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Classics Revisited

Heroes Without Glory

MIR AMMAN ATTRIBUTED *Bāgh-o-Bahār*, a collection of stories retold by him, to Amir Khusro, the great thirteenth-century Persian poet. Since then, the critics and scholars have been sniping at him. In their opinion there is no proof that Amir Khusro wrote the stories and internal evidence suggests that some of them belong to a later period.

The critics may be right. But why must they overlook the fact that Mir Amman doesn't say that Amir Khusro wrote them? According to him, these were narrated by the poet to entertain Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, his spiritual mentor who was confined to bed following a bout of illness. Mir Amman's account of the stories' genesis could be no more than a fictive gloss. All the same, who knows, there may be a grain of truth in what he says.

There is no reason why Amir Khusro could not have told these stories. He, or whoever made up the collection, was merely reworking old material to get more mileage out of it, picking up some details from here, some from there, adding a little on his own and leaving things out which did not suit his fancy. The writers belonging to our distant past were essentially recyclers. If literature is a world in itself, it must possess an ecology of its own. Classical writers everywhere had better sense when it came to preserving its ecological balance. We no longer do and so in this context one can truly understand why T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has been so symptomatic and influential. We have almost succeeded in laying waste to literature.

A great deal of misunderstanding is caused because critics treat Mir Amman as if he were an author in the modern sense of the word. *Bāgh-o-Bahār* is not a personal work. Mir Amman is merely the last writer retouching an older, collective effort. One can describe his book as a

remake, as one would a film. Of course, he must have put something of himself into the plot and the minutiae but it is difficult to lay hold of that elusive personal factor. We can regard his prose or his idiom alone as distinctive. These indubitably are Mir Amman's own.

Almost nothing is known of Mir Amman's life except that he belonged to Delhi and had gone east to Calcutta in search of a job. One of the writers recruited by Dr. Gilchrist for the Fort William College in Calcutta, he stands out in a motley company simply because he could write prose with some distinction. Most of his colleagues were of little account and would find it nearly impossible to secure a niche for themselves in a decent literary history of Urdu. Dr. Gilchrist must have been uncommonly good at enlisting mediocrities.

The Persian text which Mir Amman followed in his translation has, as far as I know, never been published. In fact, this collection of stories, also known as *The Tale of the Four Dervishes*, exists in several Persian versions, all unpublished and, sadder still, never studied by our scholars. Mir Amman's Urdu rendition enjoyed so much popularity that five different translations of it were made into English, although none is in print now. He also translated another book from Persian which for some reason failed to attract a readership and has been conspicuously unavailable.

Bāgh-o-Bahār consists of a number of assorted stories brought together without any attempt at assimilation. The strand linking them is a slim one. The arrangement is convenient rather than persuasive. Apart from the stories told by the four luckless dervishes, King Azad Bakht himself, who plays host to them, narrates a fairly long tale about the misadventures of a merchant nicknamed *The Dog-worshipper*. The merchant in turn recounts the story of a young man and his wife he once rescued from a wilderness in a faraway land. Like wheels within wheels the stories exist as separate phantasmagorias set in motion to create illusory ambiance.

Unlike Urdu *dāstāns*, in which fantasy often plays a major role, the stories in *Bāgh-o-Bahār* are marked by an approach which can be called proto-realistic. Indeed, the supernatural is strikingly absent from the story of the first dervish and the two related by the merchant. It is possible to read them as examples of very early realistic fiction in Urdu. The fantastic intrudes to some extent in the remaining stories. The *deus ex machina* ending, although it militates against the grain of these tales, is however inevitable. In the end, the complications become too knotty to be sorted out by human agency.

The book displays several curious features. For a small volume it has more than its proper share of violence, executions, mischief, and murderous assaults. In those cases where the motive for the attempted killing is villainous, the victims manage to recover. Another curiosity is the role which underground passages, sewers, tunnels, disused wells used as dungeons, catacombs, and subterranean apartments play in the narrative. There are incidents in which surgeons or physicians are called in to minister to the wounded, the lovesick, and the demented. It is obvious that the symbolic ramifications of *Bāgh-o-Bahār* have never been perceptively traced.

