

TASADDUQ SOHAIL

Poor Dear Ta'ir-e Lahuti*

Aye ta'ir-e lāhūtī us rizq sē maut aččhī
Jis rizq sē ātī hō parvāz meñ kōtāhī

IN THE FOURTH GRADE—or was it the fifth?—when we studied this verse in class, the Masterji explained it thus: “Iqbal is telling the bird that death is preferable to a livelihood that results in the loss of freedom....” He spoke the truth, and the meaning was right on the button. I love animals, I love them a lot. I remember so well that even that day, long ago, I had wanted to ask Masterji what this bird called “Ta'ir-e Lahuti” was. However, since I'm terribly timid and circumspect in speaking, I held back. “I'll ask him tomorrow,” I told myself. Tomorrow, alas, never came, and half a dozen years rolled by during which I never managed to outgrow my nagging inquisitiveness. Now in the tenth grade, I had the same poem before me once again. The teacher explained it in the exact same way and, once again, I felt the urge to ask my question but shied away thinking that I'd make myself the laughing stock of the whole class, since, apparently, they already knew what a “Ta'ir-e Lahuti” was.

Later, I started writing short stories, and they were published in periodicals of good standing. To ask anyone about the bird now was simply out of the question, especially since now people themselves asked me to explain the meaning of this and that, and thought of me as someone who was a know-it-all. Subsequently, I moved to London. Here, due to a peculiar set of circumstances, I had to abandon writing fiction and became a painter instead. My connection with Urdu language and literature was snapped. I neither read nor wrote anything in Urdu. Thirty years later when I did pick up my pen and try to write, I discovered to my dismay that I'd entirely lost the ability to even compose a simple letter.

*“Tā'ir-e Lāhūtī,” in Taşadduq Sohail, *Tanbā'ī kā Safar* (Karachi: Fazli Sons, Ltd., 1997), 91–95.

The result of refraining from reading and writing was that my mind, my thoughts, and my pen ... well, they had all become corroded. I was only a painter now. The very people whose poems and short stories had once been the butt of my ridicule and derision had now become well-regarded poets and fiction writers in their own right. I would meet them in literary soirees. I had been all but forgotten and people would say, "Sohail, he once wrote short stories, a long time ago." The ones who heard that looked at me in wide-eyed astonishment, as if saying, "Oh!" The stinging irony of this "Oh!" never failed to jab me.

Thirty years later, when I returned to Pakistan, I found it had changed a lot. Now people didn't notice my lapses of Urdu. Taking advantage of this, I thought maybe it was about time for me to ask someone about the "Lahuti" bird—because during the passage of those thirty years the matter had continued to stick in my heart like a thorn, goading me in my solitude day and night to find out about that bird. A few days later, when I started frequenting Pak Tea House in Lahore, I became friends with Zahid Dar, a man of great learning. He liked my paintings and I his poetry and his personality. We became good friends. It pleased me to know him because somehow I believed that if anyone could tell me about "Ta'ir-e Lahuti," it was, without a doubt, Zahid Dar. Finding the right moment one day I told him that I wanted to ask him about something. "Well then," he said, "invite me for a cup of tea," and then he asked, "What about?"

"About poetry," I said.

"In that case, order some cake too."

After we ate our cake and had our tea, I looked around furtively, and finding the nearest tables empty, I whispered softly, "What is this thing called 'Ta'ir-e Lahuti'?"

For a moment Zahid Dar looked at me intently, as though he was having a hard time deciding whether I was joking or really asking in earnest. Finding me dead serious, he asked, "How old are you now?"

"Sixty-ish," I replied.

"And you didn't know about this Lahuti thing all this time?"

"No."

"So why bother now? Why not just live the few remaining years of your life without worrying your head over it?" He got up and left the Tea House.

Close by the Tea House in Anarkali there is a bird market. As I was passing through it, the thought occurred to me that I might ask these people. Perhaps they would know about the Lahuti bird. When the owner of one shop saw me standing in the midst of the bird and animal cages,

he asked, "*Ki cha'ida aye babuji?*" ("What would you like, Babuji?")

"Do you sell 'Ta'ir-e Lahuti,'" I asked.

