

Idle: A short story by Ismat Chughtai, translated from Urdu by C. Christine Fair

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Life passed by on a salary of eighty rupees, an allowance for inflation, and fees from exam tutoring. There was nothing left to save. Meanwhile, the loan payments were deferred from one month to the next. There would have been sufficient money for Naseem's birth had Hajra not fallen ill with a high fever. At least there would have been no need to sell the earrings. There was so much excitement in having those earrings made. It was so upsetting to sell them. But it's okay. "They can be made again." These are the things you say to console yourself. One by one, all of the items from the dowry were sold, never to be remade. The pendant was sacrificed for Mahdi's exam fees. Fine, a permanent job will come through. Then, many more pendants will be made. But every month, when we checked the pendant's value, the price of gold never retrenched. By God, the value of gold went from Rs 21 to Rs 116. How can this pendant ever be made again?

Allah bestows women with breastmilk per the salary of men like Bakar Mian. If we don't have money for rent, it's okay; we'll manage. But it's a different matter with nature's gift of breast milk. Unfortunately, due to the fever, the breast milk dried up. Mother-in-law kept harping, "What is this trend of feeding with a bottle? In our time, we breastfed until our children were three years of age. Even then, our milk did not dry up."

Who dared to explain to her that there was no refined cooking oil in her time? People used pure ghee. "You drank large bowls filled with milk, boiled with dried fruits. You don't get an award for breastfeeding for three years with that diet." But in arguing with mother-in-law, you courted your demise. She could become horrifyingly furious. She can attack you so savagely that you would lose your wits. For several days, I had to endure her taunts. So be it. Whatever she said, I heard. The matter is finished. Moreover, she had nothing else to do apart from cursing her arthritis. She would insert the condition of her arthritis into every conversation like a broken record.

When Bakar Mian's name appeared on the firing selection list, we initially thought it was a joke. He had been working for nine years. It wasn't a permanent job. It's okay, we thought. He will get a permanent job. It's our government. They will take care of us. He got the notice. So what? He had already received such notices several times before. After some effort, he got an appointment at another school. Once, after six months of no vacancies, he got an appointment in the registrar's office. The important thing was the salary. One doesn't worry whether the job is permanent or temporary as long as there's a salary.

But this time, he got a firm refusal. Even after a year and a half of running from office to office, he found that no one could do anything about the matter. There was no chance of reappointment. His nine years of impermanent work were adequate evidence that he was useless — those who were even more worthless than he still managed to get permanent jobs. But, because of his laziness and inattentiveness, he made no serious effort to get a permanent job.

Hajra and Bakar Mian knew the difficulty with which this last year and a half had passed. The mother-in-law, too, understood in some measure. But, because she was getting a Rs 11 pension, she had sufficient funds for her paan, tobacco, and opium. Apart from food, there was no need for anything else. Father-in-law left just this much for her.

There were no more earrings or necklaces left. One by one, they had been pawned off and sold by the pawnbroker. We went to various officers' homes and begged, but did not get the job back. For six months, he got one or two tuitions. Because Mian was accustomed to teaching full classes, he was stumped by teaching one or two students.

Other women of her social class targeted Hajra because she had completed her matriculation from Punjab. Being independent was worthy of derision in her circles. When her wedding took place, her education was wasted on the care of children. She hadn't laid her hands on a book in years. Sometimes, when she was bored in the afternoon, she read and re-read an old copy of *Saheli* magazine, which she brought with her from her parents' house when she married. Hajra's father was keen to educate his daughter. A woman's magazine would regularly come to the house in her name. After marriage, the magazines stopped coming due to carelessness, busyness, and lack of money.

When a neighbor suggested she get an appointment in a nearby school, her mother-in-law cursed seven generations of that neighbor's family. The mother-in-law told so many terrifying stories about the character of educated women that Hajra grabbed her ears and declared, "Toba! When did I say I was going to get a job?" Mother-in-law would say, "All of these wealthy lady teachers have affairs with the male teachers. School is just an excuse. They don't like staying at home. They go to school to have affairs."

But necessity forces a person to go back on her words. When the situation arose that they were thrown out of their house and all of the neighbors and the neighborhood lone sharks slammed the door in their faces, Hajra had to consider her neighbor's suggestion seriously.

