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JAVED AKHTAR'S QUIVER OF POETIC ARROWS

A Legacy Survives

*Agar palak pe haiñ moti to ye nahiñ kaafi
Hunar bhi chaahiye alfaaz mein pirone ka*

It is not enough if pearls of tears abound on eyelashes
One must have the craft to weave them into a necklace of words

In 1995, Urdu poetry received an unexpected gift in the shape of Javed Akhtar's collection of poems titled *Tarkash* (Quiver). It had been a long time since a new book of poetry had generated such enthusiasm. Eager as we all were for a fresh voice, we devoured this well-produced volume (printed incidentally by 'Sahir Publishing House', certainly no coincidence), and marvelled at the poet, whose style, as the author Gopi Chand Narang declared on the dust cover, 'is an original voice, not someone else's echo'. In a flowery foreword to the book, Qurratulain Hyder, the famous Urdu novelist, declared, 'Urdu poetry flows like the Niagara Falls, and its spray produces countless spectra, in which Javed now has added his own little rainbow.'

Each poem in *Tarkash* was a wondrous joy, and an exquisite pain. The book was startlingly familiar in the way it brought back memories of the era of the progressive poets, yet radically different in the new, contemporary sensibility it claimed for itself. The relentless engagement with social conditions was evident in every poem, but the ringing promise of the revolutionary had been replaced by the wistful demeanour of the realist.

In his preface to the book, Akhtar records his remarkable life in unassuming language: an idyllic beginning in Lucknow and Aligarh, a complex adolescence, the early days in the Bombay film industry as a ghost scriptwriter, the decision to turn down a steady job for the uncertain livelihood of a professional writer and the eventual triumph over circumstances. His wry comments about the personal toll exacted by success barely conceals a wealth of pain, masquerading as experience. This experience was to find expression in Akhtar's poetry in extraordinary ways.

To understand Javed Akhtar's *Tarkash*, one needs to contextualize his work in the light of the progressive tradition in Urdu poetry for the last half a century and more. In many ways, Akhtar is an inheritor of this tradition. He is related to many of the iconic poets of the Progressive Writers' Movement (he is Jan Nisar Akhtar's son, Israr-ul-Haq Majaz's nephew, Kaifi Azmi's son-in-law). However, as we shall see, his poetry represents as many departures from this tradition as it does continuities. In this chapter, we highlight five themes in Javed Akhtar's poetry and examine them in terms of their relationship to the work of the Progressives of an earlier generation.

The New Protagonist

Akhtar's poems carry neither the raw anger of Sahir's

Talkhiyaan (Bitterness) nor the avowedly modern bent of Kaifi Azmi's *Aavaara Sajde* (Vagabond Obeisances). Instead, they appear to be a lot closer to the gentle pain found in Faiz's later works, invoking the mood of the line: *Aaj ek harf ko phir dhoondta phirta hai khayaal* (Today, my thoughts, once again, search in vain for words to express themselves). Javed's protagonist is neither the poor and oppressed labourer nor the fervent revolutionary bent on changing the world, but a modern, alienated subject who lives in a world that has been tainted by compromise and where the grandiose promises of a new dawn have already unravelled. The complex and alien landscape he inhabits produces a tortured ambivalence within him while he attempts to deal with the forces that tug at him from different directions.

Consider for example, the poem titled 'Mother Teresa'. Akhtar begins in a laudatory manner, praising the saintly figure for her work with the destitute, the impoverished and the dispossessed, and offers the following tribute:

*Tera lams maseeha hai
Aur tera karam hai ek samandar
Jiska koi paar nahiñ hai
Ai Ma Teresa
Mujh ko teri azmat se inkaar nahiñ hai*

Your touch is that of the healer
And your grace is like a boundless ocean
Mother Teresa
I cannot deny your greatness

Having acknowledged her status as a demi-god, he begins to sow the seed of doubt in the narrative he has just formulated. But his questioning is gentle and eschews any form of self-righteousness. His critique, unlike those of the PWA poets,

does not come from a position of moral certitude but is articulated in a rather tentative tone. It is the critique of a man who understands his own complicity in the injustice and is consequently uncertain about his right to express his reservations:

*Maiñ thahra khudgarz
Bas ek apni hi khaatir jeene vaala
Tujh ko maiñ kis moonh se poochhooñ
Tu ne kabhi ye kyooñ nahiñ poochha
Kis ne in bad-haaloñ ko bad-haal kiya hai?
...
Tu ne kabhi ye kyooñ nahiñ dekha
Vahi nizaam-e zar
Jis ne in bhokoñ se roti chheeni hai
Tere kahne par
Bhokoñ ke aage
Kuch tukde daal raha hai*

I stand before you
A selfish being, living merely for my own self
What right do I have to ask you this:
Why did you never wonder?
Who has brought misfortune on these wretches?
...
Why have you never noticed
That the very system of wealth
Which has snatched the bread from these poor
Now, on your demand
Tosses some morsels
Towards the hungry

The poem gradually ups the ante, ultimately holding Mother Teresa accountable for her role in a system which throws a few scraps towards those it destroys and for failing to advocate that the poor demand their right to a life of dignity rather than having to beg for it. The implicit suggestion

of the poem is that the Mother is colluding with the forces of tyranny:

*Aisa kyooñ hai
Ek jaanib mazloom se tujh ko hamdardi hai
Doosri jaanib
Zaalim se bhi aar nahiñ hai*

Why is it
That you have sympathy for the oppressed
And yet you don't spurn the tyrant?

What follows separates Akhtar dramatically from the earlier PWA tradition. Unlike Kaifi's passionate protagonist, Sahir's vanguard or Faiz's resignedly resolute martyr, Akhtar's voice chooses to abdicate the moral battleground of critique:

*Lekin sach hai
Aisi baateñ maiñ tum ko kis moonh se poochhoñ
Poochhoonga to
Mujh pe bhi voh zimmedaari aa jaayegi
Jis se maiñ bachta aaya hooñ
Behtar hai khaamosh rahooñ maiñ
Aur agar kuch kahna hai to
Yahi kahooñ maiñ
Ai Ma Teresa
Mujh ko teri azmat se inkaar nahiñ hai*

But it is true
I can scarcely ask you such questions
For if I do, I will be saddled with a responsibility
That I have escaped thus far.
Perhaps it is best I remain silent
And if I must say something, let me say just this
Mother Teresa
I can never deny your greatness

The exquisitely troubled irony of the poem treads the fine line between critique and confession. The point comes across, and

is arguably rendered more potent by Akhtar's tentativeness, for in it the readers can see themselves reflected along with all of their own contradictions. A similar sentiment runs through several of Akhtar's other poems. For example, in 'Uljhan' (Dilemma), he reflects on a dog-eat-dog world where survival depends on the willingness to disregard others. It is a world without any real choice where one's conscience is forever and always-already compromised. The protagonist of this poem, jostled by a crowd of millions, has to decide between being trampled by others and crushing them in the course of his own march forward:

*Chalooñ
To auroñ pe zulm dhacooñ
Rukooñ
To auroñ ke zulm jhelooñ
Zameer
Tujh ko to naaz hai apni munsifi par
Zara sunooñ maiñ
Ke aaj kya tera faisla hai*

If I walk
I will cause pain to others
If I stop
I will suffer their tyranny
Conscience
You are proud of your own judgement
Let me hear
What your decision is today

This tired frustration is a marker of Akhtar's uniqueness, for the characters in his poem have no dependable moral compass that can guide them in making the right decision. Gone is the certitude expressed by the Progressives and the optimism that accompanied it; the just path, if there ever was one, cannot be found.

One can see this poem's sense of dystopic loss in several other pieces as well. For instance, 'Ek Mohre Ka Safar' (A Pawn's Journey) describes the journey of an ordinary pawn which, aware of the dangers it faces, skilfully dodges powerful enemies and ends up as a larger piece, only to find that now the very power that ensures its safety also produces an alienating distance from all others, friends and foes alike, none of whom can come meaningfully close to it. Victory exacts its price.

