

## The Notes of a New Harp: Tracing the Evolution of Pakistani Poetry in English

By Asma Mansoor

### *Biography*

As a Lecturer in the Department of English at the International Islamic University, Islamabad, I have, over the last five years, had exposure to reading as well as teaching both English Literature and World Literatures in English to undergraduate students of English literature. This has enabled me to appreciate the inter-connections amongst different forms of literature, an appreciation that has further been strengthened by my own endeavours to compose poetry in English. Pakistani Literature in English, being a burgeoning field, has offered me an interesting dimension of research because of the plurality of patterns that it offers.

### *Introduction*

Pakistan has been a melting pot of various cultures, religions and ideologies which have all been sublimated into the crystalline residuum of literatures in various languages. With a luxuriant cultural substratum, the literature produced here displays a dazzling variety. Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, Panjabi, Sindhi literature, etc., each in its own right flaunts a rich literary heritage. However, this development has not been restricted to the indigenous literatures of the land alone. Interestingly, Pakistani Literature in English has also evolved into a widening genre that is winning critical acclaim and is also becoming the object of scrutiny under the microscope of various literary theories. While Pakistani writers of fiction in English have monumentally chiselled their names on the international literary scene, Pakistani poets writing in English have yet to crest to the same prominence. However, some poets have left a far-reaching impact on the literary spectrum, enabling aspiring Pakistani poets in English to follow in their footsteps.

While analyzing the development of Pakistani poetry in English, this study will undertake a historical analysis of the evolution of the Pakistani poet's identity and style across the various political and cultural vicissitudes of time up to the contemporary era. In doing so, it will bring to the spotlight the works of not only

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established and internationally renowned Pakistani poets in English but also the emerging “rhymesters” (Raffat 2) who are molding and re-shaping the English language in conjunction with the various linguistic, regional, political and intellectual alterations that are defining the current times.

### ***The Colonial Past and the Burgeoning of Muslim Exceptionalism***

The origins of Pakistani Literature in English go back to the pre-Independence Muslim exceptionalism in the Indian Sub-Continent and its various stages. The War of Independence in 1857 became a litmus test for the survival of the Muslims in India since they faced the danger of a cultural erasure through the policies of Macaulay which disseminated the British culture and traditions at the expense of the indigenous conventions and living paradigms. As Macaulay stressed:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (qtd. in Patke 57)

This resulted in fears amongst the vanquished Muslim community that their distinctive identity would be subsumed within an overarching *Indian-ness*. The “binary of the Self and the Other”, or the “politics of difference” (Masood. xix) which this newly developing socio-political order was propagating, aimed at not merely nullifying the distinctive history, culture, values, beliefs and traditions of the Muslims but in eradicating them completely. These fears of marginalization lead to the germination of “nationalism” amongst the Muslim community. Nationhood is after all about the self (Nag 4754). The Muslim Self too was constructed on the basis of an “assumed homogeneity” (Nag 4756) and endeavored to highlight its uniqueness vis-a-vis the “Other”.. Considering that they had been the rulers of the sub-continent before the consolidation of the British rule in India, they were naturally eyed with suspicion and disfavor. In order to dilute this scepticism and distrust that was visible in the hearts and minds of the British, the Muslim writers had to adjust and modify their styles of writing to carve a niche within the newly established system. The “public imperative” (Raja xviii) became the primal determining factor that compelled the Muslim writers to modify their language so that it could be accommodated within “the new hegemonic order” (Raja xxi). In the case of the Muslims, the delicate relationship between the colonizer and the colonized had to be cautiously handled as Masood Raja highlights:

This development of a political language also involved developing the concept of the 'other' within the language of Muslim politics. Muslims had to be defined as different from their Hindu counterparts. (Xviii \_\_ xix)

In this backdrop, the "binary logic" through which the "identities of differences are often constructed" (Bhabha 5) had to be modified. The notion of preserving the "Self" as an independent, free, creative and distinctive entity took root and shape in the Urdu literary works where ideas, philosophies and ideologies were moulded within a paradigm of loyalty to the new rulers. The notion of the "Binary" however, underwent refraction as it traversed through the prism of Muslim consciousness and awareness. Their concept of the Muslim Self was based on its being a distinctive, diacritical entity, independent of the Hindus whom they came to see as the "Other". The Muslims viewed this separateness as being imperative for their inclusion in the "New Order". This distinction added plurality to the patterns of colonial literature that was generated by the Muslim literati of the Indian Sub-Continent since their compositions began to highlight the Muslim experience vis-a-vis its past that extended across a wide ranging historical and the territorial canvas. Masood Raja explains: "As Muslim literature took a utilitarian turn in post-rebellion India, it also drew upon the transnational Muslim past to question the present and to articulate a future." (xxiii). Like Janus, the Muslim writer viewed both the past and the future at the cusp of the present and this vision enabled them to recover the resistant voice within the language of power. This period of "unqualified assimilation" (Fanon 377) marked the beginning of a presence from the boundaries (as interpreted from the works of Bhabha and McLeod) with the aim of retrieving a lost history and re-shaping the present according to the requirements of the Muslim community under colonial rule.

