

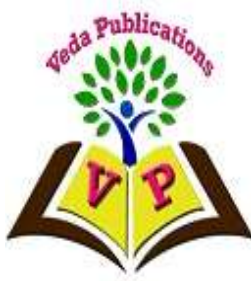


ANGST AND BEYOND: READING RAHI'S "A CALL WITHOUT A SOUND" THROUGH MODERNISTIC LENS

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The armies took their seats, marshaled into ranks.

But one man, Thersites, still railed on, nonstop.

Homer, *The Iliad*,
trans. Robert Fagles

*Poetry Forgive me for having helped you understand
you're not made of words alone.*

Roque Dalton - "El Salvador"

A poem without words choked by the harrows of silence.

- Silveira

ABSTRACT

Since the birth of literature, poetry has been the best source of expression for almost all human feelings and as such violence is no exception. A poet lives among other human beings remains quite alive to the developments and happenings which occur in his milieu from time to time. Since Rahman Rahi, a Kashmiri and the most prominent poet, like other Kashmiri poets has given voice to what Kashmir has lost. He in his poems refers to the rise, climax and fall of the violent political movement. His poems mention the wailings and laments which are heard everywhere. His poems depict myriad shades of the gloom and bleakness in which all are engulfed and the whole valley is enveloped. He refers to the rumbling noise of guns and grenades and makes evident references to the glorious past of Kashmir which no more exists now. In fact, it is reduced to mundane living full of fears, pain, bloodshed and deaths. In this paper, the researcher applies modernistic lens and argues how Rahman Rahi looks at what happens in Kashmir in his poem "A Call without a Sound". He does talk about the feelings of the poet towards his mother land and the people.

Keywords: *Modern, Poetry, Violence, Gloom, Fear, Tyranny, Struggle.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Kashmir has seen tough times especially due to the political and historical crisis which gained more strength and momentum during the last few decades due to the people's resistance movement affecting especially the youth of the valley. A lot untoward happened on this soil of Kashmir and which made even poets to express the resistance of the Kashmiris against the colonial master. This reminds me of Barbara Harlow who writes in her well-known book *Resistance Literature* about poetry:

Poetry is capable not only of serving as a means for the expression of personal identity or even nationalist sentiment. Poetry, as a part of the cultural institutions and historical existence of a people, is itself an arena of struggle. That struggle, as it is taking place, culturally as well as politically and militarily, today in various of the countries of the Third World... (Harlow 1987:33)

MAIN ARGUMENT

Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature* opines that 'The resistance poems actively engage in the historical process of struggle against the cultural oppression of imperialism, and assert thereby their own polemical historicity.' (Harlow 1987:33). In light of this quote, poetry produced in Kashmir during the last two decades of the resistance turmoil produces an altogether different picture of the agony of the people. Based on these themes, the poetry of this period can be divided into three broad types:

- Poetry as a faithful and non-partisan representation of individual experience;
- Poetry openly opposing militancy; and
- Poetry that glamorizes the armed struggle.

The poetry of the first type, based on the absolute function of poetry that is representation of experience, adheres strictly to the norms and aesthetic values of poetry without showing allegiance to any side of the conflict. It is broadly speaking the poetry that is written by highly sensitive poets who consciously experiment with language, technique, and representing experience of the poet or that of a

persona shown as a victim of violence. This type of poetry evolved naturally as a result of the theories and practices of Modernism. Some of its characteristic features are:

❖ Technical Innovations

Modern Kashmiri poetry, particularly written during the years of extreme militancy sought more and more indirect forms of expression. It refuses the stereotyped and traditionally accepted norms of use of language, figures of speech, and rhythm and rhyme. It ceaselessly makes innovations in shocking experiences of bloodshed, intimidation and oppression. The old forms of similes and metaphors could not bear the burden of the changed values. Every poem has to be a new deviation from the expectations of the readers.

❖ Anti-realism

Modern poetry, though grounded in the present, is an open rejection of the standards of traditional realism. It considers the reality within the poetry as seen or felt by the poet as an individual, not dictated by any theory of realism. The day-to-day experience is seen through artist's inner feelings and mental states. The traditional sequence of events and rational structure of the incidents are replaced by the poet's own perception and emotional state. The poets use myths and allusions to seek maximum indirect representation of experience. Ambiguity is a conscious technique in modern poetry.

❖ Individualism

Modern poetry is highly individualistic in terms of the poet's position as the conscious use of unconventional language and technique. The poet emerges as the central consciousness that deviates from routine ways of life, religion, politics, ethics, and aesthetics. His/her view point acquires central importance as the poem is self-conscious search for adequate images.