"There must be some fools who live off their wives' earnings," Bakar Mian said when Hajra asked. "Right now, I have the capability of caring for my family...When I am dead...do what you want."

"Now there is no jewelry remaining. All of it was sold off one by one."

"So what if it's sold off? I already said that I would have your jewelry remade when I have money. Why are you so worried?"

"Hmm. So you've earned enough money? How can we survive on Rs 300-400 a year?"

"Look, if you want to be a vagabond, take a divorce and enjoy your life. I cannot bear the world's curses," Bakar Mian growled, and Hajra gave up.

First, we had no money, and then, on top of that, everyone was ill-tempered. Mother-in-law was clueless about what was going on.

Mother-in-law mumbled, "Look, dear. My life is passing just fine with my Rs 11 pension. I want to know why my daughter-in-law cannot manage to run the house." She lacked the

capability and interest to understand household finances. Even though I kept track of every expenditure, however minor, my mother-in-law kept harping, “You can take care of the entire family with this money. You are not blessed with handling money, daughter-in-law. How do we survive?”

“You don’t have to pay the rent, nor do you have to pay for food or the servants’ salary ... All you have to pay for is your opium addiction.”

Hearing the word “addiction,” the blood of this senile Pashtun mother-in-law boiled.

“Even the fact that I am alive irritates you. Fine. You take the rent for this rathole. I will eat just two rotis a day. Take what they cost. What do you think about me? My health is still good. I can wash someone’s dishes and earn some money. If I become weak, have me tossed out on the road. By the grace of Allah, I will pass my widowhood on scraps...Oh, by the way...I live in my son’s house. I am not eating at the home of some rich person.”

Hajra tried several times to explain to her, “I just explained the state of the accounts. God forbid. I did not intend to imply that you burden us.” But she was not going to listen. Once she got started, there was no stopping her. She went on mourning the last seven generations of her family. After getting the rejection letter, Bakar Mian returned home exhausted. Mother-in-law began again like a broken record. She continued well until midnight. Hajra, in anger, told her husband that he was useless. And Bakar Mian, with great calculation and furor, assessed that Hajra was a bitch. And mother-in-law said to both of them whatever remained to be said. But no one was consoled.

Hajra cried the entire night.

Mother-in-law was groaning.

And Bakar Mian kept heaving cold sighs.

And in the meantime, Naseem was crying because of terrible nightmares.

After several months of these arguments, a decision was taken. Namely, if Hajra got a temporary job, it would not be the end of the world. As soon as Bakar Mian got a job, she would quit hers.

“Yes. I have decided to give my application during the Board Meeting. I am going to go to the committee office and see what the outcome is.”

“I have no interest in this wretched job...if you get a job, why should I work?” Hajra reassured her husband.

“Who am I to give you advice? Whatever is predestined will be.” “Mother-in-law expressed her faint consent.

Hajra began teaching the first class at school, earning 52 Rupees. After a quick study, she learned that this method of education, more than knowledge, calls for slaps and punches. From the morning until 5 p.m., she would scream at the children and scold them. She spread the terror of beatings to bring about order. She would embroider blouses and sarees for the entire family to impress the headmistress. She would knit sweaters and stuff and stitch mattresses and comforters. Hajra’s embroidery became so popular that her superiors had her embroider so many sarees that she became exhausted.

Hajra was very proud of the elegance of her work. But the elegance of her work became a noose about her neck. She lacked the courage to refuse requests. This wasn’t a source of permanent income, but she was earning something. If nothing else, at least her lunch would be arranged. Sometimes, as a thank you for the sarees, she would get sweets or biscuits for the children.

Everyone knew of Hajra’s situation at home. And people were constantly giving her something or other. One day, when the headmistress gave her old clothing for her children,

Hajra became enraged. She wanted to say, “I am a teacher, not a beggar.” But after thinking about it, she swallowed her anger. What’s the point of ruining a relationship? At least I can provide my family’s meals. I don’t want this to slip away from my hands. But she came home and straightaway gave the clothes to the sweeper. Mother-in-law quickly noticed this. Immediately upon Bakar Mian’s return, she told the story.

“Good clothes are being given to the sweeper?” It seems that her father gives a lot of charity. This is why, son, your earnings are inadequate.”

