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“Shi‘r”¹

Abdur Rahman

Introduced and translated by
M. Aqib

Introduction:

The present text surfaced during a translation project because of a mix-up. The confusion was caused by the similarity in the author’s name, Abdur Rahman and that of the renowned Urdu critic, Abdur Rahman Bijnori. The author of this text, Abdur Rahman, was born on 10th February 1873, in Jaipur and passed away on 30th July 1954, in Karachi. He was a professor who headed the Department of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu at the University of Delhi during the 1920s. He was recognized as a distinct scholar in British India and bestowed with the honorific title of *Shams-ul ‘Ulamā’* in 1933. In 1926, he published a collection of his lectures on the history and theory of Arabic couplet tradition as *Mirāt-ush-Shi‘r* (The Mirror of Couplet). In the preface to the book, Rahman informs that these "additional university lectures" were given in 1923 and were attended by Khwaja Mohammad Abdul Majeed Khan, a former professor of Persian at St. Stephen’s College. Khan advised Rahman to include couplets from Persian and Urdu in his lectures and publish them. The book was self-published by the author, in keeping with Khan’s advice. In these lectures, Rahman covers the keywords in Eastern poetics such as *shi‘r* (couplet),

¹ Translated from: Rahman, Abdur. “Shi‘r.” *Mirāt-ush-Shi‘r*, Jaiyyed Electric Press, Delhi, 1926, pp. 1-17. *Rekhta Ebooks*, <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/detail/miraat-us-sheir-abdur-rahman-aleeg-ebooks/>.

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alfāz (words), *majāz* (materiality), *mā‘nī* (meaning), *jazbāt* (emotions), *khayāl* (thought) etc. and through this discussion, explores shared histories of couplet in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu languages. *Mirāt-ush-Shi‘r* was re-published by the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy in 1978 in its campaign to re-vitalize important and rare books. Other than *Mirāt-ush-Shi‘r*, Rahman also authored *Sharḥ-e-Aṣṭarlāb* (explanation of astrolabe), *Ḥayāt-e-Auraṅzeb ‘Alaihur Raḥmā* (life of Aurangzeb, peace be upon him), and *Tarjumah Ibn-e Khaldūn* (translation of Ibn-e Khaldoon).

This excerpt is taken from the first chapter of *Mirāt-ush-Shi‘r* titled *shi‘r* (couplet), in which the author traces the evolution of the couplet from an emotive to a thoughtful text from pre-Islamic Arab to twentieth-century India. He describes it as an imaginative, linguistic, and creative concept that has developed in various languages and regions across the world in different ways. He further says that the common objective of *shi‘r*-writing is to reach absolute thought, which shapes itself into a couplet through human creativity and can be either continuous or broken. The author’s focus is on the latter feature of brokenness while discussing the poetics of the couplet tradition in the East from a self-acknowledged Eastern perspective. In this excerpt, he contests and analyses the claim that meter is not necessary in a couplet. He refutes the claim by saying that in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, meter is the very basis for distinguishing between what is poetry and what is not. While making his argument, he observes the pitfalls of equating *nazm*, *naṣr*, and *shi‘r* with poetry, prose, and couplet as categories of literary writing in Urdu and English traditions, respectively. The essay also warns against reducing a couplet to merely a structural unit of a larger poem.

The original text collides Urdu terms used to describe literary writings with their counterparts in English posing translational challenges. The following key will be useful in navigating this translation:

1. The Urdu words “*bayān*” and “*kalām*” have been translated as “speech” whose following meanings come closest to the author’s sense:
 - a. spoken language (Collins Dictionary)
 - b. communication or expression of thoughts (by speaking) (Merriam Webster)
2. The words “*nazm*” (usually translated as “poetry”, “verse”, or “poem”) and “*naṣr*” (usually translated as “prose”), as used in the

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original, have been retained in this excerpt to avoid confusion with their English translations occurring elsewhere in the essay.

