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Mahjoor as a Harbinger of New Age in Kashmiri Poetry: A Study

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The present paper is an attempt to place Mahjoor in the history of Kashmiri poetry and study his outpourings against the form and thematic background prevailing before him, so as to underscore his contributions as a harbinger of a sort of renaissance in twentieth century Kashmiri poetry. This paper will also illustrate how Mahjoor puffed in a fresh air in Kashmiri poetry while maintaining a middle ground between being an extreme traditional on the one hand, and an outright rebel on the other. Endeavour will also be made to explore how Mahjoor by introducing unprecedented themes and issues like nature, flora and fauna, ordinary day-day aspects, mundane love, local environment, freedom from political, economic and social subjugation etc. not only brought in modernity and a new era in Kashmiri poetry but also by doing so, expanded its canvas. What is more, unlike earlier poets all these themes were rendered in a language understood alike by the learned and the hoi polloi earning him such titles as "The Poet of Kashmir," as well as "The Wordsworth of Kashmir".

Introduction

Mahjoor stands as the most distinguished pioneers of the modern Kashmiri poetry. He remains a very well-known name in the whole of valley. Born in a religiously revered Peerzada family on August 11, 1887 at, Mitrigaam, a charming region of the valley of Kashmir, he was named as Ghulam Ahmad Peerzada. While his conformist father desired him to follow his ecclesiastical occupation, Mahjoor had different curiosities. One day, in the winter of 1905, he swiftly slipped away and reached Amritsar, a city in the Punjab. It was during this sojourn that he got the splendid opportunity of meeting such distinguished Urdu poets of the day, like Maulana Bismil and Alama Shibli which kindled his poetic imagination. It was here that he assumed 'Mahjoor' as his poetic pseudonym. However, the turning point in Mahjoor's career came in early 20th century when he was invited to a poetic symposium where the Urdu poem he narrated was not received well by the audience. The bitterness that this incident left in him made him apprehend that Urdu or Persian was not the right medium for his poetic manifestation. Subsequently, he bade farewell to Urdu and Persian and, instead, turned to his mother tongue, Kashmiri.

Discussion

Fourteenth century has been regarded as an unprecedented period in the entire history of Kashmiri poetry. Unanimously all the distinguished critics and historians of Kashmiri language and literature, like Azad (1984), Avtar Krishan Rahbar (1997), Naji Munawwar, Shafi Shauq (1992), Jayalal Kaul (1968) and Raina (2002) agree to this fact. Firstly, because this period witnessed an astonishing spread of Islam leading to its being the overriding religion of Kashmir, followed the dominance of Muslim rule over centuries old Hindu rule. Secondly, the classic Sanskrit tradition of the

Hindu period lost its grasp, and thirdly, this period witnessed the rise of a new star in the azure of Kashmiri poetry, namely, the mystic poetess Lal Ded. She expresses through her *vaakhs* (a four-linequatrain, thematically complete and independent in itself and mystical or didactic in content) her spiritual journey and all the painful processes that she like anyone in search of the eventual truth experiences and endures. These experiences she has uttered by means of potent images, sometimes presenting a person pulling a boat with an unspun thread and sometimes a person trying in vain to hold water in unbaked clay. She talks of the incomprehensible world with its sensual pleasures surrounding her, and feels it like a sugar candy load that has bent her body and galled her back. Her verses establish a fervent apprehension of mystic reality which is the mark of all God-realizing saints. Given below are a few verses of her translated by Jayalal Kaul (1968: 30):

Searching and seeking Him I, Lalla, wearied myself,
And even beyond my strength I strove;
Then, looking for Him, I found the doors closed and latched.

With a rope of untwisted thread I tow my boat,
Would God hear my prayer and bring me safe across!
Like water in cups of unbaked clay I waste away,
And long to reach my home!

The end of 14th century, and the beginning of the 15th century brings us to the most famous contemporary of Lal Ded, Sheikh Nur-ud-din Wali (1376-1438) popularly known as Nund Rishi. In most of his verses, Nund Reshi like Lal Ded speaks of the transitoriness of life and the transient nature of mundane pleasures. He express his feelings of how would it be to stand face to face in the presence of the Supreme Being, he talks of his emotional connection with death and his anxieties about the unknown situations he might happen to face in life after death. He encourages people to follow Islam with all seriousness and passion. He does not talk of merely what to believe, but what to become, irrespective of the religious label one bears. For Sheikh-ul-Alam as well as for Lal Ded the eventual reality is shapeless. Both attempt to cleanse people to make them ripe vessels for receiving the ultimate true knowledge. Jayalal Kaul (1968: 35) illustrates the point by quoting a verse of Sheikh ul Alam:

Would you know what Oneness is?
But you will cease to be.
For Oneness is all. Its splendor vast
Has set all this aflame.
Would you know what Oneness is?
But reason and thought will reach it not,
And who within his ken can bring the Infinite?

