

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*

Contents

<i>Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch</i>	xxi
<i>Foreword</i>	xxix
<i>Translator's Note</i>	xxxv
Lost Paradise	1
<i>wo jo mere paas se ho kar kisi ke ghar gaya</i>	3
she passed by me on her way to someone else's home	
<i>chaman main rang-e-bahaar utra to maine dekha</i>	4
when the colours of spring settled on the garden	
then I saw	
<i>ye ladki jo is waqt sar-e-baam khadi hai</i>	5
this girl who is standing on the balcony today	
<i>sham aai hai sharaab-e-tez piina chaahiye</i>	6
strong drink should be drunk now that evening	
has come	
<i>baad-e-bahaar-e-gham mein wo aaraam bhi na tha</i>	7
I was not soothed by the breeze that blew in the	
springtime of my grief	

Contents

<i>meri saari zindagi ko be-samar us ne kiya</i>	8
he made my entire life amount to nothing	
<i>hain rawaan us raah par jis ki koi manzil na ho</i>	9
I am walking down a path that doesn't lead to any goal	
<i>us samt mujh ko yaar ne jaane nahiin diya</i>	10
my lover didn't allow me to go along that way	
<i>ashk-e-rawaan ki nahr hai aur ham hain doston</i>	11
a stream of tears flowing fast, and me, my friends	
<i>ek tez tiir tha ki laga aur nikal gaya</i>	12
it was a speeding arrow, it passed straight through me	
<i>saare manzar ek jaise saari baaten ek si</i>	13
all words sound alike, all sights look the same	
<i>be-khayaali mein yuunhi bas ek irada kar liya</i>	14
I made a decision mindlessly, there was no reason why	
<i>dil khauf mein hai aalam-e-faani ko dekh kar</i>	15
when I see this mortal world, it fills my heart with dread	
<i>sun bastiyon ka haal jo had se guzar gayiin</i>	16
the villages that crossed the line, let me tell you of their state	
<i>bechain bahut phirna ghabrae hue rahna</i>	17
you wander restless, you're anxious all the time	

Contents

<i>dasht-e-baaraan ki hawa se phir hara sa ho gaya</i>	18
its breeze brought me back to life, this desert rain	
<i>ek nagar ke naqsh bhula dun ek nagar ijaad karun</i>	19
one town I erase from memory, another I invent	
<i>khayaal jis ka tha mujhe khayaal mein mila mujhe</i>	20
the one I was thinking of came to me in thought	
<i>thake logon ko majbuuri mein chalte dekh leta hun</i>	21
I see tired people walk by, helpless and slow	
<i>nil-e-falak ke ism mein naqsh-e-asiir ke sabab</i>	22
like a silhouette imprisoned in a sky of blue	
<i>shahar parbat bahr-o-bar ko chhodta jaata hun</i>	23
leaving water and land behind, I pass by mountain and city	
<i>khwaab-o-khayaal-e-gul se kidhar jaaye aadmi</i>	24
no escape from the dream of a rose for a man	
<i>is shahr-e-sang-dil ko jala dena chaahiye</i>	25
burn this stone-hearted city to the ground	
<i>waqt se kahiyo zara kam kam chale</i>	26
go and tell time to move slowly	
<i>ghup andhere mein chhipe soone banon ki aur se</i>	27
from the deserted dark forests come the strains	

Contents

<i>apne ghar ko waapas jao ro ro kar samjhaata</i>	28
please go back home, it weeps and it pleads	
<i>pi li to kuchh pata na chala wo surur tha</i>	29
I drank and got so drunk that I didn't really know	
<i>gham ki baarish ne bhi tere naqsh ko dhoya nahiin</i>	30
your marks remain, sorrow's rain could not wash them clean	
<i>kis anokhe dasht me ho ae ghazaalaan-e-khutan</i>	31
what is this strange forest you have wandered into, O antelopes?	
<i>dil jal raha tha gham se magar naghma-gar raha</i>	32
my heart burnt with sorrow but it kept singing its song	
<i>ranj-e -firaag-e-yaar mein ruswa nahiin hua</i>	33
in the sorrow of your leaving I faced no ignominy	
<i>gham se lipat hi jaayenge aise bhi hum nahiin</i>	34
chain myself to sorrow, I am not like that	
<i>asiir-e-khwaabish qaid-e-muqaam tu hai ya mein</i>	35
prisoner of desire, captive of fate, is it you or is it me?	
<i>shab-e-mahtaab ne shab-nashin pe ajiib gul sa khila diiya</i>	36
a strange flower has bloomed on the throne, it's the moonlit night's fault	

