

OBITUARY

Suhail Ahmad Khan (1948–2009)

A Tribute: Marking a Disappearance

To be unique is to be insoluble and Suhail Ahmad Khan was one of a kind

AT FIRST Suhail Ahmad Khan was just a name that I sometimes heard in the Tea House or the Coffee House or Cheney's Lunch Home and a face that was vaguely familiar. The only thing I knew for certain about him was that he had done his Master's in Urdu and joined the teaching staff of the Oriental College (Lahore) at a relatively young age. Formal education, whatever it may be worth in purely worldly terms, often seemed to me a sheer waste of time, so teachers meant little to me. Some of the conclusions I arrived at four decades ago seem rather ill-conceived now. Teachers do matter if they are any good. But good teachers, alas, are fast becoming a rare breed.

Anyhow, this "I know you are there but do we relate to each other" attitude underwent a sea change one day, perhaps in late 1969 or early 1970. I received a new issue of *Funūn*, a well-known literary magazine, edited by Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi. While leafing through it, I came across six or seven short poems by Suhail. I liked what I read and said to myself: here is someone I should keep an eye on from now onwards. The poems, their brevity notwithstanding, had an aura of freshness about them.

Almost providentially, a few days later, as Riaz Ahmad, my friend and one of the editors of *Savērā*, and I were on our way from the Tea House to Anarkali, in those days the commercial hub of Lahore, we ran into Suhail. I was uncommonly pleased to see him because I wanted to compliment him on his poems. Riaz had also read his contribution to *Funūn* and both of us said how happy we were to find someone with genuine promise. We also said that had he shown his poems to us we would have

published them, without any hesitation, in *Savērā*.

Naturally, Suhail was moved by our effusiveness and suggested that we should go into Cheney's Lunch Home for a pot of tea and a chat. After all, it seemed the right thing to do. During our brief conversation I realized that I had met someone who was definitely not a run-of-the-mill lecturer in Urdu. As was to be expected, his knowledge of Urdu literature was up-to-date and incisive, but he had also read Western poets, writers and critics, and what was more to the point, read them perceptively and enthusiastically. I decided then and there that here was a person after my own heart. A strange certainty pervaded my mind. It is the beginning of a friendship, I told myself, which is going to last a lifetime. And so it did.

After we had taken each other's leave, I asked Riaz about our encounter and he said: "Nothing chancy about this. There is a scheme of things which we have no inkling of. Right now we have gained a new friend." Sure enough, our rapport with Suhail grew stronger as the years went by. There were so many interests we shared—literature, music, films, paintings, mythology, cricket and the occult.

Suhail's father served as a *tabşildār* (a senior revenue officer), magistrate and additional deputy commissioner. As a child and a grown-up boy, Suhail, therefore, knew no privation. Sometimes a secure early age can make things go awry at a later stage when adjustments to a demanding environment become increasingly problematic. Either he was not a pampered child or the fact that he took to books at an early age helped him to a better understanding of life. Another positive factor was that his father's official duties often led to transfers from one district to another. It meant that Suhail was not emotionally attached to any particular place. This in itself is a blessing because to be boxed into an enervating nostalgia can possibly have deleterious effects. He received his high school and college education at Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), Sahiwal and Multan. His stay at Multan was particularly profitable as the city had a good public library and he was already an avid reader. He earned some distinction as a poet even in his college days, winning trophy after trophy in poetry contests. The poems that won prizes must have been slight (I do not think he included any of them in his published collections) but these victories may well have boosted his morale.

Afterwards he came up to Lahore to do his Master's. In those days Lahore was a sort of captivating nucleus. Once you had savored its life you did not feel like going elsewhere. Unfortunately of late the city, overcrowded and crime-infested, has lost most of its gloss, openness and cultural buzz. But that's another story.

In a city awash with literary and artistic culture, Suhail felt immedi-

ately in his element. He began to participate in the literary activities of Halqa-e Arbāb-e Zauq (literally, the circle of persons of refinement), a literary organization which has been in existence for nearly seventy years. It holds a weekly meeting during which poetry, fiction and critical essays are read out and commented upon, as often as not without any mincing of words. It is run by its members, accepts no official funding whatsoever and is completely democratic, electing a secretary and joint secretary every year by secret ballot. Its platform seemed tailor-made for Suhail. He quickly learned how to run a literary institution and there were plenty of opportunities to hone his critical skills. Although still a very young man he did manage to create considerable stir through his acumen. Even more beneficial, in a literary sense, was the widening of his contacts. He was quick to distinguish between those who were of genuine worth and those who were mere phonies.

