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T.S. Eliot and Modernism in Urdu Poetry

WHEN T. S. Eliot began writing “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as a graduate student at Harvard in 1910, he surely did not anticipate that this poem, along with his later “epic” *The Waste Land* (1922) would radically change the way in which English poetry was written—on both sides of the Atlantic. In a tribute to T. S. Eliot of 1958, the renowned critic William Empson once wrote of him: “I do not know for certain how much of my own mind he invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading” (1965, 35). Empson’s startling honesty is symptomatic of the depth of Eliot’s impact: even those who had not read him were subject to his influence since this encompassed broad currents in English poetry and the ways in which these were transported to other cultures, nations, and continents.

The young Eliot might have been even more bemused to know that he would become the most influential and most widely translated poet not only in the West, but in the world. Given his interest in Indian philosophy, he might have smiled to know that his influence—which initially met some resistance in the West—reached the Indian subcontinent relatively early. In the following pages, I would like to talk a little about Eliot’s general influence on Urdu poetry as recorded by some of the earlier critics (since these gave rise to the critical climate in which modernist Urdu poetry interacted with Western modernism), and then to offer a fairly detailed comparison between his verse and that of the major modernist Urdu poet N. M. Rashed (Nūn Mīm Rāshid), with some consideration of the differences between their respective poetic, intellectual and social contexts. One of the interesting insights that may emerge from this comparison is both the international dimensions of modernism and its cultural uniqueness.

T. S. Eliot and Early Urdu Critical Assessments

Judging from articles written by Indian writers, Eliot's poetry reached the Subcontinent relatively quickly. In 1934, just two years after F. R. Leavis, in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), was explaining Eliot's virtues to a not entirely receptive readership in England, an Indian writer S. K. Sengupta was engaged in a similar task in his article "T. S. Eliot: A New Force in English Poetry," where he too drew attention to Eliot's modernity (1934). That Eliot's diffusion into some Indian universities occurred around this time is reinforced by the statements of certain other Indian writers and critics. A. Bose states, "The powerful influence of T. S. Eliot on Bengali writers became manifest in the early 'thirties (1965, 225). Again, E. F. C. Ludowyk remarks that "Eliot's poetry came to be known in Ceylon in the early 'thirties" (1965, 103). Another critic, B. Dey, locates Eliot's influence slightly earlier: "He came to be a fruitful influence perhaps in the late 'twenties. Most of us came to know Mr. Eliot through the 1925 *Poems* and *The Sacred Wood*" (1965, 96). In general, it is evident that Eliot's work became familiar in the universities of Calcutta, Bombay, Allahabad and Osmania between the 1930s and the 1960s.

But when was the impact of Eliot's verse and prose specifically felt on Urdu letters, and the other centers of its growth such as Delhi, Agra, and Lucknow? Before considering the answers of poets such as Rashed to this question, it is worth looking at certain critical assessments. A retrospective assessment is offered by Victor Kiernan who, writing of the pre-Independence patriotic fervor which gripped India, states:

... for young poets and story-writers national and social emancipation seemed to go together, and both to go with their own new-found freedom to try new subjects and methods. They were reading, and sometimes imitating ... Western writers like T. S. Eliot and Auden and Day Lewis.

(1971, 23)

It should be said, of course, that the more renowned figures such as Mirā Jī and Rashed, while being inspired by Western modes of thought, can hardly be described as imitative. In her article "Urdū Naẓm mēñ Hai'at kē Tajribē" (Stylistic Experiments in the Urdu Poem), Saiyida Ja'far writes categorically: "In our literature, the most important formal revolution was brought about around 1930, when Nūn Mīm Rāshid, Mirā Jī ... began the attempt for the first time in Urdu to write free verse" (1965, 39).¹ She

¹All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

acknowledges, however, that “Free-verse has passed through many destinations on its way to us,” such as France and England (*ibid.* 42). We might add that attempts to write free verse in Urdu had been made by a number of writers, such as Taşadduq Ḥusain Khālid and ‘Abdu’l-Ḥalīm Sharar, though, as Rashed himself says, “Some stray experiments in free verse had already been done by comparatively unknown poets in the past, but I believe I was the first to bring out a collection of modern poems, *Māvarā*’ [Beyond], in 1941” (1969, 8). Ja‘far ascribes the growth of free verse in Urdu to, among other things, the changed complexion of the Indian middle classes after the First World War, together with the preponderance of new and more complex problems, which required a direct medium for their expression, a loosening of traditional verse forms that might accommodate a continuous expression of thought (especially since the widely used ghazal habitually fostered discreteness of thought) (1965, 46). Talking of poets such as Rashed and Mirā Ji, Ja‘far urges that, like the poetry of Eliot and Pound, their verse did not represent an empty negation of traditional forms: “In these poets, one finds a holistic perception of both tradition and experiment, and in this way their poetry has become a beautiful confluence of ancient and modern modes” (*ibid.*). She also points out that their poetry depicts the anxiety of social life, political violence, and class struggle, and that free verse, especially that of Rashed, has enlarged the vocabulary of symbolism and metaphor in Urdu poetry. This, together with Rashed’s imagery, she describes as reflecting “the mind of a new generation” (*ibid.*).

Among the notable earlier instances of criticism in Urdu which mention the influence of Eliot on Urdu verse is Jamīl Jālibī’s *Tanqīd aur Tajriba* (Criticism and Experiment). In this fine work, Jālibī interestingly points out that, as a foreigner to the English language, he is able to empathize more with Eliot’s prose than his poetry; and it is the insights of Eliot’s criticism, he believes, which are of greater importance to Urdu poetry. Jālibī argues that, after the critical ideology of the “Progressive” (*Taraqī Pasand*) Movement, no Urdu criticism has been written which is adequate to the modern era (1967, 351). This insight provides the motivation for what Jālibī values in Eliot: the separation Eliot insisted upon between the poetic and the critical consciousness; the viewing of a poem as an objective artifact rather than as autobiographical expression; and thirdly (though Eliot himself was inconsistent on this point), Eliot’s consequent detachment of artistic appreciation from personal belief. Finally, Jālibī values Eliot’s revitalizing of the concept of tradition, viewing this not

as dead and in the past but as dynamic and ever open to change by the innovations of new generations of writers (*ibid.*, 354–57).

