

Review Article¹

Some Recent English-Language Poetry from Pakistan

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THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY of both Pakistan's and India's independence has generated in both nations and in other countries throughout the world a plethora of celebratory activities. These vary widely in their scope and focus. Some, like concerts and exhibitions, are evanescent; others are more permanent. Within this latter category falls this distinctive series of books of English-language poetry from Oxford University Press, Karachi, which has been strongly supportive of Pakistani poets writing in English. The appearance of this current set of well-edited, carefully published, and handsomely presented matching volumes from Oxford University Press not only celebrates the golden jubilee of Pakistan's independence from Britain but also highlights the best work of seven of the country's foremost English-language poets.

When Pakistan was established in 1947, only a few poets there were writing in English. The best known of these included Shahid Suhrawardy (1890-1965) and Ahmed Ali (1910-94), both with strong literary connections in the West. In 1965, Oxford University Press's ground-breaking anthology *First Voices: Six Poets from Pakistan* appeared from Lahore and featured poems by older English-language poets such as Suhrawardy and Ali, but also a number of younger writers. *First Voices: Six Poets from Pakistan* was followed by *Pieces of Eight: Eight Poets from Pakistan* (1971) and *Wordfall: Three Pakistani Poets* (1975).

Among the young poets included in all three volumes was Taufiq Rafat (b. 1927), whose first collection, *Arrival of the Monsoon: Collected Poems (1947-78)*, appeared in 1985. His blandly named *A Selection* in this anniversary series of poetry is drawn in

the main from that collection. Rafat's poems are studies in contrasts. They are often full of robust, manly activities, such as hunting, polo, soccer, and mountain hiking; yet they reflect a profound, refined appreciation of nature. In "Poem for Fauzia" (10), for example, the speaker states that (s)he revels in "the lavishness of Nature." Indeed, the many facets of nature, especially landscape and weather, are dominant images in these poems. Rafat also fills them, especially those from his early period, with a veritable 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, horses, dogs, snakes, fish, and cicadas. With such a preponderance of and affection for animals in his poetry, it is not surprising that Rafat should write "Sacrifice" (14), a striking poem centring on the ritual sacrifice of a goat when the foundation of a house is being dug so that "all who dwell here / May be blessed." The speaker is repulsed, questioning the religious import and efficacy of such an act, objecting to children watching it, and finally asserting that with such a sacrifice "We are not laying the foundations of a house, / But another Dachau." Humans' treatment of animals functions as a metaphor for the way people treat each other—invariably poorly.

There is also a marked difference in the affection with which he describes Pakistan's high country and the disaffection—indeed, near contempt—he heaps upon its plains and seaside. The two poems about Karachi ("Karachi, 1955" 1; "Karachi 1968" 9) offer scant praise to this drab, overcrowded, dirty metropolis. By contrast, "A Positive Region" (2-3) is a paean to Pakistan's foothills and mountains, and their inhabitants. This is "a positive region . . . Smothered / By confident pines, and bursting over / With green springs at every nook / . . . As fresh as a newly-minted coin." The inhabitants are equally beautiful: "The Mr. Universe calves / Of the hill folk invite envy," "And the women / Need no brassières." It is with regret that the speaker must leave such a place to keep an appointment on the plains, noting with sadness as (s)he approaches the low country that "The tall pines have dwindled to shrubs."

Rafat's mastery of poetic form is perhaps best shown in the poem "Loneliness" (44-45), one of several distinctive poems in

this collection. A brilliant concatenation of striking metaphors stretched over sixteen tercets, the poem attempts to define loneliness. Rafat even manages to mix in a vivid, if repulsive, simile with the first metaphors:

Loneliness means impenetrable walls
 streaked with betel-juice and snot,
 and a single skylight, high up,
 through which the air dribbles in
 like saliva from an old man's mouth.

He concludes that loneliness

Is an innocence gone forever,
 a rebirth; it is a blinking of eyes
 in the hard light of the sun.

