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# Linguistic Inventiveness, Creativity, and Variation in Taufiq Rafat's Poems: A Stylistic Study

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## Abstract

The current study attempted to analyze the poetic style of Taufiq Rafat. The study focused on Rafat's poetic originality, uniqueness, and grammatical inconsistencies. The qualitative, analytical, and theoretical aspects of this research were analyzed as well. In order to properly and efficiently conduct the study, only a handful of Rafat's poems were selected for analysis and the concentration remained solely on lexical level. The investigation focused on few specific poems of Rafat including Village Girl, Classmate, A Middle-Class Drawing Room, and Once Upon a Time. Leech and Short (1981) models were used to comprehend Rafat's style and how expertly and artistically he handles language to accomplish his objectives and expectations. For academics interested in linguistic and stylistic analysis along with language element identification in any literary text, especially Rafat's poetry, this study is crucial. The study concluded that Rafat used relatively identical stylistic elements. Although, some similarity in the basic form of the poems resulted to deviations and innovations in a few verses while reflecting distinctive and diverse, different and unique meanings along with interpretations in each of his poems.

**Keywords:** deviation, inventiveness, linguistics, poem, Rafat, style, stylistics

## Introduction

Different researchers studied the field of stylistics from different perspectives. Five schools of thought influenced the creation and development of stylistics, for instance, psychological stylistics. In this field, a German scholar named Leospitzern, worked on the personality and psyche of a writer. The Geneva school of thought is the second philosophy. Charles Belly, a significant player in this field, worked on the speech styles of various persons associated with various jobs and social ranks. The third is French structuralism with a leading figure named Roland Barthes who

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presented the idea of a relationship between style and context. The fourth thought is, The English School in which two scholars presented their ideas or concepts, namely Firth and Halliday. The relationship between stylistic analysis and social aspects was a major source of concern for them. The last one is, The Russian Formalism and Prague School, respectively. Two scholars worked in this area, namely Viktor and Roman Jakobson whose major concern was poetic language and literary text analysis. Nowadays, stylistics has become a complete and separate area of study and at the turn of 20th century, stylistics came out as a separate area of study.

The researcher selected a Pakistani poet to enjoy his own compatriot's writing, named Taufiq Rafat. The poetry written by Rafat was both regional and contextual to Pakistani culture, explains Sarwat Ali. His literary style, imagery, and symbolism are all directly tied to Pakistan's backdrop. He did not give up his concept for the sake of a rhyming system. For him, content takes precedence above form (Hayat, [2016](#)).

Poetry is a record of individual feeling and experience with values that are universal. However, the form in no way restricts its overall value. It implies that poems represent a vast range of spoken and written forms, styles, and patterns in addition to a large range of topics. Resultantly, it can capture the readers' imagination and engage them in universal thoughts since it goes beyond the call of duty.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Keeping in view the current study's background, selected poems of Rafat were analyzed. The aim was to determine the linguistic inventiveness, creativity and variation in the selected poems of Rafat. Hence, the current research would be a new addition to the existing studies.

### **Objectives**

1. To discover the linguistic/stylistic devices for the construction of linguistic inventiveness and creativity in Rafat's poems.
2. To find out stylistic/linguistic devices' function in discovering linguistic variations in poems of Rafat.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the linguistic devices used by Rafat for the construction of linguistic inventiveness and creativity?

2. What is the function of linguistic devices in discovering linguistic deviation in the poems of Rafat?

### **Significance**

The current study aimed to identify the linguistic innovation and creativity in Taufiq Rafat's poetry as well as the style techniques. The study, therefore is a unique sort of research which was conducted by using a stylistic analysis of the poet's poems. The topic is significant for academics who are interested to conduct research on poetry from a linguistic and stylistic perspective. Moreover, it is important for anyone interested in analyzing the language aspects in any literary or non-literary text.

### **Literature Review**

The current section highlights review of related literature, concepts, theories, and previous researches linked to the present research.

