



RESEARCH PAPER

Ethereal Whispers of Indigenous Nature: Mazhar Nisar's Spiritual Odyssey at Mahogany Junction

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ABSTRACT

This research work explores the connection between nature and spirituality in Mazhar Nisar's poetry, focusing on his indigenous Sufi perspective as a means to inspire environmental awareness. Drawing on eco-critical theories by Lawrence Buell (1986) and Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), the research examines Nisar's anthology *Mahogany Junction*, where nature serves as both muse and mentor, guiding the "wayfarer" at the imaginary "Mahogany Junction" toward spiritual transcendence and divine love. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study investigates key motifs such as "whirling dervish," "starry nights," and "rain is the little girl" to highlight their eco-spiritual significance. The findings reveal a deep narrative of interconnectedness, underscoring nature's central role in both spiritual awakening and ecological preservation. The study recommends incorporating Nisar's eco-spiritual themes into educational and literary discourse to promote environmental conservation and spiritual harmony.

KEYWORDS

Mahogany Junction, Out-Stretched Hand, Spiritual Ecstasy

Introduction

The research underscores various dimensions of poetry of Mazhar Nisar who is a renowned award winning Prime-time English news anchor. His maiden anthology of poems, *The Mahogany Junction* offers variety of themes like, love, life, time, death and nature etc. The poet seeks a strong bond with the God Almighty and the metaphor of "out-stretched hand" invokes divine intervention to alleviate the intensity of adversities faced in this transitory world. His is a facile pen that weaves vivid imagery that ranges from physical to metaphysical and from mundane to ethereal. His exquisitely awe-inspiring symbols mesmerize the readers who are conjured up by a spell of mixed emotions of infinite joy and surprise. The text under research will be analyzed by applying Barry Brummett's (2010) methodology of close reading.

Nisar is also a programme host, an analyst and his services on radio and television of Pakistan date back to mid 1990s. Acknowledging his meritorious services in the field of broadcasting journalism, he was also awarded the coveted award of *Tamgha-i- Intiaz* by the President of Pakistan in 2007. His is pleasure seeking poetry that makes the readers wander through soothing Nature that embalmed their over-stressed nerves with mellow sunshine, honeyed breeze and refreshing rain. His verse is also dotted with philosophical notions of time and space and life and death. The swirling dervish is also seen in an intense scramble for self-discovery by embarking upon flinty and arduous path that zig-zags through a spiritual aura to attain the ultimate truth. At times, the readers romance with the symphony of wind in the starry nights and ponder upon mystical realities of life. His

symbols of rain, night, stars, clouds, magical hues, leaves, water and moonless nights, are in fact the hypnotic colors of a rainbow that can rejuvenate all the depleted spirits and depressed souls. Owing to the unending quest to quench our perpetual thirst of amassing riches of this materialistic world, we may get astray from the spiritual track but this poetry inspires us to tread a spiritual gambit of an imaginary place called *Mahogany Junction* that calls for our own spiritual accountability and unlearning of our vicious whims and wishes. Likewise, the concept of *Ashman* is also present in Hinduism, according to which the ritual of taking a dip in the sacred river *Ganges* would purge off all the impurities of one's soul.

Literature Review

Brief analysis of the major themes in Pakistani poetry in English language is presented in this section. On the firmament of modern day Pakistani poetry, the names of Shahid Suhrawardy, Taufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal, Zulfiqar Ghose, Alamgir Hashmi, Sardar Aseff Ahmed Ali, Ilona Yusuf, Shadab Zeest Hashmi, Shabnam Riaz and Maki Kureshi are prominent.

Analyzing the evolution of Pakistani poetry, Asma Mansoor (2012) in her research article, *The Notes of a New Harp: Tracing the Evolution of Pakistani Poetry in English* observes,

The rise of Pakistani poetry in English has been slow and gradual, primarily gaining momentum from the 1970s onwards. Pakistani poetry is still endeavoring to forge a distinct identity which is based on not only its Islamic origins, but also on its colonial past along with its turbulent present. It is probably for this reason that it is difficult to identify the rise of any particular trend of writing in Pakistani poetry in English since Pakistani poets have inherited a *mélange* of traditions and techniques from both indigenous and foreign sources(p. 20).

