## A landmark Urdu classic translated for the first time

Khalid Jawed is one of the most original and extraordinary writers in Urdu today. *The Paradise of Food* is an Urdu classic known for its radical, experimental form and savage and dark honesty.

It tells the story of a middle-class Muslim joint family over a span of fifty years. As India – and Islamic culture – hardens, the narrator, whose life we follow from boyhood to old age, struggles to find a place for himself, at odds in his home and in the world outside.

But to describe the novel in its plot is to do its originality no justice. In this profoundly daring work – tense, mysterious, even unfathomable on occasion – Jawed builds an atmosphere of gloom and grotesqueness to draw out his themes. And in doing so he penetrates deep into the dark heart of middle-class Muslims today.

Superbly translated, *The Paradise of Food* is a novel like no other.

## Praise for *The Paradise of Food*

'His art lies in turning morbidity into fiction with a writing style so engaging and prose so polished that they make the reader stick to the story, howsoever one may disagree with his depressing view of life.'

***Dawn***

'Rabelais has found a worthy successor in the Urdu writer and professor Khalid Jawed.'

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'Morbid but scathingly accurate in its portrait of a life where the domestic is a microcosm of a world that, under the veneer of the beautiful, is menacing and irredeemably cruel.'

**Scroll**

'A stand-alone novel amongst all Indian languages, in which, through the prism of foraging experiences, the whole gamut of human existence is revisited. Showing exhilarating narrative dexterity, Khalid Jawed makes the ludicrous believable.'

**Shafey Kidwai, *The Hindu***

'Khalid Jawed's novels are powerful not because of the plot but the intensity with which he makes the reader experience the most mundane, even grotesque, things – the diseased body, stark lust, even human excrement. There has perhaps never been a writer in Urdu who matches him in this profoundly anti-romantic depiction of the filth of life. He is the master of the aesthetics of disgust.'

**Shamsur Rahman Farooqi**

'Jawed catches hold of your collar and drags you deep into the dark abyss of the protagonist's soul … [a] remarkable translation.'

***The Tribune***

# The Paradise of Food

# The Paradise of Food

KHALID JAWED

Translated by
BARAN FAROOQI

juggernaut

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*For my father, Shamsur Rahman Farooqi, a treasure house of love and learning*

*Gali mein uski gaya so gaya na bola phir*
*Main Mir Mir kar usko bohot pukar raha*

**– Mir Taqi Mir**

*He entered her lane and departed, just disappeared without speaking a word*
*Many times I called out to him, "Mir! Oh Mir!" – but no answer ever came*

**– Translated by Shamsur Rahman Farooqi**

# Contents

# Introduction

Khalid Jawed is an outstanding exemplar of the new wave of fiction writers in Urdu. There had been two paradigms for fiction in Urdu: the one established by Premchand and the Progressives and the other created by Intizar Husain and the Modernist writers by largely subverting the Premchand paradigm. Khalid Jawed represents the third generation of modern fiction writers in Urdu who have been trying to establish yet another paradigm for the narrative art in Urdu. His fiction is driven by powerful prose rhythms, heavy and pregnant with meaning, overshadowed by the consciousness of fear, disease and failure, spawned by the evil in human nature.

A philosopher by training, Khalid Jawed achieved instant fame in the early 1990s through his stories of lonely individuals growing up in an environment of ignorance, or of people with families, and not lonely in the conventional sense but still unable to come to terms with what life has been for them.

Contrary to the so-called mainstream of contemporary Urdu fiction writers, Khalid Jawed is passionately interested in looking into the psyches of individuals who are somewhat cut off from

collective existence. His short novel *Maut ki Kitab* investigates the mystery of anxiety, the disease of the spirit fascinated by the death that surrounds it. In *Ne'mat Khana,* his novel published in Urdu, Khalid Jawed investigates the disease and squalor of domestic existence through the metaphor of the kitchen or the pantry. Food and sustenance make human life go, but they also corrupt human life.

