

# Countering Imperialist Stereotypes: The Poetry Of Nadia Anjum

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## Abstract

*This paper attempts to discuss Nadia Anjum's work as an authentic reflection of the reality as it is lived in Pakistan. Anjum was born in Pakistan; she has lived and worked here all her life and thus has personally experienced the life we all Pakistanis live. In the wake of this new lethal wave of terrorism in post 9/11 world, Pakistanis have been globally and reductively labeled as extremists, fundamentalists and terrorists. This paper will argue, via an analysis of Anjum's poems through Edward Said's Orientalism, that there is more to Pakistan than what is projected through global media. <sup>1</sup>Anjum's work brings out the beauty of Pakistani landscape; it reflects realistically and emotively the various facets of Pakistani life as lived in different regions of this country. On the pages of her poetry books, we witness a historically, politically-informed consciousness thoroughly soaked in the rich cultural heritage the land and its people have inherited from their ancestors. Unlike the many Pakistani writers who have chosen to live in exile and written Pakistan's story with an exilic, distanced perspective, Anjum's poetry authentically reflects the life lived in this country.*

**keywords:** stereotypes; imperialism; spirituality; authentic reflection.

## Introduction

In the wake of this new lethal wave of terrorism in post 9/11 world, Pakistanis have been globally and reductively labeled as extremists, fundamentalists and terrorists. Unfortunately, this appears to be yet another version of Orientalist stereotyping where the identity of the colonized subject is controlled and defined by the dominant power structure. This negative stereotyping fails to recognize the rich cultural diversity the country has. Remaining only on a very superficial level of understanding which is required purely for economic reasons, they refuse to go deeper than what is just useful for them. What is seen as a common practice among the Orientalists, is to create reductive simplifications where complications exist. The problem occurs when they demand that their version of truth must be taken as sacrosanct. As Said says in Orientalism, 'it is more or less assumed that no Oriental can know himself the way an Orientalist can' (Said, 1994, p.239) Thus, if Pakistan is labelled as terrorist, barbaric and uncivilized, it has to be accepted as an authentic truth about the country. The Orientalist is only interested in a very superficial level of understanding of the Oriental's culture. They refuse to recognize the diverse complexities that exist within Pakistani society. What we get to hear about Pakistan is just a caricatured version of the actual reality. As Said points out in his

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groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, ‘The colonized is typically passive and spoken for, does not control its own representation but is represented in accordance with a hegemonic impulse by which it is constructed as a stable and unitary entity’ (Said, 1994, p. 226). In this paper, I argue, via an analysis of Anjum’s poems, that there is more to this region than what is projected through global media, what, to use Said words ‘a constituted reality’ (Said 1994, p. 322). In her poetry, quite contrary to the flat, stereotyped portraits, we find flesh and blood people with complicated set of emotions, aspirations, needs and desires.

Anjum was born in Pakistan; she has lived and worked here all her life and thus has personally experienced the life we all Pakistanis live and share. The writer’s ‘I’ in Anjum’s work is a feeling ‘I’ sensitive to the happenings around her. The poet’s work does not follow or support an agenda, whether it is feminist, political or religious. She simply relishes being part of the culture, traditions and landscape of her country. The speaking voice in her works does not demonstrate – as do many of the Pakistani writers settled permanently outside Pakistan – an ascendancy attitude imbued with an overriding sense of superiority

Her work brings out the beauty of her country’s landscape; it reflects realistically and emotively the various facets of Pakistani life as lived in different regions of this country. On the pages of her poetry books, we witness a politically informed consciousness thoroughly soaked in the rich cultural heritage the land and its people have inherited from their ancestors. Unlike the many Pakistani writers who have chosen to live in exile and have written Pakistan’s story with an exilic, distanced perspective, Anjum’s poetry authentically reflects the life lived in this land.

