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Six Ghazals from *woh jo sha'irī kā sabab huā* (The Indifferent Muse) by Kaleem Aajiz

Mohammad Saquib¹

Abstract. Kaleem Aajiz is one of the foremost names among post-independence Urdu poets of Bihar. His inimitable classical style of ghazal composition has earned him a much-envied place in the world of letters, among listeners, fellow poets and critics alike who call him Meer (Meer Taqi Meer) although this sobriquet does not sit well with him. He had seen and suffered the horrors of Partition first-hand and makes it the central theme of his poetry. This translation is an attempt to understand and situate his poetry in the corpuses of Indian Urdu Literature, Urdu Literature from Bihar and Partition Literature. His sedated approach towards disconsolate grief during Partition troubles makes his poetry unique and lends it a rare authenticity. The translations of his ghazals tilt more towards retaining the sense and as such miss out on the seductive appeal of retaining the ghazal form itself in the English translation.

Keywords. Kaleem Aajiz, Urdu Poetry, Ghazal, Translation, Grief, Meer Taqi Meer, Partition

Introduction

Dr. Kaleem Ahmad 'Aajiz,' popular in Urdu poetry circles as "the Meer of present times," was born in Tilhara, thirty miles from the city of Patna, Bihar. Although both 1920 and 1926 are cited by different sources as his birth-years, he relies on his mother's memory to pin down 11th October 1926 as the date of his birth. A voracious reader since childhood, his poetic sensibilities owed much to both, his immediate and extended families. His own precociousness and refined tastes in literature had him meet and absorb much from poets and authors during his stay in Calcutta, a bustling centre for literature and

¹ Mohammad Saquib is an Assistant Professor, English at Akal University Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda (Punjab).

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arts at the time. He was an alumnus of Patna University and later taught there as well. The killing of his entire family (except his younger brother) in the pogroms before the Partition in 1946 became the most significant event of his life and the unmistakable muse for his poetry. He often returns and re-returns to the event in the tragi-romantic style of the ghazal and if the listener/reader is perceptive enough, (s)he will notice that it is very conspicuously and precariously paraded across his poetry. One could easily say he never left this dark nook and returned to it over and over again. But it definitely gave meaning and purpose to his creative enterprise and sustained it lifelong and the passing years only kept adding more depth and perspective to this doleful acquaintance with a frozen event of horror in his life. This sensibility did not however shadow the normal course of Aajiz's life in contrast to a number of poets who often resign to self-destructive abandon under such arduous circumstances. He reconciled with his pain and kept it private in the modality of mundane expressions, alluding only in his poetry. He had a notable academic career, travelled widely, was associated with social uplift and owing to his long association with the proselytising movement of *Tablighī Jamā't*, he was also a notable religious figure of Bihar. A Padma Shree awardee, Dr. Aajiz apart from being a renowned poet, also served as the Chairman of Urdu Advisory Committee, Bihar. He passed away on 14th February 2015 in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand.

Aajiz has a simple colloquial style that survived around the cultural centre of Azimabad (Patna). It does not come from a conscious effort of arriving, rather, it comes naturally, and is evidenced in the conversations he recalls in his reminiscence piece, "*Adā kyūnkar kareṅge chand ānsuū dil ka afsāna*" (how would a few tears express a lifetime of grief) that serves as the Introduction and a doorway to his poetry and to his first poetry collection *wo jo sha'irī kā sabab huā* (The Indifferent Muse) which was released in 1976 by the then President of India, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad. His expression of complex thoughts and emotions in commonplace Urdu phrases not very unlike Meer had earned him the sobriquet of "Meer of present times." There are other parallels between the two that are less routine than just the simplicity of poetic expression pregnant with profound thought. Despite their regional variance and significant temporal gap, the resemblance in rhyming inflections are uncanny, the *radīf* (recurring word/words following the rhyme or *qāfiya* in an Urdu couplet, returning in every second line of each couplet in the ghazal form except the first couplet where both the lines have *radīf*) and oftentimes the *qāfiya* (rhyming word/words that come directly before the *radīf* in a ghazal that determine the central rhyming pattern of that ghazal) seem to be a continuation of ghazals of Meer Taqi Meer. This however comes as an effortless exercise to Aajiz and there hardly seems any forced or animated attempt to imitate Meer; his style is his own, developed and matured over time. The other semblance comes from the life experiences of both the poets and seems to complement the language and style they chose to write poetry in and scores more on significance. Their poetry is marked

with a deep tinge of sadness and sorrow claimed to be arising from their tragic life circumstances beset with heart-breaking deaths of near and dear ones. Aajiz writes of a close bond of commensalism between the listener/reader and the poet, both enriching the other in style, taste, content and refinement from which he has benefitted to an extent. He resists and is peeved by comparisons to other Urdu poets arguing about the nature and provenance of grief, pain and sorrow in their work which he claims is bookish while the pain and suffering he talks about transcend mere observation; it is his own and is different in intensity as well. In contrast to the everyday trials and tribulations, his is a drowning sorrow that he claims even Meer might not have experienced.