3. A few translated keywords are:
 - a. couplet for *shi‘r*²
 - b. meter for *vazn*
 - c. rhyme for *qāfiyah*
 - d. lyrics for *bol*
 - e. melody for *lai*.
4. All Arabic quotations, including couplets, have been translated into English based on the author’s own Urdu translations in prose form in the original text and discussions with students of Arabic.

As is often the case in translating a text from a minor to a major language, this translation was no different in posing a risk of appropriation. The risk was further enhanced in this essay due to the author’s emphasis on the contrasts between the Eastern and Western poetic traditions, which he considers fundamental in establishing their distinct identities. These contrasts, as he explains, are visible in the meanings of the key terms used to describe Eastern and Western poetics. For instance, the very title of this essay brings out such a dissimilarity. Despite several instances of non-rhyming couplets in English poetry, more frequently does the term “couplet” refer to a set of rhyming metrical lines. On the other hand, a rhyming couplet in Urdu is a special case of a couplet, usually placed at the beginning of a ghazal, which is another special case of a poem. However, in common parlance, “*shi‘r*” is commonly referred to as “couplet,” which was the basis for titling this translation “The Couplet.” Furthermore, in Urdu, “*shi‘r*” can also be used in the sense of speech, as the author mentions in the original (p. 1). Whereas “couplet” in English is quite far from this sense. It is because of these differences that the above key was considered necessary for the present translation. Another concern that demanded wariness was the style of the author, more significantly so in the opening passage, structured by rhymes, which had to be sacrificed for the sake of sense. Nevertheless, the translation tries to capture the flavor of the original while striving to remain faithful to its meaning.

The Couplet

Praise be to God, who created man and gave him the gift of speech!
Do you know what speech is? It is the jewel of humanity and the prime

² However, unlike the couplet, *shi‘r* does not always rhyme.

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accomplishment of the human tongue. It appears plain, but it can become poison when it is bitter and honey when it is sweet. Its appeal is magical, and its effect is charming. Yet it is truth, not illusion, nor is it exaggeration, but reality. “Verily, some speech is indeed magic,” is the Prophet’s saying. If magic presents one thing as another and astounds spectators, then speech is no less. Making mourners laugh and the laughing mourn; turning cowards into heroes and the unfeeling into friends are but ordinary wonders of speech.

Kinds of speech and their hierarchy

Speech is of two kinds: *naśr* and *nazm*. *Nazm*, which is superior and better, is of the kind that is called the “couplet”. “Verily, sometimes a couplet is indeed wisdom,”³ describes its grandeur. Now, poetry is magic on one hand and wisdom on the other. It is true that not every couplet is divine wisdom; in fact, a couplet is very often false and heretic. But also, not all speech is the same. In much that can be said, there is little that is of value. How should one praise a good couplet? Even the worst is better than *naśr*. Irrespective of whether *naśr* is somber or colorful, or rhymed or not, it cannot be compared to a couplet. The latter is a necklace of pearls, the former a heap of trash. While even *naśr* at times pierces the heart like a lancet, a couplet often surpasses such a reading experience. It captures its readers, making them read it repeatedly, and spreading its effect in the mind, as wine does. This consciousness-seizing nature is lacking in *naśr*. It is often said that *raga* is a nutrient for the soul. But it becomes clear on closer observation that even *raga* subsists on the couplet. However, when they unite in speech, *raga* acquires wings and flies over the vast reaches of human imagination. The truth is that in calling the couplet the best speech, the connoisseurs of the past have established a standard of aesthetic sensibility and perceptive vision.

Whatever has been said about the couplet until now has been in the manner of a eulogy. Scholarly research demands something else. Therefore, we will now turn to this and see what the scholars of art have said previously.

Definition and the defined

³ The author does not mention any source here, but following his introduction, he appears to be quoting from the hadiths. That is how he makes the case of ‘magic’ or ‘wisdom’ as two polarities of speech, which challenges the common notion that in the Final Judgement, poets will not be forgiven by God because they are liars. They lie in their poetry by exaggerating, manipulating, or fabricating information.

