

MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

A Poem by Rashid: An Analysis*

THE MANIFEST CONTENT of the poem “Samandar kī Tah Mēñ” (In the Depth of the Ocean) is quite without depth. Being without depth does not always mean that the discourse is familiar, hackneyed and obvious, nor is it intended to imply that what is manifest should be accepted as reality. On the contrary, being without depth is the name for the satisfaction one gains by saying and hearing profound things. Such a depthless state is attractive as well as imperceptible. This happens when symbolic thought completely overtakes the mind. Then all complexities are swept away and all criticism is unnecessary because the writer can snuff out the beacon of symbolism or kindle it whenever he wishes. Everything is and is not a symbol; the time of the critic is expended in simply passing this judgment and the poem lies in front of us as it was, unengaged. There are two major (undesirable) traits of symbolist creations: fitfulness (*jast*) and ambiguity (*ibhām*). As a result of the first, the act of creation is quick and the reflections of the critic, slow. As a result of the latter, absolutely no reflective analysis can hope to be satisfactory.

Nūn Mīm Rāshid’s poem is, in fact, not without depth; on the contrary, it offers an opportunity to ruminate over the phenomenon of depthlessness.

At the very outset there is a reckoning with depth because the title, “In the Depth of the Ocean,” as an emblem of peril becomes a veil for the entire poem. “Depth of the ocean” is a familiar usage for the symbol of depth. “Tiny casket inside the chest” adds the motif of “mystery” to the spatial “depth.” “Dawns,” “doors,” “radiance,” “hands,” “nights,” “all around,” “water,” “voices” are all entirely symbolic, partially symbolic or pseudo-symbolic words that are not new in any way. All these words will

* “Rāshid kī Ēk Naẓm: Ēk Tajziya” in *Nūn Mīm Rāshid: Ēk Muṭāli‘a*, ed. Jamil Jālibī (Karachi: Maktabā Uslūb, 1986), 203–10.

define imagery. “Dawns of meaning,” “nights of words,” “doors of tidings,” “resolute vigils,” “diver-magicians” are all abstract metaphors whose reciprocal logic is exceedingly old. “Dawn and night,” “door and vigil” are predicated on the opposition that, in its own way, is as ancient as the pyramids of Egypt and Cleopatra’s tale. Only “diver-magicians” is a new metaphor, but unnecessary in the poem, which should have ended right at “often I think.” In any case, at what point the poem ought to have ended is irrevocably beyond our control, for symbolist poetry is a river that does not empty into any ocean.

Apart from metaphor and imagery, the poem rests on two other elements. It maintains its own mythology. Words such as “deity” and “nymph” certainly create a mythical atmosphere, but they are not strictly mythical in nature here, they are simile-oriented. (“Nights of words” are akin to the “slithery deities of water” and “the nymphs of meaning’s chaste dawns” ...) But Rāshid seems to be aware of the fact that, in reality, the ocean is the mother of all these images and forces. Dawn and night, deity and nymph, all have emerged from the ocean’s depth. From this perspective, the mythical foundation is both accurate and evident. But this foundation benefits the poem’s mystery only emotionally, not semantically. Beyond the mythical element there is also an event in the poem: the fall, theft, or slippage of the “chest.” This event demands its own history—when did it fall? (“before ever,” “even years and years before ever”). In fact, it is this fragment of the poem which is the most important and the most mysterious. Apparently this mysterious event elevates the poem from a mere symbolic plane to the status of myth. It is only when symbols are channeled through some event that they become mythical, thereby eliminating the distinction between poetry and magic. Rāshid’s subconscious does not appear to bespeak any such distinction, and the word “magicians” at the end of the poem betrays this dissolution. The question is: which way is the poet headed: toward conscious meaningfulness or toward subconscious insight? The imagery of the poem elevates the conscious plane, gives it depth and through it, gestures toward the subconscious. To accept “tiny casket inside the chest” as a subconscious symbol is a consequence of careless reflection. “Chest,” “tiny,” “ocean”: all are conscious, reflective actions. Only the event in the poem, which we call the “mythical element,” manages to remove the screen from the subconscious. The phrase “in which,” in fact, is the knife that severs the conscious from the subconscious. Only the symbol of time belongs neither to the conscious nor to the subconscious. The poet is able to find some release from the dense obscurities of this symbol and the weight of those obscurities. In response to “when,” the phrases “before ever, even years

and years before ever” clearly indicate that this is not an answer at all. Nor can these words be taken to imply that the event of the fall of the chest, its being stolen, or its slippage, operates outside of time, for no myth is independent of time. On the contrary, it bestows a new density upon time. It is worth pondering that Rāshid himself merely alludes to the fall of the chest, and ends the poem with a metaphoric rather than a mythical charge. The fact is that metaphor and symbol are primal necessities of transmission, whereas myth is a means of self-realization only for the poet.

Despite all this discussion it is still not clear what the poem is trying to say. If someone sees in the poem a reflection of the eternal dialectics between meaning and word, he should be absolutely clear about one thing: the poem is entirely nonpartisan in this respect. It is not discernible whether the poet is the custodian of the nights of words or the dawns of meaning, but this much is clear: the substance of the poem is these very same “nights.” □

—Translated by Riyaz Latif

Appendix

IN THE DEPTH OF THE OCEAN¹

in the depth of the ocean
 in the relentless depth of the ocean
 a chest—
 a tiny casket—
 a tiny casket inside a tiny casket inside the chest,
 in which, so many dawns of meaning—
 those dawns on which the doors of tidings shut
 clasped in its own radiance
 how hushed!
 (how did this chest fall?
 who knows; who might have stolen it?
 did it slip from our own hands?)

¹“Samandar kī Tah Mēñ” in *Kulliyāt-e Rāshid* (Delhi: Kitābī Duniyā, 2001), 450–52.

slipped and fell?
into the depth of the ocean—but when?
before ever
even years and years before ever?)
and still, around the chest,
vigil of the nights of words
—those nights of words,
like deities,
like slithery deities of water!
these nights of words
do not inhabit the depth of the ocean
but for the sake of their resolute vigils
they crawl there
day and night
crawl all around the chest
in the depth of the ocean!
often I think,
will these nymphs of meaning's chaste dawns,
in hope of liberty,
someday,
hear the voices of
their diver-magicians?

—*Translated by Riyaz Latif*