### **Stylistics**

Bradford ([1997](#)) observes that while stylistics is a complex and tricky subject, every contribution to the wide and varied field of literary studies includes a discussion of style. Stylistics also refers to the study of unique linguistic expressions and explanation of their goals and consequences (Verdonk, [2002](#)). It essentially describes and designates the distinguishing characteristics of literary writing as well as defines the general and structural categories of literature.

Stylistics is able to instruct us on how to identify elements of a piece of literature and how to verify their motions and activities, but it has to accomplish this by employing the vocabulary and techniques of fields that currently examine language (Bradford, [1997](#)).

### **Stylistics and Linguistics**

Stylistics, briefly, is a linguistic science that investigates the styles of language use in literary works. Because of its robust and methodical language foundation, such a critical approach, it is exceedingly scientific and objective. According to Leech and Short ([1981](#)), language is a means of interactions in which one person sends signals to another for a variety of reasons.

A preference of linguistic approaches, a break from linguistic laws, persisting characteristics of linguistic forms, and similarities are all

examples of style (Ogunsiji, [2013](#)). Style is a linguistic tool that allows you to express yourself in many ways. Writers take decisions about how to express themselves and the style is reflected in those decisions (Al-Janabi & Al-Marsumi, [2021](#)). Simpson ([2004](#)) said that language is a complex and intricate network composed of layers, shells, and associations.

While we use or communicate with language in the real world, we are presented with a slew of contextual and situational issues that make it difficult to understand what the words mean. Language is important because it allows us to convey and express the chain and sequence of judgments, responses, actions, and results that make up our lives (Bradford, [1997](#)).

Leech and Short ([2007](#)) asserted that stylistics is a subcategory of literary criticism, with linguistics serving as a convenient framework for literary researchers and academics. Crystal ([1980](#)) declared that stylistics is a subcategory of linguistics that investigates specific characteristics of language variation. In this regard, stylistic analysis looks into and interprets the writer's particular decisions on the use of language and sentence construction. Alternatively, to put it another way, a particular mood and meaning are communicated through the writer's style. Hasan ([1971](#)) claimed that the effectiveness of studying literary language for stylistic reasons is determined by how many facts about the language are demonstrated to be significant to the text as a work of literature.

### **Purpose of Stylistics**

An inherently enlightening approach of analytic inquiry emerges when complete range of language models are accessed. This style of inquiry has a significant reflexive capacity and ability. Contemporary stylistic analysis is always driven by a passion for language, which is why you should never attempt stylistic analysis unless you are passionate about language (Simpson, [2004](#)). Stylistics looks into how readers communicate with different text styles (Scott, [2013](#)).

### **Stylistics and Poetry**

The primary goal of stylistics is to examine the potential expressive energy in a language, not in a person. (Al-Janabi & Al-Marsumi, [2021](#)). Poetry frequently employs specific forms and conventions to elicit emotional or physical responses as well as to broaden and enhance the literal meaning of the words (Preminger, [1965](#)).

Widdowson (1984) considered poetry as a kind of expression that deviates from grammatical conventions. The flexibility of styles, complexity of structures, multitude of meanings, variation of melody, and playfulness of words all contribute to the difficulty of understanding and interpreting poetry. Poetry, it has been suggested, regularly violates the rules of language in order to interact with us in a new and unique way (Lazar, 1993).

### **Research Gap**

Taufiq Rafat, a celebrated poet of Pakistan, is illustrious to all. Many of his poems have been published and are widely read. He is regarded as a Pakistani legend and the foundation of Pakistani poetry in English. Many academics have thoroughly studied his poetry from a number of perspectives. The current study probed into the originality and innovation of Rafat's poetry. Additionally, it showed how language and stylistic choices could produce variances. The investigation also showed how creative and original language is. Furthermore, the study is also fascinating as it explores several linguistic substructures to identify linguistic innovation and proficiency. The artist must have considerable expertise to shape the language to fit the needs of his subject. This research highlighted both linguistic ingenuity and linguistic aberrations, allowing the readers to better grasp and appreciate the diversity of language.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Approach of Study**

Stylistic method was used in the current research. Stylistic analysis serves two purposes. The first is literary interpretation, whereas the second is linguistically instructive (Malmkjaer, 2010). Stylistic approach also tends to encourage writers to take advantage of and comprehend linguistic ambiguity and uncertainty (Buckledee, 2002).

