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Nun Mim Rashid: Poetry of the Formative Period*

I DID NOT FEEL the necessity to inquire about the year of his birth. It is true, the birth of a poet is more momentous than several emperors and their births. But merely to be informed about the date of birth does not seem too important. The veneration of letters and numbers is the occupation of those who believe in abracadabra. In any case, Rāshid is still young, was educated at Government College, and has an M.A. in economics. After graduating from the college, he dabbled in journalism for a while, serving as the editor of *Rāwī*, *Shāhkār* and *Nakhlīstān*. These days, he is in solitary confinement in the Multan Commissioner Bahādur's office.

A poetic symposium was held at Government College under the auspices of *Bazm-e Sukhan*, probably in 1929. I had only recently been admitted to the College and this was the first time that I was participating in a big mushaira as a poet. My consternation at the prospect of reciting my own poetry had consumed me to such an extent that my senses were not tuned to pay attention to anyone else's verse. Countless faces in the audience gave the impression of bobbing up and down on the surface of water, and it felt as if the poets coming to the stage one after another were harking back to their bygone days! Rāshid Sahib came to the stage. I had heard his name before but had never met him in person. The boyish simplicity of his face was at odds with the majestic grandeur of his turban, and the endearing freshness of his verse negated the sermonizing tenor of his delivery. I discerned novelty in his couplets and began listening to them much more attentively. Probably: A vow binds me, my love, that I am yours.

In those days Akhtar Shīrānī was extremely popular among the young

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people and in Rāshid's early poetry it is *his* influence that is most visible. But Rāshid did not accept the genuine but ubiquitous themes of love and romance blindly. Soon traces of a searching, a disquiet and discontent began to appear in his supplications, desires and grievances—best represented in the poems of his middle period, such as “God Only Knows Why Our Unfamiliarity Does Not Go Away” or “It is My Wish That I Not Express to Her My Heart's Sorrows.” With time, this element of exploration and contemplation became greater and Rāshid began to weigh romantic and emotional experiences against intellect and rationality. This is the final and most significant phase of Rāshid's poetry. His themes betray interiority, but conversely, they also have a special type of eventfulness and exteriority to them. He has not only perceived but also analyzed his perceptions, and these perceptions are not confined merely to love and romance. Love and romance are the first important issues of a young man's intellectual life. However, as his reflection and imagination become more sophisticated, increasingly significant and basic concerns become attached to the backdrop of sexual love. Good and evil, reality and chimera, the individual and society, along with a host of similar conflicts become locked in battle with romantic concerns and it becomes impossible for a sensitive disposition to ignore them entirely. Even in unadulterated sexual love, many dark and unfamiliar corners not consciously there in the primary stages of desire come to the fore. Like our other complacent, comfort-loving poets, if Rāshid had wanted, he too could have turned his face away from these tortuous anxieties and gone on swearing by the unfaithfulness of his faithful beloved. But he did not opt for this easy path and attempted to elaborate the minutiae of the mental conflicts of our contemporary youth. Perhaps this is why greater integrity, expansiveness, range, and depth can be found in his poetry than in that of the general run of conventional romantic poets. Here it may be stressed that he does not link these inner personal conflicts to the external environment. In his poetry, the presence of those blind and unconscious forces that have seized our thoughts and emotions is not perceived. Collectively, these forces are called the external environment, and our problems are not likely to be resolved before suitable transformations take place in this environment. The problems of life are not mathematical questions that can be solved merely by using the power of the intellect and thought. Their resolution requires a revamping of our political and economic circumstances. If Rāshid has not commented on these circumstances, he may be excused: the bulk of his poetry was written during his student days or shortly thereafter. And during that period nearly all the young people of the middle-class lived a sheltered life, both in body and

mind. The unpleasant effects of the external world follow only when Man starts seeking a place for himself in the economic milieu and realizes, after much struggle, that there is no place for him. A few are able to maintain their balance after this harrowing shock and continue their struggle, most, though, give in to hopelessness and dejection. Rāshid's new poem "Destitute Poet" is an elegy about one such youth:

life for you, a bed of fur and wool
 and for me, beggary of the foreigner;
 thanks to ease-loving forebears
 ruined, in anxieties of livelihood!
 we are indigent for a morsel of bread
 I, my friends, and millions of my countrymen, that is,
 flowers in the gardens of the European
 you did not expect a destitute poet
 the day your fate was bound to mine
 you believed, someday, my penetrating mind,
 my knowledge and skills
 would bring pearls from oceans for your adornment—
 when my dark fate blocks my path
 why would your supplications not go unanswered
 your nocturnal prostrations and entreaties as well!

The effect of modern tendencies in Urdu gave rise to a difference of opinion about whether there was a need for the restrictions of rhyme (*qāfiyāh*) and refrain (*radīf*) in poetry. Supporters of the old style stressed that rhyme and refrain were indispensable for sustaining the lyrical musicality of verse. Their opponents wrote poetry free of rhyme and tried to demonstrate that one could also write without these constraints. Experience testifies to the fact that unrhymed verses, more often than not, were little else than poetry in the guise of prose, indeed some looked downright ludicrous. This development notwithstanding, until now no poet was bold enough to meddle with the poetic meters that had been in vogue for centuries. But Rāshid experimented even with this and modified some of these old meters. In making these modifications, he has created an attractive and not-so-obvious interface between classical and modern artistic parameters. "Destitute Poet" is a specimen of this very transformation.

These transformations do not upset the internal equilibrium or the musical quality of the verses, and this, in fact, is Rāshid's supreme achievement. However, here and there in the poem we also perceive a lessening of the generally high musical effect and the perfectly balanced notes grow not just faint but also low-pitched, for example, in one section

of the poem “Enchantment of the Eyes”:

in the private abodes of coffeehouse bedrooms
your thief-like arrival, this night;
the tumult of love, deep in the night, and your youth,
your appearance, my heart
spider and its hapless victim
but why is there a quiver in your hands?
your cup about to fall from your hands
as if a young magician presents
his art with no faith in himself

In the spontaneous flow of the entire poem, the last three lines of this section do not mesh with its overall musicality, as if a patchwork of prose was grafted onto the verses. However, the poet is helpless because this experimentation with the new structure and order of poetic meters is innovative not only for Urdu poetry but also for the poet himself, and thus it is not totally unexpected that these kinds of minor deficiencies will occur.

For some time now Rāshid has abandoned writing poetry and the apparent reason is the very same economic privation and its dilemmas that trap the Youth of India and make them think of poetry as so much wasted time. But we hope that Rāshid will not allow ease and contentment to drive him to silence, but rather, that he will put his natural poetic talent to good use by relating his inner conflicts to his external environment. (1939)□

—*Translated by Riyaz Latif*