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A STUDY OF LIGHT VERSE FEATURES IN ATHAR TAHIR'S SELECTED POEMS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates light verse features in Muhammad Athar Tahir's selected poems: "Basant" (The Gift of Possession, 2012, p. 37), "Buffaloes" (Boody Loom, 2006, p. 64), "Bulbul" (The Last Tea, 2015, p. 85) and "Jikka Gali Evening" (The Gift of Possession, 2012, p. 42). These poems are taken from Tahir's three volumes of poetry: Body Loom (2006), The Gift of Possession (2012)and The Last Tea (2015). The aim of this study is to publicize how some of Tahir's poems fall into the category of light verse poetry. The writers of light verse have to be more careful and crafted than the poets of high verse as light verse requires precise technical work. In order to study the characteristics of light verse poetry in the selected poems, the researcher utilizes the concepts of W. H. Auden and Kingsley Amis. According to W. H. Auden (1938), light verse poems are written in a plain, straightforward style and in a language close to familiar speech and they should be related to a common experience. Kingsley Amis (1978) takes Auden's concept a step forward. He includes wit, virtuosity and subversive quality in the features of light verse poetry. In addition to this, Amis (1978) points out that the writers of light verse deploy best words in the best order. The findings of this research study affirm that Tahir's poems can be rated as light verse poetry. His poetry gives the impression of ease and thus evokes a good-natured smile.

Keywords: light verse features, selected poems, virtuosity, impression of ease, good-natured smile.

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INTRODUCTION

This study aims at exploring light verse features in the selected poems of Muhammad Athar Tahir: "Basant" (The Gift of Possession, 2012, p. 37), "Buffaloes" (Boody Loom, 2006, p. 64), "Bulbul" (The Last Tea, 2015, p. 85) and Jikka Gali Evening (The Gift of Possession, 2012, p. 42). These poems are taken from Tahir's three volumes of poetry: *Body Loom* (2006), *The Gift of Possession* (2012) and *The Last Tea* (2015). The purpose of this research paper is to publicize how some of Tahir's poems fall in the category of light verse poetry. Light verse poetry deals with common experience in a plain and straightforward style. Light verse poems are usually brief and always amusing. The writers of light verse use best words in the best order and it requires virtuosity. Light verse, through the use of humor, often attempts to make serious points in a subtle and subversive way. Light poetry strives to be humorous. Light poems are commonly brief and may deal with both serious and comic subjects. Light verse usually includes pun, word play, heavy alliteration and daring rhymes. In addition to this, light verse poetry gives the impression of ease to raise a good-natured smile. Billy Collins, an American poet, is famous for light verse poetry.

Born in 1956, Muhammad Athar Tahir is a contemporary Pakistani English poet, author, translator, editor, painter and calligrapher. He studied at Lawrence College Ghora Gali Murree, Oxford University England, and the University of Pennsylvania USA. His introduction included in his book on poetry *The Last Tea* (2015) informs that "He has edited five occasional volumes of Pakistani English poetry, published a collection of short stories, essays and six volumes of poems" (Akhtar, p. back cover). He has been awarded numerous awards for his work including: Tamgha-e-Imtiaz for literature (1998), Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai Award (1990), the National Book Council Prize (1991), National Prize for Literature in English, the Patras Bukhari Award (2012) and Silver Award of Asia Pacific Publishers Association (2008). In addition to this, he is a fellow of the Royal Asiatic

Society of Great Britain and Life Fellow of the Pakistani Academy of Letters. Additionally, he is the founder director of ICPWE (International Centre for Pakistani Writing in English).

To conduct the study, the poems are selected from Tahir's three volumes: *Body Loom* (2006), *The Gift of Possession* (2012) and *The Last Tea* (2015).

First published in 2006, *Body Loom*, a fine collection of verse, is an amalgam of thought, mood and feelings. It explores the idea of "human construct as the loom for creation" (Barque, 2012, p. 9). The poet weaves art and calligraphy together. The very first poem "Dot" (p. 25) encloses creation and the art of calligraphy while the poem "Calligraphy" (p. 31) displays colors that mirror sensitivity of the poet as a painter. A sizeable portion of the collection celebrates visual imagery of Pakistani landscape. Commemorating the magic of tiny creatures, the collection ends with "Punjab Calendar" (pp. 75-91), a series of twelve poems after the names of 12 months.

