

## Mushaira: Pakistan's festival of Poetry

By Louis Werner

The announcer breaks into the evening's proceedings to ask the driver of the car with license plate 6734 to please move it from the emergency exit immediately<sup>1</sup>.

The 15,000 people in the crowd rustle and fidget with impatience. "Enough with numbers. Now listen to my words," says Ali Zeryoom, the man who has been interrupted. "If patience is defeat, then my country has lost to yours."

No, this is not a political speech, nor a diplomatic address, nor even an awards ceremony after an international cricket match. Ali Zeryoom is an Urdu poet, and he is reciting the first verse of a couplet from a ghazal he has chosen for the occasion of the Aalami Mushaira, the 18th annual dusk-to-dawn international poetry symposium in Karachi, Pakistan. His listeners are now quiet. When he completes the second verse, whose unvarying refrain word is so familiar to the crowd that they shout it out in unison, they roar in the traditional accolade of Urdu poetry aficionados: "Vah, vah! Vah, vah!" Fifteen thousand right hands are thrust toward Ali.

The master of ceremonies, or maizban, is Rizwan Siddiqui, a well-known television personality. He is seated to Ali's left, and like all the two dozen poets onstage waiting their turn to recite, he sits cross-legged on an ample pillow. He interjects good-naturedly, "These are not your words!" Ali answers, "If not mine, then whose are they?" And immediately he launches into another kind of poem, a nazm, on the subject of motherhood, which now has the crowd clapping rhythmically.

A mushaira is usually a refined and intimate affair, often a private gathering of poets and knowing connoisseurs of that most demanding of poetic forms, the ghazal, whose compression of deep meaning into few words can, at its best, produce a sublime literary experience. In Mughal times, a mushaira invitation would have commonly specified the tarah, or fixed rhyme scheme and meter, to be used throughout the evening. As latter-day poetic standards have slipped from the heights occupied by such masters of the ghazal as Mirza Ghalib (1796–1869) and Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810), mushairas today often mix many forms of poetry, including ribald jokes, political humor and sentimental love lyrics that can be semi-toned in a style called tarannum.

Karachi's Aalami Mushaira (aalami means "worldwide" and mushaira is a public recitation of poetry) was established in 1989 by a group of businessmen and town fathers who belonged to a benevolent society called Sakinan-e Shehr-e Qa'id (Citizens of the City of the Founder), referring to Karachi, birthplace of Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Retired banker Azhar Abbas Hashmi remembers that, in the 1980's when Karachi was undergoing great political and social tensions, he and other members of the society wanted to bring the city together around some common element. They chose Urdu, Pakistan's national language and a tongue with particularly poignant meaning in Karachi: In 1947, after the partition of Pakistan and India, the city took in so many refugees from all over the subcontinent that Urdu, as lingua franca, supplanted the region's indigenous language, Sindhi.

Hashmi also looks back to a landmark Karachi mushaira held in 1952, the first time Urdu poets crossed the border from India, at which were present such luminaries as Jigar Muradabadi, Josh Malihabadi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Zehra Nigah, known as the city's songbird. "That helped to heal some old wounds," he says, "and we were aiming for something similar again—a mission, not simply a mushaira."

Yet Hashmi worries that Urdu's high literary culture is being lost. "Today we have a fast life, too fast for poetry," he says. "I remember fondly my school days, when my father and schoolmaster were my only teachers. Now our teachers are the mass media and the supermarket." As the comic poet Amir ul-Islam recited later that night, "Our language is supposed to be Urdu / I wish we would speak real Urdu."

Indeed, patronage—or at least a comfortable income—is essential for poets to flourish. William Dalrymple's recent biography of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor and himself an accomplished poet, quotes a letter that Mirza Ghalib wrote to Queen Victoria, reminding her of the tradition of royal support for the arts, of how rulers "rewarded their poets and well-wishers by filling their mouths with pearls, weighing them in gold, and granting them villages and recompense."

The romantic poet Wasi Shah from Lahore takes his pearls and gold in the form of royalties from his books, which sell in the millions. Dashing handsome, dressed for the night's mushaira in a red tie and business suit, he recites, "I wish to be your bracelet / When you go to bed, you will be with me / When you push me up your arm, you will play with me / When you go to sleep at night / I will be a pillow for your eyes."

In the audience, 23-year-old banker Sara Khan hangs on his every word. "I like Wasi Shah because I am alone, still waiting for someone to enter my life, and his verse reflects my sad heart." Sajjad Hussein, a student of statistics at Urdu University, has come to his first mushaira more out of curiosity than sentiment. "My home is in the far north, near the Siachen Glacier in the Karakoram Range," he

says. “My mother tongue is Balti, very different from Urdu, and more difficult. But I always want to learn new things about poetry. Ghalib is already my favorite.” For her part, Farrouk Jehan has brought her nine-year-old nephew along with a picnic, and she plans to stay until the early hours. “Tomorrow is a holiday, so we can sleep late. I want him to love poetry as much as I do.”