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Regardless of whether a definition in its scope and manner is scientific or empirical, it must convince and satisfy. What is being defined must exist and be known thoroughly so that its ordinary and defining features can be determined to a considerable extent.

Definitions often vary

Often, when two people define something, there is less agreement and more contradiction between them. This is because it is difficult to determine the most important features of anything, be it material or abstract. Such features can be many and distinct. One person will consider feature A to be defining, while the other will go for feature B. This difference in perspectives eventually reflects in differences of opinion, and in this way, the variety of definitions opens a scope for conversation.

Variation in the couplet’s definition was necessary

It is also obvious that the couplet is a consequence of human temperament and creativity. Every creation gets to its pinnacle after an initial stage of deficiency. It remains in a state of transformation for many years, gradually grows, changes its forms over and over, and then finally reaches its perfection. Therefore, it is no surprise that experts have differed in their opinions from the very beginning. Who can say that the couplet, which came into existence at the behest of nature and, by benefiting from human creativity, acquired the same form in every language? Or is there anybody who can claim that poetry in any language remained the same throughout the course of its history? The wise know that poetry goes through many stages of evolution. When observed closely, one will find that it is because of this creative hustle and bustle that the definition of couplet has varied across languages and historical periods, and indeed, it should have been so. Were it not so, it would be a matter of surprise.

Resemblance in Arabic, Persian and Urdu couplet

Owing to various kinds of differences among languages, it is difficult to cover all the definitions of couplet that have been proposed from time to time.⁴ Therefore, I will provide here only the definition of the Arabic couplet as it exists in the Arabic tradition. Since contemporary Persian poetry, which is no more than twelve hundred years old, has been

⁴ Though the author restricts his discussion to Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, he suggests in a footnote that the present discussion can be expanded by including other languages which, he says, benefitted from Arabic in one way or the other.

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nourished by Arabic poetry, and because, despite being born of Hindi and Persian, the Urdu couplet resembles the Persian one more than it does the Hindi couplet, the patterns in the poetry of these languages are found to be very similar. Hence, it would not be improper if I restricted myself to discussing the Arabic couplet and, based on similarity, approximated the same for Persian and Urdu couplets.

Definitions of couplet

A concrete definition of couplet, which the experts also endorsed, was first proposed much after the birth of couplet. This means that the aesthetic sensibilities that produced the first couplet had changed by the time the first definition was proposed. It was done to fix the parameters of agreement and disagreement, comprehension and explanation, or at least the beauty and defects of the couplet. It was then established that speech that is metrical, rhymed, and reflects inner sentiments will be considered a couplet or a good couplet. Along with this, it also had to be a compendium of the beauty of language and articulation. Later, the condition of innovation in meaning and thought was also added to it. As time went by, the couplet evolved further, and now details of the abstract thoughts presented in it were also required to add to its depth. Accordingly, couplet was re-defined as that metrical and rhymed speech that is based on the premises of fantasy and produces, through its structural arrangement, a non-realistic effect in such a way that it turns fact into fiction and fiction into fact. All the above definitions are based on what several poets have said in their poetry. They have been mentioned time and again by different scholars. In all of them, as can be seen, meter and rhyme remain essential elements of a couplet. Notwithstanding this, some scholars argue that the creation of abstract meaning should be the only condition for a couplet. What can one say about rhyme? They believe that even meter is an extraneous element. This can be seen as its fourth definition. Lastly, the fifth definition is that of the prosodists, who don't concern themselves with the aesthetics of language or meaning but only with meter. They don't mind overlooking rhyme. In their terminology, a couplet is a metrical speech whose structure is in accordance with any one of the meters found in Arabic prosody, but the speech must have been produced intentionally. Since the old masters have also often argued about rhyme in connection with meter, from this definition of the prosodists, a general definition of couplet can be obtained, i.e., a couplet is a metered and rhymed speech.