#### **Nature of Research**

The current investigation is theoretical, analytical, and qualitative. The designated stylistic categories were examined, after which a theory was chosen, pertinent to the text. This theory was applied to the study and finally the results and findings were assessed. Content analysis was used to analyze and evaluate the data.

## Population and Sampling

The study's population included Taufiq Rafat's poems sorted by titles. *A Middle-Class Drawing Room, Village Girl, Classmates, and Once Upon a Time, were the selected poems.* The shortlisted texts were used as a sample for research.

## Instrument of Study

As the nature of study implies that the researcher himself serves the source to collect the data. Resultantly, the researcher invested a lot of time reading and researching relevant theories and concepts before gathering and analyzing data.

## Discussion and Textual Analysis

The selected poetry of Taufiq Rafat and its interpretation are the main topics of this chapter. The selected poems included *A Middle-Class Drawing Room, Village Girl, Classmates, and Once Upon a Time.* Each poem was summarized in detail. Afterwards, the discrepancies were discovered in lexical level followed by the examination of innovation, grammatical ingenuity, originality, and freshness. The study then drew attention to novel stylistic elements found in these works and based on their usage and functionality additionally categorized the words. This comprehensive analysis aided in a more thorough and effective understanding of the selected poem.

## Analysis of the Poem, “*A Middle-Class Drawing Room*”

### *Introduction*

In this poem, a middle-class drawing room is portrayed. When someone enters the room, the old and torn pieces of carpet are clearly seen. The oil has been spilled all over the sofa bed since so many people seemed to have laid down or slept on it. According to the speaker, the real purpose of seeing the room is to judge whether the room is suitable for the marriage or not. In this regard, various stylistic devices are used by the writer, which would be explored in detail.

### *Deviation at a Lexical Level*

Some words are deviated in this poem. These words include *strikes, rested, carved, and wings.* The poet deviated these words in order to describe a room where a middle-class family lives. He says that when

someone enters the room, the dirtiness, messiness, and muddiness of the room can be seen. The room's outlook would surely give a mind-blowing shock to the reader's mind. Moreover, the poet says that it would not be comfortable to sit on the sofa since many people have already rested on it and it is broken at the edges. So, surely, you would avoid sitting or lying on the sofa.

**Compounds:** The poet used certain compound words in the poem. These words are *middle-class and drawing room*. He used the compound word *middle-class* to discuss a room that belongs to a middle-class family. A class denotes a status or a category in the society. Middle means (in between), neither the poor one nor the rich one. Therefore, the poet used the compound word *middle class* to discuss the condition of a room as well as the lifestyle and mode of living that belongs to a middleclass family.

Furthermore, the poet used another compound word, that is, *drawing room*. This compound word is used to elaborate on the idea or image of a drawing room. It is a room where people meet each other, or in other words, a place for socialization.

### ***Division of Words at Lexical Level***

**Noun:** Certain nouns in poem depict the culture, tradition, lifestyle, and living standards of Pakistanis. Those nouns are *mohri, carpet, sofa, head, tiger, wall, geese, wood, suitability, house, cousin, host, collar, carpet, shoulder, girl, Sindhi, costume, calendar, years, tea, home, cup, and joke*. The poet used these nouns to describe a room in detail where a mohri, a typical Pakistani carpet, is laid down in the room. That carpet is quite old and its edges are torn.

Moreover, there is a sofa in the room that looks quite dirty and dusty. It seemed as if many people slept on it with oily heads. Additionally, there is a picture of a tiger on the wall. Moreover, there is a picture of a girl in a Sindhi costume on the wall who is holding a cup of tea in her hand and laughing, which might be at some kind of joke.

