

Author's Preface

The Flame is divided into seven parts and sixty-three cantos. Part one of **The Flame** is devotional. Parts two, three, four and five are about the destruction caused by manic messiahs. Part six is about those who cause destruction, and part seven is yearning for the loss of **The Flame**. Some cantos are to extol the virtues of **the Flame** and some are to denounce bloodshed. Some are in the memory of the flame and some are to portray the destructions by the blast. I have written these cantos in the belief that maniac messiahs are misled individuals who generate the blizzard of fear and panic. Those who welcome the blizzards of the maniac messiahs or adore them commit horrendous crimes against humanity as those who carry out sinister designs. The last canto of this book delivers hope. Hope signifies that a positive outcome is possible. Without hope life is a Sahara of dismay.

As I have said elsewhere, revision is the breathe of my art. **The Flame** is the result of the eight years of my anxious care of these robins of my art. During these years, I changed my dealings with these birds in different capacities to nourish them more artistically. In the last two years, I became more diligent with more focus. At my writing table, I kept them close to me. Whenever I had time, as well as the first thing in the morning and the last before going to bed, I fed the robins with the berries of my passion. In their enlivening warbles, I drowned the chill of the time and the ghosts of the past. Several times, I took their cage to my bed room to continue hearing their notes of freedom along the shores of my sleep. They remained closed to my heart as they are now and shall remain.

I knew that these birds are not meant to be caged. When I felt somewhat satisfied with my feeding, I kicked the robin of my art out of the nest one by one. Very rarely any of them came back in despair. This way, I was able to publish some of these cantos in more than sixty publications in Canada, the USA, India, on the internet and elsewhere. That is how I treated the robins of my another collection, **Shrine**. Before they were collected in that book, several of them had appeared in more than seventy publications. I feel strongly that before poems appear in a book form, they should appear also in periodicals, because acceptances encourage a poet. At the same time, these acceptances provide additional opportunities of sharing with divergent audiences. Some editors make suggestions for improvement. Some of these cantos were included in my collection *The Flowers of Thirst*, out of print now. I have put some of these cantos myself in Urdu, Hindi and Panjabi versions.

One problem that a poet usually encounters in a long poem is the possibility of

repetition of words and phrases. Another is the maintenance of logical continuity and flow. I am a proverbial enemy of clichés though some are animating and some may creep in without being aware of them. I believe that a poet should use fresh images. I have tried to use every word carefully as a brick to build the world of ***The Flame***.

During the days of my care, I made a number of wrong turns. Life is not a ready-made dish. One makes several attempts in different combinations to find the right type of spices and amount to prepare an ideal dish. It is like finding one right turn after making several wrong ones. I am convinced that seventy-five percent of poetry is perspiration and twenty-five percent inspiration or talent. Talent by itself is nothing unless it is combined with perspiration that includes mastering the tools of the art.

The Flame is poetry and poetry is my home. I began building my home during the painful shyness of my early days when I began to dwell in imagination and the word of books. It is a long odyssey of search for my golden fleece. My odyssey was blockaged from all directions. I was from a family that was socially isolated after migrating from Pakistan. We were surrounded with a new environment in India. My father was the only earning member of the family. My mother, who was a teacher in Sialkot, now in Pakistan, started her own school for the kids who did not attend a regular school or needed extra attention. In a one room house, she gave tuition to those children to supplement income. It was not an easy adjustment from good days in Sialkot to the bad days in New Delhi.

In those days, entertainments for children from the families which were not financially very secure had been limited to meeting friends or reading. There were no tv's, and radio was a luxury. The movie theatres had been expensive and rare. I had a few friends but we did not visit each other's homes; we used to meet outside. Our sports had been self-improvised, like hitting one another with a soft ball on a street and trying to dodge. Others included different forms of plays with the marbles and kabadi. There were more entertainments along the same lines. I do not see them in the West nor in India during my visits. For some reason, my mother did not encourage me to mix up with other kids, particularly with those who were not interested in their studies. That also became a factor for making me a painfully shy kid. I began to take interest in reading. But I hated schools and their books. My father was an avid reader of newspapers. On Sundays, when he was at home, he bought most of the newspapers that I began to love.