A second article on Eliot, written by Muḥammad Ḥanīf, is titled “Ēk Dūsri Iṣṭilāḥ” (Another Term). The “term” discussed here is “dissociation of sensibility,” which Eliot characterized as a disjunction between thought and feeling occurring in European writers subsequent to the Metaphysical poets from the seventeenth century onward. Ḥanīf analyzes a poem of John Donne’s in terms of Eliot’s concept, and he recognizes, as Eliot had, that the concept is not confined to merely literary consciousness: “The meaning of ‘dissociation of sensibility’ exists not only on a literary level but also on the level of common culture and cultural consciousness.” What is interesting here is that Ḥanīf correlates a general emergence of “dissociated sensibility” with technological progress and spiritual decline. He sees the causes of such dissociation within the social contrasts that face the modern Urdu poet:

On the roads the poet sees groups of wretched people blighted with hunger and thirst ... and beggarly, ill inhabitants of dark houses ... and across the avenue, rows of splendid houses on the far seacoast. This contrast is beyond his understanding. He feels that humanity has no God.

(1973, 41–45)

In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot had urged that the contemporary poet must be more complex and more “metaphysical” in confronting the modern “complexity of civilisation” (1972, 287–90).

A further interesting article on Eliot was written by Vazīr Āghā, who compared *The Waste Land* with some poems of Ziyā Jālandhārī, a modern Urdu poet influenced by both Eliot and Pound. The first part of this comparison centers around Eliot’s line in *Four Quartets*: “The river is within us, the sea is all about us.” Āghā claims that the river represents experienced time, and the sea, objective time. Both Eliot and Jālandhārī, he suggests, are centrally concerned with the meaning of time and with the problem of making sense of the relation between subjective and objective time. He suggests the causes of this problem in a comment on *The Waste Land*:

It is evident that the “victim” of Eliot’s *Waste Land* is twentieth-century urban life which, as a result of its isolation from tradition and its artificiality, has become mechanical, but psychologically it [*The Waste Land*] points to an age which must of necessity conduct an inquiry into new values.

(1967, 139)

Āghā then compares *The Waste Land* with Jālandhārī's poem "Barf Zār" (Land of Ice) and points out that in their concern with the dislocation of the present from the past and future, both poems employ myth, a symbolism of the seasons, and imagery of desolation, such as rock and withered leaves. Both poems paint a "frightening picture of a mechanized society" (*ibid.*, 145). To this extent, states Āghā, the voices of the two poets are in harmony, but a gulf appears between them in terms of the remedies they propose for the problems of time and cultural isolation. Jālandhārī's attitude is essentially optimistic, whereas Eliot's bleak vision sees the only hope of salvation in Christianity. In Jālandhārī's poem, a layer of ice has like a blanket covered leaves and all types of vegetation, and eventually it melts into water. This imagery is used by Āghā to trace Jālandhārī's attitude toward Sufi mystical thought, where the "disjunction of part and whole is an illusion" (*ibid.*, 147). In Āghā's interpretation, the ice is the "illusion" of the water, an illusion which rests upon imperfect knowledge, the only vehicle of escape from which is the "Self." This, according to Āghā, is Jālandhārī's essential message (*ibid.*). This question of self-affirmation and self-denial—which had attained momentous proportions in the thought of Muḥammad Iqbāl—is a fundamental historical factor in the contrasting cultural contexts of Western and Urdu poets.

T. S. Eliot and N. M. Rashed in their Respective Traditions: Critical Assessments

The positions of Eliot and Rashed in their respective traditions are separated by a time lag of approximately twenty years. Talking in 1932 of the state of English poetry prior to Eliot, F. R. Leavis suggested that "something has been wrong for forty or fifty years at the least" (6). He claimed that the major characteristics of nineteenth-century poetry, such as that of Tennyson and Arnold, were a prejudice against the use of intellect in poetry and a preoccupation with the creation of a dream world, deriving from Romantic notions of the poetical (*ibid.*, 12, 17). Of the "three considerable poets" writing at the end of the First World War, W. B. Yeats is characterized as repudiating "[m]odern thought and the modern world ... in the name of poetry—and of life," Walter de la Mare as finding the modern uncongenial and therefore writing "a poetry of withdrawal," and Thomas Hardy as inhabiting a "solid" rather than a "dream" world but nonetheless as "truly a Victorian ... in his very pessimism" (*ibid.*, 31, 52, 56–57). Summarizing the effect of the "Georgian Movement," the War poets

Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, as well as Imagism, Leavis stated: “The debilitated nineteenth-century tradition, then, continued without serious challenge, and there had been nothing to suggest a seriously new start” (*ibid.*, 73). This new start, according to Leavis, came to English poetry by 1920 through Eliot’s work. Among the major characteristics of this “complete break with the nineteenth-century tradition” were: the poet assuming the right to make use of any materials, the use of the idiom and cadence of modern speech, the dramatic detachment of the poet from his personae, the use of formlessness itself as form, a breakdown of logical and narrative continuity, a concerted use of ambiguity and allusion, and the control of the emotions by reason. All of these features, according to Leavis, were underlain by a loss of the “sense of absoluteness” (*ibid.*, 75–76, 90–91).

