

Najm Hosain Syed: A Literary Profile

Zubair Ahmad

Punjabi Poet from Lahore

This article provides an introduction to the writings of Najm Hosain Syed, a renowned Punjabi author. From 1965 onward, Syed has published poetry, plays, and literary criticism. He has also made an outstanding contribution toward raising the status of Punjabi language in West Punjab.

It is not easy to find an educated person in West Punjab who does not know Najm Hosain Syed or has not read his writings. He has mentored many writers and guided others in their readings of Punjabi literature. At the same time, he is not an insider in the West Punjabi academic structures and none of his books are prescribed in the university syllabi. Syed is a shy person, who does not like to leave Lahore, does not give interviews, does not appear on television or radio, and publishes his books with relatively unknown publishers. This essay aims to introduce the writings of this enigmatic person.

Najm Hosain Syed was born in 1936 in an influential Qadri family of Batala in East Punjab. The Syeds moved to Lahore after the partition where young Najm was educated. In 1958, he completed his Masters in English at Forman Christian College. He joined the Pakistan civil services building a distinguished career from which he retired in 1995.

In the years that followed Partition, Punjabi was relegated to a position of relative insignificance in West Punjab. With the exception of *Trinjhanh* (Girls' Gathering) by Ahmad Rahi in 1953, Punjabi literature did not see any major work. In the 1960s, however, a kind of renaissance of Punjabi language and literature began to develop. Faqir Mohammad Faqir (d. 1974) and Mohammad Baqir (d. 1992) established the Punjabi Academy and began to publish classical Punjabi literature.

Najm Hosain Syed started writing early and his first book was published in 1965. Around this time, he also founded Majlis Shah Hussain and Punjabi Adabi Sangat and firmly established them with the support of writers and activists such as Asif Khan (d. 2000) and Shafqat Tanveer Mirza (b.1932).

Let us begin our discussion with his poetry. *Qafian*, his first book of poetry was published in May 1965. The opening poem in this collection is entitled 'A Ghazal.' It describes the rise of a typical day with sparrows chirping but soon turns into something very different. Syed invokes Varis Shah: *Seh vunjhe Jhanan da ant nahin* (The unfathomable Chenab has no end, Verse 48) to acknowledge that the old world is ending, and it's time to move on. Another poem entitled 'A Qafi' is about the choice of clothes. What kind and what color

of clothes should the poet wear? The question remains unanswered in the poem, instead, the situation is averted by abandoning the mirror itself. There is no need for the poet to see what he is wearing

A dozen or so poems work around the metaphor of night. Syed interprets the metaphor in contemporary terms, while simultaneously expanding and enriching its traditional usage. Baba Farid eulogizes the night in his *dohra*:

If musk is distributed at night, sleepers will not get love.
Those whose eyes are sleepy, what can come to them?

Syed elaborates on that in his poem 'Night a Burning Oven.'

Throw your hand in and place the dough
Many were cooked over flat pans
Eyes were singed lighting damp wood
Now wear the coal of this heat in your eyes
Raise your arms and dance in it
Red wheat has sprouted during the course of time
Night a burning oven
Throw your hand in and place the dough
Lay your virtues on the table
Serve yourself and feed yourself
Who knows when the day will rise, how it will rise
Whoever beheld the daybreak Will not return to tell
(Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

The striking feature of this collection is that none of the poems in it follows the forms associated with the genre mentioned in the title. Structurally, the reader expects to enter in the lyrical world of *ghazals*, *loris*, and *qafis*, but instead ends up addressing modern issues such as that of identity in the world around him. Old literary forms are effectively reworked to express contemporary reality.

His second book entitled *Chandan Rukh te Vehrha* (Sandal-Tree and the Courtyard, 1968) evokes the verses of Madho Lal Hussein, a sixteenth-century poet based at Lahore. The 42 poems in this collection many of which use the metaphors of snakes and ascetics are situated within contemporary life. The poem entitled 'Labhe de Bin' (Labha's Flute) is about a snake charmer whose story is being told by his father. Written in chaste Punjabi, it charms the reader while stressing that the tradition of snake charmers is steadily dying and these people are forced to move to other professions in order to survive.

Taking his characters from among common people and juxtaposing them with the new realities, the poet narrates the problems involved in the transition to urbanization. Pitching *nouveau riche* against the lower rung of society, he touches on the contrasts at the heart of contemporary life. There is no effort at presenting an overtly political message as the poet offers these slices of life to the reader.

Syed's use of language and mastery of the poetic craft in this book is more mature than his previous collection. Let us look at 'Going Around.'