Khalid Jawed has published three collections of short stories, and two short books on Milan Kundera and Gabriel García Márquez. He has been published on both sides of the border to great acclaim and critical appreciation. Born in Bareilly in 1963, Jawed now teaches in the Urdu department of Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

*Ne'mat Khana* is a remarkable piece of work by this third-wave Urdu fiction writer. It tells the story of an orphaned boy, Zahiruddin Babar, who is brought up in a typical middle-class Muslim joint family teeming with relatives from both sides of his parents' families. The novel is narrated in first person through the eyes of this little boy who eventually grows up to reach late middle age. The vast array of relatives from either side of the family intrigues the child. The author doesn't really explain this strange fact though the reader gets a sense of the custom of marriage between cousins in the Muslim community.

Khalid Jawed's work presents many challenges. I just mentioned above the departure from old paradigms and the establishment of new paradigms in fiction by the generation of Urdu writers which came into prominence in the late 1980s and very early 1990s. The three outstanding representatives of the new paradigm are Syed Muhammad Ashraf, Khalid Jawed and Siddiq Alam. Another name that occurs immediately as one mentions the above three names is that of Naiyer Masud,

but Naiyer Masud belongs to an earlier literary generation and in fact did not influence the three writers I mentioned above. Masud created a world of his own: highly inward-looking, intense and semi-transparent, marked by a remarkably limpid but unadorned prose.

Having said this about the new paradigm and the strong outsider, namely, Naiyer Masud, who vastly impressed but did not much influence the three writers I mentioned above, one is led to another question: what exactly is the new paradigm and what does it do to fiction?

It is comparatively easy to answer the latter question. The new paradigm opened yet another vista over Urdu fiction. If the Progressives were obsessed with social change and revolution, and upheld the banner of hope walking warily around the seamier questions of life, the Modernists insisted upon an individual view, and a point of view not related to any identifiable individual in the fiction, but to an abstract entity brooding upon the scene of the contemporary world and holding out none of the formulaic propositions of action and hope; the third paradigm was marked by an attempt to look at life from many possible angles. They eschewed the intense, almost obscure manner of most of the outstanding Modernists and chose to write a prose not burdened by metaphors and symbols. It was basically in the mode of early twentieth-century narrators but investing their prose with nuances and layers which were not to be found and in fact were entirely foreign to the manner of the early story writers in Urdu. Thus they took narrative flow from their earliest predecessors but gave the narrative itself a depth and a variety which would have been unimaginable to the writers of the early twentieth century.

The trouble is that the similarity among the writers of the

new paradigm stops here. Each of them strikes out in his own way, on his own path or paths. I say paths because these writers are passionately interested in life but are not confined to any given mode or modes of existence. Thus they present a world of greater narrative variety, that was not available to their Modernist predecessors. Intizar Husain is a sole exception, but he is a writer who is almost impossible to classify.

Khalid Jawed presents a narrative personality drastically different from that of any of his contemporaries. The noted Modern critic Varis Alavi, said, 'Khalid Jawed's art is not confined to one level or one direction. It has many layers and many directions. His fiction is opulent because it travels from naked realism to symbols, myths and to cultural agendas and corners.' He also speaks of Khalid Jawed's 'imagination which loves invention and novelty'. While these observations are sufficient to give us a general understanding of the kind of fiction writer that Khalid Jawed is, it by no means presents a complete picture. There is, for instance, Khalid Jawed's interest – one might almost say obsession – with disease, sickness, filth and the grotesque. In some of his fiction this interest or obsession is so pervasive that one of the commoner views about Khalid Jawed is that he is a writer of the morbid and the diseased. For instance, in a review published in *The Dawn*, Karachi, of 28 June 2015, the reviewer Adnan Adil said:

> Khalid Javaid [sic] is obsessed with death and disease and has a gloomy outlook. His art lies in turning morbidity into fiction with a writing style so engaging and prose so polished that they make the reader stick to the story, howsoever, one may disagree with his depressing view of life.

Apart from the fact that Khalid Jawed does not necessarily present a view of life, gloomy or depressing, and he is not interested in giving the reader a 'message', the interest in the unsightly, even the filthy, and the mood of sickness and disease in his fiction is symbolic of something deeper about the whole universal scheme of things rather than a narrow infra-lapsarian rolling and roiling in the uglier things of life.

Doubtless it itself is an act of courage to feel and then observe the sordidness, and, one might almost say, negative modes of existence: eating, defecating, making love in a mechanical and unloving way, falling ill, a narrow environment of malodorous things and objects. There was a time when people wondered and admired the courage of Balzac for writing novels upon novels about moneymaking and filthy lucre. Somewhat later, one also admired the courage of Dickens, and then Zola, in plunging into aspects of urban life with the power that we had kept hidden under a thick layer of formality and respectability. But Khalid Jawed takes the process many steps forward and feels no shame, or shows no lack of courage in talking about human life as it is lived inside small, dinghy and basically selfish environments.

