

The South Asian Wanderer: A Literary Evolution of the Orient

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Abstract

Recent times have witnessed the re-emergence of the popular notion of the oriental, though now dyed in a singular Arabesque hue due to the sociopolitical and theological nature of the present 'East' and 'West'. This paper however, aims to revisit Edward Said's interpretation of the notion and to highlight the oriental as a South Asian wanderer by exploring the literary evolution of the archetype through a series of Pakistani literature written in English; though most notably through Taufiq Rafat's play, *Foothold*. As one of the newfound pioneers of the Pakistani idiom, Rafat's works will be used as the focal point of the persona that becomes the basis of the character often found between the pages of Pakistani literary works of today. This paper will also take into account Rafat's contemporaries and how their work influenced the development of the archetype post-partition and where it potentially stands now. Following an interdisciplinary approach, I shall discuss the eternal adventurer that travels from narrative to narrative, one that is auspicious to modifications under the 'proper' conditions that is elucidated through contemporary Pakistani literature written in English. This shall be done through a study of the oriental as proposed by Edward Said and later elucidated by Lisa Lau in her book *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The oriental Other within*. Moreover, the study of the archetype and its due evolutionary aspect through the ages and through different literary mediums will also be considered through Albert I Tauber's idea of the 'immune self'.

Keywords: Taufiq Rafat, Pakistani literature, archetype, orient, self, non self

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Introduction

A lesser known name as opposed to literary artists of yesteryear, Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998) is probably one of the few writers in the region who may be considered a forefather for Pakistani literature in English. Not only did he brave the waters by deviating from the Urdu mainstream which was often credited with promoting nationalism and an identity free from a shackled past, but he also identified the “Pakistani idiom” in all its representative glory, rendering it divorced of linguistic ties. According to Rafat, “poetry emanates from the very land in which it is written. The cultural substratum that gives anchorage to its roots remains a variable source from which it gains nourishment and defines the self of the poet.” (cited in Mansoor 20)

Needless to say, he was one of the first to embark on a poetic expedition in the colonizer’s tongue, and remains arguably till the contemporary present, “the finest English poet this country has produced.” (Tahir v) However, where Rafat’s poetry has managed to attract readers and devotees in the form of intellectual disciples, this article will expound on one of his lesser known works; a three-act play which remains unpublished till date titled, *Foothold*. Rafat wrote it in 1969 and since then, it has only been performed thrice. I was lucky enough to serve as a dramaturge for the third and most recent reproduction performed in Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. My experience of closely scrutinizing the play for a period of four excruciating months has led me to the understanding that not only is it grossly overshadowed by his much celebrated poetry, but it is perhaps one of the few Pakistani plays that present an alternate image to that of the traditional oriental. By that, it is meant to enunciate that it does not pay homage to the stereotypical image of the subcontinent as perceived by the colonial masters, that is, of colourful turbans and unkempt beards, coquettish, ignorant females hiding behind a mask of arab-esque sensuality and a medieval system of governance.

Before I begin my analysis however, I believe it prudent to mention how the concept of the orient, and duly, that of the re-orient(alized) is considered within this study. Reference is made to Edward Said’s Book, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions to the Orient* in which he mentions how various interpretations from the west have successfully managed to warp the image of the east into something less civilized in need of western guidance. Whether it was the French, or the British, the definition of the ‘Orient’ revolved largely around one overlying theme: “the Oriental was a member of a subject race”, and thus, “had to be subjected”. (207)

Furthermore, considering the history of the colonizer and the colonized, along with the power politics that lay an intricate web of deceit in the guise of humanism, he also illustrates how a “well-organised sense that the people over there were not like "us" and didn't appreciate "our" values” serves as “the very core of traditional orientalist dogma.” By this, one may consider an overwhelming sense of the ‘other’ who is vastly different from the pinnacle of western wisdom, that is to say, the “Occident” and both stand as polar opposites. Moreover, despite it being a solely “Arab” problem, it is interchangeably used on any eastern locale conquered by the west. Accordingly, the world is then divided under these two umbrella terms which in retrospect, would justify the colonizer’s need for colonizing. (Said n.pag)

Thus, the aforementioned would duly be applicable on colonized countries such as India. Granted, Rafat was not writing at a time where he had to worry about the foreign ruler, however he was writing at a time when the freshly independent state of Pakistan was still reeling from the pains of having been subjugated twice; first by the British, and then by a “creed of Brown “Sahibs” who did little to pay homage to its national ideology (Patke as cited in Mansoor 14). That is not to say however, that there were not writers already writing in English at the time – they were simply few and far in between and most took to poetry as their creative muse. Examples may be found in the works of Daud Kamal (1935-1987), Zulfikhar Ghose (1935-), Maki Kureshi (1927-1995), Syed Ahmad (1931-2005) and Kaleem Omar (1937-2009).