Leavis’s perspective embraces at least the formal factors pertinent to Rashed’s place in the Urdu tradition. The most notable of Rashed’s poetic predecessors after Iqbāl included Faiz, Majāz, Kaifī Aʿzamī, Jōsh Malīḥ-ābādī, Firāq and ʿAlī Sardār Jaʿfarī. Muhammad Sadiq, like many Urdu critics, noted that the literature of this period (around the 1930s and 1940s) was characterized by a movement away from stereotyped subjects (such as human and divine love), and marked increasingly by a depiction of the “real” world rather than some imaginary realm, and by its concurrent shift of interest toward the human personality and this life rather than the afterlife. But Sadiq points out that in this period, “there has been very little formal advance in poetry ... and the poets ... confined themselves to old forms to express the new consciousness” (1964, 240, 245). Even Iqbāl, he adds, often uses a conventional diction and “does not usually mould his language to his individual use,” resulting in some disparity between thought and language (*ibid.*, 372, 378). According to Sadiq, “Iqbāl is not in advance of his age as is often maintained. He is a characteristic product of it” (*ibid.*, 388). Sadiq’s particular contention need not be evaluated here, but his general correlation of the modernity of this literary era with its content (rather than its form) is, I think, justified. The major change in the form of Urdu poetry came with Rashed and Mīrā Jī. Many Urdu critics have labeled Rashed the “rebel” of Urdu poetry. That this change in form was an index of deeper changes in man’s psyche was suggested by Khalīlūʿr-Raḥmān Aʿzamī in his article “Rāshīd kā Zehnī Irtiqāʿ” (Rashed’s Mental Development): “There is no doubt that from Ḥālī and Āzād to Iqbāl, and from Iqbāl through Jōsh, Ḥāfiẓ, etc. ... the Urdu poem has been changing slowly, but the growth of these changes remained within the confines of the verse-writing of our established traditions” (1978, 64).

A'zamī holds that these changes in the Urdu poem were merely a reflex of social and political developments, and were not the “necessary product of the requirements of a new mentality.” The latter emerged only, he says, with Rashed and Mirā Jī (*ibid.*).

Again, 'Ālam Khūndmīrī, in his “Nūn Mīm Rāshid: Insān aur Khudā” (N. M. Rashed: Man and God), points out that Rashed's “rebellion” concerns not merely political or social aspects of life, but an entire metaphysical conception of the place of Man in the universe ([1971], 52). A'zamī explains that the modes of poetry prevalent in Urdu prior to Rashed and Mirā Jī were predictable insofar as their treatment of emotions, perceptions and concepts was conducted according to a straightforward logic with no complexity of form. In contrast, he says, the modern Urdu poem as composed by Rashed is informed by a mixture of narrative and dramatic modes, with the use of one or several personae. It follows a complex pattern where the mental processes of characters break the logical continuity of time and space (1978, 65). A'zamī, somewhat typically of Urdu critics, characterizes Rashed's poetry as élitist, ambiguous, intellectual, cacophonous, and employing a symbolism distinct from the traditional stock of symbols in Urdu poetry (*ibid.*, 66–71).

Krishan Chandar asserts that Rashed's essential creative mode comprises unconscious free association which rests upon the creation of a harmony between psychological discreteness and emotional continuity, a harmony discernible not in the parts of a poem but in its organic wholeness (1941, 113). We might add to these insights Rashed's own statement that “If the justification for the new mode of expression is not internal to the subject-matter, technique becomes merely a contrivance. The essential criterion is harmony between style and subject” (1941, 17). Rashed is of course voicing a principle that goes back to Horace and Aristotle.

T. S. Eliot and N. M. Rashed: Their Modernistic Contexts

The social and intellectual contexts of Western modernism are well-known. Precipitated largely by the various crises of imperialism and capitalism that culminated in the widespread destruction of the First World War, the loss of the “sense of absoluteness” mentioned by F. R. Leavis embraced a severe destabilizing of theological explanations of the world. Consequently, every system of thought became self-consciously relativistic, and any sense of a shared reality could no longer be presupposed. The notion of objectivity became, at most, tentative, being consid-

ered a construction of collective, historical human subjectivity. These changes in thinking inform the very form of verse written by modernists such as T. S. Eliot, characterized as this was by fragmentation, allusion and discontinuity.

Eliot's early poems, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Portrait of Lady," and "Preludes," were viewed by Ezra Pound and other influential literary contemporaries as inaugurating a new era in the form and mood of poetry. When his long poem *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, it generated a broad range of poetic and literary-critical controversies that have survived to this day in the academic world. Many earlier reviewers dismissed the poem as incoherent and as violating the very requirements of poetry. As we have seen, it took the insight and interpretations of critics such as F. R. Leavis, as well as Eliot's own growing literary-critical reputation, to establish for the poem a broad acceptance. It was then widely viewed as the archetypal instance of modernist poetry, and its subsequent influence was incalculable. This poem effectively changed the way in which poetry was written; it enlarged and to some extent redefined the horizons of the aesthetically possible.

Over the last fifty years or so, we have come to appreciate more fully the complexity and heterogeneity of literary modernism, in its nature and genesis. It is no longer regarded as simply a symbolist and imagistic reaction against nineteenth-century realism or naturalism or later versions of Romanticism. It is not so much that modernism, notwithstanding the political conservatism of many of its practitioners, turns away from the project of depicting reality; what more profoundly underlies modernistic literary forms is an awareness that the definitions of reality become increasingly complex and problematic. Modernists came to this common awareness by different paths: Yeats drew on the occult, on Irish myth and legend, as well as the Romantics and French Symbolists; Proust drew on the insights of Bergson; Virginia Woolf, on Bergson, G. E. Moore and others; Pound drew on various non-European literatures as well as French writers; T. S. Eliot, whose poetic vision was profoundly eclectic, drew on Dante, the Metaphysical poets, Laforgue, Baudelaire, and a number of philosophers.

