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Mirth and the Dust-Cloud: Remembering Varis Alvi

At this inevitable parting, how does one invoke reminiscences of that vivacious vitality that was Varis Alvi (Vāriš ʿAlavī)? There is a singular incongruity in referring to him in the past tense, for it would be in keeping with him to persevere unwaveringly in our dimension. With all the vicissitudes of life—ecstasies, agonies, and enigmas—to reckon with, I suspect he loved this world too much to make an immutable exit. And thus, even with an exit ordained by Time, his refusal to depart, his holding back to keep inhabiting exuberantly the shapes and sounds of this fragile existence, reenacting what we encounter in Rilke's "Requiem for a Friend:"

> … Only you return;
> brush past me, loiter, try to knock
> against something, so that the sound reveals
> your presence.
>
> (1987, 73)

But among all things, what remains the most insistently in our dimension is his majestic laughter. It is laughter not to be assessed by the decibels of its ring; rather, it is to be fathomed by the compositeness of the worlds that it encompasses. For few lived more ardently than Varis Alvi the idea that humor permeates realms much grander than the finite stations of jest and satire; that humor is the pineal eye through which our understandings of this world are routed. It is a system that engages reality with an insightful realization that all observations, encounters, and expressions of existence come into intimate relief when refracted through the prism of the ridiculous. And thus, even when mired in the grave density of things, Varis Alvi's predominantly lighthearted bearing in life and literature allowed him to tame the nebulous burdens of being, to blow away by mirth this dust-cloud of a world.

This sensibility, it seemed to me, propelled much of his conduct—

thoughts, speech, and day-to-day interactions with everything. It was articulated in witticisms such as his masterly quip to one of his colleagues, Mrs. Ramanathan, a professor of English literature like himself. Apparently during a conversation which would have otherwise meandered away onto the pathways of academic triteness, he made this amusing suggestion to her (to the supreme delight of everyone present): "Since we cannot love each other, we *must* love Kingsley Amis!" The mirth which then must have enwrapped his ample form is only to be imagined.

It is difficult to gauge whether his stocky frame mirrored this "mirth and dust-cloud" deportment of his, or was it the deep suffusion of jocularity in his being that shaped his rotund form. One of my most enduring recollections of him goes back to the day when I was visiting him with a friend, a Gujarati poet. It was a late monsoon evening and darkness was already beginning to cloak us when suddenly the lights went out. Varis Sahib was thrilled; with a delighted exclamation of *ab maz̄ āʾēgā* (now we shall have fun), he made his way to the kitchen adjacent to the book-filled room where we were seated and returned in his customary languid way holding a small metal salver with two lit wax-candles on it. In a vignette on Varis Sahib, my poet friend later equated this moment—Varis Sahib's portly silhouette glowing in candlelight and walking towards us in an undulating motion—with some character emerging out of a painting by Rembrandt. For me, that silhouette of Varis Alvi, washed in the mystifying glow of candlelight, sums up the quintessence of his physical as well as astral attributes. More so than a character from Rembrandt, I prefer to see him as an exemplary Shakespearean character, ready to break away into a soliloquy, ever equipped to gather up his interlocutors in the embrace of his eloquence.

And there was a peculiar eloquence that permeated his writings. By his own admission, its creative contours were honed by frequenting the masters with unbridled love and devotion: the worlds fashioned by Dickens, Dostoyevsky and Flaubert irrigated the critical wellsprings of his literary persona; for him, their soaring experiences and insights, which chiseled unparalleled realms of literary expression, reached the altitude of God. … Then of course, there were unfathomed galaxies and unborn worlds roving in Ghalib's epigrammatic epiphanies. So many of Mirzā's verses, in a rhythmic incantation, would flutter on Varis Sahib's lips: *Ham uskē haiñ, hamārā pūčẖnā kyā?* (We are His, what to say of us?). Among the moderns, Faiẓ and Rāshid whispered to him the spiraling cadences of the lyrical word. Rallying some radiant ecstasy, he would recite

