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**ATTITUDES TO LOVE IN THE POETRY OF TAUFIQ RAFAT**

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### Abstract

*Critical work on Pakistani poetry in English remains scarce, and Taufiq Rafat — “the foremost poet of English in Pakistan” in Athar Tahir’s estimation — has received far less attention than his Indian contemporaries. This paper addresses that neglect through the register in which his range is widest: the love poems. In the Subcontinent the love lyric has traditionally carried mystical or political burdens; Rafat’s distinction lies in restoring it to the whole breadth of human attachment. The paper examines poems including “The Time to Love”, “The Squalor in Which Some People Live”, “The Medal”, “Poem for Fauzia”, “Death of a Carpenter” and “The Kite-Fliers”, together with the elegiac sequence “Flight to London”, “Shirt”, “Grass” and “Goodbye, Perhaps”, tracing love across its romantic, familial, fraternal and communal registers. Read through Reader’s Response Theory, these poems reveal a poet whose rural groundedness issues in a purity of feeling — love expressed simply, across its many colours. The paper argues that this body of work alone justifies renewed critical attention to Rafat’s achievement.*

**Keywords:** *Taufiq Rafat; love poetry; elegy; Pakistani poetry in English*

### Introduction

Love as a metaphor and motif is found in all works of art, especially poetry. In the Sub-continent, with its tradition of mystical beliefs, love poetry has often acquired spiritual dimensions. In the work of the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, love becomes a metaphor for political struggle. So, it is a motif that keeps evolving in its metaphorical content. This paper explores some of the love poems written by Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998), Pakistan’s foremost first-generation anglophone poet. For Rafat, love takes on various meanings and forms. Human relationships in Rafat are not limited to the man-woman paradigm. There are parents and siblings, cousins, and sometimes people in the street that he notices, and who inspire him. This is perhaps the one aspect where the evolution of his perspective is most obvious.

The poems chosen do not only reflect the poet’s position regarding physical love between a man and a woman, but also love for parents, children, siblings, neighbours and other humans in general. This is the relationship in which the perspective of the poet seems most elastic. More than his relationship with his language and land, the poet expresses himself most freely through his love poems. The analysis is undertaken from a Reader’s Response theoretical framework.

For this purpose, from Rafat’s oeuvre, the poems “The Time to Love,” “The Squalor in which Some People Live,” “The Medal,” “Poem for Fauzia,” “Death of a Carpenter,” “To Those I Really Love,” “The Kite-Fliers,” and the set of poems titled “Poems for a Younger Brother” have been chosen.

The very first poem in Rafat’s *Collected Poems* is titled “The Time to Love.” Here, love becomes an important element in tracing his journey as a poet. His perspective about love evolves as he develops as a poet. The poet in “The Time to Love” thinks of love from a carefree perspective. He believes that the time to fall in love is “when the heart says so” (Rafat, 1997, line 2). Whether it is “muddy august” (Rafat, 1997, line 4) or “tepid april” (Rafat, 1997, line 5) does not seem to matter:

for Love’s infallible feet  
step daintily  
from vantage to vantage  
to the waiting salt-lick. (Rafat, 1997, lines 6-9)

This is young love that Rafat is talking about, which does not know boundaries or limitations. It does not “need a bough to perch on” like poets who need the Spring for inspiration (Rafat, 1997, line 15); instead, “love is a country/ with its own climate” (Rafat, 1997, lines 17-18). This young love is unfettered and idealistic, indicating that early in his poetic life, Rafat believed in this idealised conception of love. The poem was perhaps a juvenile poem, and one of his first poems. It thus creates an important reference point for comparison in evaluating how the poet’s outlook on love changed with time. Love is personified here, in continuing with the poetic tradition of

the Romantic era in British poetry as well as the general ethos of poetry in the Sub-continent, in regional languages like Punjabi or Persian and Urdu. The regional literatures of the East often personify love as a metaphysical being with powers. This comes from an ancient mystification of love as something linked to the spiritual in this part of the world.