The next period of Kashmiri poetry, commences with the sixteenth century which lasted up to the eighteenth century and beyond. This period witnessed a noticeable shift both in theme and form of poetry. Thematically, mystic love was replaced by human love and the form moved from *vaakh* to *vatsun*. *Vatsun*, as Raina (1989: 67) states, "is a short poem, mostly consisting of three lines having the same rhyme followed by a refrain". Among the writers of *vatsun* type of love-lyrics are reckoned two eminent poetesses, namely, Habba Khatoon (16th century) and Arn'nymaal (18th century). Habba's verses are an expression of a woman's feelings born of the living experiences of womanhood; for instance, the episodes of love, endless craving and pains of separation with resultant uncertainties and doubts about the infidelity of the loved one. Though Arn'nymaal also continued Habba's tradition but her

verses throb with an unmitigated gloom and resignation to fate. The following lyrics of Habba Khatoon followed by that of Arn'nymaal as translated by Jayalal Kaul (1968: 189,192) are examples of the kind:

Habba Khatoon:

Come friend, let us go to banks and braes

For dandelion and water cress.

Let us not heed what others say

In rumour and in gossip rude.

They slander me: that is my fate.

...

I wait and wait the whole night through

For love's message.

I know no rest nor sleep.

O come, my love, O come to me.

Come, leave estrangements all,

Respond to the urgent call of love,

See how I still do yearn for you.

Life is short, we have not long to stay.

Then come, my Love, O come to me

Arn'nymaal:

Friend, do not laugh at me

Is there anybody who has suffered as I do?

I, whose young love has left her for good,

Sitting in my splendid room I heard the door screeching.

I thought it was He who has entered into my premises

But not having found him, my heart is sinking.

The nineteenth century saw yet another phase of Kashmiri poetry. We find, two prominent changes taking place during this period: one relating to the momentous impact of Persian on Kashmiri poetry and the other to the adoption of a few new genres of Persian literature. The most important genre borrowed being the *mathnawi*, which is a long narrative poem dealing with either romantic love (distinguished as *bazmia mathnavi*), or dealing with adventure, war or astonishing deeds of valour and adventure (known as *razmia mathnavi*). We find poets like Mahmud Gami (1765-1855), Maqbool Shah Kraalwaari (19th C), Wali Ullah Motto (19th C), Pir Mohi-ud-din Miskeen (19th C), Wahab Pare (19th C), Lakshman joo Raina Bulbul (1812-1884) and Amir Shah Kreeri (1869-1930) etc., earning their fame either by employing in their *mathnavis* the folktales and love-stories of Persian origin like *Laila Majnoon*, *Yusuf Zuleika* and *Shirin Farhad*, or by dealing with the Persian themes concerning the adventures of war-heroes like *Rustum* and *Sohrab*, *Zaal* and *Saam*. This was accompanied by an extensive borrowing of Persian allusions, figures of speech, and similes etc., similes like *sarv* (cypress) and *shamshad* (the box-tree) to describe the beloved's lovely stature, *maari paychaan* (coiled serpent) and *eshqi paychaan* (Morning Glory) for the beloved's lovely tresses. Likewise, metaphors like *mas khaes* (wine goblets) and *gulab* (rose) for the beloved's charming eyes and beautiful face respectively, and symbols like *gul* (rose-bud) and *bulbul* (nightingale) standing for the beloved and the lover. Another genre borrowed from Persian was the *ghazal*. As for the subject matter, the *ghazal* in the nineteenth century dealt mostly with things related to human love. Mahmud Gami (1765-1855) and Rasul Mir (1802-1892) being the two prominent names to have used and made *ghazal* immensely popular in Kashmiri poetry during the 19th Century. However, the older mystic tradition in the form of *Tasavuf* (Islamic mysticism) and *Bhakti* (the Hindu mystic tradition) continued to flourish.