Loneliness and abandonment are also the themes of "Coma" (47), a poem on death of the persona's—the poet's?—father. Sitting at the father's deathbed, the speaker is relieved when a nephew hurries in to relieve him/her. (S)he tries to blunt the pain of this loss saying

. . . it is better
 someone further removed should be here
 when, when with a final soft tug,
 the imperturbable hand comes clear.

Similarly, "Poems for a Younger Brother 1930-1979" (54-65), a series of eleven poems, is a threnody on the death of the speaker's (again, the poet's?) brother. The dead brother was

Indestructible, I thought.
 Younger but tougher,
 always bullying your brother.
 The uncles called you bulldog.

He is portrayed as "Tall just man / with the rough exterior. Optimist." Thus it is with optimism that the brother goes to London for an operation for cancer. The parting at the airport is especially poignant, with the speaker, caught between the desire not to be too emotional for fear of upsetting his brother, and the realization of a profound loss. The speaker is mired in the macho bravado that "real men don't cry," yet realizes that he is seeing his brother for the last time:

I rehearse
 a smile at a passing stranger, but tears
 are knocking hard at the back of my eyes.
 I wander off towards the canteen gates
 pretending I am out of cigarettes,
 and let the tears come. And then I pretend
 a mote of dust is making my eyes hurt.
 Having no handkerchief, I pull the shirt-
 end from my trousers and use them freely.
 Soon, I am a man again.

The shirt reappears as a major image later as the speaker comes to terms with his loss when the brother's wife gives him one of the brother's old shirts:

He was tall and heavy.
 The shirt hangs loosely
 on my smaller frame,
 but where it touches the skin
 it will not be shaken free.

Rafat, whom many consider Pakistan's premier English-language poet, writes poetry that is full-bodied and rich, direct and readily accessible to the reader's sensibilities, and devoid of excessive artifice. His is a poetry that links Suhrawardy, Ali, and other older Pakistani writers to such younger voices as Adrian A. Husain, Salman Tarik Kureshi, and Alamgir Hashmi.

Another similar link between the older and the younger poets is Daud Kamal (1935-87). Conspicuously absent in all three Oxford University Press anthologies, Kamal, a younger contemporary of Rafat, was for many years Chair of English at Peshawar University. Educated in Peshawar and Cambridge, he is the author of three collections. The prosaically titled *A Selection of Verse* in this current series draws from these three volumes and from a number of previously unpublished works. In his introduction to this volume, which also features an extensive bibliography on Kamal, Tariq Rahman incisively suggests that this poetry is best viewed in the Imagist tradition (v). They are most of them concise, often nostalgic, sometimes ironic. In terms of style, then, Kamal's poems differ markedly from Rafat's.

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. For example, the period of the flourishing culture of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, which dates back to perhaps 4,000-2,000 BCE, is evoked in the poem "The Plough and the Oxen" (13), where "The sweat of man and animal / sinks into the moist earth" and a thousand years later, "they dig up figurines of gods / and goddesses and a baked-clay jar / half full of blackened wheat."

Similarly, in "The Leap" (14), we are transported to the fourth century BCE, when Alexander the Great "leapt over the Indus here / or so the storytellers say," to hear "in rapt attention" talk of immortality from a naked sadhu sitting in a grove of mango trees. The poem ironically juxtaposes the immortality Alexander sought and that of another kind offered by the sadhu. Other poems assert Pakistan's connection with the Buddha (1, 15), India's mighty King Porus (16), and the great Mughal emperors (1), but also with many lesser folk: "professional mourners, premature archaeologists" (19), "a wide-eyed little boy in yellow socks / crack[ing] walnuts" and a "fat old whore-turned-midwife" (35), to mention only a few.

