Woman writing her Self with/in language: Burning issue?

Sohaila Javed
Faculty of Advanced Integrated Studies & Research
National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

“Woman is a ray of God: She is not the earthly beloved. She is creative: You might say she is not created.”
—Rumi, 13th Century poet

A young woman sits under a deep tamarind shade in the summer of 1971, thinking deeply about a form of being that is creative and responsive to creativity. She listens to life coming fresh from spaces around her, highlighted by ideas and ideals, dreams and imaginings, reminiscent of something strange and true.
I am that young woman. My experiential search for solitude at that time was not unbegetting. It just caught me, stayed with me for long, and waited to see my “shifting configurations” (Aoki, 1980). Something was happening to this being, some-thing that had not happened before. I was not my usual self. I was myself and yet some other. I felt the tremor of that living moment, and was aroused to meet its sensuality, direct, spontaneous, and immediate. Such excitement, such sensitivity in that silent moment invoked that was palpable, feelingly perceptive, and permeable in me. I perceive I saw through flashing eyes, that visionary gleam and my beautiful dream (Coleridge, *Kublai Khan*) in just one moment. Such stimulation provoked my imaginative perception and flew me on my own wings to write my soul.

The black stormy spectrum of our eyes
are risques
trapezing at will
between cosmoses
helplessly dilated by time.

I was ecs+a+ic, and dwelling in that moment’s ecstasy, I opened up to touch the fringes and fluoresce time. Time was around me, all watchfulness, setting me apart for a creative discourse in such experiential moments, and what was being felt became what the creative piece is. This was my being in the light of Love, and what danced within me became words in poetry.

This poem, like its soul mates, manifests the event in time. And for me it is my natural opiate for more exultant being.

Almost enamoured of death
I woke up
On a palette of million colors.
My green self
Spread all round its myriad leaves
Singing me, flesh and my dancing spirit
From sky to sky,
Soon abandoning me to a delight of my own.

This experience was inaugural to another form of creativity—self and language interaction, and a newly discovered universe poetically adequate to creativity. My travel in poetic expanses had begun.

My intention here is to give you, dear Reader, an opportunity to experience one woman’s poetic becoming as an ontology, and in agreement with Pinar (1995), with tremendous integrative, synergestic, and emancipatory potential. Understanding that the personal narrative is an exciting adventure with interpretive value for self-understanding, I invite you to re-position yourself with me as hermeneutic presence, for reading my personal story of coming to poetry/language/writing, and find some provocative narration for your own curricular narrative.

This writing is my first intimate meeting with myself, and your intimate presence is the best elation you offer me. I quiver with reminiscence of past memories, and retrospective emotion at the existential and experiential process of self-creation and self-performance in creativity as a woman. Performing the poetic function (Jacobson, 1981) takes us to a new
level of creative coexistence. How do we, as educators, respond to this process of mutual creativity?

The investigation of experience, fiqr-o-amal (thought and action) as praxis, takhiyuul and takhleeq (imaginative vision and creation) as the pulse of life experience, seen through autobiographical lens, is an aesthetic educational enterprise. An inner landscape etches out for an intense interpersonal gaze, and I soon find myself in self-reflexivity, and see myself set for exploration in the openness of language (Heidegger, 1968).

(Re)Tracing the poetic course

The riguor of an intent gaze
and my fragility, I am amazed.

I was young in my seventeen years of life, reading literature, an engagement that had intoxicated me in my school years at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Lahore, and now in the open corridors of Lahore College for Women, I was taken over by the new, different and freedom-loving paths of the liberal arts and humanities. The literary world and the world I imagined were exceedingly beautiful. Living in such a world for so long for the enjoyment and existential attunement it brought, inspired me to create words in the real. The real world was beautiful, too, but wanted more than mere existence and mere living. So I indulged my passion for deep living, for deepest connections, and feeling extremely safe in the liberal paths of liberating literature, began to flow in words.

Thistles of joy
electrify me.
Existence that cannot curb thought
continues to be.
Whimsical moods never stay,
and I remain phantasmagoric
to know who you are
or
who I am?

The flow of language alternates my freedom as immersion in the river of words begins. It is 1971, and I see myself opening to the free, open spaces of language, learning to live in the Open of naming and saying. The words take their own course along with the passion and thoughts too incessant to flow despite my father’s cautioning me about unreal imaginative connections, about public displeasure at a Muslim woman speaking what is presumed to be private. This was transgression from the path of truth, he said. I was asked to be careful, conform to reality, a long tradition of respectability, reservations and purdah, and reminded that to stay within private confines and resuming personal responsibility there, was also freedom.

