

Hamid Ali Bela: Tribute to a Legendary Sufi Singer

By Waqar Haider Hashmi

*Mujhe Khabar Nahin Ye Shayari Hai Ya Kuch Aur
Atta Huwa Hai Mujhe Zikr-o-Fikr-o-Jazb-o-Suroor*

(Translation: I do not know if it is poetry or something else, I have been bestowed with the attributes i.e., remembrance; reflection; rapture & passion) - Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Hamid Ali Bela was a legendary singer who had mastered the poetic work of Shah Hussain a revered Punjabi Sufi poet. Hamid has also sung Khawaja Ghulam Fareed's poetry with no less perfection.

Hamid wanted to become a ghazal singer, but on the advice of senior professionals he opted to tread upon the difficult path of Sufi singing, and his voice had a natural semblance with different mystical moods depicted and portrayed by Shah Hussain through his multi-dimensional poetic work.

'Bela' means wilderness and Hamid in a TV interview revealed that once he was singing at the tomb of Shah Hussain where a Darvish was listening to him. The Darvish suggested that since his voice was deep and serene so he should adopt the name 'Bela'. Hamid Ali is a beautiful name but 'Bela' adds another endearing dimension to it.

So it is not just a coincidence or a sheer stroke of luck that the first ever Kafi of Shah Hussain that Hamid rendered became an instant hit and an all time great listening experience. Here are some verses with translation from this illuminating piece of art:

Mae ni main kinnoun aakhan [O' mother with whom shall I share...]
Dard vichoray da haal ni [The pain of losing touch with the Beloved...]
Dhuan dhukhay mere murshad wala [Underneath smouldering heap of my Mentor's love...]
Jaan pholan taan laal ni [Lies red hot fires...]
Jungle baille phiraan dhoudaindi [But wandering from one wilderness to another...]
Ajay na payou laal ni [I have yet to meet my Beloved...]
Dukhaan di roti, solan da salan [I eat and drink nothing but pain...]
Aahen da balan baal ni [And hot sighs to breath...]

Kahay hussain faqeer nimana [Says Hussain the hapless faqeer...]
Shoh milay tan thewan nihai ni [Only communion with the Beloved can
give me real joy...]

It is believed that Shah Hussain symbolically used to equate the grave with mother's womb meaning thereby that just as a child remains in mother's womb before birth, grave keeps the body till transition to next life. For a saint, communion with the Beloved is like a new birth, hence is the driving inspiration. The deep and rich quality of Hamid's voice well translates the essence of Shah Hussain's verses.

The pain of separation, thoughts of remorse, helplessness and ordeal of temporary existence are esoterically portrayed by the master singer. Sweetness, serenity and depth in his voice lend beauty and grace to the mystical expression. This is the reason why among renditions of the same Kafi by many notable singers, Hamid's version stands out to most unique.

The somber and deep expression of the above Kafi (no. 102) is replaced with a joyful *Mera sohna sajjan ghar aaya* [My adorable Beloved has graced my abode... Kafi no. 118]. Here Shah Hussain paints a joyful picture of communion with the Beloved in the following manner:

Tusi rul mil dayou mubarkaan [Please offer me collective felicitations...]
mera sohna sajjan ghar aaya ni [My adorable Beloved has graced my
abode...]
Jis sajjan nu main dhoond-di wataan, [The One whom I always long
for...]
sou saajan mein payou ni [So I have found Him...]
Vehda te aangan mera bheya sohana [My home has blossomed...]
muthe noor souhaya ni [My forehead radiates with joy...]

Hamid improvises a little bit to maintain rhythm and harmony by skipping a few words to fine-tune phonetics. He emphasizes on 'sohna sajjan' meaning the most beautiful Beloved. 'Noor' means enlightenment of soul and intellect, as Lord Almighty has shown the right way to mankind i.e., how to offer prayers, observe religious rituals and achieve highest moral, ethical and spiritual levels. Hamid's awareness of the significance of symbols used in this Kafi is evident from his rendition. It is indeed a difficult task to maintain the sanctity of the mystical expression particularly when it has been camouflaged with the notations used by mortals. Only Hamid can do it.