Another poem from this early period that looks at a different aspect of human interaction is "The Squalor in Which Some People Live." Here, Rafat looks at the poverty around him, at men "pissing on the road" (Rafat, 1997, line 3) and is disgusted by what he sees. However, he soon develops some perspective when he thinks of his own humble beginnings. This brings in another form of love: compassion for his fellow human beings. He is reminded of "the oblique house" (Rafat, 1997, line 6) in Lahore's old city where his mother was brought up. The locality of Shahalam represents one of the city's less developed areas. Although the situation described in the remembering is not the equivalent of the squalor that is evident in "pissing on the road," the smells of "oil and lint and dung/ and unaired quilts" (Rafat, 1997, lines 34-35) represent a somewhat lower social strata inhabited by the poet's maternal ancestors. The link that Rafat makes is that while he might be disgusted by the scene he describes at the beginning of the poem, his own ancestors lived in similar conditions only one generation ago. This is a scene that can be seen in the streets of the older localities of Lahore even today, and so the people who live in these conditions are not unfamiliar with it and do not feel repelled by it. While it might appear that they live in a state where they are unaware of the filth surrounding them, Rafat is not offering a justification for the people who live in these streets and localities. Instead, what he offers is the view that having lived their entire lives in this way, they have developed a compassion for each other's idiosyncrasies. They allow each other the space that is required to live an independent life. This sense of empathy is crucial for Rafat to move past his disgust at the scene he has witnessed, and to remember the living conditions from his mother's ancestral home where he must also have spent time as a child:

room piled upon room,  
and not a ventilator anywhere  
to let the stale air out. (Rafat, 1997, lines 12-14)

There is an inevitable suffocation in these old houses, and without ventilation, the smells of daily life are accentuated. To one side of the house, "a gutter ran like a sore" (Rafat, 1997, line 15). This image links him with the "squalor in which some people live" as he remembers how the filth of his grandfather's house was not an anomaly:

how carefree we were,  
for a few ecstatic weeks each winter  
like the barna tree, all flower  
and no leaf. The filth was part of us,  
as we grew tall in that time of love. (Rafat, 1997, lines 35-39)

The carefree attitude to the living conditions does not come only from being a child; it depends more so on the way of life where the filth was not looked at something separate from the urban civic structure. The echo of "The Time to Love" in "as we grew tall in that time of love" (Rafat, 1997, line 39) shows a developing perspective even in the early poems. Rafat is aware that the jovial indifference of childhood had coupled with the inherited routine of life in the ancestral home to make him able to "love" his family and its life despite the squalor in which they had lived. This retrospective glance at his childhood, when he did not feel disgusted by the running sewage and the suffocation of unventilated rooms, brings him to feel the compassion for his fellow beings that had been missing in his reaction to seeing someone relieving himself on the road.

From the idealistic view of love in "The Time to Love," Rafat makes another departure in "The Medal." The poem explains the perspective of a woman whose husband, a soldier, has been "killed in action" (Rafat, 1997, line 5). As the poet, Rafat is not located inside the parameters of the poem in the way that we find him being a part of "The Time to Love" and "The Squalor in Which Some People Live," where the personal is part of the larger whole. In "The Medal," he is less obviously present. The poem is about a woman, and while Rafat does use the personal pronoun, he does not place himself as the woman, but rather he empathises with her anger. While this is not a traditional love for her, in trying to understand her reaction to her husband's death, Rafat attempts to understand the general fate of women who lose husbands in wars. This is another kind of love for his fellow human beings, where he wants to understand how they feel, thus allowing them identities as individual human beings. Society might assume that the martyr's widow's pride in her husband's sacrifice can

be made into a medal and kept as a token; however, Rafat tries to understand what the individual woman's reaction might be. "For two days I did not know/ what had happened" (Arafat, 1997, lines 6-7).

