

PREM KUMAR NAZAR

A Conversation with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

[Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (b. 1935) is an eminent Urdu critic, poet and theorist, who has nurtured a whole generation of Urdu writers after the 1960s. Regarded as the founder of the new movement in Urdu literature, he has formulated fresh models of literary appreciation. With rare skill and clarity, he absorbed western principles of literary criticism and subsequently applied them to Urdu literature, but only after adapting them to address literary aesthetics native to Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. An expert in classical prosody and ‘ilm-e bayān (the science of poetic discourse), he has contributed to modern literary discourse with a profundity rarely seen in contemporary Urdu critics.

Recipient of numerous honors and awards, he was most recently awarded the prestigious Saraswati Samman for his pioneering work She‘r-e Shōr-Añgēz. In this four-volume study of the great eighteenth-century poet Mīr Taqī Mīr, Faruqi uses a refreshingly eclectic approach and a variety of insightful critical tools to interpret Mīr’s art.

Prem Kumar Nazar, who engaged Faruqi over a wide range of literary topics in this conversation, is himself a well known Urdu poet. —Eds.]

PREM KUMAR NAZAR: You are known more as a critic than as a poet. Do you think the critic in you has in any way subdued the poet in you?

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI: It is not that the critic in me subdued or overpowered the poet. I think that the poet in me helped in some way for me to become the kind of critic that I am. I however marginalized my poetry in my scheme of things, because I thought that as a critic I had things to say that other critics were perhaps not saying.

Whereas my kind of poetry could be written by other people, perhaps. As it turned out, I was wrong about my poetry. For the one thing that people seem now to be saying is that it is unlike any other poetry being written in Urdu today.

P K N: As you approach a literary text, what tools do you employ to arrive at meaning? How do you view meaning in a text?

S R F: First and foremost, one needs a thorough knowledge of the language; equally important, one must have an intuitive grasp of meanings, and potential for meanings, in a textual situation.

Then there is the paramount necessity of having a full or nearly full knowledge of poetics, the cultural assumptions, the world view, that inform a given text. It is not enough to know only that particular text intimately: one must also know numerous other texts of the same type, by the same author, and other authors.

While the critic or interpreter cannot but look at a text through the haze of his own vision, he must make sure that he knows all that is knowable about the literary culture that produced the work in question, its expectations, what is understood by the term “poetry,” how it related its past to its present. Poems are made on, and by, and through, other poems. This is particularly true of classical Sanskrit, Perso-Arabic, and Urdu poetry. It is even true of modern western poetry. It was Frank Kermode who said that the best comment on a poem is another poem.

We need not accept Julia Kristeva’s assertion that all texts are contained in each other. We must, however, remember that we cannot judge a poem, any poem, unless we know other poems. Consider, for example, a student whom you teach all about an actual ghazal. Do you think that with that kind of training your student can understand, far less write, a real ghazal? Obviously not.

As for meaning, I think that all meanings are contextual, and to that extent all meaning has a condition of instability. But there is also a basic, realizable meaning in all texts, on which most interpreters would agree, and we would also agree, as language users. Aside from that minimum, perhaps irreducible, meaning, there is no meaning that is “out there” waiting to be found.

Let me quote I.A. Richards: “Understanding it is not a preparation for reading a poem. It is itself the poem.” This means that there can be no meaning outside of the poem. But this is not the same thing as Jacques Derrida’s affirmation of intertextuality when he says, “There is nothing

outside the text.” This gives a universal, almost divine status to the text, to all texts. Hindu philosophy teaches us that everything is contained in the Cosmic Consciousness. Derrida’s intertextuality is, to me, something of the same order. It is metaphysics, coming from the pen of one who despises metaphysics.

My view of meaning is that the reader is not an explorer or archaeologist who goes forth to find meanings. Rather, he or she is a projector of consciousness, of knowledge, of cultural and personal assumptions, on the text. The reader thus illuminates the text. And it is important to remember that some texts have greater capacity, and present more possibilities of illumination, than others. *Hamlet* has greater potential for meaning than a railway ticket, or a film song. The value of texts is generally determined by the number and kind of meanings they can be shown to support.

