

MIRAJI

## Two Poems by Rashid: An Analytical Reading\*

### Suicide<sup>1</sup>

IN CLASSICAL URDU POETRY depiction of character was confined to the *mašnavī*, *maršiyā*, and *haju*. The stock characters of the ghazal—such as the forlorn lover, the torment-inducing beloved, the crafty rival, the hypocrite preacher, or the devotee with his nocturnal vigils—did not provide a vibrant reflection of life.<sup>2</sup> These characters were restricted by narrow and arcane tendencies and conducted themselves in a predictable manner in a given situation, as if they were machines, or rather, railway engines that could only run on the tracks laid down by the poetry bureau. It was not within their power to act independently and tread a new path. But with the advent of New Poetry, poets were freed from the monochromatic form of the ghazal and began to drift away from its stranglehold. This allowed their inherent individuality to burst into a riot of fresh colors and infused their poetry with newer possibilities for the expression of personality and character. Today the composition of younger poets displays their own distinctiveness along with the additions they have made to the traditional inventory of poetic *dramatis personae* based on their own reading and study. Consider Rāshid's poem from this per-

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\*“Rāshid kī Tīn Naẓmēñ: Tajziyātī Muṭāli‘a” (Three Poems by Rāshid: An Analytical Reading) in *Nūn Mīm Rāshid: Ēk Muṭāli‘a*, ed. Jamīl Jālibī (Karachi: Maktaba Uslūb, 1986), 203–10. Since I provide translations for only two of the three analyses, I have taken the liberty to change the title. —*Translator*

<sup>1</sup>“Khudkushī,” from the poet's *Kulliyāt e-Rāshid* (Delhi: Kitābī Dunyā, 2001), 111–12. A translation of the poem is given in the appendix at the end.

<sup>2</sup>It is nearly impossible to recreate the rhythmic cadence of Mīrājī's Urdu in translation. In his prose, the attributes of the various characters that populate the ghazal are listed thus: ‘āshiq-e zār, maḥbūb-e jafākār, raqīb e-nāhanjār, vā‘iz-e riyākār yā zāhid-e shab zindā-dār (see “Rāshid kī Tīn,” p. 203).

spective.

Rāshid's poetry often projects the image of a faltering and exhausted human being, perhaps a little too overwhelmed by the civilizational and cultural conflicts raging in his mind, unable to enjoy anything to the fullest, fidgety, jumping from one point to another and then to a third. The protagonist in "Suicide" is just such a person. The poem projects the thoughts of a man caught up in the relentless monotony of his quotidian life. Every single day he leaves his office or shop or lays down his plow imagining that the next day will somehow lessen the oppressive monotony. But the next day it is the same routine: the same pile of files; the same transactions and customers, the same weights and measures; the same plow and the business of farming. Finally, he is able to spot fresh blood shimmering under the feet of the coquettish beloved that life is. Realizing suddenly that joys are inevitably mixed with sorrows, he resolves, for the last time, to throw himself off the summit of his joys and hopes so that the greatest veil of life will be lifted from him forever.

This is the general character of this poem's protagonist, but from the perspective of identity, who is this protagonist? Is he a farmer? A money-lender? Or just an office clerk? Only a few lines in the poem reveal that he is a clerk: "Before evening / licking the wall with the tip of my tongue, / I used to reduce it" but "By morning, / it would rise tall once more." There is always a pile of files in front of him as he sits behind his desk at the office. He spends his entire day moistening his fingers to flip the pages and make changes in what is on them. Until evening he tries desperately to reduce the heap. Then, detached from everything, a machine, he regains some sense of himself while returning home, but only indirectly. The subdued, melancholic darkness he sees engulfing the passersby is really nothing more than a reflection of his own self—a self condemned to returning to the office the next day to see the formidable wall of files stacked high on his desk all over again.

But this was his routine in the past. Today, he has made a resolution. Today, he senses that beneath the dream-like seat of the coquettish and trifling beloved (life, clerical life) he has been courting for so long he can see fresh, radiant blood. It is time for him to free himself from that life. Hence, his final resolution.