Social expectations belittle the individual's grief and Rafat as the narrator of the woman's side of the story does not seem comfortable with the mother (of the dead man or of the widow, it is not clear) "comforting a weeping neighbour" (Rafat, 1997, line 9) in the next room. The mother herself has lost a relative but is expected to be brave in the face of this adversity, and the parenthetical aside "as if she were the bereaved one" (Rafat, 1997, line 10) sums up Rafat's disbelief at how social roles have engendered an alienated sense of bearing grief. The woman, as the repository of social hierarchies, in the absence of the dead husband/son/son-in-law is expected to comfort those who come to mourn with her. As an ordinary citizen, a man hardly ever thinks of the inappropriateness of this expectation. Rafat, however, in "The Medal," manages to detach himself from the scene and inspects the reality beyond what appears at the surface:

Slowly, full consciousness returned.

I dressed for the first time as a widow.

I ate my first meal as a widow. (Rafat, 1997, lines 11-13)

When the dead husband is declared a national hero, "the friends trooped in again/ this time to congratulate" (Rafat, 1997, lines 21-22). The widow is invited to a ceremony "where the general gave me a medal/ and patted my son on the head" (Rafat, 1997, lines 26-27). The irony of this pat on the head is not lost on the poet as he tries to empathise with the woman:

For an entire week the little fellow

strutted around the bazaar

with the medal pinned on his shirt,

and the neighbours gave him sweets. (Rafat, 1997, lines 28-31)

In the normal course, Rafat would perhaps be one of the neighbours handing out sweets to the hero's son; however, here he is trying to understand the widow's reaction and so he realises that the medal, though a useful trinket for the child to wear and show off, has no practical value as such. Men admire medals and wear them on their chests with pride; to the living wife of a dead man, a medal is useless:

A medal has no hands, no lips, no penis;

it is exactly what it looks like:

just another piece of bronze. (Rafat, 1997, lines 35-37)

Rafat's perspective on this woman's plight changes from the stereotypical congratulatory reaction of neighbours to a compassionate understanding of her personal loss and the cross she now has to bear by not being able to mourn him properly. The medal becomes a blot on Rafat's own conscience as observer of this social trend of reducing the war hero's widow's grief to a bronze medal. While this is not love in the sense of "The Time to Love," it is a sympathetic understanding of a fellow human being's situation, something akin to love for humanity as a whole, and for the Pakistani woman in particular.

"Poem for Fauzia" is more of a traditional love poem, where the grief of losing a loved one draws a painful and somewhat exaggerated reaction from the poet. He leaves the home to go out into the fields and "brood on early death" (Rafat, 1997, line 2), and stays "to praise the lavishness of Nature" (Rafat, 1997, line 3). The Romantic imprint is evident here, with strong emotion translating into aesthetic experience. The poet's love for Fauzia and his grief at her early death are emotions strong enough to elicit a poem where the outside scene is linked to the inside of the poet's mind and heart. Autumn "gives and takes with abandon" (Rafat, 1997, line 5), echoing John Keats's "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (Keats, 1820a, line 1). The poet's love for the dead person has a definite Eastern sense of pity:

Dear lovely girl, you ride the

rainbow of our prayers, and give us

strength to face the coming chill. (Rafat, 1997, lines 10-12)

The strength comes from love, but also from grief, which is a peculiar combination. While she has moved on to another life and is perhaps indifferent to the "rainbow of our prayers" (Rafat, 1997, line 11), the poet looks at the surfeit of Nature's bounty around him:

Shadows lengthen softly. In the seepage

reeds and the nurse-like lilies stand,

rooted in coolness; and a gnarled

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wildberry tree tests the water

by trailing a broken digit there. (Rafat, 1997, lines 13-17)

These fields inspire another kind of love: an appreciation for natural beauty and the elements that combine to create such scenery as described in the above lines. Perhaps this is what leads Rafat to the realisation of immutability, and “now acceptance settles on the mind” (Rafat, 1997, line 18). Once again, Rafat echoes Keats’s “She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die” (Keats, 1820b, line 21). Extreme grief borne out of love leads to the maturity of accepting the impermanence of Nature and consequently human life:

And even as I fling up my arms

in an excess of pity and love,

the pebble of my presence breaks

porcelain herons into blurred flight. (Rafat, 1997, lines 20-23)

The excess of pity and love, and the blurring of the self into Nature in the background offer a catharsis that leads the poet to the evolved realisation that his perspective on grief needs a reality check. While he might be saddened by the loss of a loved one, he must also look at the larger whole and thus realise that life must move on, much like the herons who take flight at sighting him.

