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Deconstructing Death, Decay and Disturbing Content in Taufiq Raffat's *Arrival of the Monsoon*

Tariq Usman¹, Assistant Professor of English, University of Mianwali

Muhammad Bilal Ashraf², Lecturer in English, University of Sialkot

Farah Kalsoom³, Lecturer in English (visiting), University of Mianwali

Abstract

The study is about deconstructing the central meanings of beauty, peace, romanticism, and serenity in the selected poetry of Taufiq Raffat (1927-1998). Rafat is believed to be an Asian Romantic and lover of peaceful and beautiful indigenous culture (Rafique and Farhana 25, Awan and Munawar 37, Mahrukh and Farkhanda 564). The study delves into the marginal realities and unearths the converse side of the picture by dismantling the established notions. Thus, the essay uses Derrida's framework of deconstruction and chases the aporia through the collection of poetry *Arrival of the Monsoon*. The study's objective is to break the notion that the poetry of Rafat is the serene picture of the indigenous culture full of romanticism and beautiful landscapes and imagery. The essay contends that his poetry is fraught with death, decay and disturbing content that is least romantic in subject matter. The essay concludes that Rafat's poetry has multiple shades and is in flux, however, the spaces in the aporia are infested with disturbing contents.

Keywords: deconstruction, romanticism, indigenous culture, beauty, death, decay, disturbing contents.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study is about disturbing content that is present in the poetry of Taufiq. However, it is contended in the study that his poetry is chiefly viewed as celebratory and portrayal of the beautiful and there is no study available that highlights its gory, ugly, gothic and disturbing contents. Disturbing content is a social media/ media term that is associated mostly with graphic and written material that annoys, disturbs and frightens the viewer/ reader. Just like in your offline life, when you're online you might come across something you would rather not see or read. It might be content that is upsetting, disturbing or offensive. Now and then, people encounter things they do not want to see online. Someone might send an image or a link to information that is disturbing. Likewise, disturbing contents are also present in print, in literature, poetry, fiction etc. Everyone has different thresholds on what they find disturbing or unacceptable, when people see disturbing content in literature, their fight, flight, freeze or fawn response might get started. This response is the body's natural reaction to stressful, frightening, or dangerous events. While literature is an amazing development, giving instant access to a vast collection of knowledge and creativity, it's also full of the very weird and not very wonderful.

However, not all people react to literature or the content it provides in the same way. Content that one person views as positive and empowering, may be seen by someone else as stress-inducing. An example might be phobias or cultural elements that are seen differently in different parts of the world. Dogs, for example, can be seen as anything from cherished family members (pets), memes, impure (some Muslims' views), or physically dangerous (urban wild dogs). Unlike illegal or physically violent content, these types of content are very challenging for literature to automatically handle because they are problematic for the individual, rather than for the larger collective network or culture. There are no easy definitions when it comes to disturbing or extreme content. For example, graphic or violent stories in literature and films may only be suitable for adults, while they are not to every adult's taste, they may not be illegal or 'extreme'. However disturbing contents vary from writer to writer and reader to reader because of their relative nature. The study attempts to deconstruct the prevalent notions of it and locates them in the selected poems.

The study is about deconstruction of the several central meanings in the poetry of Taufiq Raffat. Rafat is one of the most prominent poets from Pakistan who chose English and made Pakistani literature in English represent indigenous people, representing the global audience in the global context. Pakistan was born out of the womb of British colonialism as a result of the Pakistan movement struggle by the Muslims of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. It is the British colonial legacy that the Pakistani nation of writers has inherited. Pakistani writers are, therefore, part of the international community of postcolonial writers with their unique tastes, smells and people of their particular areas. Poetry by Taufique Rafat can be taken as Pakistani poetry as a part of Pakistani postcolonial literature in English. The poetry of Raffat is believed to be the celebration of indigenous landscape concerning "faunal images" and "rejuvenation" presented in his poetry (Aqeel, Saba & Nauman 17).

This study highlights concrete images and prosaic language to express Rafat's views about his landscape with delicacy and leniency of his diction. His idea of celebration also contains enthusiasm, ecstasy, liberty, serenity and harmony. In this paper, a vivid picture of Pakistani land is presented to the readers through the poet's superior expressions. In a nutshell, Rafat delineates his indigenous landscape with the association of various seasons. Taufiq Rafat is a pre-eminent Pakistani English poet of the 20th century. The study breaks such notions of celebration and delves into the ugly, disturbing, gothic and horrific realities that he camouflages in his poetry.

