

Exploring the World of Kashmiri Poet Shabir Magami

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Abstract

Shabir Magami's work explores a broad spectrum of themes, including life, death, loss, hope, joy, and the poignant reality of Kashmir. His participation in Mushairas, radio programs and an invitation to speak at the Young Poets' Conferences organized by the Sahitya Akademi in Assam and Tripura highlight his growing influence in the literary community. His ghazals that have been composed and sung by the valley's leading singers have found a cult following amongst young and elderly alike. Magami has not published any poetry collection yet but his poetry is published regularly both in original Kashmiri and English translation in the leading journals like Shiraza of cultural academy and English Studies in India.

Keywords: Kashmir • Ghazals • Poetry • Shiraza magami • Cultural academy

Description

Poetry has long been esteemed as a profound form of artistic expression, offering a sophisticated medium for exploring and articulating the subtleties of human experience. It transcends conventional language by employing rich imagery, metaphor, and structural artistry to convey complex emotions and ideas with precision and depth. The significance of poetry is not contingent upon the poet's personal identity—be it their gender, ethnicity, or social class—but rather on the thematic and stylistic excellence of their work. The true power of poetry lies in its capacity to evoke deep emotional responses, provoke thoughtful reflection, and forge meaningful connections with readers. Through the careful crafting of language and form, poetry captures and reflects the multifaceted nature of human existence, achieving a resonance that speaks to universal experiences and timeless truths. This intricate interplay of expressive content and aesthetic form ensures that poetry remains a vital and enduring element of literary and emotional discourse.

In the domain of Kashmiri literature, poetry is renowned for its rich and diverse tradition, capturing the region's deep cultural and spiritual essence through intricate and evocative language. From mystical Sufi verses to poignant lyrical expressions, it offers a profound exploration of both personal and collective experiences, reflecting the unique heritage of Kashmir. Historical figures like Shaikul Alam, Lal Ded, and Habba Khatoon have laid the groundwork for this tradition with their remarkable contributions. Shaikul Alam's mystical verses delve into spiritual and philosophical realms, while Lal Ded's poetry, steeped in Kashmiri Shaivism, explores themes of self and divinity with transcendental insight. Habba Khatoon's lyrical expressions eloquently capture the depths of love and longing, and Arimal's evocative imagery and reflective themes further enrich this legacy. Additionally, the Sufi poets of Kashmir, with their spiritually infused verses, weave intricate tapestries of divine love and mystical insight, contributing profoundly to the region's literary and spiritual heritage. This foundation has paved the way for future poets to build upon and expand the literary heritage of Kashmir.

In modern times, poets such as Abdul Ahad Azad and Mehjoor have continued to shape Kashmiri poetry by addressing political and social issues. Azad's work reflects on themes of political unrest and national identity, capturing the complexities of Kashmir's socio-political landscape. Mehjoor, integral

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Received: 02 September, 2024, Manuscript No. assj-24-149154; **Editor Assigned:** 04 September, 2024, PreQC No. P-149154; **Reviewed:** 16 September, 2024, QC No. Q-149154; **Revised:** 23 September, 2024, Manuscript No. R-149154; **Published:** 30 September, 2024, DOI: 10.37421/2151-6200.2024.15.630

to the cultural renaissance of Kashmir, infused his poetry with patriotism and social critique, addressing themes of freedom and justice. Meanwhile, Naseem Shafai has made significant contributions by focusing on women's issues and gender dynamics, providing a critical perspective on female empowerment and societal constraints. Contemporary poets like Rehman Rahi and Amin Kamil have further enriched this tradition, blending innovative language and spiritual depth with on-going cultural and social themes. Today's poets, both established and new, continue to invigorate Kashmiri poetry with fresh perspectives and diverse voices, ensuring its continued relevance and vibrancy. Among these voices, Shabir Magami stands out for his unique ability to blend traditional themes with modern insights, adding a distinctive dimension to the evolving tapestry of Kashmiri literature.

