

## LETTERS

Dear Editors:

I OF COURSE share your disappointment at the lack of response to my article in *AUS* defending my (and Khurshidul Islam's) interpretation of the Urdu ghazal against its critics. Pritchett had suggested "a kind of debate on the subject," and my article was intended to initiate such a debate. However, it seems that none of those whom one might have expected to be the first to join issue with me have any desire to do so. Hanaway accepts that he simply asserts without arguing, but still declines to argue. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi wrote to me thanking me for his praise of him, agreeing that (as he put it) "Khurshidul Islam knows more Urdu than most foreigners put together can acquire in several lifetimes" but expressing the view that "this is a matter on which we should agree to differ. Perhaps it's too late for either of us to change our views on this." I replied:

Whether you and I simply "agree to differ," as you suggest, is up to you. Even if we do, both I and *AUS* readers will hope that you will tell us what it is we differ *about*. In other words I think you should write a piece however brief on what *your* view of the ghazal is even if you don't go on to engage in controversy with me. For my part, I would wish that you should engage in controversy. I am perfectly ready to cross swords with you even though I say of you what you say of Khurshid that you know more Urdu than foreigners (including me) can acquire in several lifetimes! And I hope neither of us is so fossilised that we are not capable of conceding—or *not* conceding!—points to each other according to whether or not our arguments convince.

This letter has evoked no response. So there we are.

And what about Pritchett? It was she who wanted a debate, but one could be forgiven for concluding from her contribution that she no longer does. Shaw once criticized H.G. Wells for acting on the maxim,

“Never argue: simply repeat your assertion”—and that for the most part is what Pritchett does. I gave a comprehensive account of my disagreements with her and argued the case for these disagreements. She hasn’t done likewise. If at the time of writing she felt that she couldn’t yet give the time and attention needed to argue her case properly she could have said so, and that would have been quite acceptable. But she doesn’t say that and gives no indication that she ever intends to add anything to what she has already said. So, once again, there we are.

Just a word on the most important of Carla Petievich’s comments. For most people, including, I imagine, Carla Petievich and, I hope, (but is it a vain hope?) Frances Pritchett, the greatest poetry is that which conveys to its readers the conviction that the poets have themselves felt in real, intense personal experience the things which their poetry expresses and which resonates with their own similar experience. (Technical competence in the handling of traditional themes is not in itself enough to achieve this impact.) True, you don’t absolutely *have* to produce evidence to this effect from outside the poetry, but where you can, as you can in both Mir and Ghalib’s case, it enhances the impact which the poetry makes.

For the present, there is no point in saying more. But I still hope that in some future issue of the *AUS* Hanaway, Pritchett, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and others to whom my article issued an invitation will be ready to favor us with their views on the issues I have raised. If that happens, and you think your readers will still be interested, the debate can then begin.

—RALPH RUSSELL

Dear Editors:

**T**HOUGH I HAVE SUBSCRIBED to the *AUS* since vol. 1, and have largely found considerable pleasure in it, I fear that the journal has changed in such a way that it is of little interest to me any more. Accordingly, I am returning the volume to you, and am asking to be taken off your mailing list.

At first the *AUS* was a rather scholarly journal, with much interest played on classical Urdu prose and poetry. That is what I enjoyed in particular.

Now it’s mostly contemporary prose; there is little serious criticism of

classical writing.

It is more difficult to get decent scholarly writing than to get contemporary fiction: everyone seems to have at least one manuscript in waiting in their desk drawers. It can be have way decent [*sic*], even, but it doesn't compare with scholarship, or the highly refined earlier works. Your modern material isn't particularly Urdu; rather it is just a part of modern fiction, using the European style that has become a universal among aspirant scribes.

So, the time has come for a parting of the ways. But if you do return to Classical themes, give me a call.

Best regards,

—JOHN A.C. GREPPIN  
*Cleveland State University, Ohio*

Dear Editors:

**R**EADING THE ARTICLE on Muḥammadī Bēgam in *AUS* #II, I was reminded of my notes on Muḥammadī Bēgam's poetry which I'd like to share with your readers.

Some years ago, thanks to Prof. Gail Minault of the University of Texas, I was able to examine Muḥammadī Bēgam's only book of poems: *Saččē Mōṭī* (Genuine Pearls). Her copy is a fourth edition published in 1930 by Dāru 'l-Ishā'at Punjab, Lahore, the press owned and operated by Maulvī Mumtāz 'Alī, Muḥammadī Bēgam's husband. The book consists of 144 pages, including a preface by the poet and a note by Mumtāz 'Alī, dated 23 February 1925. The note was added in the 2nd edition published after Muḥammadī Bēgam's death.

In the preface, the poet tells us that most of the poems originally appeared in her journal, *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*, and that Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī looked at them before their publication in the book. A few poems, however, were never published eralier.