P K N : With a sound critical understanding, do you think it is possible to arrive at the essential meaning of the text?

S R F : I do think that most, in fact almost all texts, have a minimal, though not essential, meaning, which can be accessed by all who have the requisite linguistic and literary competence. Meaning works precisely because all speakers of a language are in general agreement about the operative signifiers in a text, or an utterance. When I say, “The cat is on the mat,” there may be a dispute about the metaphorical meaning of “cat” and “mat,” but there can be no dispute about the fact that the word “cat” does not mean “dog,” and the word “mat” does not mean “sky.” The meaning of “on” may also be disputed, but the dispute will be within certain well defined spaces of signification. That’s why I.A. Richards said that the best way of conveying the sense of “on” in this sentence was to write “cat,” and then write “mat” underneath it; for this is the only way (though not a sure fire one, I fear) to divest the word “on” of its ambiguities. Consider the following example put forward by Groucho Marx: “Fruit flies like a banana.” Now it is clear that the meaning of this text can be determined only because we all know that fruit doesn’t fly, whatever else it may do. But metaphorical, or to use Tzvetan Todorov’s phrase, symbolic language has a surplus of meaning which it may be impossible to exhaust fully. This fact was first stated by ‘Abdu ’l- Qāhir Jurjānī.

P K N : Why is it so that you have always looked back for inspiration to

Mīr Taqī Mīr and the classical masters?

S R F: I am not sure that “inspiration” is the right word for what I have been trying to find. You see, our problem—the problem of all post-colonial literary culture which had a vibrant tradition before the advent of colonial power—is that of a discontinuity. We are no longer able to relate to our tradition in a creative, insightful way. We are obliged to see our literary past, and also our political past for that matter, through western eyes. This means that we are unable to see many things, and that we see many things through a distorted mirror. When I go back to our classical writers, Mīr, and Ghālib, and Nasīm, and Anīs, and Dard, and Valī, and Sirāj, and others, in poetry, and the *dāstān* in prose, my purpose is to understand them in such a way as to convert the discontinuity into a continuity. Only then will a full recognition of the achievement of modern writers like Nūn Mīm Rāshid, and Mirājī, and Akhtaru ’l-Īmān, and others, be possible.

P K N: Do you think the classical masters can serve as role models in present times? If so, in what sense?

S R F: It is not so much a question of finding role models in the past, although even this is important. Wasn’t it T.S. Eliot who said that those modern poets who are conscious of, and make creative use of the classical masters, are the truly original poets of their time? But our main problem is that we cannot chart our way through the present unless we are familiar with the geography of the past. A major modern poet and critic once confessed in a public gathering that he found himself unable to relate to most of the classical poetry in Urdu, especially the poetry of “second-rank” poets. I said in reply that since the second-rank poets vastly outnumber the first-rank ones, is it not a pity that close to 90% of our classical heritage is lost to him, and to people like him? So it is not just a matter of models; it is a matter of literary history, and culture, and canon as well.

P K N: Classical diction seems to enjoy an edge over contemporary use of language. Going back to the classical roots in ultimate analysis appears to be the triumph of classicism. Do you think that it is a sign of literary growth or the arrest of literary progression?

S R F: The notions of “growth,” or “progress,” or “regression” in literature are false notions. Literary history does not move linearly, any more

than the history of philosophy, or of music, does; notions of “progress” or “regression” in a time frame are Victorian notions. They liked to see themselves as the fruit and flower of civilization, as the final product of a process of change, growth, and development. History, I am afraid, has proved them wrong.

Coming back to your question, I don’t think “classicism” can “triumph” in such a way as to supersede contemporary literary idiom. At best, it can support and supplement the modern idiom; it can teach us lessons about what has been done in the past, and how it was done. It can tell us what succeeded, and what failed. Maybe it can even tell us why things were as they were.

To be afraid of the past is an unhealthy literary praxis. To look down upon it, as many of us seem to be doing today, is even worse.

