



Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind

by Suzanne Fisher Staples (288 pages)

Staples's first book is a beautiful portrayal of the life of a girl growing up among camel-dealing nomads in modern Pakistan. Life is both sweet and cruel to strong-willed young Shabanu, whose home is the windswept Cholistan Desert. The second daughter in a family with no sons, she's been allowed freedoms forbidden to most Muslim girls. But when a tragic encounter with a wealthy and powerful landowner ruins the marriage plans of her older sister, Shabanu is called upon to sacrifice everything she's dreamed of. Should she do what is necessary to uphold her family's honor—or listen to the stirrings of her own heart?

Guluband

Phulan and I step gingerly through the prickly gray camel thorn, each of us balancing a red clay pot half filled with water on our heads. It was all the water we could get from the *toba*, the basin that is our main water supply.

Our underground mud cisterns are infested with worms. We'll dig new ones when the monsoon rains come—if they come.

The winter sky is hazed with dust. There has been no rain in nearly two years, and the heat of the Cholistan Desert is as wicked as if it were summer.

Phulan walks with her eyes down, her feet shuffling, kicking up puffs of sand that is light as dust. Her name means "flower," and she is beautiful when she smiles.

I am Shabanu. Mama says it's the name of a princess, but my red wool shawl has worn so thin I can see through it. I pull it tighter around me and pretend it's a *shatoosh*. It's said that real princesses wear *shatoosh* shawls so fine they can pass through a lady's ring.

In the courtyard that circles our round, thatched huts, Mama and Auntie have made a fire, and a kettle keeps warm beside it for tea. Even when we are down to the last of our water we have tea. Grandfather leans against the courtyard wall, chin on his chest, his turban nodding in rhythm to his snores.

Mama sits with yards of yellow silk in her lap, stitching one of Phulan's wedding dresses. She has embroidered silver and gold threads, mirrors, and tassels into the bodice. You'd think Phulan was the princess!

Mama holds up the tunic and measures it against Phulan's shoulders and chest. She laughs, her teeth gleaming in the opal haze of the setting sun.

"If you don't grow breasts soon, this will look like an empty goatskin," she says, her strong brown fingers plucking at the extra silk in the curved bodice. She has made it big enough to fit Phulan when she's grown. Phulan is thirteen. She will marry our cousin Hamir this summer

during the monsoon rains. The monsoon, God willing, will bring food for our animals and fruit to the womb of Phulan.

"If God had blessed you with sons, we wouldn't have to break our fingers over wedding dresses," says Auntie as she sews the hem of the skirt. Her sons, ages three and five, play noisily nearby.

Mama ignores her and sets the silk aside, for Dadi will come soon from tending the camels, and he'll be hungry. She dips her tall, graceful frame through the doorway of our hut and comes out with a large wooden bowl. Squatting before the fire, she kneads water into wheat flour to make *chapatis*.

"I worry," Auntie goes on, her fingers flying over the yellow silk. "You'll spend your life's savings on two dowries and two weddings. Without a son, who will bring a dowry for you? And who will take care of you when you're old?"

Mama pulls at the dough and slaps it into disks. She whirls the flat bread onto the black pan over the fire.

"Mama and Dadi are happy," I say, sticking my chin out.

"What do you know?" Auntie asks, folding her pudgy arms over her bosom. "You're nothing but a twig."

"They laugh and sing. Aren't you happy, Mama?" Mama smiles, and her eyes are merry in the glow of the fire. Auntie almost never laughs.

"Don't worry, little one," says Mama. "You and Phulan are better than seven sons." Auntie purses her lips and picks up her sewing again.

Phulan covers her nose and mouth with her shawl, and her eyes tell me she is trying to keep from laughing. Auntie gives us a sour look and bends over her work.

Dadi and I bought the silk—yards and yards of red and turquoise and yellow the color of mustard blooms—on our way from the great fair at Sibi last year.

Dadi comes into the circle of the fire as the light is leaving the sky and the stars begin to peep out from their sapphire curtain. He is no taller than Mama, but his shoulders are broad and the *lungi* tied around his waist covers the thick muscles of his thighs and buttocks.

