

Poems by Akbar Ilahabadi
Translated by Miriam Murtuza¹

Note: I have put in quotations marks those words which were expressed in English in the original poems; I have done so in order to distinguish them from words which were expressed in Urdu in the original poems but which I have translated into English. For ease of reference, I have titled untitled poems “Untitled A,” “Untitled B,” and so forth.

اذانوں سے سوا بیدارگن انجن کی سیٹی ہے -۳۷

اسی پر شیخ بیچارے نے چھاتی اپنی پیٹی ہے

کہاں باقی رہے ہم میں وہ اورادِ سحرگاہی -۳۸

وظیفے کی جگہ یا پانیر یا آئی۔ ڈی۔ ٹی ہے

گئے شربت کے دن یاروں کے آگے اب تو اے اکبر -۳۹

کبھی سوڈا، کبھی لمنڈ، کبھی وہسکی، کبھی ٹی ہے

Untitled A

- 1 Beside the calls to prayer, there is the waking whistle of the “engine”;
About this very [issue] the Sheikh has beaten his breast.
- 2 Where among us are remaining those [Qur’anic] recitations of the morning?
In place of the recitations [of certain verses] are, “O ‘Pioneer,’ O ‘I.D.T.’”²
- 3 Thus now are gone the days of sherbet in front of friends, O Akbar; sometimes
[it] is “soda,” sometimes “lemonade,” sometimes “whiskey,” sometimes “tea.”³

¹ I translated these poems as part of a class I was taking on Urdu satire, taught by Syed Akbar Hyder. Although I initially translated the poems myself, I revised my original translations based on our discussion of the poems in class. Thus my translations here are indebted both to Dr. Hyder’s and my classmates’ translations. Additionally, Dr. Frances W. Pritchett and Dr. Rupert Snell kindly offered some corrections after I presented these translations as part of a presentation at the 2007 Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin.

² *The Pioneer* was an English-language newspaper founded in Allahabad in 1865 by Englishman George Allen. Rudyard Kipling worked for *The Pioneer* from 1887 to 1889. The newspaper was later moved to Lucknow and continues to be published today in Lucknow, Delhi, and other Indian cities. “I.D.T.” is presumably the name of another English-language newspaper.

زندگی اور قیامت میں رلیشن سمجھو -۹۲

اس کو کالج اور اُسے کانووکیشن سمجھو

ہو جنہیں مقدرتِ وضع و نفاذِ قانون -۹۳

بس انہیں کو صفِ اقوام میں نیشن سمجھو

آہ و فریاد سے قابو میں نہ آئے گا وہ یار -۹۴

طپشِ قلب کو بنگالِ اجمی ٹیشن سمجھو

Untitled B

- 1 Understand the “relation” between life and Judgment Day [in this way]:
Understand the former [as] “college,” and the latter [as] “convocation.”
- 2 Those who have the power to appoint and implement laws
Consider only them to be nations in the ranks of communities (*aquaam*).
- 3 From sighs and complaints [it] will not come under control, beloved;⁴
Understand the burning of the heart as the Bengal “agitation.”⁵

³ “Sherbet” is a kind of drink traditionally served to guests in India. Guests are now being served English beverages instead of sherbet.

⁴ Alternately, this line could read, “From sighs and complaints, the beloved will not come under control.”

⁵ The poet is alluding to the partition of the province of Bengal in 1905 under Lord Curzon and the resistance movements (referred to as the “agitation”) which Curzon’s decision sparked.

- ۲۶- خدا حافظ مسلمانوں کا اکبر
- مجھے تو اُن کی خوش حالی سے ہے یاس
- ۲۷- یہ عاشق شاہدِ مقصود کے ہیں
- نہ جائیں گے ولیکن سعی کے پاس
- ۲۸- سناؤں تم کو اکِ فرضی لطیفہ
- کیا ہے میں نے جس کو زیبِ قرطاس
- ۲۹- کہا مجنوں سے یہ لیلیٰ کی ماں نے
- کہ بیٹا تو اگر کر لے ایم۔ اے پاس
- ۳۰- تو فوراً بیاہ دوں لیلیٰ کو تجھ سے
- بلادقت میں بن جاؤں تری ساس
- ۳۱- کہا مجنوں نے یہ اچھی سُنائی
- گُجا عاشق، گُجا کالج کی بلواس
- ۳۲- بجا یہ نظری جو جسِ طبیعت
- گُجا ٹھونس ہوئی چیزوں کا احساس
- ۳۳- بڑی بی آپ کو کیا ہو گیا ہے
- ہرن پر لادی جاتی ہے کہیں گھاس؟
- ۳۴- یہ اچھی قدر دانی آپ نے کی
- مجھے سمجھا ہے کوئی ہرچرن داس
- ۳۵- دل اپنا خون کرنے کو ہوں موجود
- نہیں منظور مغزِ سر کا آماس
- ۳۶- یہی ٹھہری جو شرطِ وصلِ لیلیٰ
- تو استعفا مرا باحترت و یاس!