### **Literature Review**

Readers have observed a growing trend in South Asian writers, especially Pakistani writers to write back to the West. The narratives of emerging writers have been pre-occupied with the task of preserving the image of Pakistan and its citizens. However, in the process of using the voice – the stereotypical notions associated with being a Pakistani are further reinforced. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* for instance, attempts to reverse the damage caused to the image of Pakistani, immigrant Muslims in the wake of 9/11. If one reads between the lines, it is quite prominent that the negative aspects pertaining to being a Pakistani are overloaded in the text.

One must consider how desperate the central character Changez is to fit into the Western society. The ability of the protagonist to give away the flaws in his personality and make a point about them. These cues are spread out throughout his writings, very subtly, but they do tend to have an impact on the way people from Pakistan and the country itself is viewed – a morally degraded society. As a report conducted in the UK on diversity and inclusion in, “*Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place*” (Kean, 2015). This report emphasized on the homogenized and limited scope of writing by the authors of color, saying, “In addition to exposing a striking lack of diversity at managerial and editorial levels, this report showcased first-hand accounts from 60 writers of colour... many of these respondents felt pressured into the production of exoticizing and stereotypical stories that conformed to the white, western gaze” (Chambers, 2023).

Similarly, if Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* is critically read, it can be clearly seen how the writer portrays to be presenting the audience with an authentic narrative which is biased and clouded with stereotypical notions and categorization. It can be viewed as a critique of Eastern society and the lack of moral, ethical values it inhibits. This move by the author reveals the deliberate attempt to conform to the Western audience and their agenda of downgrading

Pakistan and its citizens. It does not save the East from the ravishing fire of Western, imperialist notions – it further deepens, strengthens these ideas.

“Aamer Shaheen et al in the article "Obsessive 'Westoxification' versus the Albatross of Fundamentalism and Love as Collateral Damage in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2018)" points out two extremist points of view—westoxification and fundamentalism. These concepts are represented by the two main characters (Karamat Lone and Pervaiz Pasha) in the novel. They explore the novel beyond the popular interpretation of *Antigone* and link it with post-colonial studies. They further argue that Kamila Shamsie portrays Islamophobic representations of British Muslims in post-9/11 England.” (Shaheen, 2018, as cited in Sikandar et al., 2023)

It can thus be said that many Pakistani writers are still working towards pleasing the West. Their works pretend to be de-centralizing the European categorizations, but the under-text supports the unfavorable stance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the past few years, the rising trend amidst Pakistani writers is prove themselves worthy of receiving attention and approval by the Empire. This has somehow restrained them from experiencing and promoting true self-expression (Said, 1996, p. 220). The work of these writers give the reader an impression that the writer is daring enough to respond to the West. The background of this attitude among Pakistani writers can be traced back to times when United India was under the rule of Muslim leaders. After colonization, “...they were naturally eyed with suspicion and disfavor. In order to dilute this skepticism and distrust that was visible in the hearts and minds of the British, the Muslim writers had to adjust and modify their styles of writing to carve a niche within the newly established system” (Mansoor, 2012, p. 15).

To put it into other words, the idea of representation emerged as an important underlying factor in the trending themes of post-colonial writings. These works explored various dichotomies regarding the reality of the East versus that which is assumed by the West. The bend towards de-colonizing the narrative of colonized people holds great significance, or so those who had been colonized were made to believe.

Furthermore, literature “...was used by the imperial policy to create fixed, stereotyped ideas, especially in the English Language, due to its global reach...” (Hajiyeva, 2016, p 136). Hence, English could be used as a tool of appropriation by the colonized to their advantage. They had been boxed into categories by the colonizers since a long time. So, the writers made use of English language as a technique in order to carry out the decentralizing of the colonizers' narratives.

As discussed in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, “Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.” (Taylor, 1994, p. 25)

Moving on, Edward Said's stance regarding the urgency to carry out the de-colonization of culture must be taken into consideration as well as:

...culture played a very important, indeed indispensable role. At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism. This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories; it studied them, it

classified them, it verified them...it subordinated them by banishing their identities, except as a lower order of being, from the culture and indeed ...Eurocentrism penetrated to the core of the workers' movement, the women's movement, the avant-garde arts movement, leaving no one of significance untouched. (Said, 1994, p. 222)

The erasure and the over-riding of identity in the colonized people reveals itself in the narratives of third world people where writers are still under the influence of Imperialist dominance. Breaking free from the shackles of this slavish mentality is to not consider the West to be the Center anymore. Hence, an individuals' own voice matters significantly.