*Us ke ek haath mein hai jeet us ki
Doosre haath mein tanhaai hai*

In one hand, Victory
And in the other, Loneliness

The New Critic

While the Progressives wrote in the voice of the champions of the downtrodden who sought to change the system, Akhtar's protagonists often learn to play its game of hypocrisy, exploitation and greed. Faced with a cut-throat world in which he finds himself hopelessly implicated, Akhtar does not pitch camp on a moral high ground, choosing instead to deploy sharp cynicism as a tool of his critique:

*Aaj ki duniya mein jeene ka qareena samjho
Jo mile pyaar se un logoñ ko zeena samjho*

Learn the protocols of living in today's world
Treat those who offer you love as stepping stones

There is none of Faiz's optimistic avowal of the poet's commitment to truth and experience: *Hum parvarish-e lauh-o qalam karte rahenge, Jo dil pe guzarti hai, raqam karte rahenge* (We will continue to nurture the legacy of paper and

pen, What our hearts endure, we will continue to record). Akhtar is conscious that in the contemporary social context the writer's space for expression is limited, his agency curtailed. In one place, he writes:

*Jaane kaisa daur hai jis mein ye jur'at bhi mushkil hai
Din ho agar to likhooñ use din, raat agar ho, raat likhooñ*

I wonder what kind of an age this is, where even this much
courage is tough to muster
That if I see it is day, I write it as day, that when it is night, I
call it night

It is not that Akhtar has relinquished his right to speak his mind. But even if he chooses to do that, his audience's mind is fixed on other things. The upper classes are not inclined to listen to analysis or deep thoughts. Their attention is elsewhere, its span limited. The poet's frustration comes through again in the following lines:

*Chaar lafzoñ mein kaho, jo bhi kaho
Us ko kab fursat, sune faryaad sab
Talkhiyaan kaise na ho ash'aar mein
Hum pe jo guzri, hameñ hai yaad sab*

Whatever you have to say, say it in four words
The ruler has no time for every complaint
How can bitterness not inflect my verses?
I remember all that I have ever endured

In these verses Akhtar appears to be indicting even his audience, which demands pithy and easily consumable sentiments and has no time for complexities in *sukhan*. Living in an era where Urdu poetry has become a cultural commodity, where ghazals have become products for

superficial and pretentious enjoyment and where the complexities of the tongue are beyond the reach of most, the sacrifice of poetic sensibility at the altar of an insensitive marketplace grates on Akhtar. In an amazing poem, his vituperation is palpable:

*Shahr ke dukaandaaro, haarobaar-e ulfat mein
Sood kya ziyaañ kya hai, tum na jaan paaoge*

...

*Jaanta hooñ main tum ko zaukh-e shaayari bhi hai
Shakhsiyat sajaane mein ek ye maahiri bhi hai
Phir bhi harf chunte ho, sirf lafz sunte ho
In ke darmiyaañ kya hai, tum na jaan paaoge*

Merchants of the city, in the business of love
You will never understand what counts as profit, what as loss

...

I know that you have a taste for poetry
That you cultivate this skill to adorn yourself
But you just pluck syllables, listen merely to words
You will never understand that which lies between them

As anyone who has read progressive Urdu poetry knows, the word 'merchant' is used in this genre as a particularly derogatory epithet. Akhtar deploys it deliberately and accuses his addressee of being an exploiter of words, sentiments and expression. The hollow appreciation of poetry, all too common these days, is harshly condemned. The implicit commentary here is that those who are consumed by materialistic concerns and are focused on profiteering are incapable of understanding the true sentiment of poetry. Words for these patrons of the arts remain merely words; the real meaning (that which lies in between the words) is beyond their reach.

Akhtar's trademark cynicism is not limited to the establishment or to those who occupy exalted and privileged

positions in the system. In his world, even human relations become transactional and pragmatic. In 'Aao, Aur Na Socho' (Come, Do Not Think Any Further), he negotiates a relationship with a 'beloved' that acknowledges the inherent falseness of accepted ideas about love, romance, and fidelity, but cannily suggests that they pretend to play the game by these rules for as long as it remains mutually entertaining.

*Tum meri aankhoñ mein aankheñ daal ke dekho
Phir main tum se
Saari jhooti qasmeñ khaaoñ
Phir tum voh saari jhooti baateñ dohraao
Jo sab ko achchi lagti hai ...*

*Jitne din ye mel rahega
Dekho, achcha khel rahega
Aur
Kabhi dil bhar jaaye to
Kah dena tum
Beet gaya milne ka mausam*

*Aao
Aur na socho
Soch ke kya paaoge*

Look deep into my eyes
And I will make to you
All those false promises
And you can repeat to me those falsehoods
That everyone wants to hear ...

As long this intimacy lasts
It will be an enjoyable game
And
When you have had your fill
You can tell me
That the season of togetherness has passed

Come
Do not think any more
For what is gained by thinking?

In a world where everything is commodified, where one often gets what one wants through deceit and self-deception, there is no space for the expectation of an untainted love. Akhtar seems inclined to give voice to a time in which expressions of passion and romance have become little more than empty eloquence and where sacrifice and commitment are no longer valued. The pursuit of love becomes a game to be played and the pleasures of a relationship are transient and temporal. Those who seek truth and awareness are destined to fail. As he says:

*Aagahi se mili hai tanhaai
Aa meri jaan, mujh ko dhoka de*

Awareness has brought me loneliness
Come, my love, please deceive me

The New Romantic

As we have already seen, Akhtar's attitude to love is considerably different from that of his predecessors. For classical poets love was a deep, intense, formulaic emotion bordering on conceit. For the Progressives love was often a ground that joined the lovers in struggle, as in Kaifi's *Uth meri jaan mere saath hi chalna hai tujhe* (Rise, my love, that we must walk together). At other times, it was an emotion that had to be sacrificed in order to achieve a greater goal, as in Faiz's *Mujh se pahli si mohabbat meri mahboob na maang* (Beloved, do not ask me for that old love anymore). Akhtar's attitude to love is markedly different, and at times, almost cavalier. Love is sometimes a futile and empty passion, to be dispensed with

before getting on with the more immediate task of living. For example, we have this two liner that is dismissive of the central tropes of love poetry like *ishq* (passionate love), *vasl* (the union of lovers) and *hijr* (separation):

*Lo dekh lo, ye ishq hai, ye vasl hai, ye hijr
Ab laut chaleñ aao, bahut kaam pada hai*

All right, look: this is Love, here is Union, and this is Separation

Now let us return, shall we? There is a lot of work to be done.

Love, when it does come about, is not everlasting. But its loss does not break the lover. Unlike the tragic Majnoon, he does not spend his life sifting the sands in search of his Laila. Akhtar mourns his lost love in rather matter-of-fact terms that remind one of an early Sahir:

*Mohabbat mar gayi, mujh ko bhi gham hai
Mere achche dinoñ ki aashna thi*

Love has died, I too am sad
It was my friend in happier times

This is not to say that the poet does not suffer the pain of love's loss; the act of forgetting is not all that easily accomplished. In his poem 'Dushvaari' (Dilemma), the protagonist wants to erase his memories so that he may move on with his life. But he is powerless to do so for his wretched heart not only remembers all that ever happened, but also that which could not, that which had been left unsaid:

*Maiñ bhool jaaooñ tumheñ
Ab yahi munaasib hai
Magar bhulaana bhi chaahooñ to kis taraah bhoolooñ
Ke tum to phir bhi haqeeqat ho*

*Koi khwaab nahin
Yahaan to dil ka ye aalam hai, kya kahoon
Kambakht!
Bhula na paaya ye woh silsila
Jo tha hi nahin
Voh ik khayaal
Jo aawaaz tak gaya hi nahin
Voh ek baat
Jo main kah nahin saka tum se
Voh ek rabt
Jo hum mein kabhi raha hi nahin
Mujhe hai yaad woh sab
Jo kabhi hua hi nahin*

