

Book Review

THE LAST TEA --- A PAKISTANI PERSPECTIVE

* Syed Afsar Sajid

The Last Tea

M. Athar Tahir

**Tanabana Publications & ICPWE,
Kinnaird College, Lahore**

M. Athar Tahir has recently added another verse collection viz., *The Last Tea* to his rich creative repertoire of five such anthologies titled *Just Beyond the Physical*, *A Certain Season*, *Yielding Years*, *Body Loom*, and *The Gift of Possession*. His literary-cum-artistic credentials need not be over-emphasized. He is a poet of international repute. His contribution to the English letters is enormous like the diversity of his vocations as a conscientious civil servant, an ingenious writer, a competent translator, an adept painter, a capable calligrapher, and an ardent archeologist.

In the contemporary milieu of the literary tradition, irrespective of its peculiar nativity, the poet has emerged as a pioneer of change who provides his readers an opportunity to breathe out of the environmental suffocation born of hypocrisy, fanaticism, and humbug.

Tradition is thus an attitude of life in the domains of intellect, creed, and practice. Its notional significance lies in the socio-cultural precepts being cherished and pursued in a given community of men. It is dynamic, not static. Its perpetuity is analogous to change which incorporates a whole process of fruition, transposition, innovation, and adaptation, catalyzed by the charisma of what Eliot would fondly allude to as 'individual talent'.

Athar Tahir's individual talent manifests itself in a technique which is replete with 'the organic fluidity of a born poet', and a 'brilliantly fresh' imagery --- evocative of 'the speech of silence

* Visiting Professor of English and Law, Govt. College University, Faisalabad.

through the language of the senses'. Surveying the Pakistani literature in English, Prof. Alamgir Hashmi once contended that 'Pakistani English poetry remains a *melange* of Pakistani --- or generally Asian --- and Western poetic forms and language resources'.

In his erudite introductory remarks appended to *The Last Tea*, noted writer and literary observer Dr. Waseem Anwar has viewed the book as 'A creative compilation reflective of some mystified if not completely mysterious or ambiguous credo, the poems in *The Last Tea*, like those in his other poetic works, enunciate poet's lifelong imbibing of the natural for exploring and excavating the formative moods of cultural and even civilizational expanse, more so within our South Asian colonial-postcolonial paradigm.'

The book is seemingly divided into three sections, the first, unnamed, comprises poems on Nature, human and filial relations, and abstractions like love, happiness, grief, loss, and death; the second part is titled *Haiku Aviary* while the third is headlined as *Japan Journal*. In the latter two sections, the poet has employed the popular Japanese poetic genre of *Haiku* to sing of the phenomena of Nature with its multiple connotations besides some characters, and geographical locales.

It is considered the poet's divine right to say more than he can say besides saying the unsaid. Athar Tahir has gainfully appropriated this right to reinvent a medium, in the line of his celebrated predecessor Taufiq Rafat whose *Reflections* heralds the pervasion of a deep contemplative content in the native poetic aura latterly employed by his peers and successors with greater felicity and frequency. Conceived as an interior monologue, the poem proclaims: *the renewal of man/through the revalidation of words/is the poet's task./Poet and word are rooted in time.*

The visionary in Ejaz Rahim, a vocal spokesperson of the Pakistani perspective in verse, chants: *Half of my assertions/Are oratorical/The other half/Paradoxical/And I well understand/What it means to stir /A hornet's nest/In the poetic universe.*

And now Athar Tahir, in a quasi-philosophic strain characteristic of his verse, seems to bemoan: *A chador from a*

*saint's shrine/Was spread on the mud-mound/To green it before
the grass/Smothers it in the monsoon./In many ways/We had buried
you./Now your posthumous volume appears/With lines green with
crafted candidates/And a voice modulated and calm under/The
monsoon of contemporaries, brothers, sons.*

In 'A Certain Season', he recites: *Down the dust-stirring
highway/after stampeding hooves had hushed/and elephants taken
their toll,/men more modestly moulded came/to sing, and flute, and
string/or silently let silence work.*

His 'voyage within' and 'voyage without' denote the division in the modern consciousness caused by the contrast between the development of the moral sense and the dehumanized picture provided by the discoveries of the scientists. 'To abstract from objects or scenes those qualities which logical analysis showed to be common to all, and as true for one observer as for another ---- that was a function which belonged to science.' Certain forms of utterances had become inseparably associated with certain conceptions of the function of poetry. Consequently, changes in those conceptions implied a need for discovering a new technique of communicating meaning. Hence there arose a new attitude towards emotions. To pre-empt emotions from degenerating into a kind of sugary sentimentalism is the poet's prime concern. This defiance of the accepted standards has led the poet in Athar Tahir to chart a symbolistic nay imagist path for himself in the vast arena of poesy. The symbolist's purpose is to induce states of mind in the reader. The imagist on the other hand, aims at clarity of expression through the use of hard and accurate but definite images: *Rocks rise as islands/Marble raked to seas currents/Gardens to ponder. (Zen Temple 5) A snowflake smitten/By the window pane/Liquefies, suffering quietly. (Snowflake 3)*

Haiku is a dominant feature of the *The Last Tea*. Here the poet has attempted to mix the exotic formalistic pattern of the Japanese genre in the native poetic phraseology. It (*haiku*) denotes a cluster of words comprising 17 syllables (on 5-7-5 pattern): 'Look, O look, there ago/Fireflies', I would like to say ---/But I am alone. (Taigi)

On the aesthetic level, however, *haiku* is the product of ‘the feeling that belongs to a consummated experience’ of ‘the organic force which arises in experience and unifies it’. The feeling of experience, so to say, controls the selection of words, their order, sound, rhythm and cadence. A *haiku* attitude is a purely aesthetic attitude --- a readiness for an experience for its own sake as Kenneth Yasuda has stressed in his book titled *The Japanese Haiku*. ‘Japanese writers have excelled at abbreviated forms of literature, at brief and pithy descriptions of particular objects and thoughts’, says Suichi Kato in *A History of Japanese Literature*. Seasonal element reigns supreme in *haiku*. It conjoins Man and Nature and suggests much by saying little.

The Last Tea also happens to be a befitting epilogue to the book of this title. It harps on the popular Japanese tea ceremony refined to an art form by Sen no Rikyu, a 16th century Japanese celebrity (and a poet too) excelling in the practice of tea ceremony. It was he who attributed four fundamental qualities to the tea ceremony viz., harmony, respect, purity, and tranquillity. One of his famous sayings runs thus: *Though many people drink tea, if you do not know the Way of Tea, tea will drink you up.*

Athar Tahir is on record to have ascribed the title of his book to Leonardo da Vinci’s mural *The Last Supper*. There the theme is betrayal which is stretched to *The Last Tea* wherein like Jesus, a spiritual leader is betrayed by one of his disciples who kills the master and his disciples after serving them tea. Athar Tahir has transformed the episode into a thing of beauty.

The valedictory lines of the poem illustrate Athar Tahir’s poetic skills: *Some may say I go before my time. ... But no time is before its time./Although time has been/At times burdensome ... It has been enabling./And if I have not filled/My time with the immaculate ... I have at least searched for it./I have lived with the beautiful.*

The general éclat of Athar Tahir’s verse draws on the introversive forces of self-awareness and personal conviction. By crafting haiku on his verse, he has ventured to consolidate its empirical and stylistic import for empiricism inter alia signifies

observation also. Experience and experiment are the bases of all humanities and sciences. Man does not have the capacity to create out of sheer nothing. All human knowledge flows from the natural phenomena, discernible or otherwise, by the naked eye. We do not create, but only innovate, invest. The five senses assist in formulating and promoting, establishing different standards according to one's capacity to utilize each one of them. The poet's perception derives conclusions from common observations to establish the universal truth. Experiment may help, experience may still more, to bestow sublimity upon what we symbolically call 'creativity'! Imagination is the first principle in this case.

In the final analysis, thus, Athar Tahir turns out to be a versatile poet with a modernist style. His poems are suggestive, enjoyable, and at times cerebral.