

Lee Marvin, Captain Kangaroo and Mirza Ghalib

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Some days ago Joe Mott, an old Mathematician friend of mine, forwarded a piece about Lee Marvin and Bob Keeshan. (Bob Keeshan played Captain Kangaroo on TV.) If one goes by that piece these two gentlemen were war heroes who led very active lives after their heroic deeds at Iwo Jima. Later, Bruce Glastad a former student of Joe's indicated that what Joe had sent around was nothing more than an Internet rumor that liberally mixed fiction with facts. In truth Lee Marvin was a war hero but he was wounded at the Battle of Saipan (June 1944) and got a medical discharge from military service before the Battle of Iwo Jima (February 1945). On the other hand Captain Kangaroo did enlist but after the Battle at Iwo Jima and close to the end of WWII. In fact he signed up "just before we dropped the atom bombs" and these are reported to be Bob Keeshan's own words. Now these two gentlemen were very successful in their later careers, Lee Marvin became a famous film star and Bob Keeshan made a name for himself as television's Captain Kangaroo. (In the notes below I include references where you can get some information on these gentlemen.) What got my attention was the following part in Bruce's e-mail:

Military officials have also disclaimed the exaggerated accounts presented in the Internet-circulated versions of the two actors' military exploits: Jack Green, the public-affairs officer with the Naval Historical Center in Washington, frequently gets calls about Fighting Captain Kangaroo. "I have to tell them it's a nice story, but it didn't happen," said Green, who served as a historical adviser for the movie *Pearl Harbor*. He doubts that Marvin, who also never was on Iwo Jima, perpetrated such a fantasy. "Lots of legends pop up and who knows where they come from," Green said. This reminded me of a couplet from an Urdu Poet Mirza Ghalib. I type below the actual couplet in Urdu for those who can read it.

ہیں کواکب کچھ نظر آتے ہیں کچھ
دیتے ہیں دھوکا یہ بازیگر کھلا

Roughly translated it says: The stars appear different from what they actually are, these tricksters deceive us bad.

When I read this couplet as a young boy, I had a question that I dared not ask then, "Was it the fault of the stars?" I suspect my point was: Stars are what they are; it is us who want to see them in a poetic light. The Lee Marvin and Bob Keeshan story and its rebuttal set into motion the train of thought that resulted in the following composition of sorts.

The stars are all radiation, gas on fire
Yet gem-like sparkle they acquire
Some like pearls, some sapphire
Heavenly tricksters ply deception
False images in minds they inspire
Are the stars to blame for the con?
Or the medium does such fictions sire?
Setting a rock aglitter by diffraction
Reflecting as glass, the mire

Galvanizing spots all so hideous
Refracting them into objects of envy or desire
The medium does also hide the corona of a sun
The murderous plumes of charge afire
Are the media wholly to blame?
Or is it all our own myopic desire?
Or both do join to make one big liar?

Well you have every right to ask why I rebut in English, what an Urdu poet wrote long ago. My excuse, it came up in an English speaking context. (Besides Ghalib has a tremendous following among Urdu and Persian speaking peoples, raising a voice of dissent may leave me in an uncomfortable position; especially as some of my Urdu teachers may still be around, I know that one is!)

Aside from the good natured rebuttal there is the observation that, these days, if you have any quality that gets you a lot of money, the same quality can get you a lot of attention. Thanks to the media, if you have a "cashable" asset you become a celebrity (a star) almost overnight. Once you are a star you have an army of fans. Some of those fans can also make you an idol and a role model, often quite oblivious of your other somewhat non-glamorous qualities. The media help by not focusing, in time, on non-glamorous aspects of a star. The result usually is that you only get a face under heavy make-up and you do not get to see the freckles that make up the Hyde part of Dr. Jekyll. Yet again, my question is: is it the fault of the stars?

Notes: I am taking the easy way out and leaving you to find out yourselves about the celebrities I mentioned above.

1. For Lee Marvin check out: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee_Marvin
2. For Bob Keeshan check out: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Keeshan
3. For Mirza Ghalib check out http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirza_Ghalib

Briefly, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1796-1869) was among what could be called the Muslim upper class of the times, by birth and by intellect. Those were trying times for the Muslims in the subcontinent of India. The Mogul power had shrunk and the British were slowly gaining control and, quite understandably, their utmost effort was to keep Muslims down. Under these circumstances this man lived a very impoverished, yet apparently very carefree and contented life. While living that kind of a life he left a literary treasure in the form of his poetry and prose in a language that was in its early stages of development. The language is Urdu, which took its current literary shape thanks to Ghalib. No wonder Ghalib has so many admirers.