Magami's poetry fuses the romantic fervor of Robert Browning, the lyrical grace of Lord Byron, and the nuanced sensitivity of Robert Frost, while also reflecting the imaginative breadth and visionary depth of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His poetry has been praised by critics and readers alike, with one eminent critic even remarking, "I find a Keatsian fervor in his verses." Critics acclaim his work for its ability to "transcend the ordinary," praising its "remarkable depth of empathy" and the "masterful integration of personal introspection with universal themes." Through his verse, he weaves a complex and textured tapestry that intertwines the subtleties of nature with the intricacies of the human condition, crafting a literary experience that is both compelling and illuminating.

Magami's work explores a broad spectrum of themes, including life, death, loss, hope, joy, and the poignant reality of Kashmir. His participation in Mushairas, radio programs and an invitation to speak at the Young Poets' Conferences organized by the Sahitya Akademi in Assam and Tripura highlight his growing influence in the literary community. His ghazals that have been composed and sung by the valley's leading singers have found a cult following amongst young and elderly alike. Magami has not published any poetry collection yet but his poetry is published regularly both in original Kashmiri and English translation in the leading journals like Shiraza of cultural academy and English Studies in India. Deeply inspired by the works of Rehman Rahi and Amin Kamil, Magami's poetry reflects a profound respect for tradition while embracing innovative approaches to language and form. As we enter this conversation, we gain insight into the mind behind the verses, exploring the literary influences, creative processes, and cultural contexts that shape the work of this remarkable poet.

Reading Magami's poetry and discussing it with him served as a poignant reminder that this art form is both spiritually fulfilling and deserving of committed devotion. Before delving into this insightful conversation, let's take a moment to explore one of his poems translated into English.

Shraz* lies in wait for the moon as evening falls

Echoes cast a spell on all as evening falls...

Darkness lies in a coil within the self
 Not always will the lamps burn as evening falls...
 She, whose hem the village folks would fill with buds
 Is put on auction in town as evening falls...
 The sunbeam burnt away alone in the day
 The moon, stars, heart's wounds, blaze as evening falls...
 The river might flow this way today even if late
 Someone's thirst holds out the promise as evening falls...
 Shabir Magami's eyes are a fountain of tears
 'Majnoo.n', the mad one, is brooding over love as evening falls...

(*Shraz" is a mythical animal with its jaws wide open waiting for the moon to fall so that it can eat it up..).

Conversation

SD: What inspired you to begin writing poetry, and who have been the key influences on your poetic voice?

SM: My poetic voice has been deeply shaped by my love for Urdu and Kashmiri poetry, which I've been passionate about since my school days. After immersing myself in the works of literary giants like Ghalib, Faiz, Mir, Jigar Muradabadi, Rehman Rahi, Abdul Ahad Azad and Amin Kamil, I was inspired to start writing poetry in Urdu when I was in the 8th grade. Their profound insights and emotive expressions have not only influenced me but have also guided me in finding my own voice within the rich tapestry of poetic tradition. In particular, Ghalib and Rahi have had a lasting influence on my poetic sensibilities.

SD: As a poet yourself, do you believe that poetry is an inborn skill, or do you think it's something that can be developed over time?

SM: I believe that poetry is both an inborn skill and a craft that can be developed over time. Just like any other art form, it requires learning and practice. As a child, the mind is fertile, and with the right guidance, one can cultivate the craft of poetry. In my case, I was an avid reader, which greatly helped me in refining my skills. My early poetry was quite basic, but it was during my college years that I began to write more seriously, thanks to the encouragement and support of my teachers and friends. A few books on prosody and stylistics like Anis Kazmi's *Anees ul Arooz*, Kamal Ahmad Siddiqi's *Ahang Aur Arooz* and Nazir Kulgami's *Arooz aur Balaghat* along with encouragement from my teacher poets like Syed Raza, Fareed Parbati and Meem Hai Zafar played a significant role in shaping my poetic craft. Additionally, participating in *Mushairas* provided me with the exposure and experience needed to further hone my skills. It was in such early *mushairas* that I met Kashmir's leading poets Amin Kamil and Rahman Rahi. Their encouragement gave me confidence in my voice and craft.