Published in 2012, *The Gift of Possession* is Tahir's fifth collection of poems. This National-Prize-Winner collection discovers and celebrates the gift of history, familial ties and landscape. The opening poems like "Stroke" (p. 25), "Letter" (p. 26), "Word" (p. 27), and "Stanza" (p. 28) deal with the art of writing poems. The poems like "Sun" (p. 31), "Fog" (p. 38) and "Motorway" (p. 69) preserve the memory of joyous travels. Most of the poems of this volume are a celebration of nature. In addition to this, the collection includes a number of personal poems. Preoccupied with the idea of "loss and the transitory nature of time" (Barque, 2012, p. 21), the volume keeps on "converting 'possession' into 'gift'" (Barque, 2012, p. 22). In a nutshell, the poet gifts his possessions to the readers.

Published in 2015, the most recent collection of Tahir's poems is *The Last Tea*. It is divided into three sections. The very first section includes poems on familial and universal themes. This section also enjoys nature. Inspired by Japanese aesthetic in style, the second section "Haiku Aviary"

(pp. 83-103) celebrates the images of familiar birds. The third section "Japan Journal" (pp. 105-179) bears gifts of Japanese culture. This last section seems to be the climax of aesthetic. In brief, the collection is a fine blend of personal, local and cultural experiences.

Objective

1. This research study aims to display how Tahir's poems fall in the category of light verse.

Research Question

1. Do Tahir's poems display some of the characteristics of light verse poetry?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a paper *The Poetry of P.K. Page* (1971), A. J. M. Smith recollects the poetry of a Canadian poet P. K. Page as light verse. He explores the engineered world of innocence and images in Page's poetry. In an article *Light Verse Features in Larkin's Poems* (2012), Aina March Escoto, Licenciada en Filologia Inglesa, examines the poetry of Philip Larkin as light verse. It explores the light verse features as spontaneity, ordinary speech, common experience, technicality, and wit leading to good-natured smile in Larkin's selected poems. Maxine Kumin (2012) in *Metamorphosis: From Light Verse to the Poetry of Witness* jots down the journey of the poet from light verse to the poetry of witness. Facing the hardships of a new poet, he ultimately reaches the prime of maturity. Sarwat Ali (2015), in the review of *The Last Tea,* qualifies Muhammad Athar Tahir as 'a poet of few words'. The review exteriorizes the style of Tahir's poetry saying a lot in a few words. The researcher's contribution is to study the selected poems of a Pakistani poet Muhammad Athar Tahir under the perspective of light verse.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative in nature. Textual evidences are collected to conduct the study. In order to study the features of light verse poetry in the

selected poems of Muhammad Athar Tahir, the researcher draws upon the concepts of W. H. Auden and Kingsley Amis.

In response to the post-Romantic cult of the sentimental lyric, W. H. Auden (1938), in *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, introduces poetry that is clear, enjoyable, and, regardless of age, perfectly modern. According to him, light verse poetry is written in a plain, straight forward style and in a language close to the ordinary speech. In addition to this, as stated by him, light verse poems should be related to a common experience as the poet of light verse tries to reach and attract the readers with his poetry. Auden (1938) in the 'Introduction' of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* writes: "When the things in which the poet is interested, the things which he sees about him, are much the same as those of his audience, and that audience is a fairly general one, he will not be conscious of himself as an unusual person, and his language will be straightforward and close to ordinary speech" (Introduction, p. viii). Furthermore, he indicates that "poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject-matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being" (Introduction, p. ix), would be considered light verse.

