

Birds *of the* Snows

TARANNUM RIYAZ

Translated by the author from the Urdu original
Barf Aashna Parindey



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To my daughter
Shabnum Bhat

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Publisher's Note

It is with deep sadness that I write this prefatory note to the English translation titled *Birds of the Snows* of Dr Tarannum Riyaz's original Urdu novel *Barf Aashna Parindey*. Translated by the author, this work is a labour of love that she was keen to see published, as were we at Niyogi Books. However, due to the sudden surge of the pandemic, the author was taken from us in May 2021. The news of her passing hit us like a bolt from the blue. Indeed she left us much too soon.

Tarannumji was a good friend, with whom I often interacted during my days at the Sahitya Akademi. A well-known Urdu poet, she was a regular in many of the Akademi's multi-lingual Poets' Meets. With a mellifluous voice, she recited her poems with enough feeling to carry the audience with her. When I was editing *Indian Literature*, I published English translations of her poems. Thus a friendship based on mutual respect developed between us.

Birds of the Snows evocatively describes childhood in Kashmir, capturing beautiful images of the landscape, the changing seasons, the customs, food and birds of the region. The author has crafted a coming-of-age novel that depicts a young woman's search for fulfilment and the deep humanity

she displays in caring for her professor, after he suffers a stroke. The backdrop of Sheba's family and her determination to chart her own course provides the setting for the story, with Kashmir as the larger landscape of the narrative. The use of poetry and references to classical music, as well as observations of nature, birds and trees add subtle touches to the sensitive unfolding of the novel.

When Tarannumji approached me to publish this book, her only request was that the editing should be of 'international standard'. I don't know if we have been able to fulfil her desire but when I contacted her so that she could review the edited files in 'Track changes' mode, she told me her husband Dr Riyaz Punjabi was in an ICU in a Delhi hospital, fighting for his life, and she had neither the time nor inclination to attend to this work. She requested me, 'Teacherji *aap meri taraf se yeh kaam kar dijiye* (you please take care of this on my behalf). Unfortunately, Dr Riyaz Punjabi left this world in April 2021 and in a month's time Tarannumji also succumbed to Covid-19.

Though Tarannumji passed away during the course of the production of this book, and was unable to see the finished work, its completion is our sincere tribute to her memory. We are sure that she will live on through her works, the recordings of her poetry recitations at various literary events that can be viewed online, and her children.

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editorial Director, Niyogi Books

List of Characters

Chowdhury Khuda Baksh Khan: A famous jurist and landowner of Kashmir, who had four sons

Chowdhury Bashir Khan: Elder son of Chowdhury Khuda Baksh Khan and Sakeena Begum, settled in Lahore

Bhai Jaan: The son of Chowdhury Khuda Baksh Khan's third son, called *bhai jaan* by his siblings and cousins. His siblings are his younger brother Qaiser and his younger sister Shaheen

Naaheed: Daughter of the fourth son of Chowdhury Khuda Bakhsh Khan

Nasir: son of the fourth son of Chowdhury Khuda Bakhsh Khan

Chowdhury Najam Khan: Second son of Chowdhury Khuda Baksh Khan and Sakeena Begum

Suraya Begum: wife of Najam Khan; she is called Nanna Jaani by her granddaughter Seemeen

Faheema: eldest daughter of Najam Khan and Suraya Begum; called Baaji by her younger sisters, she is the mother of Seemeen

Seemeen: daughter of Faheema and Mukhtar Ahmed

Farkhanda: second daughter of Najam Khan and Suraya Begum; called Farkhi by her siblings and Aunty Phirki by Seemeen; Farkhanda is married to Zahoor-ud-din and their son is Yasir

Sheba: youngest daughter of Najam Khan and Suraya Begum

Zahoor-ud-din: an engineer, husband of Farkhanda

Yasir: son of Farkhanda and Zahoor-ud-din

Zaheen-ud-din: a businessman and brother of Zahoor-ud-din

Nuzhat: wife of Zaheen-ud-din; she is called Pyaari by her mother-in-law

Aasim: son of Zaheen-ud-din and Nuzhat

Muqim Ehmed: Zaheen-ud-din's uncle

Munazah: Muqim Ehmed's daughter

Azeez Bhat: owner of a grocery shop across the street from the gate of Chowdhury Najam Khan's bungalow

Zarifa and Hanifa: daughters of Azeez Bhat

Shahaab-u-din Shairwaani: A university professor and later civil servant, whom Sheba considers marrying

Shams-u-din Shairwaani: brother of Shahaab-u-din Shairwaani

Professor Daanish: A sociology lecturer, and Sheba's guide, whom Sheba looks after, along with her classmates, when he falls ill

Mrs Daanish: Professor Danish's wife, who works in the US and visits occasionally

Mayuri: Sheba's room-mate and best friend in college, who later marries and moves to England

Prashant Patel: Mayuri's husband, who works in England

Saleem Miyaan: Dr Daanish's cook and helper, who also takes care of Sheba

Gulla Bhai (Ghulam Mohammad or Gull Mohammad): The cook and helper at Suraya Begum's home in Srinagar

The Walnut Orchards

Behind the plum tree, there was a small mound of brown earth on the soft ground. The birds had scattered half-eaten raw plums like flowers on it. The sun had set a short while ago and the fragrance of walnut peel and leaves wafted across on the cold breeze from the orchards beyond the rather wide but just ankle-deep stream.

A dupatta-clad girl of medium height was walking towards the plum tree, gazing at it with anxious eyes. For many hours her heart had been pounding in a way it never had before, yet the moment she set her teary eyes on the branches, she felt her heart come to rest on some object; but then the object fell to the ground, and her heart fell with it and got lost somewhere too.

