

RIYAZ LATIF

Rashed and the Carnal Elegy

Kaunsi Uljhan kō Suljhātē Haiñ Ham?

Lab bayābān, bōsē bē-jān
Kaunsi uljhan kō suljhātē haiñ ham?
Jism kī yeh kārgāhēñ
Jin kā bezam āp ban jātē haiñ ham!

Nīm shab aur she'r-e khvāb-ālūda, ham sāyē
Keh jaisē duzd-e shab-gardān ko'ī!
Shām sē t'hē hasratōñ kē banda-e bē-dām ham
Pī rahē t'hē jāñ par har jāñ ham
Yeh samajh kar jur'a-e pinhāñ ko'ī
Shāyad ākhīr abtidā-e rāz ka imā banē!

Maṭlab āsāñ, ḥarf bē-ma'nā
Tabassum kē ḥisābī zāviyē
Matñ kē sab ḥāshiyē
Jin sē 'aish-e khām kē naqsh-e riyā bantē rahē
Aur ākhīr jism meñ bu'd-e sar-e mū bhī nah t'hā
Jab dilōñ kē darmiyāñ ḥā'il t'hē sañgīñ fāslē
Qurb-e cāshm-o-gōsh sē ham kaunsi uljhan kō
suljhātē rahē?

Kaunsi uljhan kō suljhātē haiñ ham
Shām kō jab apñi gham-gāhōñ sē duzdāna
nikāl ātē haiñ ham?
Zindagī kō tañgnā'e tāza-tar kī justojū
Yā zavāl-e 'umr kā dēv-e subuk-pā rūbarū
Yā anā kē dast-o-pā kō vus'atōñ kī ārzū
Kaunsi uljhan kō suljhātē haiñ ham?

—Nūn Mīm Rāshid¹

¹ *Irān meñ Ajnabī* (Lahore: Gōsha-e Adab, 1957), pp. 161–2. For the original in Urdu script, see the Urdu section of this issue.

Lips forlorn, kisses lifeless
 What do we seek to resolve?
 These work houses of Body,
 Whose fuel, we ourselves become!

Twilight and dreamlike parlance; shadowy
 countenances,
 Like a thief negotiating the night!
 Since evening, we, the unabashed slaves of
 desires,
 Draining goblet after goblet,
 Hoping that a covert sip
 Would serve as a sign to initiate the
 mystery!

Simplified explanations, incoherent words;
 Measured pathways to smiles
 All, margins of the text,
 Through whom superficial marks of unripe
 indulgences were brought forth;
 And there was not a hair's breadth between
 bodies
 When vast, frozen distances were stamped
 between hearts!
 Through the intimacy of eyes and ears,
 what did we seek to resolve?

[...]
 Life, in search of fresh pathways to annihi-
 lation!
 Or the silent-footed ghost of ebbing age,
 face to face!
 Or the appendages of ego lusting for
 expansion!

[...]

THINGS die. Cast into existence by an irrevocably silent creator, they are sucked into the temporal paradox of salvaging their essences from an inevitable, final dissolution.... And Nature, the accomplice, in its unsurpassed act, propels and propagates the illusion of this salvaging through the sensory devices of the ultimate, tangible reality that we possess—body! Body with its pleasures and pains, desires and enigmas. Body, which

beckons us to its splendor house for the express purpose of overcoming it; which seeks extreme pleasure and submerges into it, to finally ruminate over an intense culmination which unfailingly evades us.

And what must the poet, that suffering apostle of shifting sands, do when faced with demystifying and decoding the metaphysical sabotage of bodily gratification? Maintaining his balance over the precipice of sprawling versification below, must he release the ironies and paradoxes of his insights into the force-fields of others' experience? For bodily union is not just pleasure; it supersedes and transcends pleasure. It is the primal life-force, the cosmic instinct to "be" which summons the entire gamut of sensual devices, hormones, body fluids, and psyche to a repeated dramatic and seemingly ecstatic performance to resolve that highly ephemeral equation—existence!

Extracted from these crosscurrents, then, the recurring stance of the poem is presented to us. Noon Meem Rashid (Nūn Mīm Rāshid) inaugurates his exposition with a lyrical incision: "What do we seek to resolve?" It is the fundamental query of the carnal experience:

*Lab bayābān, bōsē bē-jān
Kaunsi ulj^han kō sulj^hātē haiñ ham?*

Lips forlorn, kisses lifeless
What do we seek to resolve?

