

On the declining popularity of English poetry

The Express Tribune February 25, 2013

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“LAHORE”

“Of the six poets who published a collection of poems in 1968, four were part of a discussion on the relative success of Pakistani English prose and poetry on Sunday.”

Three of them, journalist Khaled Ahmed, actor Naveed Shahzad and women’s rights activist Samina Rahman, were on the panel while the fourth, Ahmed Rashid, was the moderator. Poets Athar Tahir and Syeda Henna Babar were also part of the discussion.

Rashid began by stating the obvious: poetry is not that popular today. “Things were different five decades ago,” he told the audience, “In 1965 the Oxford University Press published a collection of English poems by Pakistani poets titled First Voices. We were the second generation of poets who got published but did not continue.”

The six panellists recited poems by famous poets Taufeeq Rafat, Shahid Hussain and Maki Qureshi. Ahmed read out his poem Jinnah, “Written when we had five-year plans”. Rahman read out a poem, Funeral, that she had written in 1968. Tahir recited his poems Cordoba and Dictators published last month. Shahzad, who writes in Urdu and Punjabi as well, recited her poems in all three languages.

The recitations were as they were delightful left little time for a discussion. The only question discussed at length was why English prose had become more popular than poetry. “Are young people writing poetry?” asked Rashid. Ahmed said they weren’t, adding that “Whenever you approach a publisher with poems, the first thing they ask is why you haven’t written a novel,” he said, “You can still find poems in Ravi, a Government College University publication.” However poems are slowly going out of fashion across the world, he said.

Shahzad disagreed in part. She said the reason poetry was not being widely published was because every genre had its day. “We were tutored by teachers who were interested in poetry... We were pulled into the vortex,” she said, “It is a paradigm shift, but it is temporary.”

Tahir blamed the lack forums for poets to be published in. There are very few platforms like Perspective, Pakistan Review and magazines in which poets are published, he said.

“You need to hear poetry to develop love for it,” said Rahman. Her analysis of the problem boiled down to the fact that most schools focused on teaching English language, but did not teach it through literature. Ali said it was a catch-22 situation, “A vicious cycle... Not enough poetry is published so it isn’t being read, since it isn’t being read, there’s no demand for it.”

All the guests than read poems that they had themselves written. Ahmed Rashid read out two poems he had written during the Balochistan insurgency in the 1970s. Athar Tahir and Henna Babar Ali read out their more recent poems.