According to Mansoor (2012), the domain of Pakistani poetry underscores various themes and does not specify any particular trend but the reflection of colonial history, local traditions and culture are the significant hallmarks of poesy of this part of the world.

Muneeza Hashmi(2017) in her essay "Pakistani English Writing" published in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* presents analysis of Pakistani poet, Shahid Suhrwardy's anthology of poetry,

Faded Leaves (1910) and *Essays in Verse* (1937), reveal his development "from a pre-modern poet to a modern one." *Faded Leaves* has links to the earliest Indian-English poetry, which drew on Orientalist translations of Indian literature and related 19th-century British poetry. These Orientalist influences permeated Indian-English writing for generations. Suhrwardy's next collection, *Essays in Verse* (1937), made such a complete break from all other Indian English writing of the time that he makes no mention of India as a location. Instead, Suhrwardy shows himself to be "a master of such poetic devices as meter and rhyme especially in his later poems," revealing the modernist influence of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He is regarded as the first modern English-language poet of undivided India. He co-translated 9th-century Chinese poetry and Russian prose and also wrote a pioneering critical work on art, theater and literature.

According to Hashmi, Suhrwardy's poetry has been swayed by the Orientalist translations of Indian Literature and the great masters like, Eliot and Pound had greatly impressed him.

Alamgir Hashmi is considered to be a prominent poet of Pakistani origin. Commenting upon his poetry, Coppola, observes that his poetry bespeaks of uncertainty of life, tentativeness and indeterminacy and uses the pronouns 'somebody' and 'someone'. Moreover, Hashmi juxtaposes opposites, polarities and doublets and embraces implied extremes, contradictions and confutation" (Coppola, 1998, p. 217). His collection of poems, *The Poems of Alamgir Hashmi* contains seven volumes. Whereas, his anthology with the title of *Sun and Moon and other Poems* underlines his ideas and sensibilities as one of the torch bearers of Pakistani poetry.

Taufiq Rafat's poetry lays bare "cultural synthesis" (Mansoor 2012, p. 21) since it brings forward the glimpse of simplicity of the Pakistani village life. His poems *Time to Love*, *The Village Girl*, *Poppy of the Wilderness*, *Reflections* and *On the Bank of the Ravi* speak nostalgically about the simple rustic people and underscore "universal humanity" (Mansoor 2012, p. 22). To assess Rafat's poetry, Mansoor cites Carlo Coppola, who observes that Rafat's poetry is "full-bodied and rich, direct and readily accessible to the reader's sensibilities and devoid of excessive artifice" (206).

Mansoor(2012) also analyzes the intricacies and sensibilities of Daud Kamal's Poetry,

"Daud Kamal's poetry "is discernibly reminiscent of the Imagist tradition. His poetry is interwoven with local and religious imagery; of kingfishers and monasteries, of Hindu temples silhouetted by the glamour and mystique of the Arabian Nights. Yet his poetry over-arches into the present where the Arabian Nights have twisted endings that reflect the violent contemporary times" (Mansoor 2012, 23-24).

Kamal's poem, *A Rotting Pomegranate* recalls the harsh and inhuman treatment of people of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols. In his poem, *The Leap*, the poet philosophizes about the talk of immortality, whereas, *A Ruined Monastery*(15) refers to the Elephants of a renowned Hindu king, Raja Porus, who toyed with the idea of occupation of Indo-Pakistan subcontinent to claim his absolute sovereignty. "Kamal's poetry displays bravura of references ranging from Pablo Neruda, Akbar Nama, Ted Hughes, Ai Kwei Armah etc" (Mansoor 25). The critic speaks highly of Kamal's poetry and puts it at a very high pedestal and it is indeed, very fascinating.