Kingsley Amis takes Auden's concept of light verse a step forward. Amis (1978) in the Introduction of his *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, states that light verse includes several features. In the context of creating humor through utterly controlled rhyme and rhythm, light verse should display virtuosity. Although it does not need to be funny yet a poem without humor cannot be light verse. It should involve wit and can also have subversive quality. Light verse deploys best words in the best order and requires precise technical work. Amis writes:

> Light Verse obeys Coleridge's definition of poetry, the best words in the best order; it demands Carlyle's definition of genius, transcendent capacity for taking pains; and it is the supreme exhibition of somebody's definition of art, the

> concealment of art. In the result it observes the most exact laws of rhythm and meter as if by a happy accident, and in a sort of nonchalant spirit of mockery at the real poets who do it on purpose (Introduction, 1978, p. vi).

The writers of light verse have to be more careful and crafted than the poets of high verse as Kingsley Amis writes:

> Light verse makes more stringent demands on the writer's technique. A fault of scansion or rhyme, an awkwardness or obscurity that would damage only the immediate context of a piece of high verse, endangers the whole structure of a light-verse poem (Introduction, 1978, p. vii).

Furthermore, according to Amis, light verse is

> a kind of realistic verse that is close to some of the interests of the novel: men and women among their fellows, seen as members of a group or class in a way that emphasizes manners, social forms, amusements, fashion (from millinery to philosophy), topicality, even gossip, all these treated in a bright, perspicuous style (Introduction, 1978, p. xviii).

In addition to this, light verse poetry

> deals with low matters, with subjects, scenes and concerns that are either poetically or morally unsuitable for high consideration. It uses low terms, whether rustic, technical, colloquial, facetiously anachronistic, or vulgar, ill-bred, obscene. Its chief weapon is impropriety (Amis, 1978, p. viii).

Above all, light verse poetry gives the impression of ease and evokes a good-natured smile.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Basant

For the purpose of analysis, the poem "Basant" (p. 37) is taken from Tahir's collection of poetry *The Gift of Possession* (2012). Rooted in the

traditions of Punjabi culture, the title is home-grown. In Punjabi calendar, Basant is held on the fifth day of eleventh month 'Magha'; it marks the start of spring. The festival of Basant is celebrated in the cities of Pakistan, especially in Lahore. On the day of Basant, flying kites symbolize the essence of freedom.

The poem pictures the seasonal festival of Basant- kite-flying. The poem "Basant" (p. 37) and the festival of Basant both open with 'the bloom of mustard in the field'. This spring day of Basant takes the bloom of mustard in the field to the roof-tops, lanes and old city walls. It fills the cities with the kite-flying people dressed in glowing colors. On the day of Basant, the sky seems to be crowded and colorful with the flying kites. The poet presents kite-flying as a game of "losses and gains" (p. 37). Igniting something in the blood, the kites go up and down. Eyes are keen; fingers are nimble to cut the kites of others. A cultural instrument 'drum' is beaten to celebrate the victory of kite cut. This zealous festival ends with an evening 'prayer-call' and the kites are set free in the air to take their own unknown flights.

"Basant" (p. 37) is a simple poem that is written in a straightforward style. The language of the poem is plain and accessible. It does not require high intellect to understand: "The bloom of mustard in the field/ This spring day takes to roof-tops, lanes/ Old city walls…" (p. 37). The lexis of the last stanza is quite comprehensible for a common reader:

> With the evening prayer-call
> Strings are snapped and all flying kites
> In the twilight's soft and swift fall
> Are lost to freer, unknown flights. (p. 37)

The vocabulary of the poem resembles the words of common speech such as: "roof-tops", "lanes", "old city walls", "field", "kites", "year" and "evening prayer-call" (p. 37). According to Amis and Auden, straightforward style and accessible lexis are the features of light verse.

Apart from being simple, the language is also witty. In order to craft 'precise technical work', the poet uses 'best words in the best order', especially in the last lines: "… all flying kites/ In the twilight's soft and swift fall/ Are lost to freer, unknown flights" (p. 37). The poet displays wit using the image of 'twilight' and the words 'unknown flights'. 'Twilight' can signify the twilight of one's life, 'evening prayer-call' signals funeral prayer and 'unknown flights' can be considered a reference to unknown life after death. Moreover, to maintain the flow and music of the lines, the poet uses rhetorical devices such as alliteration: "sky, see/ sunny, strategies/ drums, declare/ strings, snapped" (p. 37) and consonance: "litter, flitter" (p. 37). All this can be considered writing with wit, an important feature of light verse according to Kingsley Amis (1978).

