

A Comparative Study of River Poems

By

Pakistani and Indian Poets

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The image of a river in flood has diversely been employed by poets of the Subcontinent as a means to a personal, political and historical end. But the powerful beauty of rising and receding river water has also been explored as an end in itself through metaphors of destruction and creation, source and destination, consummation and separation. Gieve Patel in "O My Very Own Cadaver" records an out of body experience in, "I see my body float on waters / that rush down the street" (p.93), and Eunice de Souza in "Outside Jaisalmer" talks of how, "we clatter over five river beds/broad, sweeping, dry" (4.1-2). Nissim Ezekiel in "Mid monsoon Madness" explores the element of spectacle as it rains "incessantly upon the night / I listen to my own madness / saying: smash it up and start again" (13-15). This comparative study seeks to examine how two Pakistani poets namely Taufiq Rafat and Alamgir Hashmi, and two Indian poets namely A.K. Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla employ a diversity of technical, linguistic and structural devices to articulate a multiplicity of cultural, political and historical themes in their selective river poems. The poems are appended for review and comparison.

The tone and poetic mode of Alamgir Hashmi's "Around Panjnad" is exploratory and analytical, whereas that of "The Snake Jungle" is ironical and speculative. The matter of factness with which events in "Around Panjnad" such as "men / foolishly let their huts be dwarfed / The mud houses swept away" (1.10-12) and in "The Snake Jungle" those who "did not have / proper circumcision.... worth drowning were sent washing" (12-14) are related, is deceptive. By down-playing the cruelty of nature in the face of human frailty in one poem, and inhuman post partition prejudice against the Hindus in the other poem, Hashmi generates a dispassionate criticism.

With the historian's fascination for the past and the journalist's preoccupation with facts, Hashmi explores how the fate of civilizations in the Subcontinent, as far back as the Indus Civilization, has been determined by the course of rivers in "Around Panjnad". He uses stringent satire in "The Snake Jungle" to relate how dead bodies in a flood become mere spectacle. And the selective extractions of bodies from the flood water are racially and politically motivated on the basis of post Pakistani independence bias. Taufiq Rafat chooses the narrative mode for his "Wedding in the Flood", drawing on the Punjabi Folklore and ballad tradition to relate the story of a wedding procession drowning in a river flood. Indigenous romantic and realistic elements are juxtaposed in novel combination. Traditional romantic elements such as the whining clarinet, the palankeen, and the journey metaphor are foregrounded by the ominous refrain of the superstition regarding "a pot-licking wench" (25) as a bride. But the poet juxtaposes these romantic elements in the modernist tradition, with the realistic blame for the rain on their wedding day, which the bridegroom attributes to his bride licking pots. The

father-in-law's preference for a dowry of oxen instead of personal articles for the bride's use only also blends the realistic and the romantic.

On the other hand Keki N. Daruwalla's "Ghagra in Spate" is descriptive and explores the paradoxical creative destruction wrought by the temperamental Ghagra river in northern India through a series of metaphoric metamorphoses. Another Indian poet, A.K. Ramanujan, adopts a reflective mode in "A River" to examine the sensitivity of old and new poets to the beauty of the Vaikai river in flood in Southern India's Madurai district. At the same time he highlights these poets' insensitivity to human suffering and destruction on account of the floods.

Although the subject of all five poems is a river in flood and devastation of life, landscape and property, the voices in which the poets choose to explore their subject are distinctly different. The poetic voice of "Around Panjnad" and "The Snake Jungle" is intellectual, analytical and sometimes there is a rueful sadness in some of the observations. The viewer's perspective in the former is extended from a flood scene where five rivers meet, to the historical past of the Indus valley civilisations such as Moenjodaro and Harappa, and back to the present to establish the historical connection of "We are children of history and of water" (2.1). In the latter poem we are given a post Indian partition perspective of the Ravi in flood. Taufiq Rafat selects a lyrical storyteller voice to relate the tragedy of the wedding procession which becomes a funeral in "Wedding in the Flood". On the other hand Daruwalla's voice and perspective in "Ghagra in Spate" is aesthetic and artistic. Cyclical changes in the river generate changes in texture, mood and movement. The voice in

Ramanujan's "A River" is objective, detached and prosaic. But there is an underlying sarcasm beneath the apparent matter of factness and understatement.