I should forget you
Yes, that is prudent
But how can I do that, even if I want to?
You are after all a reality
Not a mere dream
Here, the condition of my heart is so unfortunate
(Wretched heart!)
That it has been unable to forget the chain of events
That never took place
That one thought
Which was never voiced
That one conversation
I couldn't have with you
That one connection
Which we never had
I remember everything
That never happened

Akhtar is an unconventional romantic. His engagement with love is very realistic in its expressions and explorations of ambiguities, vicissitudes, and (tragic) ironies. His protagonist often seems to be wistful about a past love that could not reach fruition, a love that casts its shadows on the present, forever looming over his current relationship:

*Paas aake bhi faasle kyoon haiin
Raaz kya hai? Samajh mein yoon aaya
Us ko bhi yaad hai ko'i ab bhi
Main bhi tum ko bhula nahin paaya*

Why the distances even in togetherness?
The secret unfurls thus
She also remembers an old love
And I too, haven't succeeded in forgetting you

The lovers of Akhtar's poems inhabit the twilight zone between bitter prior experiences and uncertain shared futures, in a present that is marked by a variety of very real emotions, including petty ones like jealousy and possessiveness:

*Laakh ho hum mein pyaar ki baatein
Ye ladaai hamesha chalti hai
Us ke ik dost se main jalta hoon
Meri ek dost se woh jalti hai*

We may share a million words of love
But one fight is ongoing
She is jealous of one of my friends
And I am jealous of one of hers

Sometimes relationships end, but the memories of intimacies remain, only to resurface when the ex-lovers come together. In a moving poem called 'Aasaar-e Qadeema' (Ancient Remnants), Akhtar describes one such moment, comparing the failed relationship and the reminiscences it evokes to an archaeological find of an ancient ruined city whose glorious past can now only be discerned through the broken artefacts that litter its dug-up landscape:

*Ek patthar ki adhoori moorat
Chand taambe ke puraane sikke*

*Kaali chaandi ke ajab se zavar
 Aur ka'ee kaanse ke toote bartan
 Ek sahra mein mile
 Zer-e zameen
 Log kahte hain ke sadiyon pahle
 Aaj sahra hai jahaan
 Vahin ek shahr hua karta tha
 Aur mujh ko ye khayaal aata hai
 Kisi taqreeb
 Kisi mahfil mein
 Saamna tujh se mera aaj bhi ho jaata hai
 Ek lamhe ko
 Bas ik pal ke liye
 Jism ki aanch
 Ucha-ti si nazar
 Surkh bindiya ki damak
 Sarsaraahat tere malboos ki
 Baalon ki mehak
 Bekhayaali mein kabhi
 Lams ka nanha sa phool
 Aur phir door tak vahi sahra
 Vahi sahra ke jahaan
 Kabhi ik shahr hua karta tha*

A shattered stone statue
 Some old copper coins
 Strange ornaments of blackened silver
 Several broken bronze vessels
 Were unearthed
 In a desert
 And people say that centuries ago
 Here where there is only a desert
 A city was once settled
 And a thought strikes me:
 Even today, at a party
 A gathering
 When I come face to face with you
 For one second
 Just for one moment
 The warmth of your body

The fleeting chance meeting of our eyes
 The shine of your red *bindiya*
 The rustle of your clothes
 The fragrance of your hair
 And sometimes, unintentionally
 A tiny flower of touch
 And then again, that unending desert
 That desert where once
 A city had flourished

What is striking in Akhtar's 'love poetry' is that his characters are mature individuals whose romanticism is always already undercut by a sense of realism. The lover of an earlier brand of Urdu poetry who paces the streets of his beloved that variously entices him, charms him, seduces him and ultimately breaks his heart is gone. Akhtar's poems are populated with lovers whose love can be fleeting, transactional or tragically enduring. If there is any common ground with the tradition of Urdu poetry, it is this: there are no happy endings.

The New Agnostic

Akhtar, like the Progressives before him, is very dismissive of religious orthodoxy and indeed of religion itself. He interrogates Faith for its role in constricting human agency, its divisiveness, its false panaceas and its horrific companion – sectarian violence. The staple stocks-in-trade of the progressive critique of religion are to be found in his work, but again, they are tinged by a certain tentativeness or a tongue-in-cheek humility:

*Qaatil bhi, maqtool bhi donoñ naam khuda ka lete the
 Koi khuda tha, to voh kahaan tha, meri kya auqaat, likhooñ?*

The murderer and the victim were both invoking the name of God

If there was a God, where was He? But who am I to write about that?

