

Rizwan Akhtar's *Lahore I am Coming*

Reviewed by Dr. Shahid Imtiaz

Rizwan Akhtar. *Lahore I am Coming*. Lahore: University of the Punjab Press, 2017. 220 pp.

Lahore I Am Coming is the first collection of poems by Dr. Rizwan Akhtar who is an Assistant Professor of English at Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan. Some of the poems included in the collection have been published in the prestigious literary journals like *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Poetry NZ*, *Transnational Literature* and others. The Preface is written by Fiona Sinclair, editor of the on line poetry magazine *Message in a Bottle*, and the Introduction by Alistair Paterson, poet, editor, essayist, anthologist, critic and a novelist. In Paterson's view Akhtar "has the skill and sensitivity for such work as his current collection reveals."

A distinctive feature of Akhtar's collection is his thematic diversity and fictive poetic diction. From his experience of being a poetry student of Derek Walcott to the agonizing experience of being lonely on a foreign land in London, his poems focus on the human condition and predicament on the whole. There are some poems of personal loss and grief: "Flying Home For My Father's Burial," is about poet's deepest feelings on his father's death:

passengers dragged trolleys checking-in
I carried him like a luggage in boarding lounge.

In another poem entitled "Death Has Poetry" Akhtar sees graveyards as anthologies of rejected poems: "graves sit just as poems rejected." Poems like, "Children Bombed in a Park in Lahore" and "Burnt Brides of Lahore" are about the constant menace of terrorism faced by inhabitants of Lahore, a city where

Shahid Imtiaz

Seven brides and many yet-to-be brides burnt to ashes
their embroidered dresses charred into seared palls.

One of the fascinating themes of this collection is Akhtar's interest in cities and their landscape. His poem "Lahore I am Coming," the title poem of the book, is based on his early childhood recollections of impressions recorded on the slate of his memory. It spotlights the magical power, re-invoking, re-shaping and reconstructing childhood images into art. Akhtar comes back to his native city of lasting images to refresh and sharpen his creative skills. It is the city that taught him the art of writing, the skill of giving poetic form to his experience and observation of physical realities around him. Lahore has made him what he is now, a poet, and perhaps a mystic. Haggard and exhausted, the poet comes back to his city for new ideas and themes with the satisfaction that Lahore would not disappoint him. "Lahore I am Coming," therefore, creates a very strong sense of liberation from self-imagined exile in London. It's a journey back to his childhood.

I return
After my hands have been dipped in wells
Of amazing perfumes ...
I have found no other graveyard to sleep in ...
Where I played balls.

There are quite a few poems based on the theme of Lahore as a city as well as an imagined space. For example, "From Empire's Days in Lahore" is about colonial Lahore, a historical aspect of colonized Lahore that Akhtar is very aware of, for, in his words:

In colonial days the Mall Road was laid
for clerks and officials.

Even today the Mall Road along with other colonial structures of power and domination built on it are the symbols of British legacy. But it is

the contemporary Lahore which really impacts Akhtar's imagination. The poem "Pakistan Meets a Terrorist" spells out the fear the Pakistanis in general and the Lahoris in particular feel:

The world had one 9/11 and one 7/7
we live through them each moment.

Akhtar sees Lahore as a city taken over by the dreadful feeling of foreboding and fear. He finds a link between Lahore and Belfast which was also once hit by the terrorists. As a poet who travels between the East and the West with a vast cultural and literary knowledge, Akhtar understands the human condition and predicament on both sides of global division of cultures. So, this cross cultural-experience is easily translated and transformed in his poems.

Such poems as "My Language," "Text," "Alphabets," and "Your Poem's Content" reflect Akhtar's special concern with language. The choice of language for his literary and creative expression has been an issue with him. His ancestors' language was Arabic, "I dream about my ancestors in Arabic" and "I talk in my father's language" but after struggling with what language to choose for his poetic expression, he ultimately picked English, which he describes as the "one with which I swam all the oceans." His knowledge of Arabic, Persian and Urdu poetic traditions is evident in structuring of his English poems. He seems to be obsessed by the idea of "form," be it the form of a female body or the form of a poem. The form and theme of Urdu ghazal, a complete harmony of words, inspires him so much:

Why brother? Urdu ghazals speak too much of love
dark voluptuous concubines repeat Persian couplets
their shadows simmer over Lahore's skyscrapers.

A dominant feature of Akhtar's poetry is the originality of metaphors and similes. His poems are well-structured metaphors providing depth to the meanings of his poems. Like a modernist poet he takes out the traditional

meanings associated with the image and gives it a new meaning by using it in a new context. Evening has been used by the traditionalist poets as a romantic image. Whereas in Akhtar's poetry evening is dusty, "My voice in a dusty evening of Lahore," which lends new meaning to a hackneyed theme in Urdu tradition. The image of a dancing body, both male and female, is a recurrent image in his poems. The rhythm of his poems corresponds with the rhythm of a dancing body that "encores my mystical whirls" creating ecstasy of its own kind.

Besides the city of Lahore, the bird imagery adds a mystical element to his poetry. Pigeons are frequently mentioned landing at the Royal Mosque's water pond and at the tombs of saints, where the pigeons along with the 'dervash' are lost and engrossed in the mystical whirls. Birds imagery also gives us a great sense of a journey in search of truth, a journey from the outer landscape to the inner landscape of soul. Poetry is a deity and the poet is a worshipper paying homage through words. Akhtar is in love with poetry and Lahore: "Lahore I am in love with you. (p. 27)"

Overall, Rizwan Akhtar has offered all lovers of poetry a gift, a text made possible by a human subjectivity constructed both by the East and the West but that centers around the rich, great, and magical Lahore of past, present, and future. This collection of poems is the most beautiful love song for Lahore, the city of love and friendship!