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N.M. Rashed: The Development of a Major Urdu Poet
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Intellectual and Poetic Context

The poetry of N.M. Rashed ultimately has its roots in a long tradition of religious and political heterodoxy that goes all the way back to the ninth century Arab poet Abu Nawas who wrote poems devoted to pleasure in open defiance of religious strictures. This tradition might also include the Arab thinker Ibn Hazm who wrote, some 800 years before Freud, a profound analysis of love and the hidden motives behind human actions. Again, long before Descartes took to doubting himself, the eleventh century Islamic philosopher al-Ghazali used "doubt" as an epistemological tool. Indeed, the vast tradition of self-questioning and revaluation in Islamic literature and philosophy runs also from Sufi mystical philosophy through numerous poets including Sa'adi and Ghalib to Urdu modernist verse.

Rashed's early poetry is often written in conventional forms; he began experimenting with free verse around 1932, about twenty years or so after poets such as Pound and Eliot, and significantly, he later translated T.S. Eliot's essay "The Three Voices of Poetry".¹ Hence, his poetry was rooted not only in the work of Arab and Persian poets such as al-M'arri and Rumi, but in the pioneering experiments of the French symbolists and Western modernists. Rashed's poetic strategy is clearly discernible, for example, his poem "Near the Window" begins with a heavily Persianised diction:

Lamp of the bed-chamber, awake!
Wake from this joyful floor of soft dreams...

¹ This translation, published in the journal *Nai Tahreer* in September 1954, is cited in Donald Gallup, *T.S. Eliot: A Bibliography* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 339.

But the poem modulates into an irreverent evocation of the powerlessness of institutional religion:

Beneath the shadow of this minaret, I remember
A penurious and grief-stricken priest
Drowsing in some dark, hidden corner
Like a useless god...

Rashed saw himself as continuing, in his own way, Iqbal's assertion of individualism as against religious fatalism. According to Iqbal, the decadent condition of Islam, and specifically that of the Indian Muslims, lay in the pantheistic and fatalistic elements in Islamic thought inherited from figures such as the Spanish mystic philosopher Ibn Arabi. Iqbal saw himself as a spokesman for the Islamic world and his philosophy, influenced by Nietzsche, Bergson and the Persian mystic Rumi, reacted against this fatalism and ascetic ethic of self-denial. It affirmed the reality of Self as its basis. In the introduction to a translation of his long Persian poem *Asrar-i-Qudi* (*Secrets of the Self*), Iqbal states that the fundamental fact of the universe is what the English neo-Hegelian philosopher F.H. Bradley called the "finite centre", or basic unit of experience.² Iqbal extrapolates this concept, somewhat against the grain of Bradley's philosophy and more in line with Bergson's, to interpret it as a centre of will and energy which gains mastery over its environment as it develops its individuality. The ego is fortified by "ishq" or love; this represents, for Iqbal, the desire to assimilate and absorb, its highest form being the creation of values and ideals, as well as the struggle to realise these. But, for Iqbal, the highest form of individuality is God, and

²Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, trans. R.A. Nicholson (Lahore: Ashraf Publications, 1978), pp. xvii ff.

the human individual becomes more complete as he or she approaches nearer to God.³ This type of movement is characteristic of most neo-Hegelian philosophies around the turn of this century.

Iqbal saw the Ego or Self as the ultimate source of activity in any discipline. In his seventh lecture on Islam, Iqbal divides religious activity into three broad periods: "Faith", where religion is accepted unconditionally; "Thought", where religion is subject to rational understanding, and "Discovery" where "metaphysics is displaced by psychology" and "religion becomes a matter of personal assimilation of life and power,"⁴ and the individual achieves a free personality, not by releasing himself from the fetters of the law, but by discovering the ultimate source of the law within the depths of his own consciousness."⁵ This movement towards a rational subjectivity, where the subject acknowledges itself as the ultimate source of the religious and political apparatus looming over it as objective independent entities, has much in common, though is not identical, with Hegel's characterisation of history as progressing towards freedom. Once again there is a noticeable time-lag between the philosophical expression of certain values in the West and their emergence in the East. Hegel was writing on the eve of the violent bourgeois revolutions about to engulf Europe,

³*Secrets of the Self*, p. xix.