In 'Waqt', a metaphysical ode to Time, Akhtar uses a very modernist imagery to question the omnipresence of God, pondering the possibility that time and space extend into a zone where there is no Supreme Being:

*To har tasavvur ki had ke baahar
Magar kahiñ par
Yaqaenan aisa koi khala hai
Ke jis ko
In kahkashaañ ki ungliyoñ ne
Ab tak chhua nahiñ hai
Khala
Jahaañ kuch hua nahiñ hai
Khala
Ke jis ne kisi se bhi 'kun' suna nahiñ hai
Jahaañ kahiñ par khuda nahiñ hai
Vahaañ
Koi waqt bhi na hoga*

Beyond the reach of all imagination
But somewhere
There must certainly be a space
That has not
Been touched by the fingers of the expanding galaxies
A space
Where nothing has yet occurred
A space
Where no one has heard the command of creation⁸¹
Where there is no God
There
Time too, will not exist

The antagonism of the Progressives towards religion was exacerbated by their distress at the violence fomented in the name of faith, particularly during and after the moment of

Independence. Akhtar's India, though far removed from the time of the Partition, still struggles with this demon. Communal riots now punctuate the calendar with metronomic frequency; they are planned, ritualistic and often predictable. Akhtar's poems on religious violence are infused with this contemporary sensitivity often accompanied by a quiet resignation. In 'Fasaad Se Pahle' (Before the Riot), he startlingly evokes the terror of a populace awaiting an inevitable riot with bated breath:

*Aaj
Ye shahr ik sahme hue bachche ki taraah
Apni parchhaai se bhi darta hai
Jantari dekho
Mujhe lagta hai
Aaj tyohaar koi hai shaayad*

Today
This city, like a frightened child
Fears its own shadow
Check the calendar
I have a feeling
That today might be the day of a festival

The subtle invocation of *tyohaar* (festival) speaks volumes, for it is a reminder of the fact that processions brought out in the name of religion are often the source of the spark that sets off the conflagration.

Akhtar's treatment of the aftermath of a riot is also unique and reflects a deep sense of loss that demands the mourning of more than mutilated bodies and burnt homes. In a follow-up poem 'Fasaad Ke Baad' (After the Riot), he describes a heartbreaking conversation between the deep silence after the riot and its devastated landscape. The silence

understands the need to grieve for the dead, but suggests that there may be another loss to mourn first: the loss suffered by those who came to pillage and loot, the loss of the precious wealth of centuries of culture.

*Gahre sannaate ne apne manzar se yoon baat ki
Sun le ujdi dukaan
Ai sulagte makaan
Toote thele
Tumhiñ bas nahiñ ho akele
Yahaan aur bhi haiñ
Jo ghaarat hue haiñ
Hum in ka bhi maatam karenge
Magar pahle un ko to ro leñ
Ke jo lootne aaye the
Aur khud lut gaye
Kya luta
Uski un ko khabar hi nahiñ
Kam-nazar haiñ
Ke sadiyon ki tahzeeb par
Un bichaaron ki koi nazar hi nahiñ*

The deep silence spoke thus to the landscape
'Listen, destroyed shop
Smouldering house
Broken cart
You are not the only victims here.
There are others too
Who have also been victimized
We will mourn them as well
But let us first weep for those
Who came to plunder
But were themselves looted
What was lost
They have no idea
They are shortsighted
For they do not even notice
The ruins of a culture centuries old.'

To Akhtar, religion is one of the major divisive forces in society, much like war, politics and caste hatred. In a poem written about a 'Darinda' (Beast), he compares human beings with animals, suggesting that the former have far surpassed the latter in terms of producing divides and enacting cruelty:

*Mazhab na jang ney siyaasat, jaane na zaat paat ko bhi
Apni darindagi ke aage, hai kis shumaar mein darinda*

It knows neither religion, war nor politics, and no caste hierarchies either
How can the beast compare to us in our bestial cruelty?

