# The Name Game

FAYEZA HASANAT

When it comes to their names, most people in Bangladesh may find themselves in a convoluted situation. At least two thirds of the male population share the same first name (Abu, Abul, Abdul, or Mohammad, for example), and one third of the womenfolk generally carry a common maiden name of domestic adulation (Begum, Khanam, Yasmin, Jahan, or Sultana). Some people have nicknames and some don't; some use first names as their surnames, and prefer to go by their middle name; some have the father's first name as their family names; and some have the whole alphabet chart hanging in the neck as their name-tag. Only in Bangladesh both an Azam Khan and a Khan-e Azam would go by the same name (Azam), and there's a high chance that both their kids may end up having Azam as their last name. And then there are people with names like Abul Khayer Mohammad Wahedul Akram Patwari, who may simply go by Khokon. In most cases, our first names are not what we go by and our family names are not generally considered our last names. In short, our names somehow resemble the chaotic ambivalence of the country's cultural identity. In that convoluted chaos, what gives us a moment's serenity is our nicknames. And in my case, my parents tried their best to complicate the naming process by turning it into a game.

The firstborns are always hit hard when it comes to being named and I was no exception. I was born during the monsoon season, so obviously names such as Barsha, Borishon, Brishti, Nirjhora, and even Barish were on the list of possible nicknames provided by the family members. My father rejected that list completely and came up with a unique idea. He proposed to draw a lottery to choose a nickname for me and my mother went with his plan. They shortlisted six names of their choice, and my father volunteered to write those names in twelve small pieces of papers. He generously allowed my mother to be the 'chooser,' while he took the role of the 'shooter.' The rules were simple: my father would shoot the 'name dice' and my mother had three chances to pick a piece. The name that she would pick twice would win the game. Three times he rolled the 'dice,' with utmost care, making sure there was no cheating involved. And every time, my mother picked the same name.My father was shocked to see his manipulative intelligence being defeated at the hands of his seemingly docile wife. I say manipulative, because he did not play a fair game. Even though he told my mother that he had written six different names in those papers, he actually wrote two of his most favorite choices in eleven of them. Only one piece of paper had one of the three names that my mother selected. By picking the same name in all three attempts, my mother defied all laws of algorithm that he could think of. There was no logic in it, but luck. It seemed as if Destiny had favored my mother's selected name over his choices. Is there any man brave enough to defy Destiny's choice? My father therefore conceded.

Needless to say, I never likedthe nickname they gave me. Seheli. What an ugly name! My other siblings have nicknames prettier than mine—Sheuli, Kaberi, Bijoli, and Nitol. My father's nickname was Raja, and my mother's, Tuni. Even my grandmothers had Bangla names! My paternal grandmother's name was Bala (bangles) and my maternal grandmother's name was Shurjo. And here I was, a miserable girl, stamped—not once, but twice—with names imported from two different linguistic cultures (an Arabic official name and an Urdu/Hindi nickname). Why was I thus deprived? My father used to say it was my mother's luck that named me, and my mother always smiled coyly in response.

Years later, she told me the whole story. There were in fact beautiful Bangla names in their list: Shejuti, Kheya, and a few others that she did not remember any more. My father's top choice was Kheya. Even though each of them was supposed to pick three favorite names, my father later allowed my mother to pick only two. She did not like the idea that four of those six names in the list were selected by him. And then, when he came up with the lottery idea, she was furious. Who in their right mind would pick their firstborn's name from a lottery basket? She got suspicious of his generous game plan, but did not voice her suspicion. He did not let her write down those names or show her the papers when he was done writing. When she asked him to show her the papers with her selection of names, my father handed her only one piece of paper and blamed her for not trusting him. She instantly smelled a foul play and decided to teach him a lesson by beating him in his own game. She left a strong mark in that piece with her sharp nails. When he rolled his 'name dice,' she had no trouble finding the paper that had a strong pinch mark ripping through its corner. My father thought he threw a punch, but my mother defeated him with a mere pinch. After all, who can beat a woman when she is playing the game to win a name for her daughter?

*Fayeza Hasanat is an author, translator, and academic. She writes regularly for the* Star *Literature Page.*

## POETRY

JOHN DREW

### Baba

Furniture dies. Empty now,
This bookcase was my father's.
Boswell. Dickens. Shakespeare.

I put my grandson's shoes
On it and the Mao cap
He clutches like a totem.

Just now he points to things
Not because he wants them
But to know the names of them.

Cap. Shoes. Bookcase.
Furniture comes alive.
Pickwick. Puck. My father.

(from the collection *The Chorus of Birds*)

### Act of Will

Great-grandfather would make his mark, an X,
And someone else would have to write his name.
He comes to me, Will Ling, through an act of sex,
Two bodies tangling that's no cause for shame,
The only issue how their son, a carpenter,
My mother's father, now provides a frame
For me to make my mark by juggling letters,
Though others may put an X against my name.