This is the query that sets the premise for the whole poem. What do we seek to resolve with an interaction, which, while a supreme act, collapses into a sublimated morbidity! And the immanent conclusion, too, hovers over us in the realization that we are unwittingly consumed by our own bodies. This is the poet's preoccupation and in the opening lines he states it as a condensed exegesis of the whole poem:

*Jism kī yeh kārgāhēñ
Jin kā bezam āp ban jātē haiñ ham!*

These work houses of Body,
Whose fuel, we ourselves become!

Is it, then, that the act that consumes us as our own fuel is a gesture of profound futility? Unsure whether we succumb to its pleasure or its mystery, we dissipate ourselves in frequenting it. We become the receptacle to contain the alluring mirage.... And yet, what do we seek to resolve?

Let us recall: this is a lyrical incision, a poetic query. It presupposes an absence of any absolute answers. If it were not thus, the whole explo-

ration would be robbed of its lyrical veracity, for the poet-explorer, even when he directly partakes of the experience described in the poem, cannot afford to take stances; he cannot afford to voice his judgments. So as the poem progresses, we see Rashed as the “participant-observer” (to employ the much-used anthropological jargon). We see the meanderings, remorse, doubts, and predicaments, where subtle acrobatics are engineered to attain the final carnal favor! The whole preamble and approach to the sexual union is steeped in its own contemporary dialectic—a peripheral edifice, goal-oriented in its construction, comprised of cues, lures, and proddings subconsciously drawn from prevalent cultural patterns of behavior. Appreciate the covert environment hinted at in the following:

*Nīm shab aur she'r-e khvāb-ālūda, ham sāyē
Keh jaisē duzd-e shab-gardān ko'ī!*

Twilight and dreamlike parlance; shadowy
countenances,
Like a thief negotiating the night!

and the nearly predictable trajectory that Rashed traverses to create an aura conducive to the indulgence of the body. Gauge his anticipation—a vortex to which he subjugates himself, with the aid of external stimuli like consumption of wine, to gradually gather himself up into the arms of an illusory sexual bliss:

*Shām sē t^he hasratōn kē banda-e bē-dām ham
Pī rahē t^he jān par har jān ham
Yeh samaj^h kar jur'a-e pinhān ko'ī
Shāyad ākhir abtidā-e rāz ka imā banē!*

Since evening, we, the unabashed slaves of
desires,
Draining goblet after goblet,
Hoping that a covert sip
Would serve as a sign to initiate the
mystery!

In parallel, we see an intense pondering unleashed by the body to coax out an insight into the true nature of love. This is where poetic rumination suitably intervenes. The active participant in this adventure of sexual union and gratification also comes to the fore as an acute observer, striving to grasp and communicate the intangible, enigmatic paradoxes of

the sexual whirlpool that have absorbed him. Consequently, the poem gains expansion by unconsciously reverting back to the fundamental query: What do we seek to resolve?

Dare we then, slide away into the mythical landscapes where the jealous Zeus divides the powerful primordial being into “male” and “female” to curb its unabated power, with these divided parts striving ever since to achieve their earlier consummation through sexual union? Is this the secret of love’s power into which Aristophanes initiates his friends? What is the eventual mystery that is so elusive yet so elevating, so incomplete yet so persistent! Must we then, invoke Freud, who declares that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavorable to the realization of complete satisfaction? And what is that “something”? Who knows!

It is however to Rashed’s poetic credit, that he does not sabotage the intensity of his probing by attempting such detours. The mythical or psychoanalytical explanations of the enigma of bodily relationships must be bypassed in favor of confronting the sexual mirage on the most basic human level, in terms of its own attributes and tensions. For to embrace a life-force as arresting as sexual drive, one must bare one’s soul to its tempests without any explanatory shields. One must reside in its inherent confusions, where one is repeatedly dragged to the shores of a seeming meaninglessness. It is a realm where words relinquish their form. Strange subversions take over, and smiles are replete with a sub-substratum of unexposed intentions.... And Rashed, the suffering visionary, does struggle with these realizations:

Maṭlab āsān, ḥarf bē-ma’nā
Tabassum kē ḥisābī zāviyē

Simplified explanations, incoherent words;
 Measured pathways to smiles

Measured smiles, coaxing words; they lay bare the vast paradoxes of carnal gratification, as the exploration becomes more insistent. Is this incompleteness, this elusive quality, a feature of the sexual mystery, or has it crept into our being through the behavioral dilemmas of the contemporary world? We can barely grasp the immense poetic futility of this enterprise, where the whole process of coming together to seek love through inexplicable pleasure harbors within itself silent emotional distances and deceptive expanses. Is it then a moment, one may skeptically ponder, when Nature using its most coercive tactic, lures us into

perpetuating its own mysterious cycles? What is this attractive predicament when Rashed says:

Matn kē sab hāshiyē
Jin sē 'aish-e khām kē naqsh-e riyā bantē rahē
Aur ākhir jism meñ bu'd-e sar-e mū bhī nah thā
Jab dilōñ kē darmiyāñ hā'il thē sañgīñ fāṣlē

All, margins of the text,
 Through whom superficial marks of unripe
 indulgences were brought forth;
 And there was not a hair's breadth between
 bodies
 When vast, frozen distances were stamped
 between hearts!