Reflect on the metaphors of this poem too: the wall, it is clear, represents the mound of files. But what does the "seventh floor" in "I will leap from the seventh floor" connote? Does this refer to the seventh floor of the office building where the clerk works? A suspicion arises that these floors have nothing to do with a building but are perhaps stages the clerk has had to go through in the course of his employment. "My final resolu-

tion is that / I will leap even from the seventh floor today!" Here the word "even" gives a clue about his doubt, viz., that even having reached this point, even at the cost of seven years of hard work and worldly progress the poet, or clerk, decides to carry out his final resolution. In his case suicide is merely the act of resigning from his job. Why, then, the title "Suicide"? Well, resigning one's job is tantamount to a certain kind of suicide, economic suicide.

One more thing: "fresh, radiant blood"—whose blood is it? Of the beloved that is life? Or of the clerk? In fact, it is the blood of every newly ensnared clerk and is therefore fresh and radiant. Finally, the poet assumes that if he leaps from the seventh floor and severs his relationship with the beloved, this will somehow cause the formidable wall of files to "hug the ground," thereby terminating the state of clerk-hood. But whose state of clerk-hood? What will end is not the clerk-hood of the poem's protagonist, but rather clerk-hood *per se*, because not only the clerk of this poem, but all the clerks of the world have seen through the beloved's deception of coquettishly mixing the odor of the fresh, radiant blood of her every new victim into the chimera she creates of the aroma of wine, turning a normal human being into an inert machine by enticing him with dreams of well-being and luxury. It is as if this poem protests against the system of clerk-hood, and the poet's artistic ingenuity has integrated an external narrative with a mode which is internal and personal.

### Dance<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere I have mentioned that Rāshid's mode of thinking is Western. Perhaps for that very reason, the feel of his poems is generally Western too. Consider the "dance hall" in this poem, for instance—it is purely a thing of the West, although Indians in cities such as Bombay and Calcutta are now beginning to patronize such establishments and there should not be much that is alien in this poem for knowledgeable people and cinema-goers. Rāshid's poetry often projects the image of a faltering and exhausted human being, perhaps a little too overwhelmed by the civilizational and cultural conflicts raging in his mind, unable to enjoy anything to the fullest, fidgety, jumping from one point to another and then to a third. In this poem too, having become fed up with life's immensity and hauteur, his sense of camaraderie takes him to the dance hall where he

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<sup>3</sup>"Raḡṣ," from the poet's *Kulliyāt e-Rāshid* (Delhi: Kitābī Dunyā, 2001), 100–102. A translation of the poem is given in the appendix at the end.

imagines that the swirling motions of the dance are offering up his sorrows to an indistinct millstone. No, in fact, as he spins in the dance, he feels he is trampling on his sorrows. But he is still apprehensive that life—from which he has sought refuge on the dance floor—might still find him hiding there. “Oh, dance-partner, hold me”—the insistent repetition of this line itself reveals the extent to which the premonition of life tracking him down distresses him. It is as if his expectations from his dance-partner remain unfulfilled; he wants to lose himself in her, but for him this sanctuary is not sufficient. Perhaps he is still unaware of the fact that, on occasion, such an action might well lead to the creation of “life.” But we should not think such a thought for his dance-partner is a stranger to him, which quashes any prospect of meeting her ever again. His amorous attachment, however, is only temporary, merely therapy. And lest the unusual ardor of his dancing prompt his attractive and unknown partner to entertain suspicions of any kind, he hastens to tell her unequivocally that all he sees in her is a resemblance, that his fervor is nothing like the brutishness of primitive man. His desires have already lost their primal intensity from continually lowering his head in submission at the altar of culture. To suspect any danger from him is an error. The most he can do while dancing is embrace a body, he cannot assault and ravage life. Here, life can be either what is outside the dance-hall, the life that has weighed heavily upon him and which he has abandoned by stepping into this hall, or the life which he sees around him, right beside him inside the hall.