Backstage after his recitation, Shah speaks passionately about his craft to a bevy of fans, including 12-year-old Anum Masood, who wields a pink autograph book dedicated to her favorite poets. “I write a poetry of love, and I want the world to know that we Pakistanis are about more than terror,” Shah says. “Our poetry does not produce violence.

“Just as I am living as a poet, I want to die as a poet, in peace.” And then he paused to recite the first couplet he ever wrote, at the age of eight, when his father died: “Like bubbles in the water, bubbles always go to clear / On the day your father dies, bubbles also disappear.” Anum, however, seems more starstruck by Shah’s celebrity than touched by his words as a grieving child.

Translating Urdu poetry, especially the ghazal, is an impossible task. Better call it “rendering a rough meaning,” or “catching the gist of the words.” There is so much ellipsis, ambiguity and economy that a typical seven- or ten-word verse in Urdu must sprawl in all directions when put into English. The late poet Agha Shahid Ali’s English-language translations of ghazals by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, set on facing pages from the originals, run double their length. Yet sometimes, with the help of the poet herself, a sense of possibility can be achieved.

Take this couplet, a study in paradox and the emotional confusion that grief often brings, from Hijab Abbasi, a housewife, former social worker and previous Aalami Mushaira poet, who tonight is sitting backstage in the VIP section, enjoying the recitations from a comfortable club chair. On the occasion of the death of her father’s best friend, she wrote, “Your death brought happiness / But once buried, I am always sad.” Clearly such a poem is best suited for being whispered among intimate friends, not over a microphone before a crowd.

Yet even to a non-Urdu speaker, a ghazal poet’s physical expression during recitation can guide further meanings. The hands of Ahmed Navid, a Karachi poet, for example, are in constant motion, as if hiding, pulling or scattering his syllables. He holds his hands together, tents them, points and waves them. At times, he is shrugging off a rhyme, smoothing the air, or shaking his fingers. At others, he is saluting, beseeching or forgiving his listeners. Only a single couplet from a good 20 minutes of recitation can begin to be captured in words alone: “What are you trying to hide, that even your clothes cannot hide? / Silence, for which even an audience is not sufficient.”

Other arts and cultural groups take advantage of the presence of poets from India and other parts of Pakistan —Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar, Faisalbad and Quetta— attending the Aalami Mushaira to sponsor more specialized events in private venues on the evenings that follow. A mushaira at the elite Karachi Club takes place on the lawn, the audience in glittery salwar kameez and neat kurtas, reclining on bolsters, enjoying tea served by bow-tied waiters. Many of the same poets recite here, too, and, like the Aalami Mushaira, this evening too runs toward dawn. Although the crowd is more reserved in its praise, more discriminating in its tastes, they too offer hearty acclamations of “Vah, vah!” when earned.

Sehar Ansari, the erudite former head of the Urdu Department at Karachi University, is the last to recite, an honor always given to the most esteemed poet of the group. He recites a couplet with multiple meanings in this time of both domestic and cross-border strife in Pakistan: “Why use fire to extinguish fire? / Kill us with love just as well.”

Another follow-on mushaira is held at the markaz sadat-e amrohvi, the community center for migrants to Karachi from the town of Amroha, near Delhi— famous as the birthplace of some of the greatest Urdu poets, starting with Ismail Amrohvi in the 17th century and stretching forward into the late 20th century with Rais Amrohvi, his brother Jaun Alia and the master of all Amrohvi poets, Mussafi. The club is compiling a biographical dictionary of native-son poets that currently includes 566 names.

Naqoosh Naqvi, the maizban for this mushaira, was born in Amroha in 1942 and came to Pakistan a decade later. He is well versed in the maizban’s job, having hosted more than 50 such occasions, so he knows just when to cut a long-winded poet short, and when to cajole a great poet into an encore by exhorting him, “Mukarrar, mukarrar!” (“Again, again!”)

Dr. Kunwar Bechain, a retired professor from Meerut University near New Delhi, is reciting at the Aalami Mushaira, and visiting Pakistan, for the first time. “I am very happy to be here,” he says. “The feelings are the same across the border because poets are never divided by a line.” His own surname means “restless,” so by way of introduction, the maizban jokes, “We too are restless for you to start.” Bechain begins with a sung couplet: “There are thousands of fragrances in this world / But nothing better than the smell of bread to a hungry man.” The maizban tries to animate the crowd: “Applaud him, you are not sitting in front of a jury!” Bechain ends with a couplet about how words can be misused: “I wanted to make toys of them / but the world has turned them into weapons.”