*John Drew has lived on both sides of the Himalayas.*

## REVIEWS

# A Befitting Centenary Tribute to a Major Poet of Our Subcontinent

*Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms. Selected, Introduced, Edited & Co-Translated by Sudeep Sen. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2019.*

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

If people in Bangladesh remember Kaifi Azmi (1919-2002) now, it is either because of the famous songs he wrote for popular Hindu films such as *Kagaz Ke Phool* (1959), *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Aarth* (1982), or because he is the father of the celebrated actress-activist and member of the Indian Rajya Sabha, Shabana Azmi. But he deserves to be remembered for other reasons, for he also wrote major film scripts and was a notable social activist. Above all, he needs to be known as one of the leading Urdu poets of his generation who had won the Padma Shri and the Sahitya Akademi Award. For sure, he needs to be much better known in Bangladesh for his impressive poetry. That is why Sudeep Sen's unique centenary bilingual English-Hindi parallel text collection, *Kaifi Azmi* is so welcome.

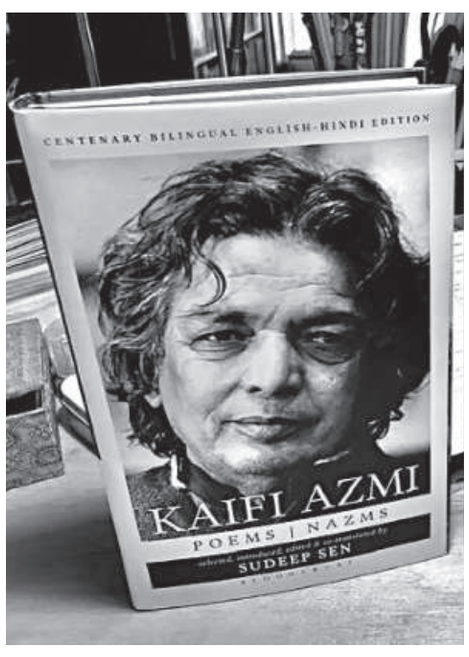
Sen has brought out a distinctive anthology of translations. Not only has he himself translated 11 Kaifi Azmi poems with the kind of fluency that distinguishes his own English poems and translations of verse from Bengali, he has collected competent translations by four other translators and Azmi enthusiasts—the academic Husain Ali, the engineer Baidar Bakht, the cinematographer Sumantra Ghoshal, and the poet cum film maker Pritish Nandy. Reading the works of such able translators from such varied backgrounds who have deployed diverse translation strategies alongside Sen's own skillful and very readable translations, one can flavor the unique nature of the distinguished Urdu poet and lyricist's works, appreciate their range and intensity, and become aware of the continuing relevance of this major poet to the people of our sub-continent.

Sen's Introduction to *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms* indicates how the Urdu poet's verse was part of his childhood but also how he was drawn to bringing out the volume and translating for it "as a practicing poet in the English language." Sen's verse dedication, "Mont Blanc," reveals how Azmi's inscription "penned" for him "on a photocopied flyleaf" and "the subtle seduction of Urdu's cursive script" had enticed him early to follow the lyric passion of a poet who had enthralled him as much as he did his mother, for such was the currency of Azmi's verse in the multilingual Delhi that the Sens had made their home. Sen's Introduction also discloses to the reader how his meeting with Shabana Azmi at the residence of the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka proved to be the originating moment for his selection. The Urdu poet's poems, he tells us alliteratively in his Introduction, left him "seared, stirred and serenaded."

In Sudeep Sen's anthology, the first group of translations are by the New York based Husain Mir Ali who points out in his Introduction Kaifi Azmi's deep commitment to, and involvement in, "the great struggles for socialism being waged across the world" at one time. Mir's Introduction tells us of Azmi's veering away from the Madrasa affiliations of his childhood and his membership in the Progressive Writers' Association, participation in anti-colonial movements, critique of monarchy and a world ruled surreptitiously by capital, and activism as a member of the Communist Party of India. The first poem Mir presents, "Habit," has Azmi declaring "Life is but a dark night/The universe full of deceit/Humans powerless/People small-minded/Cities full of greed and envy/ Villages, even worse." Clearly, this is a world of commodity fetishism. The next poem, "The Son of Mary," probably written during the American invasion of Vietnam, presents the havoc being wrought by supposed "followers of the Bible" in the jungles who have left in their wake "crucified cities...wounded villages." At times while reading Mir's eloquent selections/translations of Azmi's poems I was reminded of Kazi Nazrul Islam's revolutionary verse in a poem such as "Unemployment" in lines such as the following: "I am cold lightning, I am stagnant water/ I am the stalled sword, the diverted stream…." Did Azmi know these verses of his fellow rebellious poet when he penned lines like these and his poem "Unemployment" (remember Nazrul's "Poverty")? This reviewer was led to think of affiliations and historical moments that created noteworthy cultural currents and cross-currents in the sub-continent.

