

Frances W. Pritchett

'THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN':

Šahr-āšōb AS A GENRE

In last year's *Annual of Urdu Studies*, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and I collaborated on a translation of a *muxammas-e šahr-āšōb* by Jur'at which we called in English "In the Presence of the Nightingale."¹ Faruqi also provided, in "Jur'at's *Šahr-āšōb*: An Afterword," a discussion of the poem in its literary and cultural context.² Hardly any *šahr-āšōbs* have been translated into English, so our work was a kind of experiment. Of course in principle it is impossible to translate poetry; but there are all the best reasons for making the attempt. And some poems are more translatable (or at least less untranslatable) than others. Jur'at's poem has a feature quite rare in its genre: the final *mišra'* of every *band* is identical (rather than merely rhyming). Repetition is perhaps the most translatable of all verbal devices, and we of course took advantage of the chance to preserve as much formal unity as possible in English. While a great deal of wordplay was lost in translation, some of it could be preserved or at least suggested; we tried to convey the poem's vigor and its sarcastic wit.

When we decided to try another *šahr-āšōb*, it was Nazeer Akbarabadi's "*Duniyā-e DūN kē Tamāšē*", chosen out of Dr. Naeem Ahmad's *Šahr-āšōb*.³ It was selected partly for its formal translatability: an identical final *mišra'* at the end of each *band*. Although not as great a poem as Jur'at's, it has an imaginative wildness and verve that are most effective. We did our best with it, and the results appear in the preceding pages of this issue of the *Annual*.

Before working with these two poems by Jur'at and Nazeer, I had a fairly clear notion about the *šahr-āšōb* genre. Although its Persian antecedents were a bit murky to me, I knew that in Urdu it was a genre of poems devoted to describing the lamentable condition of some "ruined city." *Šahr-āšōbs* were defined not by form, but by content: they were "pessimistic, backward-looking assertions of the decadent state of the poet's present society," as Fritz Lehman has written; they were "extremely localized," with each poet lamenting the past greatness and present decline of his own particular city.⁴ This was the first account of *šahr-āšōb* I ever read; the most recent one I've seen is in agreement. In his book on poetic genres, Shameem Ahmad writes that the name *šahr-āšōb* points directly to the subject matter: it is the genre "in which the ruined condition of some city is examined." The successful *šahr-āšōb* poet must have not only wide human sympathies, but also "an extremely close relationship to his own society, atmosphere and life."⁵ Both Lehman and Ahmad give very satisfactory examples of *šahr-āšōbs* of this kind: poignant, indignant, or bitter, but very detailed, depictions of social decay and injustice, so closely observed that they constitute a form of sociological description or even a political critique. (Thus

their interest to historians.) This concept of *šahr-āšōb* is very much in the critical mainstream, and it certainly does fit a number of well-known poems in the genre.

But it does *not*, it seems to me, fit "In the Presence of the Nightingale." True, the poem does offer an inventory of lowly social groups and professions which are presented as claiming or achieving undue eminence. Here is the full list in order: carpet-weavers, beggars, grass-diggers, fishermen, country bumpkins, carpenters, peddlers, hut-dwellers, doorkeepers, cobblers, potters, public-hair shavers, sweepers, ne'er-do-wells, flower-sellers, bird-sellers, match- or reed-sellers, sparrow-trappers, pimps and cuckolds, crow-catchers, carpet-spreaders, rustics, greedy businessmen, Punjabi-speakers, quacks, eunuchs, dirt-carriers, whores, lime-sellers, bird-catchers, puppeteers, pimps, fools. Now such a list cannot, it seems to me, be taken as any kind of sociological description or political analysis. It could never serve to distinguish Jur'at's own city, Lucknow, from any other city; nor could it possibly be thought to describe Lucknow's real societal ills, since across-the-board social climbing by an oddly assorted combination of lowly and despised groups was never a feudal North Indian phenomenon. The seeming specificity of the thirty-three groups and professions is illusory: their only real point is to be markedly, vulgarly, *low*. Thus their outrageous, absurd pretensions to high status can easily be shown up as contemptible folly. A folly equal to that of the lesser birds--ugly, crude, and insolent every one--who presume to sing before the Nightingale.

