

Kashmiri Literature of the 90's— An Appraisal

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*"I am in blood. Stepped so far that should I wade
No more, Returning were as tedious as go-ever."
(Shakespeare; Macbeth)*

Macbeth's line quoted above sums up the hopelessness and fatigue that seem to be the current mood of the common man and woman of Kashmir today. The literature of the day reflects this mood. The dominant themes are death and destruction, loss of 'Paradise', nostalgia and fear. It is true that Kashmiri writers of standing were neither the protagonists in the action nor were their voices of any consequence to the raging ideological debate. They preferred silence to made-to-order eloquence in the prevailing climate of fear. But from the little that has been published in and outside Kashmir, it is reassuring to find candles burning brightly in the pervading darkness. Writers, both poets and prose writer, like G.R. Santosh, Rehman Rahi, Amin Kamil, Motilal Saqi, Farooq Nazki, Arjun Nath Bhat 'Majruh', Gulam Nabi Nazir, Syed Rasool 'Pompur', M.H. Zafar, Harikrishna Kaul, Hriday Kaul Bharti, Avatar Krishna Rehbar, Somnath Zutshi, Rattan Lal Shant, Anis Hamadani and Iqbal Fahim have kept the language and literature alive even while its readership continues to decline. This note is based on a textual analysis of some of the works of these very writers.

Rehman Rahi's has been one of the most powerful poetic voices from modern Kashmir. His recent poem, written in 1995, is titled, 'Khoda Ya' (Oh God), a cry that is familiar to a Kashmiri as a pathetic rather than bold appeal to God from a victim of violence. It is this very persona of the victim that recurs again and again in the poetry and stories written during the nineties. Fear dominates the bleak landscape. A few lines of poem are illustrative:

*It may not be possible to speak; what can one do?
But the heart mightn't bear the burden; what can one do?
The rose cannot but bloom, can it?
Carry the burning flame of love it must; what can one do?
Its pastels are torn to bits on the thorn,
head crowned with the turban of blood; what can one do?*

The tone of the poem is one of helplessness before a cruel destiny. The refrain of 'karav kyah' (what can one do) stresses that the speaker is not the 'subject' but the 'object'; things happen to him, he does not make them happen. Another recurring motif to which this poem introduces us is that of blood. Whether it is used for its suggestion of violence or life giving qualities, the colour of blood is inescapable in the poetry of Kashmir today. Farooq Nazki's long poem 'Agar dohan asi hisab bozuv' (where we to take stock of the days), has a rich imagery of the flowers and landscape

of Kashmir, but it is all dominated by the sense of decay. The colour of crimson drenches the pretty pictures:

*The roofs aglow with blazing poppies,
But Ah! The dread billows of wind...
A lion in winter, maddened by hunger
Falls on a village, looking for pray.
Sick desires burden the breath,
And dash against windows and doors...
None saw the vessel of pasted henna,
Nor smelt the smoke of exorcising herb,
Blood and mud were one wet lump...
A parched river awaiting the flood, boiling in veins, black blood,
And white rocks vermilion-smeared....
Miasma rises about the city,
And reaching the graveyard, the winds do howl.*

In a ghazal, Ghulam Nabi Nazir too uses the red of blood:

*...In couples we placed the stars with drops of our blood.
And passed the night in phrasing a love-letter
And adorned the dust with the red of poppies*

Red and black are the most frequently used strands of colour. Apart from being a device of contrast, their metaphorical value is exploited fully by the poets; of course as a 'literal metaphor' the red of blood and the black of the night also introduce a touch of 'magical realism' into the style.

The poetry and prose of those who are living in exile at present explore a new theme: displacement. Their work is characterized by a longing to go home. There is anger certainly; a sense of betrayal, but brooding over everything is nostalgia. The love for the sights and sounds of the beloved land shines through the pain. There is authentic emotion at the real loss of home, companionship with like-minded people, and in fact, a whole way of life. An example of this elegiac note is Motilal Saqi's poem 'Myon Shahar' (My Town):

*I remember that sweet old town!
The simple and straight, hand-kissing town,
I could die for it.
The sons of darkness lit a pyre on its brow
And swept its streets with blood.
And now it twists the neck
That once held the head so high....
Would anyone dare leave a window ajar?*

The 'Romantic agony' of the 'migrant' is evident in the following lines of a ghazal by Saqi:

*I would go home to my village,
This city has stolen my rest...
My head on a stone in the willow-grove,
I'd sleep and sleep till end of day.
The shade of chinar in these mine eyes,
I'd drain the spring and cool myself ...*

The protestations of brotherly love that flourished in Kashmir between the communities and regret at its loss form the core of Arjun Nath Bhat 'Majruh's poem 'Faasla' (Resolution):

*My soul-mate, Confidante and Childhood friend!
How did it shrink and wither,
The grapevine of our love, so green and fresh?
Was it the Evil Eye?*

A sad aspect of present day Kashmiri literature, apart from the fact of its meagerness, is that it is too burdened with the present and that tends to limit the vision. Personal and collective sorrow may be a powerful emotion in lyrical poetry, but self-pity can become a habit almost an addiction. The Keatsian, ideal of 'Negative Capability' is not much in evidence, except in some religious poetry, to which some poets have turned for solace. But here again nothing spectacular or original comes through; the sentiments are mostly the same as those of old genres of 'Durood' and 'Leela'. The form used is also the conventional. The two dominant stems of Romanticism and Mysticism that ran through the course of Kashmiri literature from the 14th century onwards seem to have hit a dry patch.

Another disturbing thing about the writings today is the cleavage between the writers based in the valley and those who have left it. In their diction, and choice of symbol and myth a sense of turning away from each other has crept in. The valley-based writers have their own set of allusions and mythology, referring to an Islamic background, while the ones in exile have theirs in Hindu epics and scripture and their own saints and seers. The script used for the common language is also different; Persian for the former and Devnagari for latter. The diction of the former is Persianised while the latter presumes a readership that understands a Sanskritised vocabulary of the 'Leelas' of old. It is a great pity that the two major religious communities that made up Kashmir as we knew it, must, under the stress of the times, address their own exclusive constituencies. In his short story 'Yim Kam Duryodhan' (Who are these Duryodhanas?), Somnath Zutshi refers to an incident in the 'Mahabharata' to suggest that the horror of the present is merely a bad dream from which one will (hopefully!) wake up to find everything as it once was, while Rehman Rahi paints a vivid picture of the miraculous Shab-i-Qadr with all its glorious connotation in his poem, 'Molul Shab' (Precious Night). While the communities were freely interacting on a single platform, the two religio-cultural streams enrich each other but today there is real danger of their work becoming obscure.

One writer who bridges this divide is Gulam Rasool Santhosh. He makes a conscious effort to weave in the Islamic, Sufi and Shaivite symbols and myths into the fabric of his poetry to fashion a

garment of composite culture. His recent poem, ‘*Baala Adan Myon Tohi Ma Dyunthavon*’ (Did you happen to see my lost childhood?), reverberates with resonance of a common heritage, the joy and richness of the past and the desolation of the present scene.

*The Nagin and Parbat, my history manifest!
Satisar and Nilnag, Eternal Truth!
At Kashyap’s call was revealed the land.
Even now the Veth flows naked, chanting his name.
How often she hid underground, at sight of sin!
Today our heads are buried, weighted by her curse.
Fortified with faith, how Budshah
Sailed his lamps in her stream,
And celebrated her birthday with vermilion dots!
The world could see its face in it,
So pure and limpid the mirror of my land!
But what do I see now with eyes moth-eaten?
Do I pluck out the stars and ask the question—
Did you, by chance see my lost childhood?
With our tongue purified, the Kalma we read—a fountain of knowledge!
The many who came, their truths we fashioned in our own way.
Embraced the raging fire of faith,
And drank their knowledge in one deep draught.*

A larger issue thrown up by the current upheaval in Kashmir is the attempt by some to rewrite history according to their own heart’s desire. In such a confused scenario it is possible that one man’s hero may be another’s villain! This dichotomy is tellingly exposed in A.K. Rehbar’s short story, ‘The Shadow’, which talks about the issue of whether Marlowe’s Tambrulane can now be called Taimur the Lame or Amir Taimur!

Finally, one must conclude that this is a time when faith, for all its much-hyped resurgence, has been under a severe test. The enthusiasm of certainties has given way to doubt. The Kashmiri writer cannot but strike a despondent note. The cruel toll of the years has broken the spirit and the only comfort can come from the refuge in the imaginatively recreated past.