Vijay Dharwadkar (2012, 275) in his essay analyzed Pakistani poetry in the *Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*,

Daud Kamal and Taufiq Rafat in particular, and Zulfikar Ghose, Hashmi and Adrian Hussain more broadly, have directed their verbal excavations at Pakistan's rugged landscape, from icy mountain and fertile river-valley to desert and seashore; and at its extraordinary pre-colonial history, from the first Indus civilization to Alexander's march, Greek colonization, classical Buddhist art, and multiple Muslim conquests. In unearthing a buried land as well as buried past, Kamal confronts the ruins of Mohenjo-daro; Ghose celebrates the cultural diversity of the ancient period, suppressed in the present; Rafat and Hussain build symbolic spaces filled with animals and animal violence; and Hashmi dramatizes epic journeys and migrations from the Caucasus, Anatolia and the Trans-Oxus region(275).

The critic states that the above mentioned Pakistani poets sketch the variety of landscapes, unearth, different civilizations and cultures, and highlight the significance of the treatment of animals by the man.

Zulfiqar Ghose has depicted sufferings and atrocities of the innocent people who were butchered ruthlessly by the Hindus and Sikhs at the time of partition of India. His poems *The Landscape* and *Independence of the Body* underline stark realities that have been pushed to oblivion by the contemporary world. His poem *The Attack on Sialkot* highlights the ravages of war that wreak havoc upon the innocent people. The poem *Silent Birds* reminds of the bygone era in which cities like Lahore would bask in peace and harmony and he laments over the terrorist attacks that have destroyed the very fabric of the otherwise tranquil life of the Pakistani society.

Vinay Dharwadkar (2012 276) in *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* analyzes the Pakistani poetry, in *Landscapes of the Mind* (1997), Maki Kureshi analyzes the legacies of British colonial rule from the viewpoint of a biracial Pakistani, like the diasporic Pakistani-Welsh scholar and autobiographer, Sara Suleri; whereas Ghose, Hashmi (in *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*, 1997), Hussain (in *Desert Album*, 1997) and Nawaz (in *Journeys*, 1998) explore the experience of dislocation, itinerancy, emigration and nostalgia in different perspectives, pitting the divided self against anchored memory and indeterminate identity against the certitude of knowledge in a transnational context. In this elaboration, however, Pakistani-English literary culture has been dominated by male writers to a much greater extent than either the Indian-English or the Sri Lankan canon. In *The Far Thing* (1997) Maki Kureishi focuses on gender issues within the dialectic of tradition and modernization in her immediate domestic, social and political environments(276).

Moreover, Aseff Ahmed Ali has also written poems on various themes like, war, excesses of capitalism, scientific discoveries, and Sufism and also aspires to have communion with God. He refers to the Muslim Spanish culture and writes a poem, *A Mosque of Cordova*. Pakistani national poet, Muhammad Iqbal also wrote a poem in Urdu, *Masjid -e- Qartaba* (Mosque of Cordova) to recall the majestic era of the Muslim Spain.

Mansoor (28) presents the analysis of Ali's poetry in these words, "his work reverberates with Miltonic, Shakespearean and Shelleyan echoes; yet one cannot help noticing the influence of the Urdu revolutionary poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, as well as Dr. Muhammad Iqbal on his poetry especially when he augurs that earthling's renaissance is nigh' (47) in his poem High Assembly of Sages."

Material and Methods

The researchers have employed Barry Brummett's (2010, 25) criteria of close reading that seeks to trace the hidden meanings underlying the 'texts' under research, especially poet's diction, reflection of his (philosophical) ideas and concepts reflected in *Mahogany Junction*. Furthermore, the critic elucidates that a close reading is an academic endeavor to comprehend the socially shared meanings that are backed by particular images, words, objects, actions and messages. He explains that in a close reading, we pinpoint meanings that are *socially shared, plausible* and *defensible* (original emphasis). A reader is in fact a "meaning detective" and close reading is mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings. A close reading must keep in view the "historical and textual context". "A text is the object that generates the meanings" we want to look for (*Techniques of Close Reading* 25). Application of the said criteria certainly encompasses detailed study of certain stanzas, words, symbols, metaphors, themes and concepts to trace the relevant meanings.