Or rather, to try to sing: for of course they fail. The sheer energy of the poem, Jur'at's strong delight in his own vigor and technical skill, the relish with which the contemptible upstarts are revealed in all their vulgarity--all this vitality transcends, and transforms, the seemingly dismal situations described. The poem culminates in a final self-celebratory *band* in which the absolute failure of the upstarts' aspirations is driven home; with joyous contempt the poet rubs salt into his enemies' wounds:

*The enemy has vainly thought to equal Jur'at's verse,
Crows who copy swans forget their own gait,
and end up worse!
He should renounce all jealousy, go and give him the word:
The rose merely laughs when, with ruffled wings,
the little sunbird
Tries to make her voice prevail
In the presence of the nightingale.*

The poem is, after all, as Faruqi pointed out, a "*hajw-e nau-šā'irān bil-xuṣūḡ zahūrullāh Nawā*," an insult-poem directed at "the new poets, especially Zahurullah Nava." The *taxalluḡ* "*Nawā*" suggested the bird and song imagery of which Jur'at makes such brilliant use. Faruqi has analyzed a few examples of the poem's elegant, resonant wordplay. As a *hajw*, it is surely one of the outstanding achievements in Urdu; but as a *šahr-āšōb* it seems a bit idiosyncratic. It is not, in the last analysis, nostalgic, pessimistic, or backward-looking; nor it is a serious,

detailed, deeply felt description of societal decay in the poet's city.

The poem does indeed convey a sort of generalized disapproval, expressed in metaphor: if poor carpet-weavers wear expensive orange shawls (Stanza 1), or shavers of pubic hair write poems (S. 5), or a whore fights with a "Rustam" (S. 18), the implication undoubtedly is that social order and decorum have been violated. But metaphors yield, for the most part, general and "metaphorical" information only. If a whore fights a "Rustam", does this imply that prostitutes are violent? That women in general are disobedient? That men are effeminate? That brawls take place in brothels? How plausible is a societal problem that takes the form of shavers of pubic hair (en masse!) composing poetry? The reader emerges, not with a clear image of real societal evils being depicted and deplored, but with a general impression of disorder and disarray. When such a high proportion of images are metaphorical, even the more specific ones become suspect: making millions through "usury and extortion" (S. 20) may seem quite a realistic accusation, but it is levelled against an unlikely group: people who used to trap blue-jays and free them for a small fee--a class perhaps selected for its bird imagery rather than its sociological accuracy! From this poem we learn about Jur'at's Lucknow only that it contains a number of insufferably vulgar upstarts whose pretensions to elite culture are as absurd as those of other birds before the Nightingale--or of the poetaster Nava before Jur'at. The poem is much more truly a *hajw* than a *šahr-āšōb* of the classic sort.

But this would not have struck me so forcefully if we had not gone on to translate Nazeer's "*Duniyā-e DĒN kē Tamāšā*," which we have called in English "The Vile World Carnival." This poem's first two *bands* prepare the reader for astonishment, for bizarrerie, for a panorama of wonders at which one can only stare in stupefaction. And the later *bands* fulfill these expectations. The fourth *band*, for example, can hardly pass as social description of the most rudimentary kind: surely Nazeer's Akbarabad (i.e., Agra) was not literally afflicted with winged creatures walking, wingless creatures trying to fly with fans, paralytics wandering everywhere, and lame people leaping about? Many more of the *bands* use animal and bird imagery exclusively, and do not even mention human groups or classes at all.

Not merely animals and birds, however, but the whole cosmos is paradoxically disordered: "*The earth revolves, and the sky stands still*" (S. 5), "*Smoke rains down, the clouds are booze-filled*" (S. 14), "*Stones are immovable, mountains mount to the skies*" (S. 24), "*Moonlight is dark, and the darkness moonlit*" (S. 25). At times an elegantly sinister effect is achieved: "*Gardens dry up, in the woods streams flow//Flowers rot, flower-faced thorns grow*" (S. 11). At others the effect is whimsical: "*The shrew sings songs, to the mouse's drum-beats//The squirrel sits cooking, preparing sweets*" (S. 15).