Apart from newspapers, our home had a small collection of books in Urdu. I was doing most of their reading. After finishing them, I began to borrow from

our local library. I finished most of the novels, collections of poems and books on psychology that were available in the library. I began to browse at book stores and ask my friends for the reading materials. I also began to move in the company of poets, frequenting the tea shops where they congregated. They had been mostly mature. I heard each and every word they discussed. During those discussions, I heard that if a person memorizes one thousand couplets of choice, he or she can start composing own verses. That is what I tried, but I could not memorize them and what I was able to, did not help me.

I also heard that a writer should write everyday on any experience or idea before going to bed. I was told that this practice helps to develop a style. I began to write about my friends, our games, chats, you name it. It proved a useful exercise.

I also heard that a writer should keep a notebook to put down any striking word or phrase that comes across during a talk, reading or from anywhere. This is a practice that is with me even now. If I like a sentence or phrase from a poem or just my own, I put it down in my notebook. When I have time or I am in mood, I go over them. I find it a very useful practice, and will not hesitate recommending others.

My father edited a religious publication in Sialkot, in addition to running a sports firm. In New Delhi, he often wrote letters to the editor and to businesses. It seems, he enjoyed writing and reading replies. When I grew up, my father wanted me to get married and settle in life and do my writing at leisure. I knew that I will not be happy making money to look after children though I wanted a family. I knew just to make enough money to be a marginal citizen would not please any one and will keep creating financial and family crisis. To be a successful bread earner for a Christian in North India was going to be a tough job. I found out that the officers at the employment centres were not friendly with Christians. I avoided the path of marriage and be settled. I began to explore ways to be an established writer. It had been a long battle, but I was not discouraged.

It was certain that one ladder for success was formal education to make money and be a successful writer. My mother was with me as far as education was concerned. But university education was expensive and to study from home for university degrees was not that easy. I yearned for real education in an intellectual and stimulating atmosphere of a university where students interact with one another and professors. My one problem was my early education that did not help me gain self-confidence and skills. It was my early education that remained a serious obstacle most of my life. I had attended the most cheapest schools that were run by governments. In these schools, the

medium of instruction was the local language. English was touched nominally at elementary level without any emphasis on conversation, till one left the school for a college or university. Those who could afford, sent their children to mission schools where the medium of instruction was English from the beginning. Those schools built confidence in their students.

After schools, the medium of instruction used to become English. There was no gradual transition. Text books were in English and professors gave lectures in English. This created more inferiority complex in students from government schools. The result was disappointing, because those from well-to-do families who had studied in mission schools shined at the college and university levels.

My mother found a way. She repeatedly insisted us to speak English at home for which we had no practice and there was no one to correct. Our neighborhood was of no help, because it was even worst. I used to burn within with the fire to have a good knowledge of English because I wanted to be a writer in English, knowing that was the way to reach the world audience. I am not prejudice towards any language. Every language, including every object, is beautiful. However, I wanted to know English well to reach the readership of other nations. That was my goal. It was confirmed later that language comes by speaking and one should be in a situation where he or she is forced to speak. I realized it when I was in Ethiopia as a teacher. I was in a situation in which people did not know English. But nearly everyone knew Italian. I started speaking Italian in a couple of months and became a fluent conversationalist within a year. It is because I was forced to speak.

Apart from the inadequate education, my religion stood in my way. Discriminations and religious riots produced fears. They demolished whatever walls of security we had. These factors led me to the caves of isolation, thinking, browsing, and imagining that prepared a good recipe to be a poet.

As a child, I used to feel that India was the safest place in the world, because it is tolerant and religious. Most of the holy persons had been born in this sub-continent. During those days Gandhi was assassinated. I saw Hindus, even old people, crying like a child when they heard the news over the radio. I heard people saying that India has become orphan—it has lost its father. India as a birth place of Buddha, Guru Nanak and other spiritual physicians is the safest place in the globe. That is what I used to hear and read. When I came out of India and had time to think from a distance, I discovered that physicians are needed where sickness prevails. The sub-continent of India has produced a number of spiritual physicians because that area needed to be healed.