To his acute historical awareness, Kamal, like Rafat, fuses a deep appreciation for the rugged natural beauty of his country, especially the barren and glacial mountain area from which he hails, and the people who inhabit this space. As majestic as mountains and rivers can be, they can also be treacherous and threatening, as in "Floods," where we are asked how one can "forgive / the treachery / of blind rivers" that destroys the future of a bride-to-be who has lost her dowry "and a sackful of expensive rice" (37). And for those who would seek solace in religion, we are reminded that "Prayers / do not work / at times / such as these" ("A Narrow Valley" 23). Ultimately, a sense of ominous foreboding, mottled with sadness, pervades these poems. Indeed, one can read Kamal's poetry as a kind of "primordial scripture of a people betrayed" (12), not only by kings and

priests, but by the weather, geography, history, foreigners, and most treacherously by each other.

Treachery and betrayal also constitute major themes in the poetry of Maki Kureishi, (1927-95), whose *The Far Thing* brings together in one place for the first time her work written over three decades. A Parsi by birth, educated at Smith College (class of 1950), and married to a Muslim, she taught English at the University of Karachi. Some of her earliest poems appeared in *Wordfall*. The distinguished British scholar, poet, and former editor of *Encounter* magazine, Anthony Thwaite, has remarked (on the dust jacket of *The Far Thing*) that Kureishi writes finely controlled free verse that is "tender and sensitive but also unsentimentally sharp." This sharpness is reflected in a pervasive sense of violence in many of her poems, violence often stemming from the real-life political and social unrest that has been a major part of daily life in Pakistan since its inception. Poems such as "Snipers in Karachi" (15), "Elegy for Karachi" (16), and "Curfew Summer" (19) offer graphic sketches of ordinary, people living under such stressful circumstances, when "No one dare walk next door" (19) for fear of being "trapped in crossfire / . . . by killers who are half-machine / and pray five times" (16).

Perhaps more explicit than most other writers in this series, Kureishi underscores the tug and pull, indeed, the alienation, experienced by people who possess modern, enlightened world views, yet live in a highly traditional, albeit rapidly changing, society where dominant values are radically different and very slow to change. The dilemma thus posed is explicated in perhaps her most famous poem, "Kittens" (7-8). The speaker bluntly states "There are too many kittens" as a result of the family cat's most recent litter. Two solutions are possible: on the one hand,

My relations say:
Take them to a bazaar
and let them go
each to its fate . . .
If they survive the dogs,
they will starve gently,
squealing a little less
each day;

on the other hand,

The European thing to do
is drown them.
Warm water
is advised to lessen the shock. . . .
They are blind and will never know
you did this.

The speaker experiences a dilemma: “Snagged / by two cultures, which / shall I choose?”

In an introduction which veritably crackles with postmodernist critical theory, Adrian A. Husain feels that “Kittens” is “a little too explicit in its intent and rigidly paradigmatic to be entirely successful,” and suggests that “while this poem undoubtedly possesses considerable power, this is more by way of rhetoric than poetry” (viii). Some—I among them—take issue with this assessment of the poem.

Some of Kureishi’s most powerful poems deal with human illness. In that she herself was a victim of severe rheumatoid arthritis most of her life, it is not surprising that she treats such themes in some of her best poems. Moreover, the opening poem in this volume, “Arthritic Hands” (1) assumes additional autobiographical significance:

One is rolled into a fist
permanently,
though two fingers can still twitch,
bent like spider’s legs.
The left, stretched out full length,
is empty,
unable to hold. If the crook fingers
tangle or viciously clutch,
it unhooks them gently
disarming pain.
So I lodge between
one that may not accept
even grace,
and the other that lets
nothing escape.

Other poems on this theme seem to spring from the intimate knowledge and first-hand experience with such physical suffering and pain, which invoke a range of reactions from different

people, everything from outright disgust to patronizing sympathy. Kureishi seems to be suggesting that most people are unable to empathize truly with such severe chronic pain unless they have suffered it themselves. Kureishi's poetry makes a direct appeal to the reader, unfettered by over-intellectualization, self-consciousness, or posturing. It is characterized by rich, vivid images, which can entice or revolt, depending on the author's intent, and a fluent, colloquial quality that shines forth, especially when her poetry is read aloud.