Rising from the dialect of acquiescence as portrayed in Ghalib's *Dastanbuuy*, native Muslim literature of the Sub-Continent underwent various phases. Later on, Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan became the spirit behind the production of Urdu literature that endorsed the creation of a comprador class and was involved in the translation of Western works into Urdu to increase the dissemination of modern knowledge amongst the Muslim masses. Later on, through a subtle evolution, some works of Urdu literature devised their own vocabulary of resistance. Some Muslim writers like Maulana Hali highlighted the reformative dimension of Islam and its sempiternal significance in the amelioration of the Muslims while Shibli Naumani places the Muslim subject not only within the outline of a pan-Islamic history, but places him against a global backdrop. In doing so, the "subaltern" voice of resistance against colonial excesses is raised by Naumani but with an

intense focus on Muslim exceptionalism that later on led to the creation of Pakistan. The questioning Muslim native thus articulates his mistrust of the Imperial designs of the Raj and challenges its status as the upholder of an ennobled and ennobling civilization in very much the same way as Conrad questions Imperial dogma in his works highlighting the fetid, “imbecile rapacity” (*Heart of Darkness*) that permeated the esurience underlying the notion of the White Man’s Burden. Urdu Literature thus, rose out of dissent and modulated its own language of resistance and exceptionalism. This is, according to Fanon, the final stage when the native goes beyond being “disturbed” (Fanon 377) and finally enters the “fighting phase. The native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people... he turns himself into an awakener of the people, hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature...” (Fanon 377). While Fanon traces the rise of the native intellectual within the framework of Arab nationalism and the rise of Négritude vis-à-vis the works of Senghor and Aimé Césaire (Gibson), one can trace parallels in the rise of the identity-conscious Muslim literature in the pre-partition Indian Sub-Continent also. As Senghor observes that “independence” is in effect the “refusal to be assimilated, to lose oneself in the Other” (the Hindus, in this case), similarly, the Muslim Native refuses to be assimilated in the “Other”.

This resistance becomes more evident in the writings of Dr. Muhammad Iqbal vis-a-vis the connection between the Muslim and the West which gain an added importance as “revolutionary literature”. Through his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* and other works like *Bang-e-Dara* and *Zarb-e-Kaleem*, he is able to express not only of what lies at the core of his people, he becomes the “mouthpiece of a new reality in action” (Fanon 377). This adheres to a pronounced alteration in the “master-native” relationship very much as Gibson shows in the works of Senghor and Césaire. This relationship now advances to a philosophical offensive as the native now questions and criticizes the colonial masters and the inherent brutality of their system. The loss of Self has to be reversed and Iqbal extracts a panacea in the form of Islam as not merely being a set of dogmas but an entire mechanism of existence and conduct set into action. Masood Raja explains this development as:

The native is not just demanding inclusion within the colonial system; he is, rather, offering his own philosophical and political ideology as a solution to the problems of the colonial masters. This alternative against the dominance of the West is presented in the shape of a universal Islamic system. It is this system of politics and culture that forms the basis of his idea of a Muslim Nation. (120)

At this juncture, what makes the anthology of his lectures in English: *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, a pivotal study is the fact that while the Muslim intellectuals in the earlier phases of the colonial rule had allied themselves with their colonial masters to ensure the survival of their cultural identity, and also to gain easier access to the Western reservoirs of knowledge, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal makes a shift from this perspective. Not only able to highlight the flaws in the Western political systems and their clash with religious philosophy, he presented Islam as a system that is not confined within any specific time, “with a view to control the forces of history” (Iqbal: *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). He, thus, endeavors to prove it as a living force imbued with the spirit of inquiry. In doing so, he does not mythologize his religion, rather he universalizes it as it has the fantastic capability of extending across the “hyperspace movement of our time” (Iqbal). Thus, the Muslim identity is not bound within a circumscribed creed or ideology; it acquires both a temporal and spatial transcendence. In identifying with this religion, the Indian Muslim becomes a part of a matrix that is much more expansive than Imperialism and in doing so becomes a participant of an ideology that is sempiternally creative. Iqbal explains:

