TAUFIQ RAFAT’S POETRY—THE KALEIDOSCOPE OF VARIOUS ‘ISMS’: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS FROM ARRIVAL OF THE MONSOON

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ABSTRACT

Present research article focuses on exploring the impacts of various literary movements and theories on the poetry of Pakistani English poet Taufiq Rafat. The analysis is based on a few of the most significant representative poems from his first poetic anthology Arrival of the Monsoon. Content and form of Rafat’s poetry certainly give the glimpses of inspiration from many literary, political and philosophical movements, but romanticism, modernism, imagism, and symbolism are the most influential that make his poetry a kaleidoscope to see through all merged in each other. In the article, it has also been evaluated how abrogation and appropriation—the modes of postcolonial resistance have been plied to amplify the local voice, and to strengthen the Pakistani Idioms in English. To support the ideas pertaining to his imagery and the significance of indigenous idioms, cross references comprising, theories, local ecology, folk culture, mythology etc., from all possible resources have been inculcated. The research finds out that whatever theme the writer uses; he never divorces it from romantic imagery, modernity and resistive voice.

KEYWORDS: Symbolism, Modernity, Traditional, Imagism, Imagery, Local, Indigenous, Resistance, Romanticism, Pakistani Idioms

Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998), the father of pure Pakistani Idiom in English (Hussain, 2009), was born in the Indian Punjab’s famous city Sialkot that was the native home of the great Islamic philosopher and poet, AllamaIqbal, and an eminent Lenin Prize Winner, Progressive rhymester Faiz Ahmad Faiz, too. Kark(2005) and Rahman (n.d.) document, he was educated at DheraDhun, Lahore and Aligarth, and finally “joined the family’s manufacturing business” (Rahman, n.d.). Afterwards, he wasexalted as the mentor of aspiring poets of Lahore in the seventies and was esteemed as the crown of all contemporaries for many reasons. Rahman (n.d.) recounts that poets—KhaledAhmed, Tariq Yazdani, Kaleem Umar, Shuja Nawaz, AlamgirHashmi and AtharTahir frequently visited him at his office. Rahman (n.d.), Kark (2009) and Hussain (2009) agreeably label him to be the originator of Pakistani Idiom in English. Reported by Hussain (2009),

Eminent writers and intellectuals [say that] Taufiq Rafat has introduced creative writing in English besides making his utmost efforts for celebrating pure Paki Idioms in English poetry’… They also [term] the legendry Rafat as the Ezra Pound of [Pakistani] literature

He has been equalized with Pound for two apparent reasons; first, Pound belonged to Imagist Movement which, “aimed to purge poetry of non-essentials, to render language precise, vision distinct, and thought concentrated into image” (Rajimwale, 2009, p. 404).Pound’s technical equipment ranges from the ‘simple conversational tone’ (p. 404) to the ‘long paragraphs’ (p. 404). Undeniably, Rafat’s Arrival of the Monsoon (1985) is replete with the same technique. Secondly,
Dabble & Stringer (2007) record that Pound also turned away from Imagist constructions in favour of translations. It also props Rafat up as the Ezra Pound of Pakistani literature when we come across the fact that:

Rafat has also translated some masterpieces of Classical Punjabi poetry. Among these are Bulleh Shah: A Collection (1982) and Qadir Yar: Puran Bhagat (1983) ... These translations ... conferred some respectability ... They are also used in introducing English reader to Punjabi poetry (Rahman, n.d.).

Mansoor (2012) views his poetry (see details in the latter part of the article) stuffed with cultural insight, rural imagery, pastoral landscape and postcolonial resistance whereas Rahman (n.d.) writes that his poetic work includes the conflict between the modern and the traditional. He also commends Rafat’s poetry to be romantic semblance juxtaposed with the modern themes—loneliness, death and love in the same poems. As a matter of fact, his work looks to be the fusion of different literary movements. To endorse the former opinion, Coppola (1998) quotes Rafat’s poem Loneliness:

Loneliness means impenetrable walls
Streaked with betel-juice and snot
And a single skylight, high up
Through which the air dribbles in
Likesaliva from an old man’s mouth (p. 205).