Salman Tarik Kureshi (b. 1942) shares with Kureishi a penchant for themes about the divided self and postcolonial rootlessness. Born of an Australian mother (Kashmiri-German) and Pakistani father, he was educated at Government College, Lahore, and later at the London School of Economics. A business executive, he travels widely throughout the world, and many of these venues are reflected in the poetry. In 1979, with Husain, he founded "Mixed Voices," a multilingual forum for poetry and creative writing in Karachi. His works appeared in *Pieces of Eight: Eight Poets from Pakistan* and elsewhere; and his *Landscapes of the Mind* consists of poems written over a thirty-year period.

In his introduction to this volume, Kaleemur Rahman asserts that Kureshi's poetry "has a different character from that of other Pakistani poets" (vii), a difference due perhaps to his "mixed descent" that gives him a command of English "like that of a native speaker of the language." Rahman further suggests that sometimes "in sentiment, too, his poetry is curiously English" (vii), citing one of the most arresting poems in the collection, "A Better Man than I," as an example. Kureshi's poetry often does possess an easy, flowing, colloquial quality, which might be attributable to English learned from his mother. However, I fail to see the "curiously English" sentiment Rahman speaks of in the poems, including "A Better Man than I," subtitled "Six Poems for Kipling." Rahman states that in this poem Kureshi shows "great affection for Kipling and even appears to identify with him" (vii). This is a curious reading if not a outright misreading of the poem. In "A Better Man than I," which of course plays off the refrain of Kipling's "Gunga Din," the persona of the poem addresses the poet of Empire, trussed up in a waist-

coat and watch chain, by his given name: "Rudyard, tell me / what woad-daubed, hide-clad shaman / lurked beneath your skin?" (3). This is one of three allusions in the poem to the blue-smearing Druid ancestors of the British "who ate raw beef / and roared for beer served in the skulls / of enemies." (5). The implication here is that when the British were savages painting their bodies blue, the great Indus Valley civilization had already risen and fallen, as did several of the Indo-Aryan dynasties that followed. The British presence in India then was not what the British said it was. In spite of apologists for the Empire, such as Kipling and others like him, despite British talk of their "mission" (3), and regardless of British "destiny . . . / your kind's appointed burden," things have changed. The use of the word "burden" here is particularly evocative, making the self-serving, grandiose claims of Kipling's most famous poem, "The White Man's Burden" (1899), seem risible, if not pathetic, from a late twentieth-century perspective.

In Lahore today, "(where / invaders paused / by the banks of the Ravi, assessed / the kingdom's defences / and leaped)," "Japanese cars with tinted windscreens and stereo sound systems / outnumber the tongas we knew," and "the Ravi itself runs lower" (5). The phrase "tongas we knew" perhaps suggests a bit of nostalgia Kureshi shares with Kipling, but, to my thinking, certainly not a "great affection" on which Rahman insists in his introduction. Indeed, "Frozen prawns and coloured television," "jet planes and motorcycles," "the reek of diesel oil" rather than Kiplingesque "covered spice bazaars / or bubbling samovars of jasmine tea" (7) constitute the sounds and smells of Karachi today. The speaker notes,

. . . the tides changed.
 The tides receded, leaving
 empty shells and curious objects
 for boys to ponder . . .
 leaving finally
 you, Rudyard,
 and I. (8)

This poem is about change, its unpredictability and its inevitability, and the folly of those who deny or try to stop it. Offering contrasts between Kipling's India and Kureshi's Pakistan, the

poem implies that the whole of Britain's historical presence in South Asia—"empty shells and curious objects"—must seem today to all but the most hidebound an "empty," "curious" enterprise. Equally curious is Kureshi's use of the ungrammatical "I" at the end of the poem. I read this as the author's repudiation of British linguistic rectitude, and a validation of the fluid, flexible English language found in parts of the world other than Britain. It might also be construed as a symbolic qualification, if not out-and-out rejection, of his Anglo-Saxon heritage.