All the pathos of love and our innate need to journey through the quicksands of flesh come across as an endeavor, abundant with incomplete, unripe resolutions. On the fundamental human level, we encounter a paradox wherein we are unwittingly brought face to face with the indifference or vagrancy of the heart, when there is not even a "hair's breadth" between bodies. Sexual intercourse creates only an illusion of dissipating the loneliness of the body. We thus find Rashed trying to enter a potent yet incomprehensible landscape which tries to emancipate and confine him at the same time. His lyrical approach, as well as his exposition, shimmers on the shores of unleashed sexuality and, in the same breath, seeks to go beyond it via lyrical insights into the same sexuality.

However, the way to these hazy insights is strangely carnal! It is a "consciousness of the beyond," which evolves through an intense involvement of all the sensory faculties of the body. In the most natural way, without any rational interference, eyes and ears and mouth and skin are geared up to an intimate pitch to partake of the carnal exploration. It is an in-built, primordial submergence of the senses. Without this submergence, the body would not be able to sustain the rapturous camouflage of its compulsive, biological involvement. Because when viewed with an unearthly detachment, sexual motion without the firsthand indulgence of all the sensuous ingredients would border on the ridiculous! For a passive onlooker, free from its swooning caress, the act would amount to a comic absurdity.

Thus Rashed, our participant-observer, does not fail to make this passing mention:

*Qurb-e ĉashm-o-gōsh sē ham kaunsi uljhan kō
suljhātē rahē?*

Through the intimacy of eyes and ears,
what did we seek to resolve?

But this is a never-ending game of loops. What do we seek to achieve through the meanderings of the flesh? We can revert back to this question repeatedly, armed with various conjectures. We can equip our conscious with an unsatisfactory biological exegesis, or simply that of human existence, and ponder as Rashed does:

*Zindagī kō taingnā'e tāza-tar kī justojū
Yā zavāl-e 'umr kā dēv-e subuk-pā rūbarū
Yā anā kē dast-o-pā kō vus'atōn kī ārzū*

Life, in search of fresh pathways to annihilation!
Or the silent-footed ghost of ebbing age,
face to face!
Or the appendages of ego lusting for
expansion!

Should we then consider love as the involvement of the subconscious with the ultimate non-existence and the rooted desire to grab the life-force through its most potent expression? From a different frame of reference, should we seek answers in the biological and genetic realms, where the rebellious, selfish seed of humanity must propagate? These are the appendages of “ego,” the innate desire to “be.” It is a force which, when it confronts the inevitable decay of age and things, reacts by the way of procreation. It aspires to perpetuate through subversive devices, for what can lure us to an experience so pleasurable intense that it nearly imparts to us the expanse of infinity, before our instant return to body’s forlornness? Orgasm is nothing but an eternity that has failed us. For Man, if not shielded by these sensual deceptions, would be too vulnerable to the unforgiving infinities to conduct life in a lucid forgetfulness.

And so the exploration of the dynamics of sexual illusion and the maze of love progress like bright sparks eaten away by the dark spaces. The central flame is still our original query regarding life: What are we and what do we seek?

Here we must admire Rashed’s great restraint, for the poem ends with the query still unresolved. No final answers. Spaces are left open. Skeptical inquiry reins supreme. The poet becoming distant, takes refuge

in the lyrical enigmas of desire which he has projected outwards and which, in turn, have engulfed him in a sad poetic embrace. Rashed's poem is nothing but an elegy to the body and its desires. It is the metaphysical futility of such intense mystery, it is the helplessness of not being able to know, that lends an elegiac aura to the expression. In the end, we still reside in the ambiguity: What do we seek to resolve? ... And this we may not know, for the answer perishes in its own multifaceted abundance! We can only salvage fragmentary insights, which are revealed to us through our pains and pleasures. Cast into existence by an irrevocably silent creator, we can only keep our probing alive. Because, after all, things die! □

(for Varis Alvi)