Untitled C

- 1 May God [be] the protector of Muslims, O Akbar;
I despair over their prosperity.
- 2 These are the sweethearts of the goal,⁶
But they will not go near effort.
- 3 Shall I tell you a fictitious joke
Which I have made the adornment of a [piece of] paper?⁷
- 4 Leila's mother said this to Majnun:⁸
"Son, if you take your 'M. A. Pass,'"⁹
- 5 Then [I] would immediately marry Leila to you;
Without hesitation I would become your mother-in-law.
- 6 Said Majnun, "You've spoken this well;
Where is the lover? [And] where is the idle talk of college?"¹⁰
- 7 "Where [is] this natural passion of temperament?
[And] where [is] the stuffed feeling of matters?"¹¹
- 8 "Old woman, what has happened to you?
Can grass ever be loaded on a deer?"¹²
- 9 "You have esteemed me well;
[You] have understood me as some Harcharan Das."¹³
- 10 "I am ready to sacrifice myself,¹⁴
[But I] do not accept such swelling/tumor of the head/brain.
- 11 "[If it is] decided that this is the condition for union with Leila,
Then accept my resignation [of my suit] with despair and dismay."

⁶ They love attaining an end goal, not the process of attaining it.

⁷ which I have written down.

⁸ Leila and Majnun are famous ill-fated lovers of Persian folklore. The cultural resonance of their story for readers of Urdu poetry is akin to that of Juliet and Romeo for readers of English literature.

⁹ If you receive an M. A. degree

¹⁰ What does college have to do with a lover? How can you compare the two, when the latter is so much more important than the former?

¹¹ A diploma, something received by those educated in the West, is stuffed in one's hand. How can you compare the lover's passion with a student's arrogance?

¹² Deer like to run wild, not carry loads of grass on their backs.

¹³ Harcharan Das is perhaps the name of some Hindu person the poet considered a toadie to the British. The name literally means feet of Shiva.

¹⁴ Literally: I am ready to shed the blood of my heart.

قطعه

- ۴۲- میں نے کہا بہت سی زبانیں ہوں جانتا
مدت تک امتحان دیئے امتحان پر
۴۳- جرمن فرینچ لیٹن و انگلش پہ ہے عبور
ثابت مرا کمال ہے سارے جہان پر
۴۴- اک شوخ طبع مس نے دکھائی زباں مجھے
بجلی تھی ابر میں کہ قمر آسمان پر
۴۵- بولی رہو گے زیت کی لذت سے بے خبر
قدرت نہ پائی تم نے اگر اس زبان پر

*Qatah*¹⁵

- 1 I said, “[I] know very many languages/tongues.
For a long period of time I have taken exam after exam.
- 2 “[I have] command of German, French, Latin, and English;
My perfection has been proven to the entire world.”
- 3 One saucy-tempered “Miss” showed [her] tongue/language to me;
There was lightning in clouds, [and] the moon [was] in the sky.
- 4 [She] said, “You will remain unaware of life’s flavor/sweetness
If you do not master this tongue/language.”

¹⁵ A *qatah* is a genre of short poem. *Qatah* literally means a cutting or portion.

اکبر الہ آبادی

برقِ کلیسا

- ۱- رات اُسِ مَس سے کلیسا میں ہوا میں دوچار
ہائے وہ حُسن، وہ شوخی، وہ نزاکت، وہ ابھار
- ۲- زلفِ پیچاں میں وہ سَجِ دَھج کہ بلائیں بھی مُرید
قدِ رعنا میں وہ چم خم کہ قیامت بھی شہید
- ۳- آنکھیں وہ فتنہِ دُوراں کہ گنہگار کریں
گال وہ صبحِ درخشاں کہ نلک پیار کریں
- ۴- دل کشی چال میں ایسی کہ ستارے رُک جائیں
سرکشی ناز میں ایسی کہ گورنر جھک جائیں
- ۵- آتشِ حُسن سے تقویٰ کو جَلانے والی
بجلیاں لطفِ تبستم سے گرانے والی
- ۶- عرض کی میں نے کہ اے گلشنِ فطرت کی بہار
دولت و عزت و ایماں ترے قدموں پہ نثار
- ۷- تو اگر عہدِ وفا باندھ کے میری ہو جائے
ساری دنیا سے مرے قلب کو سیری ہو جائے
- ۸- شوق کے جوش میں میں نے جو زباں یوں کھولی
ناز و انداز سے تیوری کو چڑھا کر بولی
- ۹- غیر ممکن ہے مجھے اُنسِ مسلمانوں سے
بُوئے خوں آتی ہے اس قوم کے افسانوں سے