'Why are you breaking your leg, Brother
 Why don't you move It away'
 'What to tell
 It is not a dog but my own child.
 Just being stubborn,
 Says, take me along to the bazaar.'
 'Bravo! Take him, it's all right'
 'The bazaar he wanted to go to is not there.
 Today after thirty years,
 I have come to this city.
 Yes, I am native to this place,
 You don't know me.
 He used to stand up to me every day
 And I used to lock him inside.
 Then I too was a child,
 Just consider me of his age.
 One day I forgot him inside,
 I didn't return in the evening.
 Trading from country to country
 I was just passing by
 He surrounded me as I opened the door
 He is still as restless as when I left
 Only nails and hair have grown.
 The bazaar he wanted to go to.
 It has been closed down since long
 After selling and earning shopkeepers have gone to rest
 Now where shall I take him, If not there then where
 'What a strange story you have told, O' Stranger.'
 'It's a recent happening Sir.
 You call it a story.'
 (Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

Syed's next book is entitled *Bar di Var* (1969). The word *bar* has a wide range of meanings in Punjabi: door, day of the week, wasteland; and was also used to refer to the canal colonies developed in West Punjab. The *var* implies a heroic ballad that sings about bravery and battles.

Bar di Var, the title poem, is about nineteenth-century Punjab. The narrator goes to a village to interview Lakhi, a local bard. Juxtaposing the life of resistance and rebellion of Lakhi with the shallow life of the urban narrator, the poem narrates how Punjabis were deprived of their rights by the British. The book also contains 'Multan Shahir di Var' (Ballad of Multan) and 13 short poems. 'Multan Shahir di Var' is the life story of a rebellious saint Shah Shamas

Subzvari Multani (1165-1276). Though constructed against the backdrop of twelfth century Multan, the poem evokes scenes of a contemporary university campus where revolutionary students are pitched against the authorities. The rulers hang Shah Shamas. The poem ends with the successors of the rulers paying homage to the saint and praising him for his pious and virtuous deeds.

'Season's Verdict,' which was very popular with activists of the Punjabi movement, runs as follows:

[To Madho Lal Hussain]

Season always gives its verdict
 The season does its own calculations
 The season counts two thirds as more than one.
 Fat rinds are cleaned with one sweep
 The season piles up all the old costumes
 Stands naked humans in rows
 Throws water on naked humans with reverence
 Oh the newly born, your first food is venom
 Anger was sifted but didn't go with sour and sweet
 Your blood is whetstone
 Your color will be the color of the world
 Your hands
 Will rewrite the destiny of humans
 Whoever recognizes pain will be with you
 (Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

Syed's next book is entitled *Rutt de Kamm* (Work of the Seasons, 1976). It includes a dozen or so poems about the seasons, and two long *vars*. The seasonal changes are contrasted with the stagnancy of people's lives. There is an underlined yearning that if nature has the power to resuscitate itself, why cannot the humans do the same. The poetic vision understands people as part of the natural world. 'A Song' in this collection reads as follows:

Silently
 The rain falls in the nights of rainy season
 Tired in our suffocation we never thought
 Where do the clouds come from and where do they rain
 How at once cold winds blow
 How do the drops place themselves in a row
 Why do the dry paths flood
 Tense with the near and dear
 Losing our heart in daily drudgeries
 We never thought of the nights of rainy season

The *Khappe* (The Gaps, 1986), his next collection of poems, is a response to the problems that emerged during the period of Zia-ul-Haq (d.1988). This is the period when Majlis Shah Hussein ceased to exist as Zia's suppression forced many supporters of Punjabi language to migrate to the West. A set of poems in this collection speak of the excesses of the martial law and how people were able to survive in those hard times.

The opening poem in this collection is about Noori Keemokay—an early twentieth century poet, who wrote *dhole* about Nazam Lohar who emerged as a rebellious figure in the British period.