The rivers in each of the five poems have distinctive and individual characters, and poets like Hashmi and Daruwalla have also endowed their rivers with gender attributes. These specific characteristics generate mood swings, kineasthetic and textual variations as well as shape modifications ranging from the human and creatural to the mythological. In "Around Panjnad" there is a predominantly bacchic male union as the "frenzied" (1.4) "Sutlej" and "round brimming Chenab put his / arms to dance (1.5-6) "and" nearby indignant / Indus raged, (1.7-8)"and then the", water busy in angry lust" (1.17) climbs in flood. Daruwalla's 'Ghagra' undergoes a series of hormonal changes effecting temperament variation and mood swings characteristic of the female gender. There is a development from an amniotic and embriotic "turning over and over in her sleep"(3) through a pubescent "red moon in menses" (9) to coming of age in an adolescent "bitchy / sucking with animal heat"(57-8). Different times of the day bring about changes in texture and temperament too. We are told that, "in the afternoon she is a grey smudge" (4) and "when dusk reaches her...she is overstewed coffee" (6-8) and "At night...she is a red weal across the spine of land"(9-11). Thus it is the emotional power of the river which shapes the structure of the poem.

The mythological element is introduced by Hashmi, Rafat and Daruwalla. Hashmi talks of the powerful raging rivers Sutlej, Chenab and Indus, "(as if it were machinery for a Mahabharata)" (1.09) in "Around Panjnad", and Rafat records how the groom's "father tossed on the horns of the

waves"(64) is at the mercy of "a brown and angry river"(59). Similarly the Ghagra like the vengeful goddess Kali in Hindu mythology, "flees from the scene of her own havoc arms akimbo," (62.3) and "houses sag... in a farewell obeisance"(65-66).

On a closer examination of the poems it becomes evident that each river has its own avocation. Hashmi's Sutlej, Chenab and Indus are History makers and like historians have recorded and taken part in the rise and fall of civilisations. The Ravi acts as a post partition Conveyer Belt from India to Pakistan carrying not only snakes, bodies and debris, but also hatred and prejudice. The Ghagra is personified not only as a creative artist but also as the medium of art. And like an artist, the Ghagra explores itself in all its sensuality, in the visual medium as paint in "a grey smudge"(4) , in taste and colour as in "overstewed coffee"(8) and in the tactile as "a red weal"(10) . In fact the changes the Ghagra brings in the landscape are described in impressionistic and expressionistic terms. Thus, whereas Daruwalla's Ghagra has the character of a vibrant and passionate painter in a frenzy of creative destruction, Ramanujan's Vaikai is the poet with meagre resources which "has water enough / to be poetic / about only once a year"(36-8). But it has powers of concealment and revelation "baring the sand ribs / straw and women's hair"(7-8), which are independent of the narrow perspectives of the old and new poets of Madurai. Like the Indus, the Vaikai also records the rise and fall of the Tamil Civilisation. Rafat's river employs all the machinations of fate.

It is often through the rivers course that the landscape is defined and transformed. The Ghagra in flood turns the

landscape into an impressionistic "stretch of water and light" but it also transforms the "thatch and dung cakes...to river scum". In "Around Panjnad" after the flood, "The land has a semblance / of itself"(3.4-5) and in "Wedding in the Flood", "The light is poor and the paths treacherous"(50). And as the Vaipai recedes it leaves "wetstones glistening like sleepy crocodiles, the dry ones / shaven water buffalos lounging in the sun"(13-15).