Rafat's main claim to fame is his collection of poetry *Arrival of Monsoon* (1985). It remains his most famous collection, and for many decades dominated the literary world of Pakistani English poetry. In his collection, Rafat presents seasons, the characters, the fragrance of mud and the cultural substratum of his homeland. His remarkable collection has gained special attribution by reviewers and critics in Pakistan as well as abroad. He gives a new mode to Pakistani poetry. His poetry is a paradigm for his contemporaries, especially those of Pakistani origin. The superiority of his style lies in the fact that he remains close to his landscape and employs images and symbols that give an inclusive picture of his local terrain. His use of prosaic language gives a glimpse of rejuvenation and optimism. This study deconstructs all such realities and highlights the play of words that further takes to other signifiers.

The study purposefully locates a few poems from his selection *Arrival of the Monsoon* and deconstructs the poems using the theoretical framework of Deconstruction of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). The poetry of Raffat is associated with indigenous idiom, Asian romanticism, cultural glory and serenity, beauty and tolerance, and nature. However, this study delves into deconstructing such myths and unearths marginalized and peripheral meanings that are in the Aporia. The study contends that the poetry of Raffat is not merely about all the positive and good things that people aspire to; rather it also has its dark side that is probably neglected willfully as it remains on the margins and only the central meanings are appreciated and propounded.

Aporia in the discourse of Derrida (1930-2004) comes originally from Greek philosophy where it signifies the state of a puzzle or puzzle. Rhetorically it is a useful expression to forward doubt. However, in contemporary literary criticism, it has become more associated with deconstructive criticism. Especially with Derridean theory of difference, as a reaction to structuralist interpretations of texts, denoting “a point of undecidability, which locates the site at which the text most obviously undermines its rhetorical structure, dismantles, or deconstructs itself” (Derrida 37).

Aporia suggests “an impasse”, a knot or an inherent contradiction found in any text, an insuperable deadlock, or a “double bind” of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are “undecidable”. Derrida, for instance, cites the inherent contradictions at work in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s use of the words “culture” and “nature” by demonstrating that Rousseau’s sense of the self’s innocence (in nature) is already corrupted by the concept of culture (and existence) and vice-versa. Derrida has also described the paradoxes that afflict notions like giving, hospitality, forgiving and mourning. He argues that the condition of their possibility is also, and at once, the condition of their impossibility.

The study focuses on the selected poems by Raffat and deconstructs the myth of the beautiful and unearths other possibilities such as disturbing content. It is a textual, analytical, and interpretative study that relies upon the marginalized meaning and empowers the weaker side of the binaries. It uses the theoretical framework of deconstruction as given by Derrida.

1.1 Significance of the study

The study explores the realms of gothic realities in the poetry of Raffat who is believed to be the beautiful face of indigenous culture. The study counters such arguments and it is a substantial addition to the existing research on the selected poet and text. It is significant for the students and scholars of Pakistani literature in particular as it offers handsome insight into the other side of the coin.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are the following:

1. To debunk the notion of beauty and serenity in the poetry of Rafat.
2. To locate and unearth the marginalized ugly and disturbing contents present in the poetry of Rafat.

1.2 Research questions

1. How does the poet camouflage disturbing contents in the selection *Arrival of the Monsoon*?
2. How do the central meanings take hold of the marginalized meanings still visible in the Aporia?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study reviews the relevant available research on the poetry of Raffat to locate the gap and to fill it with this study. The study is to deconstruct the most celebrated themes of Raffat's poetry and to unearth marginalized disturbing contents and traumatic details in his poems in the selection *Arrival of the Monsoon*. Rafique and Tabassum argue that the postmodern period is full of innovations still the elements of British romanticism are the hallmark of Raffat's poetry. They trace it in the collection of poems *Arrival of the Monsoon*. It is further argued that his poetry is a blend of British Romanticism and the local flavour of his culture. His poetry is marked with the features of vivid imagery, rural life, simple people, simple life and nature in abundance which can rightly label him a romantic poet (25). Likewise, Amin looks at Rafat's indigenous landscape and the ways the poet celebrates it with "faunal images" and "rejuvenation". The focus of the study is on prosaic language and concrete images that can express his views about his landscape with the leniency and delicacy of language. Ecstasy, enthusiasm, serenity, liberty and harmony are the core ideas it reflects (69). Tabassum et al. focus on the analysis of the location of cultural elements that erode over time. Cultural memory evokes the idea of cultural erosion and identity. The study further focuses on nostalgia and change in time over the decades and how it influences the memory of the participants in their local culture (1638).

Awan and Iqbal assert that local Pakistani culture is the foundation of Raffat's poetry even though it has innovation and modernity. His poetry is based on the notions of national, local and cultural selfhood. It is different from other works of literature written in English because it connects the author with his native or local cultural ethos and selfhood. This makes his poetry unique because literature produced in other colonies generally sticks to the native norms (19). Rana, and Farkhanda admire the skills of Raffat in that he precisely crafts his poetry on local designs although he writes it in a foreign language. He infuses his poetry with local ethos and imbues it with indigenous culture. He maintains national identity through ethno-symbolism closely weaving memories, myths, traditions, values and symbols (563). Riaz et al. interpret Raffat's poetry through the lens of Eco-linguistics which is a thriving field of study to use the nexus of language-environment interdisciplinary dimensions. In other words, it is the interplay of eco-poetics and language-environment. The study investigates the linguistic pattern of texts that have environmental backdrops. The findings of the study reveal that the characteristics of Nature in human beings are achieved only when they are aware of their location (14).

Zaheer focuses on the geographical elements that come from the use of language in a culture and can precisely reflect the author's intention. Akram et al. (2020) and Ramzan et al. (2023) also inform the influence of culture on language. Through the model of Systemic Functional Grammar, the study highlights the author's intentions in painting the indigenous culture (80). Rasheed and Asim view Rafat's poetry with the postmodern idea of Intertextuality. The study finds that his poetry is not an isolated whole but rather a combination of multiple

readings of several cultures such as the Indian, American, and British (303). Akhtar finds that in colonial literature, the idea of decolonizing is very active and the freedom of cultural selfhood is primary. The study finds that Rafat's poetry is a true expression of the indigenous self-hood that is sound and free (161). Rasheed et al interpret the hidden mysteries of Rafat's poetry through Roland Barthes' five codes – hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic and cultural – of interpretation. The study demystifies the hidden mysteries underlying the poem and makes it comprehensible for a general reader (9534). Amjad et al. through CDA explore and expose several realities such as socio-psychological factors, and ideology that monitor, regulate and control human life.

2.1 Research gap

Having reviewed the existing research, it is made clear herewith that Raffat's poetry has not yet been interpreted and deconstructed in terms of the marginalized meanings particularly to trace the aporia of disturbing contents using decentering the most celebrated and traditional central meanings. Hence, this study unearths disturbing contents and decenters the traditional meanings.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is textual, analytical interpretation of Rafat's selected poetry. Only two poems were selected from the collection that best serve the purpose. The approach adopted for the study is qualitative and the collected data were interpreted qualitatively with the insight taken from Jaquas Derrida's concept of Aporia. No text is coherent and it is an interplay of endless play, there are endless possibilities that are in a flux and keep on moving, this flux where the point deconstructs itself is called aporia. The study decenters the established and generally accepted interpretations of his poetry. "There, in sum, in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem". (Derrida 25). Hence, this study is poststructuralist critique of the selected text.

3.1. Theoretical framework

The theory of Deconstruction is chiefly derived from Derrida's book, *Of Grammatology* (2016), he contends that Western philosophy has been linked with a logo-centred approach, hence, the system of signs has been perceived as a centre of meanings. Meanings in structuralism are fixed with signs, which are merely one side of the picture. Derrida (67) further asserts that every sign is a camouflage of multiple meanings; therefore, one sign leads to another sign that further initiates a chain reaction and meanings remain in flux. Every centre can be decentered because language is an unstable human phenomenon. Moreover, meanings are asserted with the help of a binary system i.e. in the pair of binaries such as Day/Night, one is given superiority over the second which also for Derrida a flawed perception. Meaning can be the centre as it could easily be the marginal. Deconstruction focuses on the central meaning only to decentre it and to locate the marginal meaning in a text. In other words, it is to dismantle traditional associations and logos of meaning-making systems, thus, it lays stress more on a means of providing alternative interpretations and meanings. The alternative interpretations are, according to Derrida (76) in the Aporia. Aporia is a Greek word that suggests an Impasse, a contradiction

or a knot that is inherent in language and present in any text; it is a deadlock of contradictory or incompatible meanings (Derrida 93).