The book contains a total of 35 poems. One, a *ḥamd*, has the *takhalluṣ*, "Muḥammadī," while others have, "Editor." The remaining have neither. Many poems are addressed exclusively to girls, but several others are addressed to children as such. Some poems are emphatically instructive in tone, others merely moralizing in a general way. These are some of the

titles: “Baččiyoñ kē Liyē,” “Aččhī Laṛkī,” “Yeh Zēvar Aččhē Haiñ,” “Laṛkī kī Rukhṣat,” “Īd kī Khushī,” “Shajar-e Ummīd,” “Āñkḥēñ Baṛī Ni‘mat Haiñ,” “Savērē Uṭḥnā,” “Turbat-e Shauhar,” “Tahzīb-e Nisvāñ,” “Pān,” and “Āirāgh-e Rāh.” One poem, titled “Yādgār-e Maḥbūb,” is a poignant elegy on the death of her beloved brother.

In the poem entitled “Ēk Laṛkī kī Ārzū,” a mother promises her daughter to give her whatever she’d ask for. The daughter replies: “I don’t desire clothes and jewels. I have only one desire. Give me a room of my own, with several cabinets with glass doors. Then buy me a whole lot of fine books to fill the cabinets with—such as the Qur’ān, books of *hadīṣ*, books about *masā’il*, bound volumes of *Tabzīb-e Nisvāñ*, books published by the Rifāh-e Ām Press, books by Naẓīr Aḥmad and Żakāullāh and Ḥālī and Sayyid Aḥmad Dihlavī, and many other publications.”

“Āirāgh-e Rāh” is another particularly affective poem, for it tells a parable that probably reflects some particular moment in the poet’s own life. It begins: *Ēk shab barsāt kē mausam mēñ ḥā’ī tḥī gḥatā*. That night it rained so heavily that the neighborhood gets inundated with water. A girl living there became concerned about wayfarers and decides to light a lamp by the roadside. Finding she didn’t have enough oil, she tries to borrow a little from every house. But a *mard-e khudā* gets envious—he wishes to steal the girl’s good name and be himself known as a *hamdard-e qaum* for nothing. He declares that girls cannot manage such things, and that the oil should be brought to him—he would light the lamp. Consequently the oil gets divided and neither has enough. The girl then blows out her own lamp which makes the man very happy. But as night progresses his lamp runs out of oil and goes out. In the ensuing darkness, that wise girl lights her lamp and puts it by the road, gaining everyone’s praise. The poem ends with three verses that movingly express the author’s personal anguish:

*kām lekīn voh kiyā tḥā mard hō kar mard nē  
jō kisī ṣūrat na shāyāñ tḥā na zēbā tḥā usē  
us kō lāzim tḥā keh hōnē dētā voh ‘aurat kā nām  
us kī shuhrat kē miṭāñē kā na kartā intizām  
ai khudā bē-jā ḥasad sē tū bačā ham kō sadā  
aur bḥalā’ī kī hameñ taufīq yā rab kar ‘aṭā*

The most fascinating discovery for me was the poem titled “Yeh Zēvar Aččhē Haiñ.” It turned out to be the poem which inspired Maulānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī to give his own famous book its title *Bihishtī Zēvar*. As

we know, he quotes the poem admiringly at the beginning of his book but does not give its author's name. This is how he introduces the poem:

At the time I was to write this introduction, I caught sight, in the paper *Nūrun 'Alā Nūr*, of a poem with the same name as this work and making the same point. To my heart this seemed auspicious, and I fancied ending my introduction with the poem for the delight of my readers, especially young girls, who would then be more favorably inclined toward the subject of the work. If this poem were at the beginning of every section of the work, it would offer the sweet delight of successive lumps of sugar. Here it is ...<sup>1</sup>

Very high praise indeed.

The first question that rose in my mind when I discovered the identity of the poem was: why did the Maulānā conceal the name of the author? I couldn't accuse him of envy or sloppiness—a man of strict principles, he was always extremely scrupulous in such matters. The only plausible explanation was that perhaps the poem was originally published without the poet's name. Much later I came across something in one of Maulānā Thānavī's innumerable books that offered another—more plausible—explanation. Unfortunately I have since lost the reference, but I'm quite sure of my memory. In response to someone's question concerning the propriety of women publishing their writings in magazines, the Maulānā wrote that it could be done but only without indicating the author's name—it would be quite improper, he felt, to publish the names of decent purdah-observing women in books and magazines. The Maulānā practiced what he preached. He admired Muḥammadī Bēgam's poem in the extreme—he wished it could be repeated many times in his own book for the pleasure and edification of his readers—but following his own principle he carefully left out the well-known name of its author.

—C.M. NAIM  
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<sup>1</sup>Translation by Barbara D. Metcalf. (Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990, pp. 50–1.)