The peculiar features of modernism are well known. They include: (1) The affirmation of a continuity, rather than a separation, between the worlds of subject and object, the self and the world. The human self is not viewed as a stable entity which simply engages with an already present external world of objects and other selves. (2) A perception of the complex roles of time, memory and history in the mutual construction of self

and world. Time is not conceived in a static model which separates past, present and future as discrete elements in linear relation; rather, it is viewed as dynamic, with these elements influencing and changing one another. Human history is thus not already written; even the past can be altered in accordance with present human interests, motives and viewpoints. (3) A breakdown of any linear narrative structure following the conventional Aristotelian model which prescribes beginning, middle and end. Modernist poetry tends to be fragmented, creating its own internal “logic” of emotion, image, sound, symbol and mood. (4) An acknowledgment of the complexity of experience: any given experience is vastly more complex than can be rendered in literal language. For example, the experience of “love” could be quite different from one person to another, yet language coercively subsumes these differing experiences under the same word and concept. Modernist poetry tends to veer away from any purported literal use of language which might presume a one-to-one correspondence between words and things. It relies far more on suggestion and allusion rather than overt statement. (5) A self-consciousness regarding the process of literary composition. This embraces both an awareness of how one’s own work relates to the literary tradition as a whole, and also an ironic stance toward the content of one’s own work. (6) Finally, and most importantly, an awareness of the problematic nature of language. This indeed underlies the other elements cited above. If there is no simple correspondence between language and reality, and if these realms are mutually constituted through patterns of coherence, then a large part of the poet’s task lies in a more precise use of language which offers alternative definitions of reality. Eliot once said, in his essay on Metaphysical poetry, that “poets in our civilization ... must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity.... The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (1972, 289).

The earliest poems of N. M. Rashed were written in traditional forms. It was around 1932 that he started writing “free verse” (which, as both he and Eliot recognized, was never wholly “free”) in Urdu, some twenty years after European poets. Rashed also published critical essays and was later to translate T. S. Eliot’s famous essay “The Three Voices of Poetry.”² Rashed produced four volumes of poetry between 1942 and his death in 1976. He traveled widely, living for long periods in eastern and western

²This translation was published in the journal *Na’i Tabir-e-Ni*, September 1954.

countries, an experiential synthesis reflected in his verse. He was influenced both by Arab and Persian writers (such as al-Ma‘arrī and Rūmī) as well as the French Symbolists and Western modernists in the vein of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Like Eliot’s verse, Rashed’s poetry is obscure, allusive and questions the very nature of language. And, as with Eliot’s work, these qualities conspire to deny it any “popular” appeal. Those who respect and enjoy Rashed are primarily intellectuals prepared to welcome novelty and difficulty. Moreover, Rashed sometimes expressed towards religion a cynicism so deep and cutting that he wounded and alienated the orthodox. It is worth noting, however, that Rashed took exception not to the doctrines of Islam per se but to the particular fatalistic, dogmatic and inert interpretation of Islam he saw as pervading the cultural practices of the Indian subcontinent: it was this passive spirit of submission, he felt, that had contributed to Asia’s decline in the modern world. But it is often assumed, quite incorrectly, that he was an atheist. Although Rashed was cynical towards orthodox religion, his near obsession with religion reflects his spiritual struggles and his failure to find an effective religious solution. Even Eliot, a confirmed Anglo-Catholic, had said that in the modern world religious doubt is a variety of religious belief: it is part of the process whereby one arrives at God (1927a, 16). For all his rebellion against dogma and rigidity of custom, Rashed’s sensibility was inevitably shaped by religion, and the bitterness of his disillusionment with his spiritual heritage betrays a continuing dialogue with his sense of the divine. This is borne out by the comments of his widow, Sheila Rashed, who states in a letter: “My husband was not what one would call a practicing Moslem. But he was a deeply religious person in the true sense of the word” (1976, 3).

Whereas Eliot’s early philosophical skepticism eventually culminated in his return to an Anglo-Catholic emphasis on the Incarnation, Rashed’s foiled religious search ended in a broad humanism, encompassing a hatred of totalitarianism and a belief in the sacredness of individual rights (*ibid.*, 4). Rashed stated that his verse endeavored “to stress some of the current problems, the foremost among them for me being the alien rule, religious dogmatism, moral repressions ... which had continuously dwarfed the Asian soul...” (1971, 2). Rashed’s credo seems, at first sight, to be an unabashed bourgeois liberal individualism, which hardly sounds revolutionary in the West, but in his own tradition, he was reacting against a profound tradition of self-abnegation and subservience to orthodoxy.

If Eliot's modernism was in some ways a reaction against the traditions of both Romanticism and nineteenth-century realism, the trajectory of Rashed's modernism was somewhat different. For one thing, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, realism, in both literary and epistemological terms, was a uniquely Western phenomenon, and reached Eastern cultures only through importation and mimesis (1988, 120–22). In reacting against bourgeois realism, Eliot drew upon the resources of French Symbolism as well as the idealism of the neo-Hegelian philosopher F. H. Bradley, as well as the philosophy of Time espoused by the French philosopher Bergson. In Urdu poetry, however, there is no indigenous tradition of realism, a fact which is hardly surprising since the rise of the bourgeois class—of which realism was the fundamental ideological mode—was a delayed phenomenon in the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, in contrast to English, literary Urdu is an intrinsically symbolic language which was, until very recent times, sharply differentiated from the everyday idiom. In a sense, of course, every language is symbolic and, modern theorists would argue, metaphorical, but the difference in question is one of degree, as determined by literary tradition and consensus. There are so many symbols in literary Urdu that the language is already in a sense allegorical. Hence an integral impulse of modernism in Urdu poetry was a movement toward realism rather than a reaction against it. Faiz's poetry, for example, moves toward a realistic outlook in a number of ways: (a) It lays considerable stress on the literal, rather than symbolic, meanings of words; and where it is symbolic, it often invests conventional symbols with new import. (b) It is often preoccupied with present situations, arising from reflections on the poet's own experience, and addressing contemporary political figures and social problems. (c) To some extent, it offers both particular evocations of the external world as well as explorations of the persona's own psychological states. (d) It is highly secular in its outlook, viewing the world as an assemblage of particular facts and events which are not subsumed under any providential or teleological scheme. All of these are commonly acknowledged features of realism, and Faiz's verse, while it retains many traditional symbols often infused with new political significance, is at least partly informed by these principles of realism. Rashed himself acknowledged this mixture of modes in his predecessor, stating that "Faiz stands at the junction of romanticism and realism..." (1971, 8).