P K N : “Classical quotation is the parole of literary men all over the world.” This is particularly true in your case. Do you agree with Samuel Johnson?

S R F : I don’t think I quite agree, or even understand, what Johnson is trying to say here. In any case, it cannot apply to our situation, because while for Johnson, the European classical tradition was more or less continuous—even Eliot could talk about European poetry as one entity and one tradition—our sense and understanding of our classical tradition is fractured. There are discontinuities here which Johnson never had to contend with. We have to reconstruct our classical heritage, and redevelop lost insights and protocols of discourse before we can decide whether our classical tradition is too much with us, or too little.

P K N : How about modernism—is it fading in Urdu poetry? If I am not mistaken, you are of the view that modernist poetry in Urdu is not sufficiently modernist, let alone postmodernist?

S R F : I believe that modernism as a guiding principle of literary culture has come to stay, and not only in Urdu, but over most of the modern world. None of the basic tenets of modernism in literature has been effectively erased anywhere in the world today.

When I say that contemporary Urdu writers, despite their claim to have deviated from modernism, have really nothing to show by way of deviation, I mean precisely that. Contemporary Urdu writing is still modernist.

Postmodernism is not something which necessarily comes after modernism, nor is it something which is necessarily an “improvement” or “advance” on modernism. In fact, it is a state of mind and feeling. As Ihab Hassan says, postmodernist tendencies begin to appear in the 1920s when European modernism was in full flow.¹ Modernism can sometimes be seen to appear after postmodernism, as Ihab Hassan has shown.

P K N: If the scope for postmodernism in Urdu is constrained, what possible direction is modernist poetry likely to take?

S R F: Postmodernism has no agenda, no call for action, no program, literary, or philosophical. It is a denial, and a cry of despair. But the most important point is that it is not a literary theoretical position: it is a general philosophical position. One can write well enough without passionate or active commitment to a philosophical position.

P K N: Are you still of the view that prose poetry doesn't have the potential to grow into a genre? And what is your view of prose poems being written today?

S R F: There's very little prose poetry of a high order being written in India today. Its fashion seems to have declined. This very decline proves my point: it is not a genre for which there is a felt need in Urdu.

As for Pakistan, prose poems are very much the vogue in Karachi and Islamabad. Some very good prose poems are being written there. But as I wrote recently, the fate of Hindi prose poems seems to be overtaking the Urdu prose poem too: the rhythms of the Urdu prose poem in Pakistan have a similarity, a strong resemblance—more than a family resemblance—to each other in terms of musical structure. There's a strong feeling of assembly-line production.

Perhaps you're aware of the situation in Hindi: there is a strong move there to return to meter. People are saying that meter provides greater opportunity for structural and rhythmic variety and for the use of the poet's various skills.

P K N: You have very often been blamed (particularly in your earlier

¹ See his *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1987).

days) for applying western canons of criticism to evaluate Urdu literature, particularly poetry. And now you lay total stress upon what you call “*mashriqī she’rīyāt*” or “Indian poetics.” Isn’t it a self-contradiction?

S R F : There would, no doubt, be a strong self-contradiction if I had, at any time in my career, applied western norms and ideas to our literature in a blind, derivative way. I never did that. Doubtless, I learnt a lot about literary theory and praxis from western masters. In some areas I found that our own theorists didn’t have much to say, while the westerners had. But I applied western ideas in a selective, critical way, and never fell into the error of “west-centrism.” I rejected many western ideas, especially almost the whole of Plato, and the alleged dynamics of the mimetic, long before anyone had even thought of these things in Urdu. In my essays of the 1970s, I rejected a whole lot of Romantic and neo-Romantic theory. I was perhaps the first to even have questioned the aesthetics of Kant. And my criticisms of Marxist thought are well known. Still, if people delude themselves that I am a wholesale importer of western ideas, what can I say?

