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# URDU AND MUSLIM SOUTH ASIA

## Studies in honour of Ralph Russell

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Dāstān-e tāriḫ-e urdū* (Agra 1941).

<sup>2</sup> The word *tāriḫ* signifies 'chronogram' as well as 'date' in Urdu, and art of the chronogram is termed *tāriḫ-goī*, from *tāriḫ-go* 'chronogrammatist'.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the *Shorter OED* (1977 edn), s.v.: 'a phrase, sentence, or inscription, in which certain letters (distinguished from the rest) express by their numerical values a date or epoch. Thus a pamphlet published in 1666, when an engagement between the English and Dutch navies was expected, had in place of the imprint of the year this sentence: 'LorD haVe MerCLe Vpon Vs'. The sum of the numerical values of the capital letters is 1666'.

<sup>4</sup> Followed by *Mizān ut tavārīḫ* (1937), *Jāmi' ut tavārīḫ* (1943), *Āsār ut tavārīḫ* (1953), all preserved as MSS in my own collection.

<sup>5</sup> As in *ummatin* in the third Quranic chronogram quoted above.

## Poet–audience interaction at Urdu musha'iras

C. M. NAIM

The Urdu word 'musha'ira' (*mušā'ira*) is from *mušā'ara*, an Arabic verbal noun, reciprocal in reference, whose primary meaning, according to Steingass, is 'contending with, or excelling in poetry'.<sup>1</sup> That is still the basic meaning of the word in Iran, and *mušā'ara*, in Persian, refers to a poetic contest in which two persons or groups exchange couplets back and forth, each being required, for example, to respond with a couplet beginning with the letter with which the opponent's couplet ends.<sup>2</sup> In the Urdu milieu of South Asia such a contest is called *bait-bāzī* ('the game of couplets'), whereas 'musha'ira' exclusively refers to a gathering of poets for the purpose of reading poetry before an audience. (Elements of game and contest, however, are still discernible, as we shall see later.) According to Shibli Nu'mānī, musha'iras in the latter sense — i.e. gatherings of poets — began in the Persian milieu near the end of the fifteenth century; but Nu'mānī does not indicate his source of information.<sup>3</sup> However, in the Persian/Urdu milieu of eighteenth century Delhi, Muhammad Taqī Mīr tells us that a new term *murāxta* was coined on the pattern of *mušā'ara* to refer to gatherings of *rexta* or Urdu poets.<sup>4</sup> The new term did not gain wide currency and was soon replaced by the original word.

No detailed descriptions of early Urdu musha'iras have come down to us; the only available information is fragmentary and begins with the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> We know that musha'iras were held quite frequently, often at regular intervals. Night was probably the preferred time. They were held at the homes of individuals as well as at such public places as those of the *dargāh* and *takiya* associated with Sufi saints; and they were sometimes held in the Red Fort. In every case, however, the audience was restricted: these were not 'open' events. Limitations of space and the protocols of an hierarchical society dictated that this be so. Also, it appears that very few non-participants attended those early musha'iras. In other words, there was at that time no distinguishable audience separate from the participating poets. The host of the evening was also the presiding person; he conducted the proceedings and usually started the musha'ira by presenting his own verses first. He then invited other poets to read, beginning with the young



and the lesser known. The poets sat forming an arena, i.e., with an open space in the middle. A candle circulated in the assembly, and was placed before each poet as his turn came. The poets read strictly in order of fame and seniority, with the master-poets (*ustād*) coming at the very end. Any lapse in that regard could lead to serious trouble. So far as we know those musha'iras were exclusively male affairs.

Returning to the element of competition mentioned earlier, its origin no doubt lay in the tribal role of the poet among the Arabs: poets praised their own tribes and disparaged tribal enemies. That element was further enhanced in the milieu of royal courts in the Islamicized lands: poets praised kings and competed with each other for royal favours. In India, Urdu poets vied with each other for the patronage of the nobility as well as for fame and prestige. And the arenas for this rivalry were the musha'iras, just as much as were the *mahfils* or private gatherings at the homes of the nobles. We must also mention here the important tradition of *ustādī* ('mentor-ship') and *šāgirdī* ('discipleship') in Urdu poetry. In pre-modern society, poetry was considered a science (*ilm*) as well as a vocation (*fan*), and one needed to learn how to write poetry from some master (*ustād*). Every master poet had his loyal disciples (*šāgird*), and their numbers and names were matters of prestige. These disciples attended musha'iras in the company of their masters, and were quick to rectify, verbally or otherwise, any loss of face.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to this century, the chief source of competition in an Urdu musha'ira lay in the convention of *tarh* ('manner/foundation'). A line of verse was announced well ahead of any musha'ira and was called *misra'-e tarh* ('the foundation line'); it laid down the metre and the rhyme scheme which all poets then had to follow in writing ghazals for that musha'ira. Poets tried to outdo each other in discovering unusual rhymes and using them as many times as possible. Many rhyme-words would have conventional ideas to go with them; and in such cases poets strove to find original nuances.<sup>7</sup> A master-poet would not only compose a ghazal of his own, but often write verses to distribute among his disciples; he would also correct and improve their original verses, for any mistake on their part would reflect badly on him. In earlier musha'iras it was fairly common for poets to question each other's craftsmanship and linguistic or rhetorical prowess. Such arguments could develop into lengthy feuds if they were taken up by rival groups of disciples or instigated by some patron for his own amusement.

