

***The Convergence of Aesthetics and Politics in the Poetry of Yasmeen Hameed:  
A Voice from Pakistan***

Iffat Sayeed, University of the Punjab, Pakistan

The European Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The paper looks at the mystique of the poetic process and the manner in which the subterranean cultural and primal patterns of the mind of the poet – Yasmeen Hameed, manifest themselves in the lyrics. Contrary to the western paradigm of duality such patterns are studied in the light of the oriental Sufi tradition where *I and you* pine for each other. The *thee* is perceived as the core and the *me* is in a perpetual quest/voyage gyrating towards the core. The convergence of these two poles is the unison that has both aesthetic/intellectual relevance as well as spiritual resonances for the reader and the poet alike. This gravitational pull finds expression in an idiom that is almost metaphysical in the poetry of Yasmeen Hameed.

The paper explores how the two poles of the artistic process, the technical craftsmanship and content converge and finds expression in a language that is transparent as well as veiled. It also studies the way in which the visceral, existential poetic experience connects and transcends the un-etched boundary between eons to reach the primeval beginning of Time; the evocation of atoms in motion and the infusion of the spirit of Time.

The paper concludes with reference to the convergence of aesthetics and politics drawing inspiration from the native flora and fauna as well as the gross political realities of rampant fear, terrorism and global capitalism.

Keywords; creative process, primal patterns, eons, metaphysical, visceral, sufi tradition

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

Yasmeen Hameed, the recipient of many prestigious national awards is Coordinator of the Gurmani Center for Languages and Literature at Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan. Hameed is a bold and eloquent voice steeped in the aesthetics and politics of her native land-the land of Sufi saints and mystics who, according to her perception deciphered the first word. The language constraints compel me to resort to the medium of English language and thereby deny myself the chance to introduce all of you to the flavors and delectable tastes of my native language Urdu. I therefore, attempt a translation of the verse in an idiom that I hope will reach to the heterogeneous readership.<sup>1</sup> I would like to point out that Urdu script in itself is calligraphic elegant and beautiful. Following is an excerpt from the Urdu script of the poem *Generation after Generation* by Yasmeen Hameed (2012) The quote is from the first verse stanza. The title of the poem in Urdu is *Silsila Dar Silsila*:

ادھورے سر پہرے کردار  
اپنی داستانوں کے کھلے اوراق پر  
بکھرے ہوئے کردار  
قندیلیں اٹھائے  
نعرہ زن  
آتش فشاں سینوں میں پلتے خواب لے کر چل رہے ہیں  
اور کہانی حتم ہوے کو نہیں آتی

The Urdu script writes from right to left. The alphabets are not symbols like the Chinese language but they are a variation on different shapes. Some are like circles, others are oval, others are oblong and some taper off in a curve, or dip in concave or convex.

Toni Morrison in her acceptance speech for the award of the Noble Prize draws an analogy between words and life force. She talks of language as holding of a bird in hand and it is up to the holders to kill it or let it fly free (Allen, 1997). She chooses to read the bird as “language” and the wise woman as a “practiced write”. She “thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control” (Allen, 1997). Poets voice existential experiences through the descriptive medium of language. I quote Toni Morrison again “the vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it” (Allen, 1997).

Hameed writes in her poem - *Generation after Generation* (2012) of language in terms of a cumulative resource and torch bearer of a tradition. The ontological questions raised in the poem are disturbing but the poise of the poem is not disturbed.

That nascent word  
On a blank leaf  
Written by forbears  
Yours and mine  
With a dull drop of blood  
By forebears,

---

<sup>1</sup> Yasmeen Hameed writes in her national language Urdu. All translations of her poetry mentioned in this paper have been carried out by the author of the paper.

Yours and mine  
Disrupts the continuity of the narrative

The poem talks of a narrative and foregrounds the “word” that sustains the narrative as well as writes itself into being. The details of the recital are sparing. The word in itself gains strength as it appears first in the form of an onlooker, who is, perhaps a privy to a shared knowledge involving drops of blood. What do these drops of blood signify - perhaps some political, personal or official secrets/skeletons in the closet. The word then intervenes as a participant empowered sufficiently to disrupt the continuum of the narrative. The “you and I” of the poem in the very next lines spills into the communal context and reaches far back into the recesses of a shared ancestry – the common forbears or even further back than that where man as a subject is hewing into a form. The word first bridges the gap between generations and then becomes a connect transcending the boundary between eons to reach into the recesses of primeval time and hew itself into a form that defines all forms. But what grand metanarrative does it disturb? What precisely is the word? What is the load that it carries? How does the “word” that Hameed writes about in the third verse stanza as:

That same word  
That pervades the space between you and I

Later in the poem “word” translates into a parchment that evokes an all pervasive, but vague and unclassified ambiguity or some palimpsest and how the poet while maintaining the rhythmic poise makes it (word) a repository of, again in the words of the poet:

The scripture of woe  
The tale of sorrow  
That we create  
Day after day  
Night after nights

Our postmodern sensibility alerts us to the inversion or disruption of the narrative hinted at in the poem in the phrase, “that we create”. The polyphonic voices that sound in the “We”, the pronoun for the plurals - you and I, bring the readers and the poet together to view this act of creation in the inscription as a re-write or an over write or an erasure. The various tales are being created within the narrative but at what cost? The next lines exhort us to take note of that inversion as it is at the cost of posterity:

That very word  
Pause and think  
Is the legacy of generations  
Yours and mine  
Those are yet to be born

The phrase “pause and think” is significant. It manages the delicate balance between the two ancient imperatives of poetry – the paradigm of delight and instruction and the paradigm of aesthetics and politics. One cannot fail to notice the subtle, plangent, heaving of a shared responsibility into the rhythm and texture of the poem. The

brevity and autonomy in the linguistic structure of poem directs the attentive reader to the spaces within the succession of the lines of the poem. And by extension, to the spaces that lie within the socio- psychological and private framework of the readers. I mentioned in my abstract that the primal, cultural and subterranean patterns of mind find their way into the lyrics of the poem and the poem thus expands its scope and frees itself from the here and now to both looks towards posterity - “generations that are to come” and backwards to the ancestors: “forebears, yours and mine”. However, the intonation of the poem is accusatory as it points a finger at all of us for a silent complicity in the distortion and disruption of the narrative of the “First word”. Responsibility and penalty can never be evaded. Each word that we utter is an act with consequence.

The mystique of the creative process remains a closed door- a door to which I suppose, there is no key. It scales myriad battlements and cultures embedded in the archetypal patterns within the mind, of which only a glimpse is afforded to readers. The recourse open to a scholar is, therefore, a reflective reading of the poems and take pleasure in the accompanying enhancement of one’s sensorial. Poetry brings into play one’s entire sensory apparatus by bringing us to the threshold of instinctive, intuitive, primeval consciousness. To lend weight to my argument, I draw upon Seamus Heaney (2002) writing about the “governing power of poetry”:

At its greatest moments it would attempt, in Yeast’s phrase, to hold in a single thought reality and justice. Yet even then its function is not essentially supplicatory or transitive. Poetry is more a threshold than a path, one constantly approached and constantly departed from, at which reader and writer undergo in their different ways the experience of being at the same time summoned and released (Heaney, 2002, p. 190).

I herald Yasmeen Hameed as a voice from Pakistan who is totally immersed, first hand in the local scene absorbing, assimilating the nuances and intones of its landscape and its rich, cultural, literary and volatile political tradition. The poem, *Generation after Generation* (2012), opens on a scene of protests and road marches:

Holding torches and raising slogans  
Strewn on the open leaves of their narratives  
Incomplete, eccentric characters  
With dreams  
Nurturing in their volcanic bosoms  
Stride ahead  
And  
The narrative continues.

The scene in poem evokes the memory of Josh Malihabadi, a renowned Pakistani poet who was one of the stalwarts at the forefront of the Progressive Writers’ Association which was formed in the pre-partition days in the year 1936. Following is the translation of Malihabadi’s famous verse that speaks of political upheavals in no veiled words;

Youth is my name, and mutation is my mission  
My slogan: Revolution. Revolution. Revolution

Whereas Josh wrote of these spectacles to draw attention, I would say on an urgent basis as a part of his poetic agenda to challenge the political and socio-cultural status quo. Hameed draws attention to these issues with a slant. She alludes to the seething fury of the oppressed or the underdog not as a display, easily recognizable panoply but a lean into the realm of imagination and fantasy. By fantasy I do not simply mean an unrestricted free play of imagination but a controlled desire to subvert and redress. In order to avoid any lengthy explanation, I quote from the introductory chapter of *Fantasy, The Literature of Subversion* by RoseMary Jackson (1981). She writes about the power of fantasy as being central to the issue of social change.

Fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which the cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, onto disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent (Jackson, 1981, p.11).

The following poem is inspired by a headline in a newspaper and a printed photograph of an Afghan woman shedding tears during a one minute silence to commemorate the International Woman's Day in Kabul on 8th March 2002. The title of the poem in Urdu is *Khawateen Ka Almi Din*. The title in English is translated as *The International Women's Day*:

She heard the narrative of her wasted life  
And absorbed somebody's sympathy  
In her dim, fragile eyes  
Folding the memorandum of her youth  
In her obese body  
And taut vessels of the brain  
She stood up  
To seat herself straight  
Back on her seat -----  
There were countless people in the gathering  
A few of the faces were printed in the newspaper  
- the next day was spent in looking at the pictures

This is in no way a less politically charged poem. Without resorting to any scathing parody or pastiche, Hameed engages the reader into a poignant discourse that accuses nobody and yet spares none.

The chaos and commotion of a world that is always at cross purposes with either its own self or the other contending forces finds way in the intonation and images of the poems. The obese body and the taut vessels of the brain become a passage to the net work of invisible nerves that pulsate in the body of the Afghan women and, by extension find a corresponding resonance in the reader's deepest centers of acute sensations and perceptions. The poem addresses all of us who stand at the threshold of this passage. The participants and the spectators of the great game of power and politics that is played in my region are not only challenged, they are ridiculed and reduced to a travesty.

It is pertinent to refer to another poem by Hameed (2012). The title of the poem is: *We learn but Nothing* and in Urdu it reads as *Hum kuch nahin seekhtay*:

With the help of time machine  
We shall manage a habitat  
In the season that we favor the most  
And those - the ones who receive the rusted machines  
For a share  
Might not be able to turn back and revisit  
And if at all  
It would be  
Only to play back the same life entirely  
Making the same resolutions  
And would weep as much  
Laugh out as much  
And feel as regretful as before

While translating the poem I wondered at the self assurance of our race that is convinced of its higher status in the hierarchy of mammals, has appropriated unreasonable license to besot the planet with all sorts of calamities.

In the chirp of birds  
There is no sound of regret  
We learn no lessons from the birds  
Simply because we are a higher status  
We only yearn for higher flights  
To besot the ones traversing this terrain  
With sudden calamities

The high flights that mankind achieves are at the cost of a severance with the bed rock of life itself. Land is no more sacred. Instead of being absorbed in its fecundity, its energy is being put to a ruthless, unaccountable process of depletion; fodder to its chemical factories. I read the verse:” besotting of earth with sudden calamities”, as an extended metaphor for nuclear and chemical spill overs. The voice of the poet in this scenario becomes the voice of community. The personal pronoun I again spills into the collective noun. At this point I am reminded of a celebrated voice of the century – Jonathan Bate (2000). Elaborating the analogy between the climax ecosystem and the poetic process he writes:

The idea is that poetry – perhaps because of its rhythmic and mnemonic intensity – is an especially efficient system for recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community. Every time we read or discuss a poem, we are recycling its energy back into our cultural environment (Bate, 2000).

The poem entitled: *We are Born in two Ages* (Hameed, 2012) is originally *Hum dou Zamano main paida huain*, in Urdu. While talking of the tacit complicity of each one of us in this process of denudation Hameed writes:

Like barren women and barren relationship  
Silence fell upon the populace  
Striking a peace accord with their fates  
Acquiescing to oppression  
They immersed themselves in the salt mines  
And, have taken upon themselves to lick the walls

History is often disclaimed by most quarters on the basis of its remove from the particular time and space of the events that it chronicles. In this way the recorded history lends itself to distortions and revisions. The authentic record of history than is in the form of oral transmission and human interaction. The poet brings out the elementary, visceral connect that binds one generation with the other regardless of all political contingents and imperatives:

History of our age is at variance  
With the history in our  
Bosoms  
We are born in two ages  
The revulsion of our children  
Shall determine  
The age in which our  
Name is registered

The poet is conscious of the sad cadence in the poem and writes in a self- reflexive mode:

Someone asks us to write happy lyrics  
For the feet that have not yet  
Sprung to spin into a merry jig  
The tyranny of life will fall in pauses  
The entire world must not be in coincidental grief  
Show casing the striking colors of history is an imperative for us

In most of the poems, Hameed writes about words not only as linguistic or social bind, but in terms of animate objects.

Aware of the sacral, sensorial status of words, Hameed (2007) writes in her poem, *On The Slate of Time*:

In a full moment  
In a weak moment  
In a loveless moment  
If he utters any word  
Do not imprint it  
On the slate of life  
But feel that sound  
Ponder.  
Preserve  
The word  
That in a full moment  
In a weak moment  
In a loveless moment  
Breaks before it articulates  
In the resonances of the whirlwind!

Poet being a creature of sensations hears even the silence of the words and the clamor of words in the resonance, call of the whirl wind.

In most of the poems that I have discussed the poet addresses you but it is not an anonymous you. It is you of the mystic, the saint, part of the self towards which the poet gyrates. It is you of the single race of humanity. Man is not auto telic. His ontological being is dependent on others of the species. In the poems, I discern the act of meditation an express imperative. For when we pause and ponder and reflect, we deepen and enrich ourselves. We come closer to the core where the dualities dissolve and we attend to the poet singing to the world her richest thoughts articulating the sounds embedded in the words.

Hameed's preoccupation with words manifests itself in another poem. The original title is *Akhri Mojza* (2007). The translated version is entitled – The Last Miracle. In this poem she shares the spiritual existential experience of an enthralled, ecstatic devotee, captured in a mammoth glass framed picture. The statuette leaps into life to draw her or the poetic persona into the throes of his personal frenzy:

The mute inert picture before me  
With breath withheld  
Framed in a square on a wall  
Leaps  
As if to life  
To see me wail  
Before it.  
Dancing to the throes of erotic frenzy  
A grotesque devotee  
Struggles to break free the confines  
Of mammoth glass.  
One hand of the framed  
Picture – live, awake



Rests on my head:  
- Son of Mary  
Resurrects a miracle

Petrified in the dream  
The clay statuette  
Yearns to script the import.

Like I mentioned earlier on, the poet desires to translate the essence of her existential experience in a script, like the clay statue in the picture “that yearns to script the import. The poet bears witness to the miracle of resurrection. The import of this overwhelming experience finds expression in the first two lines of the poem:

Walls and windows are steeped wet  
Tears quell...

And I as a reader/translator become privy to this intense spiritual and mystical private experience that recalls the world of Faith. Generally the translated version loses the sound and syntax of the local idiom but since the poem bears the weight of the experience of resurrection that is itself physical for both the Christian and Muslim believers, the poem holds on its own even in translation.

Translation involves unavoidably, the carrying of one tradition or the inherited patterns of social, cultural, historical, linguistic and religious practices into another. This carriage into another terrain entails both impairment and restoration. The sound and syntax is lost in translation but the restoration of this loss lies in the interaction between these traditions. In this clash ridden world of ours where the powers that be are fighting to hegemonies the world to a single point of view/ their way of life, it becomes all the more important to bear the weight of other languages, other stances, other narratives to block the lethal discourses of both uni-polarity and exclusion.

Landscape, physical features flora and fauna of a region define a poet’s sensibility. Like the sturdy English Oak tree in this part of the world, the Peepal Tree is a very strong presence – a symbol of irrepressible life and a prayer tree in our part of the World. It enjoys a secular, a mystical and a religious centrality in most parts of central Asia. It is said to be the Bodhi tree under which the great Buddha sat and meditated and attained nirvana. In my part of the country as in the rural parts of other countries where it is indigenous, Peepal tree provides ample space for communal gatherings, debates and conflict resolutions. Peepal tree is to our rustic community what the Acropolis was to the Greeks.

In one of her representative poems- *O Ghaanay Peepal* (2007) Hameed addresses the Peepal Tree as the dense tree that shades a nomad, a gypsy. The poet speaks of the mutual bond between the two as both infuse each other’s essence. Notice the opening lines of the poem:

The swarm odor from the dank body of the gypsy  
Permeates your shade – O Peepal!

The poet establishes a kinship with the tree in the third verse stanza when she looks for empathy towards the Peepal:

My eyes also harbor a tree  
Where teeny birds chirp their chants  
But there is a difference – O Peepal:  
Here the gyres are free of repetitive rotations  
And the leaves are not shed  
The shards grit  
Within the retina

In the poem *Namukhtatum* (2012) that is translated as *Eternal Recurrence*. Hameed talks of the world as a theatre, an almost clichéd analogy with inter textual resonance of the seven stages of man. Whereas Shakespeare speaks of the seven stages as distinct and apart from each other but common to all, Hameed conceives of the world as a theatre where she or by extension any one of us does not play any role cut out in definite categorical terms. The palette that colors a mix to bring us into being is neither dark nor bright, neither young nor old. It is rather a liminal space. The actor speaks or withhold, act or mime according to the whim or wish of the director/producer:

My role in this theatre  
Is made of such a mix of colors  
That the day and night cannot be told apart  
Nothing is vivid  
Nor  
In complete shade

The last verse stanza of this poem evokes Shakespearean wisdom gleaned from the famous play, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark* “Readiness is all” (Act five, Scene II). It also echoes the stoic and mature acceptance in the play *King Lear* Edgar informing his father of the defeat and capture of the king and Cordelia says;” Ripeness is all” (Act five, scene II). The essence of the two quotes from the plays is concentrated in the last five lines of Hameed’s poem. The actor standing erect on his heels is the archetypal man positioned in between the two imperatives of free will and pre determination. Hameed writes in the poem (2012):

With palms on the beat of the bosom  
All the astounded spectators wonder  
Will the gates of the city be flung open  
Or close tight  
Some exigent prevails  
And the producer will not disclose  
I stand erect on my heels  
Am all ready  
To be overwhelm by distress  
Or  
Wait for a clue and dance myself to ecstasy

Since the paper attempts to introduce the poetic philosophy of the poet from the Eastern hemisphere of our diverse and heterogeneous world, I conclude the paper with the opening lyrics from *The Ballad of East and West* by Rudyard Kipling:

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!*  
(Kipling, 1889).

The terrain may not meet but the borders all over are porous enough to absorb, share and echo the emotional and intellectual prowess of the single species of mankind.

## References

- Allen, S. (Ed.). (1997). Nobel Lectures, *Literature 1991-1995* (p.11). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co.
- Bate, J. (2000). *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Hameed, Y. (2007) 'Akhri Mojza'. *Doosri Zindagi* . Karachi: Maktaba-e-Danyal.
- Hameed, Y. (2007). 'Ghanay Peepal'. *Doosri Zindagi* . Karachi: Maktaba-e-Danyal.
- Hameed, Y. (2007). *Doosri Zindagi*. Karachi: Maktaba-e-Danyal.
- Hameed, Y. (2012). *Baysamar Pairoon Ki Khwaish*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Hameed, Y. (2012). 'Hum Do Zamanoun Mein Paida Huey'. *Baysamar Pairoon Ki Khwahish* (pp. 162-163). Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Hameed, Y. (2012). 'Hum Kuch Nahi Seekhtey'. *Baysamar Pairoon Ki Khwahish* (pp. 170-171). Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Hameed, Y. (2012). 'Khwateen Ka Almi Din'. *Baysamar Pairoon Ki Khwahish* (pp. 172-174). Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Hameed, Y. (2012). 'Na Mukhtatum'. *Bay Samar Pairoon ki Khwaish* (pp. 25-27). Lahore: Sang-e-Meel.
- Hameed, Y. (2014). 'Generation After Generation'. *Atlanta review* XX.2, 67
- Heaney, S. (2002). *Finders Keepers* (p. 190). London: Faber and Faber.
- Jackson, R. (1981). *Fantasy, The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen.
- Kipling, R. (1889). *Ballad of East and West*. New York: M.F. Mansfield and A. Wessels.
- Shakespeare, W. (1985). *Hamlet, Prince Of Denmark*. Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1985). *King Lear*. Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press.