On the variety of above definitions

The first definition among these is the one most ancient and commonly accepted. On the other hand, couplets exemplifying the second definition can be seen to originate in the Arabic language in the latter half of the second century Hijri. By this time, the Arabs had evolved into a cultured people. Ignorance had been replaced with knowledge, and simplicity with sophistication. Along with this, there had also been a change in their thoughts, which had become both more expansive and modern. These reformed thoughts later shone through the meaning in their couplets, and by the turn of the third century Hijri, the Arabic couplet could be easily distinguished from its Pagan counterpart. In this age of creation and compilation, the prosodists came up with a distinctly prosodic definition, whereas the poets and connoisseurs of poetry produced a rather poetic definition, as we have already seen above. Though the couplet of the third school had started taking roots before the third-century Hijri, it took another hundred years before it could bear any fruit. That is to say, when Greek philosophy had long been translated, institutions of Islamic arts and sciences had also been established, and their effects had percolated down to the masses, influencing first the elite and then the commoners. Thus, the garden of the couplet bloomed. Therefore, one may look at this school of couplet writing in the fourth-fifth century Hijri Arab, which is also its golden period, as the accomplishment of what had begun two to three hundred years ago. No other school of couplet in the Arabic language came after this, and this is a matter worthy of consideration. As history has it, the end of the third century Hijri was the beginning of the decline of Arabs. One can ask: when the people who spoke the language were on the decline, how could their poetry evolve? Arabic poetry of the fourth and fifth centuries was, in short, only a reflection of its previous glory, which continued to radiate its brilliance even in the period of its fall. But when the Arabs fell and their territory and language were subjugated to non-Arab influences, the Arabic couplet also toppled from its pedestal and fell so that it could never recover again. In that stage of stagnation, these three interconnected schools became commonplace in Arabic poetry, and for the lack of newness, the decline of couplets continued. Praise be to the Lord!

A cursory glance at the given definitions

The rise of learning and culture in Arab gave birth to two modern schools as compared to the Pagan couplet. The third school had not yet become popular, nor had it achieved its full creative potential, when history took a turn that reversed the narrative. Even in the age of invention and abstraction of meaning, the ancient school, which still understood the

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couplet as ‘a compendium of the beauty of language and articulation’ remained the most dominant influence on poetry. This was partly because of the penetrative impression of such couplets and partly because of the school’s conservatism. For some time, therefore, it continued to enjoy its status as the main school of poetry, and consequently, the corresponding ancient definition of couplet was generally accepted and followed. The second, poetic definition could be found here and there in the works of some poets and writers, but was coined in varying terms. The third definition is mentioned in the books of logic, speculating over the syllogism of the couplet, and is surrounded by debates about whether it should be seen as reminiscent of the logical definition of Aristotle. As far as the prosodic definition is concerned, it is available in every book on Urdu prosody and has been commonly adhered to by those who study poetry through prosody.

When two communities come together, each affects the other. Thus, the Arabs influenced the non-Arabs. How then could it be possible that non-Arabs wouldn’t influence them? Moreover, how was it possible for this confluence not to be reflected in the Arabic couplet? It is true that Persian poetry, in its nascent stages, learned from these three Arabic schools. Although today it seems that the latter two were born of Persian itself and are therefore its own inventions, there are fewer examples of them in Arabic than in Persian. Persian poetry collections are, in fact, full of such couplets. I don’t have to debate here whether the effect of the excess creation of meaning was in the end good or bad for Persian poetry, but it is true that perhaps no language can compete with Persian in this domain. It was through Persian that these styles came into Urdu. Poetry in our tradition thus remained a name for this same exercise of meaning-making and thought-layering.

