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A F Z A L A H M E D S Y E D



S E L E C T I O N S F R O M

*Death Sentence in Two  
Languages*

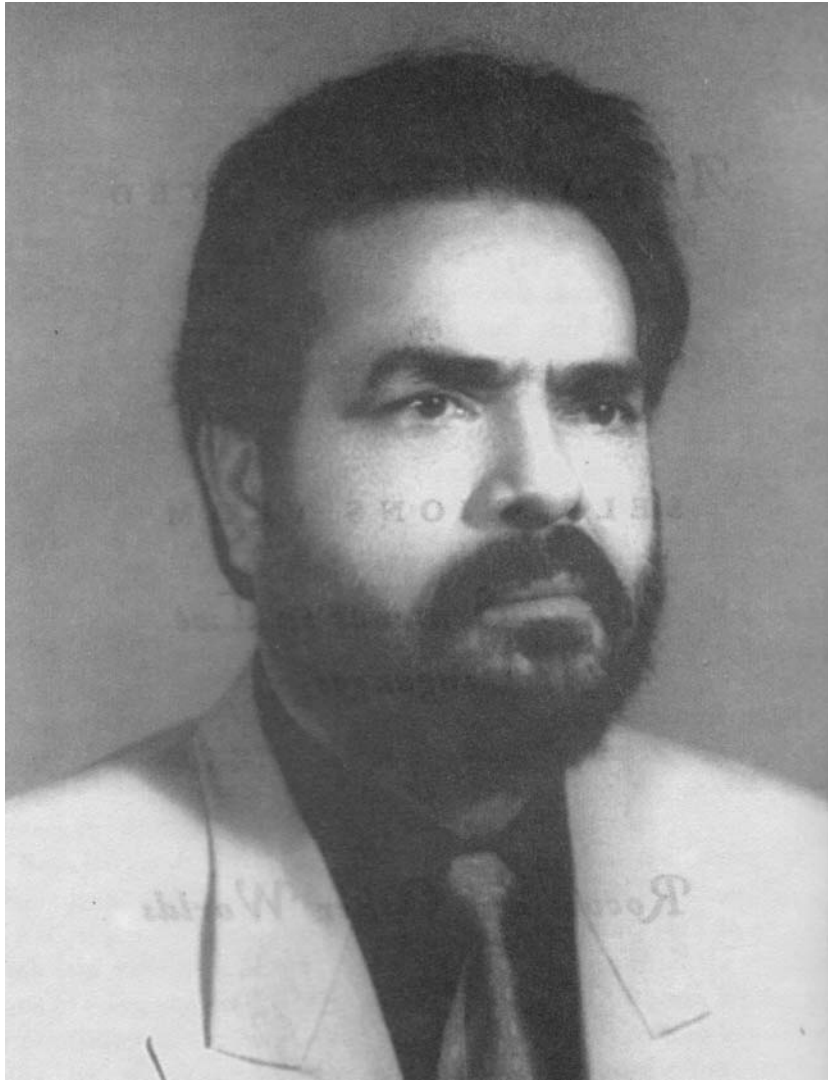


*Rococo and Other Worlds*



Selected, translated, and introduced by  
Musharraf Farooqi

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MUSHARRAF FAROOQI

## Language as Philosopher's Stone: The Poetry of Afzal Ahmed Syed

**P**OETRY not only stretches the limits of the language, with the introduction of aesthetically just expressions and images, it also validates usage, creating a new language. The elegantly individualistic poetry of Afzal Ahmed Syed (Afzāl Aḥmad Saiyad), arguably Urdu's finest modern poet, is a rare example of an artist taking aim at infinity by combining grandeur of expression, story-telling, detached but sensitive observation, and an all-encompassing view of the human story undemarcated by time and place. It is the resolute defense of an artist's inalienable right to belong to all possible worlds.

Afzal Ahmed Syed's voice is distinct yet never monotonous. His experiments with form go beyond mere exploration to a point where the form seems tailored to the poem's subject matter. That is why if we take two poems like "The Clay Mine" and "Hell," which might appear to have a similar ambience, and try to interchange their rhythms, we do not get the same admirable results. If we attempt the same interchange with "The Genres of Poetry" and "A Parable" we will be similarly disappointed. The exercise strikingly reveals Syed's command of expression and demonstrates his keen insight into the substance of things. Every time he finds himself in the presence of a poetic moment, he encapsulates it in a form that matches its spirit. This is the unique harmony of his poetry.

Syed's poetic vision has been shaped in part by his traumatic experiences: in 1971 in Dhaka, as a young man of twenty-five, he was witness to the brutal rebirth of East Pakistan as Bangladesh; then in 1976, as a student at the American University of Beirut, he escaped the Lebanese Civil War and was evacuated from Lebanon along with other foreigners; the last ten years in Karachi have seen increasing brutality, divisions on ethnic lines, state-sponsored terrorism and erosion of any remaining vestiges of

cultural life, and that has forced creative minds into an “inner emigration” like the one experienced by most German writers under the Third Reich. The fact that most of Syed’s political poems are to be found in his latest collection, *Rōkōkō aur Dūsri Dunyā’ēn* (Rococo and Other Worlds), may be due to the liberating and focusing effects of this internal journey. “Time is Their Enemy,” “Why Wouldn’t Amina Jilani Write,” “Spring Shall Return to the City,” “It Could Never Be,” and “The Secret History of a Republic” are poems that, while dealing with the greater politics of human life, also happen to be political in the restricted sense of the term.

