

[The Lonely Endeavour of Daud Kamal]

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[Abstract] *Besides discussing such seminal images in the poetry of Daud Kamal as Gandhara art, the bridge, and bird migration, this essay explores solitude as a necessary accompaniment to Kamal's creativity, as he sought, in "the translunar paradise of art", "a cure for the cancer of loneliness". This essay also examines the undiscerning critical reception of Kamal's poetry, which notwithstanding belongs to the finest tradition of Islamic mystical poetry and is therefore destined to last.*

[Keywords] *Daud Kamal; Pakistani poetry in English; Pakistani literature*

Daud Kamal (1935–1987) belongs to a generation of poets (Taufiq Rafat, Adrian Husain, Salman Tarik Kureshi, Maki Kureishi, and Alamgir Hashmi were his contemporaries) who forged a new Pakistani idiom in English. For nearly three decades, Kamal taught in the Department of English and Modern Languages at the University of Peshawar. He wrote poetry late at night while his wife and children were asleep and once compared his arduous labor to “sculpturing in marble with one’s fingernails” (“Interview by Salim-ur-Rahman” 72). It was a lonely endeavor, for his home city of Peshawar had few speakers of English compared to Karachi and Lahore. Nonetheless, Kamal found an eager audience in his students, department colleagues, and a small circle of fellow Pakistani poets who wrote exclusively in English.

Thanks to his mastery of the English language, Kamal was able to draw upon and synthesize disparate literary traditions in his poetry. In his Practical Criticism class, Kamal introduced his Master’s students to famous poems by such literary giants as Ted Hughes (“The Jaguar”), Thom Gunn (“Considering the Snail”), John Berryman (“The Ball Poem”), Archibald MacLeish (“Ars Poetica”), and W. H. Auden (“Surgical Ward”). Although his early poetry was influenced by Yeats, Kamal learned to avoid exuberant emotional overflow through suggestion, ellipsis, and allusion. His precise and evocative imagery owes much to his familiarity with Chinese and Japanese poetry, from which Ezra Pound and the imagists also drew inspiration.

The classical Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869) was Kamal’s favorite poet and a kindred soul. Kamal translated his couplets for his first book, *Reverberations* (1970). When asked whether his oeuvre in translation had influenced his own English-language poetry, Kamal replied,

It must have. Because I do belong to this culture – the Urdu culture – the culture of cultivated Muslims in the subcontinent. I may not be deeply versed in Urdu poetry, but I have inherited a love for the classics: Mir, Ghalib, Dard, Zafar – etc. I can’t disown the tradition. My feelings are deeply rooted in this culture, but, of course I write in English.
(Interview by Tariq Rahman iv)

Both Kamal and Ghalib reached artistic heights during times of cultural erasure and displacement. After the deaths of Momin in 1852 and of Zauk in 1854, Ghalib became the last great poet of the Mughal era, which came to an abrupt end in 1857. That year, the British took over the governance of India from the East India Company and destroyed much of Delhi, after crushing a mass revolt. The British murdered thousands of civilians, including Ghalib’s brother and the sons of the deposed Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was himself an accomplished poet. These circumstances, together with the early deaths of Ghalib’s children, explain the desolate loneliness of Ghalib, who wrote, in Kamal’s translation:

Like an accidental, ever-spreading
Drop of ink staining an unwritten page,
Is this black night of separation
Which fate has destined for me.
(*Reverberations* n.p.)

Adding to this sense of loneliness was Ghalib's lasting regret that his contemporaries failed to understand his work: "[M]y verse and prose has not won the praise it merited. I wrote it and I alone appreciated it" (*Hidden in the Lute* 247).