Talking of Noori
 After listening to the *dholas* of Nazam Lohar
 The poet came for a vacation from Lahore
 He said to Noori Keemokay,
 Urdu is easier for people than this
 English is understood even faster
 It better come out of the mouth
 and strike as a bullet
 Straight simple talk in Punjabi
 Noori said as if
 Bullets are distributed to the enemies
 Guns are distributed to friends
 Gun is not like straight and simple talk
 Bullet is not straight and simple talk either

Another poem is entitled 'The Colors' reads:

Let us celebrate the colors
 Of new leaves.
 Let us be all for the new leaves
 The gleam of new leaves is a message
 Gleam exudes warmth of the message
 Place the warmth inside the heart
 Touch the gleam to the eyes
 Celebrate the new leaves
 Let us be all for the new leaves.
 If winter is here then spring will also arrive
 If it continues to simmer, it will burst into flames too
 They come walking with light steps
 Let us perform the ritual of putting oil In the hinges of doors
 Let us be all for the new leaves

Those who cannot renew themselves-
 Even as they live, they are dead
 The reds greens could only come out

When worn out are taken off
 Let us be all for the new leaves
 (Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

The collection entitled *Shish Mahil di Var* (Epic of the Palace of Mirrors) was published in 1993. The poet follows the genre of *baramah* (twelve months), where poems follow the twelve months of the calendar and the poetic feelings are expressed in a changing landscape. Syed, however, does not follow the traditional model, but instead creates a set of independent poems that have little to do with another one.

The title poem is about an old house in Lahore that has just been demolished. The poem is a conversation between a buyer of debris, an actress, a retired army officer, and a laborer, whose ancestors had actually built this palace. The poem narrates the history of rulers from the Mughals to the British, who built this kind of palaces. We do not know who built this palace but we are told that its magnificence mirrored the dreads and phobias of its builders. In addition, the book includes short poems too. Two of these run as follows:

‘A Song’

If we have to live than live with the trees
 Without counting without straining
 Poison of sourness turns into nectar
 If we have to live than live with the trees
 Without asking without telling
 They light the lamps of grass and place them on our eyes.
 [Translated by Jennifer Barber and Irfan Malik]²

‘Circular Road, Lahore’

The horses are yoked to the carts
 Or are the carts yoked to the horses?
 Bellies are tightened with the vests
 Or do the vests have bellies?
 The preachers are loudspeakers
 Or are the loudspeakers preachers?
 [Translated by Jennifer Barber and Irfan Malik]

The next collection entitled *Am Dina de Nan* (Names of Ordinary Days, 1994) was written against the backdrop of the collapse of Soviet Union and all the turmoil that it caused to the leftist movement in Pakistan. Instead of mourning the demise of the promised land, Syed turns to events from the lives of ordinary people to grasp the meaning of life.

'To the Ordinary Days'

Ordinary days don't have names
 Notices of births and deaths on special days in newspapers
 Arranging tents and catering
 In history
 Carving stones for palaces and tombs on special days
 Numbers of ordinary days keep dropping off from calendars

Behind the bars of time
 Ordinary days give up
 Blue feet and black hands and face
 Have continued to live with the hope
 That if from our breaking and making
 Somehow that night could be availed
 That will stand across the bars of the years
 Will call out our names.

(Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

'The Country of the Sparrow.'

'The same earth-colored sparrow
 As we have back home.
 With the same trembling
 As it picks through
 The fallen and the crumbling.
 What is our sparrow doing here?
 In this American town?'

'Shah ji, you've never left Lahore.
 Now that you are traveling
 You see a visa stamp
 On every sparrow's wings.
 Wherever there is land,
 There are sparrows, too.
 Among sharper claws and beaks,
 One has to stake one's life,
 Pick through the falling crumbs.'

(Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

This takes us to the next phase of Syed's poetry in which he is increasingly interested in mythology. His *Kal Thal* (Time's Plate, 1998) is deeply rooted in the poetic tradition of Punjab. The death of old landed aristocracy and the arrival of the market economy serves as the background. A long poem entitled *Kahanhi*

vali Chirhi di Var (Ballad of Story-Telling Sparrow) narrates how a sparrow wants to dye herself but in the process dies a sad death. It sings of the time when life is becoming increasingly difficult for ordinary people, but the rulers continue their oppression one way or another way.

Many of the poems in this collection are written in Hindko or Pothohari, the dialects spoken in the northern and western periphery of West Punjab. A short poem entitled “The Reply of Bhagat Singh to his Affluent Classmate” goes:

Since we have arrived
How can we remain on sidelines
There is no friendship between us
We don't want to lie to you
With you, our relationship is of animosity
Perhaps this is the only way to meet
Perhaps we are not yet fully aware
No victory is a complete victory
No defeat is a complete defeat
Since we have now arrived
None is free from the span of living to dye and dying to live

Syed has been very prolific during this decade and his *Khayal ke Khayal* (Thinking about Thinking, 2000) deals with the history of changing times and how ideas and people's imagination are shaped by those in position of power. For Syed, self discovery is achieved by connecting to one's native mode of thinking and expression. The title poem of the book runs as follows:

Don't probe the ending
Eyes touching probing
Spill what has been collected
Protect the one without
Ending is an illusion
Heaps within the heaps
A glance fulfills
Neither yours nor mine
Open the one that cannot be opened
Illusion and ideas are locked
Listening is meeting
Speaking departs
(Translated by Zubair Ahmad and Fauzia Rafiq)

This takes us to Syed's *Qisse* (Stories, 2001), his latest work of poetry. The poems narrate stories of various people living at different times of history including a poem on Miss Anne Rosa Mill. Miss Mill was a retired nurse from a government hospital who lived in Lahore. From *Qafian* to *Qisse*, Syed's long

poetic journey evolves ways to sustain and revive Punjabi culture and language while attempting to capture the problems of people.

In addition, Najm Hosain Syed has written several plays. *Jungle da Rakha* (The Protector of Jungle, 1967) is a satire on how the powerful people convince the weak to follow them; *Takhat Lahore* (The Throne of Lahore, 1970) celebrates a rebellion associated with a Punjabi hero, Dullah Bhatti, against the Emperor Akbar; *Ikk Rat Ravi di* (A Night of Ravi, 1983) reconstructs Ahmad Khan Kharal's rebellion against the British in 1857; *Harh de Phull* (The Flowers of Summer, 1989) portrays the failure of leftist movement in Pakistan; and *Alfu Paerni di Var* (*Ballad of Alfu Paerni*, 2002) demythologizes the history of Punjab.

Syed's has also made significant contribution in the area of literary criticism. His *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* (1968) laid the foundations of literary criticism in Punjabi. In this book, he examines the poetry of Baba Farid, Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, Varish Shah, Mian Mohammad Baksh, and others. His other critical works are in Punjabi and include *Sedhan* (The Directions, 1967), *Saran* (The Awareness, 1974), *Sachh Sada Abadi Karna* (Always Cultivate the Truth, 1988), *Akath Kahani* (The Untellable Tale, 1990), *Khako Jed na Koe* (No One is above Dust, 1995), *Rang* (Colors, 2000), *Ahean vichun Nahean* (Consent within Dissent, 2003); and *Lokan Kamleyan Nun Qissa Hushiyar* (A Story of Awareness for the Unaware, 2004). These books present a perceptive analysis of Punjabi poetry that ranges from classical to *qissa* poets, while establishing the norms in Punjabi criticism.

To sum up, here is literary giant who has made a multi-faceted contribution to Punjabi literature and life. His critical essays shed fresh light on Punjabi literature and his creative writings present a wide variety of themes and issues and revive pre-Partition use of the Pothohari dialect. By writing about professions that are on their way to extinction, he has preserved for posterity rich glimpses of Punjabi culture. For him the revival of Punjabi language is necessary for the survival of Punjabi people. His plays constantly echo the rebellious tradition of Punjab and there is little doubt that he would like to see the revival of that tradition in the emergence of a society without corruption and suppression.

Bibliography

- Qafian*. Lahore: Zafar Iqbal Mirza, 1965.
Sedhan. Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1967.
Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry. Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1968.
Jungle da Rakha. Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1968.
Chandan Rukh te Vehrha. Lahore: Adara Punjabi Adab, 1968
Bar di Var. Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1969.
Takhat Lahore. Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1970.
Saran. Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1974.
Rutt de Kamm. Lahore: Punjab Adabi Markaz, 1976.
Ikk Rat Ravi di. Lahore: Adara Punjabi Adab, 1983.
Khappe. Lahore: Adara Punjabi Adab, 1986.
Sachch Sada Abadi Karna. Lahore: Uddam Publishers, 1988.
Harh de Phull. Lahore: Uddam Publishers, 1989.
Akath Kahani. Lahore: Uddam Publishers,, 1990.
Shish Mahil di Var. Lahore: Uddam Publishers, 1993.
Am Dina de Nan. Lahore: Uddam Publishers, 1994.
Khako Jed na Koe. Lahore: Uddam Publishers, 1995.
Kal Thal. Lahore: Uddam Publishers, 1998.
Khayal key Khayal. Lahore: Rutt Lekha, 2000.
Rang. Lahore: Rutt Lekha, 2000.
Qisse. Lahore: Rutt Lekha, 2001.
Alfu Paerne di Var. Lahore: Rutt Lekha, 2002.
Ahean vichun Nahean. Lahore: Rutt Lekha, 2003.
Lokan Kamleyan nun Qissa Husheyar. Lahore: Rutt Lekha, 2004.