Contents

<i>phuul the baadal bhi tha aur wo hasiin surat bhi thi</i>	37
the rose was there and the clouds and an elegant face	
<i>tera hona zaroori tha na hona bhi zaroori tha</i>	38
your being with me was needed, your leaving was needed too	
<i>kaisi kaisi besamar yaadon ke haalon mein rabe</i>	39
a variety of fruitless memories occupied my mind	
<i>baarishon mein us se ja ke milne ki hasrat kahaan</i>	40
I no longer feel like going to see her when it rains	
<i>shaan-e-hunar kalaam-e-sukhanvar bhi kuchh nahiin</i>	41
the glory of art is nothing, the poet's poetry here is nothing	
<i>laazim nahiin ki us ko bhi mera khayaal ho</i>	42
it's not at all certain that she also thinks of me	
<i>ye zameen ye jahaan raaz hi to hai</i>	43
this earth, this whole world, is a secret unrevealed	
<i>uga sabza dar-o-diwaar par aahista aahista</i>	44
creepers climbed the doors and walls slowly	
<i>zor paida jism-o-jaan ki na-tawaani se hua</i>	45
weakness of body and soul gave birth to a kind of strength	
<i>aa gayi yaad shaam dhalte hi</i>	46
as soon as evening came that memory returned	

Contents

<i>raushni dar raushni hai us taraf</i>	47
there is light and more light over there	
<i>abr-e-babaar shaam-e-tamanna bhi khwaab hai</i>	48
clouds in spring, this evening of longing is just a dream	
<i>mahfil-aara the magar phir kam-numa hote gaye</i>	49
I was the life of the party but I began to fade away	
<i>aaina ab juda nahin karta</i>	50
the mirror doesn't take me away any more	
<i>khaamoshi ne sada hona nahiin hai</i>	51
it is not going to become a cry, the silence	
<i>sae ghat-te jaate hain</i>	52
shade keeps decreasing	
<i>lamha lamha dam-ba-dam</i>	53
every moment every breath	
<i>udaasi ko bayaan kaise karoon mein</i>	54
how do I reveal my grief?	
<i>raat itni ja chuki hai aur sona hai abhi</i>	55
so much of the night is gone and I have yet to sleep	
<i>saaya-e-qasr-e-yaar mein baitha</i>	56
in the shadow of my beloved's mansion	

Contents

<i>aur bhi gisse hain jo mein daastan karta nahiin</i>	57
there are some other stories that I don't ever reveal	
<i>thi jis ki justuju wo haqiqat nahiin mili</i>	58
the reality that I sought couldn't be found	
<i>shebr-e-naamaalum ki jaadugari kuchh kam hui</i>	59
the mystery of this unknown town faded a little	
<i>ek aalam-e-hijraan hi ab hum ko pasand aaya</i>	60
a world of exile is all that I liked	
<i>zinda rahen to kya hai jo mar jayen hum to kya</i>	61
if I live or if I die, what difference does it make?	
<i>shikwa karein to kisse shikaayat karein to kya</i>	62
who do I complain to and what do I say?	
<i>aai hai ab yaad kya raat ek biite saal ki</i>	63
is this a memory of a night from a year gone by?	
<i>rida us chaman ki uda le gayi</i>	64
it blew the cloak of modesty away	
<i>kisi ko apne amal ka hisaab kya dete</i>	65
how was I to account for the way that I lived?	
<i>hain laakhon jahaan aabaad mere dil mein</i>	66
there are a million worlds flourishing in my heart	
<i>un se nayan mila ke dekho</i>	67
look into her eyes and see	

Contents

<i>deti nahiin amaan jo zamiin aasmaan to hai</i> if this earth cannot provide refuge the sky is always there	68
<i>ye be-sada sang-o-dar akele</i> these silent doors and thresholds alone	69
<i>shab-e-visaal mein duri ka khwaab kyuun aaya</i> on the night of meeting why did I dream of distance?	70
<i>kaisi hai rahguzaar wo dekheinge ja ke ab use</i> I'll go now and see what state it's in, that path	71
<i>sham ke maskan mein viraan mai-kade ka dar khula</i> when evening came the desolate tavern's door fell open	72
<i>abhi mujhe ek dasht-e-sada ki viraani se guzarna hai</i> I have to cross the desolation of a desert of voices calling out	73
<i>aur hain kitni manzilen baaqi</i> how many stages of the journey remain?	74
<i>darein huon ko aitbaar kis ka tha</i> the frightened people trusted someone, who was it?	75
<i>koi had nahiin hai kamaal ki</i> perfection knows no boundaries	76
<i>kitaab-e-umr ka ek aur baab khatm hua</i> another chapter of the book of life is over	77

Contents

<i>dooba nidhaal suraj taaron ka baagh chamka</i>	78
the tired sun set, the garden of stars glowed	
<i>jo dekhe the jaadu tere haath ke</i>	79
the magic of your hand that we saw	
<i>tujhse bichhad kar kya hun main ab baahar aa kar dekh</i>	80
what am I without you, come out now and see	
<i>ajab rang rangiin qabaaon mein the</i>	81
the colourful cloaks were coloured strange colours	
<i>jo mujhe bhula denge main unhen bhula dunga</i>	82
those who forget me, I too will forget them	
<i>subh-e-khundaan gham-e-shabaana tha</i>	83
the happy morning, the night's grief	
<i>dil ko haal-e-qaraar mein dekha</i>	84
my heart in a state of ease I saw	
<i>be-haqiqat duriyon ki dastaan hoti gai</i>	85
the stories of separation turned unreal by and by	
<i>ek masaafat panw shal karti hui si kbwaab mein</i>	86
a dream journey seems to rob my legs of life	
<i>safar mein hai jo azal se ye wo bala hi na ho</i>	87
the threat to this journey from its start, is it that calamity?	