There are five rhymed stanzas in the poem "Basant" (p. 37), each of which has four lines. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is *abab*. The rhyme is constructed in a thoughtful way but, however, it is not noticeable in an unpleasant way. Since the poem is very spontaneous, it gives the impression of ease. Spontaneity is one of the features of light verse according to Amis (1978). For him, a poem should have glimpse of humor through "perfectly controlled rhyme and rhythm" (Introduction, 1978, p. vi). The readers not only enjoy the festival of Basant in the poem but they also find delight in the rhyme and rhythm. Following the law of spontaneity, the poem seems to be a melodic arrangement. Dr. Ayesha (2012) Fatima Burqe quotes Zulfikar Ghose in the Introduction of *The Gift of Possession*:

> Athar Tahir's new poems … once read, keep echoing in one's mind and demanding to be re-read. Tahir's technical control is impressive as witnessed by the natural flow of his language within tightly formal structures in which rhymes are unobtrusive and the overall rhythm a deliberate melodic arrangement. (Introduction, 2012, p. 11)

According to Kingsley Amis (1978), the poets of light verse, in order to convey serious themes, present realism or a common experience in a way that it becomes very pleasant and attractive. The poem "Basant" (p. 37) reflects a common experience. Simple language of the poem is combined here with the Punjabi festival of Basant that is known to the common readers. Kite-flying makes the poem a realistic one, since it deals with the festival with which the common readers can feel identified. Every Pakistani knows well the festival of Basant, the sky filled with colorful kites, crowded roof-tops and lanes and drumbeating on every 'kite cut'. In this way, the poet Athar Tahir creates a connection with the readers and especially with the readers who dismiss poetry for being not easy to understand. This indicates Tahir's desire to write for the common readers. Celebrating the festival of kite-flying, the poet entices the reader towards the serious theme of the poem given in the last stanza:

> With the evening prayer-call
> Strings are snapped and all flying kites
> In the twilight's soft and swift fall
> Are lost to freer, unknown flights. (p. 37)

These lines have serious meanings for the readers. Here, 'Twilight' seems to be the end of one's life, 'evening prayer-call' signifies funeral prayer and 'unknown flights' can be taken as a reference to unknown life after death. That is how, the poet Athar Tahir, in order to convey the reality of life, presents a common experience of kite-flying in a way that it becomes very pleasant and attractive. As a whole, the poem gives the expression of ease and evokes a good-natured smile.

Buffaloes

The poem "Buffaloes" (p. 64) is taken from Athar Tahir's collection of poetry *Body Loom* (2006). It is structured in two stanzas each forming an

interrogative sentence of seven lines. The poem gives the impression of ease to the reader and the rhymes seem to have been placed by casualty:

> What could be more pensive
> than the buffaloes
> lolling in the village pond
> sending ripples to muddy the surface-sky
> chewing, chewing, chewing
> as one would the permutations of a problem
> and whisk pecking sparrows
> off with the skin's slight shiver? (p. 64).

According to Kingsley Amis (1978), light verse demands a precise technical work and rhymes should seem to be placed in the poem by casualty. The unobtrusive rhymes give the impression that the poem "Buffaloes" (p. 64) is very spontaneous.

Buffalo is a large animal of cow family. Asian buffalo has wide and curved horns. In the very first stanza of the poem, Tahir describes the actions of buffaloes. It wanders about the country side and swims in the pond. Mostly buffaloes are seen chewing something and with a slight shiver of their body they shake the sparrows to take their flight from buffaloes' skin. In the second stanza the poet appreciates the beauty of buffalo, their rounded bellies, and their crescent like horns which qualify their beauty as a 'goddess'. The poet also admires the 'black' color of buffaloes which is also attractive.

The poem is the amalgam of straightforward style of the poet and common experience of people. Buffaloes are seen in everyday life: "lolling in the village pond/ sending ripples to muddy the surface-sky" (p. 64). Common experience is one of the characteristics of light verse and the poem Buffaloes (p. 64) reflects the everyday life experience of Pakistani people. That is why the poem can be categorized as light verse.

The poem "Buffaloes" (p. 64) mirrors the wit of the poet who embellishes the common experience in a way that it becomes a piece of art. Tahir uses many rhetorical devices in the poem which show his wit. He compares the horns of buffaloes with the crowns of goddess: "horns like crescents crowning a goddess" (p. 64). Tahir has also taken the liberty of repeated words: "chewing, chewing, chewing" (p. 64). However, the repetition of words, here, creates not only a pleasant sound effect but also stresses upon the pensive mood of buffaloes. Alliteration is another device in the poem: "sending, surface, sky/ skin's, slight, shiver/ permutations, problem/ crescents, crowning" (p. 64). All these devices qualify the language as witty which features the poem as light verse.

The poem "Buffaloes" (p. 64) raises a 'good-natured smile'. The description of buffaloes is very pure and apt. The poem fabricates visual imagery which the reader enjoys. In routine life, the people do not care to enjoy the aesthetic beauty of buffaloes "lolling in the village pond" (p. 64) but, however; the poem provides an opportunity to celebrate the precious gifts of nature in the form of bathing buffaloes. The image of buffaloes 'lolling in the village pond' is very amusing. The pensive mood reinforced by "chewing, chewing, chewing" (p. 64) is attributed to the lazy-moving buffaloes; it carries a light touch of humor. The reader begins quivering with the 'light shiver' of buffaloes' skin. In addition to this, the image of "their rounded bellies" (p. 64) raises a good-natured smile- the fruit of light verse.

Bulbul

In order to take the argument forward, the poem "Bulbul" (p. 85) is taken from "Haiku Aviary" (pp. 83-103), the second section of Athar Tahir's recent volume of poetry *The Last Tea* (2015). "Haiku Aviary" deals with distinct images of familiar birds that conjure up the surroundings with their melodious voice. Dr. Waseem Anwar (2015) writes in the Introduction of *The*

Last Tea: ""Haiku Aviary" is full of the local birds' sounds that puncture the passing of un/ historical whispers and silences" (p. 29).

Bulbul is a tropical African and Asian songbird, typically having a crest, drab-black plumage, and a melodious voice. Bulbul is about 20 centimeters in length. Its upper-parts are brown and underparts with buff flanks are whitish. It has a dark spur running onto the breast at shoulder level. It has a long and brown tail with white terminal feather tips, but the vent area is red. Its life span is about eleven years. Its sweet-sounding song is heard especially in the mornings, from the tops of trees.

Athar Tahir's "Bulbul" (p. 85) is a very short poem of three lines which is called haiku, a Japanese poetry format. Tahir squeezes large and ungainly description of Bulbul into a few words and a graceful form. The poem displays wit in the sense that it makes use of the best words in the best order and that it seems to be a precise technical work:

> Red-bottomed bulbul –
> So many songs in its throat
> The monsoon vibrates. (p. 85)

Instead of telling a story, the poet captures a feeling and an image of Bulbul. This economy of expression qualifies Tahir as a poet of light verse. Qualifying Tahir as a poet of few words, Sarwat Ali (2015) comments: "It appears that Athar Tahir has taken upon himself the difficult task of expressing himself in a few words" (Poet of few Words). According to Amis (1978), the poets of light verse have to be more careful and crafted than the poets of high verse as light verse requires precise technical work: "Light verse makes more stringent demands on the writer's technique." (Introduction, p. viii)

It can also be said that the poem "Bulbul" (p. 85) carries some light touches of humor, which is also one of the characteristics of light verse (Amis, 1978). Tahir pictures Bulbul as "Red-bottomed bulbul" (p. 85). The

vent area of Bulbul is red. The image of red-vented Bulbul and the beat of 'd', 'b' and 'l' sounds carry a light touch of humor that evokes a good-natured smile.

Plain language is much obvious in this poem that takes it to the category of light verse. The poet in a straightforward style depicts the image and melodious song of Bulbul. He uses simple and plain language that everyone can understand. His poem can be taken as to be written for common readers. The use of simple words and style add charm to the poem. Furthermore, it reflects the common experience of people who listen to the sweet-sounding songs of 'bulbul' every day. Common experience, for Auden (1938), is an important feature of light poetry.