I am noting these phases of my life to share that the seeds of my poetic destination were sown in the early days and my struggle to establish myself as a writer and poet was more perspiration than inspiration. One can say that it was my inspiration that led me to perspiration. The shadows of inspiration and perspiration walked side by side with me everywhere. I grabbed every opportunity to sharpen my tools to be a better poet. Poetry may also be revelation and flash, but mostly it is perspiration. When poetry becomes a passion, it becomes more demanding. Poetry was and is still my passion. Peace is the womb where the baby of my passion grew. The absence of peace had shaken my psyche deeply while growing up in New Delhi, India. The solitary hours of the night spent in the web of fear and days without friends and hope forced me to read, think and imagine. Those days and nights drove me to the island of imagination that laid the seeds for my development as a poet and writer. In Ethiopia, where I went to teach, I had money, a maid, a car, good climate and peace that I desired the most. But the surrounding was not stimulating for writing. Means to reach even local population were medieval. English was more limited in its use than it was in India. There was hardly any library. I had to abandon my good life in Ethiopia to be in an English speaking nation where I could learn and establish myself as a meaningful writer.

When I came to Canada for my higher studies, the first thing I did was to find writers and poets and their groups. They were not many in those days. However, the availability of information opened a new vista for me. I came to know some publications for writers. Some came to my attention at newspaper stands and some were referred to me. I began to buy them regularly though they were expensive. These magazines were useful, because they discussed problems of writings and poets, such as how to find a book publisher, edit and so on. There was nothing like them in India. Poets in India were not organized and there had been hardly any workshops for them. On the other hand, in Canada, nearly every conference of writers had practical workshops. I began to discuss the craft of writing and about publications with others, whether they were writers or not, to get as much information as was possible. I was an attentive listener. I began inviting poets and writers to restaurants to get help to improve my writing skills. Often I had to travel afar. It was not easy to find a friend in North America where even whites are lonely. People here are very independent. Someone suggested me to try opposite sex for friendships. To find an established poet who had time to discuss the tools of poetry was not that easy. Established writers, including those who made a moderate success, had no time. Those who had time wanted to be with better writers. In any case, I kept my search and was able to make contacts in a limited way. My efforts yielded fruits but not what I expected. Search itself was perspiration.

I studied at a university in Canada for some years and then became a book publisher. The idea behind this decision was to remain close to writing and also writers. Book publishing helped me in several ways. There was respect and money, but my goal kept evading me. Most of the time, I was engaged in promoting others. My own writing suffered for want of time. To get out of even this web, I had to make further adjustments. I knew that I will have to lose something to gain my golden fleece. I bid farewell to book publishing.

Like any art, poetry is seventy-five percent perspiration. By perspiration I mean also editing again and again, reading and reading, writing and keep writing and keep sending manuscripts to publications to be an acceptable poet. It is not an easy decision to continue submitting the robins of art because of the fear of rejection. Those who want to improve their art, rejection slips are the stepping stones to success. Some rejections are sent because editors do not need additional material on the same subject or they do not have enough space to accommodate them. Some good editors make suggestions to revise certain portions of the work. A poet should never be tired of revisions. A time comes when a poem would tell when to stop. Sometimes poets have to stop revisions, because they get tired of what leads them nowhere, even knowing that the poem needs extra work. In such situations, I put my poem aside to take it up some other day unexpectedly. This procedure works in most cases with most poets. Often poets will know themselves if a poem needs further work. It is like knowing when the stomach is full. Another way is to consult an editor. Every one needs an editor, even editors do.

There is a myth that poetry strikes a poet like a flash, or it is a divine bolt. For a serious poet, it may be bolt and divine, but mostly it is cooking. I believe there is beauty everywhere. That is what the Bible says in its story on the origin of the universe. After every creation, God said beautiful. There is beauty in every object and so is poetry. Beauty is poetry and poetry is beauty.

But everyone does not have the abilities to bring out gracefully the god within. It is a poet who gives that god a shape with the beauty of the language. Language is a media between an object and poet that gives life, as God did when he created the world with his words. What is important in a poem is the arrangement of words. This is an intellectual exercise that needs dipping into the amazing world of words. These efforts need the proper knowledge of the tools.

Poets are painters who use words, instead of colours, or they are dancers, who instead of using the movements of their hands, legs and facial

expressions, use lyrics. In addition to the arrangement of words, the most important feature of a poem is economy of words.

