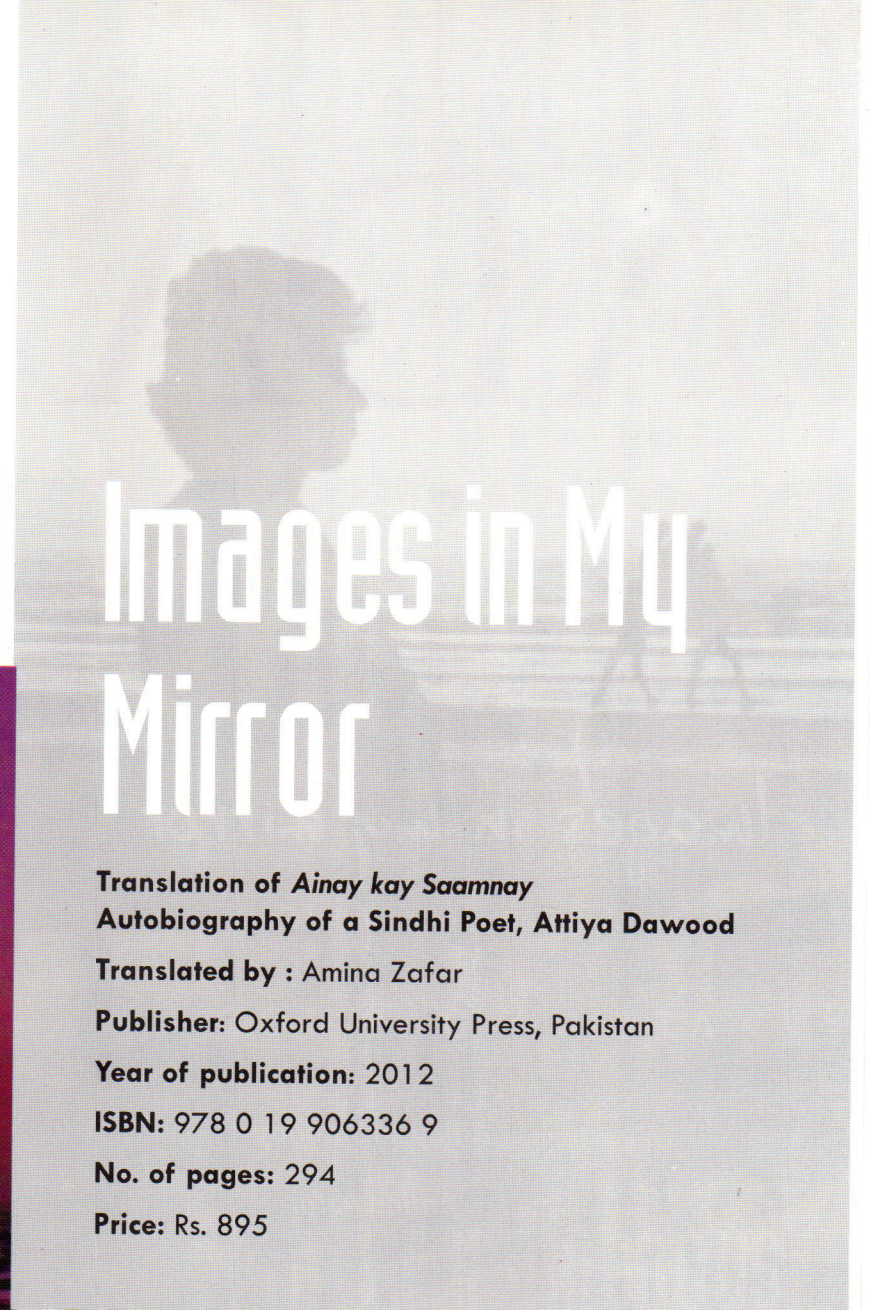
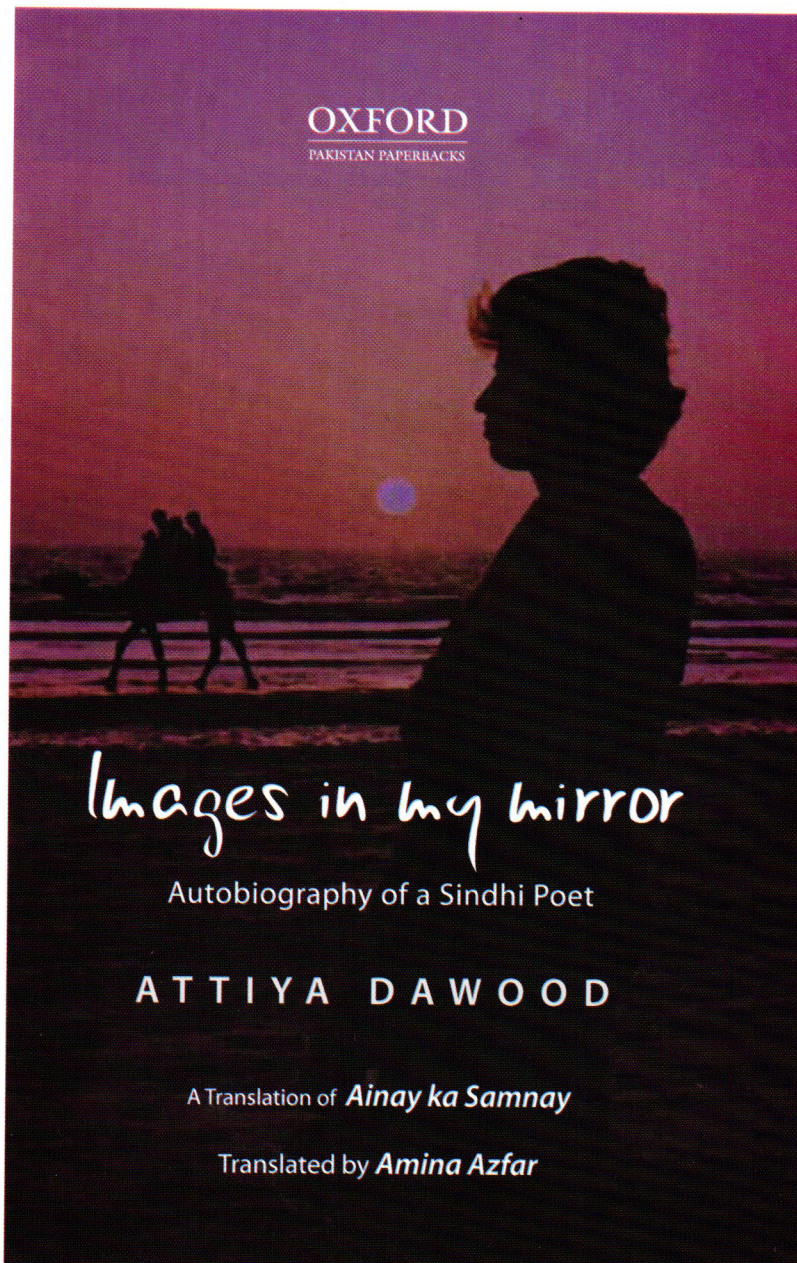


Reviewed by Niilofur Farrukh

'*Images in my Mirror*' is the narrative of an ordinary little girl born in an ordinary little village of Sindh, who, with sheer talent and tenacity, becomes Attiya Dawood, the widely read feminist poet of Pakistan.



Attiya with the women of Thar

The autobiography meanders through rural Sindh to the metropolis Karachi, giving insight into cultural and social nuances of the poet's life. Starting with ancestral background, a tangle of marital alliances not always easy to follow but it does establish Attiya's ancestors' commitment to education for women, despite the entrenched gender bias around them.

The account of her father's funeral through the eyes of a six year old is moving. Her father, who was both a mullah (pastor) and a poet, gave Attiya the advantage of a childhood full of independence

and encouragement, which ingrained in her a sense of self. It also marked her awareness of discriminatory rituals when she saw her mother's nose ring taken off to declare