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A SHAHRASHOB OF SAUDA

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The shahrashob, as with nearly every form of classical Urdu poetry, can be traced back to the Persian literary tradition. E. J. W. Gibb claims that the shahrashob first appears in the Turkish literary tradition where it was called shahrangez. Jan Rypka, however, points out that there are several shahrashobs in the Persian diwan of Masud Sa'd Salman (1046-1121). He also refers to a shahrashob in the diwan of Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) which is a collection of "epigrams in praise of fair youths."¹ Both of these poets lived several centuries before Sayfi of Bukhara (d. 1504) the Turkish poet who is considered by Edirne A. Mirzoyev to be the "originator of such medallions portraying young artisans."²

Notwithstanding the confusion as to its origin, all early Turkish and Persian shahrashobs had two things in common: they were humorous poems relying on word-play and pun, and they contain a list of various professions the young lads being described were involved in. Gibb states that the shahrashob is the "First attempt at humorous poetry in Turkish. . . . It offers much relief from the great stream of intensely serious poetry."³ Almost all of these poems "consist of three parts, Prologue, Catalogue, and Epilogue; there is always a description of night in the Prologue; and two couplets of comment are almost always allotted to each name of the list (in the Catalogue)."⁴

As the shahrashob gradually became an established form of poetry, it developed from being a purely humorous catalogue of the handsome youths of a particular city, to a satirical poem which exposed the social and political malaise of a particular era. Harfi of Isfahan wrote a shahrashob which "seems to have been bitterly satirical, for the unhappy poet was deprived of his tongue in consequence."⁵ Agahi of Khurasan wrote a satirical shahrashob on Herat which was "allegedly the counterpoint of Khusrau's Darya-e abrar."⁶

The literal meaning of the term "shahrashob" seems to be a major source of confusion concerning the contents and nature of this type of poem. Platts has defined it thus: "A disturber of the peace of a city, (met.) a mistress,--a poem of a ruined city."⁷ Haim has defined it as: "1. A disturber of the public peace. 2. Poet, a beauty (moving or agitating as it were the whole city)."⁸ Perhaps because of its literal meaning,

critics take a shahrashob to be a lament or threnody on the ruined condition of the city. If one looks at the early Turkish and Persian shahrashobs, however, it becomes obvious that the city was merely the setting of the poem which went on to humorously describe the charms and delights of the young lads in the city. As I have said, the two most important aspects of these early shahrashobs were the humorous quality and the listing of professions. As the shahrashob developed, the humorous element as well as the listing of the professions was retained, and the dimensions of satire, disgust, protest, or anger were added. It was in this form that the shahrashob came into the Urdu literary tradition.

The Urdu poem, selections of which have been translated here, is called Qasida-e Shahrashob. "Qasida" refers to the "Technic" of the poem, an aa ba ca da rhyme scheme, as well as to the style which is different than that of the ghazal. It is called a shahrashob because of its satirical tone, the poet's (or the protagonist's) obvious disgust with the times, and the listing of professions. The poet is Mirza Muhammad Rafi' Sauda (1713-1781), one of the foremost Urdu poets, and the poem was written sometime before 1760. The poem exposes the moral and social malaise of the time by describing the ludicrous position or sore straits in which men employed in various professions found themselves. It is not an invective, seeking to poke fun at or attacking a single person or institution; rather, it is a satire which voices a general discontent and anger over the social situation at a given time.

In this translation I have attempted to render the poem in rhymed and metered verse. Attention has been paid to a literal translation even where the English may have suffered a bit as a consequence. It is, of course, impossible to even suggest in English how an Urdu poem sounds. I have, however, tried to create a generally similar effect; that is, the poem moves forward at a smooth and rapid pace, and the language has a colloquial, conversational tone. It is neither vulgar nor yet formal or stately.

NOTES

1. Jan Rypka, *A History of Iranian Literature*, ed. Karl Jahn (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing House, 1968), p. 259.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
3. E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry* (London: Messrs. Luzac and Company Ltd., 1965), vol. II, p. 236.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
5. E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), vol. IV, p. 237.
6. Rypka, p. 259.
7. Platts, *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 738.
8. Haim, vol. II, p. 231.

QASIDA-E SHAHRASHOB

Mirza Muhammad Rafi'

Whoever is before me
Be he old or be he young,
Let him not claim here now
That he can speak with a golden tongue.

The speech of master Sauda
Oh my friends, indeed I've heard,
My God, how ordered in his tale!
How perfect every word!

I but made this request of him:
"Please tell us if you would
For living out one's life on earth
Is there a way that's good?"

On hearing this request of mine
He began to speak:
"Be silent, for in this matter
Even angels' tongues are weak.¹

"Let me then put it briefly thus:
What more shall I say?
When it comes to livelihood
We have no single way!

"If you become some noble's knight
By the purchase of a horse,
Look not for money from him,
But in the World to come, of course!

"In search of horse's fodder
Your entire life you roam.
Your shield is in the pawn shop
If your sword is at your home!

"You may have a padded coat,
But of socks not a single one--

You may have your arrows feathered,
But your bow will be unstrung.

"Your groom he goes and says
To the banker when the month begins:
'My mistress she has eaten,
But my master's starving for his sins.'

"If on hearing this he gives a bit
It's as good as Id,
If not, Shawwal will also be
Like the blessed Ramzan fast indeed!²

"If a courtier of some mighty lord
You would go and be,
The torture of that status
Is a real calamity.

"If he at night remains awake,
Beside him you must keep,
Though your head grows heavy
And you're overpowered with sleep.

"He may not eat when you desire
So you in hunger sit . . .
What else can I relate to you
Of woe this poem is writ.

"Sitting silently you wait, to hear
The hours chiming out

While winds race through your empty gut
Like a stallion charging about.³

"And if a man would be employed
As a nobleman's physician,
Five or ten score rupees
He might earn in that position.

"But if the master sneezes
Of his life then such is the measure
The noble looks upon him
With glances of displeasure.

"If you would take up commerce
Of these afflictions I must tell

What you have bought in Persia
In the Deccan you must sell.

"Each morning you are burdened
With the perils of the road.
At night your thoughts of loss and gain
Make a heavy load.

"If you would take your merchandise
To some noble's house for sale
This is the pain you must endure:
Just hear this curious tale.

"The noble seeks such bargains
That one's led to this belief,
That the noble thinks the seller
Is nothing but a thief.

"If you would take two oxen
And go somewhere to farm,
And get the right amount of rain
That scene is full of charm.

"If not, you live both day and night
In fear of floods and drought
For you there is no peace of mind
And you'll find no way out.

"Men often say of poets
That from want and care they're free,
But you should see our rich supply
Of pain and anxiety.

"Everyone wants to meet them
But they have to meet someone
Rich enough to be their patron
Like Such-and-such, So-and so's son.

"If to the mosque a poet goes
Intent on prayers of Id,

His mind dwells on a eulogy
In his patron's honor to read.

"All day long his thoughts must dwell
On a chronogram for the birth,
If in the womb of his patron's wife
Rests a babe she'd bring to earth.

"And should she have a miscarriage
Such verses he must keen
That none would have a thought to spare
Even for Miskin.⁴

"As for the esteem you'll get
If a Mullah you would be
Two rupees for him who sings
Rumi's famed masnavi.

"And of a teacher's daily sup
Not much can now be said.
For him a bowl of lentils
And a little barley bread.

"His days are filled with teaching boys
Poor man, but then at night
If he a mathematician be
Household accounts he must get right.

"Beyond all that which has been said
This outrage must be borne,
Within his bed the naughty boys
Have placed a large black thorn.

"If all these jobs you would forsake
And put your faith in God,
Your wife would but consider you
An idle, useless clod.

"Your son would then become convinced
His father's talk is strange;
Your daughter starts to wonder
If her father's not deranged.

"And when the Shaikh's own children
Begin to starve to death,

Behind each noble he must run
And beg till he's out of breath.

"When for the sake of piety
A lord would give some money,
The Shaikh runs 'round to Khan Sahib
To ask for a testimony.

"And in the letter this is said:
'Please give this man some dole
He is a praiser of Imams
And his marsiyas move the soul.'⁵

"If for the sake of argument
A brigade you come to lead
Don't think that it would bring you
A life that's free from need.

"Have you now heard of any way
Of living a life of ease?
Or of attaining peace of mind--
What is it, tell me, please!

"Ease is nothing but a name
To us in this world here.
It is, however, said by some
To exist in a Higher Sphere.

"Yet even to this very thought
No one will be inclined,
For it is but a figment
Of the speaker's doubting mind.

"Here we toil for daily bread,
And there we fear re-birth,
Peace of mind is but a word
Not found in heaven or earth!"

NOTES

1. This refers to the Quranic tradition that angels are constantly (continually) singing praises to god.
2. The Id referred to in this verse is Id-ul-Fitr, the holiday which comes at the end of the month of Ramzan, the month of fasting for Muslims. Shawwal is the month following Ramzan, thus Id-ul-Fitr is the first day of Shawwal.
3. The habits and manners of various nawabs and maharajas were notoriously eccentric. It is said that the Nawab of Hyderabad would establish the time for dinner every day to the minute, so, for example, all the courtiers would be expected to show up for dinner at 11:35 in the evening, no earlier and no later.
4. Although none of Miskin's works are extant, he must have been a well-known *marsiya* writer during Sauda's period.
5. This verse and the preceding one refer to the practice among Muslims of giving alms to pious men who were worthy of charity. The mention of the Imams and marsiyas make the verse particularly shia in tone since it is the Shia's who believe in Imams, and true marsiyas are laments over the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala.

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