Interesting to note regarding the aforementioned, is that despite having witnessed, and experienced the birthing throes of a new nation, this was a generation of writers who were well aware of their surroundings. They had been educated with means the colonizer approved of, and they used the colonizer’s own tongue to create a unique sense of “identity” for themselves, one that in the midst of a precarious balance between their collective colonial pasts and “literary autonomy”, coupled with “liberty” as opposed to their Urdu-practicing counterparts. (Perloff as cited in Mansoor 15) No longer would English be used to denote a dark past, rather, it would become the progenitor of a new tradition of literary discourse. Moreover, as said discourse would employ the English language, it would also provide these writers an opportunity to represent the ‘orient’ on their terms, and to an audience who previously remained unaware of what the east truly comprised of. That is, to provide a revised image, a “re-orient” (Lau 572) which, in her article titled, ‘Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals’ refers to the “perpetration of Orientalism in the arena of contemporary South Asian literature in English: no longer an Orientalism propagated by Occidentals, but ironically enough, by Orientals.” (571)

Thus, the previously undermined and misunderstood have an opportunity to set the record straight. This is primarily because neither the west, nor the east, are restricted by linguistic barriers, and rising literacy rates have given the colonized ample opportunity to clear their name and challenge the historical notions of the ‘non-west’. Lau accords this opportunity to female diasporic South Asian writers as they are ideally placed, geographically and ethnically, to cater to an Anglophone audience and duly challenge the oriental image which is inherently male dominant. The ‘powerful’, perhaps due to sheer opportunity, still represent the seemingly subaltern; what makes it different is the “the curious case in which the positionality of the powerful is simultaneously that of the insider and outsider, where the representing power can be simultaneously self and other.” (572)

However, where Lau considers this duality with regards to female diasporic orientals dabbling in contemporary South Asian literature, this article will expound on how it becomes incumbent on the forerunners of Pakistani writings in English and how they are given a position of power due to historical significance and their use of language which allows them to cater to an Anglophone audience likewise. Furthermore, since they are deeply rooted in their ancestral soil, they may be considered better authorities on what image the oriental ought to portray.

Additionally, it becomes incumbent to add the fact that since these writers are placed in a historically potent period in Pakistan's history, they also claim the privilege to set a certain literary tradition in motion; one that celebrates the Pakistani in English writings written in, and about the region, regarding the region itself. They, most notably, Ghose and Rafat, create an archetype, a 'self' that is carried forwards to contemporary times. This metaphorical 'self' not only serves as a revised version of the orient, but also as a contrast to what it opposed; the typical orient, the 'non-self'. The two exist as a duality, a precarious balance that tilts accordingly, and at times, dangerously in favour of the other.

This 'self' and 'nonself', then become auspicious to their context. This article will expound just how tumultuous such a balance can be, with Rafat's play, *Foothold*, as the foothold of this study. Moreover, as Rafat played the role of a mentor to encourage the Pakistani Idiom in his younger literary counterparts, the play will provide a means to elucidate how the Pakistani Idiom was not the sole idea that ought to be carried forwards.

Foothold – The Birth of an Archetype

Before this article can address the archetype, a brief introduction of the play is in order. The plot of *Foothold* revolves around Saleem, a beguiled Economics professor in search of answers to his existential dilemma. The play itself is primarily Absurdist in nature, though not only because of the subject matter, rather, because of the setting; it begins and concludes on a dusty train station amidst an interplay of the past and the present. An avid audience may be able to tell that the playwright was influenced by the Absurdist theatre in Britain and beyond. The progress of the play, rather, the chain of events that signify the plot moving forwards, is marked predominantly by dialogue and flashbacks, while dramatic action takes on a notion of fluidity.