- ۱۰- مطمئن ہو کوئی کیوں کر کہ یہ ہیں نیک نہاد
- ہے ہنوز اُن کی رگوں میں اثرِ خونِ جہاد
- ۱۱- عرض کی میں نے کہ اے لذتِ جاںِ راحتِ روح
- اب زمانہ پہ نہیں ہے اثرِ آدم و نوح
- ۱۲- اب کہاں ذہن میں باقی ہے براق و رُفرف
- ٹکٹکی بندھ گئی ہے قوم کی انجن کی طرف
- ۱۳- ہم میں باقی نہیں اب خالدِ جانبازا کا رنگ
- دل پہ غالب ہے فقط حافظِ شیراز کا رنگ
- ۱۴- جوہرِ تیغِ مجاہد ترے ابرو پہ نشار
- نورِ ایماں کا ترے آئینہٴ رو پہ نشار
- ۱۵- موجِ کوثر کی کہاں اب ہے مرے باغ کے گرد
- میں تو تہذیب میں ہوں پیرِ مناں کا شاگرد
- ۱۶- مجھ پہ کچھ وجہِ عتاب آپ کو آے جان نہیں
- نام ہی نام ہے ورنہ میں مسلمان نہیں
- ۱۷- جب کہا صاف یہ میں نے کہ جو ہو صاحبِ فہم
- تو نکالو دلِ نازک سے یہ سب شبہ یہ وہم
- ۱۸- مرے اسلام کو اک قصہٴ ماضی سمجھو
- ہنس کے بولی کہ تو پھر مجھ کو بھی راضی سمجھو!

Lightning of the Church¹⁶

- 1 One night I was meeting with that “Miss” in the Church;
O that beauty, that forwardness, that delicacy, that voluptuousness.
- 2 The appearance of her curly locks was such that even the demons¹⁷ were [her] devotees.
There was such graceful motion in her swaying gait that even Judgment Day became [her] martyr.¹⁸
- 3 Those eyes, mischief of time, that shall make sinners,
That cheek, brilliance of dawn, that the angels¹⁹ love
- 4 [Her] alluring gait/manner is such that [it] makes the stars falter.²⁰
[She is] that very one to whose insolence of coquetry the “governor” submitted.
- 5 From the fire of beauty, she burns/inflames the pious;
From the elegance of [her] smile she causes lightning to fall.
- 6 I humbly stated, “O bloom of nature’s garden,
Good fortune and honor and faith [are] scattered at your feet.
- 7 “If you, having tied the knot²¹ of fidelity, should become mine,
My heart will be more satisfied than if I had the entire world.”
- 8 In the heat of desire when I spoke that language,²²
In the manner of flirtatious behavior, having frowned, she spoke:
- 9 “For me, affection with Muslims is impossible;
I smell blood coming from the legends of this race.
- 10 “Why should anyone be content that they are good and pious
[When] they still have in their veins the influence of the blood of *jihad*²³?”
- 11 I humbly replied, “O life’s delight, spirit’s source of pleasure,
The effects of Adam and Noah are no more left upon the present time.

¹⁶ Or, alternately, “Lightning Generated by the Church.” This title alludes to *baraq-e-tajali*, the burning bush encountered by Moses.

¹⁷ Demons are associated with the color black.

¹⁸ Judgment Day is something certain, unalterable, yet even it has been swayed by her. Or, people have forgotten about Judgment Day because of her.

¹⁹ The angels being male slaves (*malak*) in heaven, the counterpart of female houris.

²⁰ In the Urdu ghazal universe, the beloved’s gait is usually compared to the stars because of their movement.

²¹ Literally: promise

²² Literally: In the heat of desire when I opened my tongue

²³ *Jihad*, which means “justified struggle,” is often translated in the West as “holy war.”