**Adjective:** There are some adjectives in the poem, such as *priceless, strategic, oily, three, dark, effusive, frayed, much, latest, respectable, and anxious*. The poet used the adjective *priceless* to propose that the room might be precious and expensive, as it is full of images, pictures, and interesting things. Now the room is full of dirt, filth, and dust. Nothing is properly managed.



Adverb: The adverb *ostensibly* is used to discuss the suitability of the room for the marriage of her cousin.

Verb: A number of verbs are used in this poem. These verbs are *enter, strikes, are, sit, has, rested, is, carved, am, look, served, hear, and laugh*. These verbs are used to discuss the physical environment of the room, which is quite dusty.

***Linguistic Ingenuity, Creativity, and Uniqueness***

Textual Lines	Ingenuity, Creativity and Uniqueness	Linguistic/Stylistic devices	Motive, Reason or Intention
(L1-2) <i>As soon as you enter, the room's poverty Strikes you like a blow.</i>	As soon as you enter, the room's poverty Strikes you like a blow.	Syntactical choice	The correct sentence would have been as <i>The room's poverty is obvious as soon as you walk in</i> . The poet does so to depict the idea more comprehensively.

***Summary***

This poem sketches a middle-class. When someone walks into the room, the old and torn bits of carpet are visible. Since so many people have sat or slept on the couch, the oil has spread all over it. According to the speaker, the real reason for viewing the space is to determine whether it is suitable for a wedding.

**Analysis of the Poem, “Village girl”**

***Introduction***

In this poem, the poet describes physical appearance of village girl by saying that she was very beautiful. Moreover, the poet says that her outlook was fabulous. She was quite tall and was standing for someone else.

***Deviation at a Lexical Level***

A word is lexically deviated in this poem and that is *needed*. The poet used this word to talk about his life which is quite dry and uninteresting.

The only thing that can provide him comfort and relief is in his gloomy life is that village girl who is very pretty, tall, and charming.

Compound: The poet used a compound word in the poem and that is *sugarcane*. The poet used this compound word *sugarcane* to praise her physical appearance and beauty.

***Division of Words at a Lexical Level***

Noun: Some nouns are used in this poem which include *parched days, air, and sweetness*. The poet used these nouns to describe that it is quite hard to wait for someone. Days are passing without her and these days seem quite uninteresting. He says that her hair was long and waving in the air.

Adjective: Some adjectives are used in this poem which include *tall and straight*. The poet used these words to praise her beauty, charm, attractiveness, and magic.

Adverb: The adverb *almost* is used in this poem. The poet used this adverb to describe her elegant personality.

Verb: Static as well as dynamic verbs are also used in this poem. For instance, *was, needed, could, and bear*. The poet used these verbs to describe that he had an experience of meeting a village girl whose beauty and charm were praiseworthy.

***Linguistic Ingenuity, Creativity, and Uniqueness***

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Textual Lines	Ingenuity, Creativity and Uniqueness	Linguistic/Stylistic devices	Motive, Reason or Intention
(L4-5) <i>and I who needed a measure of grace</i>	and I who needed a measure of grace	Syntactical issue	To emphasize himself or to attain the intentions of the readers towards him, the poet uses a special sort of sentence and focuses on the <i>first person</i> .

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## **Summary**

The poet describes the physical appearance of a country girl by referring to her positive attitude, and physical appearance in this poem

## **Analysis of the Poem, “Classmate”**

### **Introduction**

This poem is about a student who is very punctual as well as the most handsome in his class. His classmates praise him for his support and motivational skills with which he helps his whole class. Moreover, the poet says that he is a very soft-spoken person. Furthermore, his character, spirit, and strength are also discussed in this poem.