The logistics of serving 15,000 poetry fans over an eight-hour performance are daunting. The day before the mushaira, the organizing committee was joined by Karachi deputy mayor Nasreen Jalil to make certain that the catering company

that had been hired could spread sufficient carpets for the capacity crowd. A road grader had smoothed the dirt on the parking lot behind Urdu University, and the stage platform and three central poles strung with electric lights had been erected. High-swinging television camera dollies for live broadcast on Metro-One TV were in position, too.

By nine o'clock the following night, the crowd begins to trickle in. Some stop outside the gates to sample the kebabs and browse the bookstalls. Water stations ring the seating area. It has been 44 degrees Celsius (111° F) that day, and the pre-monsoon heat is still withering. At 11:00 p.m, an imam recites a verse from the Qur'an, and the maizban calls for attention and introduces the first poet. More than 25 are scheduled to appear; most remain seated onstage throughout the night. The reciting poet, who takes a front seat on a raised, low-railed dais, often turns back to his fellows after completing a particularly fine verse, as if to seek inside approval.

Toward four o'clock in the morning, a crowd favorite, Ather Shah Khan, a humorous poet known by his pen name, "Jadi," is introduced, and the crowd shakes itself from the reflective, introspective mood that the previous ghazal poet had established. In a buffoon's voice, Jadi brings the cross-legged crowd to its metaphorical feet. "Uncle, where are you tonight? / Uncle, I don't see you / Maybe he has died! / I also was young, two years ago." His verse aims for the funny bone more than the cerebral cortex, yet this very mix of the high and the low, the comical and the conceptual, is what makes the Aalami Mushaira such a yearly success.

Ahmed Navid, who works in the advertising business, is reciting here for the second time, and although his verse is aimed higher, he recognizes the positive role that such a mass gathering, whether for poetry or for sports, plays in city life. "Poetry is itself a medium," he says. "It doesn't need a show. If you are a good poet, you don't need a stage. But as the great poet Mir Taqi Mir said, 'What is a mushaira? Just people getting together.'"

A mushaira of this size brings out the enthusiasts as well as the eccentrics. Backstage, many amateur, self-published poets stuff their books into the hands of those better known. Others are eager to recite to whoever will lend an ear. Saeedul Kabir intones a few verses from American poet Carl Sandburg's "The People, Yes," which he follows with an Urdu poem by Sahir Ludhianvi that he says Sandburg's directly inspired. Nearly out of breath, he next declaims from English romantic poet Robert Southey's "Battle of Blenheim," and then Josh Malihabadi's poem on the very same subject—the emptiness of military victory after blood has been spilled on all sides.

The future of Urdu poetry may be found in the verse of intense, long-haired Atif Tauqeer, who works as a late drive-time disc jockey. Besides being a poet, he is, according to his Web site (<http://www.facebook.com/atifthe poet>), a man who

gets his words out any way he can, working as a scriptwriter, producer, director, storyteller, actor and editor. In the cluttered world of multimedia, he knows that poets must diversify their performance space, beyond mushairas and books, if they want to be heard. Atif was the third poet to recite at the Aalami Mushaira, when the crowd was still streaming in and before it had settled down to really listen.

From Atif's Web site, fans can download his recitations, join a live chat room and participate in a poetry-lover's forum—all very 21st-century. "Couplets are heartbeats," he says. "Some poems can be written in a moment, because love needs only a moment." Somehow, digital audio seems entirely appropriate for his of-the-moment modernity. "Media should uplift people, not keep them down. We have so much we must think about in our times—climate change, terror, racism. A poet is fortunate if people can understand what he wants to say."

The sky is still dark when the first call to the dawn prayer sounds from neighboring minarets. It is time to conclude, although the maizban has done an admirable job in keeping on schedule. No poet's feelings have been hurt, and several have been singled out for the praise of "Vah, vah!" that follows the calls "Mukarrar, mukarrar!" Only one poet is still to recite, and he has ample time to finish before the final prayer call in another 15 minutes.

At the final couplet, the maizban hurries words of thanks to the poets, their listeners and the organizing committee. The task of knitting together this polyglot city of more than 12 million residents—with more than 1500 migrants arriving every day from all parts of the country—has not been easy. The Aalami Mushaira, this celebration of Urdu poetry at its best, is one of the few glues that hold. As the Karachi poet Tariq Sabzwari recited earlier in the night, Whatever be my city's air, I'll love it still Whether in the sun or shade This land of mine, this land of ours.

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