❖ Conscious Form

Modern poetry rejects the notion of romanticism that poetry is a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth). It is highly intellectual,



cerebral rather than emotional. It is deliberately analytical and fragmentary. It does not try to offer readymade answers to the issues of life, it rather creates and stimulates questions. The viewpoint of the persona of the poems acquires primary significance. A poem is an open-ended work that does not seek formal perfection. Its form and language are inevitable for the poem itself and cannot be used in any other poem with the same reference.

Pertinently, Rahman Rahi (1925-) once one of the chief founders of the Progressive Movement, emerged as the first prominent representative of Modernism. Although he prefers to remain detached from the 'dangerous' reality of the two decades of militancy and takes refuge in mystic forms of poetry, some of his poems are definitely the most representative of the times. His poem *Thyanvi rost sadaa* ("A Call without a Sound") is perhaps the most complete representation of the rise, climax and fall of violent political movement. This poem, written in 1999, is in the form of the *ghazal*. It is a form of poetry in single metrical scheme and alternate rhyming stanzas of two lines, each stanza being an independent entity in terms of theme. The poet has written the poem in five parts.

The first part starts as an invocation to Wind, a symbol of poetic inspiration.

*O Wind, be not confounded by stirring thought,
The ocean is ebullient, the steed's hooves are nail-punched.
The flower-crazy warbling bulbul is struck dumb,
Lakes of the fir-covered land's run dry.
Many a constellation sunk into the abyss;
Many a cypress are inundated by tears.*

(Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

In this section, the poet expresses the shock of the changed reality around him and asks his own inspiration to be consciously careful in expression. Since the experience is painful, it becomes inevitable for expression. He portrays the spate of violence as a deluge that has left the valley of *Rishis* and saints completely battered. In his distinctive poetic metaphor, Rahman Rahi draws a picture of a fir-covered Himalayan valley that has been devastated

by a catastrophic cyclone. The atmosphere that made the bulbuls warble augment spring is heard no more. The *Deodars* that once covered the whole land and made it an abode of silences and meditation is now a tumultuous and arid desert. It seems as if the soil has lost its moisture to nourish any verdure. The brilliant stars, the symbols of achievement are inundated by the oceans of forgetfulness. An impenetrable gloom is enveloping all.

The poet makes a fervent call to Lal Dyad – the spiritual guide of the people. In the *vaakhs* (sayings) of Lal Dyad, there are many images of inseparable nature of the creator, *Shiva*, and his creative force or *Shakhti* and she hailed Kashmir as the land of this divine trust. But if she perchance revisits her land of peace, she would surely commit suicide. No such harmonious unity is possible in the land that is devastated. Dismayed with the present, the poet recounts the pleasures of the collective past of the people. There was a time when the people of the land participated in ordinary pleasures, fun, and festivity but now all people stand deprived of these festivities. Gone are the days when people read tales of romance and adventure and enjoyed roaming in imagination and fantasy. References to the epic *Shahnama* of Firdousi (a famous Persian poet) and *Gulrez* are apt here because the two works signify the collective past of the people. Instead of songs of romance and valour, there are wailings and laments heard everywhere.

*Gales ransacked all pleasure rooms,
Black daggers fell on all the candles lit.
Lotus-like eyes, casements ajar
Are overwhelmed by a murky smog.
Brawny breasts now wind-struck doors.
Every word the Shahnaamah of yore
Reads like a mournful elegy;
Gulrez torn to shreds, now a thorny creel*

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

The serene atmosphere is shown polluted by smoke of gunpowder and the rumbling noise of guns and grenades. It starts in the wee hours of every morning and continues up to late night when old dwellings of people are seen set ablaze. The pain of the people is too intense to be expressed in words. It



seems as if the people are bereft of conscience and no one dares to protest. All the hopes, musings and meditation have been replaced by stifling silence and sinister premonitions.

The second part of the poem also deals with poignant nostalgia. The glorious past of Kashmir is reduced to mundane living, full of fears and dread. There was a time when the people were in perfect harmony with the bountiful nature. The poet ruefully remembers the days when the land was a place of simple pleasures, fun, frolic, music and art. The poet is nostalgic about the times when in spring the *Zabarwan Mountain*, which is in the vicinity of Srinagar, was verdant and burgeoning after harsh winter, and common people, rich as well as poor, could not sit indoors. They were thrilled by the very news of the advent of spring and, in full abandon, enjoyed boating in the lakes and partying in the gardens. The hopes of New Year made the soul soar high in the sky like the birds of the land. The spring used to kindle the slumbering imagination of poets also and they partake of the rapturous season. It was a custom of the land to mud wash their houses to welcome the New Year and express their resolve to live more meaningfully and purity. The city was further beautified by the flower vendors who roamed in the streets and rowed in their row-boats in the river and canals. The youthful people knew no restrictions and false modesty. In order to honour God's blessings on them they adorned their bodies, dress and hair. The boys and girls enjoyed tripping, working and singing together.