⁴Interestingly, this is something of a reversal of Comte's periodisation of religious and secular thought: the differences between the two schemes are symptomatic of the underlying differences in secularisation between Europe and the Islamic world.

⁵*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore: Ashraf Publications, 1960), p. 181.

and many of the bourgeois values he espoused were already in the process of realisation. The movement towards subjectivity and emphasis on individuality that Hegel had discerned was beginning to be expressed in literature, for example in the increasingly popular form of the novel which was by definition a "subjective" literary form, expressing the world view of that sacred entity, the "individual". When Iqbal proclaims the sanctity of the Ego or Self, this is not an empty Utopian gesture but a powerfully charged affirmation, conscious of its own embodiment of the recent history of Western political upheaval from feudalism to bourgeois hegemony. To affirm individuality meant opposing the social structure which had belittled it. But, although the values centred around bourgeois individualism reached Islamic culture in the latter nineteenth century, it was mainly the intellectuals, like Iqbal, and later Rashed, who bore the brunt and shock of this impact. And Iqbal's powerful intellect recognised that Islam's regeneration was not to be sown on the soil already ploughed by Western social advances, nor on the barren soil of traditional "self-annihilation" on which Muslims lay exhausted. It had to come from within, from a Self whose dynamism could institute a new and peculiarly apt synthesis of Eastern and Western elements, an Islam which, while bypassing the sleeping monster of religious fundamentalism, could absorb and integrate new knowledge in the perpetually reinterpreted light of Divine revelation. Iqbal's poetry tends to dramatise these features of his thought, as shown by this ghazal:

Your song, distraught nightingale, is still unsure
Let it ripen in your breast a little more

Reason is mature if it follows prudence
But Love which kneels to prudence is immature

Love leapt into Nimrod's fire, defying fear
While Reason watches from the roof, still unsure

Love falls to action at the messenger's sign
While Reason falls back at Understanding's door

Love is freedom, an overhauling of Fate
But at Fortune's high temple you still implore

The saqi frowns on "moderate" excuses:
"Your heart still inquires what the journey is for"

Who pass round the wine are non-Arab. But mine
Is Arab wine: yet they shrink from what I pour

From the garden the breeze brings news of Iqbal
Trapped in a new net, the bird writhes on the floor.

What is striking about Iqbal's ghazal is its use of traditional images which are here imbued with a new sentiment. In Urdu poetry, the rose has often been emblematic of the cruel beloved, presented alongside the lamenting nightingale, the disappointed lover. Western readers will recall Oscar Wilde's beautiful manipulation of this bond in his story, "The Nightingale and the Rose". But here Iqbal is not speaking as a distraught lover. He is lamenting the failure of a broader kind of love, the "ishq" or basis of the Ego. He is exhorting the Muslims of the world to awaken from their passive inertia. In one sense this first couplet is addressed to himself: he acknowledges that his message, his new insight, is not completely developed. On a deeper level he might be addressing the entire symbolic history of the nightingale in Urdu tradition. Iqbal also uses to new effect the traditional imagery of saqi, wine, goblet and

Nimrod. The "messenger" in the fourth distich is Muhammad and the acceptance of his command means not bypassing Reason but recognising its limits. This is in keeping with much modern Western thought which stresses the limitations of Reason. One may think of Kant's system where pure speculative reason can apprehend only the phenomenal world of the senses and it is the moral faculty or "practical" reason which apprehends "noumenal" objects such as God. Other instances of this line of thinking would be Nietzsche's scepticism as to objectivity, Existentialism and indeed the more recent trends of literary theory such as Deconstruction. The penultimate distich implies that Indian Muslims, with their Western educational background, shrink from Iqbal's appeal. But this ghazal is as semantically open as the previous one: it is the reader who supplies the specificity.

Ironically, it was precisely the depth of Iqbal's philosophical vision which led him away from literary "realism", just as Western modernists such as Eliot and Virginia Woolf had reacted against realism in the wake of philosophies which had demonstrated that "objectivity" was a problematic concept. So, whereas the Western modernists were progressing from realism towards symbolism, the Indian Progressives felt obliged to veer away from symbolism, which had been the essential mode of Urdu poetry (including Iqbal's), and to step into a "realistic" mode. An alternative way of assessing these advances would be to recall that much Western Marxist theory calls for precisely the same thing: a turning away from endless speculative subtlety in order to focus on material and political realities.

