

**SELECTED POEMS  
OF  
BALRAJ KOMAL**

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## INTRODUCTION

His name is Balraj. Just that; no surname. And his pen name is Komal. Komal means "gentle, tender." It is not often that a poet's name expresses the full personality of his poetry. Balraj Komal's poetry is gentle, often understated, often complex and ambiguous. Sometimes puzzled and questioning, sometimes sad and lonely and occasionally rapturous, especially when he contemplates the antics of little children. Balraj Komal's tone of voice has none of the violence and eloquence of tumult that characterizes much modern Urdu poetry.

As a poet of understatement, Komal stands out in sharp contrast to the poets of the previous generation who were argumentative and declaratory. Their poems were a "turning loose of emotions", and the emotions they turned loose were so generalized that they sounded more like prepared statements than personal utterances. Balraj Komal made a conscious break from a poetics which required poems to be written in accordance with a transparent scheme. With the poets of the previous generation, one could often predict the ending of a poem by reading the first few lines. With Komal, modern Urdu poetry learned to conceal as much as it revealed. A poem of Komal is not a well mapped-out territory with all the turns and twists clearly marked. It is a slightly magical place, where you discover things as you go along. The poem comes through as a metaphor which you decode gradually; if you don't manage to find the key, you are likely to feel frustrated.

The poem is a private act, made public for the appreciation of those who are willing to interpret it on its own terms.

Much modern Urdu poetry is ambiguous, even obscure, but each poet has his own way of being ambiguous. A search for polyvalence marks all modern poets, and yet very few are similar in tone or temper. The influence of western models, particularly the nineteenth-century French symbolists and the twentieth-century English poets has made most Urdu poets travel a long way from the medieval manner of the classical poet or the

strident transparency of the poetry of the forties and the fifties. A student of English literature himself, Komal finds himself at home among his western mentors. But he has assimilated, rather than routinely imitated, his influence, and has produced a synthesis of the Urdu and Western streams. Unlike that of some modern Urdu poets, his modernity does not consist in using foreign or trendy words, in writing on modish subjects, or in modeling his poems on those of his favourite western poets. He writes like an Indian who lives and thinks in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Parindon Bhara Asman* (A Sky Full of Birds) is Balraj Komal's fifth book of poems. He has written a good bit of fiction and criticism too, and has done some occasional writing in English as well. The foundation of his reputation was laid in 1948, with a short poem called *Akeli* (A Girl Alone). It is about a little girl who has lost both her parents in the post-Partition riots. A portrait drawn in very few words, with masterful economy and no sentiment or sensationalism, the poem stands out among the mass of writings on this theme which were full of gory detail. Instead of awakening the reader's conscience, such poems numbed it.

Nearly fifteen years later, Komal wrote *Kaghaz ki Na'o* (A Paper Boat), another outstanding poem with a child at its centre. The poet and his young son are floating paper boats in the rain. Then, while the child sleeps through the rainy night, the poet writes a new poem and goes to sleep, exhausted by his creative effort. The child is up before the poet, and makes a new paper boat from the paper on which his father had put down his poem so painstakingly. The poem ends with the child declaring: "He who doesn't clap his hands today is a fool." The child's unconscious cruelty thus becomes the symbol of the soul in high glee, a soul identified with the spirit of life. One is reminded of Yeats who wanted the soul to "clap its hands and sing", and "louder sing", so that it could reach out for the eternal state of pure Art.

In *Akeli*, the child is alone and friendless, one who done no one any wrong, someone like Eliot's "infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing". Perhaps it is the poet's humanity which has transformed the lonely girl into the confident and powerful force that the young son represents. The poem also seems to say that child's happiness is more valuable than any poem.

In *Parindon Bhara Asman*, Komal gives yet another outstand-

ing poem about a child. *Nanha Shahsawar* (The Little Rider) celebrates the child's creative urge to identify himself with his grandfather, and the grandfather's nostalgia for his own lost childhood, back to which his grandson, riding on his back, seems to be taking him. The poem is the greying grandfather's paean to the growing baby's creative force -- a baby who is a miniature grandfather in the making. In spite of its seeming lack of depth, the poem presents in fact a near-mystical fusion of the two forces -- the baby's, which is resurgent and emergent, and the grandfather's, which is old and waning, but is strong precisely because it can take the burden of the young rider.