When his wife got a job, Bakar Mian felt ill at ease. He could neither spit out his discomfort nor swallow it. He would not allow his wife to work even for a moment if it were in his power. His friends would mock him. “Bakar brother, you are lucky your wife is earning. You need not do anything. You can sit around and enjoy yourself. By Allah, our wives throw so many tantrums. They can’t even get themselves a glass of water. Every once in a while, they ask for clothing and jewelry.

“Yaar, the truth is that even I don’t like a wife with these kinds of freedoms. Yaar, the job of women is to keep men happy. Asking for jewelry and clothing is her right. What kind of man deprives his wife of jewelry and clothing?” another friend said.

“You have the guts to send your wife to unknown men. Yaar, I swear to God, I would commit suicide. I couldn’t tolerate surviving on my wife’s salary.”

“These board members! These sons of bitches are next-level bastards. This is a school in name only. It’s a brothel. Don’t take offense. Your wife is honorable. These bastard lady teachers are prostitutes. These teachers are constantly going to the board members’ houses.”

“Goddamnit. Yaar, if you see these lady teachers, you want to gag. They are all bitches. They are all hideous with their frightening faces. These board members are all complete duffers. These members are having affairs with some third-class stuff. Yaar, in our neighborhood, there was a bitch lady teacher. She was heinous. Her black, goat-like legs

showed beneath her burka. Whenever she would pass by the house, I would tell the boys 'Sick a dog on that bitch.' Yaar, it was great fun. She ran away, leaping like a crippled crow. She pretended to be a decent lady. The wretch got knocked up. She was expelled from the neighborhood with a shoe beating."

These words were like an arrow piercing Bakar Mian's chest. He gave a fake smile and ignored the comments. He pretended not to hear these things. When he could not tolerate any more of their taunts, he got up on some excuse and left. As he was coming into the house, mother-in-law further gibed him.

"Today, your wife left without giving Naseem his breakfast. I asked what was going on at school so early in the morning. Mian, I am old. I have a foot dangling in the grave. I am pretty old and I could die tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. But I feel pity for you.... How will you live like this? How will these children be affected when their mother can't stay home even for a moment?"

Bakar Mian's blood boiled.

"Let the bitch come home, I'll teach her a lesson. Otherwise, I am not the son of my father."

After school, the headmistress would either check the registers of school records or the library records. Or she would have the exam papers copied. Hajra kept on working and thinking.

"Salu must be hungry. Allah knows whether mother-in-law fed him breakfast. I am afraid that he was given last night's *daal*. I forgot to tell her that the *daal* may have spoiled. I should have thrown it out. Yesterday, the washerman returned the clothes. I didn't even get time to check the clothes. I have no idea what may have been lost. In the evening, the vegetables are cheap. I'll buy peas for Sallu. The damned milk is mixed with water. My son has become so thin. Who knows whether Bakar Mian found his shirt or not? All of the shirts are worn out. I will buy some material for two shirts as soon as I get paid. He has become skin and bones because he is constantly worrying." She remembered the Bakar Mian from

the time when they were newly married. “He was so fond of clothes. The armoire was full of suits. Everyone eventually grows old, but everyone had already become old in our house. But Bakar Mian is still quite young. He’s barely 30 years old.” “Hajra, this list is incorrect from the beginning to end,” the headmistress yanked her out of her thoughts.

“What?”

“Look at this...These are the numbers from the third grade. Why have you entered them for the first grade? I’ve noticed you haven’t concentrated on your work for the past few days. There’s also mayhem in your class.”

“I’ll make another list for you, Madam, right now,” Hajra said, looking at her watch. She then busied herself making the correct list.

As much as unemployment makes a person ill-tempered and useless, so does doing excessive, uncompensated work. When Bakar Mian felt broken and inferior, seeing Hajra exhausted, all of his wounds opened up one after another.

“Where are you coming from so late?”

“From hell,” Hajra replied in irritation.

“Who the hell are you to ask...She’s a working woman. This is not a joke. She is feeding us. She will come and go as she wants.” After sitting idly all day, mother-in-law opened her mouth.

These words threw oil onto the fire.

“I asked you, where are you coming from so late?” Bakar Mian asked patiently.

“Saleem...Oh Salu..my son.” Hajra tried to avoid hearing this. She didn’t want to see it. Otherwise, a fierce flame would leap from her mind and burn down the world.

“I am asking you a question, and you are prevaricating. Bitch...Idiot.” Bakar Mian hissed.

Hajra saw the craziness in his eyes and shrank in fear. But fear made her tongue all the more poisonous.

“I went to earn money. Where else do I go?”

“Oh. So you went to work.... Are you really working this late into the evening?”

“If you say so, starting tomorrow, I won’t work,” Hajra said, smiling to irritate him. “If you are concerned about the family’s honor, why aren’t you working?.. It’s good. I work my ass off all day long and on top of that, I have to hear these abuses. You sit around the house all day doing nothing. Despite being a woman, I earn. You happily eat my earnings. On top of this, you are growling at me.” Hajra knew this was all untrue. Bakar Mian has not eaten with enjoyment for a long time. She had asked so many times, “Is the salt okay?” “What?” he would say, startled. “Yes. Yes. Everything is fine.” Then he would get entangled in his thoughts and become lost. But this time, she felt someone should chop him up and feed him to the dogs.

Every day, they pick fights with each other. The arguments and fighting became more common day by day. And mother-in-law added to the tension. There was nothing else. Just fighting.

“Of course...He is your husband, not a shoe. I never argued with my husband, no matter how angry I was. It is true. No one likes an unemployed husband or a mangy dog.”

Because they were hungry, they paused the fighting for some time. They kept their heads down, and they ate in silence. They kept mumbling. Their anger simmered. Bakar Mian lay on the rough bed, chain-smoking.

“Get up. I’ll spread out the bedding,” she said softly.

“Leave it,” came a brusque reply.

“What is the point of all of this drama?” She wanted to say something kind. But kind words were like a dream. Not possible.

“I said it once already... Leave it.” Bakar Mian growled, and Hajra lay out on the small cot and became lost in beautiful dreams of her past life. Those dreams seemed to belong to someone else.

How many days had passed without either of them speaking to each other lovingly? After she took this job, Bakar Mian became distant from her. They stopped talking to each other except for the occasional yes or no. She thought he would appreciate the sacrifice, that mother-in-law would taunt her less, that her husband would love her. When a husband brings home earnings, the wife gives her love in return. When a wife earns money, isn’t it a husband’s duty that he should not, at the very least, deprive her of his love? After all, what is her fault? Is it her fault that she is saving them from starving? Instead of encouraging her, the women in the neighborhood look at her with contempt as if she were some prostitute and they were virtuous homemakers. If she were to let her family starve, would her purity increase? The men in the neighborhood wanted her to be grateful that she was fulfilling the duty of one of their kind. A man who works is a Pharaoh, but a woman who works is a criminal. So be it. She didn’t have a complaint with the world. She had a complaint with Bakar Mian. How long had it been since he hugged her affectionately? Her tired and worn body craved the touch of his love. These days, he is idle and sits in silence the entire day. So there was a day when he couldn’t be affectionate because he was fed up with his job. He wanted every day to be Sunday. Now his life has become a never-ending Sunday, and he feels suffocated. Can those days not return? Has she become a widow in this married life?

As if God heard her, she felt as if there was a shadow hovering over her. Bakar Mian, thinking she was asleep, began to return. And Hajra, who was restless, grabbed his sleeve. Crying like Saleem, Bakar Mian came into her arms. All of the poverty, all of the bitterness, was washed away by the tears of these two lovers. Bakar Mian had become so weak! He choked up. His cheekbones were not so sharp in the past. It was as if she were meeting him after a long time. His body was so handsome on our wedding night.

He fell into a deep sleep in her arms as if he hadn't been able to sleep for many years. Now he sleeps like this. From tomorrow, she will sacrifice everything for him. It had been a long time since she applied oil to his hair. Who knows what became of his big, strong hands? His hands had become so thin. Quietly, she kissed each and every one of his fingers taking care not to wake him. Her arm became numb, but she didn't move it. After so many days, Bakar Mian was sleeping.

She dreamt that Bakar Mian got a job. That he was going to school. In her dream, she was putting a betel leaf in his mouth, and he was softly nibbling on her fingers. She felt excitement throughout her entire body. Then Hajra woke up. Someone was shaking her to get up.

“Wake up you wretch. Your wish has been fulfilled,” Mother-in-law said, beating her head. “This witch has killed my son.”