

Indigenous Landscape and Scents in the Poetry of Taufiq Rafat

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Abstract

This paper looks at Taufiq Rafat's celebration of indigenous landscape with respect to "faunal images" and "rejuvenation" presented in his poetry. This study highlights concrete images and prosaic language to express Rafat's views about his landscape with delicacy and leniency of his diction. His idea of celebration also contains enthusiasm, ecstasy, liberty, serenity and harmony. In this paper a vivid picture of Pakistani land is presented to the readers through poet's superior expressions. In a nut-shell, Rafat delineates his indigenous landscape with association of various seasons.

Keywords: Taufiq Rafat, faunal images, diction, Pakistani land, indigenous landscape.

The central concern in modern Pakistani English poetry is the portrayal of socio-cultural and religious rituals through local images. The main concern of Pakistani English poets seems to be the creation of a core identity with indigenous roots which distinguishes them from the romantic tradition of Urdu and native English poets. This is due to the fact Pakistani poets have often been compared with Romantic poets, as Romantic poets use common man's idiom and focus on spontaneity. This ties in with Wordsworth's idea of "spontaneous overflow of feelings" and Keats's assertion "if poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all".

The difference between Pakistani English poets and Romantic poets is the employment of both imaginative and romantic elements by the latter group. Their poems start with something realistic. For instance "cuckoo", "daffodils", "rivers", "mountains", "sea", "evening" and "rainbow" all exist in the real world. But the imagination of Romantic poets dominates the reality. For example, "Kubla Khan" takes the readers into a supernatural world of imagination. Romantic literature focuses on the celebration of beauty, nature and imagination. There is also a rejection of industrialism, rationalism, idealization of rural life, the inclusion of supernatural or mythological elements prevalent in Romantic poetry. Contrarily, Pakistani English poets do not talk about a romantic or fantastic world while conveying the idea of an eastern landscape. They mainly talk about their own homeland. After the partition of 1947 they have given a new mode to poetry which is an epitome of their tradition, culture, religion, identity and ideology. Their poetry gives a glimpse of celebration of local coloring, rejuvenation, ecstasy, liberty and serenity. They use prosaic language in order to present their culture, traditions and colors with which they fill the pictures of their terrain.

This paper explores how Pakistani poets differ from Romantic poets in their portrayal of “local coloring”. Local coloring in this context refers to the celebration of local flora and fauna and seeing the ‘muse’ in local colors.

Taufiq Rafat is a pre-eminent Pakistani English poet of the 20th century. Among the Pakistani poets in this era who have contributed to the development of a Pakistani idiom of poetry are Kaleem Omar, Daud Kamal and Maki Kureshi. Their style is significant because they represent their own country, but Taufiq Rafat’s name is often attuned right at the top. M. Athar Tahir beautifully comments on his poetry in the introduction of the book *A Selection*:

Taufiq Rafat, the foremost poet English in Pakistan, has for five decades been bending words from a foreign domain for the purpose of his province. By so doing he has carried English to a new creative and imaginative terrain. Of Pakistani practitioners of poetry and prose in English, he has been the most consistent in his calling. (Rafat 1)

His influence on the other poets has been remarkable as he introduces his own idioms to give a glimpse of his local terrain like “baithak”, “veranda”, “koel”, “lichee tree”, “sheesham”, “gulmohur”, “brilliantly white courtyard”, “last night curry” and “brown water”. These images we do not find in Western writings. Due to Rafat’s discerning quality his fellow M. Athar Tahir praises him in the introduction of the book *A Selection* (1997) he writes, “Rafat sang not of Daffodils but of gulmohur and cacti. He wrote not of civilized pattern of English rain, but of heat, dust and thunder and relieving the monsoon” (Rafat 3).

Rafat's main claim to fame is his collection of poetry *Arrival of Monsoon* (1985). It remains his most famous collection, and for many decades dominated the literary world of Pakistani English poetry. In his collection, Rafat presents seasons, the characters, fragrance of mud and cultural substratum of his homeland. His remarkable collection has gained special attribution by reviewers and critics in Pakistan as well as abroad.

The distinctive quality of Taufiq Rafat among all the Pakistani English and Romantic English poets is his usage of own indigenous idiom and terminologies through which he delineates his countryside. In many ways, he seems to echo Wordsworth in *Preface to Lyrical Ballad*, when the latter says:

There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called Poetic diction; I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; this I have done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men, and further because the pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry. (1798-1805)

He gives new mode to Pakistani poetry. His poetry is a paradigm for his contemporaries especially those of Pakistani origin. The superiority of his style lies in the fact that he remains close to his landscape and employs those images and symbols that give an inclusive picture of his local terrain. His use of prosaic language gives a glimpse of rejuvenation and optimism. The unique quality of his style is that he implies multifarious

images in such a skillful manner that these images create pictures before the mental eye of reader and through this, he conveys his own ideas and concepts. For instance, in his poem “*Karachi 1955*” he does not only give the fanciful picture but also points out reality.