New school and my opinion

The fourth definition is recent and full of jargon and thus limited to a circle of few. If the coming generations choose to exclude from couplet the conditions of rhyme and meter, and in general accept also unmetrical, non-rhymed, vividly imaginative *naṣr* as couplet, I won’t object to such a definition. But, as of yet, even the West (in whose imitation some Easterners are arguing for this definition) does not unanimously accept unmetrical speech as poetry. Therefore, the day is far and perhaps will remain far when unmetrical speech will be called couplet in our tradition, and until that happens, it will be fruitless research, or rather stupidity, to acknowledge this definition for which no evidence occurs anywhere in the

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historical tradition of the couplet. If some Westerners acknowledge non-metrical speech as poetry, they have a right to do that. To each is his couplet, and to each his own opinion.

Analysing the new school

As a rule, whenever a new school of thought emerges, whether born of itself or adopted from other traditions, its supporters generally ratify it in two ways. At first, by citing non-scientific evidence from the old tradition, they interpret it in such a way that their opinions seem logical. Secondly, in the name of research, they analyze the truth so skillfully that the ancient school seems altogether wrong and an adversary of the new. Those gentlemen who, in the current of modern research or the West’s imitation, are pushing for the fourth definition seek to diminish and rebut the first definition through these two ways and, hiding behind the prosodic definition, say that this definition is not scholarly. It is vulgar, or at the very least, prosodic. What have meter and rhyme to do with a couplet? They ask. Meter and rhyme do enhance the beauty of a couplet, but they are neither its essentiality nor its essence. In a couplet, abstract meaning, whether conclusive or not, should necessarily be attractive and amusing. To back this claim, the claimants quote the following sayings of the old masters: "Consider good speech as a good couplet". So-and-so has said, "Couplet is that speech which arises from our breasts in a stroke of passion and overflows our tongue."

Old masters, meter and rhyme

As a matter of fact, these sayings do not contain any mention of meter or rhyme. But can they be cited to negate their importance? Do these definitions really deserve to be called scholarly or philosophical? To be fair, no, not at all. A logical definition is difficult, even in the case of tangible materials and emotions. A couplet is, by contrast, an aesthetic intuition. It is impossible to capture its essence in the discourse of logic. Everyone has the right to define a couplet as he wishes. But to say that the condition of meter in couplet has been imposed by prosodists and that the old masters were not very fond of it is a hollow claim, detached from reality. Khalil Bin Ahmed Farahidi, a significant intellectual of the second century Hijri, was the inventor of Arabic prosody. Before him, there was no prosody at all, so there couldn’t be any prosodic definition. However, more than two centuries before him, Imrul Qais, who is the most modern

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of all prophets of poetry, interpreted rhyme as the arrival⁵ of a couplet, and since meter is complementary to rhyme, a mention of rhyme is by default a mention of meter. Look at the following couplet of Qais:

I drive off the arriving rhymes in the same way,
as a boy protects his crop from infesting locusts.

We need not rely only on Imrul Qais to defend meter and rhyme. Right from the origin of Arabic poetry until the present, there will hardly be any poet who didn't interpret the couplet as rhyme. Indeed, therefore, prosodists like Khalil have put the condition of meter and rhyme in accordance with the historical tradition itself. Kā'b Bin Zuhair writes:

Who can be the caretaker of rhyme, as are they two?
After Kā'b and Jarwal perish, one can only spoil it.

Let us now consider the old masters and experts. Ibn-e-Sirin has said, "Couplet is that speech which is tied with the knot of rhyme." Ibn-e-Qudamah, Abu Hilal Askari, and Ibn-e-Rasheeq al-Qairawani, who are regarded as the champions of research and criticism on the couplet, had all subscribed to this definition. I copy here some of the statements of Ibn-e-Rasheeq from his book *al-'Umdah* in whose compilation he has benefitted especially from Ibn-e-Qudamah's *al-Naqd* and Askari's *as-Sinā'atāin*. He echoes them when he writes, "A couplet's edifice stands on four things: word and meter, meaning and rhyme. This is the couplet's complete and logical definition." Ibn Rasheeq considers this definition complete, but he hasn't elaborated on the *jins*⁶ and *faṣl* so there remains

⁵'Arrival' (*āmad*) is one of the ways in which a couplet is said to be composed. It is used to describe those couplets that originate when a thought or feeling overwhelms the poet's mind, and it is as if the couplet arrives in the poet's mind auto-composed. The other way is 'fetching' (*āvurd*). It is when the poet makes a deliberate attempt to fetch meaning by contemplation and rational thinking.