Remarkably enough, the three restaurants I mentioned above also functioned almost as clubs, frequented as they were not only by poets, writers of fiction, critics and fans, but also by artists, painters, musicians, lawyers, journalists and even politicians. The room for interaction was enormous. In those days you could talk about poetry with the musicians, discuss fiction with the painters, mix politics with literature to banter the journalists and politicians. There were also some eccentrics around along with editors of literary magazines and a few bureaucrats who did not mind being seen at such public places. The discussions in turn were serious, lighthearted, rowdy or zany. One could always walk in and feel the pulse of the city in the open house atmosphere. It was not *comme il faut* to be one-dimensional in such surroundings. Those who ignored the protocol did so at their peril.

It was a carefree, and a bit wild, time in Suhail's life. He made many friends, notable among them Intizar Husain, Nasir Kazimi, Ahmad Mush-taq and Muzaffar Ali Syed. He was also close to Shakir Ali, one of Pakistan's best painters and a lover of Rilke's poetry, and was even closer to Amanat Ali Khan, a very gifted classical musician. There were so many sources of enrichment for Suhail. One could notice new connections forming all the time. The bane of specialization and estrangement was not yet in the air.

Now the city's banausic disposition and philistine assumptions have put paid to such fraternizing. The restaurants have all closed down. The sense of communal well-being is on the way out. Perhaps this was one reason, and a cogent one, for Suhail's gradual withdrawal from literary circles and gatherings. Something essential had gone missing. Clifford A. Pickover sums up the predicament precisely:

Our society desperately needs generalists who traverse several fields and then bring together ideas in a way that specialists may be unable to do, but we seem to be learning more and more about less and less until we know everything about nothing. Sometimes, specialists develop blind spots after years of focus on a single topic.

(2007, 32)

It is an obversion with which Suhail would have agreed wholeheartedly.

Suhail also emerged as a very innovative critic of Urdu *dāstāns* (a genre which shares several features with the sword and sorcery fantasies so popular now in the U.S. and the U.K.). Most Urdu *dāstāns*, and I dare say the best, were written down in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. They had a mass appeal for a few decades but gradually lost their popularity. In a climate fostered by an insistence on the utilitarian or ideological element in literature, most critics, and more tellingly, many readers, came to regard the *dāstān* as irrelevant leftovers of a decadent culture. Suhail, on the other hand, saw the much reviled *dāstāns* as a distinguished and indigenous literary form. His doctoral dissertation on the symbolic dimensions of *dāstāns* would remain a seminal work for quite a while. Naturally the symbolic allusions in such long works (*Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* alone runs to about 8,000 pages) can only be felt as an undercurrent. The *dāstān-tellers/writers* were fully aware of it. One has only to read the illuminating digression about this by Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh in the first volume of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* (1930, 848–49) or the introduction by ‘Āshiq Ḥusain Bazm to his *Ṭilism-e Kun Fa-Yakūn*, a *dāstān* in four large volumes which was never published and is presumably lost.* I mention all of this only to point out that Suhail’s stance has a substantial basis.

As a literary critic, he was deeply influenced by Muhammad Hasan Askari and Muzaffar Ali Syed, both were well read and insightful. Askari combined clarity with flair. Muzaffar was somewhat sedate and circumspect. Suhail learned a great deal from them but emulated neither. He had his own precise style, shorn of superfluity. It is a pity that he wrote so little and in his later days preferred to extemporize rather than write. He was a gifted speaker, undoubtedly the outcome of having taught graduate classes for many a year. He wore his learning lightly and was adept at

* The writer has explained that although the volumes are presumably lost, Amīr Ḥasan Nūrānī, a literary adviser to Naval Kishore Press, quoted at some length from the introduction to *Ṭilism-e Kun Fa-Yakūn* in his articles published in the 1960s. In those he mentioned that two of the volumes had been destroyed by termites. What may have happened since then can only be imagined. —*Editor*

making unusual and illuminating connections, the hallmark of an accomplished teacher. Strangely enough, when some of his friends said that he did not do justice to his talent by not writing more frequently and in detail, he appeared to be put off and countered by remarking that to write well was more important than writing a great deal. Whatever the truth may be, the diversity of his critical writing, ranging as it does from the East to the West, from the classical age to the modern era, is impressive.

