Rahman Rahi

Rahman Rahi on whom Sahitya Akademi is conferring its highest honour of Fellowship today is one of the most eminent poets and critics of Kashmiri. He has, through his work, profoundly enriched and influenced the Kashmiri language, thus making a singular contribution to Indian literature.

Born Abdur Rahman on 6 May 1925, Rahman Rahi is better known by his pen-name. Orphaned at an early age, he was brought up by a maternal uncle. He had his early schooling at Srinagar and Jammu and did his Matric and F.A. in Urdu and Persian at the Punjab University, Lahore. He did his B.A. at the East Punjab University, Solan, Simla. He worked in the Public Works Department for a brief period before joining, in 1948, the editorial staff of the Urdu daily Khidmat, the official organ of the ruling National Conference Party. Around this time he also joined the Progressive Writers’ Association of which he was elected General Secretary after a few years, coinciding with his leaving journalism. He also edited a few issues of Kuvang Posh, the literary journal of the Progressive Writers’ Association. Eventually he joined the cultural wing of the undeclared Communist Party of Kashmir while pursuing his studies. He did his M.A. in Persian (1952) and English Literature (1962) at the Jammu and Kashmir University. He was on the Board of Editors of the Urdu daily Ajkal, Delhi, from 1953 to 1955. He taught in many colleges before he joined the Department of Persian, Kashmir University as Lecturer in 1964. He became a Senior Fellow in the Department of Kashmiri of the same University in 1975. The University also conferred on him the distinction of being its very first Professor Emeritus. He retired from his academic career in 1985.
He was deeply influenced by Lalded and other Kashmiri mystic poets early on. The thought and poetry of veteran Kashmiri poet Dina Nath Nadim, who was a senior contemporary of his, were also to leave a deep impression on him.

The attempt by some Leftist leaders at the national level to project Urdu as the language of Kashmir brought about in Rahi disenchantment with their politics. Although Rahi’s earlier Urdu poems like “Qahqaha-e-Zaharifshian” (The Venomous Laughter) and “Faisla” (Decision) were appreciated by Progressive critics, he chose to switch over to Kashmiri in 1952 in conformity with his conviction that the mother-tongue was the natural and, therefore, the best medium of poetic expression.

He has five collections of poems to his credit. Sanaweni Saaz was his first collection published in 1952, while Siyaah-Rooda-jaren Manz is his latest poetry collection published in 1997. His first anthology of poems in Kashmiri, Nauroz-e-Saba (The Morning Zephyr, 1958) established him firmly as a prominent Kashmiri poet. The work won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1961. Nauroz-e-Saba reveals Rahi’s loyalty to the Progressive movement of that time, which was patronised by political leaders like G.M. Sadiq and D.P. Dhar and literary figures like Dina Nath Nadim. However poems like “Swanalanki Pyath” (On Swanalank, 1956), in which the poet expressed his fears in the face of all-pervading death, indicate a departure from the Progressive mould.

His evolution as a serious student of literature and his emotional experience of life in general made him veer away from commitment to any regimentation in literature, thought or belief. The sudden exposure of the Stalinist Soviet system disillusioned him further. The result was a fresh outlook in harmony with his sensibility as a writer, which was modern and free from any ideological baggage.

Rahi’s critical essays in Kahuwat (Touchstone, 1980) are considered to have developed an indigenous critical idiom for Kashmiri. This book won him the Best Literary Critic Award of the State Cultural Academy, which had earlier presented him with the “Robe of Honour” in 1978 for his services to Kashmiri literature. His other two books on literary criticism are Shaar Shinasee, 1982 and Kashmir Shayiree Ta Waznuk Soorati Hall, 2000.
He has also translated a number of works from English into Kashmiri, some of which are *Dr. Faustus* and *Baba Farid*.

He was awarded the Padmashri this year. He has received several other awards and honours in his long and distinguished literary career including Emeritus Fellowship awarded by the Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India, in 1989.

Alienation, existential dilemma and human predicament at personal, social and universal levels are the principal themes of much of Rahi’s poetry. His poem “Shadows” exemplifies this:

Give up questioning your destiny and hope of eternity,  
If you can get hold of a few moments, enjoy them.  
The much-trodden city road penetrated the dense woods  
Just as doubts wormed into the mantle of my faith.  
Opening the eyes exposed my dreams to the evil eye,  
Many surging vernal breasts became scorched wildernesses.  
Cast a look around and you see a sizzling fair,  
Reckon a thought and a lone crow in the void.  
In days gone by I longed to create stars,  
I rack my brains now to give myself a name.  
All beliefs are like withered greenery on the uplands,  
All consciousness is like an infuriated serpent.  
All gods are mine own shadows,  
All monsters like my animated self.  
Halls appear to be furnished with the gibberish of monkeys,  
Comb the forests to robe saints.  
What kind of steering and whither the shore,  
The boat is drifting unguided in the dark.  
O dasuneus, circle round him disrobed,  
Rahi is a fire-eating lunatic.

