

Classic Poetry Series

Shareef Kunjahi
- poems -

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Shareef Kunjahi(1915 – 2007)

Shareef Kunjahi (Punjabi: ????? ??????) was a leading writer and poet of Punjabi. He was among the first faculty members of the Department of Punjabi Language at University of Punjab in 1970s and contributed to Punjabi literature as a poet, prose writer, teacher, research scholar, linguist, lexicographer and translator.

Early Life

Shareef was born in 1915 in Kunjah, a small town of Gujrat District in Punjab. His father was a school teacher. Shareef completed his matriculation in 1930 from a school in Kunjah and higher secondary in 1933 from Government Intermediate College, Jehlum. By that time he had started writing poetry and was known as a progressive writer sympathetic to Indian National Congress. This affiliation became a hindrance for him to get police clearance for entry level jobs in the government service. After getting fired from

In 1943, he completed his Munshi Fazal and BA from Punjab University as a private student and later completed teacher's training from Lahore. He then continued teaching at various schools until he obtained the degree of MA Urdu in 1954, and of MA Persian in 1956. In 1959, he was hired as lecturer in Persian language at Government College, Campbalpur. He was transferred to Government College Jehlum from where he retired in 1973. From 1973 to 1980, he taught at the newly established Punjabi Department at the Punjab University Lahore.

He died on 20 January 2007 and was interred in the compound of Ghanimat Kunjahi's mazar in Kunjah.

Poetry

Although Shareef wrote poetry in both Urdu and Persian languages, and even made a name as an Urdu poet quite early in his writing career, Punjabi was always his first love. For an up-and-coming Muslim writer of that period, especially among the early progressive writers and poets, adopting Punjabi for his creative articulation was a rare phenomenon.

He became among the pioneers of modern Punjabi poetry from 1930s at about the same time when Prof Mohan Singh introduced secular themes and a new style in Punjabi poetry. His first collection of Punjabi poetry Jagrate (sleepless nights) was first published in Gurmukhi in East Punjab in 1958, and wasn't

published in Shahmukhi in West Punjab until 1965. It contained only 37 poems. His second anthology Orak Hondi Lou (dimming light) was published in 1995.

Kunjahi's poetry is a complete break from the qissa and Sufi traditions. Even his earliest poems have all the elements of modern poetry: secularism, expression of individualist experience, awareness of social and political changes around him, etc. His deep sense of departure from the existing value system was expressed in many of his early poems:

Today, I am going to walk past your village,
A place from where I was not able to move away in the past,
Where I always was looking for some excuse to go.
What excuse? The truth is that you were the real reason
Who had made that village a place for pilgrimage?
What a beautiful name it had,
How exciting it was to just listen to its name.
Looking at its trees from a distance would take away all tiredness,
It seemed like their branches were giving me a signal to come close.
Standing under their shadow was heavenly.
Today, I will walk by those trees.
Nothing is pulling me towards them,
Neither do I feel the loving touch of breeze coming from your village
No one is there to meet me with affection
Or waiting for me,
Hiding behind the Kikkar trees, and alone
I am passing by your village
As if it is a graveyard, not a village.

(Translation from Jagrate)

Without being overburdened by excessive symbolism or extreme emotions, Kunjahi's poetry is a realistic and balanced expression of his social consciousness in a relatively simple and straightforward manner. He played a crucial role in setting new directions for Punjabi poetry and he opened doors for Punjabi poets to move away from the traditional style of writing poetry and experiment with new modes and techniques.

Prose

Just like he had done in poetry, Sharif Kunjahi also broke new grounds in Punjabi prose. It was through his translations in Punjabi of two books of Bertrand Russell

and [Allama Iqbal](http://www.poemhunter.com/allama-muhammad-iqbal/)'s lectures — 'Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts' — among the numerous other translations, that he demonstrated that Punjabi language is capable of eloquently communicating even the most complex philosophical thoughts. He developed many new terms by creatively employing the vast treasure of Punjabi vocabulary. Perhaps his masterpiece is his translation of the Qur'an in idiomatic and fluent Punjabi of such a high order that it has set a new standard for writing Punjabi prose.

He was among the earliest writers who employed modern techniques of literary criticism. In a different field, his research in identifying many linguistic similarities in the Punjabi and Scandinavian languages is another pioneering piece of work.

Through his lifelong work on various aspects of Punjabi literature and language, Sharif Kunjahi carried the burden of serving his language during a time when most Muslim Punjabis had rejected their own language for all literary and creative expression. Sharif Kunjahi enriched the Punjabi language in so many different ways that his contributions will always be remembered in the history of Punjabi literature.

The Village

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[Translated by S.H.R from original Jagrate]

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