As a poet his output, quantitatively speaking, is slight: two slim volumes in all. A third volume, whenever it is published, would also include his ghazals. His poems are generally short and put one in mind of A. E. Housman or Walter de la Mare. But the comparison would be unfair to Suhail. There are no irritating circumlocutions or deep-seated bitterness such as one comes across in Housman. Nor can we find the softness, cushioned by euphony and whimsy, so peculiar to de la Mare. Instead, there is a note of sadness, of quiet reflection, valedictory in its inevitability, as the world with all its good and bad, slips through our fingers, fading out. He is a concerned but powerless watcher. Birds, which figure so prominently in many of his poems, symbolize vagrancy, dislocations and a near mystical sense of freedom and also intimations of vulnerability. What the birds actually feel in a world of dreadful changes we can never know, but Suhail reads into the visible our joys and fears and also a sense of the invisible, the phenomenal world mirroring our discontent or, to see it differently, our composure. Some of his poems would certainly press for inclusion in any representative anthology of Urdu poetry.

He also expressed some keenness to write short stories. He told me that at least four were as good as written. Indeed one of these, clearly autobiographical, was published in *Savērā*. Another will appear soon in *Dunyāzād*, a literary magazine. Whether he had also completed the other two is something I do not know. In fact, he had written a novelette back in the early 1980s. I thought it was pretty readable and wanted to publish it. For some strange reason, he seemed very reluctant to have it published. Similarly, although he had written a number of ghazals he somehow resisted the idea of seeing them in print. It is a mystery, this reluctance to keep some of his work from appearing in public.

His ability to see a problem in its totality and come up with a quick and sensible solution to it was remarkable. He could have been an excellent administrator but he disliked management, and in particular the unending paperwork which it invariably entails. He could have done wonders had he been put in charge of a purely literary institution or a big publishing house. It is easy to imagine what he could have achieved as an editor by going through *Mebrāb*, a literary magazine he brought out with

the help of Ahmad Mushtaq, the well-known poet. The six or maybe seven issues of *Mebrāb* which they published can now be rated as collector's items and had more substance in them than many bulky Urdu literary journals which appear nowadays. However, there was one thing he was very keen on doing but never managed to—bring out a magazine in Urdu carrying only well-written and forceful book reviews. “I would do it off my own bat, no matter what it may eventually cost,” he often said. I admit I did not share his enthusiasm. I knew we would rarely get any help from others and would have to write the reviews ourselves. The whole idea made me nervous.

The years he spent in Japan on a teaching assignment can be regarded as a defining period in his life. In an interview he even described it as a “rebirth,” perhaps meaning thereby that it enabled him to experience a totally different and disciplined milieu. Almost like a visit to another planet. While there was more time for him to read and think, it also afforded him an opportunity to cope with loneliness. He came back with heaps of books, a veritable treasure trove, and was rightly proud of his collection. Books were the only riches that mattered to him. However, after his return from Japan, one could also discern in him a streak of disengagement which gradually became more pronounced. He confessed again and again that he felt out of sorts with the intellectual temper of Pakistan. The increasing intolerance, the meaningless authoritarianism, the corruption and the botched educational system did not bode well for the future.

To add to his disenchantment fate dealt him a cruel blow. The sudden and inexplicable death of his young son-in-law, an officer in the Pakistan Air Force and an F-16 expert, left an emotional scar, harder to put up with than mere loneliness. Cesar Vallejo, one of the great poets of the twentieth century, says in one of his unforgettable poems, “Black Messengers,” that “there are blows in life so strong ... they are few, but they are ... they open dark pits in the fiercest face and the stoutest back.” Yes, there are blows in life which shatter one's soul. Suhail did not share his anguish with others, maintaining his privacy like a hidden wound, but the will to live may have drained away. It is only a conjecture. The bare facts are that he died after a brief but devastating illness.

There are no replacements in life. We must learn to notice and appreciate each person's, each thing's uniqueness. To be unique is to be insoluble and therefore, on its own terms, an enduring mystery. There are only openings and closures. Forty years of companionship draw to a close. During those four decades, not counting the time Suhail spent abroad, such weeks were a rarity when we did not meet, once at least.

There was so much to share: books, poets, ideas, plans. There were times when our minds lit up. There were times when we groped in the dark. The unending enigma of life and human relationship! It was indeed a privilege to know Suhail. And that's something I can say about very few persons. □

TEN YEARS GONE BY ...*

Ten years gone by and each year I see
a lonely spot in the park, flowers in a row.
A light rain marks the winter's onset.

A scene enfolding ten years and their secrets.
I see it before me as if in a mirror,
face to face with the clouded skies of yesteryears.

The winds come and go, I know not where.
Leaf by leaf the familiar world's undone.
I stand and wait here although it makes no sense.

What's gone is gone. Lost days. Lost years.
Anyway, can we ever forget them? No!
The flowers, how beautiful they seem to be.

Enough for this year; and will they not suffice
for the next year as well? Flowers in a row.
A light rain falls in the heart's lonely places.

—M. SALIM-UR-RAHMAN

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* Author's translation of his poem written originally in Urdu. —*Editor*