

**Hael**

**Getting Accustomed**

**– Hari Krishan Kaul**

From *Zool Apaerim* (2001), Pages 52-58

*Translated by Gowhar Fazili*

I was accustomed to soft, white, cottony snow, I liked it a lot. In the late autumn months Ded [Grandma] would start worrying that *Sheen-Budd'e*, Old-Man-Snow, would show up any day. And so, she would dry garlands of sliced gourd and aubergine in the sun in advance. I didn't know if she intended to adorn the old man with these garlands or to satisfy her own appetite while she huddled in a corner. I could never figure out whether she loved the snow or dreaded it.

Ded would say—and perhaps rightly so—that snow is cold. As for me, the very sight of it gave me the feeling of warmth that comes from quilts filled with freshly carded cotton. My brother moved out of our house soon after he got married. My sister-in-law would not make garlands of gourd and aubergine to welcome *Sheen-Budd'e* or to guard herself against him. She would call over the carder at the end of the lane and get him to tease out cotton from her worn out quilt before filling it back. Then, she would get the tailor's apprentice from across the road to make snow-white covers for these quilts. My sister-in-law's intelligence and the skills of the carder and the tailor made me think this is how one should prepare to welcome the snow. Ded's lack of preparedness and my own naivety made me feel sorry for myself. But when the snow fell heavily, I rejoiced at the thought that there was a carder up in the sky far more skilled than the one at the end of the lane, who carded tonnes of cotton for my quilts and mattresses and that no craftsman can match the master craftsman who cuts bales of snow white cloth to make pristine covers for these quilts!

I enjoyed lying in quilts of cottony snow and stepping on mattresses of snow. As soon as my feet touched it, they sank in. I fancied my sister-in-law's plump body and her fair limbs sinking in similarly into soft quilts and mattresses and being caressed by them.

Ded flaunted her wisdom one day: "Quilts and mattresses are soft as well as warm. But snow, though it's soft, freezes quickly and feels colder." I did not take her seriously, for I believed that there can be nothing in the universe as cold and frozen as old, worn-out quilts and mattresses.

Days, months and years kept passing and it kept snowing. What is colder, snow or old worn out rags? Though we disagreed about this intensely, Ded and I continued to support each other. I grew up, even as Ded grew old.

That year, too, Ded had made garlands of dried gourd and brinjal to welcome *Sheen-Budd'e* or to guard herself against him. That year too, it snowed heavily. The snow danced as it fell from the sky but as soon as it touched down it went berserk. Or perhaps a gust of wind from somewhere, and struck the soft flakes descending from the sky turning them into ice, freezing them just as they hit the ground. The soft heaps of cotton turned to frost and the bales of white cloth turned into crystals. Neither was Ded nor was I accustomed to this. An icy wind came from somewhere and instantly penetrated people's skin, flesh and bones, and froze the warm blood that ran through their veins before they realised what had hit them. They would have realised it only if they were accustomed to such icy winds. When I saw this cruel face of Sheen Budd'e and was confronted by the icy winds I gave out a scream and Ded screamed out even louder. But none of our neighbours heard us. Perhaps even our screams froze before they could reach their ears.

Ded held me tight and started howling. I lifted her on my back and turned towards the door. Ded glanced around the house, gathering the image of garlands of gourd and brinjal hanging

in the attic, the pots and pans lying about in the rooms and corridors and the other household items with her eyelashes and bundled them away in her heart. Perhaps my heart was already frozen. So whatever came in my way—the plates that had moulded, the earthenware with frosted collard greens, the frozen pitcher, the horoscope ensnared by unfavourable planets combinations, the almanac stamped with ominous dates—I kicked it all away to clear a path in front of us.

As soon as I stepped out of the door with Ded, I slipped. We kept rolling down the icy surface until we reached a place that we did not recognize. The cotton-soft snow would hold my feet on its chest and caress them gently, but this frozen-icy-snow could not bear us even for a second. It hurled us onto the ground with a thud and we skidded on its slippery surface, tumbling down countless mountain slopes, through gorges and crevices, until we reached a place where the sky above was on fire and the sand below blazed like an oven.

“Is there no one around?” Ded yelled again. But just like before, no one came to help us.

Ded heaved a sigh.

I sighed and tried to explain: “Who will come to help us here? In this endless desert we are like two grains of sand, almost non-existent. In the geometry of this universe you and I are just two dots... two points...”

“What is a point?” she asked.

“A point is a sign that does not have length, breadth or height but to identify it we call it *Alif Bey* or *A B* or *Ka Kha*. These names, too, only have meaning when they are seen in relation to a horizontal line and two more lines that define our coordinates. We have lost our relationship with these lines that gave meaning to existence. Our ribs did not break while we tumbled down the slopes, but we lost the grip on these lines that we held on to with our hands and feet like stilts—the stilts on which our existence was grounded”.

“So even here, there is no one we can call our own?” This is what Ded gleaned from my ramblings.

“No one, except this Sri, who is himself on fire up in the sky” I responded.

“What good will he do me? I would be grateful if he would just set.”

Sri heard Ded’s words. Perhaps it is only one who is himself burning who can understand the pain of others. Sri began to share his own helplessness. “Am I free to rise and put the skies on fire? Had it been so, I would also have had the freedom to set when vanish when it pleased me! Were it up to me, would I be hanging in the middle of the sky, burning others as well as myself?”

I couldn’t stomach this. So I said to Sri: “What are you saying? Can’t even you decide when to set”?

“What makes you think that I am the same Sri you were accustomed to?”

“What else are you?”

“I am *patang*. But not Baal-Patang Ram, the rising sun of Tusli Das, who destroyed the Rakshasas and ushered in Ram Rajya. I am the same *patang* that you call *gant-beyr* (kite) and which is *borne* on a fragile thread and handed over to the winds of time, so that they can take it where they please. But suddenly, the wind itself choked leaving me stranded in the middle of the sky.”

“Why doesn’t the one who sent you up there like a kite wind the thread back and pull you down and put you out of your misery?”

“Who knows which kite or cat<sup>1</sup> gobbled up the old man who dreamt of *Ram Rajya*? He made so many people spin threads on spinning-wheels. He had great faith in hand-spun thread which was actually fragile... This thread snapped and now I am stranded”.

“Was that old man *Sheen-Budd’e*?” Ded asked.

“No, *Sheen-Budde*’s hair and beard are white as snow. But the old man who left me stranded was bald and clean shaven.”

“God knows who that old man was... But what kind of a person relies on fragile threads?”

Sri turned to Ded and retorted, “Deddi, they say that in olden times there once was a Ded like you, in your home, who spun a thread finer than anyone else. She had such faith in this fragile thread that she used it to ferry her boat across the sea. Like Ded, my old man must have believed that his fragile thread was stronger than iron chains. He told people, ‘hold on fast to this thread. *If God* listens to your plea, he will take you across’. But people thought the old man was talking rubbish. They laughed so loudly my thread broke into bits and I was left stranded in the middle of nowhere... I smoulder but I don’t turn to ash. People burn, but they rage. They endure, they become accustomed to fire and the blazing sun. You rage because you were accustomed to snow and shade.”

Who knows if Ded understood all this? But I realized there are only two ways ahead of Adam: to endure or to rage... Those who endure are the ones who are accustomed and those who rage are the ones who are not accustomed. Ded will last only a few more moments. But I have to live a long life. So I have nothing to gain from rage. I must endure. So I must get accustomed—or who knows if in the past few days I may already have got accustomed.

---

<sup>1</sup> [a play on *gant- beyr* (kite-cat) in Kashmiri]