Two other aspects of *Bāgh-o-Bahār* deserve notice. The protagonists are anything but heroic. They fight no battles, accomplish no Herculean tasks. In fact, when placed beside the majestic and invincible knights of *dāstāns* they come close to being anti-heroes. Whether princes or merchants, they behave like ordinary people and find it difficult to cope with crises. They do fall in love now and then but this is a very human failing.

Equally remarkable is the fact that at least three of the protagonists belong to the mercantile class and one of them even manages to marry a princess. So the age of heroes is over and the entrepreneurial class enters into the limelight. Or else we come across princes who have never seen battle, who appear to be somewhat effeminate or inefficacious and at a loss in a world where the rules have changed or are changing. There is a strange sense of decay and debasement here but kept on a tight leash by the persuasive flow of the stories.

Mir Amman's prose has a pleasing cadence. He has been dubbed a stylist but it would be only fair to say that what we find enjoyable in him is not style per se but a tonal strength. He writes well, although unevenly. The first half of his book is distinctly better written than the second half. He says right at the beginning that he wishes to give his prose a conversational air. The breathless bustle and slick surface of his prose do not always permit us to notice how contrived it often is. His vocabulary is not only impressive but at places also bizarre. Or that is how it seems to us now. The stories can be enjoyed without recourse to a glossary but there are a lot of words in Mir Amman's book which need annotation.

The Travel Books Azad Didn't Write

MORE TRAVEL BOOKS HAVE APPEARED in Urdu in recent years than ever before. Although the stage is still far off at which they may come to be regarded, by their sheer qualitative ascendance alone, as an embarrassment of riches, still there is little doubt that as a genre they now have a record of popularity which is as impressive as it is intriguing, perhaps more intriguing than impressive.

With overseas travel ceasing to be the prerogative of the lucky few, the response of the general reader to the literature of travel has undergone a radical change. There must be millions of Pakistanis working abroad right now, thousands of them practically expatriates. In former years travel books had an aura of unreality about them and the general reader, as he read them, could say to himself, "All that's mentioned here may be true but it doesn't really concern me." The travel writers now provide him with a strong, persuasive whiff of reality. Their books, like sordid *bildungsromans* of sorts, titillate the young reader's fancy.

Travel books, or at least books in which travel becomes a major narrative ploy, have been around ever since literature began. In ancient times travel was more often than not a dangerous adventure, a source of endless fascination. Look at the story of Gilgamesh. It is partly a tale of travel. And Homer's *Odyssey*, of course, is all about traveling. Everyone in it seems to be moving about and we know, even as the poem comes to an end, that Odysseus shall again have to leave the safety of his hearth and home and go forth into the world.

It is also true that for a very long time, a span to be reckoned in centuries if not in millennia, there were not too many travel books. Their presence on the literary scene was more in the nature of a tiny stream trickling down a valley. It is only during the last hundred years or so that they have come to resemble a river in spate.

Let us now narrow down our focus and take a quick look at nineteenth-century Urdu literature. It was during the early years of the nineteenth century that Urdu prose first began to show signs of diversification and suppleness. It may surprise some readers to know that the Urdu novel is a relative newcomer. Travel books antedate the novel by at least twenty to thirty years. The precedence they so obviously enjoy calls for grudging admiration.

In the absence of any comprehensive statistical figures it is impossible to say exactly how popular Urdu travel books were in the nineteenth century. What seems certain, however, is that with the growing awareness

of being a citizen of a world incomparably bigger than any hitherto imagined by his ancestors, and what is more, a world whose constituent elements were becoming increasingly interdependent, the nineteenth-century man belonging to the Subcontinent very naturally held great interest in what lay beyond his immediate horizons.

Not all those who wrote travel books in Urdu in the nineteenth century were well-known literary figures. There were a few exceptions, of course. The names of Shibli Numani and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan come immediately to mind. Both are important writers but their travel books are interesting only in a limited sense. The travel writer is essentially a story-teller, aiming for a certain degree of verisimilitude to make his narrative convincing. Neither Shibli nor Sir Syed was a writer of fiction. Their travel books are not exercises in style or feats of imaginative observation. They are at best baldly descriptive. Nazir Ahmad, himself a novelist, could have been a wonderful writer of travel books but never left his native shores.

Incidentally it was Muhammad Husain Azad, a man of great literary importance, who came within an ace of writing the first outstanding travel book. He was a dreamer. His imagination was, in the main, episodic, tending to shred his themes, literary or historical, into neat little scenes, each like a miniature. He was a keen observer although his fancy at times deeply suffused his observation.

Azad twice went on long journeys which were not only dangerous but physically very taxing, quite unlike those undertaken by Sir Syed and Shibli. How the first major travel book in Urdu came not to be written makes for interesting reading.

At this juncture a brief look at Azad's rather unexciting career is necessary. He was born in Delhi. His father, one of the pioneers of Urdu journalism, sided with the freedom fighters in 1857 and after the fall of Delhi, was arrested by the British troops and executed. Azad and his family fled from the ravaged capital. He was in his twenties. After spending some lean years in what is now Haryana and the Indian province of Punjab, he turned up in Lahore which became his second home. As a teacher of oriental languages and a writer who brought a new stylistic excellence to Urdu prose he was greatly respected. But his short temper and eccentricity, itself a disguise for a suppressed megalomania, estranged many people and merely compounded his problems.

It is from Lahore that he went on a spying mission to Russian Turkistan, a tour of duty that lasted nearly a year. The British, touchy about Russian encroachment eastward, wanted to keep an eye on their

rival's movements. Why Azad offered his services for a mission which was not only hazardous but apparently brought him no official appreciation or financial reward is a mystery. He almost certainly hated the British although he was unable to give vent to his hatred. The motives for his decision to go spying for their sake are far from clear. If Dr. Leitner, Azad's superior at Lahore, is to be believed, Azad's performance as a spy was very poor. But Leitner was on bad terms with Azad. His testimony is not to be trusted.

Yet it is possible that he was right. It is more than likely that Azad was not interested in spying for the British. He probably wanted simply to visit Afghanistan and Turkistan, and when finally an opportunity presented itself he couldn't resist. The fact that all expenses were to be paid by the Government must have been an additional temptation. If Azad managed to diddle the Indian Government out of some foreign exchange we can only smile at his artfulness.

There was one snag though. He had gone to Turkistan as a secret agent. He couldn't possibly openly write about his experiences west and north of Khyber. A veil of secrecy now shrouds his first journey.

Twenty years later, with his career as a teacher almost over, he made up his mind to visit Iran. Ostensibly his purpose was to collect material for his projected dictionary of Persian. But, in fact, the undertaking was more akin to a pilgrimage to a country with which Azad felt a deep affinity, some of it at a subliminal level.

It was a difficult decision to make. He was fifty-five and not in the best of health. The recent death of his talented daughter had been a crippling blow. So severe had been the emotional stress that for a while Azad feared for his sanity. The journey's hazards would have daunted even a physically fit young man. Iran had no railways, most of the country was hilly and the roads bad.

Undeterred by these negative factors Azad left Lahore on 23 September 1885. He took a train to Karachi and boarded a ship which was about to sail for the Persian port of Bushehr. From Bushehr he traveled inland, visiting, to mention some of the well-known places, Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran, Nishapur and Mashhad. Then he crossed over into Afghanistan, reached Herat, proceeded to Qandhar, finally arriving at Quetta where he boarded a train for Lahore. He was back home in July 1886 and gave a lecture on 24 July during which he briefly narrated his impressions of the journey, lacing his account with a number of amusing anecdotes.

There is not the slightest doubt that Azad had every intention of

writing a travel book about his journey through Iran and Afghanistan. Before he could do so, madness, which for some years had never seemed far away, overtook him and though he lived for another twenty years or so he did not regain his sanity.

Speaking from a purely literary point of view, both his journeys—eventful and almost reverential, like a man simultaneously tracing his vision back to its source and backing away from the threat of insanity—came to nothing.

Many years later, when Azad's lecture and the notes he had hurriedly jotted down in the course of his wanderings in Iran and Afghanistan were brought together in a small book called *Sair-e Irān*, it only intensified the sense of loss. These notes in Urdu and Persian, very readable despite their brevity, are a tantalizing shadow of what would have been a brilliant travelogue. □