The Development of Rashed's Poetry

In an unpublished manuscript, Rashed gave an

overview of his own poetic development:

...my poetry...has passed through three...stages. Earlier poems, in Mawara [Beyond], are characterized by youthful exuberance. Most of the poems are...so-called love poems, but underneath exists a consciousness of social and moral repressions surrounding the youth which make it impossible for any love to flower. In the... second period, the latter theme finds more concrete expression in some anger and resentment against political domination, social and moral inhibitions and religious dogmatism. This further led to a broad humanistic ideology...Poems after "Iran men Ajnabi" ["Foreigner in Iran"] have developed a somewhat global context...They concern...Man as such...⁶

Rashed was too mature a poet to engage in empty imitation of Western models: this would have produced an artificial poetry which corresponded to no real issues in his social context. Rather, Rashed integrates both Eastern and Western influences into a self-questioning verse form. This is exemplified by even his earlier poems such as "The Poet's Past". Here, Rashed uses the ghazal to question the ghazal form. The poem promises to be a ghazal, beginning with the usual rhyme scheme AA BA, but this rhyme scheme breaks down:

These passion-rousing tales of yesterday's
A youthful harp's vexed and wandering lays:
Bold portraits of all my ruined pleasures
Or mirrors of my youth's first wretched phase

⁶Rashed, A brief Note on my Poetry, unpublished Ms., p. [1].

A colourful ghazal, praising Leila's hair

And worship of Saleema's magic eyes
Fond writing of Shirin, full of feeling
All, all, a past story of tears and sighs!
Where are you now Leila, and Shirin, where?
Are you, Saleema, still gasping Love's air?⁷

Seemingly simple, the poem is actually a subtle comment on poetic tradition. The ghazal's crumbling form, its breakdown in terms of rhyme, coincides with the increasingly ironic tone which degenerates into sarcasm. However, the sarcasm is directed not at traditional poets but at the legendary beauties such as "Shirin" and "Leila", who typically comprise their subject matter. These characters are themselves brought to life, as objects of a direct address by the poetic persona, only to hear their death sentences passed on them: they are now redundant. They are brought to life in the sense that, instead of being treated as merely the objects of a history of poetic tradition, they are raised to the level of subjects who embody their own lifeless status in that ossified tradition. In a sense, this is poetry addressing its own heritage from within, without the intermediation of any reference to authors. The communication between Rashed and the legendary characters exists to be overheard, especially by traditional poets. Evident here is the influence of T.S. Eliot's essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" which Rashed had translated into Urdu. A degree of self-consciousness is typically built into the traditional ghazal which tends to elaborate on pre-given themes. But Rashed extends this to an historical self-awareness, opening up a dialogue between himself and

the past. The traditional elements are there but under the light of a transformed vision. This is a simple example of how modernistic insights can be internally articulated within a tradition rather than being merely imposed from without.

Much Western modernist poetry, symbolist in technique, was an implicit reaction against naive realism. Another token of Rashed's skilful integration of Eastern and Western influences is that his poetry develops from an initial symbolism inherited from the Urdu tradition, moving through realism to a new, more complex symbolist technique. The lines cited above show the old symbolist mode of Urdu poetry co-existing with, but subordinated to, a more realistic mode. The earlier poems, mostly in *Mawara [Beyond]*, are written in this realistic vein. Love is viewed as something painful and impossible, as in traditional Urdu verse. But the pain here is a real wound, sustained from an actual relationship. In these early poems, love is viewed, in a Donne-like fashion, as a refuge from the world's harsh toil. The lovers comprise a world in themselves. But whereas Donne hyperbolically insists on the reality of such a world, Rashed acknowledges its artificial and escapist texture. In "Near the Window" the two lovers are spectators, watching through the window the sordid and empty life around them. This life revolves in a sense around the mosque and the beautiful imagery of the minaret, the highest point of the mosque, suggests that there was once hope here, a hope now devastated:

I too, like others in the city
Come out, after each night of love, to
All this rubbish
...Seeing my helplessness, I peer again
At the minarets of the city's mosque
From beside this window

⁷This translation reproduces the rhyme scheme of the Urdu poem.