*Ne'mat Khana* functions on two levels. One is a kind of stark realism which takes account of the unsaid and unsayable things of human life. It is not just disease but blood and phlegm and stagnant water and small but repulsive minor beasts that live in the crevices of houses and their kitchens and storerooms. The observation of objects and situations is clinically pitiless. It lets nothing go; in fact it sometimes seems to enjoy finding unpalatable aspects of common phenomenon. These qualities of the prose in themselves make for a strong and compelling narrative, and in fact open our eyes to things which we were always prone to behave as if they don't exist.

Then there is the symbolic level. The implied and occasionally articulated motif is the perversity of food. Food is consumed by us largely to sustain existence and to a small degree for enjoyment. Then food converts itself to filth and also provides the kinetic force for sex. Thus the kitchen and the pantry are also, in the larger sense, sex shops, and since food and sex drive human beings, life becomes a struggle for not so much as survival, but a struggle for power. The beauty of the novel is that while most contemporary novelists look for evil and narrow-mindedness and violence and power struggles in the outer world, no one except Khalid Jawed had the courage and the imagination to see homes and families as the whole outer world in microcosm. Normally, households are presented in fiction, particularly Urdu fiction, as sites of passion, or friendship, or petty acrimony and animosity. In other words, these households are just like the ones we would like to imagine through our small imagination. Khalid Jawed goes behind the people and the locations of the households, comes back and tells us that the outer world is nothing but more of the same that he saw inside the doors and walls of homes and households.

Everyone has, to the extent they could, extolled the prose in which Khalid Jawed couches his narrative. Having been a philosopher for many years before entering the Urdu academic world, Khalid Jawed seems to find kindred spirits in philosophers of gloom, both among Indians and Europeans. The sombre rhythms of philosophical writing make their way through the narrative. But his are not philosophical fictions, his are human narratives given to us in generally extremely chiselled and many-sided prose with the sharpness of sight enabling the narrator to observe the details and minutiae of the domestic environment. Unlike Naiyer Masud, who too is strong on details, Khalid Jawed gives us details of small things. He observes them with

hidden distaste, but also fascination, and both come through in this novel most tellingly.

It has been observed that Khalid Jawed is not interested in characters in his fiction, in the sense that he doesn't build characters who are 'round' in E.M Forster's terms, or characters that grow, develop and change, but this is the characteristic of all post-Progressive Modernist fiction. This fiction is always interested in events and things and the individuals in here come through to us via their ideas and through minute, static details of their lives. It is, however, true that Khalid Jawed betrays a certain misogynistic turn of phrase, if not turn of mind. Maybe, it is due to his revulsion from sex which is common to all middle-class and lower-middle-class educated Indians. The fact remains that in many of his stories, and especially in this novel, there are enigmatic women who don't lend themselves to admiration, much less affection, even when they are suffering. Yet it seems to be more than just portraying unlovely women, as these very women are or could be at some point objects of his desire.

It can be said that Khalid Jawed has established a unique voice in Urdu fiction. The danger with unique voices is that they tend to become repetitive, confined and don't always succeed in finding new patterns and subjects, but Khalid Jawed has enough strength of imagination to find new aspects of the same reality.

# Part I

# Wind

The wind was the only eyewitness to his entry into his own house like a melancholy thief. One didn't know if the house was under construction or falling or transforming itself into a ruin. No one knew this, only the wind did.

His melancholy fell to the ground through his feet, gathering in heaps. This sadness, what kind of sadness was this? It was like the melancholic gaze that rose towards the sky after peering into a closed well, and the sky was limitlessly cruel. Such limitlessness could only produce fear. All meanings, all connotations, all interpretations drowned in this limitlessness

It was just two chapattis, made with love, that were fluttering like flags on this large, ever-looming, frightening scene. But these chapattis were not meant for any stomach; they were not meant for digestion, conversion into blood and circulation in the body. Neither were they meant to be turned into excrement and flushed away into dark narrow drains. They were actually two pieces of evidence. Evidence of the spirit, like two pure and honest mathematical numbers. Like a chaste and immortal bindiya on the forehead of a plundered and dispirited-looking world. Even the embers of the chulha had become cold, but these were eternal and still warm.