As a cultural movement Islam rejects the old static view of the universe, and reaches a dynamic view. As an emotional system of unification it recognizes the worth of the individual as such, and rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity. Blood-relationship is earth-rootedness. The search for a purely psychological foundation of human unity becomes possible only with the perception that all human life is spiritual in its origin. Such a perception is creative of fresh loyalties without any ceremonial to keep them alive, and makes it possible for man to emancipate himself from the earth. (Iqbal: *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*)

In defying this earth-rootedness, the Self of the Indian Muslim writer is able to go beyond his colonial circumference and participate in a wider cultural and intellectual heritage: “an international ideal” (Iqbal). An important factor is that Iqbal does not glorify the past, since looking back can petrify: “... a false reverence for past history and its artificial resurrection constitute no remedy for a people’s decay.” (Iqbal). The Indian Muslim writer thus has to move onwards intellectually by carrying the heritage of the past only to generate a new, constantly mobile and regenerative culture that exceeds national perimeters. He has at his disposal the legacy of a collective will that is equally relevant for a multifarious assemblage and in experimenting with it he could generate vibrant literary combinations, innovative both in technique as well as in content.

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Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is not only remarkable in its philosophical and scientific approach, it can also be taken as a colonial document in which a native intellectual presents an innovative ideology for the natives couched in the language of the masters without undergoing "Westoxification" (Patke 58). In doing so, his message was able to permeate beyond the boundaries of the Sub-Continent and create ripples in various intellectual nuclei of the Eurocentric world of the 1930s, a time when India's efforts to gain independence had gained momentum.

Interestingly until 1947, the time when the Indian Sub-Continent was divided into India and Pakistan, many fiction writers in English had also highlighted the plight of the Natives under Colonial rule. Ahmed Ali sketched the discrimination that was being generated by the colonial rule and like Maulana Hali, he deplored the inertia that lay at the heart of the Muslim community in his short story 'Our Lane'. As a reader, one notices a blending of both the indigenous and foreign literary trends, since the story is both thematically and stylistically reminiscent of the Modernist trends of writing that were a hallmark of numerous English literary writers like Lawrence and Eliot. Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's novel *The Heart Divided* highlights the heart-wrenching journey that led to the division of the Sub-Continent from an educated, revolutionary woman's viewpoint. This novel too integrates the history and culture of both the Hindus and the Muslims as the writer tries to dissect history and extract an objective understanding of this calamitous event.

However, unlike fiction in English produced by Indian Muslim writers, contributions are negligible in the field of poetry in English written from the perspective of a monumental Indian Muslim minority at the time of the Partition. However, in the future, poetry in English would gradually take wing in the infant Pakistan.

### ***Post-colonial Pakistani Poetry in English***

The departure of the British from the Sub-Continent did not mean that the remnants of the Colonial rule would also be erased. While the British left, they left behind a new creed of Brown "Sahibs" to rule and govern the inchoate country. While Pakistan would have invisible, class-based lines drawn across its social topography, a love-hate relationship with the English language would emerge, with some considering English as a colonial hangover and yet coveting the progress and the social elevation an acquisition of this language ensured. As with all post-colonial poetry, this "assimilation and resistance" (Patke 14) led to

the creation of Pakistani poetry in English that was characterised by “care, precision and exactness in every word” (Jamil vii) and yet also absorbed the stimuli provided by the local culture. This literary grafting produced a variant form of writing that at times artistically deviated from the codified English. These trends, in turn, lead to an interesting mutation of the DNA of Pakistani poetry in English that did not only add interest and variety to it but also displayed the internal balance between “dependency” (Patke 4) and the “will to autonomy” (Patke 4). This, in turn, provided a domain to analyse how Pakistani poets writing in English were able to forge a unique sense of identity that graduated out of their colonial and pre-colonial past and was gradually promoted in time. Post-colonial poetry does not merely seek literary autonomy and liberty; it is in search of its own historicity (Perloff 89). This is where Taufiq Rafat’s notion that poetry should be written by those who are rooted in the earth on which it is written gains relevance.