Poetry is an unusual experience that shakes a poet thoroughly. A poem is by a human for humans about a deep inner experience that is symbolized through a language. To describe or illustrate, a poet needs tools and the struggle to master the use of the tools is perspiration. Through images and the arrangement of words and other tools a poet conveys his or her experience to his reader. Poetry is not only to convey that experience to the reader, it is also to convey it in a beautiful way and that beautiful way should also be something like a new and delicious dish. That is where perspiration gets involved.

I had no problem as far as subject is concerned. The object or the subject that had deeply disturbed me was my early days in New Delhi where the bear of discrimination and fear roamed freely. I often think that it must be the supreme power that has kept me secure and helped me to settle in Canada to be able to do something for peace. I also think that with my limited power of the pen and abilities how that divine power expects me to do something for peace. The deeper I go, the more I come to know that I can serve that purpose with whatever means I have.

The Flame is my extraordinary project of the prime level. I fathom here a subject artistically that concerns politicians, reformers, peace activists, philosophers, prophets and others. I believe that the life after death would be blissful if an individual does not destroy the legitimate peace of others. Those who maintain their lives on the path of good, their life after death would also be good. Those who promote peace on earth shall enjoy peace after death. It does not make any sense to expect peace after death by destroying the peace of others. Hindu scriptures call God peace. Jesus says that peacemakers shall be called the children of God. God is the king of peace in the scriptures of both the Hindus and Christians.

The Flame is about peace and peace is the main area of my exploration. There are several minor areas that also relate to peace, including human rights, treatment of the minority by the majority and antiwar activities. I have tried to attempt these areas in the light of my ideology of peace. Just to talk of peace is meaningless. There should be also some concrete ideology and activities. That is what I have attempted in my prose.

Peace has been my main interest in my prose, poetry and also in my talks. As I have mentioned in my articles and prefaces, the source of my inspiration is my early childhood. Lack of security in the country of my birth was responsible

for my search. I did not give up this hunt even in the countries where I was comfortably secure.

Peace has been the hunt of humans from the time immemorial. There have been different theories to weave its rainbow. Some physicians who have appeared to give directions have given their lives to light its candle. Some of them taught unconditional love and some of them taught tooth for a tooth. Some prophets have taught to be neutral or indifferent to pains and pleasures of the world. Terrorists also talk of peace. They believe that they achieve or will achieve peace by terrorizing citizens. A breed of the terrorists that is fed by religious fanaticism is most dangerously intolerant of the views of others. It is spreading fast and widely all over the world. Those who believe in preparation for war for peace have invented the deadliest weapons, such as nuclear bombs. Instead of peace, the world is coming closer to the threshold of complete annihilation. No one wants that sort of peace, except some morbid thinkers.

I believe that terrorism, an extreme form of fobia to rule others, is the work of organized groups that carry out bloodshed of innocent citizens to gain political, national or religious power. They disregard human life and do not belong to any organized armed forces. Moreover, they do not follow any rules of the war. They strike whenever and wherever it is possible. Often they call themselves liberators, separatists and jihadis. They shun democratic means to achieve their objectives. The values that are shared by law-abiding citizens are their targets and they come from every community and background.

In November 2004, a UN panel describes terrorism as a deed that is “intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.” The main weapon of these groups is violence and the threat of violence to cause as much destruction as possible with deep and wide physical and psychological impact. Their intentional targets are civilians. They want to paralyze them with fear to put pressure on the government to accept their agenda. They want to gain maximum publicity and believe they can achieve it effectively through violence. Their groups hold secret training camps, where they exercise for physical fitness, learn to use fire arms, explosives and receive constant doses for their brain wash. They are funded with the money from organized crimes, the sale of drugs, and the misuse of the funds of the charitable organizations. These days terrorists make CD’s and movies of their heinous crimes to sell them to make money. Terrorism has become an industry.

I believe that peace is the legitimate child of peaceful means. One cannot

saunter on the bones of children and innocent citizens to get the crown of peace. I believe that peace is a powerful basic human need that is the other side of the coin of love. All normal humans, no matter where and how they live, aspire for peace. Poets all over the world have reflected this need with individual techniques and symbols, peculiar to their own cultures and ages. Due to the universal interest in peace, different ethnic groups will be able to enjoy these cantos as much as I have enjoyed writing them.