This Romantic inheritance is not incidental. Shakeel and Jafar (2015) trace a similar layering of Romantic, Modernist, and Imagist influence across Rafat’s early work, arguing that these borrowed movements are consistently reframed through indigenous idiom rather than simply imitated — a pattern visible here in the way Keats’s consolatory Nature is naturalised into a distinctly Punjabi register of grief.

Another kind of love that Rafat is aware of is the love of a craftsman for his creation. As a poet, he has explored this love in poems like “Reflections,” “Last Poem” and “Poem” among others. Then, there is a poem like “Death of a Carpenter,” where Rafat shows an understanding of how a master craftsman becomes one with his craft, and achieves a state of grace that the observer can also relish in. Just as the young girl in “Village Girl” had afforded him “a measure of grace” (Rafat, 1997, line 5), as he had stood watching her “tall and straight” (Rafat, 1997, line 2) at work in the fields, watching a master craftsman’s love for his creation also offers a state of grace.

The poem is dedicated to Mistri Noordin, who is described as one of :

the skilled old men we used to know

who brightened our lives

by simply creating

out of themselves, and a stack of seasoned planks,

an endurable synthesis. (Rafat, 1997, lines 2-6)

This is a different, more mature Rafat, as compared to the poet of “The Time to Love” and “Poem for Fauzia.” Now, it is not love for a human being, but for his ability to create a symmetrical shape out of planks of wood, which to Rafat is an attribute of a human that needs to be celebrated. By appreciating the craftsman’s work, the poet pays him a greater tribute than having any personal love for him. To him, the presence of a “sideboard or dresser” (Rafat, 1997, line 10) that “gleams in grained perfection” (Rafat, 1997, line 11) makes a home lucky. Rafat actually mourns Noordin’s death because it means that one more master craftsman has left, which is not a personal loss but a loss of the joy of knowing that someone brilliant at his work is no longer alive. The poet mourns not Noordin the person, but Noordin the artist, whose death signals that there is a possibility that his art might one day die for lack of practitioners.

There is some consolation available to him, though. There are still places, where such craftsmen can be found hard at work, creating masterpieces without much care for what goes on around them:

bent quietly over his work

in total concentration,

careless of recognition

or reward, fashioning the

usual commodities with love. (Rafat, 1997, lines 21-25)

Rafat admires the skill and devotion of the artist, who makes even mundane items with such commitment that they become labours of love. Rafat stresses that the artist’s love for his creation is something to be celebrated. It is a state of grace for Rafat that he is able to appreciate and love the perfection of the master craftsman.

“To Those I Really Love” is a later poem that shows the poet’s inner struggle to express his feelings. He does not know “how to show affection” (Rafat, 1997, line 2) for his loved ones. This might be a wife, children, friends, or anyone else that he feels affection for. “I am afraid of excess” (Rafat, 1997, line 3) is a far cry from “Poem for Fauzia” where the expression of love is exaggerated and depends on the excess of love. The older Rafat, though, in “To Those I Really Love” seems to overcompensate for the expressive younger Rafat when he is “abrupt with them” (Rafat, 1997, line 5), and is mature enough to “a moment later regret my abruptness” (Rafat, 1997, line 6). This is a maturity in his perspective about love, and it has evolved to this realisation that his inability to express himself might now have made it too late for him to ever show his affection properly. It is only when he is alone that “endearments break in a flood” (Rafat, 1997, line 10), indicating that unexpressed love becomes a bottled-up emotion which suffocates the poet.

The poem “The Kite-Fliers” is another step in the evolution of Rafat’s perspective, and here two great friends are shown in a love-hate relationship. The poet is placed in the position of observer, where he sees the bond between his uncle and his friend while they appear to be locked in a perpetual duel. To the poet as a child admiring him, he is “the best kite-flier in the world” (Rafat, 1997, line 24). This loyalty to the uncle, idolised in childhood, comes from the uncle being celebrated in loyal folklore as the best kite-flier as well. His rival must therefore be a complete villain for the child:

that stubborn and jealous man  
who laughed at my uncle’s skill,  
and called him a novice. (Rafat, 1997, lines 28-30)

The child views the uncle as being perfect. He ridicules the opponent Mansab Khan, who “incredible as it seems/ had his followers too” (Rafat, 1997, lines 31-32). The child’s perspective echoes what he hears from those around him, particularly his elders:

My uncle was always amused.  
Mansab, a poet? he would sneer.  
My munshi can write much better. (Rafat, 1997, lines 42-44)

This tongue-in-cheek humour captures the carefree nature of the days, and the carefree nature of the friendship between the two men:

My uncle’s only son  
was married to Mansab’s daughter  
so he could instil some sense  
into that family. (Rafat, 1997, lines 58-61)

Next-door neighbours, Mansab and the uncle must have been great friends without the child realising it. But, the maturity of his perspective is evident in his refusal to comment on the irony of the situation. He describes it in a matter-of-fact manner, as if there is nothing to comment on in the statements made by the elders, as if the irony of being sworn rivals but marrying their children to each other was not something that indicated a deeper connection. Meanwhile, the rivalry in kite-flying grows, and when the uncle has a bad run of luck, “Mansab roared/ and challenged and booed” (Rafat, 1997, lines 65-66). The child observer notes that after a bad day for his uncle in the kite-flying field, “we dragged to a cold dinner/ and an avoidance of eyes” (Rafat, 1997, lines 73-74). The poem carries on in this light manner, until in the middle of a competition one evening, Mansab has a stroke. As he is laid on a bed and the uncle pulls up a chair to sit near him:

Mansab opened his eyes,  
and fixing them on uncle  
whispered “I’ve won again.  
I’m getting there before you.” (Rafat, 1997, lines 88-91)

These last words push the poet as observer even further into the background as the focus now rests entirely on his uncle, who has lost his rival, and goes home “where he ripped and burnt his kites” (Rafat, 1997, line 95), thereby letting his hobby die alongside his friend and rival. The poem presents for the poet in retrospect a grown-up’s perspective on friendship and rivalry. The uncle and Mansab were great rivals because they were great friends, and the child had not been able to understand the strength of that bond. Now, having grown up, and looking back at the events, he is able to understand that unique bond of love between those friends, and realises that their rivalry and apparent contempt for each other was actually deeply rooted in great friendship

and love for each other. This love is potent and different from any other kind of love in Rafat's poetry, and shows how he views the same relationship from various angles.

The final form of love that Rafat explores is sibling love, and this is explored in various dimensions in a group of fifteen poems titled "Poems for a Younger Brother", from the collection *Half Moon*, which was published posthumously and includes Rafat's last work. It is not surprising that he appears at his most mature in these poems for his late brother. In fifteen poems, he depicts the feelings of an elder brother who loses a younger brother to cancer and tries to come to terms with the grief. This is a love different from the love for a woman or for a master craftsman or the landscape of his native lands. This is a strong love which expresses itself in different ways and seems to stay with the poet well after the brother's death. Muneeza Shamsie (2002) singles out this sequence as one of Rafat's recurring achievements, reading the eleven poems collectively as a sustained meditation on loneliness and on the trauma of impending death — themes she identifies as central to his later work more broadly.

The stark reality of death in these poems moves Rafat to have to state matter-of-factly something that one would always struggle to express for a loved one. In "Half Moon," the poet says, "I am waiting for a brother to die" (Rafat, 2008, line 3). This is a profoundly moving statement that appears to have been uttered with callousness, but is actually evidence of how Rafat has come to understand the inevitability of death. For Rafat, it is love and the awareness of how this link between him and his brother is about to be severed, that is important. The brother, cancer and death are hovering in the background of this set of poems. The poet traces the bond that sibling love creates, and is increasingly aware of the impending break in this link. The acceptance of death is slow, and the intensity of feeling implies that the pain and agony that follows will also be intense.