It is true that of late I have paid a lot of attention to our own theoretical heritage: Sanskrit, and Arabo-Persian, and Urdu. This is simply because I am writing more nowadays about our classical literature. Also, the entire postcolonialist discourse is crying out today for a reevaluation of our literary past. This is possible only in the light of our own theoretical writings, rather than western formulations. The world is moving, however hesitantly, towards pluralism. The days of treating the western model of discourse as hegemonic are over.

P K N : Your persistent criticism of Firāq’s poetry has assumed alarming dimensions. Some say it is a personal bias against the man that has prompted you to denounce him as a poet. Others think that you believe that an unbiased opinion is always absolutely valueless. What do you say?

S R F : Firāq was so much senior to me that I cannot even begin to occupy the space that he occupied about the time I was born. I never set myself up as his competitor, never could have, in fact, even if I tried. My personal relations with him were cordial—except that he didn’t like my criticism of him that I wrote in 1971 and 1973. So where is the question of my personal bias against him? Even after those essays of mine, we remained on good terms. I respected his achievements, and his personality, but I was not, and I am not willing to apotheosize him.

I don't believe that my criticism of Firāq has assumed "alarming dimensions." I have written much more strongly against Naẓīr Akbar-ābādī, Kalīmu 'd-Dīn Aḥmad, Aslūb Aḥmad Anṣārī, Khushwant Singh, Sardār Ja'farī, and a host of others. In fact I am the one critic in Urdu after Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Askarī to have expressed unpopular views, and refused to accept things on face value even in matters which have assumed canonical status. A recent example is my scathing criticism of Ḥālī, and a radical deconstruction of Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād's *Āb-e Ḥayāt*. These writings are available in English.

No. I don't believe that unbiased criticism is valueless. But bland, uncritical acceptance is no good either.

Actually, the history of my life as a student of Firāq's writings is the same as the history of my life as a student of Majnūn Gorakhpūrī and Niyāz Fatehpūrī. All three were the heroes of my youth. In my life, the phrase "the gods that failed" applies to all three. It's a story of disillusionment. I hero-worshipped them and idolized them as a youth. As I grew up, I realized that they all had feet of clay. I found that their scholarship and creativity were both of a very unsatisfactory character.

Ultimately, I ended up writing against all three and criticizing them. It was most difficult in the case of Majnūn, who knew my father. In the 1960s, Majnūn began to work on a project involving the production of a glossary of western literary and philosophical terms. He published two or three sample installments in *Hamārī Zabān*. I found them unsatisfactory, and wrote a long though respectful comment, pointing out the defects in the translations. Majnūn Ṣāḥib took it in good spirit. Shortly thereafter he visited Allahabad and come to see me. Prof. Āl-e Aḥmad Surūr also came along. Majnūn Ṣāḥib said that I was entitled to my views. Later, in my long essay about the possibility of theoretical criticism (a good part of which is available in English too), I severely criticized some of Majnūn Ṣāḥib's ideas.

I found the scholarship of Niyāz Fatehpūrī to be stimulating, nonetheless weak in details. I have written very strongly against him in my book *Tafhīm-e Ghālib*.

Since Firāq Ṣāḥib is a major figure in both poetry and criticism, my disappointment in him was proportionately greater. My criticism of Firāq and my dissatisfaction with him should not be viewed in isolation. Essentially, my revolt against these three is my revolt against colonialistic views of literature, and colonialistic education, which privileged certain things over others.

P K N : When your views on Firāq’s poetry are well known, where lay the need to reiterate them?

S R F : Well, I don’t go about reiterating my ideas about Firāq in a compulsive or demonic way. Some ideas do need repeated presentation, examination, scrutiny, discussion. This is partly because they are new and unorthodox, and partly because they encourage new thinking on old subjects. I expressed my view of the poetry of Firāq only when the occasion demanded it, and not just for the purpose of *epater les bourgeois*. I rarely write to shock, or scandalize. Also, I believe that a critic is not worth half his salt if he doesn’t have the courage to hold unpopular views. Lastly, if Firāq is the great poet that many people believe him to be, then he can’t stand in any danger from my criticism. Ghālib has been criticized much more; and I don’t see that any harm has come to him by such criticism.

