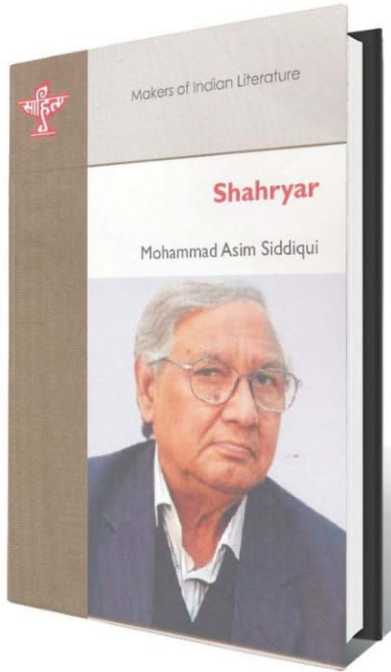


## Review: Shahryar by Asim Siddiqui

The author examines how Shahryar went beyond the worn-out romanticism of Urdu poetry to fashion a new idiom of visionary lyricism

By Shafey Kidwai

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A meditation on love's travails produces two intense and almost identical motifs - loneliness and solitude that offer a site where euphoria, despair, the impersonal, the intimate, and the sublime exist simultaneously. Solitude and loneliness are not interchangeable. As Thomas Mann(1875-1955) put it, "Solitude gives birth to the original in us". It betrays complete freedom while loneliness highlights derangements of the sensibility. This sums up the aesthetic of Shahryar (1936-2012), an outstanding Urdu poet, a well known film lyricist, and winner of the Jnanpith and Sahitya Akademi awards.

Asim Siddiqui's *Shahryar*, which examines the poet's multilayered oeuvre, points out that loneliness is the central metaphor of his work. Paradoxically, Shahryar was also irked when abject loneliness prompted individuals to take refuge in groups. "A group often achieves its identity by exclusion," Siddiqui says, adding that while Shahryar's concern about the oppressive nature of loneliness is real, his treatment of group identity, as seen in the following lines, is gently ironic:

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*Azzam koi bhi tanhaaion ka sah na sake/ Har ek shakhs ne ik anjuman bana li hai* Nobody could bear the oppression of loneliness/ Every individual has formed a group.

The false hope that keeps people together leaves the poet bewildered:

*Hawa ka jhonka bhi jis raah par nahin aata/ Na jane kis liye us raah par khade hai log* Even the gust of wind does not come on this path/ why is it that people are standing on this path?

Divided into six short and perceptive chapters, the book explores how Shahryar went beyond the worn-out romanticism hung up on unrequited love to fashion a new idiom of visionary lyricism in modern Urdu poetry. With an unsurpassed eye for the commonplace horrors of everyday experience, he makes the abstract specific and the simple sublime.



Author Md. Asim Siddiqui (Courtesy the author)

Take the last couplet of his first ghazal (from his first collection of poetry, *Ism-e-azam*, 1965) which became a rage when it was used by Muzaffar Ali in *Gaman* (1978). Here, the mirror always looks perplexed and the poet comes up with nuanced reasoning:

*Kya koi nai baat nazar aati hum mein/ Aaina hamein dekh ke hairan sa kyon hai* (Is there anything new seen in me/ why is the mirror startled?)

The first chapter provides an authentic account of Shahryar's life, works, and relationships and several poems germane to the strong bonds that the poet shared with his friends are

discussed. Not much has been written on the poems dedicated to the poet's family and friends and here, the author tries to supplement what has been left out. "Shahryar lived for friends. They were the centre of his life. He dedicated several poems to people he loved and cared about. He also wrote poems in memory of people he loved," says Siddiqui. "Importantly, the poetic persona drops in these poems for a while and readers get to know the poet's feelings for the people he was writing about. These *nazms* and ghazals point to some aspects of the personality of his family members and friends and Shahryar's warm attitude towards them."

All six collections of Shahryar's poetry come in for a close reading in the second chapter and the author's critical acuity makes its presence felt all through, though I tended to disagree with his conclusions when the poems are read against the backdrop of personal, political, and social upheavals. Initiating an insightful debate on what constitutes Shahryar's creative exploration of the world, Siddiqui refers to some of his recurrent motifs: "He was fixated on dreams; nights held a fascination for him; time is an important concern in his poetry; life in its variety and plenty puzzled him. All four of these motifs -- life, time, night and dreams -- are related to each other in his poetry and cannot be separated neatly."

High art and poetry in film: Shahryar's oeuvre was multilayered and he achieved both critical and popular acclaim as the lyricist of such films as *Gaman* and *Umrao Jaan*, both of which were directed by Muzaffar Ali. (*Umrao Jaan* publicity poster)

The author's insightful readings of Shahryar's verse demonstrate how the poet combines elegant humour, outrageous irony, brilliant wordplay, and metaphors laced with subterranean affinities. The narrator of the poem is not the poet himself as 'I' does not endorse his presence. Stanley Fish calls it the grammatical 'I'. The author makes a difference between the poet and the speaker: "The speaker in his poetry appears in different moods. He can be melancholic, reflective, ironical, and cynical sometimes. But by no stretch of the imagination should the injured and the defeated self of the speaker in Shahryar's poetry be confused with the self of the man Shahryar, who taught fiction at Aligarh Muslim University.



The book is replete with such critical insights. Shahryar's ghazals, *nazms*, and his own views on his craft, art and poetry form the other chapters. The author devotes a separate chapter on the views of prominent Urdu, Hindi and English critics including Shamsur Rahman Farooqui, Gopi Chand Narang, Waheed Akhtar, Ashok Vajpai, Kamleshwar, Ajay Bisaria and the like. He quotes Farooqui extensively but the latter's assertion that emotional complexities fully find expression in Shahryar seems too generalized as it can be applied to any poet. Siddiqui himself translated the poems and ghazals featured in this book and they read well though they are occasionally turgid.

The book highlights Shahryar's seminal contribution to Urdu literature and introduces him to non-Urdu readers.

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