In order to trace the evolution of Pakistani poetry in English, this article undertakes the task of evaluating the works of Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998), Daud Kamal (1935-1987), Zulfiqar Ghose (1935-), Alamgir Hashmi (1951-) and Sardar Aseff Ahmed Ali (1947-). It also moves on to female poets i.e. Soofia Ishaque, Shadab Zeest Hashmi, Shabnam Riaz and Ilona Yusuf since many female poets are currently making their presence felt on the scene of Pakistani poetry in English. Taufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal, Zulfiqar Ghose, Alamgir Hashmi, on the other hand, have an established place and position when it comes to Pakistani poets writing in English. It is important to note that all these writers were born and bred in Pakistan, but Ghose’s poetry falls within the domain of diasporic writings since he has long been settled in the West since the 1940s. Another important fact to be kept in mind is that the rise of Pakistani poetry in English has been slow and gradual, primarily gaining momentum from the 1970s onwards. A brief forty year history defies any effort on the part of a literary critic to compartmentalize Pakistani poetry in English within the parameters of some literary movement. One can say that this genre is currently extremely malleable since Pakistani poetry is still endeavouring to forge a distinct identity which is based on not only its Islamic origins, but also on its colonial past along with its turbulent present. It is probably for this reason that it is difficult to identify the rise of any particular trend of writing in Pakistani poetry in English since Pakistani poets have inherited a *mélange* of traditions and techniques from both indigenous and foreign sources. In an essay ‘Complexities of Home and Homeland in Pakistani English Poetry and Fiction’, Muneeza Shamsie observes:

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The universal nature of Islamic philosophy has meant that many Pakistani English writers have perceived themselves in international terms, yet identified with Pakistan... They are linked to trends in Anglo-American literature too, and that of Commonwealth countries where English was acquired due to the colonial encounter. So you have a body of work, created by a myriad of influences. Perhaps that cultural synthesis, the blurring of definition, is identity. (256)

This “cultural synthesis” is evident in Rafat’s poems. His first collection, *Arrival of the Monsoon*, appeared in 1985. One notices the simplicity of language encoding a wide range of experiences that branch out from the local to the universal. For example, in ‘Kitchens’ with a subjective nostalgia for a childhood spent in a rural kitchen that is “high-roofed” (Rafat 44) and “spacious” (Rafat 44), permeated with “the pungency/ of smoke and spices” (Rafat 44), he escorts the readers to a contemporary and sterilized kitchen that is both sterile and unreal, just like modern existence:

Chairs are insular;  
they do not encourage  
intimacy like slats...  
We would not dream  
of coming to this place  
to savour our triumphs,  
or unburden our griefs.  
(‘Kitchens’ 45)

Needless to say that the vacuum which brackets the lives of the characters of *The Wasteland* seems to have noxiously penetrated the life of this Pakistani narrator as he watches the tradition of a joint-family system undergo deliquescence before the icy radiation of modern independence. Being a “man speaking to men” (Wordsworth ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’), however, Rafat is less verbose and therefore yields a more direct but startling impact. Pakistani village life is featured in innumerable poems but this ‘ecological mimeticism’ or the “will to localism” (Patke 8) becomes an indicator that there is no doubt in the poet’s mind about where his identity is rooted. For iconoclastic “rhymesters” (‘The Time to Love’2)



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like Rafat “love is a country/ with its own climate” ( ‘The Time to Love’ 2) and yet in defining that climate he stands in line with Shakespeare of England as well as Waris Shah of the Punjab. When he admires the ‘Village Girl’ he reminds one of Wordsworth as he observed ‘The Solitary Reaper’, but at no point do the personae of the two poems get juxtaposed in their cultural identities:

there she was  
tall and straight  
as a sugarcane stalk  
and I who needed  
a measure of grace...  
saw her standing there  
straight and tall  
laving the air  
with such a sweetness  
it was almost more  
than a man could bear.

(‘The Village Girl’ 5)

Rafat’s poems are freighted with cultural insight. The melody of “red-arsed bulbuls” in Reflections, (Rafat 81) fills the air in his garden featuring shisham and gulmohars as he constructs a verbal monument that goes back to the antediluvian times when myths were constructed to give meaning to life and in going back to those myths, he connects with universal humanity. The same cultural images are found in the philosophical poetry of Iqbal as in his Urdu poems as in ‘Poppy of the Wilderness’ and ‘On the Bank of the Ravi’. This quality of creating cultural hybrids enables Rafat to connect with the bilingual readers in particular. Mina Farid Malik observes:

Audiences for writing in English ...are ones that are bilingual with a heavy tilt towards fluency in English, but nonetheless possessed of knowledge of the cadence and duality of meaning of “indigenous” language ... The bilingual reader

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is beautifully situated, completely in on the reference, which gives literature in English its sense of deepness, of echoes because it invariably refers to a culture, a language, a context that has nothing to do with the shape of an L or the crisp click of a T. ('Oysters are Poets' 831)