And that's why the wind saw that he was just sad, not weeping; he might not weep at all, or ever. He will keep his salt with care and safety; corpses take longer to go bad in salt. There's still so much that he has to keep safe.

The wind had seen many shadows, in fact, had been witness to just shadows for a long, long time now. How many shadows had passed, walking into a deep, wide and dark river. Their feet left the sandy bank and slipped into the deep waters, and they became yet deeper and denser shadows. Every time one returns from a journey, one has to perforce walk towards the water. There's nothing called empty space, or vacuum; everything is water which can't be seen, but it is present in every place where there is love or hatred.

He wasn't alone; there were two more beings with him: the shadow of a limping rabbit with a jagged ear that kept following him, and a cockroach perched like a butterfly on the collar of his shirt.

The wind, the ancient wind of that house, or even that place, the eternal inhabitant of that place, was lying crushed and buried under a fallen tree, heavy and dry, almost fossilized into stone.

One knows not when the tree lost its leaves, its branches. Only some dry roots remained, totally absorbed into the ground in a meaningless and almost ridiculously pathetic manner. Oh, and yes, there was a trunk left too; it was very close to becoming a log of wood, the kind that is used to make the joints and frames of doors for a home.

It's not the kind of wind that actually blows. It can neither be felt against someone's body, nor does it dry the clothes on the clothes line. It is stony, it just peers from under the rubble. The rubble is that of the very tree from under which it emerged. It moved in the form of blasts; having travelled a distance of many

miles, it reached the tree whose leaves and branches it touched and then stayed there. That was the tree I am talking about.

The mango tree which stood in the courtyard of past times, the wind knew that it had died a very long time ago. Still, it didn't desert it and go away. Like an unfortunate she-monkey roaming with the dead body of its baby still clinging to its pathetic stomach, just the same way, the wind ever lugged the corpse of the tree and that's why it had turned into stone under the rubble.

Could there be a bigger eyewitness than stone?

He was walking unsteadily, stumbling, yet trying to walk carefully so as not to hit something or fall. The wind realized, even as it lay on the ground, that the earth could now not stop itself from crying. The earth was weeping upon his canvas shoes which were slipping on the wet mud and sinking into it. The wind soon found out this secret too – that a dark and deep silence was also writing its story right there. The silence was pouring its story into the long ears of the wind.

And he? He filled his cold wet shoes with the dark and deep silence – perhaps he knew what was going to happen. A dreadful river was winding itself forward to prey upon a thin rivulet. Having accepted merging into the river as its fate, the rivulet was moving towards it gradually. This was a snare into which she herself was falling.

The wind saw that he was standing in a corner, like a shadow.

Exactly at that moment, the hundred-year-old snake, whose hiss would frighten to death the chickens of the house, wound itself away, almost touching him. This snake too was an inhabitant of that house, but he neither saw nor felt the snake. Neither did he see the innumerable shadows of the monkeys the house was overflowing with.

The wind saw his head hit an empty beehive that hung from the heavy, termite-infested wooden beam, but he remained oblivious of it. A hive in which no bee remained. It hung, abandoned, no longer golden brown but dry and white. Its bees had wandered off to some other planet. It was no longer a hive but the shroud of one. So weightless, weak and insignificant that it softly swayed and quivered even in the worst of the humid, airless atmosphere.

This hive, which was harmless to a disappointing degree, barely escaped falling after colliding with his shadow.

The wind saw that he had hopped over the dead dry trunk of the tree to avoid bumping into it. He had jumped exactly over the hollow in which Lucy and Jack used to huddle to protect themselves from the rain.

The hollow is yet another blanket of loneliness engraved on the loneliness of the trunk. An empty nest which is never occupied again turns into an iron nest. The tree trunk, separated from its flowers, fruits, leaves and branches, from everything, alone, and under it, a crushed but living wind. The wind never dies for it has always been alone. It can only turn into stone or ice. The wind was eyewitness to the fact that he was wandering around like the necrophiliac sadhus who roam the cremation grounds so that they may insert their spirit into some corpse and use it to their benefit.

Benefit?