This, in turn, aides the underlying themes to resurface time and again, to the point that the audience finds themselves lost in a bit of dialogue every now and then. An example may be seen in the beginning where Saleem's opening dialogue is eclipsed by the ensuing bickering of his disciples – their wordy exchange, a constant interlude between Saleem's monologue at different points in the play, provides an insight into their lives before they decided to follow Saleem on his soul seeking trek. Consider the following:

2nd Disciple: Almighty God, there is nothing new on earth. We are weary of old horrors, and the latest excitements have us one by one. It is true even now sometimes we condescend to raise a cultured eyebrow at a greater-than-usual outrage, but more than that we cannot. Our faith needs a new coat of paint.

1st Disciple: Is it too much to ask for a sign which will dispel our doubts for a season? What foothold shall we find in this slippery darkness? What glow-worm light will guide us?

2nd Disciple: Glow-worm light indeed.

I'm sure he could not find his way with the most powerful torch invented.

Saleem: Let him twit. I think I know what you mean.

1st Disciple: Something unmistakable. A voice saying, follow me, follow me, I know the way.

Vendor: Pan, bidi, cigaret.

2nd Disciple: I am sick of praying and hoping a reason for my misery will somehow emerge. I am like that inexpert fool who thinks he can tease a passable strain from the instrument by merely hammering away at the keys.

(Act I)

One is immediately reminded of Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. The disciples strike a similar note, as sheep in need of a shepherd. The only difference in this case, would be that by the end of the play, they receive an answer in the fact that there is none – akin to the train everyone seems to be waiting for, they are bound to return to the point they started from. It is a cyclical process, as the Station Master puts it; "Nothing starts here, and nothing has ended here" (Rafat 8).

Thus, the concept of 'time' is in a constant interplay with the context; not only do the characters constantly refer to the past, but in Saleem's case, the audience revisits his past in vivid detail. Interesting to note however, is the fact that each character has its own backstory, though their presence on stage relies heavily on Saleem. In fact, in certain scenes, the characters revolve around him as potential 'what ifs', 'buts' and 'perhaps', teasing the audience – and perhaps Saleem – with the possibilities of what could have been. His character, in that aspect, is always wandering and looking for answers while trying to balance himself in this "alien" world (Rafat 28).

It is within this wandering realm that Rafat provides the audience with an archetype – one that has undergone the confusion of mixed breeding and the calling of one's roots. At this point, it becomes imperative to mention that due to the fact that the play was never published, these binaries have remained understudied till now. It is still not entirely certain whether the inclusion of these archetypes was deliberate, though for the purpose of this study and duly, Rafat's role as a mentor to young literary intellectuals, this article will assume they were.

Firstly, the character of Nasreen, Saleem's hoodwinked fiancé. She makes an appearance in two of Saleem's flashbacks on a quite vocal note as in both instances, she is side-lined by the man she apparently loves by his quest for identity. Interesting to note, is the fact that the character of Nasreen, despite being younger and inexperienced in comparison, does not fall prey to the stereotypical oriental image – indeed, she falls in love with a pseudo English akin to Saleem and at one point, Ali, but she is no demure damsel in distress. She makes her opinions well known and is ready to challenge Saleem at her own discretion, an instance of which can be considered in the following:

Nasreen: Is that all? For a moment I thought, Ali made me believe...you're turning down the job?

Mustafa: Crazy. I've always said it
Nasreen: This is the limit.
Mustafa: Now Nasreen
Nasreen: This is too much. I'm turning down the job.
Just like that. No forewarning, no explanation. And
where does that leave me? Have I no say in the
matter?

(Act II)

The notion is reiterated further as the scene progresses, when Nasreen complains about how Saleem never takes her into consideration and how she should be treated like an equal. Moreover, her attitude does not change after six years, when Saleem returns to meet them for a short amount of time. In fact, it becomes even more obtuse. An instance may be considered in the following when she challenges his intellect as well as his masculinity:

Nasreen: It is as simple as that. The truth stares at you
in the face, but you wrap it up in a wool of
mystery to keep your indecision warm. If only
you had the strength to look at things as they
really are.

