struggling, the

tiny round face red and sweaty. The nappy, Sharada saw with dismay, was soaked.

She tried for a while to think that the wet nappy could remain. She still dreaded these battles with the nappy, repeated so many times a day, with the baby kicking and the nappy pins open and ready to jab. But if *memsahab* saw, that look would appear on her face.

Rapidly, in tense silence, Sharada grasped the baby's legs. She looked dartingly around the crib for the pin. There it was, as far away as it could possibly be. She stretched desperately, grabbed the pin, and jabbed at it for all she was worth. Somehow it opened, the steel glinted at her like some vicious insect, then it was thrust into the soft thick cloth, it was shakily closed, and it was powerless. Sharada straightened up, feeling weak and sweaty, and glanced once more at the door.

And now she could look at the baby. Very still, very alert, it was watching her. The bright black eyes were shining with some unanswerable question. Triumphant, happy, Sharada smiled broadly back. "Yenna-da!" she cried, loud with delight. The baby in turn suddenly kicked a leg and gave a little choked chuckle. And Sharada, graceful and slow for once, leaned over and gently, gently, lifted the little body.

With one hand she supported the fragile neck and head, which would snap back unless held. Another hand curved round the little bottom. And then, making a cradle with both arms, Sharada held the small breathing bundle tightly to her breast. She smiled with intense delight into the shining black eyes. (She would put *kajal* in those eyes.) And her own eyes began to water.

Then, silently as the tears, came the thought—her main thought these days. Maybe *memsahab* will come, maybe *memsahab* will come. *Memsahab*, who had smiled at her this morning. This thought was like a small child which would not go away, and it had come tugging at her mind again. Unknowing, she glanced up once more.

That she, Sharada, was an *ayah*. She had a *memsahab* who looked like a film

heroine. On her own she would never have sinned against her fate by aspiring to such a thing. It had been the sudden, frightening order given by her brother-in-law.

"I will go to the new *sahab*", he said, "and say you worked as an *ayah* before."

He was sitting on his string bed, leaning against the blue neon lit wall. His nylon shirt was open on his hairy black chest. He appeared to be concentrating more on the film music from the radio than on what he was saying. But Sharada, staring into the dark, her mouth half open as usual, knew what it meant.

It meant that she couldn't keep on having two meals—and tea three times—in his house for ever. It meant she was without a husband, as the whole slum knew, so she had better not talk too much. It meant that from now on he wanted an *ayah's* salary out of her, not a sweeping-swabbing woman's, or he'd get drunk and tie her legs together and thrash her. And she knew she would be taken to one more *sahab* and would wait there while her brother-in-law did the talking.

It happened. Sharada stood in front of a completely new *sahab*, her *sari* tight around her shoulders for the occasion. Her small red going-out purse was grasped in one fist. Her brother-in-law, fierce in a pink shirt, dealt with the *sahab* and *memsahab*. They listened helplessly on their porch while he thundered at them about Sharada's virtues.

"Everything", he said, gesturing contemptuously at the sky. "She can take the children to school. Polish their shoes. Talk nicely with other *memsahabs*. And all cooking." He glared at Sharada. *Sahab* and *memsahab* were done for. They looked uncertainly at each other, spoke a few reluctant words, and Sharada was an *ayah*.

Being an *ayah* she was taken, not to the tap outside the kitchen to fill her swabbing pail, but to her own quarters—a room with a small window, a string bed, and half a mirror on the wall. At first Sharada sat down blankly on the string bed. Then she got up to face her new life, and put her bundle of clothes carefully out of sight under the bed.

In the beginning, being an *ayah* was

like becoming a widow again. "There is nothing to it", her brother-in-law had said. "I've seen these *ayahs*. Just take the children to school. Take the children to the park. What is so difficult in that?" But now it was as if she had done something wrong, something which meant that nobody would talk to her. When she became a widow they had broken her bangles and attacked her *tika*. In some such way she had now lost her floorcloth and her pail. She could no longer go unchallenged to the tap, fill her pail, and, invisible to all, comfortable on her haunches, move her floorcloth undisturbed. In great swinging half curves it went, back and forth, back and forth, curving in peace. Whatever the *memsahab* was like, for her it used to be back and forth, back and forth, moving with the cloth in peace.

Now the *memsahab* stood and watched her while she rocked the baby up and down, up and down, and it howled ever louder. When she saw *memsahab* approaching her with the baby, Sharada's heart seemed to stop. She would take the baby as fast as she could and start rocking it about immediately, so as not to give it time for a breath to cry with. But it was no good. Then she would be summoned to the soup making machine. It was an orange machine which whirred, stopped, went fast, suddenly jammed. *Memsahab* would repeat patiently—very patiently—which buttons Sharada must press with her finger. Then Sharada was left alone with the machine, watched by *memsahab's* back, and Savitri's.

Savitri had done the cooking in *memsahab's* family since *memsahab* was a baby, so being watched by Savitri was as bad as being watched by *memsahab*. And Savitri had a way of being present whenever Sharada made a particularly bad mistake.

The time of day for which Sharada waited was when she gave the baby its oil massage and bath. As soon as she picked up the bottle of massage oil, her hands and arms became confident and free. Almost gaily she deposited herself on the floor, turned the bottle upside down on

her palm, and began rhythmically to stroke the tiny back. The baby lay abandoned with pleasure, as if Sharada was its mother. Sometimes *memaheeb* would pass by and see it quite clearly. In the bathroom Sharada would hitch up her sari, stretch her legs out together on the pink tiled floor, and slap the baby onto her knees with a fine flourish. It lay there, unmoving, like a little drunkard. Then Sharada would pick up the miraculous pink soap, which was unlike any other soap she had touched in her life. She began by caressing, with two ringers, the tight petal skin of the baby's cheek. And she would take the baby's special towel and wrap it round and round, so that not a breath of air should touch the child. For, after a bath, cold air on the chest would give the baby a fever, and if the ears were cold the baby would become deaf. Clutching her bundle, she would hurry to the bedroom, swab the baby dry, and smear it with talcum till it became ten times fairer than before.