Female writings holds immense potential and scope for the exploration of South Asian condition. "Anglophone South Asian women's writing is a complex formulation, referring simultaneously to a language (English), a geographical and historical context (South Asia), and a gendered literary condition" (Bahri, 2021). It is significant to acknowledge the contribution of female writers in etching history and identity for their nation. One might be thinking about what makes South Asia worthy of being discussed in the first place? To understand this in detail, consider Bose and Jalal's take on the question. "It may be more appropriate to characterize South Asia and its people as presenting a picture of diversity in unity..." (2017) Since this region is known for the richness it holds, it forever beholds this element of curiosity and exoticism about it. The beauty of languages, cultures and traditions makes it far more abundant in itself.

Anjum's poetry collections embody the essence of bridging the gaps between people. It tends to bring people together for the sake of humanity and peace building. Her poetry becomes the unifying space for the women across nations while maintaining the authenticity of their self. The use of English language by the poetess makes her content more accessible to and relatable for a larger audience across borders. Using the language of the colonizer, Anjum subverts the narrative about Pakistan and its citizens. Her version of Pakistan is that of a geographical location dripping with the emotive, cultural and historical significance it holds in the subcontinent.

History and identity mediated in various texts that expand on South Asia and its inhabitants, demand an in-depth study, writing and reformation of narratives. Gayatri Spivak has written of how the writing of "subaltern histories" in the context of modern South Asia entails reading or interpretation that is similar to the practice of literary interpretation. (Spivak, 1988) The poetry collections of Nadia Anjum present a gateway for the fulfillment of a heavy and impeding task that the poetess had taken upon herself, introducing thus a lighter, brighter and more positive image of Pakistan for the upcoming generations.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Nadia Anjum's poetry collections explore a diverse range of social, cultural, political and personal issues specific to the Pakistani experience. Pakistan's popular religion, Islam, is generally projected as barbaric, oppressive and patriarchal. Unfortunately, these reductive and negative stereotypical portraits are far removed from reality. Anjum brings to the fore that aspect of Pakistan's popular religion which remains undocumented in popular media footage and printed literary works. Depicting thus the spiritual leanings of the people of the subcontinent, Anjum devotes many of her poems to the teachings of Sufi saints whose spiritual presence continues to irrigate the minds and hearts of its people, and whose religion was and will always remain the religion of peace, harmony, love and tolerance.

Sufi shrines are a lived reality not only in Pakistan but in the whole of the subcontinent. People of this region are devoted to their saints who are remembered with enormous

love and deep reverence. The saints, on the other hand, remain spiritually connected to their devotees even after their physical disappearance from this world. Their shrines are thus holy sites which people visit to pay their respects to the saints and receive blessings from them in return.

Moreover, the Sufi's love for humanity is also a characteristic feature of his personality. According to Hazrat Nizamuddin (Rehmatullah alih) a Sufi must have three qualities; love, wisdom and gnosis (mystical knowledge). The Sufis or aulia-e- karaam – meaning friends of God – invited everyone to their halqa or community of friends. The saint and the sinner, muslim and non-muslim, all were invited to sit and receive guidance and spiritual blessings from the saints. The tradition continues resiliently in contemporary times where no one is refused entrance into their shrines on grounds of religion and race; the food distributed in the shrines is given to all regardless of their religious or national identity. A popular thought in the city of Lahore prevails that no one can starve to death in this city since huge amounts of food is distributed regularly by the devotees of Hazrat Pir Ali Hajveri Data Gunj Bakhsh (RA) at his shrine

Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia (RA) and Hazrat Amir Khusrau (RA) are two of the most celebrated saints of the sub-continent. Both the Sufis also happen to be tied in a murshid-mureed or mentor-disciple relationship. Both were devoted to each other. Khusro (RA) became Nizam's (RA) student at the age of eight when Nizamuddin (RA) was twenty-three years old. From that time onwards till Nizam's death, both remained inseparable. Khusro (RA) was Nizam's (RA) most favourite student. In fact, when Khusro (RA) heard of his mentor's death, he grieved him so deeply that he became seriously unwell. His health deteriorated gradually, and he finally passed away six months after Nizam's (RA) death.