The New Realist

Unlike the heroic protagonists that populated the poetry of the Progressives who wrote in an earlier era and inhabited a different structure of feeling, Akhtar's subjects have often succumbed to the pressures of a society that demands acquiescence above all else. We have few of the troubadours that populated Sahir's poetry, the revolutionaries of Kaifi's and Majrooh's defiant verse, the uncompromised prisoners of Faiz's *zindaan* or the angry proletariat of Majaz's streets. Akhtar's subjects fight a different battle against a different world, in which dreams are destined to be shattered by Life:

*Mareez-e khwaab ko ab to shafa hai
Magar duniya badi kadvi dava thi*

The dream-afflicted have finally been cured
But Life proved to be bitter medicine.

The world demands its pound of flesh and the protagonists have little choice but to acquiesce. The best they can hope for are a few stolen moments to call their own:

*Mere kuch pal mujh ko de do, baaqi saare din logo
Tum jaisa jaisa kahte ho, sab vaisa vaisa hoga*

Let me have a few moments of my own, O people; the rest of
my days
I will do exactly what you want me to.

Sometimes a defiant warrior does brave the forces arrayed
against him and takes on the world, but eventually he is
doomed to stand alone, awaiting his inevitable destruction.
In 'Shikast' (Defeat), Akhtar develops the story of a warrior-
hero, who after conquering many lands finally faces defeat.
He stands alone on a dark hill, waiting for the victorious enemy
forces who are coming to kill him, while behind him lies
the charred remains of the boat that he had set on fire himself
to prevent any retreat on his part. The lesson here is that the
victories of one's past do not guarantee future victories, for:

*Magar thi khwaabon ke lashkar mein kis ko itni khabar
Har ek qisse ka ek ekhtemaam hota hai
Hazaar likh le koi fat'ha zarre zarre par
Magar shikast ka bhi ek muqaam hota hai*

Little did the army of dreams realize
That every story has an end
One may inscribe 'Victory' on a thousand places
But 'Defeat' has its own place too

The invocation of the *khwaabon ka lashkar* (the army of
dreams) suggests that Akhtar might be speaking about a war of
ideas, where a principled and uncompromising position is
doomed to defeat.

A close reading of *Tarkash* makes clear that Akhtar is
enamoured with the concept of the *khwaab* (dream), much in
the same way that Faiz was captivated by the idea of the *qafas*

(cage). The difference is that while the prisoner in Faiz's
imagery is forever defiant, Akhtar's hero is forced to peddle
even his dreams. In 'Jurm Aur Saza' (Crime and Punishment),
a plaintiff addresses the judge who is prosecuting him for the
crime of withholding some of his dreams despite having
entered into a Faustian pact with society:

*Mujh ko iqraar
Ke main ne ek din
Khud ko neelam kiya
Aur raazi-ba raza
Sar-e bazaar sar-e aam kiya
Mujh ko qeemat bhi bahut khoob mili thi lekin
Main ne saude mein khayaanat kar li
Yaani
Kuch khwaab bachaakar rakkhe*

I admit
That one day
I auctioned myself
And voluntarily
Made myself available to the market
I was well compensated too, but
I was dishonest.
That is,
I kept a few dreams for myself

The 'dishonesty' is discovered, for dreams cannot be concealed.
The judge hears the case and passes a judgement: the
accused will have to give up his dreams, his flights of fancy,
the songs flowing in his veins, his soaring soul, his voice,
his memories, his feelings and thoughts, his every moment.
The judge however is not yet done. For these are merely
meant as recompense to the one who had bought the
plaintiff. The punishment is worse; the accused will not be
allowed to die.