*Tarhī* musha'iras gradually lost favour with poets and audience alike, particularly in this century when the nature and size of audiences has radically changed. Musha'iras are now public affairs of a substantial size. Small private gatherings of poets are usually referred to by some other name, e.g. *našist* or *mahfil*. Musha'iras may be held indoors in an auditorium or a hall, or outdoors in some open space or under a large tent. The easy availability of sound amplification systems has made it possible for thousands of people to attend any musha'ira. Almost without

exception, musha'iras are held only at night, beginning around nine and ending in the early hours of morning, even later. One may say that any musha'ira lasting less than four hours is not really a successful musha'ira; it is more like a *našist*.

Obviously a radical change has occurred. What were originally participatory events, in which performers and audience were almost one and the same, have now turned into occasions for a small number of poets to perform before a numerically much larger audience. This change is physically visible in the way poets are now seated on a stage separate from the vast majority of their audience. There is still a presiding person, a *sadr*, but now usually he is some politician or bureaucrat who will most likely not be a poet himself.

A more crucial role is now played by a new member of the cast: the conductor or *nāzim* of the musha'ira who is often simply referred to as the 'announcer'. It is not an easy job. The 'announcer' is expected to do much more than simply to announce the names of the poets in some order. He has to be sensitive to the feelings of the poets and must arrange their names in an order of precedence which will not hurt their egos. At the same time, he has to be alert and responsive to the changing moods of the audience, and must not let it get too restive. This requires that he should come up with a good mix of the popular and not-so-popular poets. He must also be quite witty, and ready with jokes and literary anecdotes to smooth over rough interludes; he should also be able to come up with novel ways to introduce poets. He must of course have a head for poetry, for one apt couplet serves his purpose better than ten elegant phrases. On some occasions he might find himself acting much like an umpire at some contest, mediating between feuding poets as often as between a hostile audience and an unpopular poet. The larger a musha'ira, the more crucial the role of the announcer becomes. His comments and decisions play a decisive role in the success of any large musha'ira. Thus, the announcer can add to a poet's reputation by giving him an extra laudatory introduction or by inviting him to read at some critical moment during the evening. On the other hand, he can ruin a poet's act by giving him a cursory introduction, by not paying him much attention during his reading, or by calling him to the microphone after some highly popular poet. These are only some of the ways an announcer makes his presence felt. A good announcer is therefore courted by most poets: this means more business for the announcer, which in turn makes more poets seek his good will. Earlier, it was the rule for the announcer to be a poet himself, but now some people, at least in India, have gained fame exclusively as announcers, and seem to have made a profession of it.

The original musha'iras were occasions where Urdu poets sought recognition from their peers. A poet's reputation was built upon the opinion of other poets, the number of his disciples and their status in that stratified society, his ability to compose properly and to defend his compositions from any adverse criticism, his talent for composing at



command if necessary, and so forth. In all cases, he was judged either by his peers, i.e. other poets, or by his patrons, who were frequently poets themselves. Every poet strove to show not only how good a poet he was but also how superior he was to other poets. That twofold aim still exists, but now a poet must seek approval from an audience that is anything but an assembly of his peers. Today's audiences at musha'iras are separated from the poets not only physically, but also in many other ways. A musha'ira audience these days will have a large number of people who may not be able to read, or in some cases even to speak Urdu. There will be people from all strata of society, representing all ranges of literacy, education, and value orientation. They will share a fondness for Urdu poetry, but their notions of what constitutes good poetry will be quite disparate. In fact, we now have poets who are called 'musha'ira poets' (*mušā'ire ke šā'ir*) because they are able to win over any musha'ira audience regardless of the literary quality of their verses.