P K N : When you say that Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s poetry is transparent, isn’t it that you are missing the numinous quality of the poetry? Faiz’s poetry has contexts and connotations. It has political undertones and relevance.

S R F : I don’t quite understand the term “numinous” here. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “divine, spiritual, revealing or suggesting the presence of a god; inspiring awe and reverence.” I’m not sure all this applies to Faiz’, even remotely. This could very well apply to Mīr, or Ghālib, or Iqbāl, or Shakespeare, or Rūmī, Bhartrihari, or Kalidasa. The poetry of Faiz is no doubt sweet, pleasing, moving; all the same it is weakly repetitive, and tends to adhere to pre-assumed formulas about the role of the poet in literature and culture.

As for Faiz’s relevance, and the political meanings that we derive from his poetry, I don’t deny that either. Question is: how long is that relevance itself going to be relevant? Can the relevance remain after being separated from the vague Marxist rhetoric that provides its prop? Frankly, all this pro forma idealization of some fuzzy-wuzzy image of hope, of the revolution that will come at some never-never time to some never-never land, all this invitation to pity masquerading as compassion leaves me fairly bored. And remember, Faiz’s political message is not inherent to the poetry; it is something that we extract from it. I have written about this in both English and Urdu.

P K N : Are you comfortable with fellow critics?

S R F : Yes, sure. I may often disagree with my peers, and very little Urdu criticism really adds to my knowledge, but I am not uncomfortable with it. I like, though, those critical writings better that are written in clear, precise language and are not belle-lettristic or “poetic.”

Also, I don’t mind at all being criticized. What I do mind is illogical, biased, knee-jerk response criticism of my work.

P K N : Why is the ghazal untranslatable?

S R F : All texts are basically untranslatable, only some are more so than others; poetry is perhaps the most untranslatable of all. The ghazal, being steeped in a special kind of culture, and being essentially a poetry of conventions and formal rules, is practically unintelligible to the uninitiated. And the person who reads a ghazal in translation is essentially an uninitiated person. Then there is the problem of the polysemy of the ghazal discourse: the meanings even seem to militate against, or cancel out other meanings. Finally, ghazal vocabulary has, over centuries of practice and reader/audience response, acquired the status of a code, a code moreover, which is occasionally designed to even deceive the reader/audience, and the receptor seems to like this. One can decode a code: one can’t translate it. Still, the ghazal is not entirely beyond the reach of the competent translator. Translating a ghazal is frustrating, and also rewarding.

P K N : It is generally believed that Urdu critics import literary theories only when these have lost their relevance in their land of origin. Do you agree?

S R F : I am afraid that this is by and large true.

P K N : In the interpretation of Mīr and Ghālib, on the semantic level, you sometimes cultivate meaning in a deductive manner or impose your own meaning. Isn’t it a kind of critical misappropriation? (With particular reference to your *She’r-e Shōr-Āngēz* and *Tafhim-e Ghālib*.)

S R F : There is no such thing as misappropriation of meaning in interpretation. So long as the text can support an interpretation, it is valid. While I do not go as far on this road as Stanley Fish (in his early phase), I do say that it is basically the reader who makes the meanings in a text. As

E.D. Hirsch says, it is in the nature of the text to invite interpretation.²

Jurjānī asked the question: If there are two or more meanings in a text, should we not say that there are more than one texts bundled into one? His idea was that each text should have only one meaning, logically speaking. (He didn't ask whose meaning that one meaning is, though.) Then he himself answered as follows: "By meaning, we understand in such situations the ultimate objective or purpose of the speaker—the purpose or objective which he is ultimately trying to prove or establish or deny." Thus, according to Jurjānī, the meaning of an utterance is not necessarily its primary meaning.

Bhartrihari says that if we use a word which has two meanings, or more, we are actually using all those words together on one and the same site.

P K N : There is an element of egotism/agitation in your critical temperament. How would you react to it?