The artistic merits of free verse are also revealed in this part of the poem. The flowing motion of dance is perceptible from the meter itself. Its primary unit is *fā-ī-lā-tun*. There is a flow in the staccato rhythm of the unit *fā<sup>ī</sup>lātun fā<sup>ī</sup>lātun fā<sup>ī</sup>lātun fā<sup>ī</sup>lā*, which completes all the metrical cycles, while the micro-unit *tun* arrests the flow and takes it to the subsequent half-circle of the cycle. When the entire unit advances successively two or three or four times, the force of its flow intensifies, and finally the small unit of *fā<sup>ī</sup>lun* or *fā<sup>ī</sup>lāt* works as an agent to impede the flow.

In the first half of the poem, the poet is not yet completely absorbed in the dance. Thus, there is an intermittent scattering of short lines among longer ones, which weakens the flow of the dance to some extent, as if someone is halting now and then to catch his breath while running. But in the second half, the lines are consistently long and remain that way a while. The poet is now fully absorbed in the flow of the dance, in its circular motions and in the shifts that occur when the couple changes positions in the dance steps. Only toward the end, when the poet probably realizes he has bared his soul enough, a few a short lines appear.

In keeping with the dance flow required to reflect the mental state of the poem's protagonist, the choice of *fā'ilātun* as the poem's basic metric unit is most appropriate. Other metric units—such as *mafā'ilun*, *fa'ūlun*, *fi'lun*, *muftā'ilun*, *fā'ilun*—could not have produced the same flow, the circular motion, or the staccato rhythms.

At one point the poet mentions that this dance makes him feel as if some indistinct millstone is going round and round while he continually tramples his sorrows beneath his own feet. The staccato gyrations of the basic unit [*fā'ilātun*] seem to capture well the revolving motion of a millstone. □

—Translated by Riyaz Latif

## Appendix

### SUICIDE

I have made a final resolution today—  
 Before evening,  
 licking the wall with the tip of my tongue,  
 I used to reduce it.  
 By morning,  
 it would rise tall once more;  
 at night when I turned my face toward home  
 I would see darkness upturned,  
 irate, embracing the lanes, forlorn,  
 I used to reach home  
 fed up with Men!  
 My final resolution is that  
 I will leap even from the seventh floor today!  
 Today I have found life unveiled—  
 For a long time I frequented  
 a coquettish and trifling beloved—  
 Beneath her seat of dreams, but  
 today I have seen blood,  
 fresh, radiant blood;  
 odor of blood knotted with aroma of wine!  
 She has not yet returned to the abode of dreams

and I have already made my final resolution!  
 I feel compelled to make a fearless leap  
 from this window  
 that looks onto the elevated lanes from the seventh  
 floor—  
 Before evening,  
 licking the wall with the tip of my tongue,  
 I used to reduce it.  
 By morning,  
 it would rise tall once more;  
 finally today,  
 it will hug the ground!

## DANCE

Oh, dance-partner, hold me—  
 fleeing life, I have come;  
 am shaken with fear lest it happen,  
 that life, sneaking in the back door of this dance-hall,  
 find me, pick up my scent  
 and see me indulgent in the crime of abundance!

Oh, dance-partner, hold me—  
 these swirling motions  
 in the rotation of an indistinct millstone  
 with what verve I keep trampling sorrows!  
 to myself I say, yes,  
 not a pebble of distress must remain  
 prior to life's peek into the dance-hall!

Oh, dance-partner, hold me—  
 life, for me,  
 is nothing less than a gory beast!  
 Oh, attractive unknown woman, due to *this* fear  
 I slide close to you each moment  
 I know you are not my companion  
 there is no prospect of meeting you ever again  
 you, however, are the counterpart of those desires  
 that have eluded me until now!

Oh, dance-partner, hold me—  
I am not a man of archaic epoch.  
By supplication, the desires of these doors and walls  
have turned dull, drab, and frail  
I can engulf your body  
but I cannot pounce on life!  
Therefore, hold me  
Oh, attractive unknown woman, now hold me!

—*Translated by Riyaz Latif*