When they kiss the red sky a sad farewell.

But although love is a refuge, the "I too" indicates that the lovers are inescapably part of this "rubbish". There is another, political, reason for love's impossibility. In Rashed's eyes, the atmosphere of political oppression and subjugation surrounding him dwarfed the indigenous Asian spirit in psychological terms also: one's thoughts and emotions could not be freely expressed or even felt to their full capacity. What meaning could even the experience of love have in such a repressive, constraining context? In his poem "Events," Rashed urges this apprehension on his lover:

For you, Life's a luscious cluster of dreams
For me, a wakeful vigil

Typically, this poem is resigned to the actuality of love as a purely physical union, empty of spiritual content: "If our souls cannot, let these lips meet". Love, in these early verses, is something surrounded by shadows, and is marked by contrasting imagery of spreading darkness and joyful scenes of Spring. The traditional images of clouds, stars, rose-garden and dream inhabit a disillusioned landscape darkened by the skies of religious recrimination. Love can also involve conflicting allegiances. In another poem, the persona is torn, like some of D.H. Lawrence's characters, between love and hate for his lover, who happens to be English. The truly modern element here is that, as with Lawrence, love and hate are not viewed as two coexisting emotions but as aspects of the same complex passion:

For a moment my heart imagines:
You are not my love
But a spinster on the shore of some city
And I, a soldier, enemy of your country

In "Revenge", love itself becomes a weapon of hatred. It takes on the form of an alarming and perverse self-parody: I remember even now the naked body
Of a foreign woman, from which
My lips took all night
Revenge for the helpless owners of our homeland

No doubt a feeble and pathetic gesture: to "conquer" a woman whose race has conquered one's homeland. But in its very mean-mindedness, the poem shows the profound psychological impact of foreign domination which has disturbed the foundations of the most ordinary human impulses, turning them into something brutal and ugly. The poetic technique here is a realism which attempts to express immediate experience. But, as with Eliot, the notion of "experience" itself is viewed as complex and problematic. Eventually, this perception of its complexity will deepen so as to infuse the form as well as the content of Rashed's verse; it will lead to a questioning and rejection of realism as an adequate mode of conveying "experience".

Perhaps the most interesting example of Rashed's treatment of love, as well as of his developing technique, is the remarkable four-part poem "Hassan the Potter". Again, to appreciate this poem's innovative nature, one must consider Rashed's starting point as bequeathed by Urdu tradition. We could profitably read this poem as a modernised version of an Arabic and Persian poetic form known as the masnavi. Traditionally this was a long romantic narrative poem in rhyming couplets. And, like

other verse forms, it had its peculiar conventions, beginning with lines in praise of God and the prophet Muhammad, moving to a eulogy of love and a recountal of the circumstances of the poet's composition. Other conventions might include a description of the poet's first encounter with the beloved, a rebuke by Fortune, descriptions of the woman's state, the meeting routine of the lovers and the grief of their separation.

Rashed's poem echoes the traditional masnavi as the ghost of its own living voice; it inhabits a vacancy, hinting at the masnavi as its vestigial structure. The poem is written not in couplets but in free verse. But there are more significant departures from the traditional form. In the first place, there is no straightforward narrative. The poem begins with the persona directly addressing his lover, Jahan-zad:

Jahan-zad, below in the street, before your door
 Here I stand, heart aflame, Hassan the potter!
 This morning in the bazaar, at old man
 Yousuf the perfumist's shop, I saw you
 And in your eyes was that fire
 For whose longing I have wandered mad for nine years
 Jahan-zad, for nine years I have wandered mad!

Instead of a chronological narrative, the starting point is a retrospective present. Here is a curious mixture of archaic and novel elements. The repetitions "I have wandered mad", the reliance on word sounds for semantic effect and the image of the distraught lover enraptured by the beloved's eyes are all echoes of traditional emphases. Yet the touches of realism, such as the perfumist's shop and the bazaar or market-place, leave the beloved untouched. There is no description of Jahan-zad (as there would be in a

masnavi) and of course she is not really being addressed except as a rhetorical occasion for the poet's self-reflection. The poet is effectively addressing himself and Jahan-zad is reduced to a symbol within this internal dialogue. Her symbolic content, however, is not pre-given by tradition but is created in the course of the poem.