Rahman (n.d.) and Coppola (1998) recognize the induction of natural objects as a healing power that escapes a poet from the bitter realities of life. On this subject, Rafat looks inspired by the Romantic poetic tradition as his imagery of natural objects ranges from wild beats to the domesticated animals. He fills his poems,

With a menagerie of animals: ducks and birds of every variety: geese, kingfishers, kites, sparrows, pigeons, partridges, gulls, eagles, herons, .. to name a few; and other animals as well: snow leopards, fireflies, goats, horse, dogs, snakes, fish, and cicadas (Coppola, 1998, p. 204).

Many of his poems reflect how the poet embeds the imagery to fulfill his purpose. Sometimes he relates the animal imagery to create a sense of poetic inspiration and sometimes he feels sorry for the animal’s slaughter as we find in the poem Sacrifices (Rafat, 1985, p. 67) in which a goat is being sacrificed when the ground breaking ceremony of a new house is being done.

Rafat is doubtlessly the greatest of all Pakistani poets who wrote in English. His best work, Arrival of the Monsoon: Collected Poems (1985), comprising four parts, brought him to the climax of honour and recognition. He is a unique and great imagist, impressionist, romantic as well as classical Pakistani poet for whom the integration of Pakistani Idioms remained the best practice throughout his poetic career, and the others were also inspired by his enormous poetic faculty. He is the poet who saw ups and downs on the soil of Punjab both at domestic and national levels, and at familial and political levels. His poetry exposes him to be a true eye witness of the changes taken place from pre-partition to post Partitions eras. It seems that he relates the aptitude of style with the indigenous themes. Various modes of postcolonial resistance can be applied to analyze his poetic genius. His use of indigenous idioms is also one of the types of resistance where he appropriates the language according to his personal choice. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2003) point out, the non-English writers use the language of the English for many reasons. One of them is to preserve and propagate the local
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culture so that it may catch the attention of a good number of audiences. It is drafted,

[A non-English writer who chooses] to write in English does not do so because [one’s] mother tongue is regarded by [one] as inadequate, but because the colonial language has become a useful means of expression, one that reaches the widest possible audience (p. 20).

In conjunction with *appropriation, abrogation* is also another mode of intellectual resistance against the Eurocentric concept of authenticity, particularly of language. It adapts the language of the master with the view that “the same tool offers a means of conceptual transformation and liberation” (p. 5). Rafat’s poetic art is not devoid of this thing. In his poetry, we feel that he has used both the techniques of *appropriation* and *abrogation* to serve the aim of propagation of *Pakistani Idiom*. Partly he uses the indigenous vocabulary; partly the local idioms have been translated. In *The Wind Howls*, the lines, “Postman wind, what have you/ slipped under the door tonight?” (p. 3); in *Village Girl*, the lines, “there she was/ tall and straight/ as a sugarcane stalk” (p. 5); in *Eve of Eid-ul-Azha*, the lines, “A sheep hennaed like a bride/ follows a curly headed child” (p. 60)—all are the examples of *Pakistani Idioms in English*. In his most exemplary poems *Meditation and Prayer* (p. 47), *Night watchman* (p. 68), *Reflections* (p. 78), and *Quail* (p. 95), Rafat engages indigenous vocabulary to highlight the identity of the local culture. His phrases ‘gleaming shisham table’, ‘mohalla’s self-appointed chokidar’, ‘gul-mohar… among the shishams’, and the names of birds like bulbul and quail elucidate how successfully he challenged the notion of Euro-centrism by applying the techniques of *appropriation and abrogation*. At one place in his *Reflections*, he puts the word *shisham* down to show off his own theory of poetry. He writes,

For an image should never be

An oasis in a waste of words,

But gently glow, as agul-mohar glows,

Among the splendid everyday shishams (p. 85).

