

**SIX POEMS**

Najm Hosain Syed

**A TRANSLATOR'S NOTE**

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**A** translator's note, in essence, contains both a billet-doux and an admission of betrayal. As most writers will concede, translating is primarily a deed of love. I was once encouraged and warned by Prof. Memon that one did translations at the cost of one's own writing. It is, however, undeniable that in the process of translating a piece of someone else's imagination, what is re-born in the translated language is akin to a misshapen twin, an altered thing, in tone, rhythm, meaning or intent. An act of betrayal is woven within the effort that stems from admiration, say, for a poem. Carrying such weight in the heart, a translator often finds solace in comforting strategies such as those where he aims to capture the essence of a poem or work closely with the poet or his children. There are varied approaches, all fraught with unpredictable results.

The fact that I have attempted to translate Najm Hosain Syed's poems into English is nothing short of ironic. Knowing how little he cares for medals, honors, and prizes, having turned down a state-sponsored, highly coveted prize a few years ago, he could not care less if someone did or did not translate his poems, especially into a non-South Asian language. I am certain he'd be happier if his works were indeed translated into other South Asian languages, but that's a political position for him. As for me, since I make my physical and emotional home in the US, English is the language I primarily write in and translate into. I am emotionally closer to the literary community I interact with on a daily basis. Every once in a while, however, there comes a situation which beckons one to the call of duty. Coming to know Najm Hosain Syed and his corpus through my wife, Amna Ali, a lover of Punjabi poetry, her father, Nadir Ali, a noted poet and fiction writer in his own right, and my sister-in-law, Ayesha Nadir Ali, a classically trained singer, who has recorded countless poems composed by Najm Hosain Syed, has changed my

relationship with my mother tongue.

An opportunity to study Najm's poems, literary criticism, and plays is nothing short of a call to arms. This may not be the place to go into detailed discussion of how and why the British imposed Urdu on the Punjabis and others after their colonial conquest of Emperor Ranjit Singh's empire. Nor why the foolish Pakistani state has failed to make Punjabi the medium of at least primary education in the Punjabi-speaking areas (as opposed to what India has done in eastern Punjab). Yet due to such policies, most Punjabis who speak Punjabi fluently in Pakistan cannot comfortably read either modern Punjabi or their rich classical literature. So they are doubly (and systematically) cut off from their literary heritage. That's a colossal tragedy. When a people are removed from their cultural memory it is easy for them to invent a false past. It is this phenomenon that's partially responsible for some Muslims in Pakistan (and India, though to lesser extent) embracing a cooked-up, purely Islamic past carefully shorn of any non-Muslim narrative. So the past Muslim rulers are seen as heroes, while rebels of Muslim origins such as Dullah Bhatti, who rose up against the Mughal oppression, are not part of the popular imagery. This behavior is an extension of how the British made sure that the children of the conquered Indians had no memory of their many rebellions and up-risings dotted throughout the landscape. They made sure that the next generations only saw in the Uprising of 1857 independence as a mutiny which was effectively crushed.

The valiant writers who continue to write in Punjabi in Pakistan should be understood in this light. Najm Hosain Syed is the most important avant-garde of this battle as he has single-handedly created a new consciousness among several generations of Punjabi writers. His diction, his metaphors, his subject matter all spring from the same self-awareness that takes into consideration the lost chapters of our history, the socio-economic concerns of earlier Punjabi poets, history as understood by people at the margins, oppression of women and exploitation of working class people, moral decay of the upper and middle classes, and so on.

Having written close to three dozen books of high merit, Najm is not just a remarkable poet, but a major intellectual force, which the literary world has a moral duty to acknowledge. By and large, attitudes towards most non-Western languages with regards to trans-

lation are ones of embarrassment. But even when native informants try to rectify things, their post-colonial mask notwithstanding, most efforts only deliver pain. Take the example of one recent attempt, a huge volume of Pakistani poetry was published by a respectable publisher and out of forty-three poets only four or five were Punjabi poets. Najm Hosain Syed was not among them. None of the poets published in the anthology had more than three books of poetry published in Punjabi. Most were only partial Punjabi poets as they also wrote in Urdu. My translations are in part an attempt to address the embarrassing omission. ■

