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Cultural Ceremonials and Fiestas: A Punjabi Flavor in Rafat’s Poetry (1947-1983)

Abstract:

This research analyses the insinuation of local Punjabi idiom in Taufiq Rafat’s poetry. By using the technique of narrative Rafat depicts different rituals, ceremonials and traditions like bride hunting, circumcision, marriage, dowry, kite flying, and celebration of indigenous season. This study explores the locus of local culture of Pakistan and argues that Rafat employs indigenous spaces in his work to maintain a distinctive idiom which is culturally specified. Till the partition of the subcontinent many Indian writers were writing poetry in English. Though the major concern of their discourse was their society, they were following the British stylistically. After the partition of subcontinent, writers’ focus was changed. The notion of writing back to the empire became the focal point of their writing. Rafat added to this tradition by representing his own indigenous culture and by depicting several rituals, norms and traditions of his society to prove the existence of a Punjabi flavor. Edward Said says “For in the decades-long struggle to achieve decolonization and independence from European control, literature has played a crucial role in reestablishment of a national cultural heritage, in the reinstatement of native idioms, in the reimagining and refiguring of local histories, geographies, communities” (Said 1). By applying Said’s notion of re-establishment of native idioms this paper argues that Rafat celebrates the indigenous traditions and fiestas of Pakistan which are used as a motif to recover the cultural selfhood in the postcolonial paradigm.

Key words: *Punjabi idiom; cultural selfhood; Rafat; cultural spaces; indigenous traditions*

Cultural Ceremonials and Fiestas: Pakistaniness in Rafat’s Poetry

This paper focuses on cultural motifs of fiestas, ceremonials and cultural practices to explore the Pakistaniness in Rafat’s poetry. It analyzes the insinuation of indigenous idiom and local flavor in his poems.

Muhammad Safeer Awan claims “Pakistani literature, since Independence, has come a long way from its early roots in post-independence English writings in the subcontinent. Over some 50 years or so, it has evolved from its imitative, slavish cast into an original and rather dynamic mode” (Awan 19). By extending Awan’s argument this paper aims to contend that today Pakistani poetry has its own Pakistaniness. So Rafat employs indigenous spaces in his work to maintain a distinctive idiom which is culturally specified.

Kinza Arshad claims that “Rafat made the widest contribution in establishing a distinct identity of Pakistani poetry in English. His use of language portrays the importance of local phrases which are absolutely necessary in conveying the local contextual meaning” (Arshad 118). Rafat widely use local native idiom of Punjab to establish Punjabi sensibility. For instance in his poem “Village Girl” he describes the rustic beauty of a Punjabi village girl. But for defining the feminine beauty he does not borrow similes from British poetry rather he incorporates his local metaphors as he says “there she was/ tall and straight/ as a sugarcane stalk” (1-3). This simile of “sugarcane stalk” has a distinct Punjabi flavor. This poem presents a visual picture of village girl. Though the poem looks like a still picture of a rustic beauty but interestingly Rafat has dismissed all the capitalization and the whole poem is without a single punctuation mark. Most probably this action is deliberately taken by the poet to make the poem flow easily. Linguistically, Rafat has made a few changes in the expression of his poetry for instance when he describes the girl in line 2 he uses the words “tall and straight” (CP 2) a few lines down he again uses the same words, but this time he reverse the order of adjectives and uses “straight and tall” which is a direct literal translation of an expression which is more close to Punjabi idiom “*oochi lami*”.

Although Rafat in “Village Girl” seems to be Wordsworth praising the beauty of a solitary reaper but no comparison can be drawn between Village girl by Rafat and The Solitary Reaper by Wordsworth as both personas are rooted in their own cultural identities. Wordsworth’s solitary reaper resides in highlands of Scotland where the weather is chilly whereas Rafat’s village girl lives in a dry weather as he mentions “these long parched days” (CP 7). Wordsworth is fascinated by the song of the solitary reaper when he says “The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more” (Wordsworth 31-32) whereas Rafat is

fascinated by the beauty of the Pakistani rustic feminine when he says “it was almost more/ than a man could bear” (CP 12-13). So Rafat presents the rural beauty of his land by maintaining the indigenous acuity of his culture.