Moments were immaculate for surrendering, and time being compassionate to my green youthfulness, and I, surrendering to my own inwardness, chose to be free in my own self-way. In a moment of quivering passion, the emigrant in me was fully prepared to go out into the real world and see what happens when Woman loves. Moreover, intermittent repertoires with my father, and promises of not transgressing modesty and discretion pacified his fears, and were reinforcement on my (be)wildering sojourn with words.
The high cold winds
    that blow through me
Come!
Impinge on
my sodden perches
so that
I may play ‘liberation!’

Personal disclosure came in a flow, empowering me as it came in numbers that I overcame
the resistance and a little reticence that I may have felt due to my father’s insistence that I
give up writing poetry. The power that came with words was paramount to my being human
and enjoying living in the space I had created for myself, and retrieved from people and
society not given to such disclosures at that particular time in its history. My poetry,
reflecting the inner workings of mind and heart, was music to my ears. Its thrill animated
me—part psychology, part fuel. My mind, then on wild bird’s wings, flew curvilinearly that
dodged my reserves. I cast off the curtain carefully, closed my eyes and like Vishnu, began
to sing for diaspora.

Through fichus of unlapped time,
    I freewheel back and forth
    for condescension I can dream of.

A wide assortment of real-life experiences began to emerge in poems. The voice that
speaks is unambiguously mine. But, the ache of other voices is also perceptible here.

The plains are unambiguous …
    from Kosovo to Kashmir, from Kandahar to world winds,
    black draughts
    pass windward cries from the last heartache.

The moon ramping through wet blankets
raises streams in plenitude.

The earth is now light
after the burden of a long dream.

On lavender wings it turns
    to give the world
another heart and other pulses,
    when? wherefore? why?

Each poetic piece pulsates in silence and like silence, it speaks its own language; more
incoherent, more willful, refusing to be unheard, resonating the silent spaces which sets the
creative tone for the poet in me. I readily conform to their singular self-emerging textures
and then, the rhapsody between us necessitates its hearing. To hear is to respond. And when
the poem is read, it doesn’t change but changes us, I the poet, you the reader, with dreams
of transformation, the world over.

Once in a millennium,
    the world’s upside down.

Riders reckon time over steep water-mounts.
    Hot bidders for the biggest haul
surf through walls and breaks;
the edge off
and the mountains on top,
only one liases
and marches
beyond a line of ants
to be Your radiance
and that smile, the winner.

These poetic pieces express the urgency for creating spaces of freedom, spaces we create when writing for beauty and for being-in-truth. Then, there is no ruling but passion for expression that becomes a responsibility for the empowerment it brings uncompromisingly. This empowerment does not come alone. It invites the challenge to capture and explore imaginatively, horizons within and without, with a wise passiveness to step down into self and hold communion with soul mates in a fine camaraderie of events. The palette within has “colours and sounds, intensities and becomings” (Pinar, 1995), all set for a chiascuro like nature’s yet not nature’s. Here time flows as steps are taken and entrances made.

Centuries press down
as I pass
through lanes
of sluggish gold,
moonbeams spinning dreams
end around end.

On an old carpet
I went
to sit down
and rake the deposits;
the black cone
suddenly setting up and sprawling beside me,
and the consortium
of uncharred memories
besetting things around and me;
and I, moonshiny
in this ambience,
turn now
to play chameleon
with such defiance
for me to utter
‘Oh, how nice!’

Each entrance is symptomatic of stirring activity in the pond Time sponsors to each being. As the pond fills and refills and breathers offered by creative beings, the entrant assumes power to become what s/he was not before. This breeds desire for self-expression in writing, which, like all processes, is never a smooth passage. It is interlaced with resistance, opposition and like all creative resistances, infuses resolution for more; more driven and enthused the entrants, the greater the find. A whole new world is in the making, inviting us to hold upon our world in order to know the superficies of our language and also dare to delve deep for true knowing and living liberated lives, afresh.

The mind, warm and moist, delirious from indigenous passion, aligns intelligence and vows for an open-ended spiritual liberation that is infinitely leavening for self-surrender.
Slipping out of life’s indigenous clangour,
I mount ambrosial clouds,
And see things more than delphic-
Fair tresses of landscape
   Uplifted with thousand magnificences.
New vapors that voluntarily concede favors,
   More sweet and wooing,
All who walk with humble feet
The airy grounds
   Made crystal with meteors
   That wane not with Man
   Into little dreams and nothing.

