

The Meaning of Poetry in Our Lives Today

By Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

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Mr. M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Chairman of the Thunchan Memorial Trust, and Chairman of this inaugural session, Chief Guest Ms Anne Waldman, Mr. Achuthanunni, Mr. Abdullakutty, Mr. Muhammad Ali, Fellow Writers, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to be present here this morning among you at the Inaugural Session of the Thunchan Festival. It is an honour that I will always cherish. You have called me from far away Allahabad, a place from where my name could hardly have travelled to this far in the south. As the 17th century Persian poet Sai'b, almost a contemporary of Thunchan says:

*Every tree sheds its fruit under its own shade;
To lovingly remember those who are far away
Is true generosity.*

I am conscious of my own inadequacy in this company. I counted the great poet and critic Ayappa Panikker among my friends. I count your other great poet Satchidanandan among my friends. As some of you may know, I printed some Urdu translations of his poems in my journal *Shabkhood* and now a whole book of the Urdu translations of his poems has come out recently from Aurangabad.

I greatly value the writings of M. T. Vasudevan Nair, especially his novel in which he, like his great predecessor Thunchathu has reinterpreted and recreated the *Mahabharata*, expanding, as he says, "the pregnant silences" in that great epic. I know about his and Mohammed's *The Gold of Arabic*, though I have not yet had the pleasure of reading it. I am familiar with the names of O. V. Vijayan, N. P. Mohammed, G. Shankara Kurup, Balamani Amma, and with the work of her distinguished daughter Kamala Surayya. I am familiar with the name and some works of Ms Anne Waldman.

I know these are not credentials sufficient to enable me to be among you this morning. I still hope that whatever I say to you this morning will evoke some resonance in your hearts.

Thunchathu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan almost recreated the Malayam language. By his marvellous remixing of the Dravidian and Sanskrit streams in his poetry; he made the language a most flexible

medium capable of expressing moods and nuances that were not within the reach of the formal, somewhat verbose Sanskritised diction that was in vogue in his day. Also, he became, by virtue of his life of the heart and the soul, the greatest Bhakti poet in Malayalam.

I feel particularly happy to see that this year's Festival is characterized as a National Seminar in honour of Kamala Surayya, whose name is among the best known in the north from the world of Malayalam literature.

Kamala Surayya lifted poetry from the level of a routine expression of "feminine" sensibility to a much higher level of poetic expression where categories like "femininity", "gender", "woman writer", "feminism", "protest", break down. An entirely new reality is created where the woman, her suffering, her inner conflicts dominate, but the poem remains what poetry should be: a vision and a view of the world as we do not know it; a discovery, a revelation of new ways of living and existing. In her poem "The Seashore", she said:

Not knowing what

*To do, I kiss your eyes, dear one, your lips, like
Petals drying at the edges, the burnt cheeks and
The dry grass of your hair, and in stillness, I sense
The tug of time; I see you go away from me
And feel the loss of love I never once received.*

This is not the kind of poetry that can tolerate facile labels stuck by professional critics on to poems which they can't really classify. The woman in this poem is there almost by sufferance, not by right. The poem speaks to us of the human condition, and incidentally of the woman's condition. In her poem "The Old Playhouse", where she speaks of "the all pervasive scent" of the "male breath", the woman's, the wife's voice prevails, but it prevails at a visceral, almost animal level:

Cowering

*Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf, I lost my reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.*

Kamala Surayya earned much fame and some honours in her life. But I am firmly persuaded that hers would have been a truly national name, had she not been a man and not a woman. Ignoring or marginalizing women authors is nothing new in this country, or elsewhere. My own language, Urdu, has a long tradition of women writers, but very few are known today, and those too among the specialists. It should not surprise you to know, it certainly didn't surprise me, that a distinguished Urdu scholar of the 1940's felt that the poetry of Mah Laqa Ba'i Chanda need not be considered, for she was a dancing girl, and did not express "true female sensibility." The audacity and callous patronization of this observation did not evoke any protest, even from the women. Mah Laqa Ba'i Chanda (1768-

1820) was long regarded as the first woman Urdu poet to have put together a full collection of her poems in about 1798. She was a dancing girl, but she commanded respect for her literary talent and her beauty from no less a person than Mir Alam, then Prime Minister of the Nizam of Hyderabad. She lived and comported herself in aristocratic style, riding an elephant in the Nizamul Mulk's hunt-procession like other nobles. She was a patron of poets. Yet, our learned scholar refused to count her among the poets.

Ironically, in the same city of Hyderabad, and about the same time, there was another excellent woman poet, Lutfunnisa Imtiaz. Born about 1741-1742, she is now discovered to have put together her own collection of poems in 1797, a year before Mah Laqa Ba'i Chanda. Considered as a whole, the poetry of Lutfunnisa Imtiaz is better than that of Mah Laqa Chanda. It is certainly more voluminous. In some respects, her poems resemble those of the sufi or bhakti poets. She says in one of her verses:

*I don't know what's non-Muslim and what is Muslim,
Though the world wonders, in my eyes
Temple and mosque are but one.*

Tunchatthu would have felt much affinity with this verse. Lutfunnisa Imtiaz remained even more in the oblivion than Mah Laqa Ba'i Chanda. Ironically, though she was married to a distinguished Urdu poet Asad Ali Khan Tamanna (d.1789-1790), her husband did not mention her in his own *tazkira*, a biographical dictionary of poets that he compiled in 1778-1780. It is only recently that she has received some attention.

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Talking about poets and writers generally whom time, or politics, or an accident of history or morality passed by, and who were never discovered, or discovered too little and too late, brings me to the question of the status of poetry, or of the arts today. In fact, it's not just the status of the fine arts which is in question today. It seems to me that intellectual or mind-expanding activities as such are now in danger of being bypassed. The race for earning creature comforts, status symbols, for obtaining education which converts the scholar into a money making machine generally, leaves me bewildered and anxious about the future of poetry, of our own future.

There was a time, and it's not too far away behind us, when the appreciation of poetry, of deriving enjoyment from the use of words, of creating inner and outer worlds which would hold meaning for more than a moment, was a necessary activity. It was something that we all did: we lived our language, we loved to read and make poetry in it. The biographical dictionaries of Urdu poets written in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries are full of the names of artisans, semi-literate persons, persons from so-called non-literary

families, who wrote poetry and enjoyed poetry as a natural activity. As Auden said, “The poet is himself enchanted by the subjects he writes about and wishes only to share his enchantment with others.” But are there going to be any people in the future, in the urban society at least, who will feel enchanted about things around them, except perhaps about film or sports icons?

I have nothing against films or sports, and I too like to have, or at least had my own idols when I was young. But an idol is different from an icon. An idol represents an idea, a state of being. An icon represents a fashion, a craze. It’s not related to the actuality of the icon. It disables our capacity to feel inwardly about how *we* should think, or value, or know. In brief, the pursuit of the cultural or social icon stultifies our capacity to feel inwardly. In my own home, I brought up my children to love and understand poetry, all poetry, any poetry. But the children of my children, in spite of my efforts and those of their parents, seem unable to think beyond the cell phone, the face book, the chat room, the twitter and other such activities which need immediate response and don’t leave time to the actant to think, really think about the reality of things.

I don’t blame the children. I feel that they are caught in the worst trap that technology offers us today. What we nowadays respond to are, to quote Auden again, “idle words”. I would like to quote Auden a little more at this point and ask the question, How many of us feel about ourselves as Auden would have liked to? Here’s what Auden said:

...If we respond to a poem at all, the response is conscious and voluntary and it cannot, it would seem, be reduced to an idle word...Poetry is personal speech in its purest form. It is concerned, and only concerned with human beings as unique persons. What men do from necessity or second nature as individual members of a society cannot be the subject of poetry.

I quote Auden not because I regard him as the wisest of poets, but because he was the most practical of poets. He seems to put his finger on the pulse of modern man: We like to do things by necessity and no longer seem to believe that human beings, as unique persons, cannot be reduced to “an idle word”.

I know that I sound pessimistic. I know that there have been doomsayers in the past too and they have been proved false. I hope that I too will be proved false. But in the past, we didn’t have the large-scale invasion of the technology of idle thoughts in our homes, our market places, and our work places. Life doesn’t seem to need mind-expanding activities for most of us now.

It is said that in times of stress and insecurity following rapid changes in the way of life, the people turn to charismatic leaders. At some times poets, at least some poets, were the charismatic leaders.

Thunchattu Ramanujan seems to have been one such. It is said that it was impossible to find a Malayali home in the 17th century, which didn't have a copy Thunchattu's *Adhyatamaramayana*. I understand that even now there are numerous homes of both Hindus and Muslims in Kerala which possess and cherish a copy of Tunchatthu's *Adhyatamaramayana*. That kind of charisma, in our times, seems for the most part to have been replaced by the TV serial Ramayana.

The apparent order and the systemic change introduced in our educational and cultural life by the British in the first half of the nineteenth century made us aware of the value of education. But it was not education in itself that they wanted to impart to us. Yeats famously said that "The Muse prefers the gay, the warty lads." But according to John Press, Robert Southey preferred "Rule Britannia", "Hohenlinden" and "The Burial of Sir John Moore" and similar poems to all that Keats wrote, because the Victorian view was that "poetry should be grave; it should elevate the mind." To a culture like ours where the entire universe was the manifestation of a Cosmic Play, the Victorian attitude was unacceptable, but it was forced upon us through the school curricula, through the examination system, through the requirement of "educational qualification" of a type suitable for low-grade bureaucratic work.

Life still remained unchanged for most of the poets in early British India. But the people changed, even if slowly. The need to compete, to pass examinations, to read not for pleasure but for profit or employment, gradually changed us to what we are today. Parents spend huge sums of money to "educate" their children and prepare them for making yet more money. No one, it seems, is now preparing our children to make poems, or at least understand them.

Before I conclude, however, I would like to express my sense of pleasant surprise to see such a large number of young women and men, even young students in the audience today. Literature, it seems, still has the power to transport the young people of Kerala. It is a phenomenon that is becoming, sadly, all too rare in my part of the country.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi
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