If Faiz's language tends to be more literal than that of his predecessors, the more modernist movement in Urdu literature, spearheaded by Rashed and Mirā Jī, took this literalization of the language to its current

extreme. It has long been the contention, and in my view a valid one, of Marxist critics that a poem reflects its social and ideological determinants far more profoundly in its form than its overt content. And in formal terms, the modernization of Urdu poetry was not merely a superficial matter of writing in so-called *vers libre* or of writing about “everyday life.” The most profound change in Urdu verse was the relative “literalization” and “desymbolization” of the language: it is this which underlies the other advances such as the blurring of distinction between poetry and prose, the extension of poetic subject matter to encompass “individual” experience, a focusing on the present instead of the past, as well as an attention to detail and continuity of description. Hence, whereas much Western modernist poetry, symbolist in technique, was an implicit reaction against realism, Rashed’s poetry develops from an initial symbolism inherited from the Urdu tradition, moving through realism to a new, more complex symbolist technique. Indeed, a poet, however revolutionary, is obliged to begin with the tradition he or she inherits. It is a mark of Rashed’s stature that he did not indulge in an empty imitation of Western models: this would have produced an artificial poetry which corresponded to no real issues in his social context. Rather, Rashed integrates both Eastern and Western influences into a self-questioning verse form.

Like any other Urdu poet, Rashed began by composing ghazals. But he ended by writing freer verse which was not only remarkable in its subtlety but carried Urdu poetry to unprecedented extremes of innovation. This development was quite conscious as shown by these comments in an unpublished manuscript of Rashed’s:

... my poetry ... has passed through three ... stages. Earlier poems, in *Māvarāʾ* [Beyond], are characterized by youthful exuberance. Most of the poems are ... so-called love poems, but underneath exists a consciousness of social and moral repressions surrounding the youth which make it impossible for any love to flower. In the ... second period, the latter theme finds more concrete expression in some anger and resentment against political domination, social and moral inhibitions and religious dogmatism. This further led to a broad humanistic ideology.... Poems after “*Īrān mēñ Ajnabī*” [Foreigner in Iran] have developed a somewhat global context.... They concern ... *Man* as such....

(n.d. Brief, [1])

Rashed’s earlier poems exhibit the old symbolist mode of Urdu poetry coexisting with, but subordinated to, a more realistic mode. The earlier poems, mostly in *Māvarāʾ* (Beyond) (1941), are written in this realistic

vein. Love is viewed as something painful and impossible, as in traditional Urdu verse. But the pain here is a real wound, sustained from an actual relationship. And the impossibility of love is an insight derived after the event: it is not simply the defining form of love.

The title of Rashed's third collection, *Lā = Insān* (X = Man) (1969), indicates, as in his statement just quoted, that he was moving away from immediate political dilemmas towards a more general perception of the difficulty of defining Man. If Man's nature is not prescribed by religion, and society offers an incomplete explanation, there is something mysterious and problematic about existence. A Western reader might see this as merely passing from one mystifying image to another: yet it has something in common with existentialist views of Man as well as the many Western philosophical visions which deny Man any "nature" as such. By this stage of Rashed's writing we can see that what were previously perceptions on the level of content have become so deeply thought through that they are sublimated into the formal structure of his verse. Rashed is now concentrating as much on the inadequacy of language to convey experience as the most accomplished of Western modernists. A good example is a poem entitled "Voh Ḥarf-e Tanhā (Jisē Tamannā'-e Vaṣl Ma'nā)" (That Lonesome Word (Which Desires to Unite with Meaning)):

Our limbs, raised in prayer toward the sky:
 (Don't look at the sky!)
 Is this to bypass harm in a fragile place
 Or a pretext for hiding from our deprivations?
 That ancient and high god (Paradise in truth)
 Shall one day deliver us from god
 For on this earth we are as a lonesome Word
 (But it won't be a world like this) silent and speaking
 Which lives in desire for accord with meaning

Grant us the dream of Ma'arrī
 (Grant each a smile fitting his vision's breadth)
 Grant us the vexation of Ma'arrī's soul ...

(In Habib 2003, 70–71)

The poem is a dialogue between its bracketed and unbracketed parts. It is not a conversation between two people, but a debate within one mind whose stream of thought is continually interrupted. The speaker is unidentifiable, talking in a vacuum, with no perceptible audience except his own unconscious. The "lonesome Word" was *the* Word, God, and is now humankind. The only place where it can unite with meaning is the

human mind: the gap between word and meaning embodies human doubt, the subject matter of the poem. God undergoes an ontological shift, from being a reality to subsisting as a concept. This challenges the traditional irreducibility to language of the Logos, which is not simply a linguistic designation of God but betokens the rational order of Creation itself. In other words, the self-referential nature of the Logos is denied, and the Word is reduced to merely another word in the system of language. This is an implicit recognition that the “reality” of God has been passed down through language. Even here, it is stripped of referentiality, to signify humanity’s blindness to even the phenomenal appearance of God. But, paradoxically, it is a blindness toward which the persona aspires: the classical Arab poet Abu’l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī, also a religious skeptic, was blind, and Rashed paradigmatically invokes him to exemplify the continuity of religious illusion. The entire poem, in fact, paradoxically takes the form of a prayer, a prayer for blindness rather than insight, the end being Ma‘arrī’s profound spiritual vexation as opposed to a shallow certainty. These are themes which are continued in a yet more experimental vein in Rashed’s fourth book, significantly entitled *Gumān kā Mumkin* (The Possibility of Doubt). Here, the breakdown of language and narrative extends even to individual words and Rashed’s versifying is sustained by neologisms.