"Shede," he called loudly, "*babar aa o'e! Dikh baoji ki mangdenin.*" ("Sheda, come out! See what Babuji wants.")

Sheda quickly came out and asked, "*Tara hoti?*" ("*Tara hoti?*")

"*O tara hoti dia ptrā ... andaron bulbulan da pinjra chuk laya, o kbudi lab liyange.*" ("You son of a *tara hoti* ... just bring the cage of nightingales, he'll pick one out himself.")

"No, not a nightingale," I said quickly, "I want a lahuti."

"*Obo!*" said Sheda. "*Labutiyan ... sade kol do sigyan, o savere vik gai'yan san. Kal prson tak hor aajan giyan.*" ("Right!" said Sheda. "Lahutis ... we did have two of them, but they were sold this morning. More will arrive tomorrow, maybe the day after.")

That revived my sagging spirits a bit. Jumping for joy I asked, "What kind of bird is this?"

"*Tote varga, aye jī*" ("Like a parrot"), Sheda replied. "*Zara tote nalon lamba ho'ega.*" ("A little bit taller than a parrot.")

This information raised my spirits further. I went into another lane where I came upon an old professional who was quite an expert on birds. Assuming that he was an educated man, I told him the whole story and he said, "Well, I myself have never seen this bird, nor have I sold it. Who knows, perhaps it was still around in Iqbal's time.... Consider this, no other poet has mentioned it since. It's entirely possible that Iqbal imported this bird from the West."

"In England, though, I never once saw it," I said.

"No," the old coot said. "You couldn't have. This is a French name 'La Huttie.' This 'le' and 'la' are found only in French."

His explanation made sense and I couldn't help but feel genuinely impressed by his sagacity. Why the hell didn't I think about it myself during all my years in Europe? I felt dismayed at my lack of astuteness. During our conversation that old bird-dealer raised a host of fresh questions, which drove me to a host of Lahore poets for answers. I asked them why it was that "Ta'ir-e Lahuti" never appeared in their poetry. And they answered that they didn't look kindly on the practice of using each other's birds in their poetry. Why should they get themselves into trouble after all? Why stir up animosity?

"But you fellows never tire of mentioning the bulbul in your poems," I countered.

"For a very simple reason," they said, "bulbuls are abundant and they're a favorite among the people. Then again, even if we had wanted

to use ‘Ta’ir-e Lahuti,’ we couldn’t have. Allama Iqbal had taken out a patent for this bird in his own name. After he had finished with it, he did, in fact, try to hand this bird over to other poets, but they refused to accept it. Iqbal was so ticked off by this refusal that he gave it to a woman from France who worked in the French Embassy here. Some years later, when she decided to return to France, she gifted the bird to her cook. Since a ‘Lahuti’ lives more or less as long as a parrot, say 100 or 125 years, it’s still in that cook’s family.”

The family of this cook fellow had probably already heard that I was willing to buy the bird at whatever price; they traced me to the Pak Tea House. I was overjoyed and told them to deliver the bird at my residence in Samnabad that very same evening.

I needed to see some friends that day. Thinking that these “desi” people never show up on time, I returned home about an hour and a half late. I found them already waiting outside the living room seated on a string-cot. And the minute I saw them I asked, “Where’s the bird?”

“We had it sent inside the house. Here, this cat tried to grab it again and again.” They pointed at the black cat lolling about nearby.

I literally tore into the house. I heard my sister mumbling something as she cooked in the kitchen. When she saw me she immediately let out a cry, “*Shukr hai aap aga’e ... aye ki laiyanda aye ... jebra savera da galan da nan i na’in lerabiya. Ha’e ha’e, toba, ay gosht aye keh chamra ...*” (“Thank God you came. Brother, what’s this they’ve brought ... I’ve been cooking it for hours but it just won’t get tender. For heaven’s sake! Is it meat or leather ...”)

“To cook?” I asked feeling terribly anxious. “You haven’t ...” In sheer terror, I let out a scream, and before I could say anything more my glance fell on a pile of plucked feathers.... “Ta’ir-e Lahuti” had by now become a dish of korma....

Tears began trickling from my eyes. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon