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# “Rāshid Anwar Rāshid kā Shā’irāna Ijtihād”

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*Translated by*

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**Abstract:** Rashid Anwar Rashid (1970–2024) was an academic at Aligarh Muslim University and a versatile author, poet, and critic. He published about 25 books, which include environmental poetry in Urdu, fiction and non-fiction, and also translations from English to Urdu. He received numerous awards for his writing. By way of introduction to Rashid and his craft, I translate below Safdar Imam Quadri’s essay “Rāshid Anwar Rāshid kā Shā’irānah Ijtihād” published in *Dhoop Aisi to Nahin thi Pahle* (back then, the sun wasn’t like this), a selection of the poems of Rashid Anwar Rashid (Creative Star Publications, New Delhi, 2018). These translations are part of a major research project funded by ICSSR on translating regional environmental literatures into English, 2026.

**Keywords:** Modern Urdu Poetry, Rashid Anwar Rashid

## Rashid Anwar Rashid’s Poetic Striving

There are many facets to Rashid Anwar Rashid’s artistic genius. He has the distinction of being an author, poet, and translator. He has numerous books in every genre but generally insists on his identity as a poet. Such artists who have mastered several genres often get underestimated. With the exception of Ghalib and Hali, there are barely any artists whose multi-dimensional perceptions have received attention and empathetic understanding. We often pressure our writers with the idea that they should master only one genre. An English proverb, ‘Jack of all trades, but master of none,’ is used in jest.

Maybe this is why artists who work in different genres confess to

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themselves that 'my natural talent was in some specific genre, but I tried my hand at other genres just as a pastime.' Contrary to this predicament of Urdu writers, if we take a look at European languages, we would find that most of the time, modern writers exercise their creativity writing both poetry and prose and happily making their audacity public. Writing a poem at some point in time, at another criticism, and at yet another, taking the road to writing a novel, and if the inclination exists, not even hesitating to write drama. With reference to Rashid Anwar Rashid, it would be correct to say that poetry was the mode of writing he sought for freedom of expression, and it gave him immense happiness and fulfillment. In his poetry, he appears to breathe freedom and also boasts of taking literary creation to new heights. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to recognize him as a poet. He is prolific as a writer of both nazms and ghazals, and by bringing issues and philosophical focus into them, he introduces new flavor to poetry. Perceiving nature with special attention or reading romantic sensibilities into it cannot be considered as something routine. One can have no objection to accepting this uniqueness and individuality as the foundation of his poetic genius. This is so because in the era of modern Urdu poetry in terms of subject and style, there are few who, like Rashid, through dense shades of free verse, manifestations of nature, and romantic literature, can create fresh possibilities of understanding. Sooner or later, critics will turn their attention to Rashid, and his unique style and voice will impress them.

Generally speaking, it is not easy to recognize two poetic uniqueness. A bigger question is whether it is easy for a poet to develop a unique voice. Considering Rashid's age, he has experience of merely three decades.

What secrets can words ever yield in thirty years? In the olden days, ustād's teachers would not even allow the compilation of a divān, but today, publishing houses have created opportunities for everybody. The poet has benefited due to an increase in the number of his admirers, and he can also learn about the impressions of his readers much faster. In this way, a poet does not have to wait till his death to be noticed. Rashid has a substantial following. Famous poets and critics have appreciated his poetry anthologies, but enough has not been done to introduce him to the literary world at large. Our critical precepts have changed so much that those who exercise freedom to create great works do not receive the benefits of free and fair criticism. Critics give more importance to writers instead of critiquing their works. Numerous books have been written on those whose work is not even a few pages-worth of criticism, and those

whose work deserves to be read closely are overlooked. As a result, our writers are fated to baseless fame and ruthless obscurity. Such matters have not allowed us to focus seriously on Rashid. Traditionally, importance has been given to current trends or regional loyalties. This has spelt the ruin of our poets and our poetry. The same id is the case with fiction. In short, people who could evaluate the tremor of every word and who labored to identify it are few and far between.

As far as his prose writings and creative works are concerned, Rashid does not lay emphasis on the study of poetic metre in his poetic works. He is not disappointed, but he waits for a time when his poetic creations and their uniqueness will find a receptive atmosphere. He does not have the restlessness of new writers, and even in case of being sidelined or being misunderstood, he does not promote his merits. As he himself is a critic, he could utilize his critical abilities to highlight his uniqueness like some writers and raise new points to support himself. This displays the virtue of patience in him, and more than dreaming of fame, he believes in laboring on his craft. He strives to create a unique artistic and intellectual grandeur in his poetry. It is therefore binding on us that we study such a poet closely and pay attention to him, who has managed to make a place, however small, like Dard or Momin, on the basis of his individual style.

Rashid dedicated his collection of poems *Gīt Sunātī hai Havā* (the wind sings songs; Arshia Publications, Delhi, 2015) to Varis Alvi and acknowledged in the introduction that a letter from Alvi had been the inspiration behind his poetry. Varis had praised Rashid's nature poetry and held that he was the only poet after Nasir Kazmi in whose work nature has a presence. These elements exist in European romantic and nature poetry. As an outcome of the Aligarh movement, words like 'nature' and 'natural' and even words like 'naturally' have become very common. Over a century has come to pass, and these words have become a part of the Urdu language, but the truth is that their point of reference has become separate, and this is why we are unable to find poetry that is related to nature. Some progressive poets presented high-quality romantic, nature poetry, but during that period our literature was so burdened by subject-related writing for which there was no convenient cure. As a result, our great poets wrote great poetry on specific subjects, but no attempts were made to change the nature of poetry by writing on nature.

When Rashid Anwar Rashid came out with his poetry collection *Gīt Rāshid Anwar Rāshid kā Shā'irāna Ijtihād*

*Sunatī hai Havā*, some time back, we were reminded of a forgotten lesson from our language. In today's changing world there has been a change of perspectives with regard to understanding and perceiving the universe. Environmental issues and oppression have made us aware and given us the opportunity to understand that human life cannot survive in isolation from other created life. Animals are not merely creatures with life. Trees, plants, rivers, the earth, and the mountains support human life, and that is why there is peace in the lives of the noblest of creation. Had this not been the case, the sun would have blazed so fiercely that human life would be destroyed. In environmental terminology this is the 'life cycle.' When natural disasters increased and discussions centered around the exploitation of nature by man, and questions were raised as to whether the earth is meant to be used by humans in an unlimited manner or there should also be a balance and equilibrium in using its bounties, we learned that there exists a conditional relationship between humans and the environment. Negligence in one area leads to the destruction of another. Did we ever think about the heart and soul of the green trees that were destroyed to make the sheet of paper we used? When too many trees were cut down, the mountains became weak. Rainwater flowed down with greater force, and the disaster from floods increased. We crushed rivers for making roads for our convenience. We built huge dams to harness electricity from water. One flood and one earthquake can shake up the whole setup. When dangers increased, the awareness dawned that we had no right to meddle with nature; rather, with the gifts of nature—they should have been used with thoughts on conservation. Only when millions of lives were lost did humanity realize that one must exercise wisdom on the road to progress.

Rashid Anwar Rashid did not write long articles on environmental issues. Even in his introductions he did not enumerate in the manner of an environmental expert to draw attention to his purposes. The truth is that amongst the Urdu literateurs, poets, and critics, there may not even be a dozen who know the basics of modern environmentalism. Even today, our debates are steeped in feudal, capitalist, or colonial systems. The democratic issues in our debates don't move beyond factionalism and consumerism. Then how can a new poet like Rashid Anwar Rashid be praised for writing poetry that does not center popular subjects?

As a result, despite praise from Qazi Abdul Sattar and Shafey Kidwai in their introductions, Rashid's environmental poetry has gathered less acceptance than his romantic poetry. This has happened because our critics need to gain knowledge about environmental issues.

In this complex world, democracy has always provided us with opportunities to help understand it and create new principles and regulations, but unless we have a proper mindset, how can we carry the burden of understanding this world?

If one reads Rashid Anwar Rashid's environmental poems and *ghazals* one would feel transported to another solar system in which plants, trees, animals, birds, sun, moon, flowers, fruit, sunlight, and rain all lead one life—rather, each is seen leading a purposive and individual life, similar to the way humans live on earth. Rashid has moved beyond humans and *djins* to find new communities created by God on the earth. This friendship has a separate status because it holds a new, awakened understanding of the universe. In this understanding, natural landscapes are not merely meant to be used, but instead, they are an inseparable part of our lives. Rashid does not present nature as moving and living with us aimlessly. Reducing his poetic expression to mere personification of nature would be an injustice, because, over here, Urdu poetry is seen to enter a new area of concern—one that promises to extend the boundaries of our language.

We will begin a discussion on Rashid's *ghazals* with these selections. Rhyming words such as valley of flowers (*vādī -e gul*), trees (*darakhṭ*), rose (*gulāb*), flowers (*phūl*), leaves (*patte*), moonlight (*chāndnī*), shade (*chhāoñ*), sunlight (*dhūp*), sun (*sūraj*), sky (*āsmān*), dust (*khāk*), water (*pānī*), wind (*havā*), earth (*zamīn*), night (*rāt, shab*), morning (*subah*), evening (*shām*), river (*nadī*), mountain (*pahāḍ*), flowing water (*āb-e ravāñ*), desert (*registān*), dust (*gard-o ghubār*), forest (*jangal*) etc., are specific words that force the reader to focus on the semantic nature of the poet's entire work. Have these words been introduced into the verse without an intention? Could it be considered an unconscious impulse in the writing of verse, or does it reveal a new direction, a new thought, and a new style? Rhyme is so important to the word structure of a *ghazal* that even if a poem develops it unintentionally, a world of intention emerges from it involuntarily. Some critics of the *ghazal* see this as a limitation, but we must keep in mind that the poet is not a puppet. He creates a world of intention. He is also aware of the relationships between words and meaning. Therefore, not one word from him is unintentional or unconscious.

Similarly, the titles of his poems deserve special attention. Shadows emerging in the mist, in the lake and near the whirlpool, the sun was never like this, the moon appears to sulk looking down upon the river, the careless river songs, restless wind, evening in flight, trees are being

chopped down, the tamarind tree and the ancestral house, the ocean keeps screaming, the restless waves of the ocean and you, the wood of the forest and sunlight of ages, stars! Help me, the fragrance of mud, the story of the nightingale and the rose—in choosing the titles of his poems, Rashid has created a picture gallery. Whether in the rhymes of his *ghazals* or in the titles of his *nazms*, he has deliberately created an expanse of words in which nature's manifestation showers its bounty. On the level of contemplation, the poet's objective is to view the beauty around him and make it part of his poetic ecstasy. Mir too would see faces in walls, and<sup>1</sup> Rashid too in his heart and soul, with countless gazing eyes, wants to see and showcase the natural world and its numerous faces. Before a debate takes place over here on arrival and reception, one should first turn to Mir Taqi Mir to discuss Rashid's work. Dr. Abdul Rashid in *Farhang-e Kalām-e Mīr*, after selecting poems from various poetry collections by Mir, asserted that while writing poetry, Mir unethically borrowed from Khan Arzoo's dictionary, *Chirāgh-e Hidāyat*. If one were to look closely at words, strategies, and perspectives of rhythm, we would realize that he gave a new coloring to Urdu poetry. It was necessary to cite the example of Mir so that a new window of our mind may be opened and to make us understand that a poet breaks all traditions with a fervor and puts pressure on the critic and reader to interpret his poetry according to new concepts. This is why, in trying to evaluate Rashid's poetry, his conscious striving should not be labelled as something outside literature or as a strange expression.

Through his unique poetic style, Rashid challenges contemporary critics. If one reads his poetry with negligence or gets caught up in a critic's arrogance, he will not be able to appreciate his poetry. In Rashid's poetry the entire creation of God on earth and in the heavens—humans, djins, non-living and animate worlds—unites and connects in the manner as God had planned to shape the universe. His world holds not just humans, trees, rivers, the sun, and the moon, but instead all existence is so intertwined and appears so connected and necessary to each other that nothing can be separated from the other—rather, the truth is that they are so embedded in each other's lives that separating them would scatter them and make them lose their identity.

<sup>1</sup> *Chashm ho to āīnākhānā hai dahr*

*Muñh naẓar ātā hai dīvāroñ ke bīch*

For the keen-eyed this world is a house of mirrors

Wherein an individual's mark is perceptible on walls (See Rizvi "Introduction."

*Shadows on the Wall*, Om Books International, 2026, pp. xxxiv.)

Rāshid Anwar Rāshid kā Shā'irāna Ijtihād

A ghazal by Rashid is included in this selection. It contains ‘darakhṭ’ as the rhyming word. I have quoted a few verses so that the poet’s world of meaning may be understood.

On a small pretext the courtyard tree was cut  
So, everyone dreamt that the tree had wept  
This is not an ancient story, it happened yesterday  
Birds sang lullabies, the tree was green once  
I too want to tour this island  
Where the earthly gods were silent, but the tree spoke  
They are cutting the jungle from all sides  
This tribe once used to worship the tree

It couldn’t welcome the traveler wholeheartedly  
For now, the tree bereft of its own shade  
Why doesn’t he come – The one named Gautam?  
The tree would ask every hermit this question  
When I left town and to come to the village  
With what fond gaze the tree looked at me  
Why are the branches naked this blossoming spring  
In Autumn we had seen the tree, looking so dense  
So the wind of times finally trapped it  
How could it survive, the tree had grown weak (31-32)

The tree being cut down, its weeping, it was green and birds sang lullabies in it, the tree’s speech, the tree worshipping tribe cutting down the forest, the tree being deprived of its own shade, the tree seeking Gautam Buddha, the tree gazing fondly, the tree’s branches becoming naked, the tree growing weak and being overpowered by winds and the tree’s existence being destroyed—these are the verses of this ghazal. Perhaps someone can write an article and bring all sources of information in one place and prepare a treatise—what more can be said? Reading some of the poems by Nazeer Akbarabadi surprises us in the sense that what more could be said on the subject. Along with the power of observation, involving comparison and contrast, association and disassociation from every vista of life is such an emotional and psychological experience that enriches poetry and makes it engaging. Rashid has shown the state of the tree at so many inner and outer levels

that the tree is not commonplace rather it appears as a special member of our society and its feelings and emotions seem closely tied to human life. There is a famous ghazal by Rashid which uses the rhyming word ‘wind’ (*havā*). He took a line from this ghazal- “the wind sings a song,” (*Gīt Sunatī hai Havā*) and named his poetry collection after it. The verses in this ghazal need to be read to understand his new perspective:

Does the wind stir up some painful memory  
Why does it noisily break the cold silence  
The birds have brought a message, let’s listen  
The wind sings a song near the lake,  
Those who left, never returned from the border  
Now the wind calls to them in some wilderness

How does the wind affect us and in what different forms do we see it? Let us look at its presence in Rashid’s poetry — it stirs up painful memories, it howls, it sings songs, its calls out to us, makes flowers blossom – this style of writing itself has no small stature but Rashid seeks to go even beyond this in expressing a variety of emotions:

The Gardens wilted, meadow wept, deserts brooded  
Where does the wind drift leaving everyone in despair  
Come fragrance, stay a while in our courtyard  
Once again, the wind heralds springtime blossoms

This is an unusual presentation of the wind – one such companion of human life which will support us till the very end. How these unnoticed gifts of nature impact human life! Rashid has drawn our attention to this in his own unique style. If this were not so, how could he have produced such verses:

The golden birds fly back to their nests in flocks  
When the breeze makes flowers blossom on dry branches  
Open your closed windows to welcome it in  
With what grace and grandeur blows the wind

These verses are not celebrating anthropocentrism, rather, they speak about the connectedness of human beings and nature.

In one ghazal the inclusion of the main rhyming word ‘earth’(zamīn) and in another, the rhyming word ‘dust’ (khāk) is also worth noticing. The poet is so acutely aware of his environment, that he uses ‘earth’ and ‘dust’ as subjects and wins appreciation for it. In the first

couplet Rashid mentions the condition of the modern world – how else could this line be a part of the couplet: “On witnessing the scene, the earth was frightened.” Larger issues than this one are debated today. The conflicts between environmentalists and those who support urbanization are noted by the poet who creates the following couplet:

Some time back green fields danced in the breeze over here  
And now, I see that houses have been built all over that land (38-39)

What kind of mood was Rashid in when he created this strange and unusual verse, for such rare verses are created out of innocence and affection. Here is another sample of Rashid’s remarkable poetic genius:

She had this strange obsession to meet the sky  
Every particle tried stopping her but the earth went anyway  
Along with the different moods of the earth, the verses of the ghazal with ‘khāk give us an indication of other moods. Here, along with the various situations of life and the use of idiomatic language, the poem is an attempt to create a sense of delight. These single lines from couplets are proof of Rashid’s eloquence:

Quietly to my courtyard comes the dust  
On looking closely, I saw everyone was covered with dust  
Now, even man’s faith is covered in dust  
Along with the traditional usage of language some modern issues have also found utterance. The following verses can be useful in understanding the poet’s mind:

Desires are forsaken so a better person may emerge  
My soaring hopes are mixed with futility and dust  
Who has time for leisure in this fast-paced world  
Dust settles on the Divān of Mir over here  
God alone knows what will happen to Qais now  
The desert is bereft of sand and desolation no dust (35)

From the first verse to the last, creation coexists with destruction and dream with reality in such a way that reflections on life and the illusion of life emerge by themselves. The poet brings forth so many new dimensions of khāk that a person feels stunned. Dust mingling with high hopes specifically at a time when desires are trying to build themselves expresses anguish. Adding to this, the poet is troubled by the feeling that

the new life is defined by fast pace in which it is barely possible to find time for the poetry of Mir or any other poet. That is why dust continues to settle on the anthology of Mir. The poet has drawn our attention to issues related to the present times and in the last verse of this ghazal, he reminds us of Qais. The issue is that there is no sand in the desert and neither dust in desolation. In such circumstances what will happen to Qais or any other lover, for that matter, any courageous soul? In the midst of complicated issues of modern times Rashid Anwar Rashid never forgets romantic and traditional topics and manages to find a unique opportunity to use them – and this is a distinctive style of poetry

An effective poet always astonishes us again and again and we cannot but appreciate and applaud his genius. The presence of tradition and modernity, romance and classicism along with reflections on new topics inclines us towards serious discussions. In the ghazal with the rhyming word ‘water’ (pānī) Rashid paints a variety of pictures related to present times successfully. The genius of an inventive poet is visible when he blends his language with classical devices. In all this tumult the theatricality of idiomatic language is presented with such delight, that we become aware of the poet’s polyawareness, otherwise he might be accepted as merely an environmental poet or one, concerned only with language, but Rashid has come full circle in his journey of putting together a variety of thoughts. The following first lines of couplets demonstrate how he has used various idioms for the rhyming word pānī.

#The one that overwhelmed a thousand hearts  
 #And then it poured and poured incessantly  
 #I was always able to defeat the oppressor  
 # The waters of this place have begun to suit me

Rashid does not limit himself to idiomatic language, he is celebrated for bringing in new experiences and new topics which give his poetry both, newness and completeness. In this ghazal itself he has included such delightful, romantic verses that one cannot but praise him:

Love pleased the heart so much  
 The lunatic found sustenance in the city  
 Would that the innocent ones knew  
 Your poison proved lethal  
 Your ailing lovers are on their death bed  
 Intoxicate them with your eyes

Rashid does not forgo contemporary issues while presenting idiomatic language or romantic traditions. In his oeuvre there are always some new themes or issues. In these he is always supported by his understanding of environment and he always successfully presents new perceptions. Let us then glance at some verses in this world:

Everyone should look for a safe place  
Nothing will be possible when the city floods  
Now I understand why the taste is different  
I changed place for a change of air – the water changed  
You would say that river had dried up  
Despite harsh weather there's much water in the river (36-37)

Rashid's environmental awareness is also apparent in his nazms. Ghazals have a familiar and tried and tested structure but nazms require that every new topic be presented with clarity. Rashid has understood the nature of nazms and presented those issues very differently from the manner of the ghazals. This has led to an increase in debates, questions and answers, impressions, reactions, etc. There were barely any possibilities of debates in ghazals but this opportunity has been created by nazms. His nazms may be very compact – when the need arose the poet did not hesitate in presenting a new style. The innocent tone, the loving attention towards life and the universe, ranging from issues at home to issues of world peace appear to become part of poetry with such coordination that we must applaud Rashid Anwar Rashid for his skilful mastery in writing nazms along with ghazals.

It would be an injustice not to have a brief discussion of his other works besides his environmental writings such as his romantic nazms and his general ghazals. When he published his collection of romantic poetry most critics and readers were shocked because contemporary poetry was dealing with the brutalities and relevant issues of the present age. At such a time Rashid brought out a collection of romantic poetry. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the collection of romantic poetry even after much searching, no obscene verses could be found. Rashid attempted to connect romantic poetry to our everyday life. People had praised Hasrat Mohani's ghazals for this very quality. Rashid Anwar Rashid too has presented a large number of similar creations. May he too be celebrated and honored!



**Select Poems by Rashid Anwar Rashid**

*from*

***Gīt Sunatī hai Havā<sup>2</sup>***

*Translated by*

**Sami Rafiq**

**Forest Timber**

On mountain tracks,  
Balancing bundles of wood,  
The caravan of tribal women is on the move,  
This caravan will travel for a distance  
And then stop in the village bazaar,  
Then the timber will be taken down from heads.

These logs which were cut  
And taken from beautiful forests,  
Will become the glory of the bazaar.  
The women who brought the wood,  
Carrying the weight of timber,  
In their silence,  
Deep in their hearts,  
Will sing odes  
To their robust, muscular men  
Praising their youth and vigor.

And a short distance from the bazaar,  
Their men  
With their sharp axes,  
Will be intent

<sup>2</sup> These poems talk about the loss of biodiversity owing to the unethical means by which human beings chop down forests and abuse rivers. There are undercurrents of pain and anguish as the poet sees calamitous climate change and the suffering of the non-human around him.

On clearing the forest.

These are the very lovers  
On whom  
The beauty of the forest survived,  
In every atom,  
In every corner of this forest,  
The spirit of these lovers dwelt.

Their bodies have become lean in this forest,  
And for them,  
This is the only way to survive,  
They want to kill the forest and live.  
The ones who boast  
Of progress in a thousand ways,  
How empty are they within.

### On Glancing at the River

Looking at the river  
Causes anguish now,  
The river had a past  
In countless history books,  
The river had eminence  
The river was a source of culture.

Its waves  
Taught humanity in the beginning,  
The ideas of evolution.  
Its pure, clean waters  
Nurtured for ages,  
Countless races.  
Its screaming, noisy waves  
Were harnessed for progress,  
But it was blind progress,  
That changed the river's face,

So much beyond recognition,  
The eyes can barely believe,  
What is before them is real!

That which flows  
Is a dirty, stinking gutter,  
Whose numerous stories fill books!  
How many generations did it rear!  
When the eyes  
Glimpse the state of the river,  
There is deep anguish.

### Evening of Flight

In the inky darkness of evening,  
A bird takes flight,  
It desires a companion.  
It trembles at the memory,  
Of the night's fearful turmoil,  
So in the dimness of dusk,  
It deserts its nest,  
And remains forever in flight.  
But its journey like always,  
Is tortured with thirst!

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