Like Ghalib, Kamal lived in a time of violence, decline, and uncertainty. In the final decade of his life, Kamal witnessed the spiritual and cultural contraction of Pakistan under Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship, which imposed and institutionalized, for political ends, a coercive, ostentatious, and punitive version of Islam. The military regime funneled weapons and funds, provided by the United States and Saudi Arabia, to militant groups, resulting in a bloody civil war in Afghanistan. Peshawar was inundated with Afghan refugees, black money, and advanced weaponry. While Kamal was serving as the English department chair, the University of Peshawar was closed for eight months in 1983 due to the violence perpetrated on campus by the Jamaat-e-Islami with the support of the military regime.

The late seventies and early eighties witnessed a mass exodus of writers, artists, and musicians from Pakistan. In a poem dedicated to a deceased sitarist, Kamal wrote: "The peaks / have stopped / talking / to each other" ("Ustad Fateh Ali Khan Sitar-Nawaz", *A Selection of Verse* 34). This poem, in which mountain peaks symbolize spiritual heights, conveys the loss of voices of conscience in Pakistan. Although versatile and witty English-language poets continued to emerge in Pakistan during Kamal's lifetime, they lacked Kamal's sense of the past, erudition and spiritual insight. With the death of Ghulam Ali Allana in 2020, the Sufi tradition in English-language Pakistani poetry, which Kamal epitomized, appears to have come to an end, at least for now.

Kamal shared Ghalib's enduring sense of isolation and loneliness, as well as the knowledge that the poet's calling demands absolute fidelity to one's artistic vision. "Condemned to live in the substratum of history," observes Octavio Paz, the poet "is defined by loneliness" (*The Bow and the Lyre* 223). Pierre Teilhard de Chardin defines this solitude as "the great anxiety... of a consciousness waking up to reflection in a dark universe... which we have not yet succeeded in understanding either in itself, or in its demands on us" (310). And yet poetry, because it enters the lives of readers and listeners, cures the very solitude that it necessitates, as Kamal explains:

The question... that has continued to reverberate through the ages is quite simply this: why should the artist try to "recreate" life? Of course, there is no one definite answer to this. One can only offer tentative explanations – personal conjectures. Is it because man is fascinated by the mystery of life, riddled by its doubts and destroyed by its transience? Could it be that man dreads his essential solitariness and therefore seeks, through the medium of art, a cure for the cancer of loneliness? In creating the translunar paradise of art, the artist – it seems – is reasserting the triumph of hope over despair

and the invincibility of the human will in its perpetual fight against the forces of ignorance and darkness. (“Role of the Writer” 43)

A poem that conveys Kamal’s sense of loneliness is “Mental Patient”, in which a man, with eyes “hardened into stone” – emblematic of enduring, lasting vision – dreams of the liberating and majestic dance of the peacock, one which brings forests and orchards into imaginative fulfillment:

Between him and freedom
the big, brawny
hospital attendants –
their cheap, ill-fitting uniforms

exuding sweat.
The odour of a rational world.
In this, his antiseptic,
whitewashed room

he sits all day alone,
deaf to the scrambled noise
of radios, the bright hysterical laughter
of his friends in madness.

All night he stares up
at the ceiling cracks,
the few stray moths that come
to circumnavigate a naked bulb.

His eyes have hardened into stone.
And still he dreams – of the day
he’ll see the peacocks
dance their vivid dance.

(*A Remote Beginning* 32)

The image of the moths circling the light bulb recalls the trope from Sufi literature of the self-immolation of the moth in the candle that symbolizes divine light. The world, Kamal reminds us, can be transfigured even in the recesses of a dungeon or a mental ward.

Ghalib and Kamal understood that the affliction of loneliness was at once a curse and a gift. In the words of Lao Tzu:

Ordinary men hate solitude.
But the Master makes use of it,
Embracing his aloneness, realizing
He is one with the whole universe.