It is no accident that the lover Hassan is a potter. Adding to the complexity of love's treatment here is a wealth of symbolism behind the "potter" image. Nearly all the invocations of this image in the Old and New Testaments are used analogically to illustrate God's authority. The potter's wheel is the cycle of existence, and God, the potter, has the power to make and unmake Man, his earthen vessel:

Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?
 Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay...?⁸

Persian poetry, such as that of the mystics Rumi and Hafez, also makes use of the "potter" image: it is, among other things, a reminder of Man's ultimate origin and destiny, dust. But these tend to be passing references. Perhaps the most sustained emphasis on the analogy of the potter occurs in a text long familiar to Western readers, the Rubaiyat [Quatrains] of Umar Khayyam. The final section of the Rubaiyat, as translated by Fitzgerald, is entitled the Kuza-Nama [Book of the Pots]. It is here, in the descriptions of the pots, rather than his boasts about wine, that Khayyam's antinomian and unorthodox tendencies are brought to light:

⁸ Romans, 9, 20-21. See also Isaiah, 29, 16; Jeremiah, 18, 6; Psalms, 2, 9; Lamentations, 4, 2 and Daniel 2, 41.

Listen again. One Evening at the Close
Of Ramazan, ere the better Moon arose,
In that old Potter's Shop I stood alone
With the clay Population round in Rows.

And, strange to tell, among the earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried -
"Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"⁹

Ironically, Khayyam questions Divine transcendence enlisting the very image traditionally used to affirm it. But this is strictly a questioning of transcendence (with the implication that the boundaries between God and Man are not so rigidly drawn), not a denial of God's existence. Khayyam's rejection of the outward forms of religion certainly brought him into conflict with religious orthodoxies but does not amount to atheism. Rashed is but one culmination of this unorthodox trait in "Islamic" literature. There are some similarities between Khayyam's images, of the persona standing alone in an old man's shop at a particular time of day, and the beginning of Rashed's poem. Rashed of course has gone several steps further on the path of heterodoxy, the relation between potter and pots being secularised: the pot has become the potter. The potter now is not God, not even a questionable God, but a living human being who has the same problematic relation to his pots as God previously had with humans.

So, in the same way that Eliot's The Waste Land refuses to yield a "literal" meaning, depending as it does on

⁹ Edward Fitzgerald, Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 58.

traditional voices speaking through its own voice, Rashed's poem derives its meaning not simply from what the words "say" but from their status as self-conscious participants of a history of symbolism. As well as the "potter" symbol, the images of "wine" and "moth" are used to new effect, with the new meaning containing or gesturing toward, the traditional one:

However will I forget
The delights of that wayward night?
Was it wine or the trembling of my hand
Caused that wine-glass to topple and break?

Wine is still associated with love and the breaking of the glass could signify the failure of love but these symbolic repercussions are constrained within a more factual, naturalistic context. Again, the "moth", the traditional distracted lover drawn to the candle, becomes the occasion of a new metaphor:

What a thing is time?
Time is the moth, crawling
On walls, mirrors, cups, glasses
On my jars, pitchers and pans
Like crawling time, perhaps
Hassan the potter will return, his soul burning

In this reflection, which is both generalised and particular, one can see how layers of symbolism interact in a complex way. Each image, potter, wine and moth, has been literalised so as to undermine its privileged symbolic status. However, not only does the symbolic ghost lurk behind its literal replacement but this combination of literal voice and symbolic echo itself yields a new symbolic framework based on the interaction of the new meanings. Hence the moth, formerly the lover, is time crawling towards Death

which seduces it. And the mark of Death, in the form of time, is etched on the previous emblems of love and mystic revelation (the wine glasses), as well as on the dust and clay which composes the pots, the created beings. The movement of time has a human embodiment in the emotions ("soul burning") of the creator, the potter himself. This new framework of symbolism is no longer communal but esoteric and highly individualised. It is the outward aesthetic form of the poem's iconoclastic affirmation of Self, which underlies the poem's more obvious themes of love, art and livelihood:

Before all else I am "Self"
If only we exist, still
I am
Self before all things

That this assertion of individuality should be so overt, rather than simply reflected by the form, betrays the urgency and desperation of a poet living in a society where small emphasis was placed on the individual.

