Lost Paradise

Lost Paradise

Selected Ghazals of Muneer Niazi

Translated by

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juggernaut

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For Ratika

once I caught a glimpse of a captivating face
my eyes have never seen another sight like that again

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Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch[1]

Muneer Niazi was born in 1922 in Khanpur, a village located a few kilometres from Hoshiarpur. His mother was a Mohmand Pathan and his father a Niazi Pathan whose family traced its origin to Ghazni in Afghanistan.

for a hundred generations my ancestors have been mercenaries
I achieved honour by way of poetry

Muneer's father was an irrigation engineer who was trained at the Roorkee College of Engineering. When Muneer was just a year old, his father passed away when a large branch of a tree fell on him on a stormy day while he was at work. One of his father's brothers married Muneer's mother and became Muneer's stepfather. Despite the tragedy, Muneer had a very happy childhood in Khanpur, especially as his mother's family also lived there. Being the

only boy in his mother's household, he was treated like a prince and was a great favourite of his maternal great-grandmother. He ate well, rode horses, kept pet dogs, and participated enthusiastically in all sports activities. But there was also a contemplative streak in him. He says:[2]

> *My village was very beautiful but less inhabited. I would sit by the canal and listen to the koel sing, watch the doves, count the birds while other children my age ran around.*

His time in the idyllic surroundings of Khanpur had a lasting impact on him. He kept it alive within and revisited it often in his poetry. This may also have had to do with the fact that he left Khanpur fairly early, moving to Montgomery (now Sahiwal in Pakistan) where some of his paternal uncles had established a successful transportation business.

He matriculated in 1940 while living in Montgomery. It is said that he didn't get along with his stepfather and was considered to be somewhat rebellious. So, although Muneer's intention was to study further, one of his uncles, who was an army officer, decided that the boy needed to be disciplined, and so made him enlist in the British Indian navy as a sailor. However, the navy experience did not suit Muneer. The only way he benefited from it was that his posting in Bombay brought him in touch with a literary

set and gave him access to the works of the poet Meeraji (Mohammad Sanaullah Dar) and Saadat Hasan Manto, who were active literary figures in the city. Encouraged by his mother – whose primary worry was that if Muneer was martyred while in service of the British, he wouldn't get what a martyr is due in the next world – he planned to desert the navy. His first attempt, however, ended in failure. He was caught and brought back and severely punished. Eventually, he was stationed on a ship that was to sail to Singapore where the Japanese Navy was causing trouble for the British. Shortly before the ship's departure, he jumped off the deck into the open water where the ship was anchored and, despite wearing heavy naval boots, swam all the way to shore. Apocrypha further suggests that this ship was sunk by the Japanese on its way to Singapore and not a single person survived. Be that as it may, Muneer escaped being caught and eventually made his way back to Montgomery. His family realized that he was determined to leave the navy and, instead of forcing him to go back, sent him to the princely state of Bahawalpur where he would be safe from the British Military Police.

Though Muneer began his higher studies in Bahawalpur, he was more interested in playing hockey and other sports. Partly out of restlessness and partly to avoid facing academic disaster, he transferred from one

college to another, moving from Bahawalpur to Lahore to Jammu to Srinagar and eventually to Jalandhar; he did not stay long in any of these places. Along the way, especially in Srinagar, he met professors who encouraged him and helped nurture the love of literature that his literate mother had instilled in him at an early age.

In Jalandhar, Muneer's studies were cut short by something altogether more horrific than the prospect of academic failure. The year 1947 came. Some of the worst communal rioting occurred in Punjab and Muneer fled home to the relative safety of Montgomery. But within days of Pakistan being formed, a massive tragedy befell his family. Two of his uncles were gunned down by the Dogra regiment for violating curfew. They had been carrying curfew passes and had ventured out at the request of the administration to get bus drivers to carry refugees to their destination. Even a wealthy and influential family like the Niazis, settled on what would later be the Pakistani side of the border for years before Partition, lost two of their precious sons. Muneer went wild with grief and burned with hatred towards Hindus and Sikhs for a long time after this incident.