Anjum's poem beautifully reflects the nature of this relationship in the poem, 'Bonding' where, as part of a delegation in Delhi, Anjum is seen visiting the shrines of both the saints. The title refers to the spiritual bonding that exists between the two saints and their devotees.

This very special connection exists at different levels: First is the bonding between the two saints; the second is the bonding between the poet and the saints; the third bonding is between the saints and their devotees; and finally, there is bonding among all the devotees who are connected to each other through their love for Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia (RA) and Hazrat Amir Khusrau (RA). In the poem, Anjum, thoroughly at home with and firmly grounded in the beliefs of the region buys 'a mini pack of sugar balls' as a souvenir and sends them to be brushed against Nizamuddin Aulia's (RA) tomb so that it is blessed and sanctified. The pack was duly earmarked with a tiny green dot.

Amir Khusro's (RA) resting place was the next endpoint, and the same pack of sugar balls was again sent to be brushed against Khusro's (RA) tomb. Somehow, the poet could not receive her earmarked pack for a while and here the thought which occurred to Anjum, while standing at Amir Khusro's (RA) tomb, (mazar) reflects the poet's understanding of the real nature of the deep devotion Khusro (RA) had for his mentor. Anjum muses that Khusro (RA) didn't return the pack because he could not bear to give it up since it had reached him after being blessed by his mentor. It had thus been sanctified for him as well. In a nice little snippet, Anjum is seen addressing Amir Khusro (RA).

Warily I smiled  
Silently addressing him  
'That's unfair  
It was mine  
Though you kept  
The dotted one back  
Because

It had touched your  
mentor's shrine (Anjum, 2016, p. 42)

Anjum here displays her reverence for the saints and a true understanding of their relationship with each other. Khusro (RA) would not let go of anything if it had some connection with his mentor.

The thought perhaps has its roots in the famous story about Khusro (RA) finding Nizamuddin's (RA) shoes in a beggar's possession. Once a poor man came to Nizamuddin (RA) asking for alms. It so happened that at that time the saint had nothing in his khaneqa that could be given to the poor man except a pair of old and tattered slippers. The man was disappointed, but he took them and left. On his way, he found Khusro (RA) who was coming from a royal journey with camels loaded with wealth. It is said that Khusro (RA) recognized Nizamuddin's (RA) slippers and asked the man if he would sell them to him.

Another version of the story goes that Khusro (RA) sensed the presence of Nizamuddin's (RA) slippers as he met the man and told him: 'Bu-e Shaikh mi aayad, Bu-e Shaikh aayad' (I smell my master, I smell my master). The deal was struck between them in which Khusro (RA) gave the whole of his entourage to him in place of Nizamuddin's (RA) slippers. Khusro (RA) placed his mentor's slippers on his head and went to see Nizamuddin (RA). When Nizamuddin (RA) saw the slippers, he asked Khusro (RA) how much he had paid for them, and when Khusro (RA) told him the price, Nizamuddin (RA) said, 'Arzaan khareedi' you got them real cheap – knowing that Khusro (RA) would have given the man anything to get his slippers. The sugar balls, as Anjum reflects, are dear to Khusro (RA) since they have touched his mentor's tomb and thus, would not want to part with them.

The poem ends beautifully giving us a vision of the whole congregation of the devotees bonded together in their love and reverence for these two great 12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saints. Towards the end, the poet does get her dotted pack of sugar balls back along with two more mini packs which were handed over to the poet with the message that they were meant for people back home. When the poet returns home, she is visited by people at home among whom is an elderly woman, who happens to be another devotee of the two saints. The elderly woman is so deeply connected to the saints that she believes that the saints have sent something for her as a token or reward of her sincere devotion to them. 'Did Delhi send something for me/At least from the saints.', she asks. For those who understand the dynamics of this spiritual 'bonding, it is easy to unravel this cultural code which clearly states that the sweet token of the sugar balls is actually a sweet token from the two saints to their devotees who cannot visit their shrines in person. The elderly woman thus becomes a synecdoche for the whole community bonded together by their love and devotion to the saints.