As in all post-colonial poetry, the human past remains immutably immanent in the present. In unsealing it, Rafat transcends the local to tap into the common history of humanity and derives a universal commonality that erases the distinction between the Self and the "Other" even as "the drone of the homing jet/ pollinates all cultures between/ Hong Kong and San Francisco" (Rafat 87) echoes in the background. He thus satisfies Iqbal's criterion of moving through attaining a common, international ideal. It is the power of his words that prompted Carlo Coppola to observe that Rafat's poetry is "full-bodied and rich, direct and readily accessible to the reader's sensibilities and devoid of excessive artifice" (206). What is interesting for the readers to note is that Pakistani poets in English modulated the European models to become synchronous with the inflections of the vernacular. Pakistani poets in English also searched for poetic idioms that were closer to the speech patterns of the vernacular. This call to indigenization yielded interesting results in the domain of Pakistani poetry in English. Direct and simple in address, Pakistani poetry in English displays an interesting study as to how it has been shaped by the English language and is, in turn, giving a new shape to it.

With numerous cultural paradigms being the derivatives of the colonial era, Pakistani poets had an unchartered demesne where they could savour the freedom to experiment with the verse, form, rhythm and language since the English language offered many expressive resources. It is for this reason that one explicitly as well as implicitly notices the presence of a lot of English and American poets in Pakistani poetry in English. Daud Kamal is a case in point since his poetry is discernibly reminiscent of the Imagist tradition as in his poem 'Prayer-Beads':

Under  
the shade  
of a willow tree  
where the river bends  
in a rock-pool

prayer-beads rise  
to the surface  
from the mouth  
of an invisible  
fish.

(‘Prayer Beads’ 9)

Coppola evaluates Kamal’s poetry in the following words:

Kamal possesses a unique sense of history and recognizes the need for an artist \_\_\_ and indeed a country \_\_\_ to connect with the past. As if to contradict the notion that Pakistan came into being only in 1947, he links this present-day country to the rich, illustrious history of the area Pakistan now occupies and insists that we recognize the continuity and commonalities between now and then. (‘Some Recent English-Language Poetry from Pakistan’ 206 – 207)

With his first collection appearing on the scene in 1995, he plumbs into the “dumb throat of history” (Kamal ‘The Day Brightens Slowly’ 18) in drawing this historical continuum. That is why Kamal’s poetry is interwoven with local and religious imagery; of kingfishers and monasteries, of Hindu temples silhouetted by the glamour and mystique of the Arabian Nights. Yet his poetry over-arches into the present where the Arabian Nights have twisted endings that reflect the violent contemporary times:

Baghdad  
is again on fire  
and the leather bags  
of merchant princes  
trampled and torn  
under the hooves of Mongol horses  
(‘A Rotting Pomegranate’ 2)

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Local history permeates the texture of his poetry as he compares huge boulders to “the elephants of Porus” in ‘A Ruined Monastery’ (15). Since words must preserve, that is why Kamal’s poetry displays bravura of references ranging from Pablo Neruda, Akbar Nama, Ted Hughes, Ai Kwei Armah etc as his poetry essays to enshrine the cumulative legacy of wisdom peppered across both the Occident and the Orient. Emanating from introspection and loneliness, his vision permeates the grime of the contemporary times of treachery and betrayal; where “Coke has replaced iced-sherbet” (‘A Street Revisited’ 17); to touch upon “the variety and complexity” (Eliot, T.S: ‘The Metaphysical Poets’) of modern civilization. Patke too iterates upon the “economy of means with which he manages to be suggestive without being tied down to mundane detail” (Patke 71-72).

Dealing with the same variety and complexity offered by the contemporary world, Zulfiqar Ghose, a poet of the Pakistani diaspora, too removes the cobwebs from the tomes of history. Writing from 1959 till date (his latest collection appearing in 2010), his poetry displays a gradual evolution in content, themes and style. His poetry is reminiscent of the Romantics, the Modernists, and moves on to the likes of Lowell, Roethke, Plath and Sexton. Ghose’s poetry displays the rhythms of speech synchronising in chorus with controlled and formal versification. The subject matter too moves from exile, deracination, “love, mutability, religion, politics, the conundrum of reality \_\_ indeed, nothing new, for nothing in the human condition has changed since Homer, or, if you like, Rumi or Kalidasa.” (Ghose ix). For Ghose, poetry emanated as if from a circuit connected between two poles: of the native poets and the attraction for the foreign language. Hanging on the periphery, Ghose is able to penetrate the umbrageous mystery of the politics and culture of the Indian sub continent (including both India and Pakistan).