The bald sparrow scrounges in the dust bin;
only the spendthrift gul-mohur spills its gold
in the pitiful spring that time allows.
We wear our feature to suit the landscape,
and malice moves like a rainless cloud
over the brown cliffs of the teeth. (14-19)

Taufiq Rafat’s poetry gives a sight of inspiration including affliction and joy. His poetry is an amalgamation of sadness, truth, beauty and a celebration of natural world in positive ways. Beside “gulmohur spills its gold”, there are other images in the poem like “sweet water”, “little rain”, and “road of greenery” which reflect Rafat’s concern about his land. His pattern is striking and readers discover and trace the delicacy of his mode. He has a cognizant quality which makes him want to express his emotions, thoughts and overwhelming feelings toward his land. For instance in his poem “The Last Visit”, he presents the idea of rejuvenation with the tread of an old man who visits his countryside. His every step toward his home town gives a glimpse of his reinvigoration. Taufiq Rafat uses simple images, precise and graphic details and exactness of life which formulate the poem genuine. He uses daily life diction and presents the idea of rejuvenation in an exact way. He celebrates his local coloring with the image like “sherwani”, “turban” and “pumps”. As he says:

He put on his best sherwani
and turban and new pumps. We left
the warmth of the room for the rawness

and bluster of the porch, where
his ninety years swayed in the wind. (6-10)

His unique idiom is comprised of images that come to life fully realized in their potentials. His expression contains an economy with clarity. He does not give fanciful details and neither exaggerates about the presentation of his local terrain. He describes the real and actual picture of his homeland magnanimously. His style is dexterous as he celebrates his local coloring while referring to important indigenous landscapes such as the ancient civilization of Mohenjo-Daro and Himalayas. This proves the speaker's attachment to his landscape. As he says:

Thinking of Mohenjo-Daro
Alexandria and Rome;
I note how time curves
Back on itself
Like an acrobat. (1-5)

As Kaleem Omar gives his views about Taufiq Rafat's poetry in his interview in Dawn Newspaper published on 16 April, 2017.

I am reminded of Taufiq Rafat's haunting words, when I think of Mohenjo-Daro in the context of its links to the architecture of other ancient civilization such as civilization of ancient Mesopotamia, (present day Iraq) which existed roughly the same time as the Indus valley civilization, of which Mohenjo-Daro is perhaps the most important archaeological site. (n.p)

Rafat, as a versatile poet does not confine himself to a single idea, in fact; his idea of the celebration of local coloring is grand. His tone is harmonic rather than harsh. The

spectacle of celebration of local coloring is splendid as he presents concrete images in the particular area of his country. For instance, he talks about Karachi and Taxila with their cultural and social rituals.

The season telescopes
 a short summer into a short of winter
 topped by a mini-monsoon. Each new morning
 brings no hope of change. Generally the clouds
 Are sexless, mute, and above our affairs.
 A splitting sky announces a jet not rain (9-14).

His emphasis on certain untapped parts of his country seems to serve a specific purpose—that of clarifying the reader’s thoughts about his nation state. In his poems like “Flood in a Narrow Valley”, “Street of Nightingale”, “Soil”, “Ramzan”, “Eid”, “Pigeons”, “Mango Trees”, “Family” he presents his own homeland, culture, religion, traditions and society. His symbolism, poetic style and imagery reflect the context of Pakistan.

Another important feature in Taufiq Rafat’s poetry is his delineation of faunal images. He associates various themes like liberty, harmony and serenity with birds. Like Wordsworth he also implies multifarious images like “ducks”, “gulls”, “sparrow”, “parrots”, and reference of “seldom bird”. His versatility takes into account even small insects and animals like “geese”, “squirrel” and “fireflies”. Moreover, there are various animal images like “snake”, “frog”, “horse”, “monkey”, “camels”, “cat”, “wild hen” and “dog” with whom he very conspicuously composes curiosity of the reader’s mind. Tariq Rehman pays tribute to the magnetic facet of Taufiq Rafat’s poetry in his book *A History of Pakistani Literature in English*:

Nature provides the dominant images in most of the Poems of Rafat.

Besides the flowers and grass images the poems feature animals. These range from the wild snow leopards and snakes to the domestic goats. He has also an eye for birds with the list including geese, kites, sparrow, eagles, partridge and so on. This imagery reinforces the theme of the healing quality of closeness to nature while alienation from it is the beginning disquiet. (5)

One of the most remarkable qualities in Taufiq Rafat's celebration of local coloring is his astounding ability to maintain a precise and simple diction. Rafat describes faunal images in such a way that his presentation enlivens the readers. For instance in his poem "Arrival of Monsoon", he consolidates the rainy season with life. Rafat depicts a season of monsoon which is general to the context of South Asia but more specific to Pakistan. He enlivens the readers with gorgeous sight. He presents the inspiration of upgrading in a superior way. He uplifts the celebration of human beings and animals to their height, when he gives a glimpse of lively spectacle:

Alive, alive, everything is live again.
Savour the rain's coolness on lips and eyes.
How madly the electric wire is swinging! (16-18)

There is ecstasy, which everyone feel with the arrival of monsoon. Even the wire is swinging madly; this gives the idea of the poet's conspicuous nature. Taufiq Rafat is a genius who celebrates his local coloring with idea of rejuvenation. He amalgamates multifarious images in order to give a glimpse of his ecstasy. His superiority of style lies in the fact that he delineates different seasons in a splendid way. For instance, he implies beauty in "snow of winter season", celebrates "arrival of monsoon" in his region, gives a

glimpse of marvelous “summer evening”, wondrous “cool may”, stupendous “ceremony for autumn”, “sugarcane stalk” and liveliness in the “tread of an old man who visits his native town”. His talent reflects in every sight which he notices in his local terrain. There is enthusiasm, diligence, elegancy and profundity in his style. His poetry seems to aim at the mitigation of anxieties, miseries and agitations of people belonging to his land. He wishes to make people alive again through his inspiration of innovation which people forget in their hustle and bustle of life. He is a vigorous poet to whom liberty, certainty, harmony, clemency, and authenticity have great values. His poetry takes readers to ecstasy when he gives glimpses of rejuvenation in his own land. For instance, in his poem “After Rain” he delineates the idea of buoyancy and enthusiasm with rejuvenation. As in Pakistan, people experience prolonged summer, for them rainy weather brings enjoyment, celebration and, serenity. He also implies bird images in order to show the idea of liberty. As the opening lines of the poem “After Rain” presents tenderness, commemoration and festivity:

Birds, too, have sensed that the whole year
may not gift another day like this.
They have turned out in force. In the heady air
they spurt from poplar to eucalyptus. (1-4)

Another remarkable quality in Taufiq Rafat’s poetry is that he illustrates the scene not only with the perspective of human beings but also with reference to universal living creatures. Because for him, everything in his land whether ancient civilizations or rituals have great values. He presents the pleasures of birds:

and back again, singing all the while,
I am their auditor transfixed by choice.
In the background to make the evening full
the frogs and insects are in good voice. (5-8)

The enthusiasm and ecstasy of local coloring is also prominent in his other poems like “Trees in March”, “Mangoes”, “To See Fruit Ripen” and “A Cool May”. He uses concrete images of localism and indigenization which reflect the romantic imagery that we find in Wordsworth or P.B Shelley’s poetry. There is also a nostalgic touch present in poetry of Taufiq Rafat. As Wordsworth gives a pleasant and innocent view of past in “Tintern Abbey”:

Five years have past:
Summers with the length
Of five long winters! And again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain springs
With a soft inland murmur (1-5)

Correspondingly, Taufiq Rafat also calls to mind his childhood days. With childhood, he associates an idea of harmony, innocence and purity of thought. While looking on stone chat all the memories of childhood are now awakening and desire for liberty like singing bird is also rising. As the speaker presents in these lines:

I would have missed him. But for his tail
Vibrating with excitement. He hops up
the slop held in place by a slab of sunlight,
to ridicule terrace of wheat
which does not seem worth tending (19-23)

The use of faunal images in Taufiq Rafat’s poetry gives a new paradigm to his poetry. He does not associate any supernatural element unlike Coleridge’s use of albatross in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Rafat’s mode is vigorous and there are always feelings of serenity and buoyancy in his poems. His attitude is raucous when he refers to animals as in his poem “Monkey at Hardwar” the speaker recalls pre-partition days and associates dual names Bharat and India. There is a beautiful recollection of memories

when he recalls his childhood days:

We were children then, on our way to Lahore
 For the winter break. When we reached hardware
 We anticipated the monkeys, who perched in rows
 On the terrain roof, solemnly, awaiting their chance. (5-8)

He even considers the motif of snake as ‘not entirely malevolent’. In his poem “Snake”

he beautifully portrays the picture in the reader’s mind:

The cottage
 We had rented for the season
 Was hundred feet below
 Road level and a long
 Serpentine gravelly path
 Poke with stones, led to it (2-7)

Taufiq Rafat also uses comparison of rural or urban life of his country. Like Romantics he also shows love for rural life. He uses an image of “stainless homogeneity” for urban life in his poem “Kitchens”. He presents the typical culture of Pakistan and uses his own idioms as he says:

Kitchens were places
 We grew up in
 High-roofed spacious
 They attracted us
 With the pungency
 Of smoke and spices

The images of “smoke”, “fire”, “curry”, and “high roofed” give a glimpse of his roots. Like Frost, Rafat also talks about ordinary life and experiences. We can say that Rafat’s poetry is a blend of both modern and Romantic conventions.

Taking into account all the above mentioned examples of Taufiq Rafat's poetry, it is evident that an essential feature in his poetry is celebration of local coloring. He is a great poet in history of Pakistani English poetry who gives remarkable impression of landscape. He relates significant ideas of peace, positivity of spirit, optimistic nature, religious rituals and liberty in a superior way. Local coloring, therefore, finds its expression in Taufiq Rafat's poetry. It is for this reason that Rafat is successful in thinking a new idiom for Pakistani poetry that celebrates the local coloring.

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