A Comparison of the Poetry of Eliot and Rashed

The foregoing parallels and contrasts between the modernistic contexts of Eliot and Rashed of course profoundly inform their respective modes of writing verse, as can be seen by a detailed comparison of Eliot’s poem “Gerontion” with Rashed’s poem “Ṣabā Virān” (Desolate Sheba). Both of these poems present an image of civilization. The title of Eliot’s poem is a transliteration of the Greek word for “a little old man.” Its theme is essentially the sterility of modern civilization, and the musings of the persona or speaker of the poem, the old man, could be interpreted as being addressed to God or Christ. We might usefully consider one central aspect of poetic form—the use of a persona—and situate this within the differences of social context and literary tradition mentioned above. In his influential essay of 1919, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot had advanced an “impersonal theory” of poetry which saw it not as an expression of personal emotion but of a more objectified analysis of the poet’s emotions in their engagement with the world (1972, 20). Eliot was reacting

against what he saw as a Romantic tradition and was attempting to reinstate a new classicism. In “Gerontion,” Eliot uses a poetic persona to achieve a certain impersonality of expression. Here is how the poem begins:

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
 Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
 I was neither at the hot gates
 Nor fought in the warm rain
 Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
 Bitten by flies, fought.
 My house is a decayed house, [...]

(1927b, 13)

In using the very word “I,” Eliot ingeniously suppresses personality, via the simple device of making that “I” symbolic (of civilization or humankind or the modern Western world). This symbolic reading of the “I” is forced by its poetic context: there are no spatial and temporal correlates for seeing the “I” as any particular personal identity. Where, for instance, is “here”? It is not located geographically and has only an ostensive temporal designation in “month,” ostensive since the month itself is not designated. It could refer to any month of any age. Given the unostensive (unspecifying) use of the words “here” and “month,” a use which contrasts with their function in ordinary language, two features emerge: Firstly, that the words in this poem are being stripped of their ordinary meanings and have been reconfigured so as to signify not a physical location but a qualitative one; within the “dryness” signifying, presumably, the aridity of a civilization waiting for rain from a heaven which it no longer views as life-giving.

Secondly, it is this (to use Eliot’s own phrase) “dislocation of language into meaning” resulting in the symbolic persona which is the index of a larger change in human consciousness. In an article entitled “The Modern Mind,” Eliot spoke of the “‘progress in self-consciousness’ in poetry” which “cannot be wholly abstracted from the general changes in the human mind in history” (1933, 121, 122). Such self-consciousness exists on at least two levels in this poem. It occurs as a self-consciousness of language, which is itself seen as problematic and which cannot be simply inserted into some pre-given form but must itself constitute form. Hence, the dislocation of language and the symbolic status of the persona as just described. There is, additionally, a reflexive concern with, not so much the persona’s interaction with an “external” world but rather with the

contents of its own mind. The historical events to which the poem refers, such as the battle of Thermopylae, are part of the speaker's self-consciousness. In fact, we are given a clue to this process of internalization in the last two lines of the poem:

Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

(1927b, 16)

Where the “tenants” may be historical events transformed into thoughts, or, as Hegel might say, substance transformed into subjectivity.

So reflexivity or self-consciousness is the first major modernistic characteristic of this poem. A second feature is the poem's historicity, its awareness of not only some “objective” historical past, now interned within its subjective vision, but also of its own past as a complex of voices in literary tradition, a tradition which it continues through its own speech. The poem does not merely abstractly recognize, but enacts, the historical inclusiveness of meaning via the technique of allusion or reference to previous elements of the tradition. In other words, meaning is not given in some immediate correspondence between its own words and the concepts they designate; rather, meaning is located in the interaction between itself and the other voices of tradition which still speak through its own present, multilayered intonation. The poem conveys the spiritual sterility of civilization through various conglomerations of images: “I was neither at the hot gates ...” suggests that he has no heroic memories. The “decayed house” may signify his own spiritual and physical condition. The cities to which the poem refers—Antwerp, Brussels and London—are trading and financial centers, carrying the implication that the motive of contemporary civilization is exhausted by material and economic aims. The woman is stripped of her sexuality, reduced to making tea and poking the gutter, augmenting the image of sterility, decay and mechanism. The poem continues:

I an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces.

Signs are taken for wonders. “We would see a sign”:
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; [...]

(*ibid.*, 13)

“We would see a sign” was the cry of the unbelieving Pharisees, challenging Christ to prove his divinity. This allusion may point to the obstinacy of civilization’s skepticism. The word within a word may be the Logos, swaddled with darkness in a womb-like absence of understanding. “Christ the tiger” may signify divine wrath. May is depraved, being the time that Christ was crucified, while “dogwood and chestnut” may suggest a coarser, ranker growth over the beauty of spring. What is accumulated in these images is a sense of history as having missed the meaning of the Incarnation, as having divided and torn the message as well as the body of Christ. The whispers suggest not only communion but the scheming behind Christ’s trial and execution and behind more modern guises of this betrayal. Indeed, history has become a directionless maze:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.

(*ibid.*, 14)

While human knowledge has increased in complexity, this complexity has increasingly generated a moral and spiritual confusion, in stark implied contrast with medieval schemes of knowledge where every field had its appointed place and theology stood at the apex. History has lost its bearings, lost any sense of purpose, reducing to both spiritual and physical impotence a modern civilization which is empty of passion and whose very senses have been blunted, dirempted from its ultimate sustenance in God:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use it for your closer contact?

(*ibid.*, 15)

The poem ends, in fact, with images of the old man—humanity—lost in sensual distractions and driven by various winds of destruction to “a

sleepy corner.” History is a part of the old man’s consciousness, as unredeemed memory, internalized as awareness of spiritual inertia.

We can now look at Rashed’s “*Ṣabā Vīrān*,” which might be translated as follows:

DESOLATE SHEBA

Solomon, head in his hands and Sheba desolate,
 Sheba desolate, the home of ghosts,
 Sheba an endless heap of woes,
 World devoid of grass, greenery and flower,
 Winds thirsty for rain,
 Birds of the desert, beaks tucked beneath their wing
 And men, choked on dust.
 Solomon, head in his hands, bitterly disheveled hair,
 World-dominion, world-administration, merely the bounding of a
 deer;
 Love a leaping flame, lust the odor of odorless flowers:
 Speak less of the age’s mysteries!
 Sheba is wasted for still on her soil
 A cunning conqueror’s ravaging prints are still seen
 Sheba is no more, nor her beautiful queen.

Solomon, head in his hands:
 From where now will come a joyful envoy?
 From where, which jar, will come wine into
 The bowl of old age?

(In Habib 2003, 44–45)

Like “Gerontion,” this poem effects a suppression of the authorial “I.” Also like Eliot’s poem, it progresses not through narrative description but evocation through juxtaposition of images. Hence, the two creative principles of “Gerontion”—reflexivity and historicity—also underlie Rashed’s poem. It is reflexive insofar as its content is entirely the condition and thoughts of Solomon, and historicist because it views itself as the product of a tradition in terms of the symbolic significance of Solomon. Moreover, both poems create a symbol of civilization, both convey a fundamental stance toward religion, and both use the symbol of a man in his old age. So, in the same way that Eliot’s poem refuses to yield a “literal” meaning, depending as it does on traditional voices speaking through its own voice, Rashed’s poem derives its meaning not simply from what his words “say” but from their status as self-conscious participants of a history of symbolism.

Solomon, son of David and king of Israel from c. 970 BC, has quite a complex symbolism both in the Qurʾān and the Old Testament. The latter repeatedly refers to Solomon's wealth and wisdom, as in this extract: "So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom" (1 Kings 10:23). But later Solomon is said to do "evil in the sight of the Lord ..." (*ibid.*, 11:6). He was visited by the Queen of Sheba—called Bilqīs in Arabic tradition (*ibid.*, 10). In the Qurʾān, Solomon is said to have been given knowledge by God (27:15), as well as power over the wind (34:12). Sheba, a city in Yemen, is described in the Qurʾān as a beautiful gardened terrain, sustained by a dam which made it a prosperous and civilized area until its people turned away from God; the dam was destroyed and this flourishing "Garden of Arabia" was turned into a waste (34:15–16). And this seems to be the starting point of Rashed's poem.

So in Solomon a number of symbolisms coexist: wisdom, wealth, power, prophethood, kingship, power over the natural world and administrative ability. In Rashed's poem, all of these qualities are negated by their prefixing one word: *sar ba zānū* (literally, head on his knees). Indeed, in an unpublished note on this poem Rashed states:

Solomon in this poem is a conqueror and lover who destroys what he conquers and kills what he loves, and in his old age is left with nothing except a deep remorse and a deep sense of futility. The poem has an allegorical reference to the politicians or dictators of today, who in their keenness to set things in order, often end up with doing exactly the opposite.

(n.d. Notes, [1])

Perhaps the most important factor in using the symbol of Solomon as civilization is the implication of a past where all of Solomon's earlier (Biblical and Qurʾānic) qualities were realizable and capable of generating action. But here even the material conditions of action are absent: as in "Gerontion," there is no narrative description of place. Saba, in the poem, is no more than a symbol, its attributes of aridity and lifelessness serving to evoke the consciousness of the man in his old age; they do not describe anything in the world. The *jabān kbālī* (empty world) describes not the world but the changed conception of the old man towards it. Even words such as *ghiyāb* and *sabza* are not referential but symbolic. Just as the winds in "Gerontion" were symbolic of impending destruction, the winds in this poem may relate to Solomon's symbolic status as a prophet, the message perhaps being that in the modern world, the notion of prophethood, with all its associations of tidings and revelation, lacks any

explanatory life: the very notion is waiting for rain. Even the birds, who in the Qurʾān are said to have acted as Solomon’s scouts or messengers, are not birds of any real world. They are again symbolic of the lack of any redemptive agency in the desert of his mind. The line: “World-dominion, world-administration, merely the bounding of a deer ...” has both a personal and an historical sense. It is historical insofar as all the attempts of prophethood to establish a kingdom on earth—it was one of Solomon’s missions, as described in both the Bible and Qurʾān, to build the House of God in Jerusalem. The image of the leaping deer suggests a fatuous and directionless expenditure of energy consumed in humanity thinking according to a divine plan. This image possibly echoes the image of the bounding deer in the “Song of Solomon” in the Old Testament: “The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a roe or a young hart ...” (2:8–9). And it could be significant that the image of Solomon presented in the Qurʾān is wholly good, whereas in the Bible he is said to misbehave in his later years. So it is possible that Rashed’s poem is juxtaposing two contrasting images of Solomon, or self-consciously evoking contradictory associations or conflicting interpretations of both history and prophethood.

