

The Critical and Analytical Study of Sher-ul-Ajam by Shibli Nomani

Bilal Ahmad Shiekh

Department of Persian

University of Kashmir

Mobile no.: 7006709489, 9906880731.

Email id:

bilalnabi02@gmail.com, bilalshiekh.scholar@kashmiruniversity.net.

Abstract:

Sher-ul-Ajam is a marvelous book in the field of Persian and Urdu literature, written by a great Islamic and literary scholar, historian, critic and poet namely Allama Shibli Nomani. He has contributed a lot in the field of literature by his prose and poetic works. Sher-ul-Ajam, a five volume book on life and poetical works of classical Persian poets is one of his master piece. It is detailed historical, literary and research based work and has influenced the whole literary world. This book has a unique position in Persian literature and has fully filled a big need of Indian Persian literature lovers. Till the publication of this book there was not a detailed book on life and works of classical Persian poets available in Urdu language. Allama Shibli started this great piece of work on 1324 Hijri and completed in 1339 Hijri that means it took him almost fifteen years. This paper entitled, the critical and analytical study of Sher-ul-Ajam by Shibli Nomani will lay emphasis on the book Sher-ul-Ajam, its author, its textual analysis, critical analysis, analytical analysis and its literary importance.

Key Words: Shibli Nomani, Aligrah, Tehreeki Nadwat-ul-ulma, Sher-ul-Ajam, Persian poetry, critical analysis,

Introduction:

Sher-ul-Ajam is a high level and distinguished book written by Allama Shibli Nomani on the topic, "history of Persian poetry". It is written in Urdu language and has five volumes. The book was completed in 1339AH and took almost fifteen years. The author writes on the starting of the book that he was searching for a book which contains the full life of Persian poets and literary reviews of their poetry. But unfortunately he couldn't find any book of his choice and interest. So he decided to write the book of his interest by himself. He started this master piece on 6th of March 1906 AD. (1) Shibli has created three periods of Persian poets like "Qudma", "Mutawasiteen" and "Muta'akhireen" and for every period has written a particular volume.

The first volume of Sher-ul-Ajam started from Abbas Marozi and ends on Nizami. First of all Shibli has discussed the reality and origin of Persian poetry. After this he wrote the life of poets who live during the reign of Samanid period like Rudaki & Daqaqi and also discussed their poetic qualities. Then accordingly he wrote the life and poetic qualities of poets who live during the reign of Gaznavid period like Unsuri, Farakhi, Firdausi, Asadi Toosi and Manuchehri. He also wrote the life and works of Sanie, Umer Khayyam, Anwari and Nizami Gangvi in this volume.

The second volume of Sher-ul-Ajam starts from Khawaja Fareed-u-din Attar and ends on Ibn Yameen. This volume covers the Persian poets from 7th century Hijri to 9th century Hijri. In this volume Shibli Nomani has discussed the history of Changez Khan, his destruction and his successors. He also discussed the features of the poetry of "Mutawasiteen" and also reasons for these features. He



writes that in this period Mysticism, Ethics and Qasedah dominated the literary writings. And then accordingly he discussed the life and poetry of Fareed-u-din Attar, Kamal Ismael, Sheikh Sadi, Amir Khusroo, Salman Sawagi, Hafiz Shirazi and Ibn Yameen. Shibli also writes that “Gazal” developed in this period especially by Sadi and Hafiz.

The third volume of Sher-ul-Ajam starts from Fagani and ends on Abu Talib Kaleem. In this volume Shibli Nomani started with a detailed discussion regarding the last period of Iranian poetry. He writes that after Timurid period Safavids established a vast empire in Iran and during this period India was led by great Mughals. Shibli was of the opinion that after Kaleem Kashani the Persian poetry lost its prestige, quality and fame and declared this period as the last period of Persian poetry, that is why he didn't mentioned the poets after Kaleem Kashani in his master piece. He also gave a brief look on the properties of poetry of this period. In this volume the big names who are discussed are; Fagani, Fazi, Urfi, Nazari, Talib Amali, Mirza Sayib, Abu Talib Kaleem. Allama Shibli has given a detailed life history, works and critical view of these poets.

Allama Shibli has a view that after writing the life of poets and review on their poetry in three volumes he will end up this work with fourth volume by writing the reality of poetry in general, Persian poetry and its types. But when reality of poetry and its properties extended to seventy pages then he was compelled to add fifth volume.