*Buds of the garden bush hurried to burgeon;
Steps on the road, a berserk brigade;
Curls unfurled cascaded down,
Intimated, a booty hidden was unveiled.
Beauty a passionate welcome note,
Expressed love, destiny in hand.*

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

The third section mentions the poet speaks of the sudden cataclysmic change in the moral, spiritual and political scene of Kashmir. The land once known for peace, communal harmony, and spiritualism witnessed an unprecedented mutation in its ethos. Kashmiri once pejoratively called "*zulm parast*" (worshippers of tyranny) all of a sudden

shook their sloth off, and in consonance with the massive movements in various parts of the Central Asia and East Europe demonstrated against arbitrary rule to achieve the right of self determination. Teeming thousands of young and old, children and women thronged the streets all over the Muslim dominated areas of the state of Jammu Kashmir. They were single minded in their resolve to use peaceful means of demonstrations for forcing India to address to the demand of the people in accordance with the resolutions of the Security Council. Here I get reminded of Barbara Harlow who says:

The resistance movements, within the context of which the poets write, are organized political and guerrilla movements which had and continue to have as their aim the liberation of the land and the people through armed struggle from the forces of outside oppression, from the political, military, and cultural hegemony and domination by imperialist and colonialist countries.

(Harlow 1987:47)

Initially all the demonstrations were peaceful and the people were jubilant that the result of their peaceful struggle for Independence would get resolved like other freedom movements in the states of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the Balkan states. Movements of Islamic resurgence in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan and freedom movements in the East European countries like Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Armenia, that achieved their aim during the early nineties of the 20th century inspired the Muslim population of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Rahi using his individual way of style refers to this upheaval in many similes, metaphors and allusions. He describes the change in people's temperament in terms of a 'spring dream' of a chained prisoner.

*Having many a spring-dream,
The frenzied grows wilder, breaks his chains.*

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

It was as if the icy mountain-tops felt some inner heat and started melting and rivers started gushing



forth. Although there were many dangers of bloodshed, the people dared heavily armed police and army. The poets presents it in the image of an old lamp that continues burning in spite of the wild wind.

The poet, too, feels the euphoria and begins to feel an urge to participate in people's movement. He feels as if it is a great festival in which all, young and old, are in full abandon.

*Without asking, my soul intimates
In full swing a gala is on again.
I quaffed a flame, like Aazar I dance.
Frenzied lovers took their prank scarves,
Founts of magical crooning gush forth.*

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

The people defy death and are firm in resolve that they can make the mighty powers surrender before their never yielding struggle. The sleepy country, said to have been founded by legendary Kashp Rishi, stirs and surges forth as a deluge. The primeval lake that existed before the appearance of Kashmir valley, named Sati Sar, in the *Neelamatapurana* (the oldest semi-historical account of the land and people of Kashmir) seems ebullient again. The poet too is convinced that the collective memory of the people as a distinct nation and history shall succeed in the struggle for achieving the lost identity.

*With death-defying fervour the open is filled up,
Streets and markets humming with crowds.
The starling shall carry the hill on its wings,
Slumbering Kashapmar has re-emerged, it seemed.*

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

The next part of the poem speaks of the sinister designs of the enemies of peaceful movements. It was during the peaceful demonstrations that some unknown masked gunmen in the crowds started using automatic rifles and grenades against the army. The common masses had never thought of this new turn. The use of arms provoked the army and para-military forces to retaliate with equally lethal weapons. The common masses having faith in peaceful struggle of

demonstrations could not withstand the results of the armed conflict. It was later known to them that the whole of the State was under the sway of thousands of militants who bore AK-47 rifles, rocket launchers and sniper rifles and even missile launchers. The common masses, though initially thrilled to hear of such 'heroes' ready to martyr themselves for the political cause were frightened to the extent that nobody dared to come out from their houses. Daily incidents of cross-firings across the State caused death of common citizens, burning down of schools, colleges, hospitals, bridges and all forms of communication. This turbulent change is again described by Rahman Rahi in his distinct style:

*Suddenly the weather took a whimsical turn,
Freezing wind blasted the almond bloom.
The cynic's eyes, these mourning processions;
Morbid reflection, treason in a story of love.
Evil-hearing ears hear volleys of abuse.
Some unseen worm gnaws the bulb of the crocus.
Gog's designs and Magog's hill:
The sages' jungle turns into a thicket of swords.*

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

The simile of almond blooms blasted in autumnal wind suggests that the people's struggle took an ugly shape soon after its start. People lost faith in the leadership, and each person suspected the other as his enemy. The stories of love and fraternity changed into incidents of treason. Cynicism prevailed because people started doubting one another's designs. Thousands of armed young Kashmiris joined the Government sponsored counter-militants, called 'Akhwanis'. Even the founders of militancy joined the pro-India militant groups and worked hand in hand with the security forces. The poet refers to this painful experience in the metaphor of a worm gnawing at the bulbs of the crocus. He also alludes to the biblical legend of Gog and Magog. The spate of enthusiasm petered out abruptly. Disillusionment and dismay swayed all minds. The Valley of saints became the target of the angles of destruction Gog and Magog who ransacked it thoroughly. It appeared as if tyrants of the past like Nadir and Hitler were reborn to destroy all.



The poets and other creative artists could not remain unaffected. Killing, humiliation, and public lynching of poets, artists, intellectuals, and journalists became daily news. The poet, in the fourth section, therefore seeks total withdrawal from the external world and seeks refuge in spiritual meditation. The poet, completely disillusioned and dejected, has a dialogue with the great spiritual woman poet *Lal Dyad* of the fourteenth century who taught forbearance and quest for freedom within the subjective world. In all her poetry, the existence of 'Truth' is a state of an awakened soul, not an external objective reality. Her highly metaphoric verses teach meditation as the sole means of liberation from the delusions of the world. She too composed her verses in the worst phases of violence and bloodshed in the valley of Kashmir. The section is in the form of a dialogue between the disciple and the Guru.

"Why don't you awaken your consciousness?" She said.

"The pearl," I said "is in a cracked oyster.

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

Then the Guru poetess asks him to burn the inner gloom that has overwhelmed his soul. The poet says that this spiritual practice needs tranquillity and peace, but is surrounded by turmoil and vexation.

"Your inmost dark you raze." She said.

"Outside," I said, "is turbid and vexed."

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

The poet asks the Guru to use her spiritual powers to come to the rescue of the valley of Kashmir by opening the doors under the hills. The poet Guru tells him that spiritual emancipation lies in transcending spaces. One has to change into an unheard call and resound in boundless spaces. Rahi also uses many metaphors borrowed from *Lal Dyad* like 'a call without sound', 'traversing the spaces', 'make wind your messenger', 'to dance nude' and so on and so forth. Borrowings from other poets and using them in his own creative manner are characteristic of Rahi's Style.

After taking advice from his spiritual preceptor, the poet concludes the poem with celebration of freedom. It is not the freedom that is

in consonance with the political uproar, but freedom achieved by an individual with an awakened soul. It is the freedom achieved by total detachment from the external world and its standards of loss and gain and good and bad. It is rather the freedom, which is inexplicable in terms of politics and rational thought. The poet, again in the metaphor of *Lal Dyad*, calls it dancing nude in the 'within' of the individual. New hope is suggested by images like: white doves soar over hyacinth decked hills, fragrance pent up in the Hades gets released, zephyr moves over the tops of the pine trees, a flag without a colour flutters all around, and the poet dances with the rhythm that emerges from his awakened soul. It is this type of freedom that *Lal Dyad* preached. It helps in getting rid from the dread of death and achieving salvation.

Tatam tatam thay, tanan tanaahuu.

O gales without form, you dance and dance!

Go on resounding, O soundless call!

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

Rahman Rahi, who initially hailed the sudden upsurge for 'Freedom' and expressed solidarity with the people, later on distanced himself from all political jargon. He preferred total withdrawal and retraction from all sorts of debate. His famous line of a *ghazal* has become proverbial:

V'alaikumas ni vaar mulaqaat kyah karav

(When we cannot say 'salaam', how to meet each other and converse?)

- (Rahi's "A Call without a Sound")

Most of the major senior Kashmiri poets, particularly Amin Kamil, gave up writing as a result of the cynicism and fear of political vendetta. It is very rarely that some of them wrote about the bloodshed, sabotage, disappearances, indiscriminate firings, rapes and extortion. This shows clearly that a poet can recover and restore repressed voices, stories, and histories if he / she wishes. Now I conclude with a quote from Gluzman's *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry*:

The poetic work, in fulfilling a vision of life ...within beautiful tangible forms, affects most people and is capable of inscribing things in their hearts and awakening them



to thoughts and reflections, much more than abstract theoretical debates. (Gluzman 2002:17)

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Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi. She has to her credit an M. ed. degree as well from Kashmir University. Her main areas of research interest are literature of resistance and Diaspora writings. She is a young researcher who has worked extensively in the area of conflict literature and has presented and published a good number of research papers in reputed national and international journals. She spent few years of her life as a lecturer in the UAE in American Curriculum. She is also a certified personality development trainer from Pearson and Educomp. Since Tasmiya lives in the heart of Kashmir, Srinagar, She is quite alive to what happens around her and thus uses her personal experience and in depth study of literature produced on Kashmir in making a comprehensive study of the contemporary literature in terms of portrayal of pain, anguish and distress caused by three decades old turbulence and turmoil among the common people of Kashmir.
