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A Famine of Verbs¹

URDU LITERATURE may be dead or dying, or whatever, but there are still thousands of people in this country who regard themselves as either writers or readers and thus have some connection with the literary world. We need not concern ourselves with the reason or nature of this connection. All we need to know is that this connection is not going to be severed in a hurry. To this extent, conditions may be regarded as favorable for literature. The fact is that for the so-called two “groups” in our literary world, literature has become something like the muskrat in the jaws of a serpent. They can’t swallow it, nor can they chuck it.² In fact, stagnation in literature means nothing more than a situation in which we ourselves are not sure of the attitude that we should adopt towards literature. Some of us just say that writers are fed up with the time worn subjects of literature and are at a loss to find new ones. But is it so important for the subject to be new? Flaubert, for one, wrote at least three novels which can be called unique masterpieces of their kind. Yet he always complained that he could never find the subject of his choice all his life. Joyce’s subjects had been determined in his first two books, and in his two great subsequent novels he just rehashed them over and over again. To complain of a lack of subjects is really to say that we should wait for reality to come and grab us by our ears and make us write, or that we should sit and twiddle our thumbs. For there is no other way we can write.

¹Written in 1953, “Qaḥṭ-e Afāl” was later published in the author’s collection of essays *Sitāra yā Bādbān* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Sāt Raṅg, 1963), 132–42. This and all subsequent footnotes have been added by the translator.

²Traditional belief has it that if a snake swallows a muskrat it will become blind, and if it spits the rat out, the snake will become leprous.

Then there are some who try to console us by saying that it's not every day that great writers are born. Just continue quietly with your work. One of these days a miracle will happen. Granted one doesn't find major writers on every street corner, but they also don't drop from the heavens. Major writers are born among minor people like you or me. The history of mankind may be another name for biographies of great people, but the literature of a language can never mean a list of its major writers alone. A major writer does not descend from on high like "the Promised One."³ A great writer achieves greatness only gradually and then too only while scores of minor writers are also carrying out scores of experiments in literature at the same time. And they are such as can be imbibed by him. A needle can evolve into a spear but the needle has to be there in the first place. However many minor writers there may be around the major writer, they all share some common trait with each other. They certainly share a common direction. What's most interesting is the fact that no major writer appears alone, in isolation. In fact, he brings with him a group of writers of similar, or just a little lower stature than himself. One can see figures like Marlowe, Ben Jonson, or Chapman around Shakespeare. These, as Eliot tells us, were no ordinary figures themselves. Take even the most mediocre among the contemporary dramatists of Shakespeare and you'll find that he shares with Shakespeare some basic traits or modes of fashioning character. Baudelaire brought about a revolution in European poetry. But was he the only one of his time traveling in the direction that he was?

One must not forget that Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* was published in the same year as Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In the field of painting, Delacroix was right there along with these two. The three may not be identical but they had all been influenced by the same kinds of novels, and in many ways the three were moving in the same direction in terms of both subject and technique. Besides these, we have Stendhal and Balzac twenty-five years before Flaubert and Baudelaire; they can be said to have heralded the coming of the two later writers.

Let's take an example from our own language, Urdu. Mīr may very well be our greatest poet, but are the writings of his contemporaries

³The Mahdī, or the Messiah, who is popularly called "the Promised One" or "the Awaited One" in the Islamic tradition. The Twelver Shī'a sect in Islam believes in the eschatological return of their occulted Twelfth Imām at the end of time to eradicate injustice and establish the true rule of God on earth.

totally different from his as far as language, expression and emotion are concerned? The second, and more important, question is, could Mīr have achieved such greatness if he hadn't had the benefit of his contemporaries? Again, just think about the role played by other poets in the changes in poetic language which are attributed to Nāsikh. However unique Ghālib may be, Mōmin and Shāfta also lived during his time. Everyone knows about the influence of Ghālib on his pupils, and most importantly on Ḥālī. But, as Firāq Gōrak^hpūrī says, no one bothers to inquire what the teacher learned from the pupil.

Now let's take an example from our own time. The short-story writers who came after 1936⁴ may have written good literature or bad literature, but their efforts were combined efforts. The literary famine prevailing today is also due to the fact that even if a handful of poets or short-story writers do want to say something new every now and then, they are unaware that there may also be others moving in the same direction who might be of some help to them. We still have writers, and we have writers who have at least some kind of creative ability, but the feeling of traveling together is lacking among them. I'm not suggesting that all writers should share the same political ideology, but writers belonging to the same age do share a common creative spirit or idiom which works unconsciously behind every single word written by them. Anyone can find himself a subject, or the subject may find him, but the search for words and rhythms is not just one man's cup of tea. It requires the thinking capabilities of a whole generation. Even the greatest of poets cannot impart new vitality to a language all alone. He needs at least a conscious, or even unconscious, sense of mental camaraderie with his fellow writers. Leave great literature aside, even ordinary literature is not manna which drops from the heavens.