Kureshi's poetry then attempts to reconcile, to connect opposites. His language and imagery are a thoughtful blend of brawn and sinew, delicacy and grace. The landscapes he presents readers are as much physical as mental and emotional, part unconscious and part conscious. His is a distinctive voice that seeks to resolve the dilemmas of East and West, of then and now, of both internal and external worlds. Reading his poetry, one may relish the beauty of the physical landscapes he offers, but on the mental and emotional landscapes he serves, we may feast.

Though Adrian A. Husain was born in 1942 in Kanpur, India, he received most of his schooling in England, Italy, and Switzerland; as a result he speaks several European languages, including Russian. He studied English at New College, Oxford, and received a PhD in English from the University of East Anglia. While still in his twenties, Husain published in Oxford University Press's *Pieces of Eight: Eight Poets from Pakistan*. In 1979, together with Kureshi, he founded "Mixed Voices" and remained with the group until 1983 (as was noted above). Husain also acted as editorial consultant for this entire series.

Desert Album is Husain's first collection of poems, and, in what is probably the best introduction to any volume in this series, Talaat Moreau notes that this poet, despite his unique—or what some might even consider his enviable, elite European upbringing—is a "wanderer," a "nomad" searching for his roots, for his "identity, for being and belonging" (vii). Moreau divides Husain's works into three broad poetic categories: poems about animals, which Husain seems to share with Rafat, poems about the buried past, and poems about living human beings, many of whom suffer violent deaths. Yet unlike the other poets in this

series who have spent their most formative years in Pakistan, whether in its mountains or on its plains, Husain, who has lived many years of his youth abroad, is fascinated with, perhaps even fixated upon, Pakistan's desert areas. Hence, the desert serves as a major image in many of his most important poems and is also a part of the title of this collection.

As with Rafat's poetry, one is immediately struck by the preponderance of animal imagery in *Desert Album*. "Kashmiri Rug" (28) veritably "Bristles with animals," "indelible birds," a mountain-goat, a hoopoe, and a jackal. "Goat" (10), reminiscent of Rafat's "Sacrifice," contrasts the freedom of the animal in the desert with the way it is then confined in garden, where, "Tied to a tree / he invents freedom." Dupliciously, "we approach / and cradle him lovingly," not out of love but to uncover its throat for sacrifice. Ironically, the sacrifice seems futile and worthless, for the earth, which soaks up the blood, is "Unappeased."

"The Praying Mantis" (7) may be read as a metaphor for Husain's sense of deracination. The speaker, "from devoutness / shot with guilt and fear," plucks the animal, its "forelegs / devotional," from an acacia tree and "stow[s] him, between my cigarettes." At home, on a table, the speaker inspects the creature, now dead, its legs "limp and crumpled," noting that "He'd lived as long as he was able." As if to admit to his/her role in its demise, the speaker does come to the realization that

I should have left him where he
was, hinged to his acacia. The roughness
of the surface had suited him and might have helped
him be what he had wanted: bark or tree.

Husain's preoccupation with the buried past is shown in several poems, including the title poem for this volume, "Desert Album" (2-4), a series of three poems entitled "Marble," "Carvings," and "Forbearers" (sic). The first is a meditation on the grave of the speaker's father. "Here father makes a home / among ghettoed neighbours, / his gaze fixing / upon a desert of dead." The speaker notes that

Nothing disturbs
his fluent sleep in marble
save for the headstone

... where the Holy Book opens
 on a page bearing
 the admonishment, "Ye that reject faith . . ."

The ambiguity created in the ending of the poem and the questions provoked are all intended to distress us. In "Carvings," we are told that the desert houses "Hundreds of years old / radiant sandstone tombs" are those of the rich horseman and the mighty archer. Yet the desert also offers resting places for humbler folk who have known suffering and are buried in simpler, "lesser graves clamouring to be known / for their tracery / amid silent insinuations of thorn."

