

# Nighat Sahiba: The Brave New Voice in Kashmiri Poetry

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For centuries, Kashmir has been home to some of the greatest mystic, *sufi* and romantic women poets like Lal Ded, Arnimaal and Habba Khatoon. It is towards the end of the twentieth century that poet Naseem Shafaie lights the path for women poetry that deviated from mysticism or romantic themes to address the condition of Kashmiri women in the contemporary moment and join the ranks of modern Kashmiri poets like Motilal Saqi and Rahman Rahi. The women of Kashmir suffered much through the years of conflict and violence but their voices were muffled in this chaos. Shafaie not only created visibility for the figure of the Kashmiri woman living in a conflict zone but also opened doors for women writers and poets to be heard and recognized in Kashmiri literary circles.

Years later, Nighat Sahiba, a young Kashmiri started writing poems in Urdu. On being encouraged by different listeners and poets, she started writing in Kashmiri as well. This proved to be a turning point for both Kashmiri literature and Nighat who was unsure that this 'living language'<sup>1</sup> had any takers in the literary world. Born and brought up in village Achabal, district Anantnag, her first collection of Kashmiri *ghazals* and *nazms* titled '*Zard Panike Dair*' (A Pile of Autumn Leaves) won her the *Yuva Puraskar* from Sahitya Akademi in 2017. She was also recently felicitated with 2018 Mallika Sengupta Award. Autumn leaves are a dominant metaphor in her work because of their constant presence in her natural surroundings. Dry autumn leaves also represent loss which, according to her, has been ever present in her life in Kashmir. Her work is humanistic in nature with an undiluted voice that has created uproar in Kashmiri poetry circles which are dominated by men in both attendance and participation. Her work is thought provoking and yet, in a close reading,

you will notice that she is a writer in the process of sifting through her thoughts for clarity in a milieu of chaos. She is figuring out the world and herself in the process. Nighat does not like to be identified as a 'woman' poet. She simply wants to be called a poet. To her, the label is akin to being put in a box where you won't be taken seriously. She says in one of our many conversations that categorization is mostly an easy way for men to eliminate the presence of women from intellectual pursuits. And even though she identifies herself as a feminist, she again, prefers to call her work 'humanistic' rather than 'feminist'. In her life and her work, she is constantly navigating the patriarchal society's rough terrain. She writes about the socio-political, religious, gender issues with a fervent versatility in her poems but she strives to stay away from being boxed in a corner with one particular label which is evident from her romantic *ghazals*. Her peers in Kashmiri poetry are quick to label her because that makes it easy for them to assess and measure her. The veteran poets are impressed and the young ones are intimidated by her raw, unhinged poetry. Nighat, although being awarded for her evidently feminist writing, is reluctant of the term. She says, "I am writing about the human condition in Kashmir." Her readers who are primarily Kashmiris are themselves still sceptical of the term, feminism. For Nighat, instead of liberating, the term then becomes restrictive as a poet in Kashmir because of its limited understanding. Nobody called her a feminist before English language interviews termed her work as such. She says, "It creates a negative impression that I cannot write about anything beyond my existence as a woman." Her voice tells me that she intends to break that mould of labels and categorization. She wants to write about gender but not be restricted by gender roles. She has struggled enough with

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gender roles having grown up in rural Kashmir where a girl spends a majority of time in household chores, not reading books. I must note that I, too, am a reluctant translator of her work. Primarily because each repeated reading of her poem reveals a new meaning- her poems transform like a shape shifter- at one moment, it is a woman's life story and the next, it is a sharp critique of the way men ravage lands as is evident in her poem 'For an unknown Afghan Poetess'. While this poem is still a translation in progress, the three poems chosen for this issue are unique because, these particularly bring up many questions about the process of writing itself. Without describing them any further, I will leave the interpretation to the readers. My introduction to Kashmiri poetry like most has been through the oral tradition. Kashmiris grow up listening to Lal Ded verses and Habba Khatoon songs recited by grandparents. But my first interaction with translation occurred with Naseem Shafaie's poems. It is an exciting venture for me personally because reading women in your mother tongue opens up a whole new world of experience. The translation, thus, has become a quest to bring such verses to the world so that the world may also understand a Kashmiri woman's intellectual and emotional dimensions in her own voice. Discovering Nighat's work has been an immensely rewarding experience for me not only because she is writing as a Kashmiri woman; but also because she is writing as a Kashmiri woman who belongs to my generation.

