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Poetics of Cross-cultural Assimilation: A Study of Taufiq Rafat's[1] 'Reflections'

One of the major characteristics of literary postmodernism is the exploration of intertextual relations among various cross-cultural and trans-historical texts. At the heart of such explorations is the postmodernist view that there is nothing new under the sun, that all texts are dependent on each other, or that every thing is a 'translation' or a re-rendering and re-imagination of earlier texts. The notion of 'intertextuality' popularized by the French theorist Julia Kristeva is, therefore, often invoked to study literary, historical and cultural relations among texts belonging to different time periods and written in altogether different languages. Kristeva framed the concept while drawing upon the theories of Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, especially his notion of diaglossia, or the dialogic nature of texts. Intertextuality is generally taken to refer to the interdependence of literary texts based on the theory that a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations, and that any text is the "absorption and transformation of another".[2] Since Bakhtin and Kristeva, other theorists have also come up with similar ideas about the fluid and intertexual nature of texts and their relations. For example, Baudrillard, the foremost theorist of postmodernism, has coined the terms 'simulation', adaptation and appropriation of visual texts like films.[3] It is interesting that all of these concepts may also be linked to Plato's notion of 'mimesis' or the imitation of the real world. Therefore, the question of representation of the 'real' as opposed to the 'copy'

is an old one. In literary postmodernism, the idea has regained currency with reference to the 'construction' of texts as well. In the 1960s, John Barth, in the 'literature of exhaustion', said that "it is impossible to write an original work".[4] In *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (2011), Sim states:

> Postmodernism embraces an extreme notion of intertextuality, in which the play of meaning is infinite, in which anything goes.[5]

Thus the new text created is layered with meanings founded by combining the historical and cultural elements presented in the past and the present text.

Allusions serve as the major linking chains enabling the transference of the original text to its contemporary representations. The idea of literary allusions serving more than a referential purpose came with the birth of Anglo-American New Criticism, as enunciated by T. S. Eliot in his seminal essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" where he writes:

> No poet, no artist has a complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him from contrast and comparison among the dead.[6]
>
> Eliot is ultimately focusing on the point that poetry is a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written.[7]

Keeping in view these brief remarks about the intercultural relations between texts, the explorations of intertextual allusions in literary texts often yield exciting results. Taufiq Rafat's long poem "Reflections", included in his anthology *Arrival of the Monsoon*, is analysed here for a wealth of intertexual references and allusions.

Not only is "Reflections" one of Rafat's longest, most complex poems, with significant philosophical contours and symbolism, it is also the most important in a very personal sense. The poem was written at a crucial time in Rafat's life. He suffered from a paralyzing stroke that made him bed-ridden

for three years. While he was recuperating from this physical paralysis, his poetic consciousness remained active. "Reflections" is the outcome of those three years' solitary contemplation. As such, it also marked his 'recovery' in the poetic sense, returning to his writing after considerable delay.

The title itself is rather philosophical, signifying, on the one hand, the musings and thoughts of the poet as he slowly recovered at his farm and reread many of his favourite works from Eastern and Western literatures; on the other hand, in terms of intertextuality, 'reflecting' like a mirror, numerous scholarly references to Eastern and Western literatures, histories, mystical thought systems, etc. Some of the major ones are as follows:

1) Yeat's concept of the 'gyres' of history;
2) The Buddhist (traditional) cycle of the Gautama Story;
3) J. L. Lowes' *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination;*
4) Ideas from T.S. Eliot's prose work *The Sacred Wood* and C.M. Kearns' ideas on Eastern influences on Eliot's work in *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions;*
5) Many ideas/concepts from the works of three great Punjabi mystic poets i.e. Baba Farid, Bulleh Shah and Sultan Bahu;
6) Various other references from Eastern Folklore, mysticism and concepts of 'Being' (the Punjabi *Hondh);*
7) Allusions to works/ideas of Persian mystics Attar, Jami and Hafiz;
8) References to Edward Fitzgerald's version of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam;*
9) References from Robert Bridge's *The White Goddess;*
10) References from the Hindu mythological epic the *Ramayana;*

11) Ideas from G. Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1972);
12) Allusions from Li Tai Po and Lao Tse, the classical Chinese poets;
13) Meera Bai, the Hindu mystic-poetess images;
14) T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land;*
15) Ezra Pound's *Cantos;*

Apart from this impressive array, there are many images of a cultural nature, relating to the rural life, to Lahore and its surroundings, to objects and symbols of typical Punjabi ethos, to the Indo-Pakistan partition, etc. In totality, the poem would be too complex and lengthy to be criticized or analyzed in detail within these pages. A separate, book-length study would be required to do justice to a work of such magnitude and philosophical profundity. However, the main points can be highlighted briefly.