Contents

<i>bas ek maah-e-junuun-khez ki ziya ke siva</i>	88
apart from the moonlight that provokes frenzies	
<i>imtibaan humne diye is daar-e-faani mein bahut</i>	89
in this mortal world I have been through many tests	
<i>jafaaen dur tak jaati hain kam aabaad shahron mein</i>	90
injustice goes a long way in less inhabited towns	
<i>gham mein tamaam raat ka jaaga hua tha mein</i>	91
all night long I stayed awake in grief	
<i>wo samne bhi aaye to dekha na kar use</i>	92
if she appears before you, don't look at her	
<i>ek khayaal-e-kham ne mahsur kar rakha mujhe</i>	93
a crude way of thinking had enchanted me	
<i>begaangi ka abr-e-giraan-e-baar khul gaya</i>	94
it burst and poured down, the dark cloud of resentment	
<i>itne khaamosh bhi raha na karo</i>	95
don't fall so silent	
<i>shu'a-e-mahr-e-munavvar shabon se paida ho</i>	96
let the rays of the brilliant sun be born from the nights	
<i>hari tabniyon ke nagar par gaye</i>	97
they went to green branch cities	

Contents

<i>us ka naqsha ek be-tartiiib afsaane kaa tha</i>	98
a story out of order is what it looked to be	
<i>phir subah ki hawa mein ji mein malaal aaye</i>	99
again the morning breeze fills the heart with grief	
<i>apna to ye kaam hai bhaai dil kaa khuun babaate rahna</i>	100
this is what I do, my friends, spill my heart's blood all the time	
<i>siyaahi shab ki maddham ho gayi hai</i>	101
the night's inkiness has faded	
<i>abr mein barq ke gulzaar dikhaate usko</i>	102
a garden of lightning in the clouds, I could have shown it to her	
<i>sahn ko chamka gai belon ko giila kar gai</i>	103
it brightened up the courtyard, bathed all the vines	
<i>chaand nikla hai sar-e-qarya-e zulmat dekho</i>	104
the moon has risen over the village, look, see the light	
<i>is shahr ke yahiin kabiin hone ka rang hai</i>	105
it feels like this town is near here somewhere	
<i>jamaal-e-yaar ka daftar raqam nahiin hota</i>	106
my lover's beauty is hard to put into words	
<i>koi daagh hai mere naam par</i>	107
there is a mark against my name	

Contents

<i>khayaal-e-yakta mein khwaab itne</i> a singular idea and dreams so many	108
<i>apni hi tegh-e-ada se aap ghaayal ho gaya</i> wounded by the sword of its own glamour	109
<i>saat-e-hijraan hai ab kaise jahaanon mein rahuun</i> the time to leave is here, in what worlds should I live?	110
<i>khumaar-e-shab mein use main salaam kar baitha</i> in the intoxication of night, I offered her my salute	111
<i>sooraj ki damak bijli ki kadak saavan ka hara ban dekha hai</i> the glint of the sun, the lightning flash, in the spring I have seen the green forest	112
<i>mein sun raha hoon wo jo sunaayi deta nahiin</i> I am hearing the inaudible	113
<i>thakan se raah mein chalna muhaal bhi hai mujhe</i> I am so tired I am finding it difficult to walk along the way	114
<i>rahta hai ek har us sa qadmon ke saath saath</i> wherever the feet go, a fear walks along with them	115
<i>gairon se mil ke hi sahi bebaak to hua</i> it took a meeting with strangers for her to lose her timidity	116

Contents

<i>naam behad the magar un ka nishaan koi na tha</i>	117
names without number and no sign to be seen	
<i>din agar chadhata udhar se main idhar se jaagta</i>	118
there the sun climbs in the sky, here I wake from sleep	
<i>dar ke kisi se chhup jata hai jaise saanp khazaane mein</i>	119
like a frightened snake that hides in a treasure chest	
<i>ek main aur itne laakhon silsilon ke saamne</i>	120
in front of a million genealogies I stand alone	
<i>dil ajab mushkil mein hai ab asl raaste ki taraf</i>	121
my heart is in a strange quandary, what is the right direction?	
<i>raat falak par rang-birangi aag ke gole chuute</i>	122
last night multicoloured balls of fire lit up the firmament	
<i>khush hai jaise ab riha ho kar puraane baar se</i>	123
it's like an old burden has gone and its happy to be free	
<i>kuchh waqt baad us se jo nafrat hui mujhe</i>	124
after a while I began to think of her with antipathy	
<i>Notes</i>	125
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	126

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch¹

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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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 *Shabeed* 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

Muneer Niazi: A Biographical Sketch

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

Foreword

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.

Foreword

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

Foreword

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

Foreword

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

Foreword

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.