In the aftermath of the killing of the two Niazi brothers, the administration tried to compensate by allotting a number of properties belonging to fleeing Sikhs to various members of the family. This led to bitter squabbling among

family members and ingrained in Muneer a lifelong hatred for human avarice. Whatever share he received of the family's wealth, he ploughed into two projects: the weekly literary newsletter *Saat Rang*, which he co-edited with his friend and literary mentor Majeed Amjad, and a publishing house called Arzang. *Saat Rang* became a renowned literary periodical. Manto was also associated with it. The publishing house Arzang had a bookshop that stocked 'everything from Oscar Wilde to Meer's complete works' according to Muneer, but specialized in Russian literature based on Marxist theory, reflecting Muneer's interest in Karl Marx's writings. Muneer would later become a strong critic of the political poetry of the famous communist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz and others like him, but in 1949 he represented Montgomery at the left-leaning All-Pakistan Progressive Writers Conference in Lahore. In 1951, he briefly associated with the short-lived left-wing Azad Pakistan Party.

In 1953, Muneer relocated to Lahore as he wanted to run *Saat Rang* from there. But he ran out of money after selling his share. However, it is also speculated that he had been cheated out of his share of the family property by his stepbrothers and, thus, the periodical could never be restarted. Instead, Muneer began writing lyrics for film songs. His unique poetic style ensured that he was soon in great demand. But, unlike most lyricists working in South

Asian films, he refused to write situation-based songs, and instead insisted that situations be tailored as per the songs. He also sold geets or songs and ghazals to periodicals and even worked at the film periodical *Screen Light* for a few years. Despite his rising fame, he always found himself in desperate financial conditions during these years, often not even having a place to sleep at night.

It was at the end of this decade, in 1959, that Muneer published his first volume of poems, *Tez Hava aur Tanha Phool* (Strong Winds and a Solitary Flower), which remains a landmark in the history of modern Urdu poetry. Over the years he published almost thirty volumes of poetry among other writings. Some of his notable collections in Urdu are *Jungle mein Dhanak* (Rainbow in the Forest), *Mah-e-Muneer* (The Brilliant Moon), *Dushmanon ke Darmiyan Shaam* (An Evening Spent with Enemies), *Aaghaz-e-Zamistan mein Dobaara* (A Return to the Beginning of Winter), *Pehli Baat hi Aakhiri Thi* (The First Thing Said Was the Last), *Syah Shab ka Samandar* (The Dark Night's Ocean) and *Chhe Rangin Darwaze* (Six Colourful Doors). He published three major collections in Punjabi and is acclaimed as a major figure in modern Punjabi poetry.

It was sometime during his early years in Lahore that Muneer married Sughra Khanam. Sughra was a widow and a relative from Muneer's mother's side. She had been diagnosed as being infertile and when Muneer decided to

marry her, his mother fell into despair, leading to a long-strained relationship with her son. Sughra's death in the 1980s devastated Muneer. He was later convinced by his friends to remarry and subsequently he married Naheed Begum, who was several years his junior. Muneer never had children.

Muneer's fame hit a high note when the film *Shaheed* was released in 1962. One of the songs from this film that he had penned, 'Us Bewafa ka Shehr Hai', sung by Naseem Bano, became a major hit. Nonetheless, his professional situation remained fluid. He worked at a newspaper but had to quit because he lacked the discipline a regular job required. Over the years, he established more than one publishing house and was lauded for the quality and production of his books. Inevitably these ventures failed because he did not have the business acumen for them. In one instance he paid the writer N. M. Rashid his entire royalty before the book was even published. On being questioned by his wife, he is reported to have said, 'Earlier it was up to others to do justice or be unjust. Now it is in my hands, so I did justice.' As one of his acquaintances commented, 'He did everything in great style. The only thing he wasn't skilled at was getting by in life.'

In his later years, Muneer was recognized not just by audiences of Urdu mushairas around the world but also by the Pakistan federal government and the provincial

government of Punjab that supported him financially. In 1992, he received the Pride of Performance Award – the highest literary award bestowed by the state of Pakistan. In 2005, he was awarded the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, one of Pakistan's highest civilian honours. Muneer Niazi passed away in December 2006. He left behind a wife and a legacy that has only strengthened with the passage of time.

Foreword

'Migration's Fruit'

[*A translation of Intizar Husain's essay in Urdu entitled* 'Hijrat ka Samar'][3]

Actually, I and Muneer Niazi were expelled from Paradise at the same time. These are the terms on which we have recognized each other. We run into each other here and there. Muneer Niazi starts telling me how dense the thicket of mango trees in his village was. I start talking about the way the evening fell in my village and what the peacock's cry sounded like. Muneer always tells and hears these tales as if he is telling them for the first time and hearing them for the first time. He tells his tales with a kind of melancholy and hears mine with a sense of astonishment. We carry our lost Paradise in our thoughts wherever we go. It should have been the case for others

as well, but it seems everyone has made some kind of compromise or the other, or their retentive faculties have eroded. But for Muneer and I our memory has become our enemy. Memory had tormented Eve as well. She kept thinking of Paradise for years after she had been expelled from it. She would remember Paradise and weep. The tears from her eyes in memory of Paradise fell on earth and a mehndi tree grew from them. In *Qisas Al-Anbi*[4] it is written that all the mehndi trees on the face of the earth are the fruit of Eve's tears.

