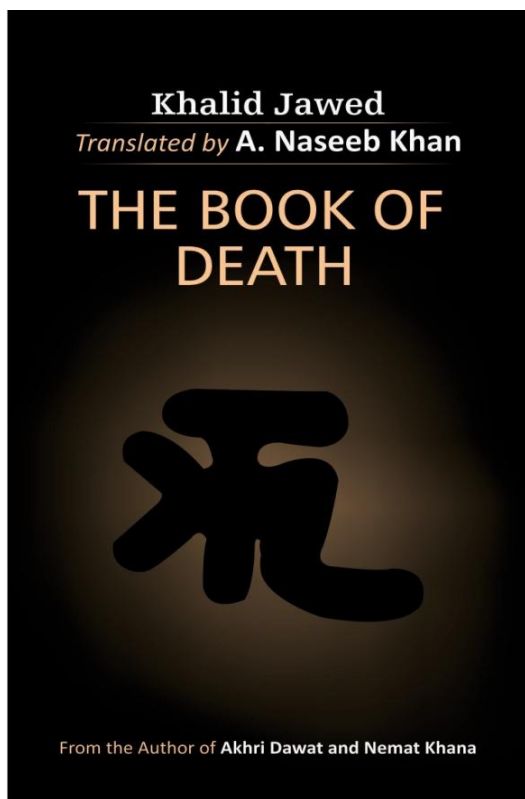




***The Book of Death* by Khalid Jawed, Translated by A. Naseeb Khan**

Reviewed by *Md. Faizan Moquim*



THE BOOK OF DEATH. By Khalid Jawed, Translated by A. Naseeb Khan. Ghaziabad: Anybook, 2016; pp.119. ISBN: 9788193251584

Khalid Jawed, apart from being a short story writer, poet, translator, and critic, is one of the leading Urdu fiction writers in India. His critically acclaimed short stories collections in English translation include *Burey Mausam Mein* (2000), *Akhri Dawat* (Penguin Book India, 2007), and *Tafreeh ki Ek Dopehr* (Scheherzade Karachi, 2008), from where his short story 'Burey Mausam Mein' won him the Katha Award in 1997. Jawed has written several academic books including *Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Fan aur Shakhsyat* (Karnatka Urdu Academy, 2009), *Milan Kundera* (Arshia, 2011), and a collection of literary essays titled *Kahani, Maut aur Aakhiri Bidesi Zubaan* (2008). He has also translated stories of Satyajit Ray and his own interpretation of the history of Western Philosophy is under publication with the title *Maghribi Falsafe Ki Tareekh*.

The Book of Death (2016), his first novel in English translation after which he has also come out with another novel in Urdu called *Nemat Khana* (2014), was first published in Urdu as *Maut Ki Kitab* in 2011. It was later translated by Akbar Rizwi in Hindi in 2014. In Urdu literary quarters *Maut Ki Kitab* has been applauded for being a unique novel, not only for its narrative style, subject matter but also for its lyrical prose. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, a major Urdu critic, observes that Khalid Jawed has almost carved a new language to portray the experiences of the unnamed protagonist of the novel. A. Naseeb Khan's translation/transcreation of the Urdu source text into English attempts to introduce modern novel in Urdu language to English speaking public and critics alike.

The Urdu version of the novel begins in *media res* with a letter, dated 2211 A.D., from Walter Schiller, an archeologist, who narrates his experiences while surveying a ruined city submerged by a central government hydro-electric dam project some 200 years ago. As a

consequence of that man-made flood all the inhabitants of the city were relocated to some other place. Now that the river has gone dry this city, Girgitya Til Maas, has resurfaced. Schiller finds a book here, in a surprisingly good condition, with a black cover without the author's name under the debris of what used to be an asylum. We are told that the language of the book is unfortunately extinct and that there are hardly any speakers of this language left. Schiller, with the help of his friend Jean Hugo who is an ancient language expert, succeeds in deciphering the text. What we read as *Maut ki Kitaab* is a machine translation of the book found in debris. In a significant divergence from the original text Naseeb Khan's translation does not contain this letter with which source text begins. Rather the novel commences directly with the first chapter.

Gregory Rabbasa once said, "it is impossible for a translation ever to be final," thereby underlining the huge demand made of any literary translation which, if not fulfilled, leave scope for further retranslations. While the English translation of this book manages to bring out the essence of *The Book of Death* as a modern tale of human miseries, it at times falls short of doing a full justice to the source text. Chilling incidents like the protagonist's father's attempt to rape his eight-month pregnant wife resulting in injury on the unborn child's head even before he has entered this world or the graphic description of a girl, with whom his father had an illegitimate relationship, falling to her death come out well enough in this translation. But in other places the translation attempts to rationalize the narration by breaking and merging paragraphs. It does not take into cognizance that the entire novel is designed as an interior monologue of a fractured psyche interspersed with few dialogues here and there; and in order to create such a psyche the source text has employed narrative techniques where paragraph construction plays a significant role, for shifts in paragraph tell us about the moods of the narrator. Moreover, at some significant places which are important from narrative's point of view, the translation becomes too simplistic and direct. For example, *Ghabrahat* gets translated as "depression" rather than "anxiety," a better choice, as with the mood of "anxiety" many existential connotations of the protagonist's life are laid bare. Similarly, in chapter 1 the source text reads: "*Mai to is tarah duniya me undel diya gaya tha jaise ek mitti ke badrang lote se paani;*" the English translation runs as, "I was tipped into it [world] like water poured into a discolored pot." This straightforward translation does not consider narrator's mood of existential reflection where the image becomes a realization of his sense of 'throwness' in this world. Another instance in chapter 7 reads: "*Use muung phaliyo se chhidh hai,*" which is translated as: "he was allergic to the peanuts," where once again, the word "allergic" fails to bring out the narrator's annoyance or vexation with every little thing in existence.

In a century old literary practice of Urdu novel writing *The Book of Death* is a remarkable milestone where Khalid Jawed weaves a pulsatingly make-believe world of palpable reality. Myths, anecdotes, proverbs, and other cultural significations create an aesthetic idiom never seen before in Urdu fiction. Breakdown of relationships are traced through his father's accusations of adultery against his mother, his suspicions about the narrator being his son, and the fractured marriage of the protagonist himself; this breakdown of relationships also translates into first a breakdown of the protagonist's psyche and then a disintegration of his body as he suffers from fits of epilepsy and later amnesia gets the better of him. It is in this condition that the protagonist ruminates on human existence. Providing perceptive insights into the realm of human existence *The Book of Death* ends with a picture of complete existential breakdown within the narrative where the last chapter is followed by a number of blank pages expressing the projected nothingness of human destiny.