"How much water is there?" he asks, crossing his ankles and sitting beside the fire. He rubs his eyes. They are red, irritated by blowing sand. Most of the desert plants have died from lack of rain.

Phulan fetches Dadi's *hookah* and lights it with a stick from the fire. Dadi sucks on the snake-like mouthpiece, and the sweet smoke of brown sugar and tobacco bubbles through the water in the base of the long pipe.

Mama looks up at him from across the fire.

"We have two goatskins, one half full. One pot is empty."

Phulan's eyes are intent on Dadi. He has just come from the *toba*, where the camels gather each day to drink.

"What's left in the *toba* is not fit for the camels, let alone for us. We must pack tomorrow."

We are the people of the wind. When hot summer winds parch the land, we must move to desert settlements where the wells hold sweet water. When the monsoon winds bring

rain, we return to the dunes. But this year and last the monsoons failed, and we must go now to Dingarh, an ancient village where the wells are deep.

"You'll take me away, and I'll never come back to Cholistan," Phulan says softly, looking at her hands.

"Nay, nay," says Mama, leaving her *chappati* making to pull Phulan into her arms. "We'll settle at Dingarh before Dadi and Shabanu leave for Sibi next month." Mama rocks Phulan against her. Dadi says nothing. His face is tired from worry, and his black hair is disheveled under his turban.

I secretly count the hours until we leave for Sibi! It will be just Dadi and me and the camels. Phulan hasn't gone since her betrothal to Hamir. Our camels are always the finest at the fair, and Dadi is a good businessman. This year we'll sell fifteen to pay for Phulan's wedding.

The winter night is cold after the intense heat of the day, and Phulan and I huddle under the quilt for warmth. There is scarcely any space between the stars. I watch them as Phulan talks about having babies. No matter how I try, I can't imagine her a mother. But her monthly bleeding began, and Mama and Dadi quickly set her wedding date for the summer, after the fasting month of Ramadan.

"You'll have new clothes too," she says, hugging me close. I've worn the same tunic over the same skirt three years, since my eighth birthday. They used to be blue as the winter sky, with red flowers and ribbons. But now they have no color at all. The buttons are gone, the sleeves are up to my elbows, and the skirt is nearly at my knees.

"How I'll miss you next winter!" I say. "It will be so cold without you under the quilt." I regret the words the second they're out. Phulan's moods are fragile.

"I'd rather die than leave the desert," Phulan says, her whisper shaking in my ear.

"Of course you wouldn't," I scold. "You'll have babies of your own, and I'll be with you next year." I brush her tears away.

But I am frightened too. Next year I will be betrothed to Murad, who is Hamir's brother. The people among whom they have settled in the irrigated area call us *gypties* and accuse us of stealing their animals and food. Last year we went to Mehrabpur for Mama and Dadi to discuss the marriage with Hamir's mother. Our dog was poisoned. Someone stole a baby camel.

This year we will go to Mehrabpur for Phulan's wedding. Next year we will go back for my wedding to Murad, and each year thereafter when the *toba* is dry Mama and Dadi will go there to graze the animals and visit us. Mama says it's a good match, because Hamir and Murad have land. Dadi will give us each ten camels with our dowries.

"Don't worry," I say, smoothing Phulan's hair and kissing her tears. But both of us know that their ways are strange, and there are unimaginable things to cry about. Phulan cries herself to sleep.

I awake in the morning, shivering like a baby camel. The sky is gray with tumbling clouds. I crawl out from

under the quilt, and the rain begins with large splatters of water that send little puffs of dust up from the ground.

Dadi is outside the courtyard unloading the camels. He and Mama have been up before daylight packing wheat and milk, bedding, and our belongings onto the animals' backs. Mama dashes back and forth across the courtyard pulling saddles and blankets into the house again.

"Wake up, Shabanu!" she says, her voice bubbling. She and Dadi have prayed hard for rain, a rare blessing in winter. "Don't stand there like a stump! Can't you see it raining?"

"Phulan!" I shout. "We can stay!" She darts out of the house like a sparrow. We hug each other and dance up and down.