The genre of ghazal is typical in the less palpable threads of themes it is mostly spun around, and Aajiz is no exception to that. It often rests on the poet to put his skill to use and convey in a few verses meanings that range from the obvious and quotidian to the esoteric and recondite. Dr. Aajiz always alludes in his ghazals to the one family tragedy that remained his “lingering consumption” throughout, infusing it with politics, ethics, philosophy, spirituality and the likes. The obvious veneer of love, loss, longing, separation, pain and resignation to the discerning eye reveals the aggrieved preponderance with one central subject that he treasured all his life. It gives a new perspective to flowers, thorns, nightingales, wine-house, beloved, poetry, fidelity, yearning and desire etc. without completely subverting their longstanding salience. His subjects also offer a contrapuntal reading from a dried out theoretical perspective, one that originated in the west and is zealously sought to be juxtaposed across various world regions and strata with overt political undertones. He is not embittered or enraged when referring to a tyrant or an assassin although he is alluding to real persecution as opposed to the sadistic cruelty of the regular beloved. This inverted flow of adoration and representation in the ghazal form not as a beloved that inflicts miseries but privations that become the object of love without being elegiac is the distinct soul of Aajiz’s poetry. He is very direct about the overarching theme and subject of his poetry: “*jahan gham mila uthāyā phir use ghazal meñ dhālā*” (“all the sufferings in my fate I accepted, and moulded into poetry”). One could also say he refined the art of political poetry infusing it with subtlety and intellectual nuances.

Although a famous poet in national and international Urdu circles, Dr. Kaleem Ahmad ‘Aajiz,’ is more significant on at least two counts, that he lived through the horrors of partition not simply as an observer (the adjectives of distant and invested not relevant here) but drowned to great depths in their darkness, and that he hails from the poetic circles of Bihar with Azimabad (Patna), an old centre of Urdu literature and culture. This very contextualization makes him a towering representative of late twentieth century classical Urdu poetry in Bihar which remains less attended to in critical academics of Urdu literature in a general comparative sense. This, along with the simplicity of his poetic idiom and uniqueness in the older form

of expression, led me to gravitate towards the translation of his poetry. The translation is also an attempt to situate and contextualize Urdu poetry from Bihar in the corpus of English translation. Aajiz remains a typical representative of classical Urdu poetry in this century whose style and art are as authentic and truthful as one could wish for.

It is always difficult to cull out pieces that best represent the overall mood, style and gradual development of a poet. There also comes the accessibility to a plausible translation while singling out a ghazal that often gets coupled, along with the question of which translation to go with, to the very form of ghazal that is whether to stick to the *qāfiya-radīf* rhyme and meter or to go with free verse to be close to the sense of it all. Skilled poets like Agha Shahid Ali have translated and composed with great tact in the form retaining the sense to great measure. The grammar and syntax of Urdu have indeed a significant role in the popularity of the ghazal form although not native to Urdu tradition and hence difficultly tractable in English with no pre-existing equivalent forms. Translating Aajiz comes with another difficulty as well which follows this problem of formal equivalence. That difficulty lies in the impossibility of equivalent inflectional colloquialisms, the turns of the regional in his ghazals that add to the originality of expression and stand as a unique quality of his ghazals and a failure to translate that seems unfortunate yet inevitable. The range offered by Urdu/Hindi in this regard cannot be matched by English and mere adaptation in to a regional English dialect would be a futile adventure. Take for instance the freshness added by the verb form 'karo ho' in one of his most popular couplets. One could only wish to translate along with that verb form:

Dāman pe koi chīnt na khanjar pe koi dāgh

Tum qatl karo ho ke karāmāt karo ho

(your clothes aren't bloodstained your dagger spotless too

It is magical how you kill, one should learn from you)

The six ghazals chosen here are from various stages of Aajiz's poetic career. The first ghazal (*khushī hai kyā kisī āwāra- e watan ke liye*) also titled in his collection as First Ghazal and dated December 1949, is not included in the first section with 16 ghazals called "*ibtidā'ī daur kī ghazalen*" (Early Ghazals). Strangely enough, it is put in the next section, "*ghazalen 1952 ta 1972*" (Ghazals: 1952-1972) which should ideally not include a ghazal written in 1949. The title and date do not appear in any other ghazal. It is quite possible that it was his first ghazal composed after the sudden catastrophe that befell him. Here he takes up the themes of fidelity, loss and tragedy and for one aware of its undivorceable context, it is a saddening reflection on the surrender to a dismay clipped of all rage and dysphoria. The second ghazal (*aisī bahār āye ke ab ke bahār mein*) takes the context of spring to contrast it with the sorrow of the poet's heart. His grief has come to haunt him during springtime as he has no cause to cheer. The third ghazal (*ham gharībōn pe to ilzām hai bejā terā*) takes up the theme of the complaining, lovelorn, lover

