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KARBALA AS A METAPHOR IN PAKISTANI LITERATURE

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We can trace present Urdu literature to some 200 years of cultural development that took place in the Muslim ethos of Indian sub-continent. This culture had its deep roots in the Muslim historical self-consciousness. Their peculiar status in India in relation to the vast non-Muslim majority necessitated a strenuous effort on their part to preserve and strengthen their historical sense of identity with monumental events and their actors that influenced Muslim mind in the past.

Karbala thus occupied – among other great and impactful events of Muslim past – an important place in the popular consciousness of Indian Muslims. While for some of them it had a certain creedal and ideological significance in their peculiar doctrinal perspective, for many it assumed a great symbol of valour, commitment and sacrifice. The annual commemoration of the tragedy of 10th Muharram involving large segments of Muslim society kept the memory of this sad saga alive in the popular imagination. Details of the battle of Karbala were so graphically described to a credulous audience that these soon assumed the form of folklore more than a historical description in the people's collective memory.

The central theme of Karbala that caught popular imagination was that of heroic stance of Sayyidina Husain bin Ali (RA) and his determined unflinching struggle against the arrogant autocratic dispensation of the Umayyads symbolized in the person of Yazid b. Mu'awiya. Husain represented popular revolt of the suppressed and silenced people against Yazid who symbolized affluent and arrogant dynastic regime of the Umayyads. Husain in his courageous stand at Karbala gave expression to the suppressed voice of those who refused to accept any nexus between the Prophet's pristine legacy and the royalist demeanor exhibited by the Umayyad dispensation. There were many other important figures who shared the perspective of Husain at that critical juncture though they did not favour his policy of confrontation with the rising Umayyad regime. They included such great luminaries as Abdullah b. Abbas and Abdullah b. Umar. Both of them refused to show allegiance to Yazid; yet they

did not go along with Husain as far as engaging in a militant struggle against the all-pervasive power of the Ummayyads.

That Husain captured the popular imagination of Muslim masses throughout history and these luminaries escaped their acknowledgement was due to highly courageous show of gallantry and determined fight to the finish displayed by Husain and his handful of followers.

There are elements in the story of Karbala that invest it with a universal romanticism and popular appeal. Husain as his supreme sacrifice was reported and recorded in the annals of popular history, appeared to stand in line with such immortal heroes of humanity as Abel, Socrates, Moses and Jesus. The message of the event of Karbala was conveyed so succinctly and loudly in our literary medium that it echoed in the conscience of common man far beyond the limits of mere historical narration. Every soul more or less felt a spontaneous sympathy with the cruel assassination of Husain by his callous enemies. The element of instant shock and an overwhelming and transparent tragedy which the story of Karbala conveyed earned an immortality for its great hero. The event no longer remained confined to the time-space limitations of the story to be seen only in relation to its immediate attendant circumstances. The event transcended all these limitations and assumed the status of a human tragedy in which everyone seemed to be unconditionally on the side of its revered hero. It was the time-less spaceless and dramatic impact of this event that secured for it an immortal place in the popular conscience of Indian Muslims and found fullest expression in almost all the celebrated genres of Pakistani literature. When we look at the locus of Karbala in Pakistani literature, we find it assuming a universal metaphor for heroism; the ingredients of this heroism are: determination, commitment, bravery, courage, sacrifice, love, loyalty, altruism, and incessant fight for supreme human values of truth, freedom, human equality, dignity, honour and self-prestige. The strongest representation of Karbala has found an abiding expression in poetry far more than in any other literary genre such as drama and fiction. There is hardly any poet of note in our literary tradition who did not accentuate his poetic expression and enrich his literary capital with the metaphor of Karbala. This wide popularity of Karbala and its theme did not remain limited to the religious lore but fascinated the highest representatives of lyrical poetry also with equal force. While some poets rose to great prominence on account of their exclusive focus on Karbala like the famous Anis and Dabir of Lucknow, the rest of them

were no less inspired by its revolutionary message and intense romanticism. So much so that in the typical poetic theme of ordinary expression of love by a male for his sweetheart, idioms were richly borrowed from the theme of Karbala. The lover who is often frustrated by separation from his beloved found a parallel between his position and that of the hero of Karbala. The former found no way to vent his feelings of deprivation of meeting his beloved except sacrificing his self in the way of his love just as Husain laid down his life for the sake of meeting his beloved God by vindicating his love for Him.