_Translated from Kashmiri: S.L. Sadhu_

For his pre-eminence contribution as a poet and critic enriching Kashmiri language and literature in a profound manner, the Sahitya Akademi confers its highest honour, the Fellowship, on Rahman Rahi.
Acceptance Speech

Rahman Rahi

Modern India’s most distinguished literary organization, the Sahitya Akademi, has conferred on me the honour of its Fellowship and I accept this prestigious award in all humility. For this great honour my heart-felt gratitude is due to all the respectable members of the Akademi, its President Shri Ramakanta Rath, its Vice President, Prof. Gopi Chand Narang, and its Secretary, Prof. K. Satchidanandand who unanimously chose me for the award.

I have a candid feeling that this honour is somehow a sincere and perceptive acknowledgment of the creative maturity and cultural importance of the Kashmiri language because whatever little I have been able to achieve as a writer could not have been possible if this language were not my vehicle. Its growth and prosperity are the surest guarantee of the growth and prosperity of my people. To ignore it or deny to it its rightful place would not only be a glaring injustice to its speakers but also an irreparable loss to the entire cultural heritage of the sub-continent. I have given vent to this dreadful fear in one of my verses thus:

Such a premonition that air comes to a stand-still before the treetops;
Oceans seep down into islets and hills break under the burden of the sound.

The Kashmiri language enables me to define my identity and my surroundings and then express my inmost feelings and thoughts and weave my choicest dreams. It is sheer ill luck that the atmosphere which is being generated at the moment in and around Kashmir is inimical to the creative process and its handling of the dream as well as the reality. The distinctive feature of creative literature is to cognize through language the inner and the outer reality and to explore possibilities of their reconciliation and harmonization or to adumbrate the fear and suspicions that waylay such a process. It is language that brings into being the pulsation of feeling and emotion, the fight of thought and imagination, the effusion of knowledge and wisdom and becomes, in the end, the source of ecstatic joy and peace of mind. Likewise it also brings to light the sordid dynamics of separation, ill-will, insensitivity, hatred and indifference. A sinister attempt to consign a people’s language to oblivion and slow death amounts to petrifying that people’s eye and heart and forcing it to feel and to aspire for what suits the narrow and selfish interest of its enemies and exploiters.

The speed and extent with which a constantly awake and enlightened literature is neglected in our present-day society should be a cause of great alarm for all of us. What is dreadfully ominous is that genuine creative expression is replaced by hollow and insubstantial literature which may yield momentary excitement but possess no perennial value. This is, in fact, indicative of the growing dehumanization and vacuity of imagination of our society. The earliest great Kashmiri poet, Lal Ded, while describing the state of her creative ferment had asserted:

Not for a moment did I forbear nor a while wait,
So ecstatic did the liquor of my own verse render me:
I caught hold of my inner gloom and wrapped it around me
Then seized it hard and tore it to shreds.

Thus Lal Ded’s own poetry acted for her as the intoxicating wine under whose effect she overcame her inner darkness and so dispelled it as to illuminate the whole atmosphere.

Literature defines the ambiguous and the inarticulate, cognizes and brings to light the unknown and the mysterious and facilitates flights to fresh horizons.
It also depicts the combat of the divine and the diabolical forces that always rage in the inner world of man. In any case, whatever its subject, it leads to a rapture which nothing else can yield.

Many are the forces which strive for darkness rather than light, and the worst of these is habit — die-hard and conservative habit — which bogs the mind and blinds the eye and makes one contend with what is and oblivious of what ought to be. This generates mental torpor and spiritual emptiness in which one feels reconciled to all evils as decrees of fate: individual discord, social inequality, communal prejudice, parochial tension, linguistic disharmony, totalitarian coercion and constricting enslavement. In such a state, seldom does any one think of questioning the establishment, much less, of challenging and seeking to overturn it. How then, in such an atmosphere, can one think of identifying the gems among the stones or producing the lotus from the myre. Man is converted to an unthinking animal subserving the interest of others or to an all-devastating social rebel outcast. Creative literature invades the fortresses of habit and conservation and awakens the dreams of reconstruction diving into fathomless depths; it brings to light the fiery streams hidden in the bowels of oceanic mountains.