The mood of the poem is madcap, wild; it seems to revel in bizarrely impossible reversals. The repeated final *migra'* of every *band* makes the point exactly: Words fail me, the absurdity and paradox of the world are beyond my power to describe or assess. Behind such an "inexpressibility" trope can lie any mood, or no consistent mood at all. I suspect the latter: Nazeer seems to

give free rein to his imagination, so that the poem has a zest and raciness not at all dependent on logical coherence. Faruqi feels that I underestimate the bitterness and cynicism of the poem's mood, and this may well be true. But in any case it is clear that the poem is concerned to suggest a mood rather than to depict an actual situation. "Thugs have abandoned their strangling ways//Travellers strangle thugs, these days!" (S. 22) may be playful, madcap, ironic, bitter, metaphorical, or whatever-- but not accurately descriptive.

My perception of these two poems was crystallized by Peter Burke's account of the traditional European season of Carnival, a festival time celebrated just before the austerities of Lent. Carnival was "an enactment of 'the world turned upside down,' a favorite theme in the popular culture of early modern Europe." This image included reversals of a number of kinds:

There was physical reversal: people standing on their heads, cities in the sky, the sun and moon on earth, fishes flying, or that favorite item of carnival procession, a horse going backwards with its rider facing the tail. There was a reversal of the relation between man and beast. . . . Also represented was the reversal of the relation between man and man, whether age reversal, sex reversal, or other inversion of status. The son is shown beating his father, the pupil beating his teacher, servants giving orders to their masters, the poor giving alms to the rich, the laity saying Mass or preaching to the clergy, the king going on foot while the peasant rides, the husband holding the baby and spinning while his wife smokes and holds a gun.⁶

How did people feel about such inversions of values? Burke finds that the images were "ambiguous, with different meanings for different people, and possibly ambivalent, with different meanings for the same person." To the upper classes, the images definitely represented chaos, disorder, "misrule"; but whether ordinary people shared this view is "much less clear."⁷

Nazeer's iamgery in "*Duniyā-e DŪN kē Tamāšā*" is obviously-- even down to specific examples--that of "the world turned upside down." And it could be argued that Nazeer's poetic stance of stupefaction, his repeated claim of incomprehension and inability to find words, conveys something of the complex ambivalence an ordinary person might feel toward a vision of drastic social topsy-turviness. But while readers may differ about the mood of Nazeer's poem, the mood of Jur'at's is unmistakably clear. If Nazeer is the "poet of the people," Jur'at adopts a thoroughly aristocratic stance: he has no trouble conveying unambiguous contempt and radical hostility toward any such inversion of social values. Both poets, however, evoke, use, and respond to the same kind of vision: not the sadly decaying "ruined city," but the paradoxically inverted "world turned upside down"; they are concerned not with a picture of local social conditions, but with a metaphor framed and shaped by the human imagination.

It seems to me, therefore, that we need to adjust our perspective on the *šahr-āšōb* genre in one of two ways. We can if we choose maintain the traditional relatively narrow

definition, which rests on specific sociological description and pessimistic mood, and declare that poems outside this group are not *šahr-āšōbs*. Jur'at's poem would thus become a *hajw* which imitates a few *šahr-āšōb* conventions. Nazeer's poem would thus become a *muxammas*, with no further descriptive category available. (Jeffrey Donaghue of the University of Minnesota argues that Nazeer may have been influenced in this poem by the "*ulṭī bānī*" of Kabir.⁸) Alternatively, we could loosen the definition of *šahr-āšōb* to include the general category of poems using "world turned upside down" imagery. This definition would gain in comprehensiveness, but lose in precision. Perhaps readers of the *Annual* would like to comment on how we can best clarify our sometimes anomalous use of the term "*šahr-āšōb*."

Notes

- ¹ *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 3 (1983), pp. 1-9.
- ² *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 3 (1983), pp. 11-16.
- ³ Na'im Ahmad. *Šahr-āšōb*. New Delhi: Maktabah Jamia, 1968.
- ⁴ Fritz Lehman, "Urdu Literature and Mughal Decline," in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 6:2-3 (1970), pp. 125-131. P. 127.
- ⁵ Samim Ahmad. *Agnāf-e Suxan aur Še'ri Hai'atān*. Bhopal: India Book Emporium, 1981. P. 97.
- ⁶ Peter Burke. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1978. Pp. 188-189.
- ⁷ Burke, p. 189.
- ⁸ Personal letter, 1 April 1984. Jeffrey Donaghue has been working on a dissertation on Nazeer Akbarabadi.