A number of poems in the collections have a mystical slant where the poet can be seen reflecting philosophically upon man's existence. The poet forms linkages to a higher power through her heightened consciousness. Anjum moves beyond any restrictions to claim the right of her fellow citizens to their own identity and experiences. As "Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history." (Said, 1994, xv) The significance of stories and narrative is preserved and re-awakened by Anjum's poems. The poem entitled 'Disquiet' is contextualized in the mystical phenomenon of majzooibat. Here, Anjum articulates a mystic's spiritual need for a union with God without distractions from the material world. This desire is manifested through the persona of a man who feigns madness for the sole purpose of warding off public so that he could connect with God in his private and hallowed space. In a poem entitled 'Realization', the poet herself can be seen standing alone away from public. Here, her private self is witnessed conversing silently

with the black stone i.e. Hajr-e-Aswad. As it is said the stone, when it descended from heaven, was pure white but gradually became black because of the sins committed by mankind. In the poem, the stone summons those who understand its language and the poet responds to its summoning. Both stand facing each other.

We stood face to face

Fielding

The One-

The Only One (Anjum, 2017, 191)

Both are in search of prenatal purity or whiteness which can make them discover the ultimate. While the stone has become black, the poet too thinks that she has acquired blackness on account of living her life on this earth.

In addition to these poems rooted in Islamic symbolism, there are poems in Anjum's collections where one finds an Emersonian or a Wordsworthian pantheistic outlook. Here too, one can discern a mystical apprehension of reality. Like the Romantics, the poet here is the chosen one gifted with an extra-ordinary sensibility to appreciate God's beauty reflected in the beautiful landscape. In the poem 'Listener', the poet can be seen again, far from the maddening crowd, conversing alone with the flora and fauna of the country. She can hear the secret language of the trees accessible only to the select few.

The pines smother

The winding slope

Speaking

To the odd

One out. (Anjum, 2016, p. 131)

'The odd one' here could very well be the chosen one extra-ordinarily gifted with a special sensibility to converse with God's creation. In a small poem 'Wonder', Anjum encapsulates the whole debate about whether language can capture the complicated mystical experiences made possible through meditation. She writes, 'How many languages/does God speak-/if he speaks at all.' (Anjum, 2016, p. 228) In very short alliterative lines, she discloses to the reader the secret which might help him/her to hear the silent language of the beautiful and awe-inspiring Margalla hills.

To hear them speak

One must

In silence

The secrets

They have spun (Anjum, 2016, p. 256)

Many a time, this delicate and mystically alive, private self comes into conflict with the public world. When coercive forces from the outside world become too oppressive, it is again a deeply felt God's presence that provides consolation to the poet. 'Succor' reflects an extreme situation in which the poet is able to feel the consoling presence of God. The situation is described in tactile terms with violent actions such as driving the cross through her heart, making her bleed: 'When they had driven/the cross/through my heart and/made me bleed ...../I felt/your presence.' (Anjum, 2016, p. 194) In a secular context, sometimes this private self is ill at ease with the reality around it and finds it limiting and restrictive in terms of her creative endeavors. Very similar to the great creative geniuses that Nietzsche speaks of, Anjum's creative self can be seen resisting such coercion. According to Nietzsche, these supreme creative geniuses among us in society. The great minds are meant to produce astounding works of beauty, but they are constantly in danger of being consumed by a mediocre mass mentality. In another poem 'Let me,,!,', Anjum expresses her need to be free from these oppressive strictures:

Let me be what I am

A briny deep or postern realm  
 A lingering beat to a yielding self  
 A husky peel to a sandal bark  
 Let me be-even if I were to be  
     a sooted image, a sinking blow,  
     a waning breath  
     a fibrous stroke  
 Let me be... haloed by  
     Poise and worthiness  
     Being my real self

Whatever I am or may be-  
 Let me be ... me' (Anjum, 2016, p. 133)

One wishes Anjum should be more resistant and not so pliant and malleable. She should militantly resist this coercive pressure. The repetition of the foregrounded fronted three words, 'Let me be', highlights Anjum's posture of supplication and points out the poet's lack of agency.

Anjum's poetry, however, does not only speak of the issues related to religion and mysticism, it is also expressive of the poet's sense of responsibility towards her society. A balanced approach towards life is recommended: On one level, the poet is mystically alive and sensitive to the presence of a transcendent, higher reality; on another, she is totally aware of and responsive to the injustices and cruelty around her in the material world she inhabits. We observe in these poems a historically and politically informed consciousness who can be seen as responding conscientiously and sensitively to the happenings around her. It is integral to document these experiences as, "The building of a nation always entails the suppression or nurturing of particular historical memories" (Said, 1994, p. 18). Forgetting the monumental events which have affected the citizens of Pakistan, would be a major injustice to the sacrifices and the loss these members of the society have gone through. The unforgettable inhumane massacre of the students of APS Peshawar is duly documented with all its horrific immediacy in the poem 'Lit-class (Remembering Peshawar)'. The poem draws an analogy between Christ's crucifixion and children's sacrifice:

These young  
 Images  
 Nailed to little crosses  
 With no strings attached. (Anjum, 2016, p. 137)

The analogy, however, questions the grand narrative regarding these kids being heroes who sacrificed their lives for their nation. According to the poet, these were needless deaths -a total waste of life. The tragedy comes at us with all its horrific immediacy when one actually hears the sobbing and pleading of those little school children before being gunned down. The end draws on the famous line by another poet who witnessed war and violence at close quarters.

Pleadings sobs of fearful eyes  
 Clutching the corridor rim  
 Lives gunned down!  
 Yeats "innocence drowned"

In school yards. (Anjum, 2016, p. 137)

Another poem about the same event now imagines a lone mother and father both learning to come to terms with the tragedy in their own way. The woman now possesses a fresh mound; and she no longer expects her children to return for an early nap or brunch', and the father thinks of the numerous boys 'gone amiss/ claimed'... 'suicidal' and whose 'whereabouts are untrailed',

Moving from the political to the social, the unseemly side of the poet's society is also critiqued and documented in her poetry. The poem 'Assembly Hall Lahore' recalls a beggar



woman with her child who is described in dehumanized metaphors: ‘a bundle soiled to brownish black’, ‘his mangolian skull squirrels away’, ‘he wriggles back/claiming a space beside her feet again’ (Anjum, 2016, p. 24). Anjum’s anger at the woman who willfully keeps her child deprived of even the basic necessities like food and clothing, speaks of the poet’s civic concern for her people and society.

At the same time there is sympathy for the child who is devoted to his mother though pitifully unaware of the irreparable damage done to his life. Unlike those feminist portraits, where such poverty-stricken women would be stereotypically eulogized and elevated to the level of warriors, Anjum projects her as irresponsible, and her selfish disregard towards her child is presented as immoral and criminal.

At the same time, a deep sense of reverence can also be discerned for the people who work hard to earn a living. The poem ‘My Landed Gentry’, is a eulogy for the domestic help Anjum knew as a child. Unlike the capitalist mindset, that consumes the worker while strategically disregarding his contribution to his success, Anjum demonstrates large-heartedness and generosity of soul, she gives a fair share of her academic achievements to all the helpers in the household. She duly acknowledges their help in and contribution to her life. The enlisting of their names gives the poem the style and structure of a ballad in which the unsung heroes of the poet’s life are monumentalized.

As a young girl, Anjum recalls, she would return home from school with her medals and academic awards, the cook would make sure that a potful of halwa and puri was present on the table to mark the event. There is Ishaq and Ameer from Chakwal whose driving is composed and unruffled’. There is mystical Sher baba and Baba Soofi with their excellent skills at the ‘rich eastern spread’, ‘courteous’ and ‘quiet’ Iqbal, chatty Mamoon and Mir Elahi whom the kids never addressed sans the epithet ‘sahib.’