Sharada would pause a minute or two to gather herself for what was coming. Then, her ungainly walk deliberately slow, she would go along the corridor to *memaheeb's* room, to stand by her, almost to touch her, and to offer her the baby.

Memaheeb would put aside her magazine and stretch her shiny pink nails ecstatically upward. Usually she looked only at the baby. But today, as Sharada had leaned over *memaheeb*, her soul in her eyes, *memaheeb* had looked up and unmistakably, without hurry, had smiled.

Sharada's tears flowed as she stood there now, clutching the baby. She hugged it as if she wanted it to disappear inside her body. She would put *kajal* in its eyes. And she would serve *memaheeb* with her life. May she die if she ever again took *memaheeb's* hair oil.

And as can sometimes happen, *memaheeb* opened the door just then. Sharada, whose feelings were out of control, darted forward. "*Memaheeb!*" she cried shrilly. "For Baby I will put some *kajal*.. and a dot like this—"she pinched the baby's cheek— "Otherwise..." here Sharada said something in her Tamilian Hindi, but she gestured upwards to

indicate the evil eye. *Memaheeb* had buried her face in the baby's body. Now she looked up smiling. And once more, against her will or not, *memaheeb's* smile had some feeling in it which *memaheeb* could not hide. Sharada made a clumsy gesture towards her, and *memaheeb* gently returned the baby and withdrew.

Sharada walked on in a daze. She moved towards the kitchen, stroking the baby's back. In the courtyard her steps faltered and unconsciously stopped. Sharada



realised dimly that *memaheeb's* sweeping-swabbing woman was standing by the courtyard tap. Shrivelled and humble, she was wringing out her cloth. She looked up, smiling faintly at the baby, and put out her knotted hands, expecting nothing. And the baby clung to Sharada like a little animal. Sharada's dazed feeling began to change to something very sweet, like incense smoke. The baby was clinging to her, Sharada, and the sweeping-swabbing woman went back to her cloth. Now she would put the cloth away and go out through the back entrance which sweeper women were supposed to use. Sharada's hip thrust itself out a little as she began to walk towards the kitchen. Her walk swung wider, and she smiled dazzlingly at Savitri from the door. "Make enough *chapattis* for me now!" she said. "Don't starve me

like yesterday." And she went nonchalantly to the orange mixer and removed the container as if she had done it all her life.

The next morning Sharada sat with the baby not in the nursery but in *memaheeb's* room. She was an *ayah* after all, not a sweeper. She made little balls out of newspaper and pelted them at the baby's head. Whenever she threw one the baby stopped kicking and looked at her, very still. "Whoosh!" Sharada swooped down and threw another ball. And the baby shrieked with delight. And as she swooped rhythmically upon the baby, Sharada in her mind was conversing with her brother-in-law.

"Nothing to it", she was mimicking him. "Oh no, this job is easy. A hundred times a day change the baby's cloth. Take the right powder, don't use Amma's powder. The bottle is too hot, the bottle is too cold. Oh no, 'nothing to it.'" And she flung another ball.

After putting the baby to sleep Sharada tripped along to the kitchen for her tea and *chapattis*. With a nervous spurt of joy she saw that *memaheeb* was there. Savitri put Sharada's cup and plate on the floor for her. And then, barely audible, she told *memaheeb* that Sharada complained about not getting enough *chapattis* to eat.

For a moment everything was still. Then *memaheeb's* face began to change, like cement setting into a mould. Her lower lip began to move sideways like a snake's tongue. "Are four *chapattis* not enough for you?" she hissed. "Who do you think you are?"

Sharada stood staring, unable to move. Her cup and plate were frozen at her feet. Her mouth was half open, and she was staring at the wall as though it did not exist. *Memaheeb* and Savitri glanced at each other and then *memaheeb* went away.

For two hours Sharada stood by the kitchen wall without moving. Nobody spoke to her and nobody asked her to do any work. Her mind was like the inside of a dark well, one where there is no movement. Once or twice a difficult thought tried, like a frog, to come to the surface. How did it happen, how did it happen? But it was too



much effort and the thought died down.

When it was dark *memsahab* went through the kitchen carrying the baby and Sharada's eyes moved irresistibly, once. And, as if impelled by that gaze, as if bound to defend herself, *memsahab* came back. "There is newspaper all over my bedroom floor", she said, her eyes cold as a snake's once more. "Please sweep it up."

Then something happened to Sharada which she never understood for the rest of her life. "I am not a sweeper!" she screamed.

What she had wanted to say was : "Of course I will sweep it up. I will die for you." Or, "I'll sweep anything. And I will eat half a *chapatti* if you give it to me. Why do you say I complain?" But at the mention of sweeping, so sudden, she had felt as if a floorcloth had been flung at her face, so she had said something different.

There was a minute's silence. Savitri stopped scrubbing the utensils and looked up. *Memsahab* looked stunned. She opened her mouth and hesitated, a little nervous. But then *sahab* shouted something from the sitting room so *memsahab* said quietly, "All right, then go."

When the household was asleep, Sharada sat huddled in the same corner, her *sari* pressed to her nose. Her sobs came in little quivering gasps. From time to time she gazed wildly round to see if *memsahab* or the baby had come back to her, and *memsahab's* words were thudding her ears like the blows of her brother-in-law. □