

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI

## Primary Lesson in Poetry

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This important essay, written in the form of pithy propositions, occurs at the end of *Tanqīdī Afkār* (Critical Thoughts, 1982), a terse and difficult book devoted to questions of modern literary and critical theory. This essay contains 96 propositions in all and shows that Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's thought has evolved strongly in the direction of interpreting and putting to new use the ideas and practices of premodern, especially eighteenth-century Urdu literary practice. Yet his reinterpretation and recuperation of these ideas are from a standpoint which can be easily understood by a modern Western student of poetry. This is because he has imbibed, with necessary modifications, many themes and ideas from Western literary theory. Much of his Western heritage can be traced to the English Romantics and the American new critics. However the presence of I. A. Richards looms large in all his conceptualizations. A certain similarity with the Russian Formalists can also be seen especially in his emphasis on the power and use of words as leading to unexpected dimensions of meaning.

The most notable aspect of these propositions (one may not necessarily agree with all of them) is the writer's confidence in having developed a system of ideas that is boldly modern and yet soundly anchored in what the modern Urdu literary idiom describes as "classical literature." The influence of the practices of the *sabk-e hindī* (Indian-style) Persian poets is also quite clear and, in fact, Indian-style Persian poetry is generally regarded by him as a part of the classical heritage of Urdu.]

### Part I<sup>1</sup>

1. Metrical is superior to unmetrical.
2. Because prose poems are metrical they are superior to prose.
3. The non-falsifiable is better than the falsifiable.
4. Implied metaphor is better than explication.
5. Ambiguity is superior to clarity.
6. Concision is superior to an excess of detail.
7. Metaphor is superior to simile.
8. Symbol is superior to metaphor. (But, because symbols are hard to find it is better to search for metaphors.)
9. Unexpected words are superior to expected ones.
10. Simile is superior to plain unadorned utterance.
11. Image is superior to simile. A simile that contains an image is superior to a plain simile or a plain image.
12. A metaphor that contains an image is superior to an ordinary metaphor or an ordinary image.
13. Thus the word containing an image is superior to other words because it adds value to them.

### Part II

1. Using words having affinity of meaning is not inferior to word play.
2. Word play has also the effect of creating play of meaning.
3. An utterance involving word play is superior to one that has no word play or other play of meaning.
4. The greatest kind of word play or play of meaning is when all or most words of an utterance have some kind of affinity with each other.
5. Whatever the nature of word play it always works towards the adornment of a poem.
6. Adornment is not a fault because its effect is counted a part of meaning.

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<sup>1</sup>Each part is complete in itself but it is not adequate to consider any part in isolation from the others. The parts have not been arranged according to any special design.

7. Metaphor, simile, image, symbol are not mere adornments; they are the intrinsic quality of poetry.
8. It is wrong to say that in order to be excellent word play should be invisible. How can we know of the excellence of a thing that is invisible?
9. If metaphor, simile, image and symbol are the intrinsic quality of poetry then word play is the intrinsic quality of our language (Urdu).
10. Word play is inescapable if one wants to achieve sustained force of expression. The capability to use low-level metaphor is more common than the capability to use low-level word play. This is because metaphor is concealed within the language itself, whereas word play is a function of the sensibility of a language and one needs to know the sensibility of the language in order to achieve word play. Most of us are at present not capable of appreciating the sensibility of our language.
11. The beauty of a two-line *shēʿr* also depends on how much and what kind of connection the two lines have.
12. Word play is extremely useful in establishing connection between the two lines of a *shēʿr*.

### Part III

1. An ambiguous *shēʿr*/poem is superior to a difficult one.
2. A difficult *shēʿr*/poem can be better than a simple one.
3. The real quality of a *shēʿr*/poem is not the ease with which its meaning can be arrived at.
4. The meaning of the most difficult *shēʿr* or poem is after all limited.
5. The meaning of an ambiguous *shēʿr*/poem is more or less unlimited. In any case there can be endless interpretations of ambiguous *shēʿrs*/poems.
6. Creation of new meaning in a *shēʿr* means both the creation of new facets of meaning and new interpretations of familiar and common concepts or things of common occurrence.
7. Since the *qāfiya* (rhyme) also enhances or aids meaningfulness, there is no harm in selecting a rhyme prior to composing the ghazal.