Falak kē dasht mēñ tārōñ kī ākhrī manzil
Kahīñ tō hōgā shab-e sust-mauj kā sāḥil

Kahīñ tō jā kē rūkwgā safīna-e ghm-e dil

In sky's desert-void the stars' final terminus
Somewhere must be the shore of the weary-wave night
Somewhere shall anchor the ark of heart's sorrow

and immediately vocalize the effect that the verse had on him: "*Aē hai, mār ḍālā!*" (Oh, it has slain me!). To him, these lines from Faiẓ's "Ṣubḥ-e Āzādī" (Dawn of Freedom), along with Nūn Mīm Rāshid's lines from "Isrāfīl kī Maut" (Isrāfīl's Demise)

Aesī tanhā'ī ke ḥusn-e tām yād ātā nahīñ
Aesā sannāṭā ke apnā nām yād ātā nahīñ

Such loneliness that no recollection of perfect beauty
Such deafening silence that no remembrance of one's name

epitomized some of the greatest ever written in modern Urdu literature.

His most soulful journeys however—the ones that truly sculpted his great reputation as an *adīb* (writer) and a *naqqād* (critic)—were into the landscapes of Urdu prose and fiction. His seminal assessments, most cherishingly of works ranging from Ḥālī's *Muqaddima* to Manṭō and Bēdī's lofty oeuvre, have resided deep within the literary experience of nearly all *Urduwallahs*. The astute connections he made with the layered workings of plot, narrative, and the all too humane shades lurking in the foulest characters of Urdu fiction need no elucidation in this minuscule little memoir. It is only when he poured out words for his Urdu contemporaries, quite explicably to their colossal discomfort, that his literary expositions began to reveal the jagged edges of his wit. For there is a near-invisible line between expressing insightful realities of literature through jest-filled discourse, and the slippage of that discourse into scorching, scathing satire. But this was the lexical instrument he had groomed and embraced so as to stare unflinchingly into the eyes of the Urdu literary world, which, in his estimation, was tarnished by authoritarian hierarchies devoid of optimum literary integrity. With his usual verve, he pronounced: "*Adab kē muʿāmlē mēñ, maiñ dastār bāñdẖnā bẖī jāntā hūñ aur sar kāṭnā bẖī!*" (In matters of literature, I know how to sport a turban and, equally, how to chop off heads!)

And the above stance was probably mirrored in his nonchalance towards covetousness, in his freedom from fretting about occupying the literary center stage, and in his being accredited as *the* exemplary Urdu literary figure of our times. In the context of such feudal obsessions of the Urdu literary world, he told me once that he preferred to be a *maskhara,* or jester, for only jesters had the right to laugh at kings! And thus he

laughed at kings, merrily stripping off the jewel-encrusted robes of their posturing, hurling devastating ridicule at whatever he perceived as literary artifice. Needless to say, he spawned detractors in abundance. Wounded by the mockery of his words, they retorted, digging out flaws in his writings and literary assessments: his was a prose infested with long, convoluted, flippant sentences where substance, if any, was buried beneath relentless jibes and witticisms. It was *fiqrābāzī* (specious speech) for its own sake; it really bloomed into nothing.

To whatever degree these revilements may have been valid or erroneous, the fact remains that a spirited, intrepid, and full-hearted expression is what defined Varis Alvi. In life as in literature, he was clearly not compatible with economy of expression. Contrary to what the perceptibly polemic tenor of his writings made him out to be, this master of the invective was warm, tender, and appreciative in his personal relationships, where all aspects of his being, to the extent that I could appraise, were enacted to the full measure of their rhetorical flair. And it is his rhetorical flair that still lingers in our dimension. Memory may have suitably archived Varis Alvi's image, visual countenance and motions, but he brushes past things, loiters, and tries to knock against something primarily as an auditory sensation. Thus even in his bodily absence, he impishly conflates the past and the present, so that we may exhort, echoing the words of the Argentinian poet, Roberto Juarroz: "Everything is fleeing toward its presence" (1988, 116).

In the face of such irrevocable fleeing, all I can say is: "Welcome, Varis Sahib!" ❑

Works Cited

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