Poem after poem in Mir's selections of Kaifi Azmi's verse presents a "rebel" poet versifying stirringly against capital, injustice, inequality and the machinations of people using religion or the state for exploitation. Azmi is clearly a poet urging "revolution" and "victory" for the masses. Even the legendary mausoleum does not appeal to this revolutionary poet for he writes these lines as his refrain in his poem on it, "Friends! I have seen the Taj Mahal/let's turn back". But Azmi is no defeatist at this stage of his verse-making either. As he puts it in "Invitation" "This time, should we burn, we will burn the entire world."

The Toronto-based Baidar Bakht's translations of the poet's verse in *Kaifi Azmi:*




*Poems/Nazms* give us a poet more disillusioned with the world and less hopeful of revolution than the one we encounter in Mir's selections. "Wandering Prostrations," the first poem Bakht translates, for example, was written (as his footnote tells us) after the breakup of the Communist Party of India and articulates the poet's "hidden anguish" and "frustrated wisdom." Tonally, Bakht's selections of Kaifi Azmi's verse show a quieter poet as in "Evening" where he is moved by "quieter melodies" that "swirl everywhere". Not that the poet's conscience has gone to sleep, for in "My Will," a poem dedicated to his son, he urges his child to yield nothing to the exploiters of the world that will perpetuate their domination. A self-centered world where "No one turns back to inquire about the welfare of others" haunts the poet in "Afternoon." The remarkably prescient poem "Smoke" depicts the havoc rampant capitalism has wrought on the environment through factories spewing "poison to the air."

But there are other sides to the passionate poet that come out clearly in at least a couple of Bakht's selection as well as those of the other translators Sudep Sen has assembled. The Urdu poet, for example, writes marvelous love poems readers can savor. Take as an instance Bakht's rendering of the opening lines of "A Dancing Spark": "Behold a sudden collision of two lines of sight/At the slightest provocation, love turned into a spark." As Sumantra Ghosal, the Bombay-based translator of Kofi Azmi's verse aptly observes in his Head Note to his translations in *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms*, the poet "was a man of many parts—communist, lover, social activist, lyricist, poet, humanist—and he worked tirelessly at them all." The eloquence of the lover comes out in Ghosal's translation of "Woman," a paean composed for his wife, the famous Indian thespian Shaukat Azmi (she passed away, incidentally, on November 19 this year). Other poems, such as "Duty," also translated by Ghoshal, indicate Azmi's ability to articulate acutely in verse essential insights into the human condition thus—"A hundred relationships, a hundred feelings, a hundred faces, /And yet amidst them all duty recognizes its own. /The one beloved, that unique friend, that relative/ Whom the heart accepts as love/ And the mind sees as a life in action".

Kaifi Azmi's passionate poems, clearly, are inspirational. One early devotee was Pritish Nandy, the Mumbai-based English language Indian poet. His translations of Azmi's verse were pioneering efforts. It is to Sudeep Sen's credit that he could retrieve some of them for his book and make Nandy write eloquently in it of how the Urdu poet had moved him in his Head Note. As Nandy puts it, he had translated "the work of one who would rank among the most powerful poets "in India," certain that "there were not many" to compete with him. Bangladeshi readers will, in particular, be moved by the ringing opening of a poem written surely in 1971 titled simply "Bangladesh." It begins thus: "I am not a country you can set ablaze, / I am not a wall you can raze to the ground/nor a frontier you can ablaze." But "Suicide," a poem written after the actor Guru Dutt had taken his life and that Nandy also translates, shows how Azmi could move his readers by poeticizing individual tragedy as well as national ones by its concluding lines, "Everyone raises your bier so effortlessly/Yet no one suffered your tenderness this way."

If Sudeep Sen chooses to begin *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms* with Mir's translations of the political poems the poet wrote at an early stage of his career, Sen prefers to end his anthology of the Urdu poet with his own translations of mostly quieter poems, knowing that if Azmi wrote about "nation, state, border, history" etc., he also wrote about "love, longing, despair, hope and more." Sen's translations bring out the lyrical Azmi, his expressiveness and tenderness as well as faith in love as in the poem called "Courage" which ends, "And yet—love hasn't conceded defeat/As yet—don't give up on love."

Sudeep Sen's skillful and fluent translations in his ingeniously assembled and attractively anthologized tribute to the poet conclude the volume aptly by giving us the two aspects of the poet on display throughout—the indignant critic of economic injustice, religious bigotry and power mongers everywhere and the tender, sensitive poet of equality, love, compassion and hope. This is why, "Celebration of Love," the last poem Sen has chosen for his section and the book he has edited opens thus—"Celebration of love—we must rejoice in a new way. /Sadness in my heart—this sadness mustn't say." Sen's translations and those of the other translators he has drawn upon is surely a befitting tribute to a poet whose verse and impassioned presence in our subcontinent need to be treasured in volumes such as *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms.*

*Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.*