What makes one a good 'musha'ira poet'? The primary requirement, it appears, is a good style of delivery. At present, in order to be successful at any musha'ira, every poet, except for someone with a very high literary reputation or some other star quality, has to have a distinctive way of presenting his poetry. That, in the great majority of cases, means a good voice and a musically attractive manner of recitation. This particular style of chanting or recitation, called *tarannum*, has been carefully analysed by the ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi, and we need not dwell on the subject here.<sup>8</sup> We should simply note that, except for those who write either humorous or political verses exclusively, popular 'musha'ira poets' rarely use the simple, declamatory style called *taht ul lafz*: they tend to favour *tarannum*, often pushing its musical quality to the limits where it might begin to resemble singing. On the whole, however, most poets maintain the distinction between *tarannum* and singing, and try to invent new mannerisms or flourishes within the limits of *tarannum*. A 'musha'ira poet' with a pleasing *tarannum* does not have to worry much about the quality of his poetry, or even its inventory. His reputation will remain safe, even if he sticks to a handful of his more popular compositions. A typical musha'ira audience would rather hear some old, familiar poem recited in its favourite *tarannum* than ask for freshness of thought and newness of imagery.

*Tarannum* or no, all poets present their ghazals in a certain manner which is very significant for our purpose. The ghazal is still by far the most favoured genre of poetry in Urdu, and in the context of musha'iras one can safely assert that eighty to ninety percent of the poetry recited will be in this form. The basic unit of poetry in a ghazal is a couplet (*bait* or *šī'r*): two lines which are grammatically and, more often than not, also thematically independent of the other couplets in that ghazal. (What all the couplets of a ghazal must share are the metre and the rhyme scheme). As the readers read or the listeners listen to a ghazal, they focus their attention on one couplet at a time.

It is this fragmentary quality which facilitates the following manner of presentation scrupulously adhered to by all ghazal poets in a musha'ira. The poet reads the first line (*misra'*) of a couplet, then briefly pauses. A few poets sitting nearby, the announcer, and some members of the wider audience can then be expected to repeat that line. The poet himself then repeats the first line, and continues with the second line. That completes the presentation of one couplet. The audience, if it liked the verse, would then show its appreciation and delight by shouting certain phrases, e.g. '*vāh vāh, subhān ullāh, bahut xūb*', etc. If the couplet pleased some people a great deal they might ask for an encore by shouting: '*mukarrar*' or '*phir parhiye*'. And the poet would oblige them by repeating the couplet as many times as they ask. He would also show his appreciation of their praise by bowing his head, raising his right hand to his forehead in salutation, or making some other such gesture.

This particular order of repetition and response probably originated in the desire to facilitate the audition and comprehension of a couplet by a large audience. It also serves, however, to enhance the enjoyment of the couplet in a crucial way: the pause, followed by the repetition of the first line, creates an air of expectation and suspense which pulls the audience closer to the performance. As the audience hears the first line, it obviously learns one half of the couplet's contents. Add to this the fact that after the first couplet, if not after the very first line of a ghazal, the audience knows the metre and rhyme scheme the poet intends to follow. The more cognizant among the audience will also be familiar with the conventions of the ghazal. Consequently, while the poet pauses then repeats the first line, the audience may race ahead and work out the second line, either fully, partially, or merely to the extent of its rhyme. In fact, one may sometimes hear the second line called out by the audience before the poet recites it. This sequence of events is in a sense the reverse of the poet's original creative process: a ghazal poet usually begins with the rhyme-word and works backward to the first line. This creation of suspense, followed by its resolution, whether in the form of fulfilled expectations or some surprise, greatly adds to the pleasure that an audience seeks at a musha'ira.

Of course, in either case, the couplet must have some thematic or linguistic virtue. An unexpected or obscure rhyme no longer suffices; nor does a trite poetic statement. The audience at a musha'ira never hesitates to express its contempt for mere poetasters. If it can be loud in praising a good poet, it can be equally emphatic in ridiculing a bad one. A poet may draw upon himself an audience's wrath for several reasons. His style of declamation or chanting may be too plain or, alternatively, too obtrusive. He may read couplets which have nothing to recommend them. He may look strange, because of his dress or physical appearance. It is fairly common in musha'iras for a number of poets to be hooted off the microphone. This can sometimes happen even to the more established poets. Younger audiences, predictably, tend to be more boisterous, and



musha'iras at educational institutions can be expected to turn into severe trials for the participating poets. On such occasions, some poets resort to reading overly erotic, political or religious verses — particularly the latter, in order to appeal to the predominantly Muslim audiences. Many a time this works, but one should give the younger audiences credit for not always being taken in.