Thus, by the end of nineteenth century, Kashmiri poetry witnessed large scale literary imitation and borrowing accompanied by lack of original creative vigor.

With the setting in of the twentieth century, Kashmir stood on the doorsteps of a new age. The centuries old feudal system was brought to an end by myriad political and historic forces. This new age also gave young Kashmiris unprecedented opportunity to go outside the valley for higher education and get in touch with the progressive forces in India, creating new enthusiasm in the minds of the literati, and an awareness in the souls of the common men. Persian was eliminated as the court language, thus ending its long held hegemony and reinvigorating the young educated men to devote more attention to their mother tongue. With the sense of this renewed Kashmiri identity and a changed environment at hand, old themes and traditional forms needed a radical reform. A new age thus seemed to be at hand.

One of the forerunner of this new age was Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor. Silhouetted against the background of poetry discussed above, Mahjoor (1887-1952) may justifiably be called as the precursor of a sort of renaissance in Kashmiri poetry. However, we have to keep in mind that Mahjoor's approach was not an approach of an outright rebel. No doubt Mahjoor was greatly responsible for the renewal and reconstruction of Kashmiri poetry he remained, to an interesting extent, a blend of both tradition and experiment. While he did away with the stylized love and foreign symbols, he reserved the traditional symbols of *gul* and *bulbul* and in his later outpourings bequeathed fresh connotation to these traditional symbols so as to give utterance to his social, political and patriotic outlooks. Not only this, while retaining the traditional genres of *vatsun* and *ghazal* he introduced in them modern themes in a language understood alike by the learned and the populace. Contrasted with the traditional ways of thought and belief like the Unity of Being and the Unscrutable ways of Fate as discussed earlier in this paper, we find Mahjoor ardently loving life in all its mundane facets so that issues like life's evanescence or the unavailability of death did not engross him. To quote Raina (2002: 103):

In his earlier life, he wasn't interested in politics; he wasn't interested in religion in any deeper sense as was clear from his refusal to follow his father's priestly profession, for his essentially Catholic mind was opposed to bigotry and fanaticism.

However, a verse in Mahjoor's poetry happens to raise a query concerning the eventual but unexplainable culmination of life into death:

'The king of the garden (i.e. the rose) who is entertained by the bird's melodious twitters, why is it that he too is obliged at last to tear open his garments and to get scattered into nothingness'.

In addition to this, Mahjoor's poem, entitled *yemberzal*, presents a metaphysical problem in an appealing manner. Nevertheless, as Rehman Rahi (2004: 187) observes, "this poem is the solitary poem of its kind in the whole of Mahjoor's corpus". Owing to such an approach towards things we find Mahjoor's initial poetry sparkling with mundane lover's longings and aspirations, expectations and qualms, agony and pleasure. The ensuing verses of Mahjoor as rendered by Raina stand as a proof:

Raina (1989: 3):

You stole away with furtive gait,

O lover of flowers, my sweetheart!
 Stay, O stay, my love!
 O wizard, why must you leave me thus?
 Tell me shall I survive.

...

Come, love, and see my heart,
 My bosom consumed with fire.
 Will you come only when I'm go

Raina (1989: 9):

The pangs of love are consuming me.
 Beloved, I offer you my life
 I'm bathed in sweat, with strength ebbed out,
 Following my love over hill and dale.
 Why can't he halt and hear my prayer?

However, this distinctive quality in Majoor's poetry was found in Rasul Mir as well and Mahjoor himself acknowledges his debt to the former as:

Mahjoor (1984: 124):

Rasul Mir, who unveiled love's gnawing pain,
 Has come again, reborn as Mahjoor. Just wait and see!

Mahjoor (1984:142):

Mir's old wine fills new cups now.
 Stocks have reached all taverns for sale.
 Pour it into glasses, Mahjoor, and serve!

Up to twentieth century nature barely found any place in Kashmiri poetry. It was Mahjoor who, for the first time, depicted nature in all its changing seasons and innumerable hues and contours. Here we had a poet who for the very first time hummed of his rose-garden-like motherland, its flora and fauna, its mountains and lakes and thereby broadening the canvas of Kashmiri poetry. The following verses of Mahjoor as translated by and Kaul may be quoted in this connection:

Mahjoor (1984: 247):

The song of the swallows woke me up
 Well before early dawn.
 I understood that winter's gone
 And effulgent spring has come.
 ...
 Who knows whence came the morning breeze,
 And why so late at night,
 Moving with slow, deliberate steps,
 Sprinkling scent on the scarves of flowers!