8. There should be no superfluous words or even letters in the *sheʿr*. Thus, if the *qāfiya* and the *radif* are not fully effectual, the meaning of the *sheʿr* is bound to suffer.
9. If multiplicity of meaning is obvious in a *sheʿr* or even if there is a possibility of multiplicity of meaning, both situations are equally good.
10. One need not overemphasize the quality of hard-to-imitate simplicity.
11. That a *sheʿr*/poem is contrived or spontaneous cannot be determined from the fact that the *sheʿr*/poem was composed spontaneously or after a lot of thought and deliberation. Spontaneity and deliberation are in the states of the poem and not in the act of composing.
12. Many good *sheʿrs* can be meaningless, but lack of meaning and absurdity are not the same. If a good *sheʿr* is meaningless it doesn't mean that it is also absurd.

#### Part iv

1. A rhymed verse is not superior to an unrhymed one.
2. A rhyme-less verse is not superior to an unrhymed one.
3. The rhyme/*qāfiya* is a way of making the poem sound musical.
4. The *radif* makes the *qāfiya* more musical. Thus it can be said that a poem that employs *radif* is better than one that doesn't.
5. But the *radif* can create a monotonous effect. Therefore, it is important to use original or unusual *qāfiyas*. This will make the *radif* seem less monotonous.
6. A new or original *qāfiya* is better than an old one.
7. But it is preferable to use an old *qāfiya* in a new style rather than a new *qāfiya* in an old style.
8. Changing a *qāfiya* can make an old *radif* sound new.
9. The *radif* and *qāfiya* should fit well together. It is preferable not to have a *radif* rather than have a *radif* that doesn't agree with the *qāfiya*.
10. A *qāfiya* expands the meaning and limits it too.
11. A *qāfiya* can create the beauty of both contradiction and homogeneity.

12. A poem without a *qāfiya* is more difficult to compose because it lacks the support that a *qāfiya* provides.

### Part v

1. All meters are musical.
2. A *sheʿr*'s rhythm is a part of its meaning.
3. The meaning is a part of the *sheʿr*'s rhythm.
4. Since there are many rhythms but limited number of meters, it is therefore clear that the rhythm of a *sheʿr* is not entirely subservient to its meter.
5. Instead of inventing new meters it is better to explore and experiment with the liberties allowed in the older meters.
6. If inventing new meters were helpful in resolving problems many new meters would have been invented by now.
7. All words have metrical weight but all word groups do not yield the desired meter.
8. Sometimes two words can have the same metrical weight and meaning, but one of them may sound better in one context.
9. This proves that every word has an environment appropriate to it. If the word is not used in its proper environment it seems inappropriate.
10. Variety in meter is important because every word cannot fit every meter and because meanings are subservient to words, it follows that certain meanings cannot be articulated in certain meters.
11. Thus it is proved that variety in meters helps achieve variety of meaning.
12. A study of meters helps us understand further possibilities of achieving rhythmic effects in our language.

### Part vi

1. It is relatively easier to compose stanzas of unfixed lines instead of stanzas in which the number of lines is fixed.
2. In stanzas with a fixed number of lines it is necessary to ensure that

the flow of thought and meaning is completed within the stanza itself.