Every successful musha'ira poet must be sensitive to the mood of the audience, and able to respond to their silent or vocal cues. If he is a *nazm*-writer — i.e. he writes thematically unified poems with linearly linked lines or couplets — he may try out a short poem before launching into something long. Another poet may read a few quatrains or perhaps some separate couplets, to get some sense of the audience, before committing himself to a particular ghazal. Of course, they all watch how the poets preceding them fare. In this context, a ghazal writer has an additional advantage: he can change the order and number of his couplets at will. Usually he will try to make his opening verse quite good, to be followed by another of the better couplets. If he gets some applause he might try to sneak in a mediocre verse before presenting another good one. Thus a poet, while reading the same ghazal at different musha'iras, may alter the order of the verses or vary their number to suit the audience.

As a poet reads, he is likely to draw the attention of his audience in many ways. He may say a few words to explain his couplet, particularly if there is some difficult allusion. Or he may simply say: 'please listen to this couplet', or 'this couplet deserves special attention' (*mulāhiza ho: tavājjuh cāhtā hūn*). Often a poet may do this to keep the other poets sitting nearby quiet or to force a rival to acknowledge him. Once directly addressed by a poet, other poets have to pay him attention and say something polite about his verse. The people at large may not, of course, feel so constrained, but they may be impressed to some extent. The more informed will even enjoy the subtle game of one-upmanship going on among the poets.

In a significant sense, a similar game goes on between the poet and the audience in contemporary musha'iras. A large section of the audience appears to come with the attitude, 'Show me how good you are'. Most of them may not be too adept at recognizing genuine talent, but they can be trusted to be quick and ruthless if someone tries to fake greatness. They never fail to deflate pomposity. A good 'musha'ira poet' remembers this. He makes sure of appearing humble before the audience, no matter how arrogant he may be towards his peers or how contemptuous he may seem of political and religious authority. A good 'musha'ira poet' never takes his audience for granted; at the same time, he uses every known device to manipulate it. One poet recently prefaced his reading by saying to the younger section of his audience, 'If you don't praise this couplet, no one will.' That of course ensured a good round of applause. Another contemporary poet was heard referring to his recently dead wife at every reading for several months, thus immediately earning the audience's sympathy.

It should be clear from the above that contemporary Urdu musha'iras are not at all like the poetry-readings one sees in the West, though both have a small number of performers appearing before a much larger number of listeners. Urdu musha'iras are larger in scale and much more lively. They are also quite complex in their dynamics. People come to a musha'ira not merely because they like poetry or admire certain poets; they come also to be active participants in it. Further, they basically come to have a good time. They watch the poets contending with each other, and they themselves engage in a playful contest with them: they tacitly challenge the poets to win applause from them, or at least not draw their jeers. In that sense, contemporary musha'iras are also vastly different from the original musha'iras of the eighteenth century. Nowadays the non-poet members of the audience have not only greatly increased in numbers but also in importance. They now contribute as much to the totality of a musha'ira as a 'performance' as do the poets. Whether these developments have been bad for Urdu poetry or good, is a subject beyond the limits of this short note.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> F. Steingass, *A comprehensive Persian-English dictionary* (London 1892).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Muhammad Sabūrī Tabrīzī, *Mušā'ara* (Tehran 1341 Shamsi); Mahdī Suhailī, *Mušā'ara* (Tehran 1343 Shamsi).

<sup>3</sup> Shibli Nu'mānī, *Šī'r ul 'ajam*, vol. III (Azamgarh, 1945 reprint), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Taqī Mīr, *Nikāt us šu'arā*, ed. 'Abdul Haq (Aurangabad 1935), p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> There is an excellent summary account in Munibur Rahman, 'The musha'irah', *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 3 (1983), pp. 75-84.

<sup>6</sup> One suspects that the extreme emphasis on an apprenticeship with an *ustād* and the close identity between an *ustād* and his *šāgird* were developments that took place in India, particularly in eighteenth century Delhi. It is a subject that deserves to be explored.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that when in Lahore in 1870 an English administrator organized a different kind of musha'ira (poets were asked to compose poems on a set theme rather than a *tarh*), the element of competition was maintained and prizes were offered. See my forthcoming article, 'Mughal and English patronage of poetry: a comparison', to be published in the proceedings of a conference on 'Patronage in India', held under the auspices of the U.S. Festival of India in 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Regula Qureshi, 'Tarannum: the chanting of Urdu poetry', *Ethnomusicology*, 13, 3 (1967), pp. 425-468, and her following paper in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> The original version of this paper was presented in a panel on 'Capturing an audience: oral performance in South Asia' at the annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Philadelphia 1985.