The fourth volume of Sher-ul-Ajam is the most important volume of this master piece as this volume is based on

literary criticism. Allama Shibli has written at the start of fourth volume that the earlier three volumes are introduction and preface of this volume. He himself has declared this volume as the crux of Sher-ul-Ajam. The fourth volume of Sher-ul-Ajam has some different chapters related to Persian poetry. The first chapter is written on reality of poetry. the second chapter deals with how poetry came into existence in Iran, gradual progress of poetry, influence of Arabic poetry on Persian poetry, the effect of personal and autonomous governments, the effect of governmental system on poetry, the effect of soldier life, the effect of social conflicts, the effect of climate and natural views. The third chapter gives a brief review on Persian poetry, comparison between Arabic poetry and Persian poetry and merits and demerits of Persian poetry. At last in fourth volume Allama Shibli has given a detailed account of Persian Masnavi in accordance with Shahnamah Firdausi.

The fifth volume of Sher-ul-Ajam is on the theme of Qasedah, Gazal, mystical, ethical and philosophical poetry of Persian language.

Life sketch of Allama Shibli Nomani:

Allama Shibli Nomani was a great Scholar, writer and poet of nineteenth century. His actual name was Siraj-u-Din Mohammad Shibli and he attached the suffix of Nomani because the actual name of Hizrat Imam Abu Haneefa was Noman bin Sabit. He was highly influenced by Abu Haneefa and followed his school of thought. He was born in Bindwal Jerajpur village of Azamgrah presently located in Utter Pradesh on 10th Shawwal 1273AH/ 3rd June 1857 A.D, when the historical revolt of 1857 took place in India against the

colonial rule of British.(1) He received his early education at his home and his teacher was Molvi Farooq Cheryakooti. He studied Persian, Arabic, Urdu and French languages. Allama also studied law but does not choose it as profession. After his early education from his village he wanted to study more but his father want him to help his father in family business. He had a lot of interest in studies and convinced his father with the help of mother and went to Rampur. Moulana Irshad Hussain Ram Pori was a famous Islamic Fiqa Scholar at that time, Shibli studied the knowledge of Islamic Fiqa with him. After that he went to Lahore to study with the famous writer and poet Moulana Faiz-ul-Hassan Saharan Pori. (2)

He did some little jobs up to five years after completion of his academic education and this was period of his struggle, but he never lose hope and his self-confidence. The most important event in his life was his recruitment in Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College Aligrah as an Assistant Professor of Arabic in 1883 AD. Actually it was the atmosphere of Aligrah and company of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan that Shibli became Allama, Shams-ul-ulma and a renowned literary figure in Indian subcontinent. He remained connected with Aligrah for almost sixteen years which made him a Historian, Biographer, Writer, Orator, Critic and Poet. He left Aligrah when he felt ill because of the climate of this place. So in order to change the climate and for his lately wish, he visited Greece, Greater Syria and Egypt and was accompanied by his teacher and friend Professor Arnold.

Allama Shibli joined the association of Tehreeki Nadwat-ul-ulma and became it most active member. The main

objectives of this association were the correction of classical education system, union of Islamic madrasas and integration among different Islamic sects. In April 1905 AD he was selected as “Muatamad Taleem” of Darul uloom Nadwat-ul-ulma and remained on this post up to 1913 AD. He did a lot of work for the promotion of modern education of Muslims of that period.

Allama Shibli was heart felt by the death of his brother who was an advocate at Allahabad high court. He was distracted for all worldly works and left for Azamgrah to complete the “Seerat-i- Nabi”, but his death didn’t allow him to do so. He also laid the foundation of “Darul-Musanifeen”, it was in early stage and he was called by almighty. On 18 Nov. 1914 he left this world but his literary and religious contribution will keep him alive till the day of resurrection. (3)

Allama Shibli Nomani has contributed a lot in the field of literature. He is known as the second big biographer after Altaf Hussain Hali of his contemporary period. Altaf Fatima has written in his research article, “The bright and glorious personality of Shibli Nomani has permeated the biographies this period in such a way that the status of his contemporary biographies has become secondary.”(4)

Views of different critics on Sher-ul-Ajam:

Sher-ul-Ajam is really a master piece in Urdu language on Persian poets and their poetry. It is known as a book of literary criticism because of its fourth volume. It has been published by different publishers multiple times and has been translated in different languages. Sher-ul-Ajam has a unique position in Persian literature and till date no book on this topic reached its level. Different scholars has written the

reviews and criticism on Sher-ul-Ajam, some are mentioned below;

1. Moulana Syed Sulaiman Nadwi writes, “Sher-ul-Ajam, is not the history of names and titles, birth and age of poets and Emperors and princes but it is critical review on Persian poetry. The life and biography of poets in Sher-ul-Ajam is not first thing but it is second thing written in it. Its first thing is the poetical perfection of poets and their golden theme. In nutshell, it is not the history of body and mater but it is the history of mind and soul.” (5)

