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REVIEW

Aahung: Poems by Asrarul Haq Majaz

Translated into English by Sami Rafiq.

one hundred years before the Urdu poet's death.

Delhi: Authorspress, 2014. Pp.208. ISBN 978-81-7273-880-8

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,

As to a translation's balancing meaning and style, Professor Rafig'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:

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See the effect of love tonight!

Her beautiful head is on my shoulder tonight!

What else do you desire Oh! Wounded heart? At least her indifference is no more tonight!

. . .

Her response to every breath of mine!

The nod of her head to all my wishes tonight!

That endless beauty of smiles!

That glance of boundless love tonight!

In contrast, in no. 48, 'Morning Dream', the less constrained, more expansive *nazm* form is employed in Majaz's forays into subjects related to his time (he was after all a member, even if a peripheral one, of the Progressive Writers Union):

Yet suffering humanity remained bereft of cure,
Passion continued to rub its forehead on doors,
Humanity continued to be ground in the mill of
oppression,
Leadership remained and so did messengerhood,

Materialism continued to thrive behind the curtain of religion...

The back story to Majaz's poetry and the decline in his reputation is the fate of Urdu itself. Professor Rafiq discerns in his love poems an innocence missing in other Urdu poems that deal with 'lover's laments about the beloved's unfaithfulness' (p. 14). In 'Ghazal' (no. 71), Majaz does not appear to have contemplated throwing over the idiom that was so integral to this genre:

The truth is this that the world of Majaz Is nothing beyond love and beauty

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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.