Tears flowed down her pale cheeks. Crying without parting her lips, she reached the mound and, kneeling down, buried her face in it. It had dried in the sun during the day, but now her tears were making it wet again.

Patwari uncle had left, leaving her alone there. As the girl heard his steps fading away, her sobs became louder, sounding in rhythm with her trembling body.

That day, Sheba had been reading the story of ancient man; her father was helping her along. Hearing Abbu's heavy breathing and occasional coughing, she felt he was tired, and asked her father if he wanted some water. As she went to the kitchen to get a glass of water, she saw many half-ripe cherries from the cherry tree near the compound wall scattered on the grass—thanks to the birds, especially the parrots. Abbu had said she needn't go so far as he could always drink from the copper surahi on the side table. The surahi had recently been plated with nickel in the month of Ramadan and was shining brightly; the tiny branches with birds and flowers carved on it were now clearly visible. But Sheba wanted to get fresh water from the kitchen for her Abbu.

The distance from the porch of the bungalow to the kitchen was just about 50 steps but she stopped in between to pick a few cherries and even tasted them secretly—the green cherry was hard, the white-and-red one sour. She wanted to taste some more cherries, so that she could know in how many days they would ripen but most of them had been pecked at by the birds...and for many days now, her guess had been wrong. Cherries are very tasty! Also, you can select two pairs from a bunch of cherries and wear them dangling from your ears like big red pearl earrings! Everyone wants to wear such earrings and eat them after some time, and wear them again and eat them again...that's why it is so important to know how much longer the cherries are going to take to ripen fully. She could certainly have shown them to Ammi but then Baaji—her elder sister—would blame her that she

ate soiled cherries and made Ammi eat them too. But no one can scold Ammi, and Ammi doesn't in fact eat them! After washing them, she tastes a bit of each and then announces how much time they will take to ripen. She then throws them in the garbage, but Baaji could still hit and scold Sheba on this pretext.

Sheba looked around and walked quickly to the kitchen. Hiding some cherries in her small fist and carrying a glass of water given to her by Noori Nana, the cook, she had already spilled half the water by the time she reached Abbu. But taking the glass in his hand, Abbu smiled pleasantly and gulped it down.

'Want some more?' Sheba asked, nodding her head up and down like Ammi.

'No, *beta* (child). Thank you very much,' Abbu replied, smiling again.

Abbu was sitting in his big chair, checking Farkhi's progress report. She looked at the wooden chair; it was painted deep brown, with flowers, creepers and leaves carved on it in such a way that they easily caught the light. She sat down on the carpet holding the book in her lap, from which she was trying to read, Abbu correcting her now and then.

'Early man lived in caves.' She completed the sentence slowly.

'What is the word for cave in Urdu?' Abbu asked her.

'*Gaar*,' she replied.

Abbu shook his head from right to left. 'It's not *gaar*, it is *ghaar*; you have to say it using the base of your tongue.'

‘Yes Abbu...*gaa...r*.’

‘No child...*ghaa...ghaa*.’ Abbu looked at her but did not smile.

‘Yes Abbu...*ga...ga...ghaar*.’ Sheba growled a couple of times and, ultimately saying the word right, burst into laughter.

‘Yes, there you are!’ Abbu laughed too.

‘But what is the difference between the two Abbu?’

‘A big difference, *beta*, pronunciation is very important. Do you remember what you did yesterday?’

‘No Abbu, I don’t.’

‘You pronounced *qualeen* (carpet) as *kaaleen*.’

‘Yes, but afterwards I could say *kaleen*, I mean *qualeen*,’ she laughed again in celebration of pronouncing the word properly.

‘So, nothing is hard if you really try to do it,’ Abbu said smilingly, yet in all seriousness. ‘Oh God, this child does not take any interest in her studies!’ His forehead was furrowed.

‘No, Abbu. I take interest in my studies. I will read all those books you’ve bought for me.’ She looked at Abbu, her head bent down, her eyelids touching her eyebrows, her chin on her chest.

Abbu shook his head again. ‘Oh no, not you my child! I’m looking at Farkhi’s report card. I know you’re very good at your studies and love to study as well. And I know, by 3rd grade, you’ll be reading these books fluently,’ said Abbu.

‘Farkhi!’ Abbu called out loudly so that Abdul Qayoom would hear him and send Farkhi to him.

'I'll call Farkhi, Abbu!' Sheba said, and ran out to the lawn where Farkhi was playing with her friends from the neighbourhood.

'I'll play for you. Go inside, Abbu wants to speak to you.' She pushed Farkhi from behind, who was sitting in a row of four playing *kho-kho*. Farkhi ran inside.

'What is this report, child? You barely passed these subjects but stood first in games! Had you spent that time on your studies, your grades would have been better. Games were not that important,' Abbu said sternly without looking at Farkhi, turning the pages of the report card while he spoke.

'No Abbu. I couldn't have scored full marks even then,' Farkhi retorted, frowning and shaking off the dust from her hands.

'Really? Why?' Najam Khan raised his head. Farkhanda looked at his face. When Abbu asked something and stopped talking, it meant that he won't ask anything else or scold you, and you could ask him whatever you wanted to and tell him whatever you wished to say.

'I would have kept thinking that if we practised properly, the 4th standard team could not beat us in the finals. So how could I remember what the teacher was saying? I even got this score because I studied right through the nights during the exams. Can I go now Abbu? We were playing *kho-kho* in the backyard when you called. It is evening already and Azeez Bhat will soon be calling Zareefahaneefa (Zarifa, Hanifa) back home,' Farkhi explained, rubbing the mud off her little hands. 'Mehmooda has already gone. Her brother