Rabba mere haal da mehram toun [O'Lord you are fully aware of my
ordeal...]
Ander toun hain, baahar toun hain, roun roun vich toun [You are inside
me, You are all around, You are in every part of my soul]

Toun hain tana, toun hain bana, sabh kujh mera toun [You are the weft,
You are the warp; You are everything I have]
Kahe Hussain faqeer namana, main nahin sab toun [Says Hussain the
hapless faqeer, I am nothing You are everything]

Hamid elates the feelings and fuels the spirit by perfectly illustrating the Sufi experience of annihilation of great Shah, and Hamid's voice depicts typical Lahori Punjabi dialect and mood. Opening line is so fulfilling that you forget you have to taste through more delicacies. The Kafi flows smoothly like a clear running water on a serene lush green piece of land. Hamid takes off and flies so cleanly.

Another of Hamid's nostalgia filled number is *Ni tenu rab na bhulli* [May you never ever forget the Lord...]. Let us examine the spirit behind this Kafi no. 47:

Dua faqeeran di ey ha [Prayer of the faqeer is that...]
Ni tainoun Rab na bhulle [May you never ever forget the Lord...]

Rab na bhullien hor sab kujh bhullien [Forget everything but never forget
Lord...]
Rab na bhullan jeyha [How can we forget our Lord...]

Sohna rouna sab chul waisi [Beautiful appearance and everything will
disappear...]
Ishq na lagda layha [Divine love is not worth giving-up...]

Horaan naal hasaindi khidaindi [You are intimate with others...]
Chah tay ghunghat keyha [Why wear veil for your Lover...]

Kahe Hussain faqeer Sain da [Says Hussain the faqeer of Lord...]
Marna tay maana keyha [Death cannot stand between me and my Lord...]

Baba Ghulam Fareed's poetic work is sweet and sublime. Consider his Kafi no. 59:

Sanwala, na maar naina de teer [O'Beloved do not hurt me with sharp
gaze...]

Thal chitraang de andar mein Sassi [I am like Sassi experiencing the
roughness of Thal desert...]

Baile baithi Heer [And I am like Heer sitting in wilderness...]

Kojhi kamli tede naa ve [Unattractive and naive associates herself with
Your name...]

Na kar yaar kareer [Please do not ignore...]

Tede naal he Sanwal sohna [Beautiful Beloved is with you...]

Dil lawan taqseer [One can't help loving the Beloved...]

Ghaus qutab sab tethon sadke [Ghaus and Qutab are ready to lay down
sacrifice...]

Kon Farid faqeer [Who cares for Farid a faqeer...]

Hamid's captivating delivery of the opening line where he further beautifies 'Sanwala' and decorates 'na maar naina' with a subtle twist as if the mystic poet is in fact happy with the attention he is getting from the Lord but deliberately complains to advance the romantic dialogue.

Yet another of Hamid Ali Bela's masterpieces is Shah Hussain's Kafi which he artfully decorates with patches from other works of Shah Hussain. Here are the lyrics:

Nyounh la leya [or originally *Mun atkeya*] *Bey-Parwah de naal* [I have set
my heart to the One who pays no heed...]

Ouh deen dunee de Shah de naal [With Lord of divine path and this
mundane world...]

Qazi mulla mattee'n deinde [Worldly wise people extend their advice...]

Kharre sayane raah dasainde [Only the truthful and wise can show the
way...]

Ishq ki lagge rah de naal [Divine love is in itself a way!...]

Nadiyoun paar Ranjhan da thana [Across the river is my Beloved's
abode...]

Keeta koul zaroori jaana [I swear I'll go there...]

Kahe Hussain faqeer nimana [Says Hussain the hapless faqeer...]

Duniya chore aakhir mur jaana [After all one has to leave this world and
die...]

Orhak kum Allah de naal [After all will have to unify with Allah...]

Sufi singing scene would have been dominated by Seraiki and Sindhi singers had there been no Hamid Ali Bela who rightfully placed Lahori Punjabi accent to the heart of the genre. Hamid achieved recognition in his lifetime and won many

accolades and awards. Although he left for heavenly abode on June 27, 2001 leaving a huge void in Pakistani music scene, but he will always remain in the heart of music lovers as an icon.