S R F : What you term "egotism" would perhaps be better described as "courage of conviction"; also I believe that an authoritative voice, a decisive manner is important for a critic, especially when he is trying to demolish, or at least challenge, existing frictions, biases, hegemonies. Richards compared the critic to the doctor. He said, "A critic is as much concerned with the health of the mind as any doctor with the health of the body. To set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values."³ Now how would you like your doctor to be hesitant, tentative, unsure of diagnosis and treatment? Surely you don't want the critic to be dogmatic, but you also don't want the critic to suffer from the "either/or" syndrome.

As for "agitation," frankly, I am not clear what you mean by this word in the literary context. Auden said that no generation is really new unless it rejects most, if not all the major writers of the immediate past. I didn't agitate for new Urdu writing in the trade-unionist sense, but I did make a strong case for it, and I think I succeeded.

P K N : What might have prompted Shelley to say that he considered

² See his *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978 [1967]), pp. 224–6.

³ *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961 [1942]), p. 60.

poetry very subordinate to moral and political science? Please relate it to contemporary Indian scenario.

S R F: Shelley, in many ways a neo-Platonist himself, was trying to redeem himself from platonic constraints. Plato taught that poetry, in order to qualify as a useful activity in the Republic, should strive to improve people's moral and mental qualities, and should make them what we would today call "politically correct." Shelley is a follower of Plato and his idealism, but he doesn't want to accept ideological constraints either. So he beats about the bush, and says things which, in his view, would be acceptable to Plato, but would also affirm the Romantic poet's freedom. He says, "The whole objection of the immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. [...] Poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects as if they were not familiar. [...] The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. [...] Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb."⁴

As an anti-Platonist, I am not much in sympathy with Shelley's ideas. I don't believe that poetry needs any "defense." Although there is some truth in what Shelley says about the power of imagination, his views are too apologetic for my taste.

P K N: You have been constantly accused of having some favorites. Is that true?

S R F: Everybody likes some things more than others, and I am no exception. But I have never played the favoritism game. I have no favorites, no *bêtes noires*. I have never praised a writer merely because he was my friend. You are one of my oldest and dearest friends, and you should know.

P K N: Is Urdu surrendering to the entertainment industry?

⁴ "A Defense of Poetry," in Edmund D. Jones, ed. *English Critical Essays: Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1919), pp. 131–2.

S R F : I don't think so. Urdu ghazal-singing can be said to have become commercialized now. And that's a pity. For the immense popularity of the ghazal as a singing genre could have been used to educate the people about the true worth and value of Urdu poetry; there is, at present a "popular" view of Urdu poetry, namely that it is a poetry about wine, women, and song, a poetry of the "cheaper" human emotions relating to romantic love in its "vulgar" modes. Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth. But it is hard to break a popular image, and the vast power wielded by the modern ghazal singer could have been used to remove popular misconceptions. That is, had ghazal singers been trained and educated in the art and science of the appreciation of Urdu poetry, their repertoire would have consisted of good poetry, representing some of the true flavor of the poetry, and not the pseudo-poetry that they seem to be singing mostly. And they don't really know much about the ghazal *gāyaki*, or about classical music. So what they mostly purvey is bad poetry, and bad music.

The *mushā'ira* also has become a sort of entertainment now. But its status as industry is that of a small-scale industry at best.

P K N : Do you think a writer has much or any role to play in society?

S R F : As Joseph Brodsky said, society can do very well without poets or poetry. A poet, however, has no obligation to society except to write well.

P K N : When a real genius is born, you can know him by the sign that dunces are in confederacy against him. Will you please comment in particular reference to yourself.

S R F : I do not really know who or what a genius is. I certainly do not fulfill my own ideas of what a genius should be. As for my opponents, I respect them for their forthrightness. I don't know how forthright they would be if I were Vice-Chancellor or Professor at a university. But that is beside the point.

P K N : Does luck play any part in literary reputation?

S R F : It certainly does. Good people do not always get recognized, at least not at the proper time. And there is occasional good luck too. Napoleon always asked when a general was praised before him for his military genius, "I know he is all that, but is he also lucky?"