Meandering to an oasis

Now sitting in the calm ambience of beautiful Vancouver (June 2006), I make precious of these moments when delving into my own private self, I see with unborrowed lens, the course of my becoming a poet. It is like traversing new ground and setting up for self-exploration against much inquired regions of biographies and autobiographies. I cannot escape the awareness that an understanding of being is reality and cannot be avoided. This relates to my being in the world in another way, engaged in realizing a certain way of living. That is what we are “first and mostly” (Heidegger, 1968). In fact, my being relates me to all beings. And that is for me what we are “first and mostly.” Our “second and partly existence” (Taylor, 1995) that is becoming something more than what we are “first and mostly” has historical perspectival reality, and also relates to our being what we are “first and mostly.” Both situations relate to Being, and to understand Being is to exist. My poetic pieces are an attempt to embody that commitment. These are efforts made to understand existence as human; each affective state distinct in its own way yet finding its own distinctive way of compounding my life as lived experience into one piece.

These reflections offer a glimpse of life through eastern eyes. They bring into the contemporary reader’s consciousness, experiential forces that invite presence and participation, and express desire for inclusion and inexclusion. The need is so pressing that there can be no retreat.

Each stepping is traversing familiar ground as both live, enjoying moment by moment, the circumstances instanced there, exploring a unified mode of existence against stretches of time that are so diverse, absorbing and yet distinct. Here, in this cognitive and emotive mode of experience and expression that the openness of language affords (Heidegger, 1968), the search for meaning begins.

Beloved,
Inspire us
   the right understanding
   of matter: to each
give Will for knowledge
   and wisdom, Love
that makes us
   sing “glorious You”
   with hills and the birds,
   flying low
   in oeuvres
   that singe for monsoons,
as a field
that is awake with corn,
as ashes
that speak passion
and sweep away the human cobwebs,
returning us to You
Who blesses
and is beloved so.

That I would meander into the world of imaginative art was not predetermined although it had been my father’s much loved engagement, besides philosophy. It was easily acceptable for him to read into literature and enjoy conversations with Shakespearian characters, for example, and also share engage me in these conversations. But for me to write about myself in language was something that I had to be apprehensive about. However, time’s beneficence could not go unregistered. I took the offer and began to spend time in expressive acts of poetry and poetic being thereof, which were exhilarating, joyful, and ecstatic. Taking the elements of life, both pain and pleasure had to be so intense as to excite me and in-form me. I had to be intensely alive in order to be living what to Keats was “living on the pulses.” I loved soulful living and embraced all souls alike. This was a mode of experiential existence that spoke to me, with multiple voices beyond time and within time, being heard and listened to with deep reverence. A vociferous multicultural and multidimensional speaking session was in progress. Here I could hear, see, smell and touch my own usualness and feel being touched by the unusual and symbolic modes of existence that define all humanity.

So many times I have melted into stories, anecdotes shared unassumingly in infinitely small moments that stretched into minutes without a second as hearts opened and outpoured content. These living performances found poetic expression and speak my story as much as humanity’s and even more definitely about mortality, meaningful living, and Beingness. Every poem now rehearses the act of our interbeing as time’s guests, and sometimes host to Necessity that finds true and free and beautiful expression in poetry.

Each poem offers two experiential moments to the reader, to step out of one’s own biography into the poet’s autobiography, and to see for oneself as to what counts and who counts. A third moment is quintessential in the lives of both reader and author as both meet in the poem’s context and celebrate this coming together as human. Such a fusion, in which “intuitive insight and moral control” coalesce (Eliot, in Spender, 1975, 17), brings passions of the mind and soul, and values that are essentially aesthetic and esoteric too. As and when these fusions are frequented, the reader will feel buoyant and ready about re-journeying in life.

Each poem I write exists on its own, built as it is on its own energies—imagination, perception and passion, and thought spurred to activity by poem’s natural musical reserves. What comes forth is spontaneous expression of ‘a life’ lived in passionate response to conferment that builds, interacts and means life to me. Am I an architect or a participant presence in other’s architectural designs for themselves?

