

Of Clay Pigeons, Sapient Crows, and Magpies: Waqas Khwaja's *Hold Your Breath*

Reviewed by Masood Ashraf Raja

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I have often wondered about my relationship to English poetry: it never touches me deeply enough to care about it. Yes, I have read my Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton and have even seen great Billy Collins read to a live audience and have felt slightly moved by some of Alan Dugan's poems, but that is pretty much my whole engagement with English poetry.

So, lately I have been contemplating my relationship to English poetry and I think I have finally pinned down the reason for my general apathy toward it. I encountered my first English poetry in 8th grade at a Pakistani boarding school, about two years after I had already read most of Ghalib, Faiz, and Iqbal. Thus, in that moment when we started discussing the "Daffodils," as part of the grand colonial curriculum of the British empire, I received it not as this marvel of Romantic poetry but as a poem by an English poet, a poem that had to compete with the my preestablished expectations of "good" poetry, Urdu poetry, and "Daffodils," thus, had only a referential value. The English poem, to me then and now, has always been about how it compares to my own idea of poetry and my idea of poetry is deeply structured by the subtlety, the rhythm, and the aesthetic appeal of Urdu verse. It is, therefore, rare for me to read a work of English verse and really really *feel* it, feel it enough to set aside my unpronounced and deeply entrenched, almost unconscious, prejudices about English poetry.

Hold Your Breath is one such book of poetry that moved me. It offered itself as a book of English verse, but then it exceeded its literal claim, for it is more than just a book of English poetry: Khwaja brings to you, almost unapologetically, the kind of poetry that is layered, that relies on languages and poetic heritage of two cultures, and then expects you to take what you can, for he does not pander to the reader nor does he make his rich cross-cultural references transparent. And this poetic representation of a life lived across cultures and across several languages is what makes *Hold Your Breath* into a book that would keep any reader, especially one as prejudiced as me, really hooked.

Those of us who dwell in two places are often caught in this perpetual struggle, the pulls from two cultures often at war with each other defined more by their mutual distrust, hatreds, and grievances and less by the possibility of a loving present and a harmonious future. In such a scenario, the figure of the poet is often caught in this inescapable, almost destructive, narrative of You and I, Us and Them. But then, maybe this dichotomy is also the space of ultimate creativity, for only this anguished existence, this lived conflict can birth the kind of poems that *Hold your Breath Offers*. Maybe, the price of such beauty, such passion is life itself, or a life lived on the borders of two cultures where the one you live in never really fully accepts you, for you were “born in many lands” (53) and the one you left either rejects you outright or at least holds you responsible for having left, for not being authentic enough, and thus having acceded your right to speak of your primary culture as your own. Khwaja, takes us beyond this dichotomy, this world of you and I and he does that not only metaphorically and allegorically but by also forcing the two languages together glossing for neither this or that, making the reader work for it, for his cross-cultural heritage does not need an apology and can be, if rightly mobilized, a new war song, a song that forcefully pushes the world to confront its differences and instead of resolving them, for resolutions always default in the favor of the powerful, live with them:

He declares:

I was born in many lands
I have traveled across many seas
Scaled mountains and trekked through timeless deserts
I have been many people

Mujhay dekho tau sahih merey jism kay kitnay tukrray hain
Ek ek hissa jis ka naam tha
Aaj gumnaam hae (53)

And this self, born elsewhere, that has trekked across the mountains and has lodged itself in another land, sent its roots down, and spread its branches is the self that is absolutely necessary for the future of the world, a self that can live here but occasionally transport itself “there” a self capable of being at two places at one time, a self that loves the past but does not dwell in it a self that longs for a future, a “tomorrow [where] this desert/ may come to bloom” (42) even if you and I “will not know” (42) or see it unfold, but the possibility of that future is what animates this poetry.

