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Urdu Nazm An Introduction

By Syed Rizvi

The ghazal in Urdu represents the most popular form of subjective poetry, while the nazm

exemplifies the objective kind, often reserved for narrative, descriptive, didactic or satirical purposes. Under the broad head of the nazm we may also include the classical forms of poems known by specific names such as masnavi (a long narrative poem in rhyming couplets on any theme: romantic, religious, or didactic), marsia (an elegy traditionally meant to commemorate the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain and his comrades of the Karbala fame), or qasida (a panegyric written in praise of a king or a nobleman), for all these poems have a single presiding subject, logically developed and concluded. However, these poetic species have an old world aura about their subject and style, and are different from the modern nazm, supposed to have come into vogue in the later part of the nineteenth century.

In order to understand the distinguishing features of the nazm it will be helpful to place it by the side of the ghazal and mark the point of contrast and resemblance between the two. The ghazal, as is well-known, is a short poem, generally of seven, nine or at most, of a dozen couplets in the same metre. It always opens with a rhyming couplet called "matla", and ends with the "maqta", which often includes the pen-name of the poet. It follows a set rhyming pattern: aa, ba, ca, da, and so on. The nazm is not bound by any such considerations of length or rhyme scheme. There could be a long nazm like Iqbal's "Shikwa", which contains as many as 186 lines, or a short one like Iqbal's "Ram", with only twelve lines. Further, the poet of the nazm is free to adopt any metrical arrangement that suits his subject or mood. A large number of nazms, such as Mir's "Khwab-O-Khayal", or Josh Malihabadi's "Kissan", are written in separately rhyming couplets which, however, observe the discipline of a uniform metre throughout the poem. Some nazms like Chakbast's "Ramayan ka ek scene", or Mehroom's "Noor Jahan ka Mazaar", use another popular poetic measure called "musaddas", a unit of six lines, consisting of a rhyming quatrain and a couplet on a different rhyme. Iqbal's poem, "Ram", follows the rhyming pattern of the ghazal in all the couplets but the last, which, to give the effect of finality, makes use of a new and different rhyme.

A group of progressive writers of the early decades of the 20th century have successfully exploited the freedom and flexibility of the nazm. Taking a cue from English poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, they reject the rigidity of the regular rhyme, dispense with "radif" and "qafia", and opt for the medium of blank verse or free verse. A poem written in blank verse is called "nazm-e-muarra" in Urdu. Such a

poem breaks with the tradition of "radif" and "qafia", but observes the sanctity of metre, and sticks to lines of equal length. The free-verse poem called "Azad Nazm" goes a step further, for it not only discards the rhyme, but also feels free to use lines of unequal length in the same poem, or even in the same stanza. With the skilful manipulation of the internal pause, and by avoiding the frequent use of end-stopped lines, the practitioner of this form can give a greater degree of flexibility and naturalness to his lines, so as to bring them as close as possible to the intonation and rhythms of natural speech. However, even the poet of the "Azad Nazm" is careful to preserve the inner rhythm and cadence of his verse and obeys the laws of metre, without which his poem may forfeit its claim to be classed as poetry. It may not be out of place to mention that despite the outstanding achievement of "free verse" poems in the hands of poets like N. M. Rahid and Meeraji, the traditional kind of nazm continues to delight the readers with the incantation of its musical measures.

The nazm differs from the ghazal in another important way. The ghazal prides itself, among other things, on the detachability and completeness of its individual verses, which retain their sense and

effectiveness even when divorced from their context in the poem. The verses are not bound by the law of unity and consistency. The poet of the ghazal is at liberty to talk about love in the first verse, death in the second, envy in the third, mysticism in the fourth, and so on. Such is not the case with the nazm which owes its strength and identity to the logical evolution of thought and theme. A nazm must have a controlling thought or idea, discussed, developed and concluded, with due regard to the laws of poetic composition. That's why a nazm, as against the ghazal, always carries a title summing up its central theme. The various units of the nazm, besides subserving the need of the central thought, must be mutually interlinked, so as to contribute to the forward movement of narration which should culminate in an aesthetically satisfying close. And this reminds us of the etymological meaning of nazm, an Arabic term implying a stringing together of pearls, or an artistic ordering of words and lines.

Although the nazm, in the aforesaid sense of a specific theme logically developed and metrically presented, has existed in Urdu poetry since the very early times, as can be evidenced by the nazms of Quli Qutab Shah (1565–1611) or of Nazir Akbarabadi (1732–1830), the nazm in its modern form may be said to have begun in the later part of the 19th century. One cause for the revival and popularisation of the nazm was the growing realization among the poets and readers that the traditional ghazal was too narrow and restrictive to serve the larger interests of life and society. No doubt, the ghazal, in the hands of the master-poets like Mir, Sauda, Zauq or Ghalib, has demonstrated its capacity to deal with the whole range of human experience, its one staple subject has been love: love, earthy or ethereal, which it treats, because of the exigencies of its form, in a characteristically condensed and suggestive manner, with the aid of images and allusions, without stating its case directly or in detail.

The foundation of the modern nazm was formally laid on 30 June, 1874, when, under the aegis of the "Anjuman-e-Urdu", a new kind of "mushaira", called "Munazama" (literally, a symposium of nazms), was organized at Lahore (Pakistan). This was a unique symposium for the reason that it gave to the participating poets not a "tarah misra" (a line of poetry which was to serve them as a model for their poetical exertions, in terms of mood, metre, and rhyme), but a specific topic to build their poems upon. In fact, the "munazama" extended the freedom of the poets not only in the choice of the size and shape of the poems, but also in the matter of subject and theme. The poet of the nazm could now write on any subject under the sun, provided it stirred his imagination, and contained the potential for striking a

responsive chord in the hearts of the readers. The first topic prescribed for this poetical gathering was "Zamistan" (Winter Season), which shows a turning towards the poetry of nature from an age-long obsession with amatory themes. Mohammed Hussain Azad read his poem, "Shab-e-Qadar", on this occasion, which was highly acclaimed.

But it was Altaf Hussain Hali, who in his poems like "Hub-e-Watan", "Barkha Rut", "Chup ki Daad", and "Bewa ki Munajaat", as also in his masterpiece, "Musaddis-a-Hali", blazed a new train and used the long Urdu nazm as an instrument of social and moral reform. Hali also used the nazm for interpreting the beauties of nature – a theme which was more or less neglected, or treated marginally by the poets of classical ghazal. It was he again who in his prose treatise, "Muqaddama-e-Shair-o-Shairi", underscored the limitations of the classical ghazal and pointed out the hollowness of its hackneyed themes, thus putting the nazm on a surer path of progress.

Hali's poems draw into focus an important feature of the nazm. While the ghazal has been primarily used as an instrument of aesthetic and intellectual pleasure, and a source of courtly entertainment, the nazm combines pleasure with purpose, and expends its resources in the service of society. It is more useful, more pragmatic, more earth-bound form of poetry, loaded generally with a moral and a message. It believes in the dictum of art for life sake, as against the aesthetic creed of art for art sake. This is true of the poems of Hali, as of Akbar Allahabadi, Chakbast, Mohammed Iqbal, Josh

Malihabadi, or, for that matter, of the poems of Nazir Akbarabadi, which, though written long before the revival of the nazm in the modern form, are all addressed to the needs of the common man, and deal with issues of universal import, in a language that may truly be called the language of every-day speech.

There is another relevant point to be noted. The nazm which began as a reaction against the domination of the ghazal gives precedence to reason over imagination, and not vice versa, as was done heretofore. Instead of taking the reader into the intricate depths of the human mind, or on flights of fancy beyond this world, the nazm prefers to keep its feet planted on this earth, which is the earth of all of us, and is content to portray real life in a relatively realistic way.

A peculiar beauty of the ghazal lies in its brevity and suggestiveness, in its ability to express in just two lines what will need a much longer space if stated directly and in detail. As the nazm is not bound by the restriction of length, or by the discipline of the rhyming order, it can afford a more discursive, and a more detailed exploration of its essential subject than the ghazal. The availability of a larger canvas enables the poet of the nazm to survey and record the vast panorama of life including the sights and scenes of nature, oddities and jealousies of man, vagaries of time and fate, atrocities of the strong and the sufferings of the poor, besides, of course, the all-important affairs of the heart. It is significant that Faiz Ahmed Faiz, when he turns to take stock of "problems other than those of love" (dukh aur bhi hain zamaane mein mahabbat ke siva), chooses the mould of the nazm in preference to that of the ghazal, though he is equally at home in both these genres. The capaciousness of the nazm makes it specially relevant to the modern world, riddled as it is with ever-new problems of social, cultural, or political sort.

That the form of the nazm is capable of responding to the changing needs of the times, is borne out by the works of several poets contained in this volume. When the movement for Home Rule was at its

height, it found its voice in the poems of Chakbast, when Hindu Muslim unity was the need of the hour, poets like Hali and Iqbal came out with patriotic songs such as "Hub-e-Watan" and "Tarana-e-Hind"; when, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the flag of rebellion was unfurled against the British regime, Josh Malihabadi came to the fore with his stirring poems like "Baghawat", and "Zawal-e-Jahanbani", and when socialistic ideas gained currency among the Indian intelligensia, a group of progressive poets such as Faiz, Sahir and N. M. Rashid emerged on the scene to defend the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, and to glorify the Red Revolution. The nazm as such has always measured up to the needs of the people, something which the ghazal alone could not have so successfully done.

Lest we overstate the useful and hortatory role of the nazm, we should read the poems of Akhtar Sheerani and Majaz Lucknavi, both of whom return with a vengeance to the world of love and lyricism, though this lyricism, in the case of Majaz at least, is mingled with a strong note of protest against the inequities of the social order. The romantic note insistently heard in their poems is meant to remind us that, despite our preoccupation with social and political issues, love will continue to play a pivotal role in the arena of art and life. And then there are poems like "be karan raat ke sannaate mein" (N. M. Rashid), and "samunder ka bulawa" (Meeraji), which demonstrate that the poet of the nazm has not surrendered his right to be introvert or introspective. He can, if his subject demands, take the reader into the interior realm of his mind and thought, and back again to the world of physical and social realities. All this speaks volumes for the sweep and scope of the nazm.

I would conclude this note with a word of caution. Despite the multiple merits of the nazm, and despite its relevance to the drama of real life, it holds no threat to the power and popularity of the

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ghazal, which in the hands of such consummate artists as Jigar, Asghar,

Faiz, Fani or Firaq, has amply proved its worth as an imperishable art form, fully equipped to fathom the mysteries of the human mind, or tap the complexities of love and life. As a matter of fact, the ghazal and the nazm are complementary rather than mutually exclusive poetic forms, and their areas of artistic functioning have a tendency to overlap. The two together enable us to make the two essential voyages: the voyage within, to strange countries not visible to the actual senses, and the voyage without, in the external world of social, religious, natural, or political phenomenon.

Syed Rizvi

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Different Forms of Urdu Poetry

By Syed Rizvi

The following forms of Urdu poetry are known, some more popular than others: fard

Gazal
hamd
hazal
hijv
madah
manqabat
marsiiya
masnavii
munaajaat
musaddas
naat
nazm
qasiidaa
qataa
qavaallii
rubaayii
salaam
sehraa
vaasoKht
fard

A composition consisting of only one sher.

Gazal (pronounced "guzzle")

Ghazal is a collection of couplets (shers or ashaar) which follow the rules of `matla', `maqta', `bahar', `qafiya' and `radeef'. The couplets are complete in themselves. All the couplets of a ghazal must be of the same bahar, end in the same words (radeef) and have the same rhyming pattern (qaafiyaa). Every ghazal MUST have a matla. A ghazal may or may not have a maqta but if it does, it has to be the last sher of the ghazal.

Ghazals which do not have a radeef are called Gair–muraddaf ghazals. In such cases, the rule of qafiya is strictly followed. These type of ghazals are very rare. Ghazals with the same radeef are called ham–radeef ghazals.

hamd

Poem written in praise of God.

hazal

Humourous poetry, also known as `mazaahiyaa' or `mazaakiyaa' shaayari. Some examples of humourous Urdu poetry can be viewed [here](#).

hijv

A satirical poem written to condemn or abuse a person. This type of poetry is considered inferior and generally avoided by reputed poets. The opposite of a hijv is a madah which is written in praise of patrons.

madah

Poem written in praise of royalty, patrons, etc.

manqabat

A poem written in praise of members of the family of the holy Prophet.

marsiyyaa (muhr–see–yaa)

An elegy written to mourn the death of a great man or a dearly

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loved person.

In its stricter sense, traditionally accepted in Urdu, a marsiya is an elegy written specifically in honour of the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Husain and his comrades at Karbala. It describes the battle fought on the plains of Karbala by Hazrat Imam Husain against the army of Yazid. The most well known writers of Marsiya in Urdu are Mir baber Ali Anees and Salamat Ali Dabir. Sub–parts of the marsiya are called Nauha and Soz.

masnavii(pronounced "mus–na–vee")

A long narrative poem – much longer than the ghazal – embodying religious, romantic or didactic stories. It is written in rhyming couplets, with each couplet having a different rhyme and radeef. The most famous masnavis are Masnavi–e–Rumi in Persian, Shah Namah of Firdausi, and Zehar–e–Ishq in Urdu.

munaajaat

A lyrical poem written as a prayer to God.

musaddas

A poem in which each unit consists of 6 lines. The most well known poet of this style of writing was Maulana Altaf Husain Hali.

naat

A poem written in praise of the holy Prophet.

nazm

In a broad sense, nazm is a term used to define all kinds of Urdu poetry which do not fall into any other category. However, in a literary sense, a nazm is a well organized, logically evolving poem where each individual verse serves the need of the central concept or theme of the poem. Though a nazm is traditionally written in rhymed verse, there are many examples of nazms written in unrhymed verse, or even in free verse.

qasiidaa (pronounced "quh–see–daa")

A panygeric, or poem written in praise of a king or a nobleman, or a benefactor. As in a ghazal, the opening couplet of a qasida, is a rhyming couplet, and its rhyme is repeated in the second line of each succeeding verse. The opening part of the qasida, where the poet may talk in general about love and beauty, man or nature, life or death, is called the `tashbib' or `tamheed'.

Interestingly, the ghazal has evolved from the qasida. Over time, the tashbib got detached and developed into what we today know as Gazal. A qasida is usually quite long, sometimes running into more than a 100 couplets. A Gazal is seldom more than 12 couplets long, averaging about 7 couplets.

qataa

A poem consisting of four lines, in the form of two shers. However, unlike shers in a ghazal, the subject of the two shers is the same. It is believed that the qataa was invented for occasions when poets felt that they were unable to express their thoughts completely and satisfactorily in a single sher.

qavaalii

Traditionally a devotional song expressing love and oneness with God sung by a group of people to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Nowadays, qawaallis cover popular topics like love and wine.

rubaayii(pronounced "ru–baa–ee")

A self–sufficient quatrain, rhyming (a, a, b, a) and dealing generally with a single idea, which is

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customarily introduced and developed with the aid of similes in the first three lines, and concluded, with concentrated effort and impact, in the fourth line. The most well known rubaayis in Persian were written by Omar Khayyam. In Urdu, some of the most well known practitioners of this form were Firaq, Josh and Yagna Yaas Changezi.

salaam

A salutary poem written in praise of the holy Prophet. It can also be a poem describing the incidents of Karbala. It is recited standing up.

sehraa

A song sung at the time of tying the seharaa during the wedding ceremony. It is usually in praise of the bride/groom and their relatives.

vaasoKht

A poem describing the displeasure and carelessness of a lover

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