

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI

## Saraswati Samman Award Acceptance Speech

HONORABLE SHRI INDER KUMAR GUJRAL, Prime Minister of India, President of the Foundation Shri K.K. Birla, Chairman and Members of the Selection Committee, fellow writers, ladies and gentlemen—

Let me begin by thanking the K.K. Birla Foundation and the Selection Committee for choosing me for the 1996 Saraswati Samman. As I stand here, I feel saturated with happiness: it's like an intoxication. One is reminded of Omar Khayyam:

I am in that moment's thrall  
When the Saki says,  
"Here, Take another cup."  
And I cannot

But this sense of elation soon gives way to a feeling of anxiety. I realize, standing in this august assembly, that I am part of a culture, a tradition, of which the Prime Minister himself is a fine example. It is the composite Indo-Muslim culture of India. This culture is the plant and flower of centuries of liberalism, secularism and tolerance. It was born from the fusion of the best in the Indian and the Perso-Arabic cultural consciousness. To be a member of such a culture is to establish connections with the thousand-year-old history of the composite Indian reality. It's a great honor and a great responsibility. It is not easy to prove worthy of this responsibility and this is what causes my anxiety.

Anand Narain Mulla, who died a few weeks ago at the age of ninety-six, was another child of the Indo-Muslim culture. Poet, writer, jurist, parliamentarian, and activist in the cause of Urdu, it was Anand Narain Mulla who said, "Urdu is my mother-tongue; I can give up my religion,

but I cannot give up my mother-tongue.” Rabindranath Tagore also belonged to the great Indo-Muslim cultural tradition. He said that the culture of his family was composed of both Hindu and Muslim influences.

The most important fact about this culture is that it derives its creative inspiration from India. It belongs to no religion, community or race. The products of this culture make you see and feel India through the way it constructs, or represents reality. The key factor in this culture is the value it places upon the word, and therefore on poetry. Bhartrihari said, “Consciousness can exert [*sic*] in all the creatures only after it is preceded by speech.” And it is not for nothing that in Urdu we use the word *kalām*, which means *speech*, to denote poetry. It should come as no surprise to the Urdu speaker that Mir equated silence with death. He said:

You are poets; don't be silent,  
Silence causes loss of life;  
Speak, say some poems, teach us  
A bit of poetry.

In classical composite society, respect for the word prevailed over respect for material goods. The poet, as creator and artist, stood supreme in his world. Poetry was not bound by worldly protocol. Mir said:

The honor that I got,  
In the mansions of the rich;  
I'll give the same to them,  
In the mansion of my poetry.

Things have changed since Mir's days. As Seamus Heaney wrote, “We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram for political action.” The modern state is greatly tempted by the attractive energy of the word, and wants to use the poet as a spokesman for the power élite. In classical times, the state left the poet alone, or used him as an ornament, but never as a spokesman or ideologue. The modern poet is sorely tempted to let himself be used by the state, and get, in Browning's words, a handful of silver, or less, in return.

There is yet another, peculiarly Indian problem. The modern Indian writer has an uneasy relationship with the colonial past. The colonizer imposed his own narrative on the story of Indian creativity. Partly due to

a lack of understanding, but mainly due to the colonialistic imperative, the British read in our literature signs of moral decay and intellectual failure. They judged our literature according to their interests, and found only a very small part of it to be satisfactory. In due course, these perceptions spread among the Indians too, and ultimately the Indians themselves emerged as the strongest denigrators of Indian literature. They condemned almost all of it as immoral and most of it as unrealistic and unuseful, if not positively harmful to society. A call rang through the centers of creativity and learning in India that Indian literature was moribund and morally and intellectually deficient in general and stood greatly in need of “reform.”

By the time I was a young man, I was so firmly steeped in the view of Urdu literature purveyed by the colonial power that I didn't even know that there was much more to Urdu literature than was dreamed of in our textbooks. I was quite convinced that only those parts of Urdu literature were good which could be shown to be good from western standards. I was not aware that other standards were possible. I was taught to discredit and disbelieve classical accounts of Urdu literature as false or shallow. In any case, they were not criticism; they were merely conventional, empty praise or blame, of no value to the modern mind.

I didn't realize until much later that the colonialist interpretations of Urdu literature and its history performed a political, and not a literary, function. The colonialist effectively muzzled the Indian voice, substituting for it a voice synthesized for colonialist needs. Indian literature became, as Fanon said in another context, someone else's potential: it made sense only to the extent it made sense according to colonial norms.

