



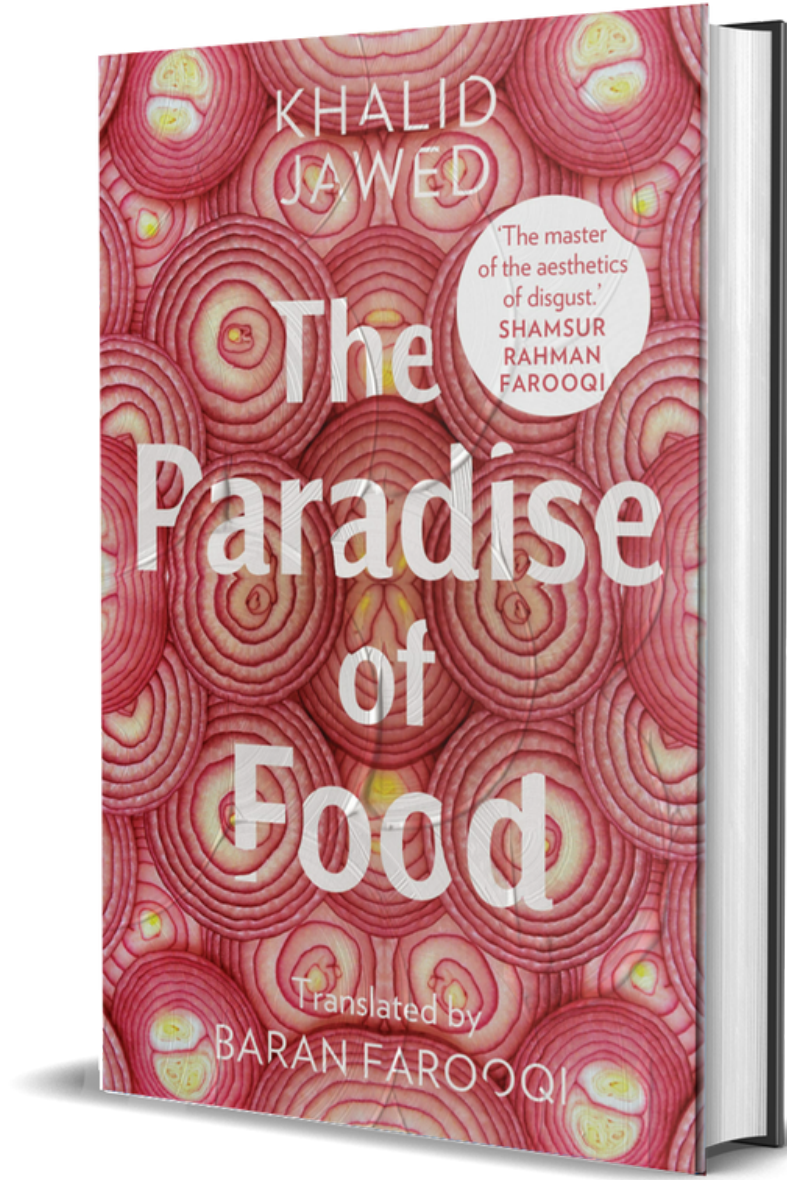
Paradise of Food

by

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CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY
INDIAN WRITERS

The Paradise of Food

KHALID JAWED

Translated by
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 juggernaut

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?

Benefit? What was it?

To how much could the stony gaze of the wind be a witness?

Those eyes saw that he was wandering in his own house, an earthen pot in one hand and a yellowing, crumbling manuscript in the other.

He wanders but doesn't see a thing. Not even the crow on whose accidental death a large number of crows had arrived, God knows from where, flying long distances, and most surprisingly, perched in silence, their heads bowed, on the kitchen roof. That very dead crow sat silently on a fallen beam. But he didn't see it, regrettably, he didn't see it.

The wind saw that the rabbit with the jagged ear had left his side and was actually munching the grass growing on its own grave, and the cockroach had flown away from the collar of his shirt and was creeping with malicious intent towards the rubble of the walls and the bricks of the kitchen.

The wind knew that all sins, all gluttony and all greedy intent must go that way even if it had all been foolish little childhood games. All destiny is ultimately the same. Even after the checkmate and the closing of the game of chess, trying to drag back past time, time which is dead like a dead monkey's paw,

results in terror and defeat, nothing more. The truth was nothing but becoming the dog in the stomach and then perishing. The journey towards total annihilation of the mental and corporeal continues, to such an extent that the annihilation of memory becomes the highest point of all.

The wind knows that other world too where no one recognizes anyone else. The chain of blood is just a memory. All worship, all religion, and all ethical practices are nothing but strategies for getting rid of memory. In that world, everyone will be rejoicing in their solitude. With dreadful shamelessness. Even a ghost doesn't have such shamelessness. This is because the ghost at least maintains some kind of relationship with this world; that this relationship may be full of ill intent, envy and diabolicity is another matter. But he doesn't rid himself of his memories. And he is punished for this with his sharp claws and the hollow pits of his eyes.

So, one will have to dismiss from the memory all worldly relationships, all emotions, all loves and hatreds, all lusts and desires, every one of them. What good will come out of going to a paradise where one wouldn't even remember who one's father was?

One will have to put up with this state of 'oh my soul! my soul!'. Bear it with patience.