## CHRONICLE OF A WAR<sup>1</sup>

Pick up the newspaper from the verandah!  
 But that's only a sunlight's splinter  
 What, no paper today?  
 These days they are printed on the late side  
 There's control on paper and there's blackout too  
 Also they don't print every single news item now  
 Why, is there something wickedly worrying?  
 No, it's the war, and often there's loss in war  
 May Allah be kind to us!  
 In essence what's loss and what's gain  
 A Muslim doesn't think in those terms. Our aim is  
 nobler. That's all. Otherwise our time in this life is a  
 temporary affair, a test, a trial. There is no essential  
 meaning to a person's suffering and a person's  
 eventual demise for he is like a drop, a wave, inside a  
 nation's river  
 I tell you I am finding such ecstasy in namaz these  
 days!  
 Something I haven't experienced before  
 It feels as if the doors of God's benevolence have  
 opened  
 The siren has just rung, step inside  
 Coming, coming  
 Let's all go in, which is the right thing to do  
 The thing is I am not a strict Muslim but  
 I do have personal pride in me  
 I take it as an insult to fear death  
 No one really is afraid of dying  
 It's just the thought of those

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<sup>1</sup> The original title, *Jangnamah*, is a traditional form of poetry

we leave behind is what scares me  
Come outside, all clear, come  
Come outside, all clear? Find out over the phone  
No, I have heard the siren  
Still, go ask, no harm in that  
Let's go and sit outside  
Look, it's a newspaper after all  
And my, my he says a splinter of the sun  
Why, wasn't it a light patch?  
This has just arrived  
And splintered off deep  
Down beneath the verandah

## STUMP

Near the decrepit cinema, a stone's throw  
away from the police station  
right where the shadow of the pipal tree once  
hovered—nothing but a stump  
now enveloped by a new  
sidewalk—yesterday an old man made it his  
seat gazing at the traffic the thoroughfare  
has widened, so have  
the cars approaching, I teased, “Having a good time?”  
He laughed inwardly.  
Today I passed him again as he  
sat atop his usual stump seat  
wearing home-washed clothes watchful  
“Back on duty?” laughing I approached  
Though wide eyed, he slept.

YOU

You have vanished inside us  
O unperturbed petite one  
We became numb searching for you in books  
The paths only pile on more twists and turns  
The billboards pop up all around splashing our names  
And from the loudspeakers hang our voices  
At times a glimpse of you  
A warmth that flits across the eyes  
This the assurance, the hope for us  
Roam through the dazzling dark of our city,  
Like a black firefly!  
You have attired yourself  
You the blessed one!

**KHAYAL**

when skies go green  
and seas turn red  
when the flocks of soft  
azure breeze descend  
on the wonderstruck, childlike  
hands of trees  
Only then old friends  
would narrate a story  
to each  
other  
anew



## ROAD

They do not wish us to cross this road  
Although they do not long let us in on their fear  
they jab us to nurse our own!  
They advise us, "Keep on moving  
along the road (It is not in  
your interest  
to go across.)  
The old consolations have perished; what do you look  
for now!?  
These are not cars but an army  
Those who dare to engage will perish  
so flow with  
the flow  
Take it as a bridal procession and mingle  
The cauldrons sit on flames  
Eat what you like."  
Across the road is not the door of god for us  
What awaits us is a promise to meet  
They don't want us to move  
Not a road but a smoke river where  
the crocodiles made of smoke want  
us to swim like fish of smoke

## GOKI

She's barely four  
 Yet she doesn't like visiting the zoo  
     any longer  
 The last time she visited, she spoke  
 to the monkeys  
 The loudspeaker announced:

    "A four-year old girl's missing  
     red frock and red sandals,  
     whoever finds her should  
     bring her to the office  
     Thanks!"

Let's go to the museum, she  
 insists everyday although it's  
     just us two, she buys three  
     tickets *What if someone wants to come  
     out with her from inside!*

Halting before Victoria, she inquires,  
 "Who is she?"

    The English Queen, I tell her  
 She responds, "Oh the one I heard who used  
 to live on the Mall  
 Road."

Bracelets made of ivory  
 attires for kings  
     tunics steel sculpted  
     swords, seeing

All these she says

    "The *bashas* take these off to be sent here  
     And then sit on the throne naked?"

"What do people say to them?"

("Badshah" she cannot

pronounce yet, still  
says “basha”) and as we take a turn outside  
the Governor House, Goki asks  
“Someone lives here?”  
“Yes, the Punjab’s basha,” I inform  
“Should we go and look?” says she  
joyfully  
I inform again, “They don’t allow people in.”  
“Because he must be naked,” she whispers in my ear  
Then she sinks into deep thought  
Leave it!  
*He’ll eventually come to the museum  
of his own volition*