The basic themes of "Reflections" are three, summed up thus:

(i) The concepts of Birth, Death and Rebirth, linked to the natural order as well as the lives of individuals within the larger cosmic panorama;

(ii) The relationship between life and art, as expressed by the human desire to preserve and explain nature, the meaning of existence and other related mysteries, in order to find directions for self improvement and perfection;

(iii) The mystic apprehension of the artistic, poetic experience, as lived and felt within the bounds of various human traditions and rituals of all descriptions.

These themes may be dealt with on two levels, at least – (a) the Meditations of the poet himself in the cosmic plan, based on different intellectual and philosophical traditions from both East and West; and (b) a technique of mirroring images

and symbols from nature and the poet's own Punjabi heritage and surroundings to reflect deeper truths by analogy.

Taking the meditation level first, it must be kept in mind that, Rafat was quite influenced by the writings of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden and, to a lesser extent, W.B. Yeats. While he did not necessarily agree with some ideas of Eliot's, he admired the author of *The Waste Land*, most of all his depiction of the modern wasteland that the Western civilization turned into in the wake of two world wars. It seems that Rafat had the modern wasteland in his mind when writing "Reflections". However, it is not an affirmation of T.S. Eliot's ideas in *The Waste Land* but an Eastern reply, a rejoinder or even refutation of the same. Rafat's essential philosophy was coloured by his native identity. Since religious belief, in diverse forms of course, is still intact in most Eastern societies in comparison to the Western societies where it has been constantly waning, Rafat therefore justifies the tradition of Eastern continuity as compared to Eliot, who sought to revive what had been lost in his civilization. While Rafat may complain or criticize the trends towards Westernization in Pakistan but he is assured of his own roots and believes that the the 'Eastern' cultural ethos will survive and continue in its essential character long after the Western 'fads' are gone.

Rafat is a skillful story-teller, as is evident from his narrative poems like "Mr. Nachiketa", "Wedding in the Flood", "Gangrene", and most of all "Reflections". It is apparent from these poems that he is not a sentimentalist; rather he is the master of understatement who rather conveys his tragic vision of existence with the economy of expression. Referring to his long illness and vegetable existence on bed, and later recovery of health and creativity, he writes:

> The long dry spell is over,
> Waiting is ended. The paddy fields
> receive last monsoon showers
> with a fierce gladness.[8]

Therefore, "Reflections" can be considered Rafat's "Rebirth" or "Second pilgrimage" as he himself writes in the poem. Hope is revived after struggling with illness, uncertainty and creative inaction – "The large dry spell is over", he says; "there is a new briskness in the air"; "the definitions that made us uneasy/were put aside"; though seemingly the poet's work "flows into the substance / like water into sand" each word is, in fact, "irreplaceable"; and the potential to achieve deeper understanding, or levels of consciousness, is always present even in the worst of places at the worst of times. What is required is basically love – which is already present and does not need to be 'developed' like Eliot's formula of "da, da, da" – and this love has its own seasons, and all we require is to be like the "laburnum" tree, to become "conscripted to love". The examples of such devotion or commitment abound in Eastern poetry and lore and in the very imagery derived from trees, soil, water and sky. The poem is intuitive and proceeds, in a Dionysian fashion, on its "intense, illogical way" and by virtue of this process, is able to reach the truth denied to more intellectual, rational schemes of order such as followed by Eliot and other Western scholars and thinkers. These intuitive poems and myths rooted to a culture "native to the place/ as a banyan tree" are also developing and evolving, and never static, "… we, their latest heirs, / must find the myths for our age" and ensure that the "drone of the homing jet / pollinates all cultures between Hong Kong and San Francisco". "The Drone" of the jet becomes the bee "drone", moving from flower to flower, pollinating. "This, then", he concludes, is the ultimate task of the poet – "the renewal of man / through the revalidation of words". This is also the "miracle", or power of "one word" (the *Shabdh* of Punjabi mystics, the *Logos* of the biblical tradition) that is potentized – "one yes can rekindle love / or start a war."[9]

The range and depth of his knowledge of other cultures and literatures is quite visible in this poem. His interest in Hindu mythology and Buddhist tradition is revealed by numerous references to Ramayan, Arjun, Ganesh and Gautam.

The poem even opens with a historical Buddhist reference, as the epigraph.

> Then the Blessed One said to the monks:
> Behold now, mendicants, I say to you, everything is subject to decay; press forward untiringly to perfection.
> This was his last word. (Gautam at Kusinara).[10]

For Rafat, the job of the artist is to restore human values, irrespective of religion and ritual, as he says: "This, then, the renewal of man/Through the revalidation of words/Is the poet's task/Poets and words are rooted in time".[11] Carrying this line of thought further, one feels that the nature of the creative process, in poetry especially, is one of the major concerns of Rafat in this poem. For him action means words:

> Articulate again, I find
> white phrases tumbling in the air.
> To my outstretched hands they come
> in a tightening gyre, willingly,
> to be cooped in a poem's space.[12]

It is obvious that, unlike Eliot, he puts faith in the Dionysian creative process, that is, in the poetry of spontaneous overflow of emotions recollected in tranquility or the mystic apprehension of existence, as against the Apollonian process of creativity as an intellectual exercise. Perhaps that is why there is no fixed movement in "Reflections", but it moves "in tightening gyre", an image invoked from the Irish poet laureate, W.B. Yeats, or like "the winking eel".[13] He gives his poetic and creative motto thus in the poem:

> Must a man waste half a lifetime
> and a million words
>
> before he can say things
> the way he wants to say them?
> …
> For words are our element,
> a responsible air

without mercy, or luck or only
for those who hone technique

till the craft flows into the substance
like water into sand;[14]

Creative process is the major theme of the poem; words are more real than emotions, the artist's vision, the nature of permanence and the relevance of myths. There are brilliant images of the red-arsed bulbuls (nightingales) injecting a dumb tree with the songs and rhythms of life, the flashing of a kingfisher's wings against a brooding tree and the stillness of herons in a pool. These images "trigger a new chain of thought" which leads to composition till "A poem is a monument/ Sculptured in words."[15]

But his poetic vision is not mere outburst either. He exercises his craft "till each word is irreplaceable/but slips into the landscape of a poem".[16] The poem has a logical structure. It is Rafat's take on many philosophical problems and metaphysical issues: "To consider permanence/is to study the casual".[17] We are told that the poets create myths, but they must be destroyers (of myths) too. "Reflections", and later on "Glimpses of Paradise", remind one of Wallace Steven's preoccupations with the nature of existence. Like a consummate artist, Rafat has carved his poem by drawing on many intertextual references and allusions from a variety of cultures and literary traditions.

In terms of resolution, one may offer the following interpretation:

(a) Life, or existence, the entire universal order, is viewed as content as well as context; and the one cannot be without the other;

(b) And that the 'meeting point' where content and context come together is the 'Reality', the 'Truth' as finally perceived by Rafat, just as it was perceived by earlier poets and many mystics of the Subcontinent. Baba Farīd and

> Bulleh Shah's *Hondh* (Being / Real Living) is thus available to us as always in a way that the post-Eliot Western 'wastelanders' cannot imagine.

We note how deeply his creative process is embedded in his own Punjabi cultural roots and his deep interest in Eastern cultures, religions, literatures, philosophies etc. These find a basic place in his poetic imagination. Thus, even when he is intertextualizing Western allusions or references, he always remains an Easterner, a Pakistani and a Punjabi. We never consider him as 'divided' between two or more cultures, as we feel on reading the works of some other Pakistani writers who write in English in particular. In the major bulk of his poetry, the essential 'Easterness' comes out. As Pakistanis, we recognize and identify with many of the symbols and images that he invokes and we are often amazed how accurately he captures our culture. Indeed, of all the Pakistani poets writing in English, he is still the one who has most closely captured large and small aspects of our identities.[18]

Apart from this, he is one of the few Pakistani writers in English who have also facility in writing in Urdu and/or a regional language – in his case, some fine writings in Punjabi. And, above all, with 3-4 exceptions, he is the one to undertake the translation into English of some major regional/classical texts i.e. the works of Baba Bulleh Shah and Qādiryār's *Pūran Bhagat*. Dr. Christopher Shackle, one of the eminent scholars of Punjabi and the translator of the *Dīvān* of Khwaja Ghulām Farīd, paid a rich tribute to Rafat by saying that he was "a Modern Punjabi *bābā"*; who, in fact, was using English to convey the wisdom of the great Punjabi *Sūfīs* to the world.[19]

Gauri Vishwanathan made the important distinction, given below, that writings in English from ex-colonies may take any one of the three forms:

(i) Writings by natives of these countries, who are living in them, and writing works relevant to their situations;

(ii) Writings by people living in these countries but "divorced" from their situations, creating "very personal" literature or "escapist" literature;

(iii) Writings by ex-inhabitants in exile in other countries, especially immigrants to Western societies, who focus either on their "lost" homelands with nostalgia or on their situations in their new, adopted countries.[20]

Taufiq Rafat is one of the few, genuine Pakistani writers to fall into the first category or group. Again, with very few exceptions, most Pakistanis writing in English fall into the other two categories. Interestingly, the continuity of the tradition of the first category in the writers who are producing poetry today is also largely dependent on those who have been directly or indirectly influenced by Rafat. Of his *protégés*, Athar Tahir, Kaleem Omar and Omer Tarin are the most noteworthy. Ejaz Rahim has also found inspiration from both Taufiq Rafat and Daud Kamal. Indeed, we can say that the pure, indigenous Pakistani-English poetry is even now very much that, which established in Rafat's "tradition". Thus, this tradition has proven its value and power as most vital in Pakistani-English writings.

The writer in Rafat's own generation who approaches him most nearly in contributing to such developments is Daud Kamal. In Rafat's verse, we can find broad Eastern symbolism like this:

… he could see
the towers of Kapilvastu
where abandoned wife and child
still waited;
the tree in whose shade

he had received intimations
of his destiny;
and the deer-park in Benares,
the place of his first acclaim.

"Return to Rajagriha"[21]

These lines refer to Buddha's life and "Kapilvastu", "the [banyan] tree" and the "deer-park in Benares" are familiar to all as Buddhist symbols. In Daud Kamal's verse, we have a very close parallel,

… Vasanta had only been rendered insensible
by the outrage in the garden.
A sadhu watches his toe-nails grow
in his Himalyan cave.

"An Ancient Indian Coin"[22]

Here, the symbols are from the ancient Indian mythology, such as "Vasanta", "outrage in the garden", "Sadhu", "Himalayan". The poets' spirit is very similar in both examples, with the difference that Rafat's style is simpler while Kamal tends towards a more complex one.

Both these poets also have a more specific, regional symbolism, that is, in Rafat's case Punjabi, and in Kamal's, Pushtun or Pakhtun. In Rafat's poem, "Village Girl", the girl is compared to the sugarcane stalk; and again, in "Partridge Calling" how the bird's voice comes to symbolize a landscape, or regional attitude. Both the girl-as-sugarcane (sweet, tall, pleasing) and the partridge-Punjabi landscape – hunting (agrarian, beautiful yet cruel) symbolic chains make distinct impressions on the mind. We automatically bring up associations of Punjab and its various cultural aspects. If we take an example from Daud Kamal, we can similarly conjure a very 'Frontier' image –

Alexander on horseback
Leapt over the Indus here,
Or so the story tellers say …

"The Leap"[23]

The Indus, or *Abasin*, is venerated by Pushtuns. To leap the Indus is symbolic of decisiveness, of boldness and manly

courage, typical Pushtun traits. Alexander, or "Sikandar-i-Azam" still bears a legendary reputation in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and many boys are named after him even today. The "storytellers" remind us of the Qissa-Khwani Bazar in Peshawar, the traditional 'Market of the Storytellers', where legends and myths live on in rugged, proud surroundings, over cups of *qahva.* In three lines, Kamal also creates a magic of his own. Again, we see that Rafat's allusions are more direct, more proverbially Punjabi; while Kamal is more obscure, creating his own images rather than referring to Pushtun allusions.

Alamgir Hashmi is another poet who balances between two cultures. However, he does not attempt to pretend to be otherwise. His poetry about Pakistani themes clearly reflects an urbanized attitude viewing rural society, or restricts itself to urban topics. In other cases, he simply refers to western culture and society, using allusions and symbolism appropriate to these. For example, in "Encounter with the Sirens",

> Ulysses stopped his ears
> With wax and had himself bound
> To the mast of the ship,
> Though it was known to the world
> That such things were of no help[24]

A witty comment, with a purely Western classical allusion. It may be said that while Hashmi is one of those poets who view Pakistani society through a windowpane. Rafat is the typical *desi* companion and friend who shares jokes and tears with us, sitting by our fireside. He is able to pick up all our ways, mannerisms, customs and habits; to understand us and appreciate us with all our strengths and weaknesses. He is a part of this environment – a Punjabi, a Pakistani, an Asian. To him, the voluptuous sounds of blonde sirens trying to seduce Ulysses are not so important as the rhythmic, beautiful walk of a tall village girl like a sugarcane stalk. His heart beats for Waris Shah's *Heer*, not some imported ideal of beauty or grace.

Acknowledgement

Back in 1999-2000, I was introduced to Rafat and his poetry by Omer Tarin, himself a poet of note and a great protégé of Rafat. For many fine points in this article, I am indebted to Prof. Tarin's insightful discussions and explanations that he did for my benefit, then.

NOTES

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1 Taufiq Rafat, was born into a respectable, well-to-do family of Sialkot in 1927. His father was connected with business and trade while his mother's family belonged to the middle class of landowners. In his poem, "The Kite Fliers", he enshrines the memory of his maternal uncle, Shakir Ali, who indulged in the traditional pursuits of Punjabi *Zamindars.* This uncle was one of the early influences in determining the directions of Taufiq Rafat's later poetry and imagination. In addition, the rural environment of villages in the Sialkot area, with the ancient historical background of myths and mysticism, influenced him from the very beginning. It is not surprising that he was coloured by this influence and, in later life, he translated some classical Punjabi literature into English including the epical *Qissa Pūran Bhagat* by the poet Qādiryār. This poem is historically based in the Sialkot region, as part of the larger Raja Risalu 'series' of tales and poems. We may understand the depth of his understanding and involvement in his native culture by this example, which Rafat was to refine into his own, original poetry too.

After early education at the prestigious school of Dehra Dun in the Indian Himalayas, where he was first introduced to the joys of English literature, becoming his other lifelong passion in addition to his native culture, he went on to study at Aligarh and then Lahore. Rafat was not only a person with creative and literary tastes and inclinations but also a practical-minded student, who opted to go into the world of business and commerce for a successful livelihood. Unlike most poets of the Subcontinent, he proved to be a success as a company executive in a number of jobs, securing early financial security. Apart from his

professional commitments, he kept on writing poetry in English as well as Punjabi, privately in the beginning but then publishing some of his work in papers and magazines, from time to time. He also involved himself in English literary activities and voluntary teaching. Especially as a visiting fellow in Government College, Lahore, where the famous *Ravi* magazine printed his earliest poems and in which many literary debates of the day were carried out by many of the top scholars, writers and intellectuals of the Subcontinent. In this milieu, Taufiq Rafat flourished considerably.

Between 1982-83, Rafat made excellent translations of Punjabi poetry, including notably the works of Baba Bulleh Shah and Qadiryar's *Puran Bhagat.* In 1985, his personal collection of poetry *Arrival of the Monsoon: The Collected Poems 1947-1978* was published to great acclaim. During this period, unfortunately, Rafat suffered serious health problems, especially with two strokes in 1977-78. Although he recovered gradually from these setbacks, he lost a great deal of his energy and decided to retire, by and large, to a small farm he had purchased near Bedian, Lahore. Here, with his usual zest for life, he continued to write and meet literary people although he retired more and more into a self-imposed isolation as he suffered later relapses of illness, ending in a series of strokes which left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. However, he struggled on bravely, and with humour, until his demise in 1998. The Oxford University Press (Pakistan) later published some of his newer poems posthumously.

[2] J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Penguin Books, 2000).

[3] Andrew Bennet & Nicholas Royale, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (India: Pearson Education, 2004), p.252–4.

[4] Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (USA: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.52.

[5] Stuart Sim (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (UK: Roultledge, 2011), p.256.

[6] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, Edited and introduction by Frank Kermode (Mariner Books, 1975), p. 781.

[7] Ibid., p. 762.

[8] Taufiq Rafat, *Arrival of the Monsoon; Collected Poems* (Vanguard: Lahore, 1985), p. 78.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., p. 78.

[11] Ibid., p. 89.

[12] Ibid., p. 78–79.

[13] Ibid., p. 79.

[14] Ibid., p. 79–80.
[15] Ibid., p. 82.
[16] Ibid., p. 80.
[17] Ibid., p. 84.
[18] For a more detailed study of this aspect of his poetry, please see my article 'Eastern Symbolism and the Recovery of Selfhood', published in the *Kashmir Journal of Language Research*, vol.14, No.2, 2011.
[19] Apparently, this remark was made by Dr. Shackle, at the First International Writers' Conference, Islamabad, 1995. Taufiq Rafat was also present as one of Pakistan's delegates to this landmark conference.
[20] G. Vishwanathan, "An Introduction: Uncommon Genealogies" in *Ariel.* 31.1&2 (2000). pp.13-31.
[21] Taufiq Rafat, p. 58.
[22] Muneeza Shamsie (Ed), *A Dragonfly in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writings in English* (Karachi: OUP, 1997).
[23] Ibid.
[24] Alamgir Hashmi, "Encounter with the Sirens" in *My Second in Kentucky* (Lahore: Vision Press, 1981), p.17.

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