

A true ‘*Sitarah-e imtiyaz*’

Among many other literary prizes, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi received the Pakistani award ‘*Sitarah-e imtiyaz*’, and the name has always pleased me. He had such a keen sense of *imtiyaz* in its meaning of ‘discernment’, ‘judgment’, ‘distinction’-making. Usually he also showed ‘discretion’ and ‘good breeding’. And as a tea-drinker he had such ‘discrimination’ that when he visited America he brought his own supply of a brand called ‘*Ap ki pasand*’. Finally, he most definitely had ‘preeminence’.

As we all know, Shamsur Rahman was a phenomenon. Nothing in his background predicted him, or explained the extent of his achievements. He often used to say that being a civil servant, outside the domain of academic life and politics, was a great boon, since it kept him intellectually independent. Not only was he in a class by himself, but it was a class with a constantly expanding range. He wrote his own Urdu poetry, and translated poetry from Persian and Urdu into English. He wrote important critical books and articles about topics in literary history, modernist theory, and classical poetics. (It often seemed that he could write books faster than many of us could read them.)

And all the time, steadily humming along in the background, there was *Shabkhoon*! It’s hard to imagine what the modern Urdu literary scene would have been like without it. If Shamsur Rahman had done nothing other than to keep bringing out *Shabkhoon* for all those years, he would have been a major literary figure for that contribution alone. But there was so remarkably much more besides.

It was my immense good fortune to be able to work with him on a number of projects over the years. We had lively discussions of all kinds of burning issues (whether God could be unjust, whether ‘*radif*’ could be translated as ‘refrain’, whether there could be ‘spoonerisms’ in Urdu, whether modern Urdu speakers could avoid using English words, whether the left hand was superior to toilet paper). He was a true intellectual omnivore; he could turn his mind to anything. I can recall only one instance in which he sometimes found it difficult to do so. As we worked on our biggest shared project, that of translating *Ab-e hayat*, he sometimes became so annoyed that he would heap abuse on Azad—for being both so theoretically wrong-headed, and also such an irresistibly captivating writer. At such times he was even more vexed by the awareness that our translation would make Azad’s pernicious views more widely accessible. Thus we ended up with a section among our prefatory materials called ‘How not to use this translation’, in which we emphatically warned the reader that this was *not* a reliable literary history.

Shamsur Rahman began as a devoted Ghalibian, but eventually transferred his supreme allegiance to Mir. I remember how shocking it was to hear him say on the phone, in a hushed and almost alarmed tone, ‘I’m afraid that I think Mir is a greater poet than Ghalib!’. He never afterwards changed that view (though sometimes he would be willing to qualify it slightly: they were equally great poets, but Mir had a wider range). Mir’s 1,916 ghazals became the center point of a massive project that was far more innovative and indispensable than his Ghalib work had ever been—partly because of the total lack of a commentarial tradition on Mir (as compared to more than 100 commentaries on Ghalib).

At the heart of this project were the four monumental volumes of *Shi‘r-e shor-angez*, his *intikhab* and commentary. In my view these volumes are the greatest work of literary criticism that we have in Urdu. Each of the four begins with a substantial theoretical introduction—including discussion of various terms that Shamsur Rahman himself has been chiefly instrumental in (re)establishing. Most of the

selected verses receive commentary that embeds them within a well-chosen, invaluable wide network of other Urdu and Persian verses (including many by Mir), which themselves also receive comparative analysis. These remarkable merits are obvious to any reader. But I want to dig deeper, and point out something very particular.

About one ghazal of Mir's (#1502; SSA452; my translation) Shamsur Rahman says that 'one wants to put the whole ghazal' into the *intikhab*. He then reports in considerable detail how he included, then excluded, then re-included, various of its verses over time. Finally he explains,

I've discussed this in such detail not only so that the reader would be helped to understand the method of making the *intikhab*, but also to clarify the way it's not proper to ignore any verse of Mir's because it seemingly has no abundance of meaning. And it's also not proper to place any verse on a high level simply on the grounds that it pleases us. If pleasing us would be made the standard, then a great part of Mir's poetry would be in the selection. But I needed a kind of selection about which I could be confident not only that it contained verses of the highest level, but also that I would be able more or less to describe the excellence of these verses.

That is, the real standard of the selection would be not merely personal taste, but rather an intellectually informed taste that had obtained the assistance of critical consciousness, of a virtually complete understanding of the tradition of classical ghazal, and of an awareness of various methods of poetic analysis. Please also keep in mind Askari Sahib's saying that many of Mir's ghazals are such that they might not have a large number of high-level verses, but the whole ghazal itself seems to be entirely an *intikhab*.

This passage seems to nail a flag to the mast: critical rigor is the means and the end. One should wrestle over time with the choosing of each individual verse, seeking to be guided not simply by personal taste, but also by rationally explicated criteria of judgment that are based on sound critical methodology and scholarly knowledge of the tradition. Anybody who has worked with *Shi'r-e shor-angez* will know how thoroughly it seeks to adhere to this commitment. Thus the passage above seems unexceptionable—right up until that final surprising sentence.