Mahjoor (1984: 266):

The spring has spread out velvet in
 Gulmarg, Nila Nag and the two patheris.
 Bathe in the Sind water, meditate
 Manasbal and see God on Harmukh

Mahjoor (1984: 259):

O saffron flower! Sitting in silent meditation

And radiating the fire of youth
 Many a famed beauty swoons
 Seeing your amazing, flaming form.

Instead of bestowing his sentiments on fantasized beloveds abiding in some fairy lands or flattering the exotic and mysterious beloveds of classic Persian like, *Laila* and *Zuleika* or *Azra* and *Shirin*, Mahjoor is seen zealously showering admirations on an average bucolic girl (*grees kuur*):

Mahjoor (1984: 13)

Bouquet from Beauty's everlasting garden,
 Heemall of Heaven or Caucassian fairy,
 O peasant girl, what grace! What beauty!

...

Exquisite beauty, how simple is your attire,
 With neither flashy border nor brocade!
 O bright Kartik moon, draped in black clouds!
 O peasant girl, what grace! What beauty!

...

What gulfs between you and high-born dames!
 You are the soul of freedom and flowers,
 And the dames languish in shuttered prisons.

Unlike earlier poets, Mahjoor paid attention to the ostensibly commonplace facets of the day-to-day life bestowing his poetry with new freshness, vitality and vigor. *Baghi nishat ke gulo* (O Nishat Garden's Flower) and *poshi vuni baghuch poshigondariye*, (Bouquet of Everlasting Garden) two of his most renowned poems, echo this novel chance in the poet's imagination. This shift from the formerly romantic imaginative world towards the ordinary splendors of his land and individuals was an extraordinary departure on the part of Mahjoor. Instead of earlier fairy domains, he now celebrates and praises the rose budding in the well-known Nishat garden, found in Srinagar, the central city of the valley of Kashmir:

Mahjoor (1984: 37):

Flower garden of Nishat Bagh,
 Come with your graces,
 See, spring has come
 To Dal, Nishat and Shalimar,
 O, use these aching eyes as boats!
 Come rowing across!

It will be perhaps pertinent to mention here that it was Mahjoor's this concern with the ordinary, familiar and day-to-day aspects of mundane life that earned him the title of being 'The Wordsworth of Kashmir' by Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore.

According to Chamam Lal Chaman (1987), another feature which differentiates Mahjoor from most of the poets prior to him is his connection to his local, native environment. This feature gives his traditional love poetry originality and freshness. A couple of verses from his earlier songs make the point obvious:

Mahjoor (1984: 92):

He sneaked away from me to far off places shouldn't I look for him across the
 fairyland
 But who knows where he actually is at Dal-lake, Telbal or Shalimaar
 To caress my burning heart I have recourse to nothing but my tears
 Oh! Could I know where he in fact is- at Prang, Drang, Brang or Kotehaar.

Mahjoor (1984: 267):

Spend some moments at Doda Patheri
 And the Tars where roses are thornless
 In Sokha Nag and Tosa I saw
 God revealing His face to the devotees.

What is interesting to note is that, it is his this attachment to the local environment that in his later poems developed into his ardent love for his homeland and his Kashmiri fellow beings, making him the first ever nationalist, patriotic Kashmiri poet who unlike former poets sang fervently in admiration of his hometown. In one of his very celebrated poems namely, *gulshan watan chu sonuy*, (Our homeland is a Garden) he blissfully articulates his adoration for his native land as:

Mahjoor (1984: 266):

The bulbul sings to the flowers:
 'A garden is our land!'
 ...
 Like walls of white marble,
 The mountain peaks enclose
 A sunny space of emerald green,
 A garden is our land!
 ...
 Mahjoor, our motherland
 Is the loveliest on earth!
 Shall we not love her best?
 A garden is our land.