"Watch out, you'll knock over the milk pots!" says Mama, but she is laughing too.

We spend all day inside our round mud house, birds chirping in the snug thatched roof. Dadi brings us camel harnesses to mend, and Grandfather tells stories about his days as a great warrior in the Army Camel Corps of the Nawab of Bahawalpur. His thin, wrinkled face is animated, his eyes lively. Usually he is half-asleep, and we are happy to hear his voice, rough as the windblown sand, telling stories of defending the desert against the Rajput princes from India.

The rain makes us giddy with its bitter, fresh smell. We keep a fire going all day, boiling milk, making tea, and celebrating the rain, not minding the cold.

The rain beats down all morning, but we are safe and dry under the thatch. Sharp bluish smoke from the fire rises in a slow, twisting ribbon and escapes magically through the branches that keep the rain out. By afternoon it's raining so hard we can barely hear the thunder, and Dadi builds a doorsill of sticks to keep the water from pouring in.

Toward evening he announces he will go out to the *toba* to see how much rain has collected.

"Are you mad?" asks Mama. "There is no such thing as too much water! The *toba* will be there in the morning, and the fuller the better."

Dadi sighs and sits down again. But he is happy.

While Mama fixes *chapatis* and spiced lentils for our dinner, he sings a desert poem, his voice husky and clear like wood smoke.

Auntie says little, except to cluck at her boys who have grown restless indoors all day.

Auntie is married to Dadi's brother. Uncle lives in Rahimyar Khan, where he works in a government office. Uncle comes several times a year, bringing Auntie gifts—quilts, shawls, and brass pots. He brings us vegetables, wheat, and lentils. Auntie is lonely. She feels superior to us because of Uncle's salary and her two sons. But she does her share of the work and is kind to Mama.

It rains all night, and in the morning Phulan and I crawl out from under our quilt, teeth chattering. Mama hands us each a cup of milk tea.

The air is clear—I can smell the sweet absence of dust.

The sand sparkles like water, though the early morning breeze has dried it to powder again. Tiny purple flowers cover the ground, where two days ago there was nothing but camel thorn. The winter sky is blue-green above the lavender line that rims the horizon.

Across the courtyard Auntie comes out of her hut, tucking quilted jackets under the boys' round chins. She pulls them close to the fire.

"Did God give you rest?" she asks. Mama greets her back.

The sun spreads an orange wash across the swept mud floor, and mellow points of light glint from Mama's silver bracelets. I am impatient to take Gulband to the *toba* to see how much rain has collected. I take the goatskin and water pots to where he stands tethered to a wooden stake at the edge of the courtyard.

"Phulan, stop daydreaming and bring more milk," says Mama. Phulan opens the rough wooden door to a baked mud mound at the edge of the courtyard, where the camels' milk will keep cool through the day. She reaches inside and pulls out a round earthen pot. I rub Gulband's nose and slip a piece of brown sugar under his lip. He grunts softly as I take his reins.

"Ushshshsh," I say softly. "Uuuushshshshsh." He dips his great head, roaring a protest as he always does, perhaps to let the world know he is a camel. He folds his front legs under him and kneels, sinking quietly to the ground. I fling the goatskin over his shoulder and attach the earthen water pots to his wooden saddle. I climb up

behind his hump and twine my fingers into curls of rough brown hair to hold my seat while he lurches to his feet.

Guluband lifts his head and we survey the gray desert, rising and falling like the Arabian Sea beyond the dunes, with misty mounds of *pogh* and thorn trees floating for hundreds of miles around. I squint and look at the dunes on the horizon, which is inside India.

Sometimes our animals wander across the border, and when I go to fetch them I look hard to see how it differs from our Pakistan. But the same dunes roll on into India, and I can't tell for certain exactly where Pakistan ends and India begins.

Without a signal from me, Guluband turns toward the *toba*, his feet whispering in the powdery sand, his powerful legs unfolding and stretching in a loping rhythm as ancient as the desert. I think of leaving Cholistan, and my chest swells with a pain so deep it closes my throat and sends tears to my eyes.