### **Deviation at a Lexical Level**

Some words are deviated in this poem which include *answers, embraced, remembers, doodles, dominated, elected, smuggled, screamed, churned, organized, sits, passes, revert, and seems*. The poet deviated these words to describe a schoolchild who is answering phone calls from behind the safety of the corner. He comes down and meets some people who were his classmates. His classmates hugged him and praised his spirit and strength. He was the dominating student in his class. Moreover, the poet says that he also organized and participated in several competitions and programs and won many of them.

### **Division of Words at a Lexical Level**

**Nouns:** Some nouns used in this poem are *man, hair, moustache, women, magazine, phone, counter, classmate, years, neighbor, friend, wives, children, brain, life, soul party, monitor, girls, boy, school, messages, and president*. The poet forces the readers to learn about a man who has brindled hair and a moustache. He was our classmate and a close friend also. Moreover, he was our neighbor.

**Adjective:** A verb is used as an adjective in the poem. *Brindled hair*, here the word brindled modifies hair in the poem which means the boy had brownish hair. One more verb is used as an adjective in the poem. *Disordered life*, here the word disordered modifies life in the poem. It means after the school, our lives never seemed smooth and easy and that we would not be able to lead a good and happy life after the school.

There is another verb which is used as an adjective in the poem. ***Ruined*** *promise*, here the word ruined modifies promise in the poem. It means that we wept a lot for our classmate as he did not fulfill his promises and never tried to meet us.

Some more adjectives are also used in this poem which are *several, close, old, and handsomest*. The boy was our classmate and a close friend for many years. We always remember the old school days when this boy was our classmate. He was the most charming and attractive person in our class.

Adverb: Some adverbs are used in the poem which are *desperately, always, and almost*. When we looked at this boy seriously, we came to know that he was our classmate. The boy who is our classmate used to be our leader and president. We cried when we finally saw our classmate after so many years.

Verb: Dynamic as well as static verbs are also used in the poem which are *answers, met, was, have, is, was, dominated, elected, smuggled, and organized, sits, light up, could, and seems*. The boy was reading a magazine and combing his hairs. Meanwhile, there was a phone call from the security service which was held by a person who was from one of my old schoolmate. That schoolmate was the highly influential person of the class due to his extravagant personality.

***Linguistic Ingenuity, Creativity, and Uniqueness***

Textual Lines	Ingenuity, Creativity and Uniqueness	Linguistic/Stylistic devices	Motive, Reason or Intention
<i>L16-18 who was the life and soul of each party, who dominated the class by his size, A natural monitor?</i>	who was the life and soul of each party, who dominated the class by his size, A natural monitor?	Trope Rhetorical question	Here the poet uses a rhetorical question. This question is asked not to get any sort of answer. Rather, this question is asked to emphasize or

highlight something. The poet uses this question to attract the intentions of the readers towards a boy who was both talented and charming in the class. He was an excellent monitor too.

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### ***Summary***

This poem is about a student who is quite punctual and has the most attractive smile in his class. His classmates laud him for the encouragement and drive he provides to the entire class. Furthermore, the poet claims that many girls are smitten with the youngster because he is a soft-spoken individual. In addition, this poem discusses his character, attitude, and strength.

### ***Analysis of the Poem, “Once Upon a Time”***

#### ***Introduction***

This poem is about the life of a man who remembers those days when he was young. He says that he had beautiful teeth and he used to admire his beauty and attractiveness, but now he has grown up and aged. He will turn 39 years old in October. That is an indirect way of saying goodbye to his youth. His face has wrinkles. He thinks that while he still has the strength, he can make himself look better and enhance it.

#### ***Deviation at a Lexical Level***

Some words in this poem are distorted lexically which are *uneasily*, *confirms*, *unhealthy*, *travelled*, *disgusted*, and *wanted*. The poet altered these words to say that a man’s tongue reflects this discomfort and the survivors have developed an unhealthy brown because of the cheap

cigarettes. Moreover, their whiteness has made its way north to the middle of his brain.