- 12 “Now where in the mind do Buraaq and Rafrat²⁴ remain?
The stare/gaze is fixed in the direction of the “engine” of the people.
- 13 “In us no longer remains the color of Khaalid the Brave.
The heart is overwhelmed by the color of Haafiz of Shiiraaz.²⁵
- 14 “The polish of the *mujaahid*’s sword may be sacrificed on your eyebrow.²⁶
The light of religion may be sacrificed for the mirror of your countenance.
- 15 “Where is the surge of Kauser²⁷ now? In my garden.
Thus I am cultured, student of the saint of the magian.²⁸
- 16 You have no reason for displeasure with me, O beloved.
A name is only a name; otherwise, I [am] not a Muslim.”²⁹
- 17 When I plainly said this, “[You] who should be insightful,³⁰
[You] should remove from this delicate heart all this doubt, this
anxiety/superstition.
- 18 [You] should think of my Islam as a tale of the past.”
Laughing, [she] said, “Then you should also consider me willing/agreed.”

²⁴ Buraaq and Rafrat are the names of the Prophet Muhammed’s horses.

²⁵ Khaalid the Brave is known, especially to Sunni Muslims, as a determined warrior, a “sword of Islam,” and is associated with the color red. Haafiz of Shiiraaz, who was the equivalent of the poet Ghalib in the Persian ghazal tradition, is associated with wine drinking. Thus, according to the speaker, the color red is now tied to red wine rather than the blood of *jihaad*.

²⁶ A *mujaahid* is one who carries on *jihaad* [justified struggle]. In the Urdu ghazal universe, the beloved’s eyebrow is often compared to a sword, bow, or crescent moon because of its shape.

²⁷ A river and fountain in paradise.

²⁸ A magian, in this context, means the head of a Christian or Zoroastrian fraternity, who, unlike pious Muslims, drinks in a tavern. The implication of this couplet is that the speaker has traded heavenly pleasure for earthly pleasure.

²⁹ In the first half of this line the speaker could be asserting that he is a Muslim in name only, and/or that his Muslim name is just a name, something that should not bother her. In the second half of the line, he could be vouching for the validity of what he has just said by swearing upon his Muslim-ness, and/or asserting that he would not be Muslim if he had to be of the old-fashioned, *jihaad*-waging sort (and thus unappealing to her).

³⁰ Literally: possessor [*saahib*] of intellect/knowledge/understanding

- ۱۹ علم مغرب پڑھ کے ہوں گی ایسی خود سر بیبیاں
بیبیاں شوہر بنیں گی اور شوہر بیبیاں
- ۲۰ کیا بتاؤں کیا کریں گی علم پڑھ کر بیبیاں
ہوں گی سب ڈپٹی سے لے کر تا گورنر بیبیاں
- ۲۱ آدمی کیا چیز ہے حیواں کے سر چڑھ جائیں گی
جب پری بن جائیں گی سایہ پہن کر بیبیاں
- ۲۲ ان کے دام و مکر سے بچنا ابھی دشوار ہے
اور آفت ڈھائیں گی سائنس پڑھ کر بیبیاں
- ۲۳ ہاں مگر تسلیم سے یہ فائدہ ہوگا ضرور
ہوں گی عیسائی مشن میں جا کے نوکر بیبیاں
- ۲۴ جن کے پتے پانچ گز ممل کی بھی قیمت نہیں
ڈال دیں گی ان کے سر سایہ کا لنگر بیبیاں
- ۲۵ ہاں مگر تسلیم ان کو چاہئے اتنی ضرور
مرد کی غم خوار ہوں، بچوں کی رہبر بیبیاں

Untitled D

- 1 After having studied the science/knowledge of the West, wives/ladies will
become [so] headstrong
[That] wives will become husbands and husbands, wives.
- 2 What should I say, what will I do? Having studied science/knowledge
All the wives [in their professions] will range from “deputy” to “governor.”
- 3 What thing is [a] man [who] will tyrannize beasts?
Having worn their own shadows, wives should/might become fairies.³¹
- 4 From their net and craftiness it is difficult [for us] to be saved right now,
And having studied “science,” wives will bring calamity.
- 5 Yes, but from education there will certainly be this benefit:
Having gone to the Christian “mission,” wives will become servants.
- 6 Those who do not even have the capacity to five yards of muslin³²
Wives will spread on their heads the cloth of protection.
- 7 Yes, but they [wives] certainly need such education;
They may become the companions of husbands/men, the guides of children.

³¹ This line has something to do with women becoming spirits. Spirits are believed not to cast shadows.

³² the very poor