4. DISCUSSION

The poetry of Taufiq Raffat is associated with beauty, romanticism and serenity while the second binaries such as ugly, dry, boring, gothic, and disturbing have been neglected in the collective body of research. Disturbing contents are never picked from the margins and brought to the centre for interpretation.

It is contended that Rafat's poetry is a fair expression of the beautiful indigenous culture of his country; however, the ugly side, which is quite obvious although seems camouflaged and marginal, also finds expression in his poetry. Nevertheless, this ugly side of the indigenous culture is mostly overlooked and neglected by the researcher and readers because, first it is utterly marginal and secondly it is shaded by no means willingly. Several studies contend that his poetry is the poetry of beautiful nature and culture. More or less the case of Rafat's poetry is close to the case of the poetry of the British poets; William Wordsworth (1775-1850) and Ted Hughes (1930-1998). Wordsworth holds nature as angle-like, whereas, Hughes goes for its wild and raw side. Rafat, however, seems to be oscillating between the two. His talent is in his objective observation of his culture and expression of society.

In this broader context, the titles of his poems are juxtaposed with the gory and disturbing details. Death, decay and disturbing contents are spread all over the canvas of his poems. His poem, *The Wind Howls* has a startling movement. The wind is a perennial old beautiful natural phenomenon, this poetic expression collocates with "blow", whereas, Rafat uses howl for it/ its movement. This gothic expression is quite startling for the readers as it has nothing beautiful and serene in it. Thus, the poem opens, "The wind howls about the house / like a cat mourning its young." (1-3, p 3).

Moreover, the ugly urban settings in any of his poems in the collection also debunk the notion of serenity. The myth of the beautiful and peaceful contents of Rafat's poetry is further busted in the poem *Karachi 1955*. Unlike Rafat, in cultural and national discourse Karachi is believed to be a city of lights. It is the lifeline of Pakistan. How come, Rafat being a popular poet and advocate of the beautiful indigenous culture and society, deals with Karachi in a gory and dehumanizing manner? He makes use of disturbing and scary metaphors and symbols to bring to the surface the ugly realities. It is quite an unpoetic description of the city of lights. "Screaming wind, muscular rays, stubborn rock, biting sea, scarce water, little rain, panicked care, bald sparrows, dust bin, malice moves, brown cliffs, and commuters storming the gates" (p 6) are such eerie expressions that run all through the poem, painting the city as full of pollution and ugliness. Reading the poem is a freakish and uncanny experience. This spectral picture of the city of the lifeline of Pakistan certainly busts the myth of serenity that is associated with Rafat's poetry.

It is nearly impossible to find anything beautiful and serene in poems such as *Children Understand Him*. Pakistani indigenous is also believed to be a storehouse of noble values. However, the said poem tells a different story and paints a sinister picture that confirms the

degradation of moral and social values which is also a reflection of the hard and white realities of life. Rafat illustrates a society devoid of humanity and old-fashioned respect for the elders. “An old man must be humoured / and sent to his room” (10, 11). This is an outrageous and extreme level of degradation of human values. Old and retired people are respected and they are taken care of. Whereas, the poem is about the gruesome realities of life for a humane society cannot abandon its weak and miserable. In the poem, Rafat brings into light a type of character – an old man who is retired and enjoys no respect at home. Moreover, the government does not seem to be taking care of him either as he has an “inadequate pension” (p 7). The poems of Rafat are packed with death and decay, however, this kind of thematic treatment has escaped the central attention and appears to be on the margins.

The ghostly and disturbing contents are not paradoxically on the margins in every case of his poetry. Evidently, a great number of his poems are loaded with death, decay and disturbing contents. *Gangrene* is one such poem that is difficult to read as it invokes petrifying feelings. This narrative poem is a tale of the woe of a poor village boy who becomes a victim of a village quack and ultimately loses his life. “I heard the boy died on the operating table” (72). A man who has a little heart left inside cannot manage to read this tragic end a boy who belongs to a culture that is allegedly celebrated by Rafat in his poems. Nearly, seventy percent population of Pakistan is rural (Yaseen 1). The pathetic thing is that every village is a house of quacks as physicians have the least interest in the marginalized rural areas for house jobs. This is a bleak situation, however, this dark side of society is least unearthed in Rafta’s poetry. By no means is the tragic tale of the boy, narrated in the poem, beautiful. It is surely a tale of woe that disturbs the mind of the reader.

Such horrific details of death and decay continue almost all through the collection. Rafat seems to have an art of camouflaging the disturbing contents. The poem *Cancer Ward* is one such example. The poet calls the disease as “This is a beautiful disease / It blossoms slowly” (13, 14). No one on earth would like to depict the deadly disease of cancer as a beautiful disease. Likewise, the poem *Cremation* is so disturbing that it strips all labels of peacefulness and beautiful from the poet. It is utterly horrific for only an executioner may dare read it. It is one of the most disturbing, upsetting and offensive poem by Rafat in the collection. The speaker in a cold-blooded manner as a spectator and witness of the bloodiest incident paints the picture of the death of a living young child who happens to be trapped inside the car of his parents that goes all on fire burning the child alive. It is utterly heart rendering to view a living child screaming of pain. “His hair caught fire first / In minutes the car was an inferno” (23, 24). The image that moves all across the poem is utterly disturbing for it details the description of an innocent little child. To a little child burning and dying from close quarters is not easy to bear and breathe. The poet goes into the minutest details of the death scene here.

His overdone body bunched

Like an embryo, and little fists

Driven into his cancelled eyes. (32-34, p 131)

The fire has reduced the dead body of the child to ashes and charcoal that has been mummified. It is so eerie to see the burnt corpse of a little child whose struggle with the fire has been mummified. It unveils the last moments of his life and the amount of torture he underwent inside the car. The question is what is so beautiful in such type of poems in the collection? Why this collection is labelled as the best expression of the beautiful life and culture of rural Punjab when there are plenty of poems that contain the themes of death and decay and reading them is so disturbing that it demands parental control and many more?

Nothing there seems to be celebratory in his poems. Punjab, Pakistan is a land of rituals and festivals, nevertheless, the poet does not go for this beauty rather he seems to be more interested in the celebration of the petrifying moments. In the poem *Circumcision*, the ritual is not celebrated with the spirit of religious and cultural fervour rather it is painted as an event loathsome. The first-person narrator narrates the event.

Having hauled down my pyjamas
they dragged me, all legs and teeth,
that fateful afternoon, to a stool
before which the barber hunkered
with an open cut-throat. (1-5)

The opening of the poem is abrupt as the narrator is taken by surprise for they (the family members) pull down his trousers and drag him to make him sit on the stool. This level of treatment of young children is utterly unromantic and disturbing. Circumcision is a religious duty, however, it has been turned into a family festival. The treatment of the subject is freakish and ghostly, although, the event is not that much horrific. The barber but not a physician circumcises the boy in the manner of a cut-throat. It brings to the surface the traumatic feelings of the young boy. It could have been dealt with differently but the poet in quite plain words describes it in horrific and gothic imagery. That's why this poem inclines to be unromantic. However, realistically the poet concludes the poem that painful events can prepare children to deal with the tough times of life ahead. "life will ask us to look at / between our circumcision and death" (45, 46). However, it is not a logical thing to test on young children unnecessarily. The things that are simply beautiful are reduced to ugliness in many other poems. *Village Girl* is a poem that is least romantic as he compares the woman with a "sugarcane stalk" (3). No Asian poet may be found comparing the beauty of a pure innocent village girl with that of a sugarcane. What an occult and queer simile is this!

Further, in the collection *Arrival of the Monsoon*, there is a long list of poems that have less or more prominently central and marginal themes of death, decay, and disturbing contents. Only in the first fifty pages of the collection there are several poems, such as, *Under Fire*, *The Medal*, *Drought*, *Death in the Family*, *The Kingfisher*, *A Partridge Calling*, *Poem for Fauzia*, that are concerned with the themes of death, decay and disturbing contents less or more.

5. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the poetry of Rafat is more admired on the grounds of romanticism, indigenous culture and beautiful landscape, however, the bleaker side of the picture is not viewed clearly as it is blurred and in the aporia. The study reveals that the poetry of Rafat is implicitly fraught with the ugly picture of indigenous culture and society and instead of romantic elements and features his poetry is a compendium of death, decay and disturbing contents. These marginal spaces have escaped the attention of the readers and researchers over the decades. The study dismantles all such notions that label his poetry as serene, peaceful and beautiful. The study with several textual references brings the hidden and camouflaged meanings to the surface. Although, there are multiple layers of meanings, however, the study only dismantles the few mentioned above.

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