I like mehndi trees and Muneer's poetry. This may be because my tears are also mingled in them. When Muneer calls out to Khanpur then my heart too wants to call out to a village. When he mentions his gardens and his jungles, I leave him in his world and travel away to my own jungles. Though the jungle in my village was not very thick, my memory has made it thick. When I read Muneer Niazi's poetry, it feels like that jungle has become even thicker and spread wider. So now my jungle is thicker and more widespread, but that's not the end of it. It feels like there is some other jungle beyond that jungle. Walking in my jungle I have suddenly entered a completely different jungle, a bigger and more frightening jungle. I am afraid. It is like I am breathing in ancient times. It may be that ancient times are, indeed, to be found in our childhood.

Or is it that Muneer Niazi has made some kind of strange path with his couplets, a path that starts from Khanpur and passes through my village on the way to ancient times? So now it so happens that when I read Muneer's couplets, I travel, via my childhood, to ancient times. The fears and misgivings of childhood merge into the fears and misgivings of the man of ancient times.

> if someone calls you from behind in the jungles, Muneer
> don't ever turn around, don't turn around to see

But I think that Muneer himself has turned around and seen.

In the passage from ancient times to today, fears and misgivings have become a part of man's makeup. From the outside we appear fearless, but inside we are full of fear. Earlier we didn't turn to see, now we are scared to look within. Does some jungle lie within ourselves as well? Actually, earlier the jungle used to be outside of us, but now it is within. We came out of the jungle and built big cities and surrounded ourselves with walls, but, unknown to us, the jungle entered into us and sat hidden behind seven veils. And now it is sleeping inside us. Muneer Niazi is that person within whom the jungle has awoken and is stirring. Because, after all, he has turned and seen. While reading his poetry we feel as if we are walking in

the jungle and descending into the netherworld. Strange images emerge:

> buried underground the terror of cries that are voiceless
> in a hidden dungeon something like lightning flashes
>
> will you make me ill or
> will you become the fear of the unknown
> will you stay forever in some deep layer
> like some fear in the darkness

Then strange images come to my mind too. I descend into my own netherworld. Stories from different times, tales forgotten and scattered, come back to me, like shiny, glinting pots of gold buried in the ground. Raja Basath. The golden domes of Raja Basath's palace that would shine in the darkness of the earth. My grandmother told me many stories of how these pots would travel under the ground and call out, and what would happen to the person who heard one of these calls. Her words appeared to contain a desire to hear those calls. But she used to be scared as well; what if she herself heard that call on a dark and lonely night? Snakes guard those pots. My grandmother told me that the snakes have a king. She called him Raja Basath. In the writings of the Hindu pantheon, his name is given as Raja Basuka. His palace is

made of gold and shines in the darkness of the netherworld. My grandmother rarely took the snake's name. She would mention him through hints and gestures. Muneer Niazi is also scared of taking his name, but he mentions him a lot. So much fear and such attraction! But why?

Fear of the unknown and such an attraction to the unknown! This state of fear and attraction in Muneer Niazi's poetry makes one feel like Adam and Eve have just left Paradise and come to earth. The earth scares them and yet pulls them towards it. The netherworld is a mystery and the open expanse is also a mystery. The atmosphere of mystery is generated by one thing in one place and another thing in another place, and the stories of the Hindu pantheon and old fables get continuously entangled in the couplets.

the threat to this journey from its start, is it that calamity
or is it just the breeze, open the door and see

the desert of death may lie that way, beyond that point
    don't go
if you want to turn back you find there is no road

For Muneer, this earth with its netherworld and its expanse is an experience of terror and wonder. But then the same question arises: Why? Does this also have to

do with the story of expulsion from Paradise? Is this the fruit of migration? These mehndi trees didn't just grow on their own. Ancient man's experience is buried within you and me and within stories of the pantheon and old fables. Something must have happened, after all, for them to have come to life again with a new significance.

The clan of those who have written of the experience of migration must be separated from the other clans of Urdu literature. This experience took different forms in the writing of different writers. In Muneer Niazi, the experience has given rise to a form that creates a map of something like a new pantheon. As for the other new poetry, that can be done sitting in the teahouse without reference to any experience.