Results and Discussions

We will analyze various themes prevalent in *The Mahogany Junction* and compare them with other prominent Pakistani poets of English language. In the Foreword of Nisar's anthology, Ejaz Rahim, a prominent English Poet and retired Cabinet Secretary to the Government of Pakistan claims, "it is a creative work of excellent merit in terms of expression as well as the thoughts and emotions that spur an out pouring in the poetical realm. The poet finds himself at home on Mount Parnassus. The imagery is fresh and often stunning" (Foreword, p. 1).

Nisar very often brushes up his poems with metaphysical strokes that undoubtedly create an aura of surprise and wonder for the readers. The poet's metaphysical leanings reach their zenith in, his poem *The Paper Bird* in which, he laments upon the unrequited love, and urges "If I could I would be a paper bird" (p. 84) and yearns to meet with his beloved and imagines as if his kite is tied to the strings of maiden's kite and heartily exclaims;

I fall in the beloved's courtyard
And all hurt turns to joy
I am the bounty, I am the conquest
Tied to the beloved's string (84)

In a John Donne fashion, the poet employs the 'conceit' of "rain as a little girl" and lends a 'Midas touch' to the form and style of the said poem by stretching his metaphysical imagination to its zenith, *Rain is a Little Girl* (p. 54):

Rain is the little girl who lets paper boats sail
On her being for voyages that are momentary
But stirring memories that last forever

The reader also joins the little girl, who brings him never ending joy by letting the paper boats sail and rain adds colorful panorama to the whole milieu, "the bright grey, the lush green, the deep blue" (p. 54).

Like Daud Kamal's imagist tradition, Nisar also sketches lively images in his poems to create a salutary effect on readers' minds. Kamal's poem, *The Leap* can be compared with Nisar's poem, *Love Beckons*, in which the later, vehemently declares, "for love beckons, nothing dare stand in the way" (p. 50) and love is an unflinching passion which is "lending strength to the meek and courage to the reluctant" (p. 50). In his poem, *Of Love's Serenading Serenity* the poet's passionate platonic love transcends the bounds of time and space in a quest to attain the ultimate truth and fervently longs to be in tune with the blessings of God. "The sonorous serenity of the whirling dervish" (p. 44) creates an image that casts a magical spell over the readers, who also join the same serenade in a frantic fit of divine love and set out on a spiritual journey to attain the eternal truth. In *Of curled Leaves* the poet speaks about "eternity of love that defy time and space" (p.32). Eternity of love is also poet's favorite theme, which is referred to in *Rohtas Fort* "the silence of the night is broken by love's eternal dance" (p. 10) and the love's labor is lost when the "hazel eyed princess" falls for a poor slave and she is ultimately, inhumanly punished by the tyrant monarch who could not stand the love of the slave girl for his son and the poem later points towards the historical reference of the battle fought between Raja Porus of Indo-Pak subcontinent and Alexander the Great. This poem can also be compared with Daud Kamal's poem *Ruined Monastery*. The former poem refers to awe and grandeur of the Mughal Emperors and later

speaks about the epic journey of Alexander and his encounter with the local Hindus who gave him fierce resistance, but ultimately they surrendered in front of him.

The poet also longs for a meeting with his beloved in *The Panorama* and his utmost urge to re-join her, surpasses all the bounds of daily grind and hectic metropolitan life of a modern man, and aspires, "when you come we can relish each moment" (p.42). In *Moments* the poet in a nostalgic tone recalls the time spent with his beloved, "the moment that stood frozen for months where she last stood" and he further asserts "time is evanescent moments are not" (p. 16). Night is one of the favorite symbols of the poet and he shares his moments of joy in *On a Starry Winter Night* "there is something bedazzling about starry winter nights the black satin spreading its arms so wide" (p. 26). Furthermore, he aspires to get those memorable moments spent with his beloved, frozen in time and his passionate love becomes eternal and everlasting. The same passion is intensely revealed in the same poem.