Not only this, Mahjoor has many firsts to his credit, As Naji Munawwar and Shafi Shauq (1992) state, Mahjoor was also the very first Kashmiri poet to have risen his voice forcefully against the oppression that Kashmiri people underwent at large, and brought to forefront the political suppression, financial exploitation of the Kashmiri masses and the resulting destitution which had left them absolutely astounded. Mahjoor, as a poet felt it as his foremost duty, to come what may, modification the miserable conditions and to smash the psychological, political and economic manacles of the time. What is more, Mahjoor was fascinated by the ongoing struggle for the liberation of Kashmir from the aristocratic and dictatorial Dogra rule and made his poems a forceful medium for jarring the down-trodden from their centuries-old inertia and infuse in them a sweltering craving for political, social and economic sovereignty. In order to achieve this goal as Taing (1996) states, Mahjoor unlike any other poet provided this people an awakening peep into the glorious history of Kashmir when it enjoyed political independence and cultural abundance. In one of his eminent poems, *kache zuun boz miyeen zeereyey*, (Oh! Lovelorn moon Listen to my Woeful Tale) he speaks of Kashmir's past glory:

Mahjoor (1984: 65):

O lovelorn moon! O beautiful
Princess! Wait awhile and listen
To my tale of woe I shall
Surrender my life to you.

...

You have kept the secrets of the
Earth for ages. You know all
Our ancestors who were lords
While we are only hirelings.

...

Do you remember how wise
We were once when we had
Large empires? Now you must
Be watching our worthlessness!

These qualities in his poetry turned his poetry into an awakening clarion cry for national and cultural rebirth. He conveys his deep distress about the current political and cultural wretchedness in such words:

Mahjoor (1984: 99):

After day long toil, I have to
Contend with the half-meal
The master doles out.
He should have awakened to my plight!
My grandfather's life, property
Were mortgaged for a mere penny.
The loan that I toiled all my
Life to repay, is still uncleared.

Jayalal Kaul (1968) reports, that Mahjoor appealed people for action, asking them to exert out their own redemption and be prepared to face any adversity that may befall them. The poem *waloo haa baagwaano* (Come O Gardener) expressing such emotions became the defacto national anthem of the Kashmir freedom movement:

Mahjoor (1984: 214):

Arise, O Gardner! And usher in
The glory of a new spring.
Create conditions for 'bulbul' to
Hover over full-blown roses.
Dew bemoans the garden's desolation.
Harassed roses have torn their garments.
Infuse new life into flowers and 'bulbuls'.

...

Who will free you, O 'bulbul',
While you bewail in the cage?
With your own hands, work out
Your own salvation.

...

In the garden many birds sing

But their notes are varied.
May God harmonize these
Into one effective melody.

What is stimulating to observe however is that, this amazing and noticeable change in Mahjoor's thought didn't come abruptly. He was pretty cognizant of what he was undertaking. He (1984: 155) himself called on his reader's attention to this substantial expansion in his imaginative progression by saying:

Mahjoor's ghazals play fresh tunes on the harp of love.
You could read them to know to whom he sings and what he sings.

Mahjoor's service has not only been to Kashmiri literature but we are also indebted to him for keeping the Kashmiri language alive during a time when Kashmiri literature and language was not considered to be a matter of any serious study, and didn't even find a place in Kashmir's educational curriculum. Mahjoor's decision in such a scenario to not only write in Kashmiri but also convince his contemporaries like Abdul Ahad Azad (20th century) and Abdul Sattar 'Aasi' (20th century) to switch over to their mother tongue, goes a long way to show his precision and ripeness of thought and verdict. Mahjoor, commenting on the helpless neglected state of Kashmiri language states, Mahjoor (1989: 76):

The bulbul to the flower: 'Superb is your beauty',
But for one deficiency-you don't have speech!
And no one survives here without this gift!

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that studied against the backdrop of the poetic scenario existing before Mahjoor, Mahjoor's poetry with its unprecedented themes pertaining to nature, mundane love, local environment, flora, fauna and day-to-day aspects of ordinary life not only infused a fresh life in pre-existing thematically monotonous poetry, but it also ushered in a modern era in Kashmiri poetry in addition to enlarging the entire canvas of Kashmiri literature. It would also be pertinent to mention here that had it not been for Mahjoor, if the two themes of mysticism and love are deleted from poetry prior to Mahjoor, very less outpourings would be left in the stock of Kashmiri poetry. Mahjoor's poetry also provides an important link, a kind of a bridge between the poetry existing before him and the outright modern, progressive and postmodern era of poetry that followed after him. All these qualities in his poetry rightly justify him as "The harbinger of new Era in Kashmiri Poetry", as "The Poet of Kashmir" and as well as "The Wordsworth of Kashmir".

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