⁶In Logic, *jins* (genus) is the widest of all five predicables (including genus, species, differentia, property, and accident), signifying an attribute that defines something wholly or partly. It groups together those entities whose essences are mutually different. Whereas *faṣl* (differentia) is a smaller category that signifies the attribute or attributes by which one thing is distinguished from other things based on essence. For example, "animal" is a *jins* because it applies to different essences such as humans, lions, goats etc.

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scope for elucidation. Talking about meter, he writes: "Meter is the most special and significant element of a couplet." He goes one step beyond when he discusses rhyme and writes, "Speech can't be called a couplet unless it has meter and rhyme." Despite so much evidence, if one doesn't regard meter and rhyme as necessary conditions for a couplet, it is up to them. But this claim that the condition of meter and rhyme in an Arabic couplet is a prosodic obligation, and the ancients didn't consider them to be so, can only be called their willful ignorance. As far as those sayings are concerned, in which there is no mention of meter or rhyme, they don't define couplet but indicate and eulogize a good couplet. They have nothing to do with the inclusion or exclusion of meter and rhyme. This is the reason why, although there were born the second and third definitions in Persian and Arabic, neither the importance of meter nor rhyme was denied, nor was unmetrical speech considered a couplet. In fact, along with meter and rhyme, more characteristics were added. However, this doesn't mean that every couplet contains words and meanings. A couplet is just another name for meter and rhyme. And, although meter is an element that makes a couplet a couplet, meaning has a more important role to play than meter in its poetics, both in text as well as mind. Let us first consider the textual level. Imrul Qais says:

I drive off the arriving rhymes in the same way,
as a boy protects his crop from infesting locusts.
When they become too much for him, finally
He chooses five or six good ones from them.
Like him, I also put the corals aside.
And to weave only pearls in my poem, decide.

The ranks of meter, rhyme, and meaning

If only meter and rhyme were sufficient for a couplet, why would Imrul Qais select only some from many rhyming words? This is an indication that for the poetics of the couplet, something other than them is needed. This important thing has been mentioned repeatedly in the works of both Pagan and Islamic poets. But I'll stick to what Ibn-e-Rasheeq has said, because it well summarizes the opinions of great poets and critics.

After defining couplet, Ibn-e-Rasheeq elaborates and says that “couplet can be understood through the analogy of *bait* (house or buiding).

whereas “eloquent” is a *fasl* because it applies to Mary, Ram, Salman etc. who are all in essence humans.

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Its floor is the temperament of the poet, and its roof is memory and tradition (that is, awareness of the works of geniuses). Its door is practice or experience, while its pillars are perception and knowledge. Meaning is the master of the house. Meters and rhymes are like molds or types, or ropes in the case of a tent, which raise the very structure of the tent." On the one hand, Ibn-e-Rasheeq regards meter as the most characteristic element of couplet, while on the other, he considers it secondary to meaning. And then he cites the ancient masters to affirm this and says, "Most of the scholars say that if a couplet contains a good analogy, a choice simile, or an eloquent metaphor, then only can it be called a couplet. Otherwise, it is nothing more than metrical speech." Having written this, Ibn-e-Rasheeq goes on to say that "if a poet neither modernizes the meaning nor selects his words coherently, nor does he render an existing theme more pleasantly in his poetry, nor is he concise, nor is he able to bring a twist in meaning, he is a poet only in name. The only advantage he has over others is metrical speech. But, according to me, he doesn't deserve even that distinction."