Among the lines composed by Urdu poets that were immortalized in the literary memory of our people are the following:

قتل حسین اصل میں مرگ یزید ہے
اسلام زندہ ہوتا ہے ہر کربلا کے بعد

‘The killing of Hussain is in effect death of Yazid;

In fact, ‘Islam stands revived after every Karbala!’

The author of this line is no less a person than Muhammad Ali Jauhar – the great lover of the Turks and an acknowledged outstanding poet of Urdu apart from his lofty locus in Muslim politics of 19th and early 20th centuries of India as the most dynamic leader .

The poets of Pakistan and also those of India (before 1947) liberally employed the theme of Karbala and the symbolism associated with this drama to develop a rich and varied idiom for the articulation of their political defiance of the colonial and post colonial wielders of total domination and the players of ruthless power. They identified all their enemies who represented oppression and injustice with Yazid ,and every challenger who stood to confront them with Husain.

Those of our poets who did not make use of Husain for the glorification of a recent or contemporary figure, however, out number the others. They have mainly seen and projected Karbala and its hero as an immortal source of inspiration for rising in revolutionary spirit characteristic of Husain against an oppressive, obsolete and unjust status quo and chart a way forward to reform and deliver the society from their ills. Poets employing the metaphor of Karbala for such an altruistic aim are too many in our recent and past tradition to be counted easily. We would be confining ourselves to cite some examples of the most celebrated ones among them. These poets have greatly enriched our poetic tradition with developing a fertile vocabulary derived from a description of

events culminating in the great tragedy of Karbala. They also derive many lessons from this event that contribute to a certain interpretation and awareness of the dynamics of history. They emphasize the sacrifice of one's blood for the sake of accomplishing a noble mission in life, especially when that mission involves an intense struggle against the dominant forces of evil, forces that thrive on status quo and resist all efforts for reform and change.

Some other poets of note have also borrowed from the metaphor of Karbala, ideas and inspirations to underline the esoteric dimension of Islam. To those, specially ones who are reared in the Sufi lore, there is a certain tension, if not conflict, between the exoteric and the esoteric forces within the body politic of Islam. Such advocates of esoterism seem to have been influenced by the trend visible in Persian poetry that is represented by Hafiz Shirazi. According to this school of our poetry, the dominant forces of exotericism have been responsible for screening away the real face of Islam which according to them essentially stood for inner reform of human self. An excessive preference of the legalistic literalism exhibited by the advocates of exotericism (Ahl al-Zahir), according to this school, had its negative impact on the spiritual health and development of the Muslim community. Hence the need in their view to project and promote the inner dimension of Islamic faith and practice. For such people, Yazid and his votaries represent the custodians of exotericism who projected and often managed to promulgate their one-sided view at the cost of the deeper meaning and message implicit in the legacy of the Prophet of Islam. Some of the more extremist representatives of this view have stretched this notion too far to the extent of undermining the clear manifest meaning of the Shariah tilting all their stress towards the tariqah in contradistinction to the former. But that aspect of the issue is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Therefore, we leave it aside for the present and focus on the literary manifestations of the extensive application of the Karbala theme to enrich, expand and diversify the figures of speech in vogue in our poetry.