The history of world literature is a record of achievements — great and small — of demolition and rebuilding on enlightened lines. In its own way Kashmiri literature too is a short and small, yet meaningful chapter of this glorious history. Literature awakens in man the consciousness of realizing his self and his significance in the universe and of coming to terms with the unknown and intractable mysteries of destiny. It reveals to him the self-consuming dedication of the censer that destroys the rose. It enables the affluent to feel the desperation of the needy and makes the hungry appreciate the helplessness of the wise. It engenders the anguish of protest against hatred based on differences of belief and conviction. It exposes, in its own way, the sham trickery of hypocritical religiosity to hoodwink and exploit. It makes man cry and wail on the hegemony and hightandedness of the mighty against the weak. It nerves the weak to challenge and defy the forces of tyranny, coercion and imperialism. It sensitizes the insensitive so that they begin to see the mysterious in their own colourless lives and insipid surroundings. It revives the heart and awakens it to realize the essential unity of all mankind. Like all great literature Kashmiri literature too aspires to realize these noble objectives.

For ages Kashmir has been an acknowledged centre of Knowledge and enlightenment with its doors and windows wide open. Its contacts with Central Asia and the Far East led to the popularization of the truth-speaking and life-revering thought of Buddha. When it embraced Sanskrit culture it made Katha Sarit Sagar sweep the surroundings far and wide. Through Kalhana it lit up the path of historiography in the subcontinent and promoted aesthetic thought through geniuses like Anandavardhana, Abhinavagupta and Mammata. When it patronized Persian language and literature it won the title of mini-Iran through the creative achievements of Ghani and Sarfi. In the Kashmiri language it produced a mystic and visionary of Lal Ded’s stature and a multi-faceted revolutionary rishi like Sheikh Noor-ud-Din. Even in the pitch dark days of slavery it produced luminaries like Mahmud Ghami, Rasul Mir and Shamas Faquir and altruistic, patriotic and freedom-loving poets like Mahjoo and Azad.

How sad that this warm, sensitive and broad-minded region has been in the grip of an enervating and soul-consuming malady for the last five decades. They have torn to bits a lovely flower-garden, sowed thorns and thistles in fields and plains, converted the hill-tops into ammunition dumps and courtyards into slaughter-houses. Worst of all the barrel of the gun has banned thoughts and feelings and emotions and it has ruled that to dream is to be an impudent traitor or rebel. Opportunism, bribery and hoarding of worldly pelf have become the order of the day and idealism is equated with stupidity. Consequently, most of the modern Kashmiri literature is the literature of anguish, restlessness and protest. It is in revolt against those forces of darkness which seek to destroy our age-old, soul-nourishing values and create anarchy, unrest and pessimism. Kashmiri litterateurs, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, are engaged in an earnest endeavour to humanize and sensitize man in order to replace what is ugly, vicious and false with what is beautiful, good and true.

Unfortunately, an insidious conspiracy seems to be afoot to force the Kashmiri writer into silence. Kashmir right now is the victim of a cultural aggression carried on by opportunistic and myopic forces from within and without. The identity of a people is its peculiar culture and the most effective and resilient defender of culture is a people’s language. That precisely is the reason why Kashmiri language has become the prime target of the cultural aggressors —
neither the reed-bed nor any flute. Mahjoor has forewarned Kashmiris of this invasion:

*Said the bulbul to the rose, “your beauty is perfect,  
But your drawback is that you lack the tongue  
And those who lack it forfeit the right to live.”  
Come love and handsomely harness my being.*

The Kashmiri writer knows that raising slogans and throwing gauntlets is none of the business of literature. He also knows that the imaginative literature promotes in man self-recognition in an immeasurably vast and complex universe, but when the very vehicle of the writer's expression (his mother-tongue) is in danger of extinction he cannot but feel lacerated and enraged. The Kashmiri writer is not unconscious of the fact that the world today has been converted into a global village and that languages other than the mother tongue ought to be learnt but he knows at the same time that if his language is suppressed in order to promote another language it will deal a death-blow to the intellectual and spiritual vitality of his people. Shaikh Noor-ud-Din, the standard-bearer of Kashmir, prayed in earnest that may his lays be read and understood, but if the very language in which his thoughts are enshrined is destroyed how shall the prayer come true? The Kashmiri people owe their warmth, their sensitivity, their humane ways, their love of beauty, the idealism and their dreams, in large measure, to their language. To suppress this language is to undermine the admirable values which make Kashmiri culture what it is. This culture is a valuable part of the cultural heritage of the world and to safeguard and promote this culture is the duty of all those intellectuals and creative writers who crave for the restoration of mankind.

At a crucial juncture in the history of the subcontinent, Mahatma Gandhi saw the only ray of light in Kashmir. Today we—Kashmir litterateurs—look up to the intellectuals and writers of the subcontinent to join us in ushering in a fresh dawn so that the darkness in which we are caught up is dispelled and once again—as in the past—we are able to make a substantial contribution to the enrichment of the colourful literature of the subcontinent. As a Kashmiri writer, this is my highest aspiration, my cherished dream—and in this context I view this ceremony, being held today under the auspices of the Sahitya Akademi, as a good augury with consequences of far-reaching import.

Thank you.