India was at civil war,  
the crow excreted where he pleased. And I ,  
reborn from a fairytale, saw bones charred  
in mounds on pavements.  
(‘The Body’s Independence’. 7)

For Yeats, the contemporary world “was no country for old men” (Sailing to Byzantium); for Ghose, India “was no country/ for princes” (Ghose 7). This sense

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of loss brings to mind the sorrow of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler of the Sub-Continent as well as an Urdu poet:

Delhi was once a paradise,  
Where Love held sway and reigned;  
But its charm lies ravished now  
And only ruins remain.  
(Dalrymple 26)

Partition and the multiple reactions to it remain an important theme of his poetry. Ghose's identity seemed to have become a conundrum for him. Demanding independence, he was pushed to the perimeter; from a participant he seems to have become a cynical observer, "a stranger" (9)

... The troupe, grown  
into a nation, halted, squirmed: the sets  
for its act, though improvised, were re-cast  
from the frame of an antique, slow-moving dead past.  
(‘This Landscape, The People’ 9)

This troupe carried on performing in the social and political political circus. Guns and ammunition thunder in the background in ‘The Attack On Sialkot’ (11 - 12) an attack that was myth-enamelled in Pakistan, but to the narrator \_\_ a sadly alienated observer who no more has a “Mecca to turn to” (‘The Attack On Sialkot’. 12) - the war is a grotesque travesty of the pilgrimage of the Hajj:

... from the air  
the jets converged all month on Sialkot  
in a massive pilgrimage, bloodier than  
the annual sacrifice of goats and sheep.  
(‘The Attack On Sialkot’ 11)

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As Pakistan plummets further into the petrifying whirlpool of poverty, terrorism, extremism, natural disaster, all the time flapping its wings to remain alight, Ghose returns as an expat in ‘Silent Birds’ (63 – 64). Upon his return he notices the sense of loss and terror in bulbuls, eagles and parrots of Lahore: “not even a chicken’s peep now from the eagle’s open beak” to replace the “exultation” (64) that characterised the old days. Lahore is no more the city that inspired Iqbal to claim:

Rapt in its music, in evening’s hush, the Ravi;

But how it is with this heart, do not ask \_\_\_

Hearing in these soft cadences a prayer-call,

Seeing all earth God’s precinct...

(Kiernan 22)

In Ghose’s time, however, God’s precinct is devoid of spiritual illumination and presents a visage scarred by internecine conflicts, poverty and terrorism:

Bombs suddenly exploded at the World

performing Arts Festival in Lahore. My

family home shook as in an earthquake.

a day later came news from Bombay of

a terrorist attack on the Taj Hotel right

there opposit the Gateway of India.

.... A bulbul hopped across the lawn

and stopped, seeing me, flew away...

(‘Silent Birds’ 63)

The same consciousness of the changes that are taking place in Pakistan permeates the works of other Pakistani poets in English including Alamgir Hashmi, Adrian Hussain etc. A relatively new addition to the emerging corpus of Pakistani poetry in English is Sardar Aseff Ahmed Ali with his maiden anthology

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*A Book of Verses: High Assembly of Sages*. A politician by profession, Aseff Ahmed Ali's poetry lacks the control and power of Alamgir Hashmi's versification and Kamal's skill in constructing images, yet it is an interesting study since it encapsulates an interesting menu that includes politics, Hollywood heroes, nihilism, warfare, capitalism, genetic discoveries, scientific mysteries, existential dilemmas as well as mysticism that originates not only from the Punjab and Sindh but also from the intellectually fertile Khorasan and Andalusia. Like the Sufis of the Middle East he desires an ecstatic union with God. It is well-known that the country's poetic language owes a lot of its energy to the Sufi thinkers. Sufi poetry is imbued with a symbolic vitality of its own. Many critics believe that in Pakistan it has been used as a medium of resistance against authoritarianism.

In addition to the strains of Sufism, his work reverberates with Miltonic, Shakespearean and Shelleyan echoes; yet one cannot help noticing the influence of the Urdu revolutionary poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, as well as Dr. Muhammad Iqbal on his poetry especially when he augurs that "earthling's renaissance is nigh" (47) in his poem '*High Assembly of Sages*' which was published in 2009. The matrix of the East and the West that is energized with the collective energies of the literary works of the two cultures is markedly evident in Aseff Ahmed Ali's work. Intriguingly, his work does not merely absorb its colonial heritage, it also puts on display the influence of the American culture and media on the people of Pakistan.