Each river is also characterised by its own kineasthetic speed. The Vaipai "dries to a trickle"(5) each summer, then "rising"(20) later carries away houses, cows and a pregnant woman. Hashmi's river is "frenzied"(1.4), "round brimming" (1.5) and he even mentions the "water's noxious toeing"(1.21). In "The Snake Jungle" we are told that "the Ravi bounced"(1) and there are men, women and buffaloes "lashed on/by water"(10-11). Rafat's "river is rising"(55-6) and shakes" the ferry... this way and that"(61). There is a "heaving tide"(61) and " an eddy"(62). Daruwalla's Ghagra takes a " nightmare spin" (26) and steers her course speaking "the river's slang"(46). When she recedes there are movements such as "sucking" (59) and "sawing" (61) until she "flees"(63).

The contents of the rivers in flood in each of the poems are characterised by repetitive image patterns occurring in clusters. Daruwalla's poem enumerates the widest range of flood affectees ranging from king fishers, gulls and buffaloes to men, children, peasants and even fish. Hashmi's poems begin with the flood sweeping away men and mudhouses to encompass entire cities. Snakes and buffaloes in "The Snake Jungle" are also swept away and "some thought, maybe Agra would now come floating with its marbles minarets"(24-26). In Ramanujan's poem the enumeration is specifically limited to three houses,two

cows and a pregnant woman with twins. Images of collapsing streets, and man and beast floating over roof tops also form recurrent image patterns. The clustered images of animate and inanimate objects floating down the river in random order enhances the effect of helplessness, since no matter what the shape and size of the object, all are to suffer the same fate of destruction. The rivers thus become the time line of past, present and future which unite to lead only one way _____ to death and regeneration.

Human suffering is down played in all these poems. Rafat's poem consummates the marriage in death by drowning, and Ramanujan uses a second person narrative and enumeration to create a distancing effect. In Daruwalla's poem we are told that people "don't rave or curse" (45) and "No one sends prayers to a wasted sky/ For prayers are parabolic" (47-8) and after the flood recedes a process of self help begins. In "Around Panjnad", helpless men" pulled on God in his sleep/But nothing happened" (1.15). The exposure of the river bed in "Around Panjnad" leaves " men/and cattle/ like avid hens/claw in the offal", (306-9) and in "Ghagra in Spate" the river leaves behind, "paddy fields /... their fish / till the mud.../ strangles them"(68-72). Even the Vaipai in "A River" exposes sand, straw, hair and stones as it recedes.

The treatment of time also varies in each of the river poems. Whereas "Around Panjnad" has a general historical past- present- future orientation, "The Snake Jungle" has a specific post-Indian partition context. The "Ghagra in Spate" is dominated by the seasonal and cyclical, but time is arrested in the surreal and for "Twenty minutes... / fear turns phantasmal"(27). In "A River" time is defined not

only in terms of the seasonal, but also in terms of the old and new poets' attitude to the Vaikai. In "Wedding in the Flood," time is subservient to plot. Each stanza begins with the unspoken thoughts of a character which is integrated into narrator perspective to carry the story towards its climax.

Since all these poems are written in free verse, this choice releases the rhythm from a regular beat and line. This leads to an increased control of pace, pause and time. All these poets show great innovation in the use of line, length and pause. In Hashmi and Ramanujan we find one line sentences which act as brakes on the speed of poetic communication. The placement of words in the text of these poets enhance the effect of the pause and is reminiscent of the traditions of Concrete poetry.

All five poems are a rich reservoir of indigenous objects, customs people, animals and attitudes. Dung cakes, bamboo, buffaloes, paddy fields, "hennaed hands"(18), "a palankeen"(10) and a dowry of " the cot and the trunk/and looking glass"(24-5) are only some of the local elements mentioned in these poems.

