

## Review, Akbar Ahmed's *Suspended Somewhere Between*

Reviewed By Shadab Zeest Hashmi

Akbar Ahmed. *Suspended Somewhere Between* (A Book Of Verse). PM Press, 2011. 144 pages. ISBN 978-1604864854.

In Akbar Ahmed's "Suspended Somewhere Between," the poems themselves seem to assume suspended shapes, moments hanging in the wide expanse of history that the author draws inspiration from. Not only are these poems suspended in time but between disparate cultures, between faith and intellect, between the personal and the public, ideational and palpable, between the sacred and secular, between love, hate and understanding. That Akbar Ahmed, who is considered by the BBC as "the world's leading authority on contemporary Islam," should choose to publish a book of poems, says a lot about his spiritual approach to the complex subject matter that has occupied him as a scholar for nearly half a century.

If read purely for poetic merit, this work would fall short on many accounts as the author's intent (as elaborated in his preface) is not to write an ambitious work of poetry but rather to chronicle the moments of his life that have shaped his deeper understanding of historical dynamics. The power of this work is in its large-spirited acceptance of everything — the noble, the questionable, the profound, the grotesque and strange around him and within him. This gesture of seeking higher wisdom in things scared or profane, and acknowledging the powerful sweep of compassion has a Sufi flavor and is supremely exemplified in the poem "*Walking the Streets with the Dahta:*"

The cane-waving policeman/smiles at me/and takes care to reply in his  
English/but the Dahta is unequivocal in his care/and perhaps the false  
beggar/returns from him richer.

Ahmed's declaration that he has never edited his poems ought to serve as a guide as to what kind of reader would glean the most from this work. These poems are not crafted with the often ruthlessly precise artistic chisel of a seasoned poet, rather, these are moments of inspiration caught raw, and recorded promptly by an extremely precise thinker. His judicious spirit enables Ahmed to present things as they are or as they were, without as much as a scratch of the chisel. Even

the more personal poems (some of which border on being sentimental) from his young days are left untouched because editing these would inflict a sort of censorship and concealment of his younger self, which, to the reader's benefit, Ahmed is bold enough to embrace. The value for the reader here is to appreciate the influences and the evolution of this great thinker of our times, unhindered by cosmetic revisions.

The poems in this collection are centered on themes ranging from the spiritual to the political, personal to the historical and are written in various tonal registers. Because the book spans the author's entire life and is unrevised, the style swings significantly from poem to poem. The work's uneven literary quality becomes a lesser concern when one considers its incredible breadth and depth. Well-written lines such as: "Strings of spittle hang/at your mouth, you./drooling, helpless/clutching wildly at air/your tiny body—just six months old—cannot move or obey your will/only your eyes lucidly convey and pierce me with love" (*For Umar, With Love*) more than make up for weaker ones such as "In robust days and ill health/In failure and in wealth/Through the highs and lows/ you always took for me the blows" (*For Zeenat, Princess of my Heart*).

The awkward redundancy in "On the western front frowned the eagle/ mighty Caesar in imperial regalia regal," (*I, Saracen*) is compensated by the chilling lyrical narrative of *The Meeting*: "a snake—the deadly village viper/it stood stock-still by the prayer-mat/ " or by breathtaking poems such as *Spring Thoughts in Farghana*, which are striking in their immediacy despite the distance of history: "The pipe and the kettledrum/have sung the warrior to his sleep;/the mourners wail their way/back to the village/ High above, the mountains which stretch/like a young man's ambition in springtime, an iced drizzle starts to speak..." Here is where we see the true gems of this collection.

"Suspended Somewhere Between" does a remarkable job of exploring dualities and even multiplicities of the self, of the loneliness and the longing for identity that has anguished the Pakistani soul since its inception. Akbar Ahmed's voice is a vital contribution to the world of contemporary letters and he has aptly been called "a national treasure."

**Akbar Ahmed** is the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, American University in Washington, D.C., the First Distinguished Chair of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the U.S Naval Academy, Annapolis, and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. A former ambassador of Pakistan to the UK, Ahmed has taught at Harvard, Princeton and Cambridge Universities and is the author of a dozen award-winning books. His most recent book is called *Journey into America—the Challenge of Islam* (Brookings Press, 2010). *Suspended Somewhere Between* is Ahmed's first book of poems.