My first interaction with Nighat happened on a rickshaw ride from Kashmiri gate metro station to Ambedkar University on a winter morning in Delhi. Having gotten pleasantries out of the way, we bonded over the fact that we both belonged to the rural Kashmir in Anantnag district. We both exclaimed, "We would have been neighbours if Kashmir had a different history!" She opened up to me with a surprising ease as we talked about the roles that girls like us are expected to fit into. She said something akin to this, "I don't know why women don't understand that they have been conditioned into a certain way of life. You don't HAVE TO clean the house every single day. You have been

conditioned to believe that you are not an ideal woman unless you are fulfilling certain household duties like picking up the broom every single day. I always ask 'Why?' The settled dust can easily be cleaned up twice a week rather than every day. It doesn't make you less of a woman." I nodded in enthusiastic affirmation and understood why her words stick like a fish bone in the throat of most Kashmiris. I understood the depth to which her work is informed by such personal observations when I heard her poems in a private reading the next day. She writes in her poem, 'For an unknown Afghan Poetess', "*Suboh sham angnik banjar putavyin*" ("I have to smooth over the rough terrain of the front yard, day and night"). These lines took me back to our conversation on the rickshaw. She also introduced me to Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* and I sent her poems by Ocean Vuong and Anne Sexton. As I write this, Nighat and I are discussing all the reluctances that come with the feeling that you are the only woman in the world standing on the dais reading your poems. It takes courage to tell your parents that you write poems, it takes courage to step out of your house and into a gathering of men to recite your verses, it takes courage to be a woman in Kashmir and it also takes courage to continue writing with a feeling that you are the only woman in the world of Kashmiri literature. It is an immense burden but we have decided that we will not be the only women writing in the world, be it any language. There is a large gap in terms of space and representation that Nighat Sahiba's verses are filling up. I am hoping that the translations contribute to the same. And a few years from now when a Kashmiri girl is trying to find the courage to step out of the house and recite her verses, she will have Nighat Sahiba's verses for encouragement and more women sitting in the audience, cheering her on. In conclusion, reading Nighat's work reminds me of the eleventh century poet Kshemendra's words, "Poets should write in their own language"<sup>2</sup> because it is in this 'living language' that Nighat has expressed what it means to be a human being finding the courage to speak frankly in her mother tongue.

## سرِ یہہ قلمس

سُلہ سوئٹے ییلہ ووتھ شورپنس  
 زوتھ دوہ نیرن ژورپنس  
 واول چھنہ ٹھہراں کھورپنس  
 لگی پتہ لارن نہ وورپنس  
 ژھوپہ کر ہر دج کتھ کانہ مہ ون  
 بیم لاکھ چھ زگاں پنہ ووتھرن  
 کس ژھانڈی، پانوکس راوکھ  
 بٹھہ پھر دی گئے ساری وپہ ہاؤک  
 بیٹہ یورین صحران منز  
 کس پزاری ہم ہتھ ناؤن منز  
 پد پد کس ووتھری ناگہ پوکھ  
 اوش قطن چائین راواثر  
 وونہ سرِ یہہ چھہ رتھ کھنڈ دون چشمن  
 وونہ چوئے ہا ہتھ رڈرا تھن  
 وونہ چھی کینہہ پوش تے موجو دے  
 راؤن مشراد، وچھ کیناہ رڈوے  
 متہ انتہ گوڈے سہلاب اچھن  
 ووتھ نیر وٹکھ نے چھہ خواب اچھن  
 وونہ چھم دل، دادیک آگر چھم  
 وونہ چھم اکھ سازوزاں رُم رُم  
 وونہ چھم ارمان سبز اے  
 وونہ چھم پنہ ووتھرن شہجاریے  
 وونہ چھم اختا بچہ ز تہ بلمس  
 زہد روزنہ باپتھ سرِ یہہ قلمس