Ah! Those two gates of heavens revealing eyes
That are microcosm where time stands still (26)

In *A Conference with the Stars* the poet creates an image of a night that oozes out peace and tranquility:

As night falls on the sun kissed vale,
Like tresses nudged by the gentle breeze,
Obscure the innocent radiance of a damsel's face (28)

The poet earnestly wishes to go beyond the boundaries of time and space and aspires to accomplish eternity in the domain of divine love and ardently feels the need to unravel the mysteries of eternal truth. In the same poem, he earnestly refers to eternity in time:

The secret as whispered by the meandering wind
Is that in impermanence lies permanence
In the transitory is the eternal
And there is longevity in leading and being led (28)

Nature is also a recurring theme in this anthology and the reader is so much awestruck by the images that create a halo of freshness around him/her. In his poem *Spring Musings*(74), the poet also entices us to take refuge in nature:

The consonance of chirps
Creating a symphony so intoxicating
The clear blue sky adorned with white fluffy clouds
Gentle breeze kissed by the mellow sun
Spring comes to the front lawn

The imagery is so vivid that the reader is deeply transformed from the drudgery of life into an aura of embalming Nature. Nisar's treatment of Nature makes the reader recall Wordsworth's notion of "communion with Nature" which proves an infinite source of peace and enjoyment. In *Whistling Symphony* the poet aspires that "the wild wind takes your hand and breaks into a whistling symphony" (p. 78). The symphony is a state of trance, tranquility and serenity that an individual achieves in the company of Nature. Moreover, the poet uses various images of wind, sun, moon, rain, stars, moonless nights,

changing seasons, starry nights, birds, to convince the readers that they should refer to Nature. Nisar's never ending infatuation with the objects of Nature is also evident in *Rohtas Fort* "when the full moon rises to light up the night sky" (p. 10). He wishes to be lost in the ecstatic moments of rain and utters longingly in *The Rain God*, "And then transports us to a state, where life is a rain dance" (p. 14). The poet compares the never ending human quest to amass the riches of this ephemeral world with that of the "rain dance" which symbolizes the daily grind of a common man, who hankers after material gains in this transitory world. In *Moments* the poet shows the change of seasons in these words, "of the few rain soaked moments that outlive the autumn and grow wings, so that they can flutter away to a blissful abode come summers" (p. 16).

In the poem, *The Mahogany Junction*, the poet underlines the need to attain the spiritual truth by visiting a symbolic place like, Mahogany Junction, where the spiritual and the mundane converge and "the wayfarer sits on a lone bench lost in thoughts" (p. 48). The metaphor of a 'way farer' stands for an individual, who embarks upon the spiritual journey by transcending the boundaries of this transitory world. The junction is a rendezvous where mystic and the Sufi spirits are invoked and the wayfarer gets embalmed in the divine love that is ultimately bestowed upon him/her, in the spiritual journey to get the ultimate truth.

From that day on trains come to a grinding halt
Wayfarers disembark in reverence, offerings are given, prayers answered
At the Mahogany Junction(48)

In *The Ultimate Quest* the poet like a Sufi(saint), philosophizes about the true reality of soul and exclaims, "the soul is free from the confines of space and time" (p. 82). In *Redemption*, the poet reveals, "The crows suspend their hunt for the day" (p. 80). The crows metaphorically stand for the human desires that are hankered after by the lustful man, thus pushing aside all the decency, justice and fair play but the ultimate peace of mind rests within the ambit of offerings, prayers and repentance upon the sins committed in this life. While embarking on a spiritual journey, the poet explores his real self and underlines his own identity in the poem, *Who am I*,

Am I the fire that burns at a Sufi's abode
Where devotees come in reverence
To seek warmth for frost bitten souls
And re-ignite the flame within (66)

The poet's mystic sentiments are profoundly ignited and he earnestly seeks a divine union, whereas, his transition from the mundane to spiritual, leads to self-exploration and earnestly seeks his own salvation through purgation off his sins.

