

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 1, SPRING 2018

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

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Excerpts from Masud Hasan Rizvi Adeeb's "Lucknow Ka Shahi Stage"

Translated by: Ayesha Irfan

Masud Hasan Rizvi Adeeb's "Lucknow Ka Shahi Stage" translated from the original Urdu version (published by Kitab nagar, Lucknow, 1957)

Urdu Drama and Stage

Volume 1: The Royal Stage of Lucknow

The Imitation by Tricksters/ Jesters/ Imitators:

There were small hilarious tricks staged by the impersonators on the stage, in English they have often been referred to as "farce", and in Hindi as 'purhaseen'. These stage performances were characterized by just one or two dramatic scenes. In the fairs of Lucknow, the bazaars, at the celebrations and at the elaborate extensive parties the impersonators were always invited. They used to entertain the audiences with their comical tricks. It is well known about these tricksters, that, "*without them the gathering looked deserted*". Even the royal gatherings were incomplete without the tricks of the tricksters. In October, 1823 when general Sachet came to Lucknow, the Badshah of Awadh Ghaiuddin Hyder, threw a lavish party in his honour and this entertainment extravaganza included tricks played by tricksters¹. There the exceptional tricks staged by them left the audiences spell bound.² The trickster by the name of Noora was presented with a jacket of exclusive brocade by the Badshah in December, 1825³. In July 1837 after the death of Nasiruddin Hyder, the Badshah of Awadh, Mirza Ummana Jaan ascended the throne of Awadh. The son of Noora Bhand, danced at his reception, and there was a most exquisite spectacle.⁴ When the Badshah of Awadh, Mohammad Ali Shah, from 1256 Hijri to 1258 Hijri, had completed the construction of buildings at Haseenabad, then in front of the theatre, a bazaar was held each day, where according to Saroor: *The impersonator's and actors performed their comical tricks.... They performed also in order to feed themselves.*⁵

The impersonators learnt a bit of singing and dancing as well. But their primary task was impersonation. In order to entertain the audiences they often performed obscene gestures on the stage. But most of them were well read and lived a decent life. Wajid Ali Shah while referring to this sect of performer's, writes:

The two sects became popular as impersonators and actors. Their livelihood was acting, and their art was to imitate and impersonate. And their art of imitation and impersonation ended with them. I have observed that they also firmly abided by religious ethics and laws, God be praised, If you place a bag full of thousands of rupees and request a performance from them at the stake of missing their prayers, and in turn

*tell them to accept thousand of rupees thrown at them. They would choose to say their prayers on time, instead of displaying their acting skills.*⁶

At the dawn of twelfth century, amongst the troupe of impersonators in Delhi, the most popular was Taqi. He also had the patronage of the Badshah. A lot of noblemen invited him with a lot of respect and longed to be a part of his mehfil. In the wardrobe maintained by these impersonators there were costumes and armaments belonging to people of all the ranks and positions. And young and handsome boys were a part of their troupe. In the same period, also lived Shah Daniyal who was called Surkhi, he was unparalleled in mimicry, play acting and humour. He was as vivacious as a nightingale, and performed in a number of languages, he excelled in music as well. Khawasi and Anutha were amongst the well-known impersonators of Delhi and worked under the patronage of king of Delhi. They were unparalleled in putting up new impersonations, and they also displayed special skills in dancing and singing. Yari, the impersonator, was exceptionally good looking, and all impersonators belonging to his troupe were well educated.

From the account given above, the difference between impersonators and tricksters can be accounted as follows: the task of the impersonators was to mimic and entertain by jokes. The task of mimics was to impersonate a character by mimicking and adorning a costume while presenting a story. Both impersonators and tricksters excelled in dancing and singing. Later this distinction between the impersonators and tricksters was obliterated. And later the word trickster gradually disappeared.

The Impersonators: the impersonators excelled in the art of putting up disguises and impersonating people. This art has also been popular in India for a long period of time. Mulla Abdul Qadir Badayuni has described an episode in the life of Emperor Humayun of India that he had witnessed.

*In 5985 the son of the popular Irani poet Hyder Tooni, Ain Hyder, who was very timid by nature. He was present at the court of Humayun, and he was describing his state as being extremely fearful of undertaking a ship journey. Even now he was feeling quite shaken out of fear, I said to him, if he was regretting a ship journey for performing Haj. He answered yes. The Badshah asked him as to why he would shy away from a journey to the Kaba. In the meantime the Badshah's jester entered, who was also an exceptional impersonator, enacting the role of a man bitten by a mad dog and he came darting in like a barking mad dog, and grabbed Ain Hyder towards him. He bolted away so quickly, that his turban and shoes flew in different directions. Eventually he bumped and fell. All the audiences laughed out aloud, and when he learnt about the reality, (that this was just an impersonator) he was extremely embarrassed and the Badshah consoled him.*⁷

The last Badshah of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, during his reign has mentioned a trickster in this manner, that one day he was with a few of his companions, who were entertaining him with their interesting stories and their pleasant jests. At this moment

(he says), I felt like testing them for their loyalty towards me. Therefore at my instruction came a trickster employed by me, in disguise of a wounded man, he carried a naked sword in his hands, while blood was oozing out of his body wounds, he descended the stairs and came and attacked me. I also pretended to be shocked, on seeing this one of my accompanist got up and held him by his hand, while another grabbed him by his waist, and tried to kill him with his sword. He started pleading that he was only a trickster. I now told my accompanists to stop and saved his life, though he was injured. I rewarded the trickster and also employed him in my service. I also rewarded the accompanists with a sword, dagger, gun and the revolver and complimented them with the title of young guardians and appointed them as watch guards to my royal seat.⁸

I have seen tricksters putting on different disguises. But three faces of these exceptional tricksters are worth mentioning. The disguise of a one hundred year old woman with her face full of wrinkles, her neck and her hands are shaking because of alzimers, her feet are staggering while she is walking and her voice is trembling, she is walking with the help of a stick. The second impersonation is that of half a man and half of a woman, from head to toe, half the body is that of a woman and other half that of a man. The veil is worn in such a manner that when the veil draping the body is moved to one side it is the face of a man, and while this drape is moved to the other side of the body we find a beautiful woman adorned with ornaments. Third is the impersonation of a brave soldier with a sword, who is speaking in hissed voice and intensely describing the state of the war where his nose had vanished, with his opponents attack. Don't know how he had made his decent nose vanish.

A few tricksters were also trained in impersonating as animals. As a reliable narrator has narrated of an incident where a few people had assembled at the house of an affluent person and were engrossed in a conversation. In the meantime a huge chimpanzee with its tail upward, came jumping towards them. They were all afraid and they got up. When this chimpanzee stood up to salute them and asked them for a prize, then the reality dawned on them that it was a mere trickster. They were all impressed by his tricks and rewarded him according to their position.

Notes:

1. The tricksters were also known as impersonators.
2. Raqala Chedi Qalmi.
3. Newspaper, Jaam Jahanama.
4. Fasanaye Ibrat, pages 11-12.
5. Fasanaye Ibrat, page 3.
6. Quoting Wajid Ali Shah from his book Bani, page 126-127.
7. Muntaqab Altareeq: 130.
8. Mahal Khana-e- Shahi, 77-78.

BIO NOTE

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