The wind saw his face clearly for a moment. It was the tired face of someone who had experienced a long and uncomfortable journey. A very, very long journey, as long as the journey that the hot or cold winds perform. He had come home like a flowing wind.

Home?

Though home was perhaps not anywhere; there was just black water and a floating, frightening shore which seemed like rubble

on which he was roaming around, stumbling again and again, like a blind and panic-stricken man. Once, in fact, he just prevented himself from falling like a dry leaf tumbling down on its own shadow. This was like a dream, but while dreaming you can't even see one of your eyes. If only he could see the misfortune of that eye, its dryness and its moisture, see the way the wind could. Pity that it wasn't possible that the eye which dreams, the same eye could also be visible to the person dreaming. See a face which looks like a sheepish, tired and broken railway engine hit by the fog, a railway engine which reaches its destination very late, and which continues sadly to emit smoke amid its absolutely silenced whistle.

The wind found him to be like herself.

The wind found him strange, something unique in its own self. He had come to the dead of the past and was devoid of every emotion, feeling or mood, just a spinning whirlwind. Or, he was a mummy whose brain, sucked out through the nose with great skill, is thrown away so that the body may not rot or decay. The brain wanders around in garbage pits and the body in the air.

Because of the eternal separation of the mind and the body, only shadows are born between them, devoid of emotions and feelings, just dark shadows. Certainly, they were nothing but emotions on whose river-like expanse he used to float the earthen pots of his sins and crimes and drag them with him as he swam. For of course, what else was it but the mind which devised the means of making and then pushing the pots under water. Now the pot could be pulled along comfortably, because it contained the creative power of the maker of the earth and also the force of the river's flow. An extra power, an external support.

But now he was a man, alone. Alone and hapless like the first man on earth, dependent upon the grace and mercy of God. For there was a long and deep abyss of sand where the river used to flow. He now carries the pot of sins like a headload, all alone on the sand. The wind is watching the downfall of Adam, and the

wind also sees that the marks of his feet on the sand seem to form snake-like patterns.

‘This is my snake! But where is yours? Show your snake too, you angels and decent, good-hearted people!’

He should have screamed this out loudly, protesting angrily, but he didn’t. His lips were slathered with putrid honey and were glued together forever so that the silence would also putrefy on his palate and in his throat.

His cockroach reached the bricks of the kitchen. The wind saw that this was exactly the moment his left foot got stuck in the mortar of the earth, and it kept sinking. He held to an iron pipe. Otherwise, he would have fallen on his face right on his own shadow (though the shadow would not have been visible, he was himself a shadow). This thick and rusted pipe had actually conveyed the water in past times.

One could swear that however much the wind may have been crushed and trampled – it may become a fungus-ridden cliff, or by God’s grace a stone statue even – it can always recognize the footfalls of rain from far, very far. The wind and rain are related in an eternal and mysterious fashion. A mystery, somewhat like the mysteries between human beings.

The wind could sense that the rain was arriving and along with it came another strange wind. A wind which didn’t have any connection with this house was coming along with the rain. A wind which could drag out the dead.

Unable to walk, buried under the dry dead body of the tree, the wind smelt the alien, unfamiliar, fast and forceful wind and knew it to be brutal, merciless. The wind didn’t feel any envy at this alien wind’s presence. She knew that every wind had to turn into stone one day and be absorbed into stillness.

And certainly, it came.

The rain came riding the shoulders of winds from some other world. The rain was noiseless; it was wetting his head. The rain continued, drenching his head, and lice invaded his hair. He stood in the rubble, silent, with one leg stuck in the mud. He was somehow caught in the alien, dark wind. His red sweater, blue shirt and white canvas shoes seemed to have turned black. Even his eyes were filled with black wind. But not every decision is necessarily pronounced at the time of death. It can be declared later too. He stood on one foot, swaying in the black wind and getting drenched in the rain.

‘Guddu Miyan has come! Guddu Miyan has come!’

The wind heard the sound of the cutting of the white sheet of still silence. It was the same sound that arises when you cut a sheet from a bolt of cloth with a sharp and ruthless pair of scissors. He wanted to wrap the two-metre-long scrap of the white and still silence around his body. He wanted to prepare an account of Death so that along with the entry of his name, he could in due course make entries concerning others. It was just like when one makes portions of roti and halwa. The rich sweet food, when prepared on ritual or other occasions, is made sacrosanct by saying prayers on it; the portions are then distributed among the deserving. So it was his portion to make: accounts of the deaths, so that he may not be treated as an absent absconder accused at the soon-to-be-set-up Court of Judgement, even if the court had no judge present.

‘Guddu Miyan has come.’

The wind saw, with some joy and some grief, that his shadow, which was getting soaked in the rain, had recognized that child-like lisping tone this time. The wind silently heard the plodding steps of the dead. They were all going to come, their numbers couldn't be estimated by the sound of their feet.

Holding the old, rusted iron pipe with his left hand, he was standing at the same place, still and immovable, and his left leg was buried in the wet and slimy mud in such a fashion as if a hard, sturdy paste had been applied on it and a broken bone had been made entirely incapable of movement.

But the wind saw all this. She was the only eyewitness to this tragedy or comedy.

And if there had been a flash of lightning along with the rain, the wind would have been able to see that innumerable cockroaches had gathered on the crumbling walls of the kitchen. The court is in function.

The kitchen – it's a dangerous place.