I knew, for instance, that Mīr wrote six *divāns* of ghazals. He also wrote other poems, whose volume would equal or maybe exceed the six *divāns*. Very little of these were studied in class, or by the critics in their works, or even by the people in general. Some of Mīr's work was passed over in embarrassed silence, as “immoral,” or nearly “obscene” and “unfit for civilized gatherings.” A very great part of Mīr was apologetically described as being of “very low quality.” A standard phrase in Mīr's criticism, attributed to Navāb Muṣṭafā Khān Shēfta, an early-nineteenth-century scholar, was that “Mīr's low was low beyond measure, but his high was very high.” It was believed that much of Mīr fell in the category of “low beyond measure.”

Similarly, although he was universally held as the greatest of Urdu poets, no one seemed to be sure where Mīr's greatness lay. In accord with the British view of love poetry, the ghazal too was assumed to be a narra-

tive of the poet's personal experiences, feelings and observations. Accounts of Mir's life were made to fit his poetry, and his personality was retailored to fit our image of the English Romantic poet: perpetually sad, of bitter aspect, humorless, devoid of all erotic or "immoral" feelings, self-absorbed to the point of morbidity, and so forth.

When I approached Mir as a young man, I was disappointed. Surely, this was not the greatest of poets? I asked myself. In the selections that I read, he seemed too bland, too mainline, too meek, too unwilling to take risks, either in language, or emotion, or thought. The statements about Mir's poetry that I read in standard critical works didn't seem to agree with even the limited reality of Mir reflected in the selections. I was told that classical Urdu poetry had no poetics worth the name; there were no rules or laws for analysis or appreciation. Classical Urdu writers had no critical sense, at least not a developed one.

The great discontinuity that occurred in our culture in 1857 was regarded by us, not as a tragedy of broken connections, but a point of new departure, revival and renaissance. After 1857, the British imposed upon us a rigorous regime of self-examination and self-blame. The results were as expected. Not only did most of the literature get rejected, but worse, all the critical support material, all the theory, went by the board. So even a simple question like why Mir wrote what he wrote could be answered only partially, and that too only in the light of colonialist formulations about literature and its imperatives. If one asked the question why more than 90% of Mir's literary production should have been worthless, the answer (not necessarily stated, but always implied) was that it was in the nature of Urdu poetry for much of it to be worthless. After all, it wasn't a "natural" and "realistic" poetry. All of it was only flights of fancy, so why shouldn't it be useless?

By the mid-sixties, it was clear to me that something was badly wrong with our reading of classical Urdu poetry. The poetry seemed to be doing a number of things that just couldn't be explained, or interpreted, in terms of western poetics. In Urdu poetry, the view of reality, and of metaphor, for instance, was quite different from the assumptions made about these things in western literature. At that time, I was immersed in Ghālib, and also fashioning a critical idiom in Urdu suitable for the modern, experimentalist literature that needed to be established as the new mode of writing. Ghālib's mind seemed in tune with the modern spirit, and it was common for us in those days to invoke Ghālib in support of modernist practices. However, I was looking for continuities from before Ghālib, hoping to reestablish links with our past, to get across the

barrier created by British policies, since the middle of the nineteenth century. I wrote in 1967 that there is no difference between classical and modern poetry, except that of attitude and that both are poetry in the best sense.

The case of Ghālib was easy in another sense too. Ghālib's Urdu *divān* was a very slim affair, not even 2,000 verses. He had rejected, or suppressed, nearly two thirds of his Urdu poetic production. So we were dealing with the *crème de la crème*, we should not worry too much over what Ghālib himself had rejected. Mīr was a different matter altogether. His work was more than fifteen times that of Ghālib in volume, and much of it was believed to be worthless.

But was it worthless? And who determined it to be so? were the questions that began to worry me more and more. None of Mīr's contemporaries, or immediate successors, seemed to hold the view that a vast amount of Mīr needed to be trashed. The famous remark of Shēfta in the 1830s, to which I referred earlier, turned out in reality to be quite different. Shēfta, it appeared, never said that Mīr's low was low beyond measure, though his high was quite high. In fact, he said, "Although his low is slightly low, his high is very high indeed." And he never said anything about most of Mīr's work being worthless. Did we have the right to discard and condemn most of Mīr on our own? Perhaps we did, provided we first read him the way he himself expected his poetry to be read.

There are two ways of criticizing a poet of the past, especially of a past between which and us there is a major discontinuity. One can say: He may have been good enough for his time, but we don't think he was that good. This judgment may not do justice to the writer in question, but it is a judgment that can be reasonably made, for after all, each age reads the writers of the past in its own terms.