Being able to draw on more than two cultural heritages, derided by all purists, is also the ultimate enrichment of self and the work that that self produces. This richness of this layered representation becomes evident in one particular

poem: “Kughu Khorray” (کگھو گھوڑے). This is a poem with layers upon layers of meaning! Even to contemporary native Pakistanis, the literal core of the poem would be elusive, and this is also where the Western obsession with close reading, especially when it comes to poetry, as the ultimate tool to unravel intricacies of a poem would fail miserably, for one needs more than what is on the page to actually grasp the poem. The poem, therefore, is instructive, for it teaches us the limits of our own interpretive acumen and forces us to acknowledge that to enter this poem, or any other poem in this collection, a reader will first have to wander somewhere outside of it to develop the necessary reading repertoire or an apparatus to simply read and understand the poem. Here is what a traditionally trained American reader will get: This is a poem about a toy peddler! But beyond that, beyond this paraphrase, not much liked by some of the stalwarts of New criticism, one would have to know the specific rural and urban culture of Pakistani street vendors, their melodious calls and narrative techniques to really imagine the scene. In a sense then, the poem forces us to acknowledge that in order for us to reach its core, we have to enter this world with humility, with some training and only then we would hear the toy peddler with his

Doves and horses
Dumb birds and beasts
Hoopoes and goats (43)

To really understand the poem, one will have to be privy to the culture of street peddlers but also of their trade: kumhars. As a caste the kumhars specialized in making clay pots and pitchers which were widely used by rural communities in India and Pakistan for storing water and grains. The toys, the Kughu Khorrays, were usually made out of leftover clay and then fired in a small kiln along with the larger utensils. Traditionally, the villages worked on a barter economy; the Kumhars will exchange their wares for wheat. But when they ventured into urban spaces, the kumhar peddlers would mostly peddle small utensils, like plates and saucers, along with their toys. The poem captures that exchange: a kumhar peddler in a city street surrounded by wild eyed children as he blows into a dove to produce a melancholy sound or when he displays that the clay wheels on his clay cart actually roll when you push the oxcart around. You can imagine his song, the sound produced by the toys as you “give them your breath” (43) and the gendered exchange of goods, for if you are a girl or a housewife he also has

Pots, serving trays, and saucers
Clay skillets and pans
Bowls, sifters, colanders, jars, dishes, and spoons (45)

The toy peddler, thus, is a lost figure from our Pakistani past but also one cog in the machine of precapitalistic economy who, also, simply through

exchange of goods and toys stabilized the gender roles, for girls never bought the singing doves and pigeons, only boys did! But more than that, as the ending part of the poem suggests, this “toy” economy had a natural cycle, was environment-friendly, for after the toys were discarded, they could be reused as clay for future toys. But, to further clarify my point, this and other poems in the collection give me what most English poetry cannot: the possibility of a deeply felt subjective response. I understand that those of us still in the last remaining thralls of New Criticism and its bloodless technicality of reading poetry would probably find this assertion a bit troubling, but I am relying on David Bleich’s important work here.¹

Bleich suggests that “the essence of a symbolic work is not in its visible sensory structure or in its manifests semantic load but in its subjective recreation by a reader and in his public presentation of that re-creation” (20). This “recreation” of the poem, in Bleich’s view, relies on the “affective” and “associative” responses to an act of reading. The affective response “describes the actual affect he felt while reading the poem” (33) and the associative response, which allows the reader to associate his or her own feelings to the feelings invoked by the poem, for Bleich, “is the most complex but the most useful form of expressing feelings about literature” (48). Thus, read under the registers of affective and associative responses, “Kughu Khorray” comes across to me as a different and probably oversaturated poem because I can step from its immediate affect, my own cultural memory of the toy peddler, to a larger associative net of feelings: plight of the peddler, the nature of toys now, and the destructive impacts of plastics in opposition to the clay knickknacks sold by the toy peddler. A Western reader, of course, would have his or her own affective responses to the poem, but it would take someone striving and traveling these two cultures, physically or at least metaphorically, to really receive the poem with its complex meaning. It is this ability to read the poem and feel it in its complexity that in my view makes a reader like me really “feel” this poetry, a feeling that no English poem, no matter how technically sound, if written within the confined symbolics of a purely European or American symbology will do. And maybe this promise of drawing on these two worlds of lived and imagined incommensurabilities and similarities that is absolutely needed for today’s poetry to make a difference in this world.

This aspect of Khwaja’s poetry, in my view, runs through the entire collection, for every poem, in one way or the other, is a testament to the

¹ Bleich, David. *Reading and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism*, (Urbana: NCTE Press, 1975).

subjectivity of a writing subject that can only be constructed across cultures, in a material and symbolic habitat where the subject can neither fully assimilate in its new habitus nor completely dislodge the cultural and historical markers of his primary culture. This aspect of seeing both places—the place of one’s birth and the place of one’s dwelling—comes across clearly in “Going Back,” a poem where this dual, complex self and its relationship to both the places (the place of birth and the place of dwelling) is staged:

Not this time—
No, it does not feel like home
All is familiar as before
Nothing seems to have changed
Covered in dust
Leaves hang limp
Birds struggle
To find shade (12)

Contrary to the usual journey back home, which often narrates either the altered “homescape” or at least one’s transformed perception or memory of it, for the narrator of this poem, nothing in fact has changed. But as you read further, you realize that the poem is not only about cosmetic changes, but rather an indictment of the class structure, for the poor are still poor and the rich still live their privileged lives. Capital, as usual, underwrites this material narrative of life, and for the native elite

Generators purr away
In walled mansions
Electric motors pull
All water for private use
While people wait at public hydrants (14)

But in comparison, the miseries of the place of abode, or where the narrator lives now:

Where I live now
The fight is all about fuel
Not water
Billions of gallons are flushed down
With toilet paper every day
And many more
Spiked with lethal
Chemicals and carcinogens
Injected down earth’s throat

To access oil and gas (14)

And, we learn, the very rich in the place where the narrator lives, are equally as ruthless and rapacious but they remain untouched:

Their filching clever
Their deceptions commendable
They operate without fear
While, the destitute are, well
Destitute in all things

Except the taint of their epidermis (16)

Thus, in this poem that moves from one world to another—back and forth—while the common suffering of average humans exists at both the places, the reasons vary, and the privilege of the elite is maintained and structured through normalized corruptions and racialized identities, for “deprivation and guilt/ Are inked into the hide” (16) but back “home” of your past, no matter who you are, but especially if you stand out, “There are bullets printed/ with your name on them” (17). The poem thus captures the ultimate dilemma of a cross-cultural life, a life of reflection, for when you live across two cultures, you never get to choose one over the other, you never can eject one and overwrite your self with the other, but rather, if you care, you acutely feel the very wrongs of both and, surprisingly, you find that while your race decides your value in the place where you live, your thoughts and link to this other place that never fully accepts you, makes you, sometimes, a target and often a subject of derision!

Now, why does this poem move me? I had started this review with an inquiry about my own problematic relationship to English poetry, so may be I can hazard an opinion here. This poem moves me because it brings me in touch with both the affective registers: The affective and associative! I feel for the people of the place where I live, for I know the possibilities and limitations of this experience, but I can also feel for the people that I came from. For this poem to work in an associative register, where I can apply these feelings to my own life having both registers functional is ideal; having at least one is absolutely necessary and anyone who tends to read it without either one of the registers would probably just perform an apt close reading of the poem and move on, thus robbing poetry of its most crucial function: its ability to help us reshape and transform our feelings!!

So, this is what *Hold Your Breath* does: it forces you to read these pomes and then feel with the poet about the possibilities of cross cultural life, its heartaches and anguishes, and, most importantly, that it is okay to be out of place to feel lost and to know, deep down, that all acts of belonging are transitory and

that, in the end, even when we have rooted and grown tall in a place, it does not mean that we belong there!

So, to reiterate my stance on English poetry, It would take works like *Hold Your Breath* for someone such as me, caught in between two cultures, to really love and appreciate English poetry, for it does, what people like me expect of poetry: it commemorates what we have lost in our primary cultures and inaugurates a mode of writing in which the poet from the global periphery neither panders to his or her host culture nor unpacks its thoughts transparently. It rather does what any great work of literature must do: Trust the reader and occasionally force them to confront their own empty handedness so that they go looking for the tools to read poetry that comes from more than one place and that captures the thought in its most effervescent form, neither here nor there, but like the “sapient crow,” and the magpie, both:

Hunted and trapped
Pursued by assassins and slayers
Indiscriminate epicures
Perceived as menace
Their roots blown up by dynamite
Neither eats its kind. (48).

On the whole, *Hold Your Breath* is an exquisite work of verse and a great contribution to contemporary world poetry and I highly recommend it to be read, discussed, and taught by all those who still believe in the transformative power of poetry in our collective and individual lives!!