His all statements are directly or indirectly the store houses of symbolic treasury. He could have used them in translated form but he did vice versa. For instance, we have the word *shisham* that could be translated as *sissoo* but the poet did not do so and strengthened his own conviction that “poetry should be written by those who are rooted in the earth on which it is written” (Mansoor, 2012, p. 20). On the other hand, his use of this word in his poetry has also many resistive objectives behind it. *Shisham, sissoo, tahi and talari* are the different names for the same tree. It is of great significance in rural areas of Eastern and Western Punjab. This tree was the symbol of solace, love, and unity but modern industrialization has reduced its traditional worth. The following lines of *Meditation and Prayer* are expressive of the lost past and the current modernity:

Now breakfast’s over, not a crumb

On the gleaming shisham table;

The napkins neatly quartered again,

And leftover foodstuff whisked away (p. 49).

Rafat also revolts against the prevailing neo-colonialism and multiculturalism. By doing this, he wants to highlight his own cultural values that have been blanketed by the foreign intrusion and influence. He is a true nationalist and comes up to the notion of nationalism given by Nayer (2008) as:
Nationalism provides some of the fiercest protest and resistance writing in almost every nation-state in modern times. The resistance to colonial domination, seeking self-expression and basic freedom, make the idea of a united, homogeneous, and well-defined ‘nation’ or ‘culture’ attractive and even feasible (p. 41).

His nationalism imbued with the historical facts presents the conflict between the traditional and the modern. *Arrival of The Monsoon*, says Mansoor, encodes a range of experiences, from personal to political, economic to religious, local to universal and many more.*Kitchens* (p. 44) is one of his most important masterpieces. It has gained a remarkable renown among the contemporary English literature of Pakistan. *Kitchens* is a symbolic and ironic display of past culture and the expression of modernity that has corrupted its traditional setting and metamorphosed the familial practices and norms into disintegration. Due to such treatment with his indigenous theme, writes Rahman (1991), “Jamal Rasheed calls him doyen of Pakistani poetry” (p. 165). Being Punjabi natives like Rafat we know that unlike the modern version of kitchen, traditional kitchen was the symbol of familial integration where the folks used to be at home in with each other. In this context, it is said,

Kitchens were spaces
We grew up in
High roofed, spacious,
They attracted us
with the pungency
of smoke and spices (Rafat, 1985, p. 44).

Here the phrase “we grew up” gives an impression of unity, amiability and selflessness. But in the present age we seldom find the statements like this. Instead we come across the words like ‘I’ that is all because of the materialistic needs of the present era. Except it, the kitchens have forfeited in the far past. Mansoor (2012) conveys,

*Kitchens* with a subjective nostalgic for a childhood spent in rural kitchen that is ‘high roofed’ and ‘spacious’ permeated with ‘the pungency of smoke and spices’, [Rafat] escorts the reader to a contemporary and sterilized kitchen that is both sterile and unreal, just like modern existence (p. 21).

These Kitchens used to be the main source of sharing news of “births, deaths, marriages, crops” (Rafat, 1985, p. 44), but now all has been replaced by the numb behavior of the people “who have no time to talk” (p. 44). Rafat also laments over the lost status of mother as a nurse of her children. He cleverly relates the image of motherhood with traditional kitchen where, “Mother [used to preside]/ contributing only her presence/ busy ladling ladling” (p. 44). Over and above, the poet very sensibly creates a beautiful image of the traditional lukewarm kitchen and the penetrating cold of December as:

From December beds
we hurried to the cheer
of wood-fires, above
which sang black kettles (p. 44).

All these images in the latter part of the poem have been replaced with the imagery of modern kitchen that has numb and
stiff atmosphere where nobody shares others triumphs or grief. Consequently, the poem is the portrayal of the past and the present, the manual and the digital, the pure and the corrupt, and “[h]is vibrant images and descriptions of common sights and things still live on… Taufiq was a true carpenter who chisels the wood and carves out a great masterpiece out of an ordinary piece of log… [he creates] pathos and beauty” (Dawn, 2009).