In "Half-Moon," the intensity of pain is depicted in a very matter-of-fact manner:

Where he is  
there is no moon,  
not even half a one.

He will never see it again. (Rafat, 2008, lines 4-7)

This understatement is even more moving as the reader is always aware that the poet is experiencing a very personal loss.

In "Flight to London," as the brother departs for treatment, the family stands at the airport, and the poet seeing the brother off, is moved to observe that "I am seeing you for the last time" (Rafat, 2008, line 3). The elder brother is expected to act bravely like the younger brother setting out on this final journey before death. However:

I rehearse  
a smile at a passing stranger, but tears  
are knocking hard at the back of the eyes. (Rafat, 2008, lines 4-6)

Rafat the poet can no longer be detached from the grief of Rafat the elder brother. This is a departure from the poet who had written "Poem for Fauzia." He cannot find solace in Nature, perhaps because age and the immediacy of the dead relative have numbed the senses in a way that Fauzia's death had not. And yet, the poet has to play a role in the poem, and having seen off the brother he knows he will never see alive again, he returns:

Soon, I am a man again. To relatives  
return with cheerful talk no one believes  
and every one is eager to promote. (Rafat, 2008, lines 13-15)

The poetic persona of objective observation had broken down on seeing off the brother, but here that persona assumes its indifferent demeanour once again.

"Shirt" is emotionally draining on another level, with the dead brother's widow gifting an old shirt to the living elder brother:

He was tall and heavy.  
The shirt hangs loosely  
on my smaller frame,  
but where it touches the skin  
it will not be shaken free. (Rafat, 2008, lines 5-9)

How profound is the sense of losing a beloved brother that an old shirt worn by him can evoke Rafat to write such moving lines. Ostensibly, these lines do not show an exaggeration of grief. Much like Philip Larkin, Rafat states a fact, that the shirt is too loose for him. However, we see the poet placed in the position of a participant who appears to be numbed by the sense of profound loss contained in these lines.

In "Grass," Rafat visits the dead brother's grave, and makes the rather mundane observation that whereas nearby graves must once have been regularly visited by the family and friends of the deceased, "Time's weather and democracy of grass/ have made them equal" (Rafat, 2008, lines 5-6). While it seems a bizarre observation, what lies at its heart is Rafat's great love for his brother. He fears that like the other graves, eventually his brother's grave might also be overgrown with grass, as with the passage of time even Rafat might no longer find time or inclination to visit the grave. While these "Poems for a Younger Brother" show great care and affection for the late brother, the underpinning grief in "Grass" is not just the loss of the brother, but also the inevitable realisation that this death too will be made bearable as some time elapses.

Thus, the final poem in this series, "Goodbye, Perhaps" sees the poet trying to move on while retaining part of the grief as something inherent to his heart. "Leave me, this theme, leave me alone" (Rafat, 2008, line 1). The poet has not lost a loved one for the first time. There is however a never-ending sense of loss:

Yet am I daily reproved  
by some thought or incident that he is gone.  
It seems it will never be done. (Rafat, 2008, lines 6-8)

Rafat has now endured this grief long enough to look back and analyse it in light of the fifteen poems that this death has prompted him to create:

Poems were always hesitatingly dared,  
but these come like guests, unbidden,  
and find me unprepared.  
I breathe them out for what they are worth.  
Not to say is a worse kind of hell. (Rafat, 2008, lines 9-13)

When compared to the kind of love he feels for Fauzia in "Poem for Fauzia" or for Mistri Noordin in "Death of a Carpenter," the love Rafat feels for his late younger brother is more deeply rooted, perhaps drawing on a shared childhood. The love between two life-long friends in "The Kite-Fliers" is more akin to the kind of feelings depicted in "Poems for a Younger Brother." So, the poet knows that this love has brought about a grief that will last him for his remaining days, much as his uncle's grief at losing his friend and rival in "The Kite-Fliers."

The simplicity of a rural background in Rafat influences the purity of his emotions. His love poetry, despite its many colours, is in essence, a pure expression of emotions felt simply.

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