After all of these elucidations, no one can say that meter and rhyme are the only necessary conditions for a couplet. Although poets and critics have maintained that meter is a condition in couplets, they have never considered it sufficient. Instead, they have regarded meaning, style of meaning-making, or beauty of diction and articulation as the soul of a couplet. These characteristics, which Ibn-e-Rasheeq has established as the defining features of couplets, are, without meter, also found in *naṣr*. In our tradition, this *naṣr* is called *inshā* (essay). Any ordinary *naṣr* is not *inshā*, but that, whose essence is meaning creation, and which is also known as *inshā-e-latīf* (literary essay). The contemporary modernists also call it *shi‘r-e-mansūr* (couplet in prose form or prose couplet) and some don't even want to retain the *mansūr* (prose-like) part in the name. I can call it couplet-like-*naṣr* but I won't concede that it is couplet. This is also the long-standing critical opinion. The poet Buhturi (Al-Walid Ibn Ubaidullah Al-Buhturi) says in praise of a contemporary essayist:

Your inventions in essay are inimitable,
Those who tried it after you, lost their spirit and quit.
The eloquence in your words is such,
(That) your sentences shine like strings of pearls.
From it radiates the beauty of writing,
Like flowers bloom when spring arrives.
You create such meanings that if they were metrical,

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Even the couplets of Jarwal will hang their heads in shame.
The words in your speech are so clear and fluent,
So free from the darkness of frenzy and chaos

That when on the page they appear, in the form of black lines,
Like a charming maiden in whites, the page with their beauty shines.

Buhturi illustrated several constituents and qualities of couplet in *inshā-e-latīf*. He didn’t call it couplet but rather mentioned the lack of meter and rhyme in it. Therefore, in our Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, meter is the basis of distinction in speech. If it is metrical, it will be *nazm*, otherwise *naśr*. Now, in *nazm*, if there is found, in addition to the presence of the meter, some other semantic merit or some other attractive quality about it, it is a couplet; otherwise, it is not. Similarly, if *naśr* has some literal or semantic creativity, it is an essay, otherwise ordinary prose.

Disagreement over classification of speech

In English too, the criterion of classification of speech is meter. Speech is of two kinds: PROSE and poetry. Some scholars now say that meter is not a necessary condition for poetry. It rather applies to verse. That is, poetry is not bound to exhibit all the properties of verse. In contrast, the couplet is a higher art in Eastern tradition. Therefore, it must contain the properties of *nazm*, which is the lower art. Those Western scholars who are not fond of meter in poetry thus demarcate the kinds of speech: if it is metrical, it is verse; otherwise, it is PROSE. Further, if it contains complex and abstract meanings, it is poetry, whether it is verse or PROSE. That is, both verse and PROSE can be poetry. It is obvious that this classification is different from what we practice here in the East, and this only reflects the diversity of interests and opinions. Despite this, however, our classification is more holistic because, in their tradition, the poetic verse and the poetic prose both have the same name “poetry”. But in ours, we have two distinct names: couplet and essay respectively. Yet, as goes the old maxim, “new is delicious”, some people find this position that meter is not necessary in a couplet more palatable to announce because of the name of Western research attached to it. Why should it not happen then that the East begins to echo it and say, “We also have two terms, couplet and *nazm* in our tradition, just as there are poetry and verse in the West. Just as meter is not a necessary condition for poetry, but it is for verse, here also the condition of meter should apply to *nazm*, not couplet”?

Conformity

To benefit from others’ learning is good, wherever it comes from. Only a fool will regard this as below his dignity. I don’t consider imitation bad either. It has happened across history and has often turned out to be a source of progress. But those gentlemen who want to judge the poetry of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu on the scales of Western poetry do not understand that until East and West unite, their terminologies and truths cannot be equated. Western scholars are free to define their poetry as they choose. It is up to them whether they consider meter important or not. Inhabitants know their house better. But if we begin to manipulate the couplet to make it fit the garb of poetry, it won’t be wise. There is already a term “essay” for poetic *naṣr* in our tradition. It will do no good to call it a couplet. Instead, it will create confusion, which we should avoid at all costs. If of course there are properties in Western poetry that Eastern literature should also inculcate, then it should be done. Who denies that? Those who are capable should produce and add a new genre to the literary forms, either by sticking to meter, detaching from it, or however they like. They can call it whatever they wish. Mere talking won’t do. Is it not a matter of surprise that those who disregard meter in couplet themselves neither compose an unmetrical couplet nor acknowledge anyone’s *naṣr* as a couplet?

