

This is a draft version of the introduction to and translation of poems from “The Lament for Delhi” (*Fuġhān-i Dihlī*) eventually published in: *Nationalism in the Vernacular: Hindi, Urdu, and the Literature of Indian Freedom*. Ed. Shobna Nijhawan. Delhi: Permanent Black. 2009. 88-92.

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The Lament for Delhi (1863)

The collection of poems gathered under the title *Fuġhān-i Dihlī* (*The Lament for Delhi*) were authored by various members of the Delhi literati and compiled in 1863 by the poet Tafazzul Ḥusain Kaukab, who was a disciple of Mirzā Asad Allāh Ġhālib. These poems are formally varied, including 14 *musaddasāt*, 38 *ġhazals*, and a few *qit‘ahs* among their number, but they are united by their reference to the city of Delhi and to the turbulent events of 1857 and the years that followed. Largely for reasons of space, I have chosen to translate two *ġhazals* by Shahāb al-Din Aḥmad “Šāqib” and Ḥakīm Muḥammad “Aḥsan,” each of which is prefaced by a short biographical notice from the *Lament*.

The effect of the testimony of some of the *Lament*’s authors regarding the provenance of the poems is strangely inconsistent with the hints provided by the poems themselves with regard to their relation to one another. In his laudatory review (*taqrīz*) of the *Lament* (contained within that text), Sālik tells us that the compiler, Kaukab, “has collected all of these [poems] with the utmost effort and caused them to be sent from various places” (205). This description gives a sense of a scattered set of materials which Kaukab has brought together for the first time. Yet almost all of the *ġhazals* are in the same *ẓamīn*—that is, they all share the same metre and the same *radīf* (refrain) and *qāfiyah* (rhyme-word): “-ān-i Dihlī”—as though they were the result of a *mushā‘irah* or a similar sort of coordinated effort. It is possible that other signs of intertextuality, such as the fact that Aḥsan’s final verse alludes to another verse from a *ġhazal* in the *Lament* by the poet Rizwān, may simply be evidence of the existence of a community of poets interacting amongst themselves. But Sālik’s picture of the genesis of the *Lament* as a gathering of far-flung fragments is very likely a fiction—a fiction which, however,

seems to allegorize the reconstitution of Delhite society with which many of the poems conclude.

By virtue of their shared subject and the common attitude of lament that they take toward that subject, literary critics have understood the poems of the *Lament* as examples of a single semantic genre of poetry (*şinf-i sukhan*) known as the *shahr-āshob*. How has the *shahr-āshob* been described? In tracing the history of the term through the Persian, Turkish, and finally Urdu literary traditions, the critic is confronted by the fact that as a genre of Urdu literature, “*shahr-āshob*” takes on a different meaning from the one that it bears in Persian and Turkish poetry. In the latter, the *shahr-angez* or *shahr-āshob* (the city-exciter or city-disturber), is a young boy whose desirability agitates the hearts of the citizens of a particular place (Munibur Rahman). Such *shahr-āshob* poems generally present a menagerie of such youthful male beloveds, each of whom is usually marked by his association with a particular trade. Sunil Sharma’s reading of Mas‘ūd Sa‘d Salman’s *shahr-āshobs*, which he understands as the first poems that truly belong to this genre, demonstrates that prior to the genre’s solidification sometime in the Mughal period, the species of the different boys were not necessarily determined according to a single classificatory scheme. That is, the emphasized quality might be occupational (the ambergris-seller), physical (the cross-eyed boy), etc. (Sharma, *Persian Poetry* 111, see also Sharma’s valuable essay “The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape”).

In Urdu, on the other hand, the city-disturbing artisan boy is usually absent from poems of the *shahr-āshob* genre that inherits his epithet. Munibur Rahman tells us that Urdu poems that present catalogues of the ravishing youths of the city are seldom met with, and that those that do exist are direct imitations of Persian models. It is not clear why the

signification of the term shifts when it comes to Urdu, but according to what is as far as I am aware the first attempt at a definition of the Urdu *shahr-āshob* as a poetic genre, it comes to signify a poem detailing a sociopolitical crisis: “We can say that the *shahr-āshob* is that classical genre of poetry in Urdu in which, without any special formal restriction, the ruin of the generality and the elite due to a political, social or economic crisis is expressed” (9-10). The above formulation by Naʿīm Aḥmad makes no mention of the urban setting that we would expect to characterize a genre known as “*shahr-āshob*,” and in his essay on poetic genres Shamīm Aḥmad more explicitly states that several types of geographical space other than the city may be the subject of a *shahr-āshob* (143). Munibur Rahman’s account, on the other hand, differs from Naʿīm Aḥmad’s in at least two regards: firstly, it connects the Urdu *shahr-āshob* more specifically with the city, defining it as a poem that is meant to paint an image of urban disarray. Secondly, while Naʿīm Aḥmad stresses the shared suffering of the elite and the commoners and claims that this circumstance dissuaded the former from representing the latter in a negative light (33), Munibur Rahman reminds us that part and parcel of the crisis that *shahr-āshobs* depict is the weed-like rise of people of inferior occupations, and the consequent uprooting of the elites.