Rafat’s poetic art is replete with the Romantic traits but he does not alienate them from his native soil where he was born. His poetry mostly presents pastoral imagery where he details the local animals, seasons, people, flowers and trees as we have already discussed about *shisham, bulbul* etc. Hussain (2009) quotes, “there [is] nothing foreign about the characters and situations in his entire effort”. His poem *Village Girl* (Rafat, 1985, p. 5) reminds us of *The Solitary Reaper* (The poetry foundation, n.d.) of Wordsworth even though both are not matching with each other in terms of cultural identities. The poet is fully aware of his roots and “Pakistan village life is featured in innumerable poems…and yet in defining that [local] climate he stands in line with Shakespeare of England as well as Waris Shah of Punjab” (Mansoor, 2012, p. 22). Although Wordsworthian character Solitary Reaper’s comparison with ‘nightingale’ and ‘cuckoo’ is more detailed but the village girl of Rafat is the embodiment of Punjabi feminist beauty, described in precision. Here the simile “Sugarcane stalks” (Rafat, 1985, p. 5) clearly describes the charming physical height of that village girl. Beloved’s comparison with the natural objects has been the practice of the Punjabi poets, and out of them, ‘cypress tree’ with which the height of beloved is compared, is of great importance. Here, the writer seems to deviate from the traditional comparison and chooses a new imagery. Instead of using the phrase ‘cypress tree’, he uses the image of ‘sugarcane’. Ali (2009) comments that in Rafat’s poetic production “[such] images [are] evocative in nature. They [carry] with them the smell, the touch and the feeling that [are] homespun and very local in complexion”. *Trees in March* (p. 105), *The Marsh Birds* (p. 118), and many others display the rural images before the reader’s mind. The poem *Trees in March* presents the images of *mulberry, ‘mango trees’, ‘ripe monsoon’, ‘tardy pipal’, ‘kites’, ‘shisham’* etc. Here the natural objects herald the coming summer as,

Some trees live some men, are early in their declaration of summer.

And much the earliest of all is the impatient mulberry…

now mango trees are in full bloom

pressing a ripe monsoon (p. 105).

On the other hand, *A Touch of Winter* (p. 113) delineates an altogether different experience. Here the season of winter has been sketched out as:

The hallucinatory leaves of winter

brush my sleeves as I walk abstracted

among the crows, which are dropped

in their black suspicious

a litmus wind

which turns my red lips blue has burnt
The most famous poem *Arrival of the Monsoon* (p. 55) also assimilates the local imagery with the monsoon season. Very beautifully, the poet draws the scene of monsoon with as much fidelity as it has importance in the culture of Punjab. Monsoon, in Punjabi, *Sawan* is the season of restoration. Soofi (2014) encourages this point of view as, “It’s the month which not just changes all the things around but also breeds everything apparently dead that has a shade of green; the victim of unbearably hot and dusty spell”. It symbolizes ‘farewell to summer’ and ‘welcome to winter’. Further, the poet reveals, “A welcome darkness descends. Harsh contours/ dissolve, lose their prosaic condition./ All the sounds we have loved are restored” (Rafat, 1985, p. 113). The phrase “all the sounds” relates the rains of monsoon with the local ecology, whose sudden squalls, “sweep the street and equally sudden /are the naked boys padding in the ditches” (p. 55). By adding the imagery of local lanes, the poet recalls the past and the local celebration of monsoon season. *Sawan* has a great significance in the lives of the Punjabis and,

"[It was] greeted with so many rituals; religious and secular that have almost died out with the passage of time because of changing socio-cultural conditions accompanied by newly-acquired single thread religious identity in an otherwise diverse society (Soofi, 2014)."

It affects all the zoological and botanical creatures, and penetrates into the physical bodies to make them alive again. To have a nostalgic touch about the month of *Sawan*, we may cite a few lines from one of Shah Hussain’s *Kafi*, “Sawan has descended in all its colourfulness/earth is all a sprawling grass floor”(Soofi, 2014). This romantic season also touches upon the hearts of lovers. Qasmi (2011) writes that “the romantic rainy season [has] a special significance for young men and women in the rural Punjab” (p. 84). Khawaja Ghulam Fareed, too, encapsulates the same theme in his lyrics as, “Sawan is here with its rain-song/ may you have pity and turn your mount back, my love” (Soofi, 2014).