In *Of Moonless Nights*, the poet also un-reveals the mysteries of the Universe and metaphorically mentions 'wayfarer' who is lost in the labyrinth of the transitory world and refers to his much coveted and ecstatically spiritual union with God:

The hide and seek of a wandering celestial being,
That is but a deceptive glimmer of hope,
A mirage that lures the wayfarer
To lose his way and embark upon a quest for the elusive (46)

The metaphor of "out stretched hand" spells out poet's quest for an invisible help in the wake of untoward and unforeseen circumstances and vicissitudes of life. In

Mahogany Junction the poet seeks divine help and exclaims “sun falls on its knees and outstretches its hand offering garlands of gold”(48) In his poem *The Flame*, the poet is sanguine, “breeze’s out stretched hand lifts it to its feet” (40). Furthermore, in *Of Love’s Serenading Serenity* he hopes that the whirling dervish,

Serenades till the seeker becomes one with the beloved
the souls intertwined and hold ecstasy’s outstretched hand
and spin till they are in sync with cosmic motion
transcending to the state of ultimate truth (44).

In fact the poet’s optimism is as infectious like Browning’s who also advised us that we should always be hopeful that God would help us not only in this world but also in the life hereafter.

In *Nothing Lasts Forever* the poet brings forward theme of death and mortality of life and like John Keats, admits the transitory nature of this world in repetitive and alliterative mode of expression that too smacks of escapism. “I rejoice, I revel, I soar, I sing, I dust off the glitter, I fly, I flutter”(76)

In *Of Curled Leaves*, the poet cogitates upon the reality of death in this way “Ah! In death’s cold embrace is the power to bestow eternity”(p. 32). *The Ace* also underscores the stark contrast between life and death in this way, “Alas death comes too often, annihilation comes but once”(p. 20). *Nothing Lasts Forever* refers to mortal life and “drinks from a holy spring” and utters, “For nothing will remain, for nothing is forever” (p. 76). Moreover, the transitory nature of this mundane world is also underscored in *Of Fleeting Winter Nights* “The transitory must submit to the eternal”(p. 36).

In *A Prayer for My Mother* Nisar pays rich tribute to his mother in a distinctively startling manner and lends a metaphysical touch to his strong urge to take care of his mother if once again, she is given back her childhood in the life hereafter. He ecstatically utters his solemn prayer in a unique fashion that is Nisar’s signature style,

If I could, I would in the next life,
Raise you as a little girl,
For what more fitting tribute can be
To your love’s eternal spring

Moreover, his strong wish to take care of his mother makes him say,

To tie your hair each morning
And walk you to school

For the paucity of space it is not possible to reproduce the whole of the poem here but the idea is so startling that the readers are reminded of Robert Browning who used to bring forward surprisingly new themes and images from under the carpet.

Conclusion

Nisar’s poetry highlights the drudgery of the way-farer –a common man, hankering after the materialistic pursuits but at times, like a dervish, he scrambles to get the ultimate truth. He expects that some outstretched hand will guide the wretched, dejected and sin-blasted soul through the vicissitudes of life. His startling style of introducing very unique themes surprises the readers and his incandescent symbols of rain, night, stars, clouds, magical hues, leaves, water and moonless nights, weave a glittering halo of hope and optimism that also proves a balm for the weary. The poet

suggests that a lay man may get onto a spiritual track by a chaste refinement of spirit and by visiting a sacred place like Mahogany Junction, a rendezvous to immortal glory, to purge himself/herself off the sins. This Junction leads to a track of peace, power and purity and provides an opportunity to ignite a spark of heavenly fire within.

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