Given that the *shahr-āshob* is essentially defined as a poem portraying social upheaval, it is no surprise that for many critics, the importance of *shahr-āshobs* lies in their richness as funds of socio-historical information (see Sharma, “The City of Beauties” 74), and in their orientation towards the political. The genre has been cast as a saviour from other, embarrassingly language-centred kinds of poetry, which generally refer more to other texts than to historical circumstances. Naʿīm Aḥmad certainly makes it clear that he sees the *shahr-āshob* in this heroic light, setting the exemplary simplicity of the genre against the abstruse

and ornate style that usually characterizes classical poetry. Other genres of poetry, according to him, are valued for “making nonsense of the meaning.” (Revealingly, this phrase, “*mudda’ā ko ‘anqā banānā*” or “making the meaning into an ‘*anqā*-bird” echoes Ghalib’s famous metapoetic verse alluding to the mythical and proverbially arcane ‘*anqā* bird: “No matter how much awareness casts the nets of understanding / the meaning of my speech-world is an ‘*anqā* [i.e., it is meaningless].”) Concomitantly, the *shahr-āshob*’s supposedly “plain, common and easily understandable words, and light figures of speech” produce an unobtrusive lens through which historical realities may be gazed upon: “the elements of art have been mixed in only up to a limit, such that instead of getting lost in aesthetics and artifice, the mind turns toward factuality and reality. And so it may be unhesitatingly acknowledged as a reality that in the *shahr-āshob*, neither have ideas been sacrificed to feelings, nor have thoughts to opinions, or matters to form” (32). This statement contains much that is worthy of critique; let us be content to comprehend the view that an excess of literariness—one of the sins of the classical ghazal and of *sabk-i Hindī* poetry in general—would allegedly have disoriented the reader’s attention away from the historical reality to which the *shahr-āshob* refers.

Before recalling the historical reason for the lionization of the *Lament for Delhi* in particular, let us state the obvious: the *Lament*’s *shahr-āshobs*, like other poems in this genre, could be highly ornate and full of artifice. We need only look at Aḥsan’s ghazal to see that it is imbued with a literariness with which a poet with an unadorned style would be ill at ease. For instance, we have Aḥsan’s remarkable play on the written form of the word “Dehli”: “The *lām* of Delhi is the flagpole, and *he*’s squiggle is the flag / now that nothing’s left but Delhi’s name and signs.” The verse does not present any factual information, but operates at a level that is removed from historicity by several degrees: the vanished city’s very signs (the flag and pole)

are now commemorated by means of their likeness to the written form of the city's name. Through this highly literary device, the verse draws attention to its own status (and the status of the *Lament*) as a literary monument. In her notes on Jur'at's *shahr-āshob*, Frances Pritchett has shown that poems in this genre can be highly literary and only minimally historical. In the case of the *Lament*, references to and opinions on historical events do abound, but they are not unmediated by literary language.

The general tendency of critics from the mid-19th century onward to value a supposedly direct and simple literary style has been well-documented and described. The further reason for the *Lament*'s importance in the mid-20th century was of course the manner in which 1947 and 1847—the “First Indian War of Independence”—were imagined as parallel events representing the culmination and the beginning of the South Asian struggle for independence. The 1954 edition of the *Lament* contains prefaces by both the editor Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Aḥmad and the copyist Aṣḡhar Ḥusain Ḳhān Naḏīr. What can be gleaned from the manner in which these two prefaces contradict one another is the extent to which the *Lament* poets' attitudes towards the events of 1857 were problematic for Pakistani and Indian nationalists in the 20th century. In his preface, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Aḥmad is bent on introducing the *Lament* as a collection of barely suppressed proto-nationalist outcries against the atrocities of the British colonizers. In doing so, he is impeded by the inconvenient presence of verses in praise of the British and of applause for what were represented as their efforts to restore order and normalcy to the city (see Ṣāqib's ghazal, for instance), which presence was made all the more glaring by the fact that his fellow-prefacer Naḏīr highlights such verses in his remarks (composed before Aḥmad's). Aḥmad attempts to explain this approbation by insisting on the

existence of a climate of fear in the aftermath of the British suppression of the rebellion. He writes,

In this short period [sc. the six years between 1857 and the book's publication] the dust of that lesser Judgement Day had barely settled [...]. In such a tumultuous time it was nearly impossible to reveal one's true sentiments, especially when the nation's new rulers were bent upon crushing that people which had ruled this country before them.

He goes on to add that the overspreading of this pall of intimidation only made it more poignant that some of the poets did register their criticisms of the British (8). This spirit of criticism supposedly represents the "true sentiments" that the poets had veiled for fear of punishment.