Iran men Ajnabi [Foreigner in Iran] was mostly written during Rashed's stay in wartime Iran. Not surprisingly, they are more overtly political in the sense that make numerous allusions to contemporary political events, such as the invasion of Iran by Britain and Russia. But Rashed's invective is not reserved for foreign powers only. He also strikes out at the Shah of Iran:

King Reza
A foreigner's salutation to you!
An Indian soldier's salutation!
How can you see me?
Your eyes are fixed along the horizon of Elburz

Here, below you statue
I stand on the glittering stairway

The statue, of course, betokens the Shah's self-aggrandisement, one of the themes of this poem. This piece is part of a series of cantos, broad ranging in subject matter and style, including elevated passages with Persianised diction as well as colloquial dialogues revealing the sordid intimacies of private lives. These cantos are also structured around a contrast between the glories of ancient Persia and her relative stagnation in the modern world:

Theatre of a field of flowers
Is Iran no more?
...Iran is now a wailing old woman
Whose beauty is long withered
At the desolation of Ctesiphon Persia sheds tears
Naushirwan and Zardasht and Darius
Farhad and Shirin, Kaikhusrau and Kaikbad
We are a story, they were its characters
We a caravan, they its leaders
Whose tombs lie below the earth

Iran is a history unfulfilled, a narrative begun and looking in vain for completion. A striking poem of this period is "Deserted Sheba", which plays on the multiple symbolism of Solomon both in the Qur'an and the Bible:

Solomon, head in his hands:
From where now will come a joyful envoy?
From where, which jar, will come wine into
The bowl of old age?

The man of wisdom, now perhaps signifying the United

Nations¹⁰, is pictured as a beggar left to rule a desolate kingdom.

The title of Rashed's third collection, *La=Insan* [*X=Man*], indicates that he was moving away from local political and religious concerns to a more metaphysical and general concern with the nature itself of humanity. Rashed's endeavour to define the human operates not only at the level of content but at the deepest level of form, as a self-consciousness in the very language – perceived as inadequate – that he is forced to use. A salient example of this formal self-consciousness occurs in a poem entitled "That Lonesome Word (Which Desires to Unite with Meaning)":

Our limbs, raised in prayer toward the sky:
(Don't look at the sky!)
Is it to bypass harm in a fragile place
Or a pretext for hiding from our deprivations?
That ancient and high god (Paradise in truth)
Shall one day deliver us from god
For on this earth we are as the lonesome Word
(But it won't be a world like this) silent and speaking
Which lives in desire for union with meaning
Which has longed for accord between word and meaning
Grant us the dream of M'arri
(Grant each a smile according to his breadth of vision)
Grant us the vexation of M'arri's soul...

There occurs here a dialogue – in the mind of one speaker – between the parenthesised and other parts of the poem. The narrator is not specified, emerging as a disembodied

¹⁰ Sheila Rashed tells me that Rashed once offered this particular interpretation.

voice. We could read the "lonesome Word" as the Logos, the Word of God which has now been displaced by human language. The only space where this Word can unite with meaning is in the human mind; the distance between word and meaning embodies the historical emergence of doubt, of a recognition that this unity is arbitrary. It is this doubt which furnishes the poem's theme: God is here treated not as an entity but as a concept, with its roots in human needs and human language. Ironically, the words "Grant us" which form the typical invocation in a prayer, are addressed to no entity; they merely echo in the speaker's mind, perhaps intended to be overheard by a reader or listener. Again, their locus never transcends a strictly human consciousness. The speaker, ironically, aspires to the blindness of the sceptical Arab philosopher al-M'arri: his prayer, perhaps directed only to himself, is for blindness, for a genuinely spiritual vexation, rather than the shallow and illusory reassurance of blind obedience. Overall, this poem is an index of the secular and modernist vision achieved in Rashed's later verse.