Six ghazals from *woh jo sha'irī kā sabab huā* by Kaleem Aajiz

and is also politically charged in interpretations. The lover's complaint is mixed with adoration and resignation in equal measure. The fourth ghazal (*judā dīwānāpan ab aise dīwāne se kyā hogā*) drops more tragic notes of helplessness, betrayal and the stoic acceptance of lifelong suffering. The fifth ghazal (*ārzū dāman hī phailātī rahī*) is perhaps one of the more direct expressions of something that can only be alluded to due to its unspeakability. It is also an expression of the relation between his sorrow and his poetic engagement and its reception as well. The sixth ghazal (*merā hāl pūchh ke humnashīn mere soz e dīl ko hawā na de*) could not be left out for the simple reason that it contains the title of this poetic collection i.e. *wo jo sha'irī kā sabab huā* (The Indifferent Muse). Apart from being a profound poem it is also noteworthy in the brilliant use of the same *qāfiya* and *radīf* as in Shakeel Badayuni's famous ghazal "*mere ham nafas mere ham nawā mujhe dost ban ke daghā na de* (O my love! my intimate friend! Do not betray me after your vows of loyalty). The poet's wound is likened to a delicate treasure that is painful yet precious, one that he cherishes and holds dear but does not wish for anybody else. This is not out of possessiveness but the sheer weight of pain that has to be borne, one that few could go through, stays life-long and obviates the signification of any other thing or event.

I

First Ghazal

Joy holds no meaning for a soul cast aside,
Even if the land is reborn in the glad springtide.

I was not beholden to the tulips and roses,
I gave all my life for a ruthless despoiler.

If I found some moments of solitude perchance,
I recalled solemn memories of long-gone friends.

How do I protest to their injustices, O Aajiz?
Fidelity requires me to keep my lips sealed.

-December 1949.

II

Never had the spring worn such hues before,
The shrivelled trees stand, begging for shade.

There's no place for passion in this colourless spring

Neither will nor action stands true to the heart.

No secrets I hold to my eventful days
The euphony you hear is the tune of my ruin.

Who knows hope is stranded in what alien land
I have waited too long for the silver lining.

I was eager for Spring at the onset of Autumn
Now I long for Autumn in this dreary Spring.

In the same garden reigns desolation and verdure
They relish their juvenescence as I sit in anguish.

O Aajiz! Your verses wallow in such affectations
Have you no words left for the beloved's ringlets.

III

It is not fair that you blame us wretched souls
Listen for the whole world holds you guilty.

I know all about the cruel games you play
I while away time watching your mischief.

I live in silence, without address or epitaph,
Slip quietly in oblivion not to sully your name.

No relief could come of your false succor,
Your salve won't cure my wounded heart.

I keep grace intact even in frenzied passion,
Your secrets are preserved with my dignity.

Losing oneself to wild abandon was rare a while ago,
But now the world seems hopelessly infatuated by you.

They cry foul in vain, begrudge and complain,
Six ghazals from *woh jo sha'iri kā sabab huā* by Kaleem Aajiz

Yours is the sole discretion who you entertain.

IV

There exists no cure for such a condition as mine
People try to talk sense into me but I am long gone

What glory tell, lies in a sacrifice without the ritual pain
I choose to smolder in agony while the moth burns in a blink

They say he is my assassin, O! he had killed me indeed
Let him swear his innocence, the world knows his guilt

It is only fitting that you pull back your hands O Aajiz,
When prayer has no effect, it's no use raising the hands.

V

The yearnings lingered with fervent entreaties
And the indifferent spring just kept passing by.

Consciousness required me to remain mindful,
But inebriation convinced me to lose myself.

Unfettered by the destiny of the candle or the moth
You kept yourself entertained in blissful apathy.

My friends kept lamenting over my miseries,
And I kept smiling and smirking at my fate.

The burning candle as it consumes itself
Illuminates the gathering on the meaning of pain.

Long after I lost the rhythmic beats of the heart,
A faint dim echo kept reverberating around.

Even as I kept screaming earnestly in distress,
Six ghazals from *woh jo sha'iri kā sabab huā* by Kaleem Aajiz

There were those who just dozed off to slumber.

VI

Why do you so stoke my sorrow dear friend by asking after me,
My sole prayer now is that this grief not befall anybody.

The wound that I have been nursing, carrying around in secret,
Someone unversed in matters of grief might scuff it afresh.

I commanded long the high ground where you sit and judge the world,
I am not some regular destitute who would answer at your hollering.

The vicissitudes of love have brimmed my eyes with tears,
I would that theses squalls of grief leave its lamp burning.

The indifferent Muse of tragedy, that tale of grief and woe,
I relate in my verses, so the world binds it to memory.