

Aahung: Poems by Asrarul Haq Majaz

Translated into English by Sami Rafiq.

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Professor Sami Rafiq's introduction to Asrarul Haq Majaz's *Aahung* precedes a memoir of nearly twenty pages written by the poet's sister Hamida Salim. Her narrative highlights the initial promise of her brother's attractive qualities. However, despite graduating from Aligarh Muslim University, and the precocity of his literary talent, his career was progressively undermined, first by a desultory student life, then by his failure to secure a suitable marriage partner. His life was wasted in admiring a married woman, leading him to be consumed by descent into alcoholism and mental illness. Fired by this infatuation with, in Professor Rafiq's words, an 'imperfect woman', though not embittered by her weakness which he attributed to 'the decayed institutions of society', Majaz was led 'through countless paths of difficulty and suffering', which actually sparked 'the creation of his finest poems' (p. 13). A parallel is drawn between Majaz and John Keats; however, in contrast to a life cut short at twenty-six by tuberculosis, Majaz lived into his mid-forties. Perhaps a better comparison would be with the French Romantic poet and author of *Voyage en Orient*, Gérard de Nerval, who wrote in *Aurélia*: 'Condemned by the woman I loved, guilty of a fault for which I could no longer hope for forgiveness, nothing was left to me but to throw myself into vulgar distractions'.* His last years beset by mental breakdown like Majaz's, Nerval committed suicide in his mid-forties in 1855, one hundred years before the Urdu poet's death.

As to a translation's balancing meaning and style, Professor Rafiq's faithfulness to the repetitious declamatory form of the Urdu *ghazal* is encapsulated in many poems. We can see it in poem no. 14, 'This Night', where 'tonight' is the final word in each of seventeen couplets:

And in the very next poem in the sequence, no. 72 'From Allahabad': drunkenness is celebrated as also part of that idiom, though at the same time carrying a dangerous literalness with respect to his personal condition:

In Allahabad there is discussion everywhere that the
drunkard of Delhi has come with a hundred loiterings and ruins

...

Bring wine, spill it splash it
As the love of wine comes,

Carrying drunkenness in the eyes,
The lover of the beloved's eyes has come

Though English and Urdu both belong to the same Indo-European family every language has its own music and rhythm. Technically this English translation succeeds in staying close to the meaning of the original, while retaining other features such as *ghazal* structure and rhyme. The translator has also exerted an editorial function, providing an introduction, to which is appended a memoir furnishing historical and biographical details. Clearly this translation of *Aahung* has been a labour of love. It is greatly to be commended and hopefully will revive interest in Majaz of Lucknow.

* Gérard De Nerval, *Aurélia*, trans. Geoffrey Wagner, Boston, 1996.

G.N.