

A DIFFICULT TEST

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Synopsis

A young good-looking Asian woman in her early thirties finds that getting married arranged by her conservative family having some conventional ideas on marriage is not going to be easy. She must pass several tests which will make the readers gasp with disbelief before she is considered eligible for marriage.

A deeply touching short story, A Difficult Test is a passionate analysis of a critical moment in Shalini's life when she goes through the dilemma of either accepting or rejecting some marriage proposals that come into her life one by one. The ordeals of Shalini will make the readers think of them as stranger than fiction.

It was twenty years back, and Shalini had to go through a very difficult test in her life. Even now, the day of her test haunts her, and she is skeptical whether she could have done better in the test or not. What kind of test was it? Was it a test on English Language or Literature or any other subject? Actually, the test was not based on any subjects that people take at some stages in their life. It was a test that was a very simple one for many young women of Shalini's time, but this test turned out to be the most difficult one for her. Shalini shocked her family and her relatives by the pathetic performance she had shown in the test.

Although it was twenty years ago, the memory of the test was still so fresh in Shalini's mind. To her, it seemed that everything had happened just yesterday! Her would-be father-in-law (who was a religious man and worked for a mosque) asked her, " Can you recite a short **surah** (a short chapter in the Holy Quran) now in front of us?" There was pin-drop silence in the room, and Shalini hoped against hope that some of her relatives or family members would come to her rescue and tell the man that this was not needed. To her utter disappointment, no one spoke a word and left Shalini alone to decide her fate.

Being an educated woman, Shalini couldn't imagine herself reciting a **surah** in front of her guests (like a child reciting a newly-learned poem to please everyone). Destroying the expectations of her family and relatives, Shalini gave a blunt answer to her would-be father-in-law. She told the man that she would not like to recite any short **surah**. What Shalini failed to understand is that how reciting a **surah** could be a criterion for a woman to be accepted as a daughter-in-law in a family.

The next day, Shalini's family informed her that the religious man asked his son, who was a doctor and a captain in the army, not to be engaged with her because she was insolent enough to refuse to recite a **surah** in front of him!

It was quite unbelievable for Shalini to know that the son of the religious man would really break-off with her because before his father came to see Shalini at her home, for days he'd talk to her over the phone to know her better. He even met her once at

her house and gave her the impression that he was eager to have a relationship with her. Only God knows what his father told him, and without a second thought, he gave her up easily. In a way Shalini felt that it was good that this man didn't proceed further in a relationship with her because she felt that he'd be easily influenced by his family members, and he'd be too weak to take any decisions in life. She disliked and disapproved of men who had a weak character, and listened to their parents blindly.

After a few days, the son (whose name was Biplob) of the religious person called her and the conversation ran thus:

"So, you were pretending to get married to me all these days."

"No, not at all. I'm not a pretender and I haven't done anything to deceive you. I just refused to say a Surah to your father. That's all."

"My family members have a feeling that you aren't interested in getting married to me."

"Why would that be the case? If I weren't interested, I wouldn't have bothered to talk to you over the phone."

"Anyways, it seems that perhaps you have an affair with someone, so intentionally you acted in such a way in front of my family members so that they have a negative impression about you."

"As far as I know, I haven't done anything wrong, but it depends on what you want to think of my behavior and actions in front of your family members", said Shalini to the man. After that day, she never heard from this man.

Although the family members of Shalini were very upset to scold or blame her for not being able to get married to the well-established son of the religious man, but she could understand their feelings from the expression on their faces. She felt guilty that her family had made a lot of arrangements for this occasion but everything was ruined. Living in the 21st century Shalini's family believed in some traditional concepts of marriage. They believed that if a marriage proposal came from a well-off family, and the would-be-groom had a prestigious job in the society, then nothing else mattered. Even if the man's family asked some peculiar and silly questions such as, "Can you cook?", "Do you pray five times a day?", "Can you recite some verses from the Holy Quran?" and so on. Being a woman, it'd be wise to tolerate these types of questions and move on. Although they were educated, they believed that it was a stigma for a woman (in her country- a country in Asia) if she was rejected by her would-be husband's family.

Anyways, Shalini was depressed because she let her family and relatives down. She didn't want to be the cause of trouble for her family, but most of the time she ended up doing or saying something beyond their imagination or expectation. It's not that she wanted to do these things deliberately, but somehow it just happened.

She recalled another marriage proposal for her. One of her father's colleagues had a son who was a Lecturer at George Washington University. Since this was a traditional arranged marriage, as usual, arrangements were made at Shalini's house for her to be seen and "tested" by her would-be-in-laws. During a conversation between Shalini and her would-be-father-in-law, he asked her "Do you offer your prayer five times a

day?” Without making any pretensions, Shalini grinned and said “Sometimes when I’m busy, I am not able to pray five times a day.” It seemed that the man couldn’t believe his ears and the expression on his face changed. Shalini could understand that he didn’t like her answer at all and imagined that the man must be thinking “How shameless and bold is the young lady!”

Anyway, the third proposal was the worst one. The man who sent a marriage proposal to her (via his family members) was an engineer. After seeing her, he came up with some conditions. He said that if he married her, she wouldn’t be allowed to work because in his family, they don’t need a working lady. An educated housewife is enough for them. Next, Shalini would have to wear “borkha”- a black covering for the Muslim women, and she would have to follow their ways of thinking.

It was very difficult for Shalini to accept all these conditions from a man who was hardly known to her. However, the engineer guy had some other conditions, so ultimately there was no further progress with this proposal. Shalini found it surprising that all these three proposals emphasized on her being religious, praying five times a day, knowing the verses of the Holy Quran, wearing a veil, and so on. “What made those people think that she would be willing to accept their narrow and bizarre mentality? Was she so desperate to get married to the strangers (because all these were arranged marriages) with their unusual demands and conditions?” thought Shalini.

It was really pathetic that she had to go through all these nonsense about arranged marriages. In Shalini’s family, it was not allowed for her or her sisters to choose someone and get married to that person. Always her family gave her and her sisters the impression that only parents can take the right decisions for their children and whatever they do, they do it for the welfare of the children. It’s because of all these beliefs and ideas in her family that Shalini was too timid to take any decision on her own. She was afraid to do anything which would be against the wishes of her family. Having a weak character, she believed that perhaps she would not be able to choose a right person for her. Perhaps she would make some terrible blunders and regret for the rest of her life. Now that it’s been twenty years, Shalini realizes that she should have been stronger in expressing her views to her family members and the others. She needed to defy and rebel against all the traditional concepts of arranged marriages that she learned from her family, but now what’s the use of crying over spilt milk?

The fourth proposal was an interesting one. One day, Shalini’s mother informed her that a proposal has come for her from one of the close friends of her father. The would-be fiancé worked at the Foreign Ministry and had a good position there. This time Shalini and her family had to go to the house of the close friend of her father to “sit for the test.” Before going there, Shalini’s mother lectured her in the following way:

“Now, dress nicely (although you are good-looking) and do not talk too much in front of the hosts. Answer all questions politely and don’t show your impatience or annoyance at any of the questions. Refrain from showing your boldness. Have you understood?”

“Yes, I have,” said Shalini. She could detect that her family got bored and fed-up with all the marriage proposals that came on her way, but it’s not her fault that she failed to pass “these tests” again and again.

Anyways, Shalini went with her parents to meet the would-be fiancé's family. The strange thing was that this time the mother of the guy didn't ask her any questions. She just observed Shalini closely and that was all. Later on, Shalini was told that the mother of the guy reported to his son that she was bulky and in future would get bulkier. Listening to this comment, the guy decided not to even see or meet her.

"I'm not bulky. I can't have a figure like the super models weighing only 40-45 kgs," said Shalini to her mother.

"I know you aren't bulky, and we're surprised to hear the comment as well," said her mother.

"If they wanted a skeleton, then they should have informed you people earlier before we went to meet such weird people."

"You know Shalini, the man has an affair with one of his cousins, and his parents were ignorant of it until they came to see you. It's a pity that your father's friend had no idea about it, and as a result, we had to waste your and our time going there. Anyways, let's wait for the next proposal and see what's in store for you. The other day your brother-in-law was saying that it's difficult to get a suitable man for a woman who is thirty years old. We're very worried that you are thirty years old and after a while, good proposals will stop coming for you, dear."

"Do you want me to accept some guys who are not suitable for me?"

"We never said that and we've left it for you to decide your own fate."

Her mother's words sounded ironical to her. She wanted to question her mother, "Why did you bring me up in such a way that I was afraid to fall in love with someone? Besides, she felt like saying "If you gave me the freedom to choose my own life partner, and if I got the hint that you would approve of my choice, then I wouldn't have to go through all these humiliating and degrading situations. You have no idea how it feels to be rejected repeatedly.

She said nothing about her ordeal to her mother, and waited for her next performance in the "test."