When Husain speaks of the living, Moreau notes, "it is in conjunction with sickness and madness, and war and death, and most often unnatural death" (xi). Husain's living are a suffering, besieged lot, and perhaps the most besieged are those who die in the witless crossfire of politics. Several poems deal with the violent demise of politicians, such as "The Death of Mrs. Gandhi" (38) and "Calvary Misunderstood" (41), written on the death of Mir Murtaza Bhutto, brother of then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was gunned down outside his home in 1996. Husain calls him a "Martyr to no known cause." The poem "For Srebrenica's Dead" (40) speaks of the exhumation of mass graves of those caught up in the horror of ethnic cleansing, "Casualties of a somnolence," who "are brought up to air / at last."

Husain's is the poetry of quest for identity and roots. His poems are the modern explorations of the universal themes of human isolation and alienation, webbed with illusions and death played out metaphorically in the hot days and cool nights of the desert's browns, purples, and blacks. Swatches of green—the colour of hope—are not plentiful in his poems. Perhaps he sees the human condition too clearly.

The most widely published and well-known English-language poet from Pakistan is Alamgir Hashmi, the author of nine collections (the one under review here being his tenth), which have appeared in the UK, the US, and Pakistan. Well known and well received in literary circles of several continents, Hashmi writes poems, which, according to Britain's Poet Laureate Ted Hughes (on the dust jacket of *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*), "are a delight—

sinuous and assured, serious with a light touch, full of character, surprise, authenticity.” In his introduction to *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*, Ken Goodwin further suggests, quite rightly in my view, that Hashmi must be viewed in mid-career, as “a major world poet” (v).

In contrast to the work of all the previously discussed poets, many of Hashmi's poems are distinguished by an uneasy sense of incertitude about the world. Hence, the reader is offered only fleeting glimpses or veiled hints of Hashmi's mental universe. For example, one is struck by subjunctive voice of the first line of the first poem, “Game and Such” (1): “It may have been a Monday morning.” It may have been another time as well; the persona of the poem does not remember, and in fact it may not matter at all. However, this uncertainty is further enhanced by collocations throughout the poem such as “faltering,” “rumors,” “feigned,” “whisper,” and “waiting.” This process is repeated in many other poems as well.

In addition to this tentativeness and indeterminacy, Hashmi blends generous portions of understated whimsy and gentle irony into his observations about the human species. In this sense, “A Gift Horse” (3), playing off the adage “Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,” is something of a prototypical Hashmian poem: Somebody must have

given it to someone;
 only gifts and toys
 can suffer
 such love, such neglect,
 soaked
 in the wetness
 of this lawn.
 Cloth, or perhaps wood,
 it is only that.
 The hard and soft
 is all the same.
 Its owner,
 the child, must be
 asleep or have
 found something else.

I am unable
 to make out
 its beginnings
 or end exactly:
 the eyes are a bleary
 black;
 the mouth seems sealed
 airtight
 as if to lock out
 a couple of proverbs.
 I do not think
 it will speak.

A vague, inconclusive “Somebody” must have given it to an equally vague, inconclusive “someone,” pronouns which are used repeatedly in many of the poems. The persona of the poem speculates with “must have” in terms of who gave what to whom, and the child who “*must be / asleep or have / found something else.*” The mouth “*seems sealed . . . as if to lock out / a couple of proverbs.*” Referring to the neglected toy horse, the speaker “*do[es] not think / it will speak.*”

In addition, the juxtaposition of opposites, polarities, and doublets is also striking: “love” and “neglect,” “Cloth” and “wood,” “hard and soft,” “asleep” and “have / found something else,” “eyes” and “mouth,” “think” and “speak.” There are implied extremes as well: the condition of the horse when it was a new gift and its present condition, the child who received the gift and the adult who gave it (possibly the persona of the poem—a parent?), the adage (one of the “proverbs” of the last stanza?) about not looking gift horses in the mouth and the reality that indeed the child has done so, even though “the mouth seems sealed / airtight.” In the end, this poem and others in the volume leave the reader with contradictions and confutation, and the realization that, in spite of proverbs and adages, we humans persist only in paying them lip service but do not abide by them. Hence, the world in Hashmi’s poetic view, as Goodwin notes, is “disorderly, unpredictable . . . where expectation, hope, and disappointment all seem equally likely” (vii). The uncertainty, then, is of our own making.