(qtd. in D’Aquili, et al. 102)

The poetic vocation entails, according to T. S. Eliot, “a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (“Tradition” 53). In “Damp Stone Door-Step”, Kamal wonders, “What should I take / and what should I leave behind? The loss will certainly cut deep” (*Recognitions* 12). Kamal understood that the quest to preserve the evanescent self is futile, for the Buddha wonders, “Which is your true self, the self of yesterday, that of today, or that of tomorrow... for whose preservation you clamor?” (qtd. in Nisker 144). In his poetry, Kamal subsumes his transient selves into millennial currents, heeding Mirza Ghalib’s admonishment: “If you live aloof in the world’s whole story, / the plot of your life drones on, a mere romance. / Either one enters the drift, part and whole as one, / or life’s a mere game: Be, or be lost” (“Translations,” “Poem V” 8).

In “The Blue Wind,” as in the finest tradition of Islamic mystical poetry, migrating birds convey spiritual ascension, imaginative flight, and immortality (Cooper 20; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 87–89):

Imagine how it is
in the mountains –
the sharpness of pine-needles
and valleys green with regret.
Chart the flight of birds
On the night’s migratory page.

(*The Blue Wind* 7)

The pine-needles evoke the meanings of the verb *to pine* as well as its associated pain. The migrating birds are a portentous image, for the *Qu’ran* states: “Have they not observed the birds, made subservient in the sphere of the sky, whom only God can control? In this are signs or a people of faith” (“The Bees” 16: 78).

The use of the image of migrating birds in “The Blue Wind” to convey the evolution of souls recalls Fariduddin Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* (1177 AD). In this classic of Persian mysticism, thirty birds set out in search of the *Simurgh*, the King of Birds, only to eventually discover that they themselves are that same *Simurgh*. The mystical bird in Attar’s parable represents the hidden self (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 884), affirming the Prophet Muhammad’s insight that “He who knoweth his own self, knoweth God” (Al-Suhrawardy 80). The epigraph of Kamal’s “Rain on Moss”, taken from Tennessee Williams’s story “The Knightly Quest”, reads: “Have you ever seen the skeleton of a bird? If you have you will know how completely they are still flying” (*Before the Carnations Wither* 74). These words suggest both the soul’s immortality and the poet’s dynamic existence after death in the minds of readers.

Poetry, the ultimate cure for loneliness, is, in the words of Octavio Paz, a “suspension bridge between history and truth” (“San Ildefonso nocturne” 423). For Kamal, the figure on the bridge – on the threshold of transition from past to future, from wakefulness to dream, love to loneliness, the mundane to the divine, and life to death – must always leave something behind:

Even if the bridge
 were still there
 and I could cross it,
 the other side of the river
 would remain the other side.
 These words too
 are a kind of a bridge,
 but whether they bring
 me to you or you to me,
 tomorrow's mirror will not bear
 the burden of today.

(“On Crossing a Bridge”, *Before the Carnations Wither* 11)

Tomorrow is a vessel that reflects back without the burden of having to endure. “The past”, L. P. Hartley observes, “is a foreign country” (17) and therefore cannot be dwelt in for long, as Kamal conveys in “Departures”: “Points of departure, / every one a paradise that's lost” (*A Remote Beginning* 18).

One lost paradise is the ancient civilization of Gandhara, which was centered in the Peshawar valley. Kamal's imagery resurrects the language of Gandharan art, which Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter deems a “subtle blend of Indianity and Hellenism, of the art of the Steppes and classical canons,” adding that “[s]uch a language, sensual and intellectual, but also narrative and symbolic could only have emerged in these fringe zones favoring both material and spiritual exchanges” (17). Through an archeology of desire, Kamal recovers the ethos of ancient civilizations of the Indian subcontinent, especially that of Gandhara, near present-day Peshawar. This act of recovery has profound implications, for as Mircea Eliade observes, the contemplation of the spiritual universes of archaic civilizations can result in cultural alterations (*Journal III* 7).

In “Reproductions” Kamal tells us: “I sit scraping / the rust off my ancient coins” (*Before the Carnations* 12). These ancient coins refer at once to Kamal's valuable (from a poetic standpoint) personal experiences and to his rich cultural heritage. In “I Stride Ahead of Myself,” Kamal reminds us of the “pawned jewels of my past” (*Before the Carnations Wither* 1), evoking departed cultures in the spirit of the etymology of *nostalgia*, which Milan Kundera elucidates as follows: “The Greek word for return is *nostos*. *Algos* means suffering. So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return” (5). The yearning for a return to lost happiness, to civilizations founded in wisdom and love, and humanity's first promise, prompts Kamal to traverse the ages to bear witness and to reawaken spiritual traditions erased by time:

Young woman
abashed at her own loveliness
radiant with desire.
But that was
a different world –
now forever lost –
shapes of absence –
leaves of hammered gold
on a windswept beach.

(“Harbor Reflections” 102)

The hammered leaves of gold evoke the leaves of illuminated manuscripts as well as the religious iconography in which gold symbolizes divine light. This richly allusive image also recalls the gradually disappearing South Asian tradition of *warq*, passed on through many generations of craftsmen, in which sheets of gold, used to decorate desserts and saffron rice, are hammered so fine that they break at a mere touch.

Kamal’s yearning to return is, above all, a desire to return to the presence of the Beloved. As in the Islamic mystical tradition, Kamal experiences the Beloved through nature. In this excerpt from “Winter Rain”, Kamal draws upon the rich imagery of the earth to invoke the divine through direct address:

Is death
the only exit?
The moon thaws
before your loveliness:
you are the breath of violets –
The vivacity
of a snow-fed stream.
Nightbound travelers –
you and me –
and this winter rain.

(*Rivermist* 122)

The divine in this poem is at once a constant companion and yet also unattainable except through death.

Shabbir Akhtar notes that, notwithstanding its undeserved reputation as a legalistic religious text, the *Qur’an* has ten times as many verses about signs than about religious law, finding divine portents in “the moods of the seasons, the tempers of natural forces and the pregnant silence of the empty space” (78). Indeed, the *Qur’an* contradicts the notion of a human-centered universe: “The creation of the heavens and earth is far greater than the creation of humanity; but most humans are ignorant” (“Forgiver” 40:57). The *Qur’an* refers repeatedly to the signs of nature, beckoning the believer to observe and learn from them. In the words of Muhammad: “One hour’s meditation on the work of the Creator is better than seventy years of prayer” (Al-Suhrawardy 81).

In the spirit of this enlightened Quranic understanding, Kamal creates an idiom that draws upon the richness of the earth in the opening lines of “A Clatter of Doves”:

You
have ransacked the moon
in your search for images –
dredged the wide rivers –
listened to the sad cry
of marshbirds.

(*Rivermist* 116)

In this excerpt from “River”, Kamal, immersed in a sacred time beyond time, returns to temporal reality, connoted by the clockwork of the human heart:

Only swimmers understand
the embrace of water –
its dazzling voluptuousness,
its tangled urgency.

I wind my clockwork heart again
while you seek comfort
in the alien clarity of a mirror.

(*Before the Carnations* 51)

As in other poems, in “River” Kamal uses an impersonal second person form of address that implies a dialog (or is it a monolog?) with the divine, whose reflection in the human heart connotes self-knowledge, as is implied in this famous hadith: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, and so I created the world” (qtd. in Williams 1).

Three and a half decades after the Kamal’s death, his books remain out of print and difficult to find. The scant literary criticism on his poetry consists mostly of brief book reviews, prefaces to his books, and jejune student papers posted on the internet. In Pakistan, where the humanities in general, and literary criticism in particular, continue to languish, the commentary on Kamal has been undiscerning, for, like Ghalib’s, Kamal’s poetry has long been deemed obscure and difficult.

Alamgir Hashmi, a gifted Pakistani English-language poet, identifies two main styles in Kamal’s *A Remote Beginning*, “lyric-narrative” and “staccato sentimentality and telegraphese,” stating that “[w]ords are used with economy, themes do not matter – not so much at any rate – but image and phrase, as they induce a mood or hint at a feeling, are all-important” (164). But themes such as the circularity of history, the camouflage of the sacred, the loss of the Beloved, and the inaccessibility of meaning are the very staple of Kamal’s poetry. And as Kamal said in an interview, “Ted Hughes... the most powerfully original poet of our time – once remarked that the real problem is *not how to write but what to write*. This is also my view. I am more concerned with the substance than the style, the wine (metaphorically speaking) than the bottle” [italics in the original] (Interview by Salim-ur-Rahman 73).

In a fatuous prefatory essay to Kamal's posthumous *Rivermist* (1992), Ikram Azam, commenting on Kamal's *Recognitions*, writes: "Daud's present poetry is a confluence of recognition and recollection, as of delicacy and of the word and its meaningful nuances, the image and the idea, the artist and the man" (xvii). Azam appears to have lifted these words, without attribution, from Anthony Thwaite's very brief introduction to Kamal's *Recognitions*: "His best work shows recognition and recollection moving harmoniously together with delicacy and strength" ("Introduction" 3). Azam continues: "There appears to have been an inward development in Daud over the years, for he seems to have discovered himself within himself by turning within" (xvii). Such explication, devoid of insight into the historical context and rich imagery of Kamal's poems, helps explain why readers have yet to fathom, if that were even possible, the extent of Kamal's achievement.

In a similarly unedifying introduction to Kamal's posthumous *A Selection of Verse* (2007), Tariq Rahman assures us:

But Daud Kamal probably has something significant to express even in poems which fail to be intelligible. Upon closer inspection one invariably finds that the least intelligible poems are those where the symbols are not connected even by those few laconic hints of narrative comment which serve as bridges between images and symbols in the best poems. In other words, the very qualities of brevity and reliance upon imagery and symbolism which creates the magic of Daud Kamal's best poems, also results in obscurity in some of his least successful products. Luckily, however, the number of good poems far exceeds the number of obscure ones. (x)

If Kamal's poems appear obscure and unintelligible to Rahman, it is because they demand an effort and engagement that Rahman is either unwilling or unable to make.

In an interview, Rahman asked Kamal about the "sense of nostalgia and much preoccupation with the themes of unrequited love and regret" in his poems. Kamal replied, "[L]et me take this opportunity to make it quite clear that love, regret, and nostalgia are not really a part of my life. I am happily married and – but this is going into personal details – have no emotional deprivation or regret. But when I write this is how my sensibility expresses itself and it is authentic as far as the process of creation goes; it is not a spurious pose" (Interview by Tariq Rahman iv).

Rahman does not appear to grasp that Kamal conjures the divine through the memory of the deeply engraved loss of the Beloved, which as Faiz Ahmed Faiz observes, is the true subject of poetry (qtd. in Ali 178). As in Urdu poetry, the Beloved is an ambiguous figure in Kamal's poetry; for as Aijaz Ahmad observes, "although always a poetry of love, Urdu poetry never contemplates the experience of man in a specific love relation. Specification and personality are kept rigorously out of the poetic substance" (3).

British critics have fared no better than Pakistani commentators in elucidating Kamal's evocative poems. Although the British ruled India for two centuries, first through the East India Company and then through the British Raj, British literary critics appear to be on the wrong side of a one-way mirror when writing about the Indian subcontinent. In a review of new books, the poet and novelist Alan Brownjohn devotes but a single sentence to Kamal's *Recognitions*, commenting, "Daud Kamal writes in a slow, almost

too painstaking way, to detail his Pakistan landscape; until the point works through the careful serene surfaces; as in ‘Floods’” (77). Brownjohn does not specify what that point might be, which presumably lies in the final lines of the poem:

At the army relief-camp
the bride-to-be
covers her head
while her parents
look the other way.

(*Recognitions* 19)

The point, as Brownjohn calls it, lies our inability, or refusal, to see in this figure of human suffering, the veiled divine.

In an even more benighted book review of Kamal’s *Recognitions*, the British poet and critic Neil Curry conveys a lazy bafflement:

How does one evaluate one’s responses to the lyric poetry of a culture that is not one’s own? There are names of people and places, which could be real, but may be legendary. Knowing nothing of them, one has only the sound to go by, and that is not always safe: Lucifer and Beelzebub, shorn of all their connotations, have, to my ears, something gentle and soothingly exotic about them. And the exotic is part of the problem. These are very evocative poems, and they come from Peshawar on the North West Frontier of Pakistan, and because of that, I’m not sure that I haven’t been reading them in the same way that I watch those travel-cum-nature films on BBC 2 on wet Sunday evenings. (92)

Curry might have consulted an encyclopedia or, failing that, skipped reviewing poetry that he did not understand.

In a similar vein, the British Marxist historian, Victor Kiernan, who translated such renowned Urdu poets as Iqbal, Faiz, and Ghalib, wrote that Kamal’s “poems often have the air of random strings of impressions or images. They are evocative but of what?” (qtd. in Shamsie 266). In other words, Kamal’s poems evoke that which Kiernan fails to perceive.

To this day, Kamal remains virtually unknown among American academics. In her critical study *The English Language Poetry of South Asians*, Mitali Wong devotes but a single sentence to Daud Kamal, seemingly only to point out that Kamal was omitted from the first three anthologies of Pakistani poetry in English published by Oxford University Press (49).

Fortunately, it was not Kamal’s fate to be eternally misunderstood. Peter Dent, the editor of the Interim Press, based in England, published three slim volumes of Kamal’s poetry: *Recognitions* (1979), *The Blue Wind* (1984), an anthology of Pakistani English-language poetry, and *A Remote Beginning* (1985). Previously Kamal had only self-published a single chapbook of his own verse, *The Compass of Love* (1973). In a letter to me dated May 20, 2021, Peter Dent recalls: “Looking back I can still see exactly why I took to his poetry: the

precision and sharpness of detail – no words wasted – its feeling for matter that pressed... Unlike so many poets of our time, whose subject is largely confined to self, Daud was skilful enough to register both distance and the intimate within a single glance” (Dent, *Letter to the author*).

Three posthumous volumes of Kamal’s poetry were also published but quickly went out of print: *Rivermist* (1992), *Before the Carnations Wither* (1995) and *A Selection of Verse* (1997). At a time when Pakistani literature in English is gaining critical recognition, and as more readers discover the rich allusion and symbolism in Kamal’s poems, a complete and authoritative volume of his poetry is long overdue.

The students of Daud Kamal perpetuate his memory on social media and in their scholarship. Like them, Kamal foresaw that his poetry would last:

One more botched life –
I say to myself –
but the geraniums conspire
with the moon-harlot
to flash back
a different message.

(“The Night Our Hangman”, *Rivermist* 90)

Kamal remained true to his artistic vision, resulting in a lasting contribution to Pakistani letters and Islamic mystical poetry. He summarized his poetic creed as follows: “We all know, with Wallace Stevens, that: ‘The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us.’ The primary task of the writer, I venture to suggest, is to communicate his unique vision of life as effectively and truthfully as he can. His first loyalty is to his art. The most that he can hope to do, as Dr. Johnson said, is to enable his readers a little better to enjoy life or a little better to endure it” (“Role of the Writer” 44). Through “the translunar paradise of art” (“Role of the Writer” 43), Kamal traversed the many moons of writers and readers. His solitude, it can now be said, is finally about to end, and his achievement summed up in these words that conclude his translation of Muneer Niazi’s “Relics of a Lost Reality”:

Cramped and lonely
I had a dream
Abundant as the earth

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