Literature can be vibrantly alive only when not just the writers but also the readers have at least some interest in the problems of literary language and expression. This is because reading is a creative act too and in order to create literature both reader and writer have to use their respective creative energies. If we are still concerned about the life or death of our literature, we must learn to read before we start writing. And this is not a difficult task at all. Pick up a magazine or a book and choose a ran-

⁴The year in which the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) was established.

dom page as a sample. Make a list of the types of words used. The whole picture of literary stagnation will become clear.

For instance, let's take the question of the use of verbs in contemporary literature. But let me make it clear at the outset that I'm not trying to condemn anyone or anything that doesn't also include me. I'm quite convinced that I too can write well only when others are also writing well, or are writing something which can be called good prose. I feel suffocated when I read my own prose; and only then am I able to look at the shortcomings of Urdu prose in general. If I were satisfied with my own prose, why would I bother about others? It's entirely my self-interest that makes me wish that everyone would write well, so that I in turn might gain from their labors.

The problem of the use of verbs is also part of another basic problem. In many ways, our entire literature has been a victim of the ghazal. Perhaps we should thank the ghazal for not allowing a sense of architectonics to develop among Urdu poets and prose writers. Even the greatest of our non-ghazal poems do not achieve a clear symphonic form. Some of Iqbāl's poems, or Ḥālī's "Munājāt-e Bēva" ("The Widow's Lament and Prayer"), or Saudā's "Shahr Āshōb" ("Satire on the State of the Realm") may be said to have some feeling of it. But these should be regarded as exceptions.

Even the saint hits the dead or dying:⁵ the idea that the subject is the prime issue in literature came into vogue after 1936. Having had one experience, it doesn't take long for an experience to get transformed into literature. Despite having written a great deal of free verse, we failed to understand that experience comes into being by means of words. Even "means" is a misleading term here. In literature, it is the words themselves that are the experience. Whether it is a poem or a short story, merely describing the experience somehow by grunts and shouts won't get you anywhere. The subject or the experience should be present, not just in the whole poem or short story, but it should be there in every word and phrase. If the writer has an honest and creative investment in his experience, the only proof of this would lie in his making sure that his words are not mere corpses that serve to fill a hole, but are operative in the verb mode.

The true poet and the primitive man share one common mental trait: both see things as animate. The poet's mind is also animistic. Thus,

⁵This proverb means that the weak party is always the victim [gets the whip].

unless each and every word exudes life, poetry is not possible. Let us now understand the meaning of this word “life” before we proceed. Aristotle pronounced “action” to be more important than character for the tragedy. He also said that a man is recognized by his actions, not by his thoughts. We can in fact apply this not just to tragedy but to all poetry, and to a large extent to creative prose as well. The true poet’s words and phrases don’t just contain emotions and feelings. They also contain action. Here again, the language of primitive man can illustrate my point. Their brain made no distinction between the subject and the act. They regarded a thing only to the extent that it contained some action within it. Thus many of their words were actually whole sentences in which the subject and the action have merged into one. This characteristic is still retained in many ancient languages. For instance, the word *ravam* means “I go” in Persian. Let’s go a step further. Psychologist Wilhelm Reich’s theory is precisely this: language exemplifies basically the internal acts of the organism. Since the poet has an awareness of the most basic elements of human existence, his words will always exhibit an internal action. Listen now to a literary person on this subject. Fenollosa says that a poet’s greatness can be determined by the fact that the verbs used by him contain action within them, for such verbs make us conscious of the great powers of nature. Shakespeare’s famous, or rather notorious, lines come to mind: “Daffodils / That come before the swallow dares, and take / The winds of March with beauty.”⁶ In fact, Fenollosa has even said, use the word “is” and poetry disappears. And in reality, excessive use of this word is a sign of the entire nation’s biological decline.

To what extent these ideas are true and how closely the world’s great literature does conform to them cannot be the issue under discussion here. Presuming for the moment that they are true, take a look at our own language and literature. In the first place, I have doubts about the creative literary abilities of peoples living on the plains, for they live far away from the intense manifestations of the power of nature. Every great literature of the world was produced near the seacoasts or in the shadow of the hills. If nothing else, let there be at least a desert. We Urdu writers are deprived of these benefits. However, if we cannot go delve into the depths of nature, we can at least acquire the ability to describe human existence. Even a cursory look at Urdu literature will show you how far our language has declined in vigor and vitality through successive stages

⁶*The Winter’s Tale* IV.4.135–7.