From the start of schoolgirl days, I walked through the warm ebullient corridors of English literature and bore the chalice of creative becoming. Unmindful of inopportune time, I would run on imaginative escapades, have wild childhood repertoires with falcons and phantom listeners, and look for airy spaces on the spacious playgrounds of the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Durand Road, Lahore, Pakistan. Here and in my small space at home on Nisbet Road, I would be with my intimate self and see the world with “inward mind” (Wordsworth). The traffic here was fantastic. I floated on moonbeams beyond the sky and each float transmuted my odd years on Earth “into something rich and strange”
As I grew up, I plodded deep into romanticism and lived up to the romantic dream. This was luxuriant, charismatic existence. I gave up all order and imbibed the aesthetic relish and reprieve many literati offered. I was living on their pulses, and soon began to feel my own impulse. At such moments, I felt empowered to enter “otherness” (Huebner, 1999), and do justice to human joy and sorrow. Spending some consequential time in writing made me see order in this disorder, and now I am making contours of various shapes and assortments. The moment is intense, and insistently works upon me. I am living on the pulses and in no mood to be another hesitating, deliberating Hamlet, but let passion and vision play upon me for ‘a life’ in the world and words, of poem, my autobiography, and in a special way, the reader’s autobiography, too.

To run riotous and play
more powerfully ‘Hamlet’
on the stage of your manliness,
and breathlessly slake the passion of your bared breast,
and for the unbarred,
in your temple rest,
and walk down the aisle,
all sweetness and light.

The world of these words is a living context, and that is for me, a meaning and meaningful life. It’s a strange relationship that helps me strive to be what I want to be and what I am not yet. A constant striving brings into knowing the wrangling human concerns that bereave life and deprive it of joyful being. But, again the question arises of how proprietorial a performer gets about such strange music in much midst as it takes over its own performance in poetry.

In full midst
I’m spared,
pure words, my refectory
and savour
their pounding on my heart
strong and long and spacious

Every word watches me
the space in me
and the words
I listen deeply listen to
their sonorous overtone
ringing in my ears
over and over
as it comes on me
in rapt silence
till the sound slows
to become silence
in me
at home.

This state of being is a way of carrying us beyond to our creative becoming and conscientious being. Here forms of words and worlds with many shades of meaning and
metaphoric texture enrich human experience. I know this is another kind of existence seen by eastern eyes and expressed in the English language. And I also know that such creative interactions fill the soul and become inspiration for more soulful living in the real world and the world of words.

My poetic expression affirms my natural desire for interbeing and intercultural dwelling, and most joyfully in poetic spaces where words melt and only spirit speaks. Here I am my original self, I mean, the way I am and would be only that way. My self then gets presented in words that express that is deep, I mean our human connections, and once these are known and acknowledged, we start living on our pulses, with this beautiful knowing becoming knowledge, relations making relationships, communicating and communion bringing communication, and our human individuality enriching Humanity. Only then we begin to confirm our engagement with life as creative, and of ourselves as more alive joyfully than mere living.

And to make this journey, you have to step in, and saying ‘yes’ to this quest, take yourself on rounds of the same spot with the whisper ‘who’s here’? With ourselves living on transcendence, we move beyond our limited circle and enter the circle of Life and celebrate our togetherness. I know that this is the central facet of human existence and experience, and agree with Griffiths (1994) that this is “the goal of human striving, the truth which all art, science and philosophy seeks to fathom, the bliss in which all human love is fulfilled”. Our unified Being in this kind of existence thus asks us to move from self-transcendence toward world Creation that blesses us, and is a way of blessing our beautiful Earth, and celebrating what we are today, human, and that gets named and said most beautifully in language, words that is poetry.

**Resources**


About the Author

Sohaila Javed is a PhD graduate (November 2004) from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. She also has a Masters in English and a Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English as International Language.

Sohaila has an extensive background in English literature, and a wonderful experience of teaching English literature for 22 years in 4 federal colleges of Islamabad, Pakistan, and is now working as Associate Professor and Graduate Advisor to the M. Phil and PhD students in the Faculty of Advanced Integrated Studies & Research at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Sohaila is a teacher, educationist, poet and spirituality enthusiast. She can be reached at jsohaila@hotmail.com.

About the Artist

Rahat Naveed Masud is an artist of international repute, and has participated in numerous exhibitions abroad and at home since 1982. Her most recent participation with her self-portrait in “Let Peace Prevail 2003” by Women Painters in Pakistan, expresses her grave concerns about the human world. She has many publications and art displays at important venues in Pakistan and abroad to her credit.