SD: Writer's block is a challenge all writers face. How do you break through it and find your way back to creativity?

SM: Writer's block is a trial faced by even the most esteemed literary figures, from John Milton to Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Ghalib and Iqbal. This challenging phase of creative drought can endure for months, leaving a writer in a state of barren silence. Each writer devises their own strategies to overcome this obstacle. Personally, I seek solace in solitude, engage in contemplative thought, immerse myself in music, practice meditation, and read distinguished poetry. Despite the struggle, history shows that great writers invariably transcend this period of stagnation. Emerging from it often leads to their most profound and remarkable work. The journey through writer's block, though challenging, ultimately paves the way for creative breakthroughs and exceptional achievements.

His free verse poem "Soan Loal", in English translation reads as:

Our Love
 Our love is a tale of the yore.
 The vagrant moon...
 alone in the silence of the dark night...
 hangs numb from the sky.
 Our bodies and our souls like broken stars...
 Fallen off some celestial sphere,
 are scattered over the sands of the Earth.
 No longer do the birds of dream and desire
 stay put in the wetlands of our eyes.
 The pigeon that was sent with the message never returned.
 Our love is like two streams flowing different routes
 And losing themselves in one river.
 And the river flows unmindful of the banks
 into the ocean and is lost for ever.
 Two hearts apart in two separate bosoms
 simmer in their pain.
 Two broken boats sailing anxious and restless across the same
 shore...

SD: With your deep expertise in English literature and your role as an English teacher, what drew you to express your poetic voice in Kashmiri instead?

SM: Every great poet, whether it be Shakespeare, Keats, Ghalib, Rumi, or Iqbal, often writes in their mother tongue because it allows them to express themselves most authentically. While it's possible to be a multilingual poet, there's something uniquely powerful about writing in one's native language. For me, Kashmiri is my mother tongue and my first love, so it felt natural to express my poetic voice in this language. Although my early poetry in Urdu was praised by friends and literary critics, I decided to focus on writing in Kashmiri when I reached college. Since then, I've focused on writing in Kashmiri, drawing inspiration from Rehman Rahi and Amin Kamil, whose works have deeply influenced my decision to write in my mother tongue.

SD: What are the central themes in your poetry, and why are they important to you?

SM: The central themes in my poetry often revolve around life, loss, death, love, conflict, philosophical questions, and the meaning of existence. Additionally, my birthplace, Kashmir, is a recurring element in my work. However, the interpretation of these themes can vary, and ultimately, my readers are the ones who would understand and interpret the nuances of my poetry. Kashmir's suffering and pain is subtly woven into everything I write, reflecting its profound impact on my life and work.

SM: I predominantly write in the ghazal form, a genre distinguished by its intricate balance of tradition and innovation. The ghazal demands exceptional skill, dedication, and patience due to its complex structure and the need for a precise adherence to its traditional refrain and rhyme schemes. My approach to the ghazal incorporates innovative elements while remaining deeply rooted in these classical conventions. This commitment to both honoring the form's heritage and exploring new creative directions is central to my work, reflecting the enduring and dynamic nature of the ghazal as a form of poetic expression.

SD: Can you share any specific poem(s) that hold particular significance for you and explain why?

SM: Each Ghazal I write is crafted with care, aiming to convey profound meaning and emotional depth. It's difficult to select a single poem that stands

out, as each one reflects the themes of suffering and pain that are central to my work. The significance of my work lies in its ability to connect with and move people across different contexts and experiences. My poetry, primarily in the ghazal form, focuses on Kashmir and reflects the tragedy, suffering, pain, and loss experienced by its people. My poems 'Mea Chhu Pheran chon' and 'Maani Sirseav' vividly depict these challenging conditions and the emotional landscape of Kashmir. These poems and ghazals express the longing and yearning of each of us for something that is gone and lost.