(Act III)

Thus, she is no coquettish female. In fact, she could be considered a feminist in front of a Pakistani backdrop. It is as if the roles have been reversed; she considers her supposed intellectual love interest prey to an inferior intellect. Furthermore, the fact that she waits for Saleem all this time speaks for her consistency; she is not afraid of demanding what she wants because she believes she will get it. Additionally, this is the case with the rest of Rafat's female characters in the play – they are decisive and constantly uphold an air of superiority when it comes to their male counterparts. For example, Saleem's mother, Fatima, is quick to reiterate how foolish she thinks her son is being by turning his back on everything he has practically achieved so far. In contrast however, said male counterparts play a much more submissive role in the context, an example of which may be found in Saleem's best friend, Ali.

Ali plays the role of a lone painter who hides behind a mask of frivolity. Ironic to note, is that he knows that his cheerfulness and inherent escapades in debauchery are a lie, and admits it wholeheartedly in front of Saleem by comparing their dual existence to that of a washerman's dog, "belonging neither to the house nor the washing-ghat." (32) The comparison highlights the rootlessness of a character borne in a tussle between two ideologies – the orient and the occident. In this aspect, he can even be considered the yang to Saleem's yin; where Saleem plays the part of a clueless, unsatisfied wanderer, Ali knows all the answers. An instance of this can be seen in when he admits how confused one in their position can be, and calls said position an "offspring of a strange marriage" because their roots and their upbringing constantly clash with one another. (31) He admits a weakness, and thereby admits that this duality that their characters personify is consequently an imperfection with no clear winner; neither the eastern ideals, nor their western counterparts, can lay claim of superiority over one another. It is a balance between the two the previously colonized has to suffer which in turn, makes the oriental a "misfit". (29) If the

character of Saleem represents one side of the coin, it is clear that Ali is the darker other – he pivots on the same point, though unlike Saleem, his wandering comes to a close fairly early in the play.

However, that is not to suggest that the archetype that is represented by his character dies with him. It is carried forwards with Saleem, the aforementioned professor committed to the Sisyphean task of answering the question of his existence. He, like Ali, is aware of the rootlessness he feels, though unlike Ali, he is too cowardly to face the reality of it. An example of this may be considered in the following:

Saleem: Most of our frustration is a result of our foolish upbringing. We think and speak more readily in a foreign language. That is not a matter of pride. We despise our own traditions. That is not a matter of pride either. But it's upto us to change all that and adapt ourselves to the new conditions. We can remedy the ill if we try. Merely saying, this was wrong, and that was wrong, will not solve anything. We've got to try.

(Act II)

The entire play revolves around his efforts to make sense of his own bearings. Moreover, he acts as the centrifugal force which keeps the stage together – all of the characters rely expressly on his role, and the train will not arrive lest Saleem finds his answers. This dependency, coupled with the earlier notion of constantly vying between the occident and the orient, along with a surprisingly dominant female character, constitute an interesting pre-set for Pakistani literature.

Moreover, the character of Saleem signifies the uncertainty that comes with place and purpose. From an organismal perspective, said character might not survive for much longer and the same may be considered for this archetype. According to Rafat, the audience is left with three pre-sets; Nasreen the modern Pakistani woman, and Ali and Saleem, the conflicting personas dancing about a post-postcolonial stage, still unsure of where they will take root or remain afloat. Not only does this defy Said's oriental definition, rather, it proposes an evolution of intellectual ideal of sorts; the woman no longer takes orders, and men no longer command the authority that comes with their position.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study stands at a crossroads. Considering the fact that Rafat served as an intellectual mentor for the young, emerging literary artists of the time, one begins to feel quite puzzled as to his legacy; where the Pakistani community is left with wonderful poems celebrating the 'Pakistani Idiom', they are also left with the beguiling question of rootlessness. Should one still pay homage to the dust caked glamour of tradition, or should one look to the future? The answer lies within contemporary literature today, which, ironically, is just as uncertain due to the different socio-political and cultural implications that weigh heavily on the community.

Ironically enough, even at his time, Rafat predicted it through his works – maybe the persona of Saleem constitutes as the Pakistani rhetoric, in which case, we, as an avid community, still meander over phantom train tracks.

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