Moreover, Rafat celebrates the local norms and traditions of Pakistani culture. Circumcision by Rafat describes a religious ritual which an individual ascribes being a member of Muslim community. In this poem Rafat narrates the tale of a six years old boy who went through the process of circumcision. When the poem starts a sense of tragedy prevails in the poem as Rafat uses the word of “fateful afternoon” (CP 3). On a superficial level it looks like a tale of a six years old who is circumcised. Although it appeared to be a furious and violent attack but it is not so. This very act prepare us for the ebbs and flows of the life. As Rafat says

For by the act
Of pull and downward slash,
They prepare us for the disappointments
At the absence of golden birds
Life will ask us to look at

Between our circumcision and death (CP 42-48).

Though it seems an inspirational poem which gives us a philosophical conclusion at the end and motivate the reader to be ready for hard days but it also has a political understatement. By giving the illusion of a golden bird, the boy is deprived of his foreskin. This whole incident of circumcision could be a metaphor of partition of Bengal 1971. On an allegorical level the golden bird could be the illusion of martial law free Pakistan, by using which East Pakistan was separated from the West Pakistan.

In another poem “A Middle Class Drawing Room” Rafat presents the custom of bride hunting. He says “the real purpose/ is to judge the suitability of this house for a cousin to be married into” (CP14-15). In the Pakistani context, bride hunting is done by the parents and the other relatives of the groom. Usually they visit each other’s places and have tea to discuss the matter of marriage and also to judge the decorum and living style of both families. As in this poem the persona is observing each minor detail of the room. When he enters, he is staggered by the “room’s poverty” (CP 1). He says “The mohri carpet/ may have been priceless once now its worst/ patches are hidden by strategic

placement of/ occasional pieces” (CP 2-5). This strategic placement of sporadic pieces is also an art observed in Pakistan where people do not discard old clothes or carpets, rather they repair them by use of patch work. When the persona sits on the sofa, he sits stiffly on the edge “to avoid the stains” (CP 6) of oil. As he is conscious of the fact that many oily heads had rested here. Through the mention of the “oily head” Rafat is drawing attention to a local norm of oiling, which all men and women used to do after bath to keep their heads fresh. It’s a local belief in Pakistan that oiling not only helps to keep mind healthy but also leaves a sweet fragrance behind which is admired by people. Oiling is the equivalent of the modern gel to style hair. Rafat also mentions “on the wall a set of three geese/ carved in dark wood, their wings fully/ extended, diminish toward ceiling” (CP 10-12) these lines suggest the indigenous style of decoration of traditional houses of Punjab. Rafat also mentions tea in his poem. He says “Tea is served. This is too much like home” (CP 23). Tea is also a part of Punjabi cultural festivity. So Rafat is celebrating the idea of slurping tea in the prospective groom surveying.

In addition, the traditional and cultural identity of Lahore is also revisited in Akhtar’s poems. For instance, in “A Half-Rhymed Tale of a Punjabi Girl”, Akhtar writes about the tradition of marriage in Punjab and the traditional roles of girls in Punjab. He pictures a rural girl in a domestic space where she has to perform certain duties. He says: Since the last harvest/ they dispatched the matchmaker/ to all the neighboring villages/ to find a groom for their only daughter” (HRTPG 1-4). The tradition of finding a suitor by parents for their daughters is a common tradition in all the Punjab and the harvest time in Punjab is considered the prosperous time for the farmers because at that time in every year they have enough money to manage their daughter’s marriages. The poem represents a native Punjabi wedding where a lot of people gathered for attending it and the cluster of women is there to stop their children’s cries.

He further says in “A Half-Rhymed Tale of a Punjabi Girl”, that the girl in the poem plasters “cow-dung cakes / on the courtyard’s wall” (HRTPG 16-17) and she rolls “*Rotis*” (HRTPG 26) but her mother criticizes her for her “poor kitchen skills” (HRTPG 28). The domestic chores performed by the girl are considered as her real education in rural areas. The rural girl in the poem collects cow-dung and prepares it as a

fuel in order to make chapattis for her family. Despite that her mother nags all the time and gives her lessons on improving her domestic skills.

On the contrary, in “Sacrifice” Rafat reprimands the tradition of sacrifice of a goat which is “a necessary part of a ritual” (CP 11-12). The persona in the poem is at his friend’s house and they all are “laying the foundation of a friend’s house” (CP 5). Besides the sacrificial ceremony of a goat is also a religious practice in Muslims in order to cast off bad luck, malevolent glare and evil eye. Before the ritual starts the elders of the house usually recite some verses and say prayers to break all curses and to get rid of all the demons. In this poem Rafat also mentions this pre-ceremonial “After a brief prayer that all dwell here/ may be blessed” (CP 6-7). But from the very beginning of the poem the persona is uncomfortable with the idea of sacrifice. As his friend moves the knife across the neck of the goat, he feels that the knife is not on the goat’s neck rather it is his neck that is under the point of the knife. He further says “as the blood geysers from the jugular/ a hot and sticky sweat breaks out on my body” (CP 3-4). These lines suggest the disgust of the persona towards the ritual. It is also a part of the ritual that the one whose house is being made is supposed to slaughter the animal but Rafat does not use the word slaughter rather he uses “butchered” which entirely changes the perspective of sacrifice. There are children around. They watch the scene and are “animated by the tableau” (CP 17). They watch in fascination how the blood flows into a dug hole. At this point a white bearded man chants something holy “and feebly thrust the pick into the virgin ground; the camera clicks” (CP 21-22). This clicking of the camera raises a few questions about the sanctity of the ritual. The word “camera clicks” suggests that the goat is being slaughtered not for the sake of religious purpose but for the sake of a photograph that can be showed to relatives and to other neighbors, just to boast off. The word “tableau” also suggests that this slaughtering is not a sacrifice rather it’s an amusement show that has been organized to animate children. Rafat at the end of the poem strikes with a punching line when he says “we are not laying the foundation of a house, / but another Dachau” (CP 23-24). Here the poem gets a political end. Throughout the poem it seems that Rafat is disliking the idea of sacrificial ceremony of a goat. But by using the allegory of this religious practice, Rafat actually condemns the human sacrifice. He is pointing toward the event of partition of the subcontinent in which Muslims laid the foundation of a new home

Pakistan. But the cost of this home land was the blood of millions of people. Though there were no concentration camps in subcontinent but nonetheless the loss was all the same. In all around “13 million people were displaced by partition. This was the largest migration in a century whose wars and ethnic conflicts rendered millions of people homeless” (Talbot 152). But, according to Mushirul Hasan, “nobody knows how many were killed during Partition violence. Nobody knows how many were displaced and dispossessed” (Hasan 36). So Rafat in this poem is not against the cultural and religious tradition rather he is disapproving the act of human bloodshed. So the emphasis is on the pleasure violence brings. The spilling of blood is for mere entertainment which became the cause of wars.

Rafat also celebrates the local street culture of Punjab. He is attracted towards street vendors, monkey shows and snake charmers. For instance in his poem “Python” the persona is inspired by a snake charmer who is amusing people. Rafat says that although the snake charmer does his “... real business/ with a cobra” (CP 1-2) but he is carrying a python as well with which he is attracting the pedestrians. The important fact to note is that all the pedestrians “are mostly faceless peasants on their way / to the District Courts” (CP 4-5). Rafat points out the role of a snake charmer in his locality. He says

The snake charmer is a psychologist.
he picks up the python whose smooth length
he handles with sexual fondness
that it seems the loveliest creature of all/
a godlike ancestor” (CP 11-15)

So Rafat’s snake charmer makes money from human observation and appeals to the sexual desire in the hearts of human beings. Therefore his power over the python is also his control over the watchers. Other than snake charmer, Rafat is also inspired by a vegetable seller. In inner cities of Pakistan, vegetables are not sold in a shop. The vegetable sellers usually carry them in their basket and wander through every nook and corner of the streets in order to sell them as in Morning Exercise Rafat says “... he sauntered away/ calling ‘Pumpkin, radish, and cauliflower’” (CP 19-20). The loud cry of the vegetable seller resonates in the mind of the listener as an integral part of daily living experience. In response to the repetitive song of the vegetable sellers, Atteqa Malik in her article points out a folk song of Pakistan which is named as “*Aalu Kachaloo*”.

She says that “This playful song is full of actions taught to children so that they can easily learn the names of basic Pakistani vegetables in Urdu” (Malik 110). Not only the art of selling but also the repeated loud cry of the seller makes the process of selling as “intangible heritage of our country” (Malik 110). Vegetable sellers are a marking factor of the start of everyday because women can purchase fresh vegetables on their doorstep when their men are at work. He is a part of local community culture. Those which are sold by the street hawkers are field-fresh and economical as well but now the trend is declining. To imitate the western culture most of the buyers move towards supermarkets where they are not fresh but preserved and consequently are bland. Buyers do not understand that by going to supermarkets they are not only drawn away from their local culture but also they are falling prey to the commercial agenda of supermarkets.