Even the metaphoric technique in all the poems shows great variation. The tenor and vehicle components of the metaphor are combined through verbs and adjectives, as in the description of the Ghagra's nature and movement. Hashmi in "Around Panjnad" describes waves as "playful brooms" (1.13) and Rafat's river "disgorges its screaming load of guests"(61-2), whereas Ramanujan's Vaikai inflood results in a "baring the sand-ribs"(7). Similes in Hashmi's "Around Panjnad" and Ramanujan's "A River" are not embellishing but emotive and cognitive. Synecdoches, as in

Rafat's "thirty garlands" (65), Hashmi's "Cities have been eaten by mouths" (2.5) in "Around Panjnad" and "The Snake Jungle" "where each finger spotted" (21) demand connections between the part and the whole to apprehend truth in its entirety.

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Annexure:

The Ghaghra In Spate

By Keki N. Daruwalla

*And every year
the Ghaghra changes course
turning over and over in her sleep.*

*In the afternoon she is a grey smudge
exploring a grey canvas.
When dusk reaches her
through an overhang of cloud
she is overstewed coffee.
At night under a red moon in menses
she is a red weal
across the spine of the land.*

*Driving at dusk you wouldn't know
there's a flood 'on':
the landscape is so superbly equipoised—
rice-shoots pricking through
a stretch of water and light
spiked shadows
 inverted trees
 kingfishers, gulls.
 As twilight thins
 the road is a black stretch
running between the stars.*

*And suddenly at night
the north comes to the village
riding on river-back.
Twenty minutes of a nightmare spin*

*and fear turns phantasmal
as half a street goes
churning in the river-belly.
If only voices could light lamps!
If only limbs could turn to rafted bamboo!*

*And through the village
the Ghaghra steers her course:
thatch and dung-cakes turn to river-scum,
a buffalo floats over to the rooftop
where the men are stranded.
Three days of hunger, and her udders
turn red-rimmed and swollen
with milk-extortion.*

*Children have spirit enough in them
to cheer the rescue boats;
the men and still-life subjects
oozing wet looks.
They don't rave or curse
for they know the river's slang, her argot.
No one sends prayers to a wasted sky
for prayers are parabolic:
they will come down with a plop anyway.
Instead there's a slush-stampede
outside the booth
where they are doling out salt and grain.*

*Ten miles to her flank
peasants go fishing in rice-fields
and women in chauffeur-driven cars
go looking for driftwood.*

*But it's when she recedes
that the Ghaghra turns bitchy*

*sucking with animal-heat,
cross-eddies diving like frogmen
and sawing away the waterfront
in a paranoid frenzy.
She flees from the scene of her own havoc
arms akimbo, thrashing with pain.
Behind her the land sinks,
houses sag on to their knees
in a farewell obeisance.
And miles to the flank, the paddy fields
will hoard their fish
till the mud enters into
a conspiracy with the sun
and strangles them.*

A River

By A.K. Ramanujan

*In Madurai,
city of temples and poets
who sang of cities and temples:*

*every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand-ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them,
the wet stones glistening like sleepy*

*crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffalos lounging in the sun.*

The poets sang only of the floods.

*He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, a usual.*

*The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.*

*He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda*

*and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different-coloured diapers*

to tell them apart.

Wedding in the Flood

By Taufiq Rafat

*They are taking my girl away forever,
sobs the bride's mother, as the procession
forms slowly to the whine of the clarinet.
She was the shy one. How will she fare
in that cold house, among these strangers?
This has been a long and difficult day.
The rain nearly ruined everything,
but at the crucial time, when lunch was ready,
it mercifully stopped. It is drizzling again
as they help the bride into the palankeen.
The girl has been licking too many pots.
Two sturdy lads carrying the dowry
(a cot, a looking-glass, a tin-trunk,
beautifully painted in green and blue)
lead the away, followed by a foursome
bearing the palankeen on their shoulders.
Now even the stragglers are out of view.*