In the post-Imperial world, where Pakistan is forging new roles and new identities for itself, the Pakistani poet writing in English too has to alter his theme and style in coherence with this global metamorphosis. Being anchored in a rich global heritage his work emanates from a Pakistani consciousness aware of its international connections and historical roots. Like Rafat, he too is conscious of the alienation and nihilism that has become a characteristic of the age, where man entertains "plastic dreams" ('Grand Hope' 63) inhaling the absorbing tylenol amidst "media screams" (Ali, 'Grand Hope' 63). Like Hashmi, Aseff Ahmed Ali tries to bridge the gulfs amongst the human race and tries to reconcile them on the mystical plain. 'In Cordoba', Alamgir Hashmi writes:

Near La Masqita

and let heaven's music fill in for light –

turn the shadows in the nave

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back to the rows, people.

So you will not avert

the breezes from the Yemen

or your silent prayer

through this watchful arch of time

(to a God who will bless

without design, not convert).

(Hashmi A.)

Asseff Ahmed Ali sketches the same non-discriminatory omnitude of God's blessings in the following words:

Was all emptiness primordial,

First in radiance filled

Of Divine love's seal

Before the universe was willed?

('Dawn'. 136)

A bilingual reader cannot fail to observe that both the poems are vividly reminiscent of Iqbal again. One cannot help recollecting Iqbal's poem 'The Mosque of Cordoba':

Shrine of Cordoba! From love all your existence is sprung,

Love that can know no end, stranger to Then-and-Now.

(Trans. Kiernan 102)

Since the 1990s, Pakistani poetry in English has undergone a dynamic renaissance with many female poets emerging on the scene with powerful compositions and anthologies that illumine the world of the Pakistani experiences from a feminine perspective. These include Soofia Ishaque, Shahbano Bilgirami, Shabnam Riaz, Shadab Zeest Hashmi and Ilona Yusuf to name a few. New notes are added to the



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symphony that is constantly being generated by the poetic harp of Pakistan. Soofia Ishaque's poetry is structured in simple language that has the capability of constructing images in the minds of the readers. Reminding one of the imagists, she penetrates the crust of her elite society to reveal the bankruptcy within in her poem 'Dilemma' (99).

Diamonds on my  
fingers,  
with a bankrupt  
soul,  
I collide with  
reality,  
in minute eruptions  
of consciousness.

A single sentence alternating in the number of words in every line, this poem reveals a remarkable control over language, its epigrammatic terseness camouflaging the depth of ideas that is conveyed. Social consciousness too permeates the works of Shahbano Bilgiram (born in 1973) and Shabnam Riaz as well. In her poem 'Buy My Flag' that carries Marxist overtones, Shadab Zeest Hashmi demythologizes the glamour attached with the Independence Day celebrations as a poor child sells flags:

Green and white, the colour of  
Summer grass and jasmine,  
... Contorted into someone else's  
Dream of grasping a ten rupee note.  
Buy my flag! Buy my flag!  
So that I can pull myself out of  
Searing flames of engine heat

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And hellish gnawing need,

( Hashmi, Shadab 88)

In highlighting the ubiquitous pain of poverty, she speaks as a Pakistani disturbed by the vista of chronic poverty and exploitation that has surrealistically come to characterize her world. It seems to be the voice of a Pakistani speaking to a Pakistani about Pakistanis. This again is markedly reminiscent of the Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, as he highlights the issues of the average Pakistani on the streets. Extracts from his poem 'Dedication' grant this comparison a greater clarity.

Let me write a song for this day!

This day and the anguish of this day

For this wilderness of yellowing leaves\_\_

Which is my homeland.

For the carnival of suffering \_\_ which is my homeland.

(Trans. Shoaib Hashmi)

Ilona Yusuf 's collection '*Picture This .... Poems*' (published in 2001) is also an interesting addition to the corpus of Pakistani poetry in English. The daughter of a Polish mother and a Pakistani father, Ilona Yusuf 's work also explores the question of identity and self-expression from unique angles as in 'whispers' she tries to place herself in the background of the past:

... what am i but

echoes of moments in my past

vibrating against the clock of time

endeavouring to be freed and heard

to manifest the urgent

whisperings of my soul.

Asma Mansoor

Like many women writers, she also makes an effort to define herself in the light of her personal experiences and perceptions, as the consciousness of womanhood intrudes into her understanding of existence and the imagery of her poems, the way it does in the works of Maya Angelou and the Pakistani poet Perveen Shakir.

i'm like a candle  
living in parts  
snuffed then lit  
then snuffed again  
... loneliness wafts through me  
Like the scent of roses  
Drying on their stems  
A whiff caught then gone  
(‘prism’ 12)

The consciousness of being a woman is markedly present in her poetry, and brings to mind the Pakistani Urdu poet, Perveen Shakir. An extract from Shakir’s poem “Working Woman” brings this consciousness to the fore:

They all say  
I am too proud.  
That I bloom and blossom with the  
efforts of my own sweat and blood.  
Every leaf is watered by the sweat of my brow...  
I am like a tall tree.  
Yet within me there is an ancient creeper which sometimes \_\_\_  
when the gales are strong \_\_\_  
wants to find a strong branch

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round which to wrap itself.