P K N : You have led a busy official life holding high offices. Moreover you have not been keeping fit for quite some time. How do you cope with a heavy schedule of writing (and reading)? What do you think to be your sources of inspiration and strength?

S R F : I don't think I have done all that much. And I suppose everyone wants a space that one can call one's own, and tries to create, or achieve that space. As for inspiration, I think my real inspiration was, and is, a sense of urgency: I feel I need to write poetry, to write about literature, to discover and help others discover the glory and the greatness of my culture. It seemed to me, when I began writing, that I had things to say which no one else seemed or wanted to say. That feeling still persists.

P K N : Which is the most rewarding moment in a literary man's life? Has it arrived in your case?

S R F : I suppose the most rewarding moment is when one knows that one has set out on paper a well-thought-out position or thesis in an elegant and logical way, and that the position or thesis so presented has the force of theory as well as the beauty of intuition. I have been trying, though I don't know if I have ever really done this so far. Some of my theoretical work, and some of my work on Mīr and Ghālib and modern Urdu poetry has, I think, worn well. That's a great reward, I think.

P K N : You have made a selection of Ghālib in your *Intikhāb-e Kulliyāt-e Ghālib* published by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. What were your considerations?

S R F : I just made a selection from him, at the request of the Sahitya Akademi. In my introduction, I have tried to establish Ghālib's credentials as the first modern Indian poet.

P K N : Have you ever resorted to ghost writing?

S R F : No. I did write under different names, like Shaharzād, Jāvaid Jamil, and maybe one or two more, for *Shab-Khūn* in its early days. In very early youth, I wrote under the name Shamsī Raḥmānī. If I had to earn my livelihood through my writing, and if that entailed ghost writing, I'd have done it cheerfully.

P K N : A critic should describe and not prescribe. You are accused of doing the latter. How do you plead?

S R F : All descriptions are in some way prescriptive: one can't escape making value judgments. This has been known since at least the 1950s. I have done enough describing in my time, but I have never viewed the activity of prescribing as something pernicious, or deleterious to literature. So long as you are prescribing literary ideas and principles, you are doing your job as a critic. There is no harm, and in fact a lot of good, in saying what a poem should be, even if you just say that a poem should not mean, but be, as Archibald Macleish said.

P K N : As a critic, you always expect miracles from the poets.

S R F : No. But I do expect them not to rest on their laurels. They should perform to their full potential.

P K N : It has often been noticed (particularly in *Shab-Khūn*) that you start reacting even to those issues which you can easily ignore. Is it anger or a sense of hurt that invokes such responses?

S R F : The first thing to note is that though I am often, and regularly, attacked in many magazines and conference situations, and although the attacks are often personal, and not in the best of taste, I never respond to such criticisms when they are published in magazines other than *Shab-Khūn*. In *Shab-Khūn*, I feel obliged to answer. The reason should be obvious: most such criticisms seem to have been written only to engage me in a debate. And I publish almost every text, letter or paper, which purports to attack me. I answer about half of them. It is true that I feel occasionally hurt, especially when I see that the attacks are motivated, or uninformed, or personal.

P K N : Fārūqī Ṣāhib, how would you define the function of poetry in modern times?

S R F : At the risk of sounding pretentious, I believe that poetry in modern times has the same function as myth had in the ancient: It helps us make sense of the world, both the inner world and the outer; it helps life become more livable. The French Marxist novelist Claude Simon (who

won the Nobel Prize a few years ago) was an active figure in the French Resistance. He has written that during those hard and dangerous days, poetry was a source of great strength to him. He says that reading poetry didn't take away hunger, but it made him feel valuable somehow.

Auden has said that poetry makes nothing happen. This is quite true, and therein lies its strength. From this point of view, poetry assumes something like the power of beauty, in Kantian terms. You would remember that Kant defined beauty as something which makes for "disinterested enjoyment"; you enjoy poetry, even if it doesn't fill your belly.

Finally, here are some lines from William Carlos Williams. I'd like our conversation to end on this note:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die everyday
for lack
of what is found there. □

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