I firmly believe that to promote peace, it is important to appreciate also other cultures, emphasizing similarities, rather than dissimilarities. The emphasis on dissimilarities is usually to shock, not to build bridges. Since the cantos of ***The Flame*** are about that eternal flame, a universal phenomenon, these cantos will help readers realize, consciously or unconsciously, that hope is still alive under the sun. This realization will open gates for the appreciation of the writings of other cultures and to the fact that their writers are also human beings, mixtures of strengths and weaknesses, with the same basic needs.

Canada, where I live, is a complete world in microcosm. It is blessed with distinctive ethnocultural, as well as political, racial, social and religious groups. It is the second largest country in the world and its citizens come from every corner of the globe, who retain their distinctive heritage. Canada publishes every year more than three hundred newspapers and periodicals in ethnic languages. One thread that links the ethnic groups is their increasing awareness of the richness of one another and significant contributions in several areas.

Flame also symbolizes sharing, compassion, sacrifice, courage and witness. I use flame as a symbol as I have used the bird dove. Flame is the visible form of the fire. It has been discovered that gravity plays some indirect part in the formation of the fire. If flame has a connotation, the gravity also assumes that form. Flame has been the main symbol in the Vedic scriptures. In Hindu religion, the Almighty symbolizes five elements. One of those elements is fire. People in the Vedic Age worshipped fire and even now some Hindus keep the fire burning during worships. They also perform a sacred ritual of fire at important events, including births, weddings, funerals and major holidays. The Hindus use it also on their festival of Diwali. Jewish light candles on Hannukkah and Christians use it on Christmas. It is used as eternal flame to watch at monuments and tombs. Candles flicker in churches, temples and mosques. Flame is also a symbol of Methodist Church, a Christian denomination with a long history.

Methodist Church uses the flame with the cross that represents the third person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit that refers to Pentecost when believers witnessed

tongues as fire. In Greek mythology flame refers also to the Olympic Flame that commemorates the theft of fire from Zeus, a Greek god, by Prometheus. During the ancient Olympics, fire was kept burning throughout celebrations. According to Greek mythology, fire or flame was in the possession of gods only. Prometheus stole fire from god Zeus to give to humans when they lived in dark caves. This gift brought productivity also in the field of art and literature. Prometheus was punished by Zeus for this act of compassion and generosity.

To destroy humans, Zeus gave another gift to humans. He collected disdainful objects and put them in a box that was given to a beautiful girl that was created for that purpose. Zeus named her Pandora that means all gifted. She was told not to open that box, but she did. Consequently, the contents of the box that contained pains, bloodshed, fear, economic strangulations, anguishes and sufferings, began to roam in the world. All that was left was Hope. Eventually, it was also let out of that box. Expression of hope is the last canto of ***The Flame***.

The maniac messiahs open this box with the fingers of science and technology, using the muscles of fanaticism to spread a carpet of untold brutalities for the sake of their macabre pleasure. These openers of the Pandora's Box roam in the world in every shape to cause as much destruction as possible. They go to universities, do usual business, greet their neighbours, smile, shake hands, eat and do everything like normal human beings. Next moment they are seen killing citizens with the rage of their guns and explosives, killing even themselves. They are trained to hide their love for bloodshed. Actually it is the education that they receive during their childhood and years of adolescent that is never washed away. These robots steal the flame in whatever shape they find anywhere.

The openers of these boxes are also gifted with every beauty as Pandora was. The most precious of them is the gift of life that they have been trading with the ugliness of evil. They reject their gift to long for the domain from where no one comes back. Their path to that domain is paved with the bones of the children and painted with the blood of the innocents. The flowers that grow on the both side of that path are fed with the tears of the helpless children and widows. To reach their other world, they walk over the ground that is concreted with the blood of the dreams of mothers. Walking on this path, they dream of entering the domain of bliss. Intelligent people may not find logic here, but the life of brutalities is more real for terrorists than the life they see around in their daily life.

Obviously these openers reject the gift of life, turning their backs even to the normal joys around them. When this rejection is combined with the philosophy of their bliss, they stand up to do anything. Most of them are prepared for the

work of terrorism in their childhood. Aristotle said that first school of a child is the lap of the mother. Laps of mothers of these maniac messiahs must have disciplined them for this type of life.