It is no accident that I have chosen these poems on children from Komal's oeuvre to introduce his poetry. More than any other modern poet, Komal has shown an awareness of children and a creative identification with them. Reading Komal's poems on and about children, one is constantly reminded of Yeats, but not because Komal's poems have Yeatsian echoes or reverberations. Rather, Komal's poems are so different, ultimately so unaware of the outside world (an entity which disturbed and moved Yeats almost all times), that they become epiphanies of childhood, rather than occasions for intense speculations about poetry, art, the world of ordinary, good and bad people, and Platonic essences.

In Komal's poems, no harmony is attempted or contemplated between the the children's world and the outside world. There are, instead, some collisions, when the child's world intrudes on the grown-up people's world, and want to hold its own, or even prevail. In *Lambi Kali Jhil* (The long dark lake), a group of noisy children are on their way to the school while a woman (perhaps a young bride), commits suicide in her own home. The poet's family, and the child, are out shopping. The child demands:

*Tell me about it once more:  
A star shot from the sky and  
went down  
last night  
Into the long dark lake.*

The poem ends here (it's a very short poem anyway), and we do not know if we should hope for the child's world to be ulti-

mately victorious, or can only hope for it to survive somehow in the midst of squalor and the cruelty which characterises the world of grown-ups.

There is a remarkable poem in the collection entitled 'A Sky Full of Birds'. I have not seen anything quite like it in the whole of Urdu literature. It might be interesting to look at it here, for it is in many ways a poem that could introduce all the poems that Komal has written on or about children. Yet it does not have children, or the children's world, for its theme. *Saba ke hath pile ho gae* (The wind's hands are now saffron) is about a young girl getting married, or who has just got married. The poet gives her all his best wishes and blessings, but the subtle change in the girl's emotional state seems to be independent of or even indifferent to these blessings and prayers. The metaphor of wind suggests that she is destined to go away from her home. After a few lines, we perceive that *saba* (wind) could be the real name of the girl. (Saba is a common enough name in Urdu). We are told that night and day, the wind (or Saba) now decorates her body with doors and walls; a ceiling is now the hem of a shawl to cover her head with; she decks out her feet with the caressing touch of a marble floor. These and other, even more complex, images serve as metaphors for the girl's state of mind: the thought of a new home pervades her psyche; or she now feels sensuous and fulfilled; or she now sees her new destiny about to be played out before her.

*The wind opens her mouth, smiles  
she now speaks to no one  
in whispers*

Thus marriage is self-fulfillment, the birth of a new confidence, a coming to maturity, symbolized by her becoming both visible and audible. The protagonist seems to have a tinge of regret in his tone, but it is also triumphant, proud. And yet, the regret seems to linger. Is the poem making a statement about our male-oriented society, in which women can attain self-identity only through marriage? Or is the poet regretting what our tradition-ridden values would describe as the girl's loss of innocence? Or does he merely celebrate the fact of a daughter's marriage, a duty well done, a responsibility faithfully discharged? It is difficult to insist on any one interpretation. The ambiguity gives a

rich complexity to the poem.

Balraj Komal is a difficult and rewarding poet. He is also one who renews himself constantly. Ten or fifteen years ago he seemed to be flagging, the tone of his voice and the rhythm of his poems seemed to have hit a groove. Then he switched to prose poems, and then to poems which make greater use of Persian-based words. The delightful ambiguity, which seemed about to give way to vagueness, came back in a different garb: apparently simple poems about his grandson. His metres became more various; his line arrangement on the page also took on more variety, with better visual effect. He still remains more fond of image and symbol than of simile, metonymy and forceful statement. He does little overt violence to the language, but his richness of metaphor keeps his reader alert. Like most modernist Urdu poets, Komal also suggests more than he states. But he discovered and practiced his poetics long before it became fashionable. He is a true heir to Miraji (1912 - 1949), the greatest modernist poet in Urdu.

What role does Balraj Komal assign to, or propose for, the poet in the modern world? Our times are torn by conflicts and rivalries so vast that the very future of humanity seems uncertain. Like Auden, Komal too has no grandiose notions about the poet's role. But like E.E. Cummings, he does seem to throw out a challenge; it is easy to blow up the world; it is difficult to make a poem. Komal's archetypal poet is a stranger, one whom he views as his own double. He is enamoured of words, fond of the pleasing way they can be arranged, in love with their sounds. And that is why the unfeeling multitudes suspect that he is a 'transcendental' and raise a shout:

*Kill the stranger; bury him. Night and day,  
Through his whispers, this stranger now brings down  
doomsday-intoxication  
upon a terrified city.*

Shamsur Rahaman Faruqi