While reading the poem, the reader enjoys the beauty and melody of nature and in response a 'good-natured' smile raises upon his lips as "a thing of beauty is joy forever" (Keats, 1884, p. 66).

Jikka Gali Evening

To study light verse features, the poem "Jikka Gali Evening" (p. 42) is also taken from Tahir's collection of poetry *The Gift of Possession* (2012). "Jikka Gali Evening" (p. 42) is a sequel to "Jikka Gali Morning" (p. 41) which is also published in the volume *The Gift of Possession* (2012). This sequel is written in similar quatrains as "Jikka Gali Morning" (p. 41), and thus consists of three stanzas, with four lines each. The title of the poem "Jikka Gali Evening" (p. 42) suits light verse; it does not seem convenient for high verse poetry. The speaker describes the scene of evening in Jikka Gali- a town in Murree, Punjab, Pakistan. From the hilltops, the clouds slide down and spread all over the town. Lingering upon the roads, they colonize the treetops and stand still over some slopes. The clouds themselves are stunned by evening's changing gift of possession. The clouds curl over the town and stay there to beautify and celebrate the sight of Jikka Gali evening.

As in Jikka Gali Morning (p. 41), the rhyme is not constructed in a clichéd way; however, the poem is very spontaneous. The lines "seducing summer flowers and weeds/ with practiced ease, lingering on" (p. 42) give the impression of ease. In addition to this, Dr. Ayesha Fatima Barque (2012) in the Introduction of *The Gift of Possession* points out that the land is "preserved joyously and naturally in images as the clouds penetrate the trees in 'Jikka Gali Evening':

> Some treetops with extending arms
> They colonize, some are kissed in
> Wisps of whim, some they stick to like
> Settling resolve…" (p. 9)

The flow of lines evokes soft and tender feelings in the readers. According to Amis (1978), the reading of light verse poem should give the impression of ease. The same is the case in the poem; it seems to have been written spontaneously.

The language of the poem "Jikka Gali Evening" (p. 42) can be qualified as plain, since it is accessible. For example, the lexis of opening lines: "Clouds from hilltops down pine forests/ with lazy grace of landslides slide" (p. 42) is not difficult to understand and is written in a straightforward style. To Auden (1938) and Amis (1978), this would be a light verse feature. In addition, the language of the poem is also witty, especially towards the end of the poem when the speaker says: "…Over some slopes they/ just stand still, stunned by evening's/ varying gift of possession" (p. 42). This gift of possession refers to the natural gift that enables the poet to share and celebrate the conjuring moments of life with the reader. Furthermore, Tahir also includes in this poem rhetorical devices such as alliteration: "seducing summer/ some slopes/ stand still" (p. 42), and a reference to Jikka Gali. All these features constitute virtuosity, a characteristic of light verse. Tahir

knows how to use the best words in the best order to make the poem attractive.

Light verse poems should be entertaining, according to Amis (1978). The way how the clouds, in the poem "Jikka Gali Evening" (p. 42), slide down with 'the lazy grace' and seduce 'summer flowers' is quite amusing and carries a light touch of humor: "with the lazy grace of landslides slide/ seducing summer flowers and weeds/ with practiced ease…" (p. 42). This delight reaches its climax when the clouds penetrate and "colonize" the trees: "Some treetops with extending arms/ they colonize…" (p. 42). That is how the poem seems to be a 'precise technical work' and thus evokes 'a good-natured smile.'

CONCLUSION

In the light of above arguments, it can be affirmed that the selected poems of Athar Tahir fall into the category of light verse poetry. For most of the poems share certain characteristics of light verse. All the selected poems are written in a plain, straightforward style. The poems are accessible for any kind of reader. It seems that Tahir wants any person to be his audience. Crafted in witty language, the poems are amusing and some of them carry light touches of humor. In addition to this, Tahir's poems feature a spontaneous rhyme and a style that seems effortless but, however, requires a 'precise technical work'. As Kingsley Amis (1978) says that the poets of light verse have to be more careful and crafted than the writers of high verse. Above all, Tahir's poems give the impression of ease and thus raise a good-natured smile.

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