The other way of critically dealing with such a poet is to state flatly and in absolute terms: He was a bad poet. Or, although he was a good or great poet, much of what he wrote was garbage. Nāsikh suffered the first judgment: he was a bad poet. Finis. Mīr suffered the second fate. I asked myself, Are we correct in passing such absolute judgments without even inquiring what these poets and their peers, their audience and patrons, thought they were doing? What did they mean by the term "poetry"? Did they create poetry in a vacuum, or did they have some models, some exemplars to work by? Can one become a great poet, or even a poet, without having a critical sense, or without having a notion of his mission as a poet?

Mīr's was a long and eventful life. He had frequent and long interac-

tions with scholars, eminent poets, noblemen, and generals. He lived to be eighty-eight. Assuming that he began writing at the age of fourteen, he had a working life of seventy-four years. Were we right in believing that throughout these seventy-four years he had never a moment's doubt about his poetry, and continued to churn out what we know to be mostly rank bad verse?

It is a truism of modern literary theory that there can be no poems without other poems. And poems have to be continually tested against other poems. Obviously this must have been going on in Mir's time too. I asked myself, should I not be doing the same, if I want to understand Mir? Shouldn't I be reading him in the light of his contemporaries, and in the light of those whom he regarded as his predecessors? And I should also read Mir's contemporaries and predecessors and successors in the light of Mir. I should try to recover the poetics, the literary theory, that must have gone into the making of the poems of Mir and his contemporaries. Was this poetics Arab, or Iranian, or Indian, or all of this put together? It occurred to me that the "Indian-style" Persian poetry produced in India did not make sense to the native Iranian. In fact, the Iranians generally rejected that poetry as "foreign" and "alien." So if the Indian-style Persian poetry was deeply Indian in character, Urdu poetry must be much more so.

With these and similar questions, I began my voyage through the territory of Mir, and of eighteenth-century Urdu poetry. It was a journey without maps, or with maps whose symbols and legend had lost their meaning. I decided to begin with the poets themselves. What did the poets say about the nature of poetry, and about their own poetry? One of the immediate discoveries I made was that a new poetics began gradually to come into being in Urdu from about 1690, and its development continued until the great discontinuity of 1857. Nearly every poet of stature from Vali (1665–1707) to Ghālib (1797–1869) wrote interesting and often seminal verses about the nature of poetry. So my mapping of the territory became somewhat easier. My second discovery was that some of the fundamental statements made by these poets could be better understood in light of Sanskrit poetics. For example, Mir often insists that his poetry is complex, having many sides, full of twists and turns. Such a statement is hard to find in any Arab or Iranian book of literary theory, and certainly not in the Arabic or Persian books of poetics current in Mir's day. It reminded me of Mammata's classification of utterances. Following Anandavardhana, Mammata classified seven differences between direct and indirect utterance. Thus an utterance could mean more than, or dif-

ferently from, the words actually used. And this is what Mīr meant when he characterized good poetry as being *tahdār* and *pēčdār*, that is, having many layers and twists.

Over many years the qualities and contours of Mīr the poet, and Mīr the craftsman, became somewhat clear to me. I found him much too great for any formal description, or summatory label. Reading his poetry was like looking at sunlight passing through a prism. With each shift of light, a new reality appears, and no reality can be taken as the last and final version. Mīr is both saint and sinner, king and commoner, lover and lewd, bitter and sweet, wise man and madman. There is no aspect of human experience that Mīr is not familiar with, that he can't express in his poetry.

I have spoken of the discontinuity that occurred after the events of 1857. "Domination of the imperial narrative" just about sums up the history of ideas in Urdu literature over the century that followed. Another theme that looms into view in the mid-twentieth century year is the status of Urdu. Urdu fell on such evil days that it came to be described as a foreign language. Writers of my generation saw Urdu writers vilified and marginalized, its literature described as separatist, its spirit labeled as alien. Writers of my generation therefore found themselves writing in a language which they regarded as representing the very essence of Indianhood, but which was regarded by many others as by nature divisive and even lying at the root of the country's partition. How difficult it is for creative writing to flourish in such circumstances, and how heart-breaking such a situation can be for young writers can be better felt than described. It is greatly to the credit of the Urdu writer, and the fighting spirit of the language, that writer and language both survived their ordeals and continued to make a positive and beneficial contribution to the Indian literary and socio-political life.

The greatest merit of democracy is that it corrects its mistakes, and rights previous wrongs. This is what our democracy is now doing with regard to Urdu, even if slowly. We have great hopes from you, Mr. Prime Minister, for you are a lover of Urdu literature, and an Urdu speaker yourself. The award of the Subcontinent's greatest literary honor to an Urdu writer for a large and somewhat difficult book in Urdu is itself an example of a healthy democracy in action. Thank you. □