

The Lament for Delhi (1863)

The collection of poems gathered under the title *Fughan-i Dihli* (*The Lament for Delhi*) were authored by various members of the Delhi literati and compiled in 1863 by the poet Tafazzul Husain Kaukab, who was a disciple of Mirza Asad Allah Ghalib. These poems are formally varied, including 14 *musaddasat*, 38 *ghazals*, and a few *qit'as* among their number, but they are united by their reference to the city of Delhi and to the turbulent events of 1857 and the years that followed. Largely for reasons of space, I have chosen to translate two ghazals by Shahab al-Din Ahmad “Saqib” and Hakim Muhammad “Ahsan,” each of which is prefaced by a short biographical notice from the *Lament*.

The effect of the testimony of some of the *Lament*'s authors regarding the provenance of the poems is strangely inconsistent with the hints provided by the poems themselves with regard to their relation to one another. In his laudatory review (*taqriz*) of the *Lament* (contained within that text), Salik tells us that the compiler, Kaukab, “has collected all of these [poems] with the utmost effort and caused them to be sent from various places” (205). This description gives a sense of a scattered set of materials which Kaukab has brought together for the first time. Yet almost all of the ghazals are in the same *zamin*—that is, they all share the same metre and the same *radif* (refrain) and *qafiya* (rhyme-word): “-an-i Dihli”—as though they were the result of a *musha'irah* or a similar sort of coordinated effort. It is possible that other signs of intertextuality, such as the fact that Ahsan's final verse alludes to another verse from a ghazal in the *Lament* by the poet Rizwan, may simply be evidence of the existence of a community of poets interacting amongst themselves. But Salik's picture of the genesis of the *Lament* as a gathering of far-flung fragments is very likely a fiction—a fiction which, however, seems to allegorize the reconstitution of Delhite society with which many of the poems conclude.

By virtue of their shared subject and the common attitude of lament that they take toward that subject, literary critics have understood the poems of the *Lament* as examples of a single semantic genre of poetry (*sinf-i sukhan*) known as the *shahr-ashob*. How has the *shahr-ashob* been described? In tracing the history of the term through the Persian, Turkish, and finally Urdu literary traditions, the critic is

confronted by the fact that as a genre of Urdu literature, “*shahr-ashob*” takes on a different meaning from the one that it bears in Persian and Turkish poetry. In the latter, the *shahr-angez* or *shahr-ashob* (the city-exciter or city-disturber), is a young boy whose desirability agitates the hearts of the citizens of a particular place (Munibur Rahman). Such *shahr-ashob* poems generally present a menagerie of such youthful male beloveds, each of whom is usually marked by his association with a particular trade. Sunil Sharma’s reading of Mas’ud Sa’d Salman’s *shahr-ashobs*, which he understands as the first poems that truly belong to this genre, demonstrates that prior to the genre’s solidification sometime in the Timurid period, the species of the different boys were not necessarily determined according to a single classificatory scheme. That is, the emphasized quality might be occupational (the ambergris-seller), physical (the cross-eyed boy), etc. (Sharma, *Persian Poetry* 111, see also Sharma’s valuable essay “The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape”).

In Urdu, on the other hand, the city-disturbing artisan boy is usually absent from poems of the *shahr-ashob* genre that inherits his epithet. Munibur Rahman tells us that Urdu poems that present catalogues of the ravishing youths of the city are seldom met with, and that those that do exist are direct imitations of Persian models. It is not clear why the signification of the term shifts when it comes to Urdu, but according to what is as far as I am aware the first attempt at a definition of the Urdu *shahr-ashob* as a poetic genre (*sinf-i sukhan*), it comes to signify a poem detailing a sociopolitical crisis: “We can say that the *shahr-ashob* is that classical genre of poetry in Urdu in which, without any special formal restriction, the ruin of the generality and the elite due to a political, social or economic crisis is expressed” (9-10). The above formulation by Na’im Ahmad makes no mention of the urban setting that we would expect to characterize a genre known as “*shahr-ashob*,” and in his essay on poetic genres Shamim Ahmad more explicitly states that several types of geographical space other than the city may be the subject of a *shahr-ashob* (143). Munibur Rahman’s account, on the other hand, differs from Na’im Ahmad’s in at least two regards: firstly, it connects the Urdu *shahr-ashob* more specifically with the city, defining it as a poem that is meant to paint an image of urban disarray. Secondly, while Na’im Ahmad

stresses the shared suffering of the elite and the commoners and claims that this circumstance dissuaded the former from representing the latter in a negative light (33), Munibur Rahman reminds us that part and parcel of the crisis that *shahr-ashobs* depict is the weed-like rise of people of inferior occupations, and the consequent uprooting of the elites.