2. The big name among the critics of Sher-ul-Ajam is Mahmood Sherani who has written a book namely Tankeed-i-Sher-ul-Ajam (critics of Sher-ul-Ajam). He started this book by writing that, “after studying Sher-ul-Ajam, my personal view is that while writing the book Shibli Noman has remained negligent in the duties of research and history. Whatever interesting comes in his study he writes...it is possible he is good at Islamic history but his historical knowledge regarding Iranian poets is limited... various fictitious and unhistorical stories got valuable place in Sher-ul-Ajam. General misconceptions which has been repeatedly written by various biographers has been mentioned in Sher-ul-Ajam... The information which Moulana Shibli got easily available wrote in this book without doing much research on it.” (6)

Mahmood Sherani is right on some places as per his critics is concerned but the whole process could not lower the importance and literary reputation of Sher-ul-Ajam.

3. Dr. Ibadat Baralwi writes about Shibli Nomani as a critic that, “Shibli’s Status as a critic is crystal clear. His views are wide and deep, innovative and productive and their influence can be seen in his critics. In critics and literary analysis he is not less important than any other. The height of his aesthetic taste is very high and all this came in him due to deep study of Persian literature. No one of his contemporary reached to his level.” (7)

4. Prof. Nazir Ahmad writes about Sher-ul-Ajam, “Moulana would had not thought of the popularity Sher-ul-Ajam got and the fame he himself got by writing this master piece. The topic on which Sher-ul-Ajam has been written on, from seventy years no book like it, came into existence. Sher-ul-Ajam still has the status of milestone and due to lack of resources it came into existence. It is the only king of history of Persian poetry from last seventy years,” (8)

5. Dr. Mohammad Ilyas-ul-Azmi writes in his book “Nakoosh-i-Shibli”, “various criticism has been done on Sher-ul-Ajam but these criticism cannot lower its status. It can be said that no book like Sher-ul-Ajam has been written in Urdu till date.” (9)

Critical analysis of Sher-ul-Ajam:

Sher-ul-Ajam as a biography and critical book of Persian poetry is a great master piece of literature. It has a marvelous importance in Urdu critical books as well as in Persian critical literature. The theme and the contents has been discussed in introduction of this paper, now emphasis will be laid on its critical analysis.

Allama Shibli Nomani has done a great job by writing this book and has full filled his aim of writing a book as it is. His writing down the historical background of every period of Persian poetry is extremely perfect and interesting. This part of the book shows that he has a deep study of Persian history and Persian emperors. He has given life history of poets but in this section of book, nothing seems new and addition to knowledge as compared with other books. He has focused on the analysis of poetry and poetic techniques of poets but less is given regarding biography of Persian poets. Shibli Nomani analysed the poets mentioned in Sher-ul-Ajam and their poetry on the basis of historical and literary criticism. He was a great critic and at the Persian time was a poet. His criticism on Persian poets and their poetry is mostly literary and technical and he remained confined only to poetical qualities and not interfered into their poetic theme.

The most important and the cream part of Sher-ul-Ajam is its fourth volume as per its critical nature is concerned. In this volume Shibli Nomani has given a scholarly critics on Persian poetry, its reality, origin, properties and so on. He has discussed poetry and its importance and relevance with philosophy. He has also discussed the essential elements of poetry like imagination power, simile, metaphor, beautification of words, simple and elegant poetry etc. After that he has given a detailed review of Persian, Arabic poetry and their influence on one another. While discussing these topics Shibli Nomani has nicely given the examples of Persian great poets and their poetry in order to strengthen his critical arguments.

Conclusion:

Allama Shibli was an Astonishing personality and has contributed greatly in different fields of literature. The most astonishing contribution towards Urdu and Persian literature is Sher-ul-Ajam. The book has been written almost a century ago but still no one can write a book like this. The book gives vast knowledge about Persian poets and poetry and all the development it went through from its early stage. Sher-ul-Ajam is a vast and detailed book, it should be further explored and needs special care of worthy scholars. All Persian lovers should study the book and it should be preserved. Various publishers has published it multiple times especially Darul Musannefin. The latest edition published by Darul Musannefin Shibli Academy in 2018 has a number of errors in writing. By this paper I want to convey a message to the literary world especially the Persian and Urdu lovers that Allama Shibli Nomani should be further explored and a research institute like Darul Musannefin purely based on Shibli studies should be established. His critical literature like Mawaznah Anees o Dabeer and Sher-ul-Ajam should also be included in syllabus of undergraduate and post graduate courses. So that this legendary personality will become known to upcoming generations.

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