The next line, *ze rāz-e dabr kamtar gō* (speak less of the age’s mysteries) leads into what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the poem. Until now, the poem’s tone and imagery have conveyed a retrospective dejection and loss, but now the evocative mode suddenly stops with a forceful intrusion of abstract statement and reasoning (as occurs in the “history” passage in “Gerontion”). The persona of the poem, which has been created up to this point, is suddenly swept aside with an authorial intrusion. The next three lines are not Solomon’s thoughts or any evocation of his state, but the poet speaking directly, as it were, in an outburst of political realism:

Sheba is wasted for still on her soil
A cunning conqueror’s ravaging prints are still seen
Sheba is no more, nor her beautiful queen.

(In Habib 2003, 44–5)

The plunderers could be the British or the Americans or even the Russians, who had designs on Iran’s oil resources. The point is that the line refers, urgently, to something in the real world. Such an interpretation might lead to a retrospective assessment of Solomon as being a symbol of the United Nations, and this multiple symbolism from past and present is the means whereby the poem achieves historicity or historical self-con-

sciousness. Alternatively, we might say that historicity is a constructive principle of the poem, as it was with “Gerontion.”

The final three lines of the poem continue its multiple symbolism: there will be no prophetic revelations or messengers with glad tidings to bring life into the old man’s conception of himself, which is his past, or into a civilization which has outgrown the vitality previously imbibed from religion. While Rashed’s poem may have been influenced by certain Western modernist principles—such as allusion to tradition, internally constructed symbolism, lack of ornamentation, economy and precision of diction—it nonetheless perpetuates the exquisite tendency of Urdu poetry toward abstraction and is still somewhat removed from personal experience.

To assess the significance of these similarities and differences between the two poems is a complex task and here just one or two generalizing suggestions will be ventured. A useful starting point might be a famous essay on Western modernism by the Hegelian-Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs entitled “The Ideology of Modernism.” Here Lukacs asserts a principle basic to Marxist literary criticism, that the style or form of a literary work is ultimately determined by the worldview underlying that work. According to Lukacs, the ontological image of Man in realism is as “*zoon politikon*,” a social or political animal, where the being of characters cannot be distinguished from their social-historical environment. In contrast, the image of Man in modernism is as a solitary being, asocial and unable to enter into relations with other human beings except in a superficial and accidental way (1963, 19–20).

Applying Lukacs’s insights, we might say that the image of Man presented in “Gerontion” is that of a fragmented Self; the Self is no longer seen as a definable or composite entity interacting in an observable way with an objective world. That is why the experience of this Self cannot be conveyed using subjects and predicates in an ordinary manner. Also, the Self’s experience of time is seen as complex, mediated by memory and consciousness; hence events cannot be depicted in any chronological or systematic order. The subject and object of experience are not mutually distinguishable but rather merge into each other. Thus, Gerontion, in Eliot’s poem, has no definable personality; he is merely an ensemble of images and evocations which constitute his consciousness. He is not totally distinguishable from his house, the Jew is an aspect of him, his awareness of having failed Christ and his reflections on history are all part of the same non-identity. So, in Lukacsian terms, Man is here expressed as

a being totally cut off from anything outside of his experience; he has no coherent relation to other people, or to social institutions.

Such a view of Man reflects what Bryan S. Turner calls the “subjective experience of a rational society”: a society where capitalism has developed to the extent that Man feels alienated from the products of his own labor as well as from other human beings; a society where every institution is felt to be impersonal and incomprehensible; a society which is secularized at the psychological level, where there is no viable conception of a deity as furnishing order and direction (1978, 155–56). Each of these features of capitalist society is embodied in the conception of Self which governs the form of Eliot’s poem. The Logos, or Christ, who offers potential redemption or provides a fixed point against which the meaning and direction of history can unfold, is lost in the dark chaos of humanistic relativism. That is why the poem reflects existential crisis: such crisis, located wholly within subjective experience, cannot be expressed by a realistic mode.

The formal techniques of Rashed’s poem are similar to those used by Eliot. And what is at stake in his individualism also is the complex phenomenon of secularization. This phenomenon, the decline of religion in terms of both institutional power and thought, is one that occurred almost exclusively in the West. It began effectively with the Protestant Reformation in Europe; this contributed to the displacement of a Roman Catholic emphasis on “other-worldliness” (whereby this life was regarded as transitory and essentially worthless) by a supposedly more rational “this-worldliness,” whereby the present world rose in significance. Many Enlightenment and nineteenth-century developments of thought extrapolated these implications: science, Biblical scholarship, evolutionary and political theories all contributed in various ways to loosen the grip of religion on the human imagination. But all of these were epiphenomenal of economic developments: it was essentially the rise to political power of the bourgeoisie on the waves of industrialization, urbanization, economic rationalism and individualism that threw back the defining shores of religion. Islamic cultures simply did not undergo these economic changes until much later, hence the correlative displacement of religious thought, in terms of both intellectual institutions and personal psychology, was also delayed. Inasmuch as secularization has occurred in Muslim nations, it has been mimetic of Western secularization. It has been a surface phenomenon, with no economic foundation until the relatively recent past. It should be said that Islam was never as exclusively “other-worldly” as Roman Catholicism. It has always had a practical and rational empha-

sis. But equally, it has never been divested of its “other-worldly” strain which is, as with most religions, its *ultimate* foundation. So, when we encounter secularized attitudes in Eastern poets such as Rashed, it is worth remembering that such figures were part of an intellectual élite nurtured on exposure to international currents of thought. Rashed achieved some externality to his literary tradition but had the acuity and knowledge to criticize that tradition from within. Even Rashed’s unorthodoxies are a testament to the way Islam defines the lineaments of a person’s psyche in Muslim culture: it is always the starting point and one would rather blame God for Man’s misfortunes than seek a wholly secular explanation. Ironically, then, Eliot’s modernism, arising within a secularized context, seeks a retrospective path toward the totalizing vision offered by religion. Rashed’s modernism is necessarily political and sees its only viable path as humanistic. Essentially the same formal poetic features subserve both of these endeavors. □

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