Faced with the temptation to make the publication of the work appear patriotic and timely [in the aftermath of 1947](#), it seems as though Aḥmad is willing not only to explain away verses in praise of the British but also to ignore the many lines penned in condemnation of the rebels, Šāqib's criticism of Baḫt Ḳhān's methods of taxation being a relatively tame example. In many poems in the *Lament* the rebels are othered as dark-complexioned foreign interlopers bent on spreading mischief; Munibur Rahman's comments about class conflict are no doubt to be heeded in considering these depictions. Yet when it comes to laying the blame for the disaster that befell Delhi, the poems in the *Lament* are arguably not invested in accusing either the British or the sepoys. Instead, the enemy that is inveighed against again and again is the *falak*, *āsmān* or *charḳh*—the sky, a being that functions on that very level of literary convention that Na'īm Aḥmad insists is muted in the *shahr-āshob* so as to properly orient the poem towards history. Looking through Na'īm Aḥmad's anthology, it becomes evident that the sky, the locus in which destinies are produced, is a conventional scapegoat for the city's turmoil. But does

the fact of its conventionality justify the manner in which it has been overlooked by critics who wish to focus on the much less-invoked human enemies that appear in the *Lament*? What perspectives on the history and the politics of mid-19th-century Delhi might arise out of a heightened attention such elements of the *shahr-āshob*'s literariness?

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From *The Lament for Delhi*

Shahāb al-Dīn Aḥmad “Šāqib”:

The melody-making of the nightingale of elect speech, Nawāb Shahāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḳhān Bahādur, pen-named “Šāqib,” the eldest successor of Nawāb Ziyā’ al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḳhān Bahādur; peerless in the universe as a composer of poetry and prose, of the elect disciples of Nawāb Asad Allāh Ḳhān Bahādur “Ġhālib.”

Ancient Sky, Delhi’s mortal enemy,
 what did you gain when Delhi’s every trace was lost?
 Alas that Shah Jahan’s building should be dug up!
 Alas, for Delhi’s splendour has been razed.
 Neither the Fort is there, nor its old street.
 Why, then, should Delhites think Delhi is Heaven?
 Thanks to this city’s ruin, other cities are peopled.
 Delhi’s autumn is the worldly meadow’s spring.
 Why shouldn’t Delhites bemoan their luck
 when Baḳht Ḳhān takes taxes from Delhi?
 There were thousands of musicians with enchanting melodies, but now
 the few ones left are singing elegies for Delhi.
 God sent us a governor, just and wise,
 then some of Delhi’s houses were peopled again.
 Who is that ruler of Jamshed’s rank? Cooper sahib!
 May he be called the Shah Jahan of Delhi!
 Night and day, the citizens of Delhi chant:
 “God save the ones who brought such grace to Delhi!”
 Once more the Jama Masjid’s bustle fills the market,
 once more, every store in Delhi is adorned.
 There is a beautiful museum in the Fort
 like a Chinese idol-house it watches over Delhi.
 Chandni Chowk was ruined, but then built anew
 let us call it the youthful fortune of Delhi.
 The colour of adornment in the Chowk’s garden is such
 that even Paradise swears by the life of Delhi.
 No doubt Iranians will hear this ghazal, and they’ll say:
 “Perhaps Šāqib was of the knowers of the language of Delhi.”

Ḥakīm Muḥammad Aḥsan:

One of the fresh remembrances of Ḥakīm Muḥammad Aḥsan Ḳhān Bahādur, pen-named “Aḥsan,” the eldest successor of the late Ḥakīm Muḥammad Ḥasan Khān Šāḥib, one of the old nobles of Delhi. He speaks well:

Alas for those who were the soul of Delhi!
 They went to heaven, imagining Delhi.
 Moses fell down swooning has been disclosed—¹

¹ Qur’an 7.143. Moses sees the mountain receiving God’s self-disclosure (*tajalli*, translated in the half-line as “splendour”) and faints.

every home in Delhi is a house of light.
Let's call Chandni Chowk the breast, and say the Fort's the head,
and let's imagine Jama Masjid is the waist of Delhi.
The *lām* of Delhi is the flagpole, and *he's* squiggle is the flag—
now that nothing's left but Delhi's name and trace.
Tyrannous Sky! Are there any more disasters left?
Why do you spy upon Delhi through the Sun's eye?
In sorrow for Delhi's ruin, rather than pure wine,
Delhi's wine-drinkers now drink their own hearts' blood.
I have such love for this place that after I die
I'll watch over Delhi through a chink in my grave.
Small wonder if this is spoken in Eternity:
may Heaven's folk enjoy the tongue of Delhi.
Tear open Aḥsan's breast, and then, as Rizwān says,
"the mark of Dehli's decline is upon his bloodied heart."