3. A poem in free verse should first of all be free from the rhythms imposed by the practice of writing ghazals in prefixed rhymes and meters.
4. If the lines are of uneven length, it is better to not have a pause at the end of each line.
5. The title of a poem is a part of its meaning, therefore an untitled poem is more difficult to understand than one with a title, provided the poet has not given a misleading title to his poem. But if there is a title, then the poem should not be interpreted without reference to the title.
6. Usually the interpretation of poetry is subjective. However, its subjectiveness notwithstanding, its interpretation must arise from the poem itself.
7. A poem with very short lines is often indicative of the fact that the poet is incapable of writing a long poem. Therefore, by shortening the lines, the poet wants to increase their number.
8. In our language a line usually comprises six or eight metrical feet. So the poet (writing a modern poem) should strive to have lines the length of at least six metrical feet. Even if the poem is a prose poem, very short lines injure the rhythm of the poem.
9. Even free or blank verse can and should have internal rhyme.
10. A major beauty of free verse is that the lines should be broken or cut in such a way as to achieve a dramatic effect or shock of meaning. It is possible to create this effect to a certain extent even in blank verse.
11. Our (Urdu) verse cannot be liberated from the confines of meter.
12. A poet writing free verse or prose poems should also have an artistic vision. This is the capability to envision how the poem would look on the printed page of a book or a journal.

### Part VII

1. It is essential to conform to grammar, usage and idiom.
2. But if bending the rules creates a new facet of meaning or a novelty of theme then it is desirable to bend the rules.
3. But only a poet whose mastery of the rules of language and its idiom

has been proven has a right to bend the rules.

4. If word play and idiom go hand in hand then their enjoyment is doubled. An idiom is a stultified metaphor and a proverb is a stultified myth.
5. Using a metaphor to create another, that is, using metaphors in sequence is very good provided there is sufficient connectivity between them.
6. It is not the wise man's practice to compare one moving thing with another moving thing or a static thing with a static thing; that is, using a simile for a thing similar to the one for which a simile is being sought is not desirable.
7. Complex similes, that is similes that have more than one aspect of similarity are superior to simple similes.
8. It is wrong to say that a literal translation of a metaphor turns it into a simile. But there is no doubt that, compared to a metaphor, a simile contains a greater element of literal meaning.
9. Using more than the required number of words for expressing an emotion, or using words stronger than warranted by the emotion or situation is called sentimentality and is a practice of fools.
10. Metaphors stem sentimental outpour. That is why weak poets have less of metaphor and more of sentimentality.
11. Repetition of words is fine, provided it is not for the purpose of filling out the meter or compensating for the lack of ideas.

### **Part VIII**

1. Poetry is both a science and an art.
2. The saying that poets are God's disciples does not mean that poets have no need for learning. It simply means that the ability to write poetry cannot be acquired.
3. Poetic ability doesn't mean an innate or intuitive control of meter. Although the latter ability is innate too and every one does not have it in equal measure, and an innate sense or control of meter can be polished with practice, yet everyone having this quality is not a poet.
4. By poetic ability is meant the ability to use words in such a manner that new configurations of meaning may emerge.

5. By new configurations of meanings is meant that the emotion, experience, observation, situation, feeling or thought depicted in the poem should have or convey to us an impression or mood or knowledge that had not been previously within our experience or reach.
6. Obviously such use of words is not possible without bringing the power of imagination into play. But information and knowledge strengthen the power of imagination as well.
7. A poet may or may not improve with practice. A poet who relies only on practice may not become a successful poet, but his chances of failure are less than those of the poet who does not practice.
8. Practice does not mean simply writing a lot of poetry. It also means reading and thinking about the poetry of others, especially that of one's contemporaries and remote precursors.
9. Because, if one has to deviate from the path of others, one can do so only after knowing what their path was. The fear of being influenced by others can only be removed by knowing what the others have said.
10. All poetry is traditional in some sense or other, so the better poet is one who is fully conscious and aware of the tradition. Poetry that knows its tradition is better than poetry that doesn't.
11. Poets who experiment, even if they fail in their experiment, are generally better than poets who follow the safe and beaten path.
12. Knowledge is essential for experimentation too. Thus there is no escaping from acquiring knowledge. □

—*Translated by Mebr Afshan Farooqi*