An unaffected thankyou  
To them and their great  
Great grand ones  
Without whom  
Our achievements  
Wouldn t have been

Widespread (Anjum, 2016, p. 194)

“Memory is crucial to the individuals who function in a social world; but the same is also true of groups and even of nations” (Said, 1994, p. 226). Anjum recalls and pens down her personal experiences to strengthen her core memories and ultimately - identity. Her poems about her father addressed as ‘Janjee’ speak of a deep and intimate parent/child relationship. ‘Janjee’ comes at us as a much-loved protective figure who provided the poet and her siblings the necessary education needed in their practical lives. Due to negative stereotyping, the image of a father in a traditional Islamic society brings to mind an oppressive patriarchal figure who simply treats women as his property. Anjum’s poems give a very different but true picture. Refreshingly, Janjee does not have anything common with the globally projected Muslim father stereotyped as patriarchal, heartless and controlling. In a poem entitled ‘Breakdown’, the poet movingly recalls the happy times when Janjee would take his three daughters for shopping to Khan baba’s silk centre. Anjum paints a beautiful dreamlike image of Janjee’s chaddar-clad daughters smiling and laughing, thoroughly enjoying their shopping spree with their father who is seen generously waiting for his daughters as they choose from ‘marina wool, pashmina and brocade/ ceremoniously unrolled.’ (Anjum, 2016, p. 44)

Furthermore, it is important to understand why Anjum is sharing her unique and one of the most beautiful, personal life experiences. According to Said, “Culture must always be studied in the context of actual people, rather than abstract ideas about them” (Said, 1994, p. 95). To get a better insight into the culture of a particular place – developing a closeness with

the writer is a crucial step. The poem 'Diary' offers a wonderful recreation of the poet's childhood in which her father is celebrated and commemorated as a friend and confidant. Usually, keeping a diary would require one to sit by him or herself and pour out thoughts in a diary but, indeed not when one has a father like 'Janjee.' (Anjum, 2016, p. 73)

Beginning abruptly – 'Come to think of it/did we ever maintain a diary? – the poem goes on to recall in a quasi-humorous tone how experiences at school, playgrounds, labs and libraries were conveyed to Janjee; 'little class happenings/ narrated as mega events-/half a mark less/on math's test/as academic holocaust'. Janjee's benevolence and selfless generosity is reflected in the last lines where the poet calls her father 'our diary': 'Janjee was our diary then/whose pages/harbored our lives/more than his own.'(Anjum, 2016, p. 73)

As a spiritual healer, he would help allay the anxiety the children would feel during exam by praying and blowing over children's head and planting 'amen' on their foreheads. For the poet, Janjee sets the standard and she wishes to live up to the image Janjee has of her.

Slightly bent  
To absorb father's prayer  
Recited and blown  
Over our heads  
As we lined up  
One two three  
The fourth one trudging along

Held by tender hand  
An amen planted  
On our heads

Father's prayer  
Before every school and college exam

Who evolved  
Us that way  
And kept us comforted,  
To date.

(Anjum, 2016, p. 160)

In a moving poem 'Denial', the poet unconsciously carves out a way of coming to terms with the fact of her father's death. The moment of her father's death, the poem demonstrates, is a moment of denial. The poet holds her father's wrist and keeps telling herself she can feel his pulse, whereas, in reality, it is her own pulse that she feels while holding his wrist. Janjee now lives in his daughter since, in the end, the poet claims that she feels her father's pulse in her fingertips meaning thereby, thus, that her father is alive in her.

Fairy Dust is a collection of stories in verse for children as well as adults. There are some precious gems of wisdom for all ages in these stories. The book is basically addressed to children – 'flowers', as she calls them, 'that await fairy dust'. For her, children are our hope; they are the life force that can and must be tapped into; and they are a potential that must not be left to rust. In short, children need guidance at their tender age; it is in their interest that they receive necessary and proper training that can go a long way towards making them good human beings.