Other than street vendors and snake charmers, Rafat celebrates the local seasonal festivals in his poetry. For instance in his poem “The Kite-flier” he celebrates the event of kite flying and pigeon flying which are central to the Pakistani locality. Basant is a festival which is celebrated at the start of the spring. Historically, it was Maharaja Ranjeet Singh who introduced his people to the festival. But after him it became a common practice to celebrate cultural festivity (Desai). On the day of Basant people climb up on their roof and fly kites. In the poem Rafat introduces two personas Shakir Ali and Mansab Khan. Both are kite fliers and hence rivals. The character sketch of Shakir Ali is explicitly local. He is a landlord of six hundred bighas of the richest land in the district. Moreover his muslin kurta and quail in his fist along with four or five companions around describes his grandeur. The whole poem is about the tussle between who cuts how many kites of their rival. His rival Mansab is also applauded by his followers who praise him with “haunches raised from the ground and uplifted arms” (CP 38-39). The point Rafat celebrates in this culture of rivalry that despite this competition Shakir Ali’s daughter is married to Mansab’s son. Moreover at the end of poem when Mansab dies due to a stroke Shakir Ali “ripped and burnt his (own) kites” (CP 95). These lines suggest that the cultural bond between two rivals do not aggravates violence rather it intensifies the bond of friendship between them. But unfortunately the cultural harmony which was related with this festival is now weakened. The continuous banning of spring festival has deprived new generation of kite

flying. Kite flying is dangerous to some extent as Rafat presents case of a boy in “Gangrene” who “had fallen/ from a roof while flying a kite. / The damage was negligible, just a shattered elbow” (CP 9-11). While talking of the damage caused by kite flying Rafat also talks about the bone settler of locality who mends bones with “oil and lint” (CP 20).

Other than kite flying Rafat rejoices at the festival of marriage which is the integral part of every culture. He describes a marriage ceremony to the fullest with all pre celebrations as he says in his poem “Loot”, “All week/ dozens of cousins have made a din/ on the dholak, and caterwauled in chorus” (CP 4-6). Even the structure of the poem is local as he says “that there’s a bridegroom in the house” (CP 1). Moreover he says “that he is an elder brother/ is the reason why you are here in the ancestral house” (CP 2-4). In the above mentioned lines Rafat uses the word “that” which is unnecessary in the structure but linguistically this structure is closer to Urdu. Moreover he introduces indigenous idiom from the Urdu language like “*baithak*”, “*kulfi*”, “*chaat*” and “*dholak*” to give the poem a local flavor. He discusses the whole arrangement of the wedding house as he says “exhalations of curry from the kitchen/...../sleep four to a bed/ dress as you like/ neglect your homework” (CP 8, 13-14). These lines suggests the festivity of the occasion where everyone is free to enjoy. Especially children relish it to the fullest because not only they are free from their homework but also they are well supplied with money to eat and for merry making. The title of the poem is very controversial. Although the poem is about marriage ceremony and its feast but the title is loot which does not refer to the event denotatively. By using the title loot Rafat is actually pointing towards a tradition of showery money on marriage. Traditionally, when bridegroom sits on a horse, elder uncles shower money which is collected by little children. As Rafat says “shower after shower/ and you get your share” (CP 46-47). Rafat also adds a native idiom in his poem he says “Out he comes/ the bridegroom, and is helped on to a horse which shies. A bad omen” (CP 36-38). There is a belief in Pakistani culture about riding the horse on wedding day. People believe that if the horse allows the groom to sit on him then it’s a good sign for his marital life but if the horse does not allow the groom to sit on him then it’s a bad omen for his marital life and it is also believed that it will bring bad luck for the groom and his health will be affected.

Culture is formed by human and natural forces; the cultural relationship among humans and their surroundings varies in keeping with human's perception of the landscape. In this manner culture alters both the internal landscape of the man or woman and the bodily outlook of the natural world. So within the cutting-edge world, inspired by means of industrialization, we have a tendency to see nature as something to be dominated and controlled by means of human effort. Rafat in his poetry mourns over the effects of industrialization which has affected natural spaces. Moreover he celebrates the indigenous climate and landscape which are used as a motif to recover the cultural selfhood in postcolonial paradigm.

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