Your Essence, Martyr: Pakistani Elegies edited by Alamgir Hashmi (Plainview Imprint, 2011)

To read Your Essence, Martyr means to enter a world of lamentation, where words, like tears, seem to trickle through the pen from the wounded hearts of the poets. In spite of having a complex relationship with Pakistan as a Bangladeshi (Bangladesh got independence from it in 1971), I am deeply saddened hearing ‘the heart’s cry’ (3) of the people of Pakistan during 1970s. It is surely a bold attempt of Professor Alamgir Hashmi, a renowned scholar, essayist, critic and poet in Postcolonial Studies, to gather the English translation of the seventy Urdu poems of ‘samizdat existence’ (3) for the first time in a collection thirty-two years after their composition. It not only will bring the readers in touch with the poems of peerless beauty, but make them aware of the turmoil-torn history of Pakistan during that decade as well. Though the book is plainly covered in white with a scarlet title, it becomes the voice of the suppressed, raised and heard from any nation at any time under unconstitutional Martial Law.

The towering personality who stands at the back of these songs of lamentation is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the charismatic but unfortunate nationalist leader of Pakistan. Picking up the tune of cry for the martyrdom of Hussain Ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (Peace be upon him), in Kerbala and Hussain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, the Persian Mystic, the poets mourn for the unjust execution of Z.A. Bhutto on 4 April 1979. He is compared with these two Muslim mystics between whom one represents just leadership after Hazrat Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and the other stands for the courage of-telling the truth (Mansur uttered ‘ana’lhaqq’ meaning ‘I am the Truth’ or ‘I am Allah’):

You are the envy of Zulfiqar,
...
O Hussain of my time, salam!
O Light of the eyes of martyrs, salam! (Salam 8)

Or

Other Yazids have re-enacted the history of Kerbala.
See this new chapter on the slaughter of Hussain. (Farigh 17)

Or

At every stage of history we find a lesson from him.
Today I see before me the “I” of Mansur. (Waheed 37)

Or

The face of Mansur is eternally alive.
You have obliterated your own existence, my people. (Waheed 36)

Yet the poets do not cling to the Muslim tradition only. Qateel Shifai evokes the image of Jesus Christ nicely:
They rise up against him, who resurrects the dead.
In every age we have crucified Jesus. (12)

Similarly, J.S. (Javed Shahin) utters, like T.S. Eliot in the first line of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest of all months
Flowers grow in this month,
And the land takes on a new shape.
But that is a real old story.
For now, it is the month of the death of colour and fragrance,
   And of the martyrdom of flowers,
...
Come! People, let us remove this month
From the calendar. (63)

Again, this leader also is compared with Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, breaking the barrier of gender discrimination as the ruler:

After the departure of the truthful and just Bilqis,
What became of the city of Sheba in our age? (Farigh19)

This amalgamation of different legendary personalities into one to magnify his magnitude as a leader can make this collection truly multidimensional in thought and ideas. *Your Essence, Martyr* can be regarded as an emblem of the rebellious voice that cannot be kept hushed for a long time. These elegies were written in 1979 in Urdu. But the poets could not even use their names in full, except some pseudonyms or initials, in fear of ‘the torturer’s whip and the hangman’s noose’ (3). Again, after their publication in the original, ‘they have never been seen by anybody except by some Urdu readers’ (3), who used to recite them secretly at home or intimately in cafes. Consequently, this collection, published after such a long time, reminds us of the comment of *The New York Times* in their report immediately after the execution of Z.A. Bhutto: ‘The way they did it… is going to grow into a legend that will someday backfire.’¹ The poems are obviously a backfire, a boomerang that boldly pronounces: ‘I see the crop of tyranny, green and verdant’ (37). Or ‘He is hidden from sight, but He beats in every heart.’ Or ‘No matter how much you press him down, He will rise again’ (25). The letter of Benazir Bhutto to the editor, attached at the end of the book, also guarantees this truth as this collection came as a solace to the burning heart of a daughter:

I am proud that I am your daughter, Papa;
The daughter of one who is the Shabbir of this age.
...
I could lay down my life, for the way you chose to die; (A Daughter’s Lament 85)


A common contention about translated literature is that ‘Beautiful translations are like beautiful women, that is to say, they are not always the most faithful ones’\(^2\) and like half-veiled beauty, they arouse an irresistible yearning for the original. Nevertheless, in the hand of Rafey Habib, Faruq Hassan and David Matthews, professors of literature, the English translations have become simultaneously beautiful and faithful. Their earnest endeavour to be careful of bilingual sensitivities (3), along with the preservation of the gazal and nazm form, makes the piece unique. The expressions of emotions and passions of the famous Urdu poets (such as Shohrat Bokhari, Josh Malihabadi, Qateel Shifai, Farigh Bukhari, Jauhar Mir, Ahmed Waheed Akhter, Saleem Shahid, Kishwar Naheed, Zaheer Kashmiri, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Javed Shahin etc.) win the heart as well as the sense. Ironically, plainly, metaphorically and allegorically, they draw imageries from the familiar nature and life around them which carry the readers away to the land of death, darkness and deception, to the land of slaughter, sadness and suppression. We hear Josh Malihabadi saying, envisaging a weary journey through a difficult and thorny way:

Ah God! How long will I tread this difficult path?  
How long will I walk this uneven road? (9)

Or, Farigh Bukhari uttering:

I am afraid of the word ‘deception’,  
But this journey was like a path through a jungle. (14)

Or, A.F. bemoaning:

There is one journey on which  
Not the feet, but the heart tires. (21)

The most repeated imagery used by the poets is of rope around the neck in the gallows:

And your rope  
Brings out  
Your tongue and eyes in wonder, (Shohrat 7)

Or

The gallows of the Messiah of the age smell sweetly (Mir 29)

Or

As a rose bloomed upon the bough of the cross  
On top of the gibbet his face is smiling. (Parvez 34)

\(^2\)George Steiner in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*  
The pathetic description of the time also touches our heart when we find A.F. is uttering:

The whole city weeps;
Even so, how silent it is. (21)

Or, as Shohrat Bukhari:

At this time such a cloud has gathered, which
Does not clear, or even give rain. (27)

But when the grief becomes unbearable the poets desire to see the Day of Judgment when the just cause will come out:

Although God’s creation is now silent,
Tomorrow this secret will also be revealed. (40)

With all these sorrow-ridden utterances and more, the poems express the picture of the pressed humanity lamenting and sobbing under the pressure of the torturous time. I think first reading of this collection would attract the second and the second the third, and thus the poems would bring back the poetry-lovers again and again to its undying delight of pathos as if the poems urge: ‘Do not close the casements of the wounds yet’ (Mir 30), ‘I am the wound. If I speak, blood will trickle’ (Qit’a 31).

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