The central theme of Karbala has also given birth to a number of subsidiary metaphors that have become an integral part of the Urdu literary tradition. The poets cultivated through their skilful medium of verse a rich reservoir of imaginative ideas to diversify and deepen their literary acumen and genius. For example, the metaphor of blood symbolizing utmost human sacrifice has been variously employed to represent the height of humans' dedication and

commitment to the focus of their love, adoration and loyalty. Many poets are found using such expressions as: 'the ablution of those who perform the Prayer of love (Ishq) is accomplished with blood' (cf. Goopi Chand Narang, Sanihai Karbala Ba Taur Shi'ri Isti'ara, Lahore, 1991, p. 17). According to these poets, 'the truest of all testimony is the testimony of blood' (ibid, loc. Cit.)). Their view is not entirely devoid of historical truth and cannot be dismissed merely as a poetic fantasy. For human history bears out the fact that the glory and glamour of the greatest kings and princes fades out of human memory, while the luster and light kindled by the blood of a martyr is never extinguished. Also it often happens that in the very life-time of powerful monarchs and emperors, the apparently helpless death of certain exceptional gems and giants of humankind at their hands secures for these heroes – the supreme symbols of courage and sacrifice- an abiding moral victory – a victory that puts their enemies' naked physical power to shame holding them to public ridicule for ever. Thus history bears ample testimony to the fact that moral victory soon supercedes physical conquests. As our greatest poet, a poet laureate of all times, says in his famous line:

نه گور سکندر نه قبر دارا مٹے نامیوں کے نشاں کیسے کیسے

"Neither could survive the grave of Alexander nor that of Darius,

See how these "celebrities" were wiped out by the tide of time!

But contrary to this fate of extinction in the debris of history has been the case of all those men of honor, truth and commitment who refused to bow before the mightiest of monarchs because they refused to subject truth and justice to the arbitrary will of the users of sheer unscrupulous power. Leaving the most glamorous examples of the greatest men, the Divine Messengers who offered their own lives as token of their testimony to the truth of their mission apart, human history is replete with many other shining examples of such exalted character. Death of the great companion of the companions (tabi'i) Sa'id b. al-Jubair at the hands of the autocratic ruler of Iraq Hajjaj b. Yusuf, death of Muhammad b. Abdullah b. Hasan, popularly known as al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah, a descendant of the hero of Karbala by the allies of the second Abbasid Khalifa Abu Ja'far Mansur and scores of other examples in our history furnish sufficient proof of the truth of the above statement. Incidentally, history repeated the irony of Karbala in a strange fashion. The second incumbent of the office of Khalifa in the Umayyad dynastic order felt threatened and challenged by a descendant of

the Prophet's daughter. The same kind of drama with many common features was enacted in the reign of second occupant of the Abbasid throne Abu Ja'far Mansur as well. The latter felt threatened and was soon challenged by Al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah. He had to be eliminated by the new rulers. It seems every new dynasty and dictatorship finds itself constrained to foreclose the doors of prospective challenges to their newly wrested authority. In other words, every fake claimant of a position has, perhaps through an instinct of self-preservation, an ability to locate the source of threat and identify his potential challenger even before the latter even thinks of taking an initiative in that direction. As the Persian saying goes:

هر فرعونے را موسى

"For every Pharoee there is a Moses",

It is perhaps true that for every usurper there is a Hamlet. When real gold is available in the market fake one becomes difficult to sell. The litmus test of the bearers of the torch of truth is that all symbols of falsehood should feel a threat to their survival in front of them. Just as when sun rises, night disappears. When a genuine man appears on the stage of history, all fake men feel they were doomed and their ill fate was going to befall them sooner or later. Even if they complete their biological lease of life they are soon jettisoned into oblivion and fade out of the centre stage of history.