Shamsur Rahman himself is quite aware of this problematical nature of this claim. Elsewhere (#1589; SSA177) he says,

Askari Sahib, in his introduction to his *intikhab* of Mir, has said a very fine thing: that many of Mir's ghazals are such that when they're read as a whole, only then do they give the proper pleasure, even if individually speaking no verse in them would be worthy of inclusion in an *intikhab*. As true as this idea is for the ghazal critic, it's equally worrisome as well. Because ghazal criticism is usually based on individual verses, and in the poetics of the ghazal there's seemingly no scope for a ghazal to be found to be of a high level, even if no verse in it would be of a very high level....While making my *intikhab* from Mir, I often had to confront this difficulty, so that I was also compelled to reflect on the secret of these ghazals' success.

The first point I understood was that in these ghazals the musicalness [*musiqiyat*] was uncommon. And as with classical music, if only a portion (as with only one part of a *bandish*, or only one section of a raga) would appear, then there's a sense of incompleteness; and when the whole ghazal (so to speak, the presentation of the whole raga) would be heard or read, then the pleasure becomes complete....

The second point is that we can construe this situation of musicalness as the highest 'mood' [*kaifiyat*] of 'flowingness' [*ravani*] that is possible in the ghazal.

The third point is that in the harmony [*ahang*] of such ghazals there's a swift-movingness [*tez-raftari*] that compels the reader to keep reading on, rather than stopping at any verse.

This discussion left me flummoxed. The idea that there could be first-rate ghazals composed of second-rate verses flies in the face of all traditional understanding of the ghazal, as Shamsur Rahman himself is quite aware. How could one even be sure of recognizing such ghazals, using only vague criteria like 'musicalness' or 'flowingness' or 'swift-movingness'? I asked him to tell me more about it. He replied (personal communication, July 2013) by providing a sort of ostensive definition: a list of more of Mir's ghazals that he would put in such a category. Beyond that list, he had only this to add:

As for the speed of recitation, opinions may differ. I think all these ghazals don't need many pauses, or a thoughtful style of recitation.

No, it's not musicality, or *ravani*. It's something even harder to pinpoint, but it can be felt; though it doesn't follow that everybody will agree on another's choice.

But why would he go out of his way to create a new, unsupported, quite gratuitous category—one so vague that he could cast doubt even on his own (vague) criteria for recognizing it? Defying his own explicit goal of analytical describability, he was gesturing toward something irremediably subjective, something that had no warrant in the tradition and could only be 'felt'. Gradually I realized that this wild new quasi-category should in fact be seen as a badge of honor. Shamsur Rahman was preferring the slippery, inconvenient truth of his own perceptions, over the consistency and completeness of his theoretical work. I want to celebrate, with deep admiration, both his impressive analytical powers, and his ability—and willingness—to go exploring beyond them, to go out on a limb.

In his later years Shamsur Rahman also turned novelist (and short-story writer as well). *Ka'i chand the sar-e asman* was, in several senses, a blockbuster. As always, he was a surpassingly hard worker. There was to be a Devanagari script edition: Shamsur Rahman sat with the editor while they went over every word together. There was to be an English edition: finding no suitable translator, Shamsur Rahman ended up translating it himself—and *The Mirror of Beauty* was embraced by a new and wider audience. He was unfailingly articulate about his work and his thoughts, as can be seen from the number of interviews on youtube.

Let me say something now that Shamsur Rahman would definitely be happy to have me say. He and I used to ruefully agree that if English literature had a magnificent multi-volume romance of remarkable stylistic and imaginative quality, then it would be a pride and glory of the tradition. Critics would celebrate it, students would study it, scholars would be all over it, Netflix would turn it into a huge series.

But we Urdu-lovers actually do have such a priceless romance, and we basically ignore it. By saying this I don't at all mean to deprecate the recent 'dastan revival' that has been inspired by Shamsur Rahman's work, as mediated through his nephew Mahmood Farooqui and an increasing number of other performers. Their oral narrative work started with dastan passages, and has steadily broadened in scope until there are now more and more 'dastan' performances devoted to modern figures and topics.

This is a fine development—except that we still mostly ignore the main romance cycle itself. Not only do we ignore it, but in fact we've only recently stopped being ashamed of it (for having too much magic, sex, wine-drinking, playfulness; not enough realism and social consciousness). Only *very* recently have we even securely preserved all the 46 volumes of the Naval Kishore Press *Dastan-e Amir Hamzah*. They are now available on rekhta.org, thanks to the excellent arrangements of Sanjiv Saraf, and to Shamsur Rahman's cooperation; Columbia University is also in the process now of putting the whole cycle archivally online.

Anyone interested in exploring this vast, marvelous, and almost untouched terrain in the field of Urdu literature will have a real treat in store. It is the last frontier, and perhaps the wildest of all. Shamsur Rahman was working on the next installment of his multi-volume *Sahiri, shahi, sahib-qirani* right up to the end of his life. He had decided to discuss, at least briefly, every one of the 46 volumes. I once asked him why, since after his first reading of the cycle (he read all 46 volumes several times) he was very ready to rank some of the volumes much more highly than others. He replied that over the years he had learned much more about dastan construction—so that now he had come to enjoy every single volume, and couldn't stand to deprive any of them of at least a small place in the sun.

This area of his work was always close to his heart, though it received so much less public and scholarly attention than many of his other projects. But perhaps, as he very much hoped, that neglect will change over time. His legacy is so wide-ranging that it will take us years to fully assimilate it. He was one of a kind. Where will we find another *sitarah-e imtiyaz*?

--Fran Pritchett
New York, July 2021