*I like the look of her hennaed hands,
gloats the bridegroom, as he glimpses
her slim fingers gripping the palankeen's side.
If only her face matches her hands,
and she gives me no mother-in-law problems,
I'll forgive her the cot and the trunk*

and looking-glass. Will the rain never stop?
It was my luck to get a pot-licking wench.
Everything depends on the ferryman now.
It is dark in the palankeen, thinks the bride,
and the roof is leaking. Even my feet are wet.
Not a familiar face around me
as I peep through the curtains. I'm cold and scared.
The rain will ruin cot, trunk, and looking-glass.
What sort of a man is my husband?
They would hurry, but their feet are slipping,
and there is a swollen river to cross.

They might have given a bullock at least,
grumbles the bridegroom's father; a couple of oxen
would have come in handy at the next ploughing.
Instead, we are landed with
a cot, a tin trunk, and a looking-glass,
all the things that she will use!
Dear God, how the rain is coming down.
The silly girl's been licking too many pots.
I did not like the look of the river
when we crossed it this morning
Come back before three, the ferryman said,
or you'll not find me here. I hope
he waits. We are late by an hour,
or perhaps two. But whoever heard
of a marriage party arriving on time?
The light is poor, and the paths treacherous,
but it is the river I most of all fear.

Bridegroom and bride and parents and all,
the ferryman waits; he knows you will come,
for there is no other way to cross,
and a wedding party always pays extra.
The river is rising, so quickly aboard

with your cot, tin trunk, and looking-glass,
that the long homeward journey can begin.
Who has seen such a brown and angry river
or can find words for the way the ferry
saws this way and that, and then disgorges
its screaming load? The clarinet fills with water.
Oh what a consummation is here:
The father tossed on the horns of the waves,
and full thirty garlands are bobbing past
the bridegroom heaved on the heaving tide,
and in an eddy, among the willows downstream,
the coy bridge is truly bedded at last.

Around Panjnad

By Alamgir Hashmi

1

For years we had seen the five rivers meeting
and, all into one, secretly move down to the sea.
Who knew it like two confluent in the open?
One day frenzied when Sutlej came
and round brimming Chenab put his
arms to dance up on land,
 nearby indignant
Indus raged,
(as if it were machinery for a Mahabharata).

There water pitted against itself, men
foolishly let their huts be dwarfed. The mudhouses
were swept away, for the waves were such
playful brooms. Men had no time
for thought. They clambered on trees
 and pulled on God in His sleep.

But nothing happened.
Water busy in angry lust overreached their gruff shouts,
bodies yielded. Everything was done.

Now behind the earth-barrier,
for us in these precarious islands, there is
water's noxious toeing
and a nightly
submarine cry.

2

We are children of history and of water,
Water has not spared us
a grain of rice or cottonseed. Our alluvial
fortunes keep hunger company.
Cities have been eaten by mouths
stunned and yawning, and
reticent need.
And he that made the country has unmade it.

3

Violence over,
brick by brick
home is reappearing.
The land has a semblance
of itself;
and men
and cattle
like avid hens
claw in the offal.

The Snake Jungle

By Alamgir Hashmir

*The Ravi bounced,
water was measuring against tall men.*

In another hour, it climbed the housetops.

*Then,
all were crying*

*snakes were riding the wave. Handed
the secret on the left bank,
we were thrilled*

*and, slightly, anxious. Men were coming,
buffaloes and women lashed on
by water. Here were seven*

*corpses examined: they did not have
proper circumcision and, worth-drowning,
were sent washing.*

*ahead. A man with spare pajamas was
suspect: 'There, a squatter!'
A straw could sting.*

*Sunday,
all left-bankers gathered on the bridge
to see the snake jungle*

*and each finger spotted a different thing.
since all was coming down
from a land once*

*owned by us, some thought maybe
Agra would now come floating
with its marble minarets. And there were*

*those who stood unperturbed like the date-tree
and took the clearance.*