Some other poets have focused their literary pursuits on showing the personal traits of the hero of Karbala deriving there from a role model of true allegiance to the ideals of Islam. They have shown these traits in sharp contrast to the stance of those conformists who are ever ready to declare their allegiance to this or that wielder of worldly power. However, the eulogical tributes of these poets remain limited to the infantile stage of Husain's life. It is the stage where he appears as a dear and darling grand child of his maternal grand father – the greatest of all men who lived in history. Apart from this early biographical projection, he makes his debut-as far as our literary accounts are concerned- at the charged and tragic scene of Karbala as its main hero and supreme martyr. In the latter stage, Husain is seen as following the great example of yore set by his glorious precursor Hamza (RA), the master of all martyrs, the example of the second Khalifa 'Umar (RA) as well as the example of his own father 'Ali (RA). They all laid down their lives for the noble cause of faith, truth and justice. It is indeed surprising that Husain's participation in the historic campaign for the

conquest of Constantinople has been more or less ignored by most of our poets. This was the campaign promised with sure victory by the Prophet (SAW) For this reason a great many companions of the Prophet (SAW) participated in this battle with exceptional spirit and zeal. The list of these participants is long and includes on the top the great host of the Prophet (SAW) at Madina Abu Ayyub al-Ansari.

Most of our poets however, have tried to bring to light universal human values that are loudly conveyed by this matchless martyrdom. They have underlined the importance of certain basic traits of human personality such as perseverance, courage and the strength of character without which such a supreme example of martyrdom can not be set.

They have also tried to project Husain as an example par excellence of those essential traits of leadership that are a hall-mark of a true Muslim leader. According to them such a leader must be an embodiment of the values advocated and upheld by him. When these supreme values of life are threatened by worldly powers, a true Muslim leader is ready even before his followers to court death. He thus negates himself in order to affirm his lofty principles. Such a leader records on the annals of history his testimony inscribed in his own blood.

Alongside early expressions of the tragedy of Karbala in Urdu and Persian at a time when Urdu was still in its formative stage, the other vernaculars of our country had already been influenced by this theme as a kind of folklore. We find in Saraiki, Sindhi, Baluchi and Punjabi ample collection of poetry dedicated to the hero of Karbala and his followers. Some of these popular poetic expressions were mere lamentations over the brutal mass murder of the grand son of the Prophet (SAW) and his helpless family and children. These popular native representations of Karbala hardly went beyond this versified wail over their travail.

However, with onward development of Urdu literary idiom these expressions gradually assumed the form of a full-fledged genre of Marthia. The city of Lucknow – a great centre of Muslim culture and literary accomplishment during the 19th and early 20th centuries- witnessed, nursed and patronized this genre enabling it to reach un-paralleled heights. This genre became so advanced that it formed an integral part of Urdu literary tradition. This development was epitomized by the most celebrated and monumental work issuing from the pen of

one of the greatest historians and literary critics of India namely Shibli Nu'mani, his work entitled: *Muwazana-i-Anis-o-Dabir*. Anis and Dabir were two giants of this genre as it evolved and developed in the literary metropolis of India that was Lucknow.

The universal human appeal of the theme of Karbala as accentuated in the poetry of Muslims, also found echo in many such attempts by non-Muslim poets of the sub-continent. Worthy of mention among them are Maharaja Balwan Singh, Kunwar Sain Muztar, Josh Malsiani, Rupkumari (woman) and Baba Kirshan Gopal Maghmum. The list is longer and includes the famous living poet of India Muhindar Singh Bedi, a Sikh migrant from Pakistani Punjab.

We have already cited the celebrated verse of the great Muslim leader – who was not only the relentless advocate of the Turkish Khilafat in the world but was an untiring striver for the cause of the Turkish people in general – namely Muhammad Ali Jauhar (d. 1931). He also says elsewhere:

کہتے ہیں لوگ ہے رہ ظلمات پر خطر
کچھ دشت کربلا سے سوا ہو تو جانے

‘People say that the path passing through dark seas (the path of hard struggle) is filled with dangers and risks;

‘pray tell if it is more daunting and dangerous than the desert of Karbala?’