Let me quote a stanza from his poem "Me Chhu Phairan Chon":

Temi Shahraech shech yeli waav anan
Yath brandas peth yeli tschoang dazan
Yeli bombrasm poshich maay ganan
Ya tschaengis ponpur gath chhu karan
Me chhu phairan chon.

English translation:

When wind brings news from that city
When the candle is lit on this porch
When a beetle's love for a flower intensifies
Or a moth flies maniacally around a candle
I yearn for you.

SD: I was captivated by your poem "Kamras Manz" (In a Room) which, I believe, is about COVID-19. Could you share more about its inspiration and the message you aimed to convey through it?

SM: The COVID-19 pandemic was a period marked by immense suffering and isolation. With millions of lives lost and the world confined to their homes, a profound sense of despair spread across the globe. The stark and haunting memories of that time left a deep impact on me. In response, I wrote the poem "Kamras Manz" (In a Room) to reflect on and process the collective anguish and the shared struggles felt by people around the world. This poem seeks to capture and transform the raw pain and solitude of those times into a meaningful artistic expression. While deeply reflective of the era's struggles, "Kamras Manz" speaks to universal themes of resilience and endurance. It aims to resonate with readers by reflecting their own experiences and emotions, offering a mirror to our shared human condition and fostering a sense of connection and understanding during times of adversity.

Some of the verses from that ghazal are as follows:

Nebra hankal basar chhu kamras manz
Koot mushkil safar chhu kamras manz
Daari bar dith bihit chhu mot majnoon
Saari samyuk matschar chhu kamras manz
Tschoang kun zon dazan chhu brandas peth
Ponpura akh magar chhu kamras manz.

English translation:

Doors locked from outside, to live a life time in a room
How onerous to take such a journey in a room ...
The frenzied lover sits, doors and windows closed
Tumult of the entire universe lies in a room ...
A candle is burning alone on a porch
And a moth lies trapped in a room...

SD: How do you feel about your poems finding life in a song rather than being

captured in print? And when we might expect to see your poetry collected in a book?

SM: Despite having more than two dozen of my poems sung by various renowned singers, I find it curious that poetry, on a global scale, often attracts fewer readers compared to prose. Poetry tends to have a more selective audience, yet its profound impact endures through the ages. This is why the works of poets like Shakespeare, Keats, Rumi, Ghalib, Iqbal, Shaikul Alam, and Lal Ded continue to resonate with readers today. Even though my poetry has been brought to life by celebrated Kashmiri singers such as Qaiser Nizami, I have been frequently asked about the publication of my first collection. I am hopeful that, by the end of this year, my collection will finally be available to readers. The enduring nature of great poetry assures me that, despite its niche appeal, it possesses a timeless quality that will continue to touch hearts and minds.

SD: Across the globe, literary gatherings create spaces for poets, novelists, and dramatists to connect and discuss their work. Does Kashmir host any such events where the local literary community can come together and share their creative Journeys?

SM: In Kashmir, many literary organizations are criticized for not encouraging or inviting young poets, often focusing on well-established figures or those with political connections. This practice stifles new talent and prevents emerging poets from gaining recognition. These organizations have a crucial role in preserving and promoting native tongues, but their failure to support young writers undermines this effort. By neglecting emerging voices, they miss an opportunity to enrich and diversify the literary landscape while safeguarding local languages and traditions.

SD: As a poet, where do you see Kashmiri literature fitting in among the world's literary traditions, and what makes it stand out?

SM: Comparing literatures from different cultures and eras can be problematic, as each is shaped by its own unique historical, social, and cultural contexts. Each literary tradition reflects the distinct experiences and issues of its time, making it challenging to directly measure one against another. Thus, every literature possesses its own form of richness and significance. Focusing specifically on Kashmiri literature, it is evident that it holds a distinguished place, particularly in the realm of poetry. Although Kashmiri prose may not be as developed, the region boasts a remarkable tradition of poets such as Shaikul Alam, Lalla Ded, Habba Khatoon, Mehjoor, Azad, Kamil, Rahi and various other Sufi and 'secular' poets. Their contributions in the realm of poetry are exceptional, demonstrating a level of excellence comparable to the greatest poets in other languages.