In Syed’s world, instead of a lamentation over the agonizing present we encounter an artist’s superior view, which seeks harmony between Infinite Time and human destiny. If poetry is a form of politics, then the highest poetry is perhaps to be in opposition to oneself: to rebel against the constraints of human existence, to defy the oppressive forces that operate on one even as one writes. It could be anything from violent political upheavals to the erosion of culture to the oppression of not being understood in a society that has become increasingly distant from, and even hostile to, the world of letters. These forces might find redemption if an artist found them worthy of his notice. Yet to sing against them can be tantamount to sinking one’s art to the same depraved level, consigning oneself to the degeneracy of the times. The artist is then the hostage of the times, and is manipulated by them. At that point the artist cannot stand above Time’s unfolding mire nor make any meaningful comment, having forfeited his or her integrity as a witness and relinquished all possibility of making a valid political statement. Syed has consciously and successfully circumvented such traps.

While the Urdu language can claim some of the world’s finest poetry in any language written, it is rare to encounter one poet who has so successfully addressed such a variety of subjects. Not surprisingly, the poems having themes alien to the great body of Urdu poetry sound distinctly foreign to ears tuned to familiar motifs and imagery; popular taste does not take naturally to subjects that lie outside its immediate range and social memories. Nor are Afzal’s sympathies restrained by geography. It does not escape the poet, as an artist, that the perpetration of an act of injustice is never against a person or a race or a people. It is always an act of injustice against humanity and if we do not feel affronted by it, perhaps we should. He continually reminds us to the truth that given all the manifest absurdity of our existence, we live connected with each other not only in the present, but in the whole of our past and in the whole of time to come.

These are a few premises on which Syed's autarchic world is founded. His vision is a strategy of survival as well as a denouncement of the tyranny of his times. This vision is the argument of sanity against the mirror's portrayal of madness. His poetry is "the feeling of the mind, when the poison has been fused with the soul." A mature suffering, in a voice that is never overwhelmed by the sorrows of the heart, but rings defiantly against the strictures of oppression.

The significance of Syed's work must also be understood in the tradition of modern Urdu poetry, which has never really fostered a sustained relationship between prose and verse. While the Urdu language is equipped to handle the most sublime poetic expression in the traditional structure of the *shē'r*, the same attempt could become very tricky in prose, where the poet must produce a delicately balanced expression. When it is fluid, Urdu prose can easily slip into the banality of speech, and classical Urdu prose can be replete with archaic terms that may compromise poetical structures. In performing this balancing act Syed has created an expression never before seen in Urdu.

Nowhere in Urdu poetry do we encounter such detached, cerebral, and simultaneously heart-rending prose, and a classicism all its own. Syed treats language as if it had the power to redeem the world, as if it were the philosopher's stone whose touch would turn dirt into gold. In this effort, which brings him closest to the classicists, he has evolved a language entirely his own. We feel it in the tragically playful style of "Zarmeena." We also come across it in the ballad-like narratives of "Naujaubna" and "Sobia," where, though in both cases the refrain is the impossibility of Love, the language and treatment are markedly different.

The difference between "Naujaubna" and "Sobia" is perhaps also the difference between the two books of poems to which they respectively belong, *Āhīnī Hu'ī Tārīkh* (An Arrogated Past) and *Dō Zubānōñ mēñ Sazā-e Maut* (Death Sentence in Two Languages). There has been a marked change in Syed's poetry since his first collection. Whereas in the first book we see a definition of subject matter, and successful experiments that suggest a break from diction while the sense is eminently retained, in the second book the expression has become more visual, the imagery more detailed and the experimentation bolder. Here sometimes a word is used to create an atmosphere (e.g., *mustakhdimā* = servitrix) and foreign words (Puerto Marona) and novel classical terms (*seḥr-e mashārik* = canon of nature's mimicry) are freely borrowed if they conform to the aesthetics of a poem. There is also a greater reliance on narrative devices.

Afzal Ahmed Syed does not have recourse to abstraction as a creed.

While the images are abstract, the whole is not. One need only look at the strong story-telling tradition evident in his poems to realize that. He uses abstraction like a musician, as a tool for improvisation. And like a consummate musician he does not let the melody break. A remark is never made in isolation. It is placed within a story. Even the most fleeting observation is fitted into a theme. Abstraction is used sometimes to effect a desired impression, sometimes to underline the eternal indifference of History to the fate and destiny of human beings.

When a universal theme is addressed with dynamic expression, a standard is set. In that sense Afzal Syed's poetry may be said to have set a rare standard in Urdu poetry.

Born in Ghazipur, India, in 1946, Afzal Ahmed Syed has lived since 1976 in Karachi, Pakistan, where he works as an entomologist. He is married to academist and poet Tanveer Anjum. His published collections include: (poems) *Āj ki Kitābēn* (Karachi; Āj ki Kitābēn, 1984) and *Dō Zubānōñ mēñ Sazā-e Maut* (Karachi; Āj ki Kitābēn, 1990), and (*ghazals*) *Khaima-e Siyāh* (The Dark Pavilion; Karachi; Āj ki Kitābēn, 1986). His fourth collection, *Rōkōkō aur Dūsri Dunyā'ēñ*, will appear from Āj ki Kitābēn later this year. Afzal Ahmad Syed has also translated extensively from Eastern European and Jewish poetry, and has rendered into Urdu Gabriel García Márquez's "Chronicle of a Death Foretold," among other short stories. □