جب تک دل سے محو نہ ہو کربلا کی یاد
ہم سے نہ ہو سکے گی اطاعت یزید کی

‘Untill the memory of Karbala is deleted from the heart;

‘We have no capacity to submit to any Yazid.’

According to a contemporary critic of Urdu poetry, Gopi Chand Narang (ibid p. 30), ‘it is not improbable that Jauhar might have been influenced by the great poet – philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1938), who had written a whole poem which is included in his Persian work: ‘Mystries of Selflessness’ translated from the Persian by the famous English Orientalist A.J. Arberry (pub. 1918). This poem is titled:

در معنی حریت اسلامیہ و سر حادثہ کربلا

‘On the meaning of Islamic freedom and secret of the tragedy of Karbala’

This poem of Iqbal consists of 28 lines. We are not here dealing with Persian poetry. Suffice it to say that in this poem Iqbal underlines the event of Karbala as a lasting message of freedom, honour and commitment to the

principle of Khilafa, that embodies the doctrine of Divine unity. This doctrine, according to Iqbal, is operationalized only when it is translated in the form of concrete action in history. In the same persian collection of Iqbal, we find another poem dedicated to Sayyida Fatima. In this poem there is also a reference to Husain – Says Iqbal:

در نوائے زندگی سوز از حسین
اهل حق حریت آموز از حسین

‘In the melody of life, tenderness and intensity come from Husain;

‘The followers of the path of Truth have learnt the meaning of freedom and honour from Husain’

In another famous work of Persian poetry by Iqbal entitled: ‘Javed Nama’ (Epistle to Javed, pub. 1932), he wrote a poem to eulogize Tipu Sultan the great Muslim hero of India. In this poem, he pays tribute to this great Indian Martyr in the following epithet: ‘heir of the charm of Husain.’ (وارث جذب حسین).

These few examples of Iqbal’s notice of Karbala and its hero in Persian verse apart, we revert to some of the most celebrated and widely sung lines in Urdu that Iqbal produced. These few lines became part of our literary lore for good. Says Iqbal:

حقیقت ابدی ہے مقام شبیری
بدلتے رہتے ہیں انداز کوفی و شامی

‘The position of Shabbir is a permanent reality;

While the whims and ways of Kufis and Shamis (people of Kufa and Syria) keep changing’

He also says:

غریب و سادہ و رنگین ہے داستان حرم
نہایت اس کی حسین ابتداء ہے اسماعیل

‘strange, simple and colourful is the saga of Haram’;

‘it culminates in Husain and originates from Ismail’

The last line has assumed the form of a very common and frequently used proverb in Urdu language to this day.

In recent times, Pakistan and India witnessed the emergence of a progressive school of poets who espoused the philosophy of Marx for revolution. Prominent among these poets have been Faiz of Pakistan, and Ali Sardar Jafari

of India. Faiz has composed many poems using Karbala and its hero as symbol of progressive forces' resistance against the powers of oppression and exploitation. In one of his last poems, he lamented the killing of poor armless Palestinian refugees of Beirut by brutal Israeli forces. The title of this poem is: 'A song for the Karbala of Beirut'.

Another progressive poet of recent era has been Makhdum Muhyiddin. He wrote a poem to pay tribute to the famous hero of Africans and civil rights, activists in America, Martin Luther King. In this poem he describes the sad assassination of Martin Luther King in the following words:

یہ شام شام غریباں ہے، صبح صبح حنین
یہ قتل قتل مسیحا، یہ قتل قتل حسین

'this evening is the evening of the destitute stranded at Karbala, this morning is the morning of Hunain;

This murder is the murder of Messia and this killing is the killing of Husain'.

Thus we find that Karbala, its great hero, all other actors and events associated with this tragedy, have been transformed over a period of time into a universal idiom for dissent and defiance, revolt and rebellion and have been liberally applied in many languages including Urdu, the lingua franca of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan .