

# Josh Malihabadi all but forgotten

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By Ashfaque Naqvi

THEY did have some sort of a function at Islamabad, but the death anniversary of Josh Malihabadi which fell on Feb 22 went unnoticed in Lahore. He had a large number of admirers but many more enemies. He was maligned and condemned mostly because of his liberal views and the none-too-discreet way of projecting them. I still remember one of his articles appearing in the weekly *Musawwir* of pre-partition Bombay in which he said that only he who had the fear of God in him could be a poet. Evidently, it raised many eyebrows. He was clearly an iconoclast and yet wrote 'marsias' with an intense feeling. No one can deny his mastery over words and his inexhaustible vocabulary. Even when writing songs for films he showed his class. I remember a few lines from one which he composed for a sensuous sort of dance:

*Mairay jubna ka dekho ubhar  
Jaisay Ganga ki mauj  
Jaisay Turkon ki fauj  
Jaisay gaddar anar  
Dekho dekho ubhar*

And how can I forget the long poem which he wrote to mourn his youth.

*Thaki Jamna ko jab Ganga kaleijay say  
lagatei heh*

*Mujhay beysakhta apni javani yaad  
aati heh.*

In this poem he even invented some rhyming words.

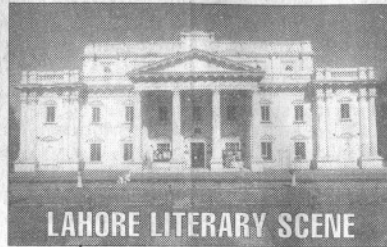
I have been a Josh fan ever since he came to be known as Shair-i-Inquilab. Those were the days when I actually purchased books to read and he used to be on top of my shopping list. One verse of his ghazal has been haunting me since then:

*Phir qashqa bar jabeen koi nikla heh  
deir say  
Ahang-i-azmaish-i-eeman kiye huey.*

I personally believe that had Faiz not been there, Josh would definitely have been accepted as the greatest poet of the last century although Hafeez Jullundri is also a strong contender for the slot. Iqbal, of course, is not in the race as he is on a different plane altogether. He cannot be equated with any of the conventional poets.

The only thing I have against Josh is his bias against the poets of the Punjab. The *rubai* he wrote about Hafeez Jallundri when he went to Hyderabad Deccan to collect donations for his *Shahnama* was highly derogatory. And then I have heard him in person at the Mohni Road residence of Sufi Tabacum when he came to Lahore

together with Ravish Siddiqi and Sahir Ludhianvi. The remarks he made about Hafeez and Faiz at the sitting, though jokingly, were not in good taste. To round off this piece, I'll narrate my personal, and interesting, encounter with Josh Sahib. Once while travelling from Bombay to Poone by a train with an appropriate name, Deccan Queen, and



passing through a most scenic terrain, Josh happened to be the only one in my compartment. Knowing that he snubbed anyone pronouncing an Urdu word incorrectly, or at least made faces when someone did so, I decided to play safe. I started talking to him like an illiterate Punjabi. "O Josh saab ji, ki haal heh tuhada ji. Sanun pata heh tusi baray wadday shair ho ji... Hoar sunao ki haal heh ji..." and so on. The result was that he rested his head against the

window and kept dozing for the rest of the journey.

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I HAVE just seen two beautifully, rather artistically, produced books by Tajdeed Isha'at Ghar of Lahore/Islamabad. Titled *Ik Umr Chahiye* and *Jheel Jheel Udasi*, these are poetic collections of a father, Asghar Mehdi, and his talented daughter, Sheba Taraz, who also happens to be an artist. So far as Asghar Mehdi is concerned, he has appeared for the first time as a poet and not done badly at all. That is despite the fact that, as he says himself in his introduction, he never gives a second look to what he has written nor does he seek advice about his verse from anyone. I wish he could curb both these habits. He would then emerge a much better poet.

Sheba, however, has been known earlier as well, mainly as a poet of haiko and co-editor of the monthly, *Tajdeed-i-Nau*. In this collection, however, she has presented her short poems in free verse. In the preface to the book, the veteran poet, Razi Tirmizi, has gone all out, and rightly so, to praise the young

lady. Who would not after reading such poems as:

*Tum bhi apni zindagi mein muftala ho  
jao gay*

*Mein bhi apni zindagi mein beytarah  
kho jaoongi*

*Eik lamha wasl ka  
Yaad kay gumbad mein latka ... jhool-  
ta reh jaeega*

I don't want to spoil the poem by giving an English translation.

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ONCE while speaking at the launching of a book in English I gave credit to the author and the publisher for daring to write and produce a book in a language which is completely on the wane in the country. Even teachers of the so-called English-medium schools, while asking for a day's leave, write in their application, "Please leave me for one day."

But now I have another example. The other day I saw a young lady studying in a high school, a girl in an English-medium school, with a uniform reading *KESTREL* with the word, I looked up at the word. And, lo, it was spelled as *KESTREL*, a kind of small bird.