

***Modern Poetry of Pakistan* edited by Iftikhar Arif and Waqas Khwaja. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010. Pakistani Literature Series. 344 pp. \$16.95 (paperback).**

***Contemporary American Poetry: An Anthology* edited by Fakhar Zaman. Islamabad: Pakistan Academy of Letters, 2009.**

The companion books or complementary volumes, whatever one may call them, *Modern Poetry of Pakistan* (2010) and *Contemporary American Poetry: An Anthology* [Asaari Amriki Shairi] (2009) can be interpreted as a two-way intercultural journey between the poles apart, the United States of America and Pakistan. The books carry us through the postmodern *trans* on the powerful “wings of poesy,” making us realize that humanity’s heartthrob is accessible and translatable through the ultra-lands of our imagination. In general, the peculiar exchange through the translated and retranslated resources in these books offer what the editor Iftikhar Arif in his Preface to the *Modern Poetry* explains: “an appreciation of the poetic output . . . the remarkable range of poetic sentiments, thoughts, and themes” (xviii). Despite their geographical or spatial distances, the USA and Pakistan have been long-term close partners on many sensitive and sensible issues. A politician’s prerogative or a poet’s idealization, global peace is one of the basic human dreams but more so in our part of the world that is declared an “epicenter of terrorism.” Because understanding humanity other than ourselves is in itself a border-crossing phenomenon it reposes a dialogic dilemma that the American Romantic poet Robert Frost has beautifully described in his famous poem “Mending Wall”: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall. . . .” That the poet’s dream to promote neighborly peace through poetic means can become a diplomatic realization and longer-lasting ex/change is a proven reality. It is perhaps with this faith that the authors and editors of *Modern Poetry of Pakistan* and *Contemporary American Poetry* from two great nations join heads and hands to share the philosophy of hearts and philology of minds of their peoples; peoples who apart from living in the newspaper clippings or media images have a genuine right to converse through the pens of poets and give voice to their reflective silences.

In our postmodern context and apart from its myriad connotative applications the prefix *trans* also determines our choice for transportation, transition, translation, transplantation, transfusion, transmutation, transformation to synchronize the fluidity of our linguistic journeys. It appreciates the possibility of our intercultural mergence with the need to be known to others, while to be known to others through the languages known to others becomes an art that

requires some kind of poetic license for co-creating. It therefore generates its own grammar of clarity, its own syntactic and semantic structures. In *Modern Poetry* and *Contemporary American Poetry*, translation and retranslation of the regional or national thoughts and feelings to international ones or vice versa transform the creation into a co-creation, dispelling the locally limited identities into global citizenships beyond the rigidity of self. Oxymoronically and paradoxically, it breaks down our linguistic imprisonment by amplifying our minds and hearts, connecting us all the more as human beings. Although many translation theories are applicable to what has been attempted in these companion books, Lawrence Venuti's criterion of the translator's invisibility and pleasant fluency described in his *The Translator's Invisibility* helps us understand the intent of the editors:

When *simpatico* [congeniality] is present, the translation process can be seen as a veritable recapitulation of the creative process by which the original came into existence; and when the translator is assumed to participate vicariously in the author's thoughts and feelings, the translated text is read as a transparent expression of authorial psychology or meaning. (274)

Translations in both the books under review recapitulate the original, while the translators participate in this process to forward vicariously the psychology of semantics. Following the principle of underlying sympathy with the voices that represent peoples of the two lands, the books revitalize a readership that is replete with deeper comprehensibility. One glaring example of such transparently shared feelings can be quoted from the books' launch at Lahore, covered by the daily Dawn in its 27 July 2011 "Metro and Central" supplement (17): "US consul swept along by Faiz's poetry," her eyes "brimmed with tears until she concluded" her rendering of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's famous poem "Don't Ask My Dear the First Love Again [Mujh Say Pehli Si Mohabat Meray Mehboob Na Mang]." No doubt, this was a mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart exchange through the translated feel of the poem, a realization of the *simpatico*.

Apparently, the Translations Editor of *Modern Poetry of Pakistan* Waqas Khwaja seems consciously humble to quote Tony Barnstone in his "Introduction:" "all translation is mistranslation" (xix). He therefore strives hard throughout to render "thoughts, feelings, and emotions into recognizable shape, into legible characters, into comprehensible, communicable speech or discourse [that] lies at the heart of our experience of life" (xix). Khwaja's efforts along with those of his teammates keep us in touch with the "fidelity" of the poems, more when the translators actually try to stay invisible. This behind the scene articulation carries the readers closer to the original. Because translation is not just about code switching from one language to the

other but mainly about transporting and transplanting the ethos of one culture into another, this being a stereotypically open secret haunting the readers' minds at the very outset or even before they turn the first page of the book, the translators' job in both *Modern Poetry* and *Contemporary American Poetry* becomes very challenging. The process drastically involves the absence-presence dialectic, a highly cautious game similar to gardening; transplanting and fertilizing of a foreign tree to the local soil or of a local tree to the foreign soil. Both ways, keeping "fidelity" to originality demands tolerance along with technique from the gardener. In *Modern Poetry*, Khwaja and his team sow on both local and foreign soils very diligently. From Urdu, Sindhi, Pashto, Punjabi, Baluchi, Siraiki, Gujrati, Kashmiri and other local linguistic seeds or saplings the growth appears well-seasoned at cultural and conventional levels. Poems in *Modern Poetry* do "come across as poems in English with a global touch and not as 'English poems,'" because they "retain," what Khwaja describes and then Khurram Khirram Siddiqi compiles as "the cultural flavors of the original" (xxxv).

*Modern Poetry* unveils multiple modalities related to the Pakistani local and regional poetics popular among its peoples. From the frankness of "nazm" or "azad nazm" to the sophistication of "ghazal," from the rhyme and rhythm of "rubai" to the alliterative attributes of "thumri," from the drumbeats of "qawwali" to the soothing semblance of the "sufiana kalam," or from the meandering tones of "marsiya" to the melodious narrative of "masnavi," the daunting experimentation in *Modern Poetry* highlights the class-gender-faith-ethnicity-nationality matrix around various eastern poetic techniques including "qita," "qaul," "doha," or "qafia." The translations here transmit cultural complexity that brood these diverse types, their lyrical and mystical enrichment to connect to historical grids for exceeding geographical graphs—be they Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Spanish, or South Asian in spirit and soul. Our journey from the clichéd passive eastern forms to much capitalized active western modes of expression transfers our idiomatic orientation into an occidental reality with powerful suggestion if not complete symbolism. Approximate if not appropriate the lineation, reproduction, contextualization of images through metaphors and similes, patterns of onomatopoeic and oxymoronic ideas, replication of instinctive frisson of responses, and many more ways of practicing the *trans* as a process of encapsulating with consistency the "unfamiliar" within the frame of "familiar" tames the strange to a more structured stance. From Ustad Daman's typical Punjabi rendition regarding "He knows not what he must express" (64) to his challenging "My country has two Allahs" (65), from Allama Muhammad Iqbal's "The Great Mosque of Cordoba" (3) to Munir

Niazi's "Love Will Not Happen Now," from Kishwar Naheed's "Counterclockwise" to Parvin Shakir's "Misfit" and "Soliloquy," or from Taos Binhali's "Anthem" to Ata Shad's "Laments of the Merchants of Hope" or to Hasina Gul's "A Small Desire," *Modern Poetry* blends the regional metrics with the national and international modulations to reveal a society riven by its political differences yet sharing the same concerns.

Following somewhat similar processes and procedures, *Contemporary American Poetry: An Anthology* or *Asaari Amriki Shairi* "opens as many windows on" what the Chief Editor and the Chairman of Pakistan Academy of Letters Fakhar Zaman nutshell in his Foreword, "each other's interior space" for a "heart-to-heart conversation" (20). In its bilingually transmitted message *Contemporary American Poetry* complements the exchange between the peoples of Pakistan and United States to get "a whiff of . . . flavour" in "letter and spirit of the original" and therefore being able to listen to "the voice of the heart" (20). An "unusual literary enterprise," as Dana Gioia, 2003–09 Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts at Washington, D.C., puts it, *Asaari Amriki Shairi*, like its companion anthology *Modern Poetry*, offers "a representative sampling of regional voices" from New England to the Mountain states to Southwest and Pacific Northwest (28). Not a "monologue" but a "chorus," the anthology captures the "multicultural nature" of "voices singing in harmony, in counterpoint, and even occasionally in dissonance" (28). A mixture of old and new, it lets the readers wonder upon the historical enigma that Kevin Prufer, the Editor, reechoes so pertinently: "What is American about American poetry?" (30), something that Khurram Khirram Siddiqui then tries to demonstrate through the variety compiled by him in *Asaari Amriki Shairi*.

With an ever-ready historical backdrop of the shining stars of American poetic expression, its mythical and legendary lyricism, its chants, songs and incantations represented by the Mexican tribes or the native Pocahontas groups, by the Puritan European immigrants or the Catholic Latin settlers, or by the later poets like Anne Bradstreet (1612–72), Edward Taylor (1644–1727), Phillis Wheatley (1753–84), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), Walt Whitman (1819–92), Emily Dickinson (1810–50), Ezra Pound (1855–1972), Robert Frost (1874–1963), Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), Langston Hughes (1902–67), Robert Lowell (1917–77), Sylvia Plath (1932–63), or by even the later experimentalists like "Beat," "Black Mountain," "Nuyorican," or other multiethnic groups and individuals—Nikki Giovanni, Simon Ortiz, Amiri Baraka or Maya Angelou, and many others—*Asaari Amriki Shairi* reveals a constant humanity in transition, its tradition and promise that floats with radiance and malevolence. That American poetry is fundamentally about exploring the cosmic as well as human

heartbeat is what makes it “inclusive” and “all-embracing” for its “ever-evolving population” (30). The anthology under review represents most of the living poets from 1946 to 1996, focusing more on the “unrhymed, unmetred . . . [and] lyrical free-verse”; the “Youth-oriented spoken word” that co-exists with the traditional rhymed forms (32). It is thus successful in offering a “vast landscape of competing, coexisting styles” (32) that are bound to be the byproduct of an academic filament. Thirty out of the represented thirty-five poets hold a university teaching background and are equally adept in websiting and emailing that are the newer or emerging globalized forms of literary cafés or coffeeshouses.

*Asaari Amriki Shairi* focuses on variety and diversity to “suggest a wide range of aesthetic styles and concerns” (34). It explores and expresses the old human experience to what Ezra Pound proclaims, “make it new” and therefore take pride in being a human being. From Thomas James’ “Wajuhat (Reasons)” to Li-Young Lee’s “Tokia (Pillow), Jane Kenyon’s “Aa Janey do Shaam Ko (Let Evening Come) to Terrance Hayes’ “Udaas Terrance (The Blue Terrance), Lynn Emanuel’s “Tadfeen (The Burial)” to D. A. Powell’s “Sunno Maan (listen mother, he punched the air),” Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Siaah Haans (Black Swan) to Frantz Wright’s “Aik Ghair-Aabaad Farmhouse key Khiyalaat (Thoughts of a Solitary Farmhouse) or to Cathy Song’s “Jhal Pakhiaan (Waterwings), the colloquial in this collection mixes with the conventional. The colloquial-conventional blend in poetry compiled here impresses what H. L. Hix rephrases in Whitmanisue style, “Yeh mujh mein hey keh ik kehkashaan ho jaon / ya fern key poday ki aik paati (I have it in me to be a galaxy / Or one leaf on the frond of a fern) (401–02) or what Khaled Mattawa resounds in Langston Hughes’ tonality, “Mere hont ghulaamon key aik qafiley key saath aae / Jin ka taaluuq Azeem Sanussi sey tha (My lips came with a caravan of slaves / That belonged to the Grand Sanussi) (459–60). Overall, the poetry in *Asaari Amriki Shairi* is sung with the objective re-expressed poetically by Yusef Komunyakaa in his poem “Aafriat ka Bhais Badalna (Camouflaging the Chimera): “Baanson ko galey laga kar / Naddee kinarey uthi parvai mein hum ney taik laggai / Bhooton key saath aahista aahista ghisathey rahey (We hugged bamboo & leaned / against a breeze off the river, / slow-dragging with ghosts (127–28).

In gist, *Asaari Amriki Shairi* informs us about our historical journeys through the American poetic sensibility and traces its chameleonic chimera and its slow-dragging evolutionary process by understanding its ghostly and ghastly invisibilities, its deeper undercurrents that revive its primeval self for rejuvenating it anew. It is in its secret prerogative to hug the bamboos and lean against the slowly dragging ghosts of evolverment that the fundamental question has been raised again: “What is American

about American poetry?" The ghosts of growing humanity allow us to look into who we are as humans and who we need to be, while America and Americans take pride in exploring and learning humanity in all its variation! Ever since Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and his "Passage to India," the contemporary poets included in *Asaari Amriki Shairi* exhibit this spirit of reaching out the universe beyond; humanity that is not fixed to the limits of self but that exists in a *trans* and connects people-to-people through multicultural heartthrobs. Despite the limit of space, page, time and talent, the poems included in *Asaari Amriki Shairi* offer a model for diverse representational modes through literary expression. The readers get an idea about America and its evolving identity around its ages-old myths of melting-pot or mixed-salad. It introduces in many ways what Senator William J. Fulbright's describes as "more and more compassion into the world affairs."

Like any other project of its size and standard, one may always look for an ideally better presentation when it comes to critically analyzing the pros and cons of the companion volumes *Modern Poetry* and *Contemporary American Poetry*. Besides all the great impact that these volumes make, some gaps and shortcomings are visible and can be reviewed and remedied in the next editions. *Contemporary American Poetry* has a bilingual format, and one imagines if *Modern Poetry* could also accommodate such a multilingual spirit by offering the poetic versions in their original languages. That would have helped easy comparison. But then the placement of English and Urdu scripts side by side in *Contemporary American Poetry* (while English follows a left to right and Urdu right to left transcript) gives a jumbled effect, posing problems for a conventional reader of these languages. The editors might look into reformatting it differently for the readers' convenience. Also the paper quality and production of *Modern Poetry* appears better than that of *Contemporary American Poetry*. Overall, the volumes manifest an investment of real hard work on the part of editors and proofers, for the readers may not find at all or very small-scale typos and other minor publication pitfalls.

From publication to publicizing and then to the current needs of going back into historical realities, the readers realize that the poets can still function as ambassadors of peace. Travelling across the politics of printing we may conclude that it is time now to take some more practical steps, that this effort in *trans* can become more productive when it continues to be known from those who know to those who do not. Some recommendations follow:

1. Embassies of both the countries can help introduce these books to the academic and cultural institutions, while the cultural attachés of the two countries may publicize significance of these complementary volumes to the higher education commissions and the local libraries.

2. Professors of humanities and liberal arts may use materials from these books as textbooks for their classrooms, in particular for American Studies and South Asian or Pakistan Studies courses.

3. Professors and educationists can develop cultural and literary concordance to trace the thematic unity of this joint project when it comes to explore universal human values.

To wrap up, one may wait for and expect for more transparently shared feelings that sweep along poetry and poetic forms so that our eyes also brim with tears for humanity and let happen with “*simpatico*”—a mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart exchange.

Waseem Anwar  
*Forman Christian College University*