***Division of Words at a Lexical Level***

Noun: Some nouns are used in the poem which are *youth, teeth, mirror, morning, thirty-nine, and October*. The poet used these nouns to describe a man’s youth. He says that a man had beautiful teeth when he was young and he used to see himself in the mirror every morning. Moreover, the poet tells us about the man that he has grown up now and will turn thirty-nine.

Adjective: Some adjectives are used in this poem which are *beautiful and cold*. The poet used these adjectives to describe the qualities of a man who had beautiful teeth during his youth and had enough strength to do any sort of work because he was energetic. However, he has aged now and cannot indulge in such things. Even when he drinks cold water, he gets a headache.

Adverb: The adverb *ago* is used in this poem to describe the youth of a man when he was energetic and powerful and could do any sort of task easily.

Verb: Static as well as dynamic verbs are also used in the poem. These words are *had, laugh, admire, will, and feel*. The poet used these verbs to discuss the adolescence and youth of a man who had an enormous and pleasurable life in his youth. When he used to look into the mirror, he felt shy and approved of his attraction and fascination. He is not young anymore.

***Linguistic Ingenuity, Creativity, and Uniqueness***

Textual Lines	Ingenuity, Creativity and Uniqueness	Linguistic/Stylistic devices	Motive, Reason or Intention
<i>(L18-2) I’ll be thirty-nine in October, which is a roundabout way</i>	I’ll be thirty-nine in October, which is a roundabout way	Lexical choices, Compounding	The poet uses a compound to discuss the idea of separation and departure. He says <i>goodbye</i> to his youth

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<i>Of saying goodbye to my youth.</i>	Of saying <i>goodbye to my youth.</i>	that will not be back and he does not mourn it. He simply says "good and bye," which means it was a good time that I had come across.
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### **Summary**

This poem describes a man's life as he recalls his youth. He claims that he used to enjoy his attractiveness and beauty since he was young had beautiful teeth. However, he has grown up and aged now. In October, he will turn 39 years old which is an indirect way of bidding goodbye to his youth. His skin is wrinkled. He believes that while he still has the strength, he can improve and enhance his appearance.

### **Conclusion**

In the poem, *the Middle-Class Drawing Room*, there are certain deviated words which include *strikes, rested, carved, and wings*. This deviation reflects the domestic condition of a middle-class family.

The poem, *Village Girl*, portrays the physical personality of a countryside girl. He says that her attitude was fantastic.

In the poem, *Classmates*, poet used some of the rhetorical questions pertaining to the quality and character of a schoolchild. The boy was the most talented in his class and everyone loved him a lot. He was the motivator, monitor, and supervisor of the whole class and everyone appreciated and praised him. He was selected as the head of the school because of his excellence and performance.

The poem, *Once Upon a Time*, describes the life of a man who recalls his youth by saying that he had beautiful teeth and he used to admire his beauty and attractiveness. However, he has grown up and aged now. He will turn 39 years old in October. That is an indirect way of saying goodbye to his youth. His face has wrinkles. He thinks that while he still has the

strength, he can make himself look better and enhance it. Some nouns have also been used in the poem which include *youth*, *teeth*, *mirror*, *morning*, *thirty-nine*, and *October*. The poet used these nouns to tell us about a man's youth: that a man had beautiful teeth when he was young and he used to see himself in the mirror every morning. Moreover, the poet tells us about the man that he has grown up now and will turn thirty-nine.

After studying Rafat's literary output, the researcher concluded that this author is exceptional at conveying his messages using a range of media. He has a huge and amazing capacity for interpersonal communication. The creative use of language to express several meanings and enhance the aesthetic value piques the reader's interest.