The speaker of Ilona Yusuf 's poem 'amazons' carries similar feminist overtones:

so can this century of  
dissent dissection  
discussion  
break the charmed circle  
of ages gone by  
give the phoenix  
time to rethink  
woman  
or will it be just one  
forlorn forgotten chapter  
in the book of tome  
an ephemeral resurrection  
of the Amazon?

In the manner of e e cummings, Ilona Yusuf does away with the laws of punctuation and capitalization to stress upon the effacement of her "self" in a chauvinistic society and also the continuity of her experience. There seems to be no beginning and no end to the quandary of existence. But her thematic forte is not merely her individual self and for her "not every poem/ can be a celebration" (Canto. 62). Like Hali, Iqbal and Faiz, she too perceives the flaws of her social systems again in a Marxist way. The Pakistani side of her personality is pronouncedly articulate as she explores the sham that democracy is for most Pakistanis:

so hail here the poor  
hoodwinked by governments

that make a mockery of promises  
delivered on public holidays  
impassioned against the backdrop  
of fairy light-draped buildings  
bolstered with patriotic anthems  
(‘democracy’ 60)

Urchins, beggars, the “persistently poor” (‘city’. 57), crows, monsoon, the Rohtas fort, the Karakoram, the ‘parawaanay’ and the ‘koyal’ (not Wordsworth’s cuckoo): all find a place in her poetry as her vision scours across the psychedelic contradictions of the Pakistani society integrating the local myths and perceptions about things. In ‘parawaanay’ she brings to the fore the traditionally perceived futile love-affair a moth has with a flame:

strange love affair this that brings  
them scurrying in myriads from corners  
as if beneath the earth they feel  
monsoon’s breath caress their bodies  
unfurling wings to rise in flight  
and dance around the misty lamplight  
come morning and drifts of discarded wings  
bear silent testimony to their midnight tryst”  
( ‘parawaanay’ 129)

Shabnam Riaz’s poetry (her collection ‘*The Whispering Wind*’ appearing in 2005) too displays a similar social concern like Faiz, as the hungry “common thief” (‘What Hunger Is’. 59-60) steals leftovers and in the process is manhandled and humiliated. But for him and his, life is to be taken as a moment to moment struggle:

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When looking up hot tears burned down

For his aching bones he did not care

Even through disgrace and hurt

He rejoiced to see his bag still there.

...All gathered around excitedly

As spilled the contents on the floor

Leftovers of meals so sloppily nibbled,

But a feast for the starving hopeless poor.

(‘What Hunger Is’ 60)

Although slow to rise, Pakistani poets writing in English have generated works that provide bravura of linguistic and thematic richness. These works display a stunning and elastic variety that emanates from the rich linguistic and thematic spectrum of the indigenous cultures of the Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent. The ambit of Pakistani poetry in English is flexible as it osmotically absorbs the multitudinous stimuli provided by the contemporary world as well as its profound reservoir of history. Giving a general overview Mina Farid Malik observes:

We’ve enough poets working their quills to have a spectrum of style, subject and talent to choose from. When it comes to art maybe at the end of the day it doesn’t really matter whether one is part of a Pakistani diaspora... or living the Third World life... or what one’s politics or aesthetic is defined by. What matters is cadence, image texture. What matters is that a piece speak to some part of one’s soul, stir a memory, a smile, a shadow of longing or regret. That it “go where no road goes ... to bring you the sunrise/ the now in eternity”. (‘Oysters are Poets’ 835)

This article has simply endeavoured to highlight the variety of patterns that Pakistani poetry in English exhibits and the factors that have generated these paradigms. The canvas of this domain is expanding and with every passing day, a new note is generated that adds new dimensions to the notions of identity exemplified by Pakistani poetry in English. Starting from a notion of the ‘Self’ in relation to the colonial masters, the British, as well as their communal rivals, the Hindus, this notion of identity as highlighted in Pakistani poetry in English has undergone a monumental development as today’s Pakistani poets writing in

English need to address issues and themes in relation to their own community and also in relation to the global community which has intruded into the national realm of Pakistan. Therefore, the subject invites a continuous analysis and evaluation. As the sand continues to slide through the hour glass the harp continues to sing, inducting greater creativity into the ambit of Pakistani poetry in English.

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