These openers include educated and illiterate, rich and poor, men and women, politicians, engineers, medicos and religious leaders of all ages. Among them, religious fanatics are most brutal. They aim at killing as many innocent citizens as possible because they are soft targets. They do this work for a greater good or for themselves to enter the kingdom of their land of peace easily. They do not appear to be mentally sick. They do not think about the wrong they do. They do not feel the pains of others and do not suffer from clinically defined personality disorder. They are not alone. There are groups behind them who control their minds. They have an agenda.

These assassins of humanity steal joys in living. These days with sniffing dogs and other scientific checkups, there is no real defence against them. When I was growing up in New Delhi, there were no dangers from suicide bombers, but from crowds or stabbers. Our home was also a target that I came to know later when the riots subsided. There were hardly any telephones and police were not as active as it is in the West. Moreover, they were far off. When I think of those days, I still shudder and think that there must be a purpose for which I have been saved from uncouth killers. I have experienced their stings. I know what fear is in the jungle of helplessness. I know what life is when there is no hope. We were surrounded by the original inhabitant of India, called AdiBasi that means the real inhabitants. I still remember how they used to sing hymns all day and night to the Hindu deities without any pause. They used to sing on loudspeakers loud enough to be heard blocks away. They were devout and religious. Most of them were from labouring class. They had been also involved with killing. In the ladder of caste system they are not from higher casts. Many years later when there were other serious riots, against the Sikhs this time, again such people were involved. That uprising was due to the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her own body guard who happened to be a Sikh. Luckily in those days of riots I was in Canada. It happened in the eighties.

How a spiritual person would start killing even his own neighbours and friends seems to be an enigma to me. Perhaps killers have been fed with the poison for earning points to enter the kingdom of God, or it is the mass hysteria of violence when even normal beings act as animals. They do what other do, forgetting all the norms and principals of life.

Fear became an unwelcoming guest in my life. As a potent biological presence of unpleasant danger, it took away a considerable joy from my life. It often led

me to the heightened perception of being persecuted that destroyed the delicate fabrics of my trust. In the shape of fear of rejection, it led me often to make irrational decisions. The scars of this powerful emotion were not easy to wash from the psyche even after I came out of that fear abroad. To find hope, I traced riches, education, faiths and many other things. I tried to see the face of hope in political ideologies, including Marxism, Nazism and dictatorship. To take the root of fear out, I took a long and painful journey of efforts. My life in Canada was my attempt to refuse to let fear to be my master. But this is not that easy. Writing, particularly poetry, is one way to do that. Poetry is my refuge and my helper to help others to be aware of the enemies of peace. The result of that is ***The Flame***. It is not to attack a particular creed or religion or nationality. Scenes in ***The Flame*** are common to any destruction in Canada, the United States, India or anywhere. People are people everywhere and suffering is suffering. I believe that remorseless forces of brutalities have their own agenda. They do not follow any organized religion. ***The Flame*** is my humble offering to that end. It is a collection of the flowers whose cultivator has roots in the centuries-old culture of the sub-continent of India. I expect people of other traditions and heritage to view this bouquet from that angle.

Pseudo-critics are known for marring beauty by dissecting works of art into fragmented forms in an attempt to search only for ugly spots. I have toiled in these cantos to catch the flame in a net of diverse techniques. This diversity is also to avoid the monotony of treading the same path. This is in an earnest venture, using every possible tool of a poet within my human limits, to catch the essence of that flame. However, the beaten track of expression does not provide the ruling atmosphere in this book.

The eternal flame knows no occupation, faith nor complexion and cannot be imprisoned within human bonds. It has engulfed millions, whose names can be traced in every age and land. This flame is known to engulf mortals even today, melting unknown metals into one. I dedicate my book to this eternal flame.

My preface would remain incomplete without mentioning the helping hand of Judy Wouk that was always there whenever I needed it the most. This hand has been there for years now. This hand always helped me to weed out the husk. The logical mind that perhaps has been shaped also by the knowledge and training as a lawyer and working as the head of a refugee department came to my help often. I find no words to thank her.

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