Additionally, grammatical errors might be noticed in some of his poetry. Each word in the poems was classified according to its function and usage. Before analyzing the poems stylistically, the researcher provided a full synopsis of each of the chosen poems. The current study helped to understand the inventive and creative use of language in Rafat's poetry. Moreover, it would also increase the understanding of Pakistani poets and their poetry. It is helpful for those who are interested in analyzing language features of a literary or non-literary text. The current study would provide special attention to each stretch of language in order to point out the linguistic creativity, ingenuity, and newness in Rafat's poetry.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

The stylistic technique is used to analyze any literary work, however, poetry is particularly well suited for this. The current study suggested that future academics may use this approach if they are interested in looking at the language elements of poetry. It also recommended the readers to concentrate on the differences between Rafat and other authors' writing styles. It could result in many distinct meanings.

The author advised future studies to employ the stylistic technique to discover originality and variation in other writers.

The stylistic approach is beneficial as it allows students to analyse a larger range of literary works and understand the language from many perspectives.

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## Appendix

## A Middle-Class Drawing Room

*As soon as you enter, the room's poverty  
strikes you like a blow. The mohri carpet  
may have been priceless once; now its worst  
patches are hidden by strategic placement  
Of occasional pieces. You sit stiffly  
on the sofa's edge to avoid the stains  
at the back where many an oily head  
has rested. On the mantelpiece  
an aluminium tiger is ready to spring,  
and on the wall a set of three geese  
carved in a dark wood, their wings fully  
extended, diminish towards the ceiling.  
What am I doing here? Ostensibly  
a neighbourhood call, but the real purpose  
is to judge the suitability of this house  
for a cousin to be married into.  
The host is effusive. His collar  
is as frayed as his carpet. I cannot  
meet his eye. Instead, I look over  
his shoulder at a girl in Sindhi costume  
smirking from an airline calendar  
torn to a December three years gone.  
Tea is served. This is too much like home.  
I fidget as I balance the cup on my knee,  
and hear his version of the latest joke,  
and laugh politely, as anxious as him*

*to appear respectable and to please.*

### **Village Girl**

*there she was  
tall and straight  
as a sugarcane stalk  
and I who needed  
a measure of grace  
to see me through  
these long parched days  
saw her standing there  
straight and tall  
laving the air  
with such a sweetness  
it was almost more  
than a man could bear.*

### **Classmate**

*Observe this man with the brindled hair  
and moustache, doodling naked women  
on a magazine cover. He answers  
queries on the phone automatically  
from behind the safety of the counter.  
He was a classmate for several years  
and a neighbour and close friend.  
We met an hour ago on the tarmac  
warmly, embraced, and patted each other  
on the back. After the first do-you-remembers  
and enquiries about wives and children*

*we have nothing to say. Desperately  
I rack my brain for subjects. He doodles  
and is inaccessible.  
Is he the one  
who was the life and soul of each party,  
who dominated the class by his size,  
a natural monitor? Whom the girls  
from the adjacent convent elected  
as the handsomest boy of the school?  
They smuggled messages to him, and screamed  
go, go to his bow-legs as they churned  
to little purpose in the annual sports.  
Addicted to politics, he organized  
societies on the lines of the Gestapo,  
complete with secret signs and rituals,  
and, of course, was always president.  
Now he sits behind an airline desk  
in a foreign capital, disinterested, vague,  
old at fortythree. His eyes light up briefly,  
I note with relief, when a pretty girl  
passes; then he reverts to his doodling.  
I could almost weep for him. Before  
the tragedy of his ruined promise  
the fact of my own disordered life  
no longer seems real or important.*

*Once upon a time I had beautiful teeth,  
and every now and then  
I would laugh into the mirror  
so I could admire them.  
But that was long ago.  
I have lost a molar since,  
a great gap  
my tongue uneasily confirms,  
and cheap cigars have given  
the stragglers an unhealthy tan.  
Teeth that cracked a walnut in half  
ache at the touch of too-cold water.  
Their whiteness has travelled north  
to a spot in the centre of my head.  
Now the only time I look in the mirror  
is early morning  
when I have to shave.  
I'll be thirtynine in October,  
which is a roundabout way  
Of saying goodbye to my youth.  
Nearing forty I feel  
like a marathon runner  
hearing the bell for the last lap.  
So while I still have the strength.*