## Moist Pen

From the sound of rustling leaves in early spring  
 You sensed, they would last, at best, four days altogether  
 Even the wind can't control a leaf's pace  
 Useless for you to chase after it, barefoot  
 Shush now, don't tell them of your autumn news!  
 These people are on the hunt for fallen leaves.  
 Who will search for you when you lose yourself?  
 Even your guides have turned their faces away.  
 Here, in these sandstorms,  
 Who will wait holding the oar for your boat?  
 Who will wipe the sprouting springs at every step  
 if your tears lose all meaning?  
 There is still some water in your eyes.  
 There is still a dread of you in rainy nights.  
 There are still some flowers safely kept.  
 Forget the losses, salvage what you have left.  
 Don't flood your eyes so soon  
 Get up, go on, tell them,  
 My eyes still have dreams living in them.  
 My heart, still, is an ocean of pain  
 My soul, still, has a song to sing.  
 My longings, still, are evergreen.  
 My leaves, still, have some shade left in them.  
 Sunrays, too, lie here in my lap.  
 My pen still has some moisture left  
 Quite enough for me to survive.

## پچھان

پرس دؤپن  
 ژ چھکھ ویشو  
 گز بران چھکھ  
 گو ان چھکھ  
 دو ان چھکھ  
 اسان چھکھ

مے دؤپ دپس یہ چھے ژے بزم

مگر دؤپم بلاے دس

پرس دؤپن  
 ژ چھکھ چکھن  
 کھو ان چھکھ  
 کھو ان چھکھ  
 کھو ان چھکھ  
 کھو ان چھکھ

مے دؤپ دپس یہ چھے ژے بزم

مگر دؤپم بلاے دس

## Recognition

Last year, he said to me

You are the Veshaw<sup>3</sup>

You gush

You sing

You run

You laugh

I wondered if I should tell him  
 "This is simply your illusion!"

But then, I said to myself,  
 Let it be.

This year, he said to me

You are the devil!

You engulf

You engulf

You engulf

You engulf

I wondered if I should tell him  
 "This is simply your illusion!"

But then, I said to myself,  
 Let it be.

## بیم گم پشندی گری؟

اکھ گراوس سہ  
 یس چانو معصوم اتھو بنو  
 اکھ گراوس سہ  
 یس مانزا اتھو چانو پآ روو  
 اکھ گراوس سہ  
 یتھ چانو لوسہ ونو، گنیل تھکو متو اتھو  
 کٹھ کٹھ کچھ کور  
 کمہ تاں رتہ پاپک خواب وچھتھ  
 اکھ گراوس سہ  
 یتیمہ چہ بجائی باپت  
 دعائے خاں کراں بندرے رآوے  
 سے گری  
 یتیمہ کس ڈینگ ہاس تاں  
 واتاں واتاں شام گوؤے  
 اکھ گری چھ یہ سرکار بلڈنگ  
 یتیمہ چہ ا کس تنگ کوٹھر اندر  
 دروازس کن مدے گنڈتھ  
 پزاراں چھکھ ا خری آرامس

## Whose Houses are These?

There was once a house  
 made by your innocent hands.  
 There was once a house  
 decorated like a bride  
 by your hennaed hands.  
 There was once a house  
 that your ageing, wrinkled and tired hands  
 furnished from room to room.  
 There was once a house  
 where you dreamt of a distant, pleasant future.  
 There was once a house  
 for whose prosperity  
 praying ferociously  
 you lost all sleep.  
 It is that very house  
 on which evening descends  
 before you reach the dining hall.  
 One house of yours  
 is this government building  
 Here, inside one of its narrow cells,  
 gazing towards the door,  
 your wait for the final rest.

## NOTES

1. Raina, Trilokinath, *A History of Kashmiri Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, 2002.
2. Ibid.
3. Veshaw is a tributary of river Jhelum which begins at Kausar Nag Lake in Kulgam District, South Kashmir.