Given that the *shahr-ashob* is essentially defined as a poem portraying social upheaval, it is no surprise that for many critics, the importance of *shahr-ashobs* lies in their richness as funds of socio-historical information (see Sharma, “The City of Beauties” 74), and in their orientation towards the political. The genre has been cast as a saviour from other, embarrassingly language-centred kinds of poetry, which generally refer more to other texts than to historical circumstances. Na‘im Ahmad certainly makes it clear that he sees the *shahr-ashob* in this heroic light, setting the exemplary simplicity of the genre against the abstruse and ornate style that usually characterizes classical poetry. Other genres of poetry, according to him, are valued for “making nonsense of the meaning.” (Revealingly, this phrase, “*mudda‘a ko ‘anqa banana*” or “making the meaning into an ‘*anqa*-bird” echoes Ghalib’s famous metapoetic verse alluding to the mythical and proverbially arcane ‘*anqa* bird: “No matter how much awareness casts the nets of understanding / the meaning of my speech-world is an ‘*anqa* [i.e., it is meaningless].”) Concomitantly, the *shahr-ashob*’s supposedly “plain, common and easily understandable words, and light figures of speech” produce an unobtrusive lens through which historical realities may be gazed upon: “the elements of art have been mixed in only up to a limit, such that instead of getting lost in aesthetics and artifice, the mind turns toward factuality and reality. And so it may be unhesitatingly acknowledged as a reality that in the *shahr-ashob*, neither have ideas been sacrificed to feelings, nor have thoughts to opinions, or matters to form” (32). This statement contains much that is worthy of critique; let us be content to comprehend the view that an excess of literariness—one of the sins of the classical ghazal and of *sabk-i hindi* poetry in general—would allegedly have disoriented the reader’s attention away from the historical reality to which the *shahr-ashob* refers.

Before recalling the historical reason for the lionization of the *Lament for Delhi* in particular, let us state the obvious: the *Lament's shahr-ashobs*, like other poems in this genre, could be highly ornate and full of artifice. We need only look at Ahsan's ghazal to see that it is imbued with a literariness with which a poet with an unadorned style would be ill at ease. For instance, we have Ahsan's remarkable play on the written form of the word "Dehli": "The *lam* of Delhi is the flagpole, and *he's* squiggle is the flag / now that nothing's left but Delhi's name and signs." The verse does not present any factual information, but operates at a level that is removed from historicity by several degrees: the vanished city's very signs (the flag and pole) are now commemorated by means of their likeness to the written form of the city's name. Through this highly literary device, the verse draws attention to its own status (and the status of the *Lament*) as a literary monument. In her notes on Jur'at's *shahr-ashob*, Frances Pritchett has shown that poems in this genre can be highly literary and only minimally historical. In the case of the *Lament*, references to and opinions on historical events do abound, but they are not unmediated by literary language.

The general tendency of critics from the mid-19th century onward to value a supposedly direct and simple literary style has been well-documented and described. The further reason for the *Lament's* importance in the mid-20th century was of course the manner in which 1947 and 1847—the "First Indian War of Independence"—were imagined as parallel events representing the culmination and the beginning of the South Asian struggle for independence. The 1954 edition of the *Lament* contains prefaces by both the editor Salah al-Din Ahmad and the copyist Asghar Husain Khan Nazir. What can be gleaned from the manner in which these two prefaces contradict one another is the extent to which the *Lament* poets' attitudes towards the events of 1857 were problematic for Pakistani and Indian nationalists in the 20th century. In his preface, Salah al-Din Ahmad is bent on introducing the *Lament* as a collection of barely suppressed proto-nationalist outcries against the atrocities of the British colonizers. In doing so, he is impeded by the inconvenient presence of verses in praise of the British and of applause for what were represented as their efforts to restore order and normalcy to the city

(see Saqib's ghazal, for instance), which presence was made all the more glaring by the fact that his fellow-prefacer Nazir highlights such verses in his remarks (composed before Ahmad's). Ahmad attempts to explain this approbation by insisting on the existence of a climate of fear in the aftermath of the British suppression of the rebellion. He writes,

In this short period [sc. the six years between 1857 and the book's publication] the dust of that lesser Judgement Day had barely settled [...]. In such a tumultuous time it was nearly impossible to reveal one's true sentiments, especially when the nation's new rulers were bent upon crushing that people which had ruled this country before them.

He goes on to add that the overspreading of this pall of intimidation only made it more poignant that some of the poets did register their criticisms of the British (8). This spirit of criticism supposedly represents the "true sentiments" that the poets had veiled for fear of punishment.

Faced with the temptation to make the publication of the work appear patriotic and timely in the aftermath of 1947, it seems as though Ahmad is willing not only to explain away verses in praise of the British but also to ignore the many lines penned in condemnation of the rebels, Saqib's criticism of Bakht Khan's methods of taxation being a relatively tame example. In many poems in the *Lament* the rebels are othered as dark-complexioned foreign interlopers bent on spreading mischief; Munibur Rahman's comments about class conflict are no doubt to be heeded in considering these depictions. Yet when it comes to laying the blame for the disaster that befell Delhi, the poems in the *Lament* are arguably not invested in accusing either the British or the sepoys. Instead, the enemy that is inveighed against again and again is the *falak*, *asman* or *charkh*—the sky, a being that functions on that very level of literary convention that N. Ahmad insists is muted in the *shahr-ashob* so as to properly orient the poem towards history. Looking through Na'im Ahmad's anthology, it becomes evident that the sky, the locus in which destinies are produced, is a conventional scapegoat for the city's turmoil. But does the fact of its conventionality justify the manner in which it has been overlooked by critics who wish to focus on the much less-invoked human enemies that appear in the *Lament*? What perspectives on the

history and the politics of mid-19th-century Delhi might arise out of a heightened attention such elements of the *shahr-ashob*'s literariness?

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