The concept of *zeest-e be-amaan* (a life without mercy) occurs several times in Akhtar's poetry. Akhtar's world is intransigent and uncompromising. The power structures are entrenched and victory is near impossible. The poet's heroes still struggle and sometimes sacrifice themselves for their ideals. However, unlike the martyr figure in the poems of his progressive predecessors whose sacrifice was public and epiphanic, Akhtar's rebel recognizes that his death may be unsung, its mark limited, its gains incremental:

*Mein qatl to ho gaya tumhaari gali mein, lekin
Mere lahu se tumhaari deewaar gal rahi hai*

True, I was murdered in your street
But my blood is now corroding your walls

The martyrs in the poems of the Progressives walked with dignity to the gallows, secure in the knowledge that their death heralded the revolution. However, in an era where sacrifice has been rendered inconsequential, Akhtar is often drawn to despair:

*Jeevan jeevan hum ne jag mein khel yahi hote dekha
Dheere dheere jeeti duniya, dheere dheere haare log
Neki ek din kaam aayegi, hum ko kya samjhaate ho
Hum ne bebas marte dekhe kaise pyaare pyaare log*

In generation after generation, we have seen the same game played
That the world eventually won, and the people were gradually defeated
'Goodness will one day be rewarded', don't try to convince me of this
For I have seen many beautiful people die helplessly

And yet, Akhtar's protagonists speak truth to power, laying

bare the hypocrisies and the soullessness of those who choose the path of compromise:

*Vasl ka sukoon kya hai, hijr ka junoon kya hai
Husn ka fusoon kya hai, ishq ke daroon kya hai
Tum mareez-e daanaa'i maslehat ke shaidaa'i
Raah-e gumrahaan kya hai tum na jaan paaoge*

What is the tranquility of Union, and what the madness of Separation?

What are the enchantments of Beauty, and what the secrets of Love?

You who are afflicted by Wisdom, who are a slave to Compromise

What is the path of the Iconoclasts? You will never understand

Javed Akhtar's poetry reconfigures the fervent romanticism of the PWA poets into a troubled realism, but one that continues to defiantly tilt away at the windmills of his dystopic world. He provides proof that the rumours of the death of socially responsible Urdu poetry are greatly exaggerated. If one may be permitted a blasphemous theism, thank God!

یہی جنوں کا یہی طوق و دار کا موسم
یہی ہے جسبہ، یہی اختیار کا موسم

پاؤں سر جو میں ابھی رام نے دھوئے بھی نہ تھے
تو نظر آئے وہاں خون کے گہرے دھبے
پاؤں دھوئے بنا سر جو کے کنارے سے اٹھے
رام یہ کہتے ہوئے اپنے دُک سے اٹھے
راجدھانی کی فضا آئی نہیں راس مجھے
چھ ڈسہبہ کو ملا دوسرا بنواس مجھے

فلک نے دیکھ لیا اور زمیں بھی مان گئی
کسی کی آئی سواری کسی کی جان گئی

کچھ نہیں تو کم سے کم خواب سحر دیکھا تو ہے
جس طرف دیکھا نہ تھا اب تک ادھر دیکھا تو ہے

تقدیر کا شکوہ بے معنی جینا ہے تجھے منظور نہیں
آپ اپنا مقدر بن سکے ایشا تو کوئی مجبور نہیں
سُنتے ہیں کہ کانٹوں سے گل تک ہیں راہ میں لاکھوں دیرانے
کہتا ہے مگر یہ عزم جنوں صحرا سے گلستاں دُور نہیں

یہ ہم گنہگار عورتیں ہیں
جو اہل جُستہ کی تمکنت سے
نہ رُعب کھائیں
نہ جان بیچیں
نہ سر جھکائیں
نہ ہاتھ جوڑیں

یہ ہم گنہگار عورتیں ہیں
کہ جن کے جسموں کی فصل بیچ
وہ سرفراز ٹھہریں

نیابت امتیاز ٹھہریں
وہ دائرہ اہل ساز ٹھہریں

یہ ہم گنہگار عورتیں ہیں
کہ سحر کا پرچم اٹھانے کے نکلیں
تو جھوٹ سے شاہ راہیں آئی ملے ہیں
ہر ایک دہلیز پر سزاؤں کی داستاںیں رکھی ملے ہیں
جو بول سکتی تھیں وہ زبانیں کٹی ملے ہیں