in its history. Mīr has many verbs which describe the different actions of the human body, not like Shakespeare to be sure, but still, he has quite a few. You will find these only occasionally in Ghālib. Ghālib has always tried not to use any verb other than “to be.” Actually Ghālib’s ruination was because of his fear of being deceived by existence.⁷ Philosophically speaking, existence may be an illusion, or whatever, but the poet cannot become a true poet without being deceived by it. Ultimately, Ghālib too had to resign himself to the idea that nothing can be said without talking of the cup and the wine.⁸ Poetry cannot achieve greatness without the experience of pure existence, and also without a full consciousness of being. Once it loses the sense of being, literature is reduced to a mere paper flower. After Ghālib, and during the time of Ghālib idolizing, our literature fell on truly bad times. Writers like Niyāz Fatehpūrī and his contemporaries tried to write prose which had few verbs but a whole slew of adjectives with each noun. And when the sense of action dried up, these people lost the sense of things too. By separating the object from its quality (adjective) they made both their language and diction quite hollow. As a result, their prose gives the impression of layer upon layer of bricks piled one on top of the other without mortar. A little push, and the whole pile topples over. This was a period of extreme weakness for Urdu prose.

After the year 1936, efforts were made to present mere lists of objects or nouns in the name of literature. The literature of that time does have verbs which are not restricted to just “being,” but rather also signify action of some sort or other as well. But this action is mechanical, not organic, so the possibility of joining human actions with the power of nature still does not arise. In truth, this literature represents that kind of repressed human being who is incapable of seeing anything other than himself. But anyway, let’s grant that a mechanical sort of action could be discerned in our literature. Nevertheless, even that has started dwindling over the last three or four years. Now our prose and, especially, poetry are

⁷This is a reference to Ghālib’s famous *she’r*: “*Hastī kē mat farēb mēñ ājā’iō Asad / ‘Ālam tamām ḥalqa-e dām-e kheyāl hai*” (“Don’t be deceived, Oh Asad, by existence / All the world is naught but a link / Of the snare of thought”).

⁸This is a reference to Ghālib’s famous *she’r*: “*Harčand hō mushāhida-e ḥaqq kī guftgō / Bantī nahīñ hai sāghar-o-mīnā kabē baghair*” (“However much one may discourse / On observing Truth / But there can be nothing to say / Without talk of wine, and wineglass”).

dominated by that one verb “to be.” And this reflects the attitude of all of us towards life. We have lost touch with action that is in tune with the diversity of nature’s powers. All that remains is a dim consciousness of our own existence. Let’s see how long even that will last. We describe this situation as literary stagnation and feel content, although the matter is not as simple as that.

Well, let’s look now at the literature being published today. One disintegrative element was there already when Urdu was constructed.⁹ Persian speakers are responsible for the undesirable invention of adding “būdan” (“to be”) and “kardan” (“to do”) to Arabic words and making verbs out of them. On top of that, the Urdu speakers imitated this style and started adding “karnā” (“to do”) and “hōnā” (“to be”) to Persian words and fashioning verbs in abundance, kicking out adequate and rather useful indigenous words to make room for the neologisms. This practice became even more rampant in the times of Ghālib and Nāsikh. Very few verbs have entered the Urdu language since their time. But what is most incredible today is that we seem to have forgotten verbs entirely. My estimate is that these days the newspapers or magazines don’t use more than fifty verbs. It’s said that the dictionary of the Urdu language contains fifty-six thousand words.¹⁰ In that case there must be at least a minimum of a thousand verbs among them. Even if we are using only a hundred out of those thousand verbs, just imagine the number of things we could say using those hundred. What else will our literature become if not impotent? But the interesting part of it all is that some of those people who do not have command over more than fifty verbs imagine that our literature can be placed side by side with the best literatures of the world. And things have come to such a pretty pass that apart from “to do” (“karnā”) and “to be” (“hōnā”) it is difficult to find a third verb in our writings.

It is freely granted that there must be social, political or psychological reasons for literary stagnation, yet the fact remains that the first thing that a writer or reader encounters is language. Let’s first take a careful look at

⁹This is an echo of a famous line of Ghālib: “*Merī ta’mīr mēñ muḡmar hai ek ṣūrat kharābī kī*” (“A form of ruination lurks behind my construction”).

¹⁰This is a reference to the dictionary *Farhaṅ-e Aṣīfīya* (c. 1908–17) compiled by Maulvī Saiyad Aḥmad Dehlavī, who stated in his foreword that according to his count Urdu had 56,000 words.

words. Even if we were to remove all the other obstacles, so long as our command over words remains what it is, can we ever hope to create literature? Even if a person with the greatest literary talent were to be born among us in these circumstances, what lands would he be able to subdue? Our foremost task is to conquer words, and this task can only be accomplished by an army, not an individual. Literature is not created by writers alone, readers also take part in its creation. The stagnation in our literature can be removed today, provided we are prepared for these small tasks. These do not, indeed, require any fanfare, but the life of literature is ensured only by performing these humble tasks. It now remains to be seen whether we want to keep literature alive or not. □

—*Translated by Baran Rehman*