As far as the imagery of *Reflections* (Rafat, 1985, p. 78) is concerned, splitting it into eleven cantos, Rafat touches upon the process of creativity both in the creative artists and the agricultural lands. The poem is a multi-layered description of many objects where the poet associates the outer world to the inner world of the man. The poem starts with the lines,

> The long dry spell is over.
> Waiting is ended. The paddy fields receive the last monsoon showers
> with a fierce gladness (p. 77).

The pastoral imagery actually belongs to his own native land—Sialkot that is famous for its huge production of rice. Memon (n.d.) records that “Rice is mainly grown in many areas of Pakistan. In Punjab, it is cultivated in Sialkot” and many other cities so we can say that the imagery is not superficial but empirical in its nature. “Monsoon showers” give a new life to the dry climes as we have already debated upon. It is a botanical fact that the rainwater of monsoon is inevitable for the crop of rice. Memon (n.d.) writes that the [production of rice] decrease[s]… and effects of monsoon rain and late receding of water period in rice field prolonged the sowing”. If the rains of monsoon are not in time, it could be heavily drastic for the yield. Here, once again, after giving the description of an indigenous crop, he carries on his subject and says that all the objects of nature welcome it. It has been vividly described in *Arrival of the Monsoon* that “the dry trees rise and shake themselves” (p. 55). In the same manner,
It only needed
this [monsoon] to turn the weather. Already
there is a new briskness in the air
to which every living thing responds
and the poet too
wakes up from his dreams and doodling (p. 78).

Archetypally, the lines are very significant due to the expression of the time of productivity. Monsoon, for both poets and the agricultural land seems a blessing from the respective gods and goddesses. Calliop, Erato, and Thalia, the goddesses of epic poetry, lyric and pastoral poetry respectively (The Names of the Nine Muses, n.d.), can be equalized to Adonis (Britannica, n.d.), Tlaloc and Chaac (Mills, Parker & Stanton, 2005, p. 481), the gods of vegetation and rain. Here, the poet’s approach towards the process of composition of poetry is like those of romantic poets. The couplet, “The time for action is here/ and actions for some means words” (Taufiq, 1985, p. 78) seems very like to Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Leitch, 2001, p. 647). His images ‘rounded patterns’ (Rafat, 1985, p. 79) and ‘landscape of poem’ (p.79) in canto II present how the poetic frenzy coined by Longinus (Leitch, 2001, p. 140), works throughout the poem. As a result of which, “The words are willingly ready,/ to be cooped in a poem’s space” (Rafat, 1985, p. 79). In addition to it, in canto IV, he talks about the poetic inspiration as:

I sit in my garden
And listen to its overtones.
Here the red-arsed bulbul come
io inject a dumb tree with life…
The lashing of a kingfisher’s wings
Against a brooding tree
Triggers a new chain of thoughts (p. 81-82).

It reminds us of John Keats’ Ode to Nightingale (Newbolt, n.d.) where the nightingale’s character inspires Keats to compose his words into rhythmic lines. Instead of using the word nightingale, Rafat employs indigenous word bulbul. Except it, ‘the kingfisher’s wings’ also prove fruitful for the artistic unity of the poet’s creativity. At another place in canto II, Rafat transports our attention to the art of creativity that gains ripeness, in both content and form, with the passage of time. He writes,

As we grow older,
we try to pare words to the bone
for autumn has stuck blindly at
the equal leafiness of skull and vision (p. 81).

Closing the debate, it can be claimed that Rafat’s poetry is indeed the kaleidoscope of many ‘isms’. No doubt that
he adopts the themes and style from the movements—imagism, symbolism, realism, romanticism etc, but his poetic landscape itself frames all influences according to the need of Pakistani Idioms. The poet appropriates all the objects related to his local landscape, seasons, crops, vocabulary etc. to magnify the picture of indigenous cultural practices. In actual behind the curtain of these images, he endeavors to amplify the voice of nationalism, and creates a counter discourse against the colonial influence that has evidently disturbed our mentality, corrupted ecology, and contaminated the passion of love and integration. Apparently, the poetry is romantic in style but ironically pathos, lamentation and sympathy work beneath the surface.

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