Reason for disagreement over terminologies

As far as I understand, the word “poetry”, unlike the word “couplet”, is used to mean both an individual couplet and poetics. When poetrywalahs define poetry, they mean it in the sense of poetics, and because poetics is found both in nazm as well as in essays, they take both *naṣr* and *nazm* to be poetry and meter automatically loses importance. However, the word “couplet” is not used for poetics, and whatever is a couplet, is always metrical. That is why we consider meter as an important aspect of a couplet. We also do not deny that *naṣr* can contain poetic properties. This is the reason why the Pagans of Arab called the Prophet a poet but didn’t call the Quran couplet.⁷

By couplet, we may also mean an individual couplet. But, in English, if I am not mistaken, one couplet is not called poetry, even though it may be poetic. One couplet is called either “line of poetry” or “COUPLET of poetry”, though poetry in the sense of poetics can be contained even in

⁷ The Pagans refused to accept that the Quran was Allah’s word and alleged that the Prophet was only a poet, not the messenger of Allah.

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one line or couplet. In our tradition, continuity is important neither in the couplet, nor in other genres. As a matter of fact, the categorization of speech for Western researchers is according to word and meter on the one hand and meaning and style on the other. Therefore, in scholarly terms, it is true that meter is not the defining property of the couplet. “Man is an erect animal with broad nails.” This material description is not the definition of human reality, although it occurs within this materiality. In other words, this materiality is a condition of reality. His human distinction in speaking doesn’t eliminate his animal properties. The same is true of meter. It is not the essential truth of the couplet, but the couplet always observes metricality. Especially the couplet in our tradition is not used in the sense of poetics. If it happens in the future, terminology will also adjust to reality.

An analogical argument about the importance of meter and its critical analysis

One of the analogical arguments that seeks to remove meter from the essential properties of couplets compares meter in couplets with lyrics in raga. Just as raga is independent of lyrics, so is a couplet independent of meter. Even in the depth of this analogy, there is the same fallacy that equates poetry with poetics. My first objection to this is that, in research, truth is not established based on analogies. Secondly, this analogy is itself based on a false notion that has been concocted by making both reality and terminologies deliberately ambiguous and can be understood only by looking at the details. Therefore, let me now elaborate on this.

Absolute sound, which has neither words nor melody, is a *jins*. Word and melody are two of its *faṣl*’s. In the order suggested by logic, words precede melody. This is to say, man first learned to speak, and thereafter only did he begin to sing. If you cannot speak, you can also not sing. But you can speak without singing. In this way, the premise is absolutely wrong that raga is independent of lyrics. The second order is that proposed in art and scholarship, which is what is being discussed here. It considers melody primary and words only secondary. According to this viewpoint, raga does not need lyrics. It can be sung without it. But it is still wrong to conclude from this that a couplet does not need a meter. This is so because meter and lyrics in this analysis have been considered as two autonomous and fundamental entities existing in their absolute state, even though lyrics are in reality an amalgam of word and meter. That is, it is a special arrangement of words that produces a melody, which in turn can be matched with the raga during singing. The common term for this provision in words and their arrangement is meter. Because lyrics are innately

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metrical, they are automatically *nazm*. In other words, *nazm* is the higher form of sound, while raga is the lower form. The lower must be contained in the higher. But the converse is not true. An organic body doesn't need to be sensitive, but sensitivity can only be located within an organic body. This is why raga is not dependent on lyrics. But, for lyrics to be lyrics, they should have some meter or melody, and as soon as meter is included, it enters the genus of couplet or *nazm*. Therefore, saying that a couplet doesn't need a meter is no different from saying that a couplet doesn't need to be a couplet.