Shuja Nawaz shares with Husain what Khaled Ahmed calls in his trenchant, hard-hitting introduction to *Journeys* the “hybrid

life in an international environment" (ix). Born and reared in Pothowar, a region in the rough-and-tumble Jhelum River area in northeast Pakistan, Nawaz immigrated to the US. He now works for the IMF in Washington, DC, and lives, and writes poetry, in suburban Alexandria, Virginia. Nawaz is what Ahmed calls a "born-again ex-pat Pakistani" (xii); as such much of his poetry is informed by memories of the Pakistan of his youth, "of a place that no longer exists" (xi), but which allows him to stave off the immigrant's alienation that arises from living in the West. Implied throughout is the unrelenting persistence of change.

In contrast of Husain's desert images, water is the dominant image in Nawaz's poems. It is often a standard of measurement, of wealth, success, even manhood, and even a way to determine the extent of change. The first poem in the collection, "The Well at Mohenjodaro" (1), Pakistan's famed Indus Valley archeological site discovered in 1921, offers not only water images but also the first of many images of tourists (transmuted in other poems to immigrants). In the past, stones were thrown into that well "by thirsty hearts to measure / the water's depth." Nowadays tourists participate in the same ritual at the 5,000-year-old well—"an unblinking Cyclopean eye"—but with no hope of hearing a splash at this sere, threadbare site. Today, after the ritual is performed often enough, the stones in the well must be removed so that the "aortic surge" may resume. The only water present is a tourist's sweat and the cold drink in his hand. But yet, as if to participate unconsciously, archetypically, in the ancient ritual of the stone, a tourist, "wrapped in his sweat / stops and looks, cold drink in hand, / bends down, lifts, and lazily lobs / one more stone into the well." He thus connects with the past, imperfectly, but a connection nonetheless, and the "falling message wakens echoes / that are added to the laden air."

Change is also measured by its appearance in nature. In "Dreams and the Man" (14-15), the speaker, wishing to emulate his father, who had boasted that he swam the mile-wide Jhelum River when he was sixteen years old, proposed "to break the hymen of [his] youth / in battle against that mile of water." Today, however, the river, "having been settled / by politicians [is] no more alive":

No more is water
 the hurling, racing fearful god.
 Its surge, strength, and speed bartered
 away on the table of economic necessity.
 Even the mosque that offered steps to the river
 for religious ablutions is empty now,
 for faith cannot withstand economics.

Instead, he sees tubewells, shallows, headworks, barrages, and “rows of sad-eyed village lads,” who, unlike the speaker in his youth, seem to be dreamless. He realizes in the wistful sadness which memory brings that “I shall make myself a new / dream, for some dreams are / too beautiful to restore.”

Change is also measured in the form of the ever-present pipal tree. The speaker has observed one such tree every year for fifteen years, presumably on an annual visit home. Both (s)he and the tree have aged:

. . . I noticed
 how it sheds its leaves,
 like a lazy pensioner
 discarding clothes.
 Someone else will pick them up.
 (“The Pipal Tree” 10)

The signature poem of this collection, “Journeys” (4-9), recounts the speaker’s “search . . . for meanings / on the dusty pathways of the mind.” The search is undertaken by looking back, “lizard-like / at my peeled-off life.” In the six sections of this poem, each section made up of seven four-line stanzas, the speaker summons ancestors and more recent progenitors, who, for a plethora of reasons and as many circumstances, have ended up in the Jhelum River area, more specifically, in “the cold crispness of the Pothowar dust”: warriors, seers, farmers, who have witnessed the change, even the arrival—and departure—of the British,

Those that slithered out of our toil
 to mine the surface for wealth
 wore wide-brimmed hats in the sun.
 Their verse blundered up Putney Hill.
 They viewed their yesterdays
 from vantage points where all seemed clear.

The British failed in India, implies the speaker, because they did not know themselves. “It takes generations for a banyan to ma-

ture / or to breed a class of men / who recognize themselves," (s)he observes. The class of men from which the speaker comes do know themselves:

We have journeyed long and deep into
the dawn. We are the men who know
loneliness is not in being alone
but knowing others could have been there.