The book consists of little anecdotes with invaluable messages and lessons for children. They offer a value system which, if inculcated successfully into our children's minds, will help them fight the challenges of their lives with grace and forbearance. The best thing about this book is that many of the stories are in the form of questions and answers, which is a very effective way of learning. The questions initiate a thought process at the end of which the answer is earned not simply received. In 'Tale 1', for instance, the poet recalls 'fatherly advice' about humility; the method and style adopted in the poem is neither pedantic nor authoritarian. It is dialogic in which the reader becomes part of the dialogue in the poem and towards the end, can learn an invaluable lesson.

### **Tale 1**

Fatherly advice fondly remembered.

the little child shared one of his favourites, told to him each year the night of revelation:

God asked His guest what gift have you brought for the Host?

Humility, the guest replied.

Lovingly God smiled, for that's the only gift He accepts. (Anjum, 2019)

'Tale X11' extends another brain teaser for the reader who is invited to reflect upon deep existential questions regarding free will and Divine Providence.

### **Tale XII**

You dictate your will, your desire to Him! The father mulled over his child's cry for a bigger gift.

You mean my will matters not? The child whimpered.

That's where you go wrong. Father smiled.

It matters when you earn it. (Anjum, 2019)

There are four characters in the stories: God, Nature, father and a child. The son here is the inquisitive child we all have inside us. He sometimes complains about things unacceptable to him; at other times, shirks responsibility and needs to be reprimanded. He is also seen ruminating innocently over universal phenomenon: 'how would one recognize and know the divine presence when one never sees face to face' (Fairy Dust 1). The father is the guiding figure who helps the child find those answers.

Where the little child is seen communicating with nature, the collection hints at the eco-critical imperative that bonding with nature is essential for our well-being. Countering effectively the anthropocentric views about nature being a commodity to be exploited by human beings, Anjum humanizes Nature and makes children see it as something alive like themselves. Various vegetative forms appear to be conversing with each other like human beings. Anjum's poetry becomes a necessary voice in this age of rapidly increasing technological advancement where our children are increasingly becoming more and more distant from nature.

Anjum's poetry nurtures a connection with nature that our children, glued to mobile phones, electronic gadgets and computer games, are losing out on. In doing so, it is indeed a call back to nature. In Tale X111, for instance, an endearing dialogue between the tall oak tree and the grass at its feet occurs and reinforces Anjum's vital message of humility.

### **Tale XIII**

How did you survive the storm last night. I was so scared of ....!

The Tall tree asked the grass greening at its foot.

Look at my bark, the tree said, it was so stern and I was so assured if its strength.

Alas! It splintered. All gone.

Grass bladed a sway. When wind fierces by, I breeze a humble bow (Anjum, 2019)

Anjum's messages become most crucial when placed in the context of our times. It is a much-needed intervention into the historical process which is progressively taking our children away from the cherished values of our elders. This may eventually leave them lost and disoriented. Some of the stories have a mystical slant and that is why one must connect it to its fairy title; it is fairy dust that our little flowers need, and which their souls eagerly await and aspire for. All parents and all care takers can find invaluable lessons in these tales to be delivered to their loved ones.

### Conclusion

To conclude, as "Liberation as an intellectual mission," (Said, 1994, p. 281) Anjum's poetry gives an inclusive and authentic picture of the society the poet lives in. Unlike the works of many Pakistani writers, portraying Pakistan through an exilic lens, Anjum's poetry realistically and faithfully depicts the life as it is lived in Pakistan, considering all its different facets. It opens a window to the culture, tradition and religion as it is practiced in this region. As "Language is the location of culture, and consequently it is also the place where all forms of cultural hegemony are practiced" (Said, 1994, p. 331). Anjum's poetry offers itself as a database for the authentication, validity and vocalization of the multifaceted reality of Pakistan and its residents. Stereotypes are questioned and countered not as a planned agenda but because of the truthful portrayal of a personally-experienced reality as it is lived conscientiously and feelingly by the poet.

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