SD: What do you believe are the most pressing issues that poets in Kashmir should address through their work?

SM: Kashmiri poets have richly documented their times, from the spiritual reflections of Shaikhul Alam and Lalla Ded to the socio-political insights of Azad and Mehjoor. Each poet has captured the essence of their era, addressing the unique challenges and experiences of their time. In contemporary times, poets in Kashmir should address a range of pressing issues through their work, including the preservation of language, culture, heritage, and ethos, as well as challenges such as conflict, displacement, and socio-political instability. They should also explore themes like social injustice, environmental degradation, the struggles of marginalized communities, and women's issues. While poetry may not respond directly to these issues like prose does, it can subtly reflect and engage with these concerns, offering profound insights and fostering a deeper understanding of the societal and cultural landscape.

SD: Do you believe Kashmiri youth are drifting away from their mother tongue? What factors are driving this, and how can we reignite their connection to the language?

SM: It is undeniable that younger generations are drifting away from their mother tongue, Kashmiri, driven by deep-rooted influences. Colonial legacy has imposed a mindset that elevates foreign languages above native ones, and this is reinforced by an education system that sidelines Kashmiri in favor of other languages. In homes, many parents fail to nurture the language, believing that

other languages are keys to success. Tragically, this detachment reaches even further, with an inferiority complex prevailing among bureaucrats, academics, and writers, who often shy away from speaking or writing in Kashmiri, viewing it as less sophisticated. To revive the language, we must reimagine its role in our cultural life. Kashmiri should not only be taught in schools but celebrated as an essential thread of our heritage. Writers must cast aside any hesitation and embrace their mother tongue with pride, knowing that language is the lifeblood of literature. Media, too, has a vital role to play in breathing new life into Kashmiri, ensuring it resonates with modern sensibilities while preserving its essence. By making Kashmiri visible and vibrant in literature, media, and everyday life, we can inspire the younger generation to reconnect with it, restoring it to its rightful place as the soul of our cultural identity.

SD: How do you imagine the Kashmiri language will evolve in the next thirty to forty years, and what advice would you give to emerging writers to ensure its legacy and flourishes?

SM: The Kashmiri language, rich in history and tradition, faces a challenge as newer generations increasingly favor Urdu and English, even at home. This shift threatens the survival of our mother tongue, which persists largely due to the efforts of our elders. If people continue to ignore Kashmiri over the next thirty to forty years, there will be few speakers left, and the language could face extinction, much like hundreds of languages that have already become extinct. Just as languages like Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, and French thrive because their speakers take pride in them, we must foster a similar respect and support for Kashmiri through government initiatives, educational institutions, literary organizations, and parental encouragement. Even the National Education Policy 2020 supports the use of mother tongues in education, underscoring their importance in cultural preservation. For emerging writers, my advice is to embrace and celebrate the beauty of Kashmiri in your work. Use it to capture contemporary experiences while honouring its rich heritage. Experiment with innovative styles and themes, but always with a deep respect for the language's traditions. Your writing can bridge the past and the future, making Kashmiri relevant and vibrant for new generations. By doing so, you will play a crucial role in ensuring the language's

legacy endures and flourishes.

SD: In your view, what holds greater significance—your personal identity as a poet or the poetry you create?

SM: I am not important as a person, but my poetry is. This principle is applicable to all great creative artists: the essence of their contribution lies not in their individual selves, but in the enduring power of their work. It is the poetry that survives not the ego or individual identity. The artist may fade into the background, but their creations resonate across time and space. Through their work, they achieve a form of immortality, reaching minds and souls beyond their own existence. Thus, the true significance of art is measured by its impact, not by the fame of its creator.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

How to cite this article: Dar, Showkat Hussain. "Exploring the World of Kashmiri Poet Shabir Magami." *Arts Social Sci J* 15 (2024): 630.