Armed with such insight, Nawaz seems capable of taking on the West. In "The Invasion of Europe" (43), Nawaz takes on the West with "a warning" which is heeded "in vain." But what is even more striking is the description of the Pakistan he abandoned:

I have left an angered land
behind, seething in self-destroying dissent.
A land where tongues are silent with fear,
no words have raised their heads for an age.

This volume contains a number of poems set in various parts of the world where Nawaz has travelled in connection with his job. Those set in the West are chronicles of Nawaz's on-going struggle to adjust to uprootedness and to change. "Birthday Poem" (38) addresses the universal change: aging. Looking into a "self-constructed mirror," the speaker asks, "Is the mole still sitting / on the chin, the dimple not yet / hidden by fat? Does the waist / still deserve that name?" One awkward well-wisher says that some things do not change, such as the speaker's eyes: "The sadness is still there." "Midnight Song" (50), with the subtitle "*The switchboard will close at midnight—House rules,*" is a meditation upon memory and loss. As "Darkness settles upon / concrete forests after a winter burial / of the jaded sun" and as "police cars scream through the night / conjuring memories of jackals / at home, sex-maddened, calling for mates," the late-night-working speaker dreams: "I am incomplete. / And the phone will not ring. / For it's late. Far too late." And, finally, in "Home" (53), the last poem in the collection dedicated to his wife, the poet seems to have extracted some accommodation for his circumstances:

We have built a home
with untutored but willing hands. . . .
The rooms are filled with books and prints
from our past. We dream new dreams

in this new home, from the dusty seams
of yestered years. As we draw and fill and tint
each page in this, the album of our life,
today, I offer a prologue for my wife.

Nawaz's poetic voice is a distinctly muscular, masculine one. Sprung from a martial people, he assumes his bellicose stance with pride, if not bravado. He sifts through his past and takes from it what he cherishes and can use in his present circumstances. He similarly has evaluated his life in the West. It is not all bad, he concludes, but it needs pruning and cultivating, just like the farmer's fields of his youth. This he has done through his poetry. In it, the battle between East and West is reduced to, at most, a tug-of-war. There seems to be a truce, or at least an accommodation, but it is, at best, tenuous, uneasy—so much so that one must ask: would the poet or his readers have it any other way? To borrow one of Nawaz's water images, surely, if there were a winner, the wellspring of his poetry would dry up.

Taken in aggregate, these seven volumes of poetry not only celebrate Pakistan's golden anniversary but also the cultural commonality each of the authors shares and the artistic individuality each of them relishes. The appearance of this series must also be seen as an unspoken, underscored declaration by Pakistan's poets writing in English that they are a talented lot, working hard at their art, thereby contributing generously and significantly to world literature in English. As such, they are deserving of critical attention and appreciation. The quality of the poetry found in these collections—a veritable embarrassment of riches—will assure these writers and others like them in Pakistan such attention and appreciation.

NOTE

¹ Alamgir Hashmi. *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*. Preface by Ken Goodwin. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1997. Pp. xiii, 57. Rs 400; Adrian A. Husain. *Desert Album*. Introd. Talaat Moreau. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1997. Pp. xix, 52. Rs 400; Daud Kamal. *A Selection of Verse*. Introd. Tariq Rahman. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1997. Pp. xv, 51. Rs 400; Maki Kureishi. *The Far Thing*. Introd. Adrian A. Husain. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1997. Pp. xix, 52. Rs 400; Salman Tarik Kureshi. *Landscapes of the Mind*. Introd. Kaleemur Rahman. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1997. Pp. xv, 76. Rs 400; Shuja Nawaz. *Journeys*. Introd. Khaled Ahmed. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1998. Pp. xv, 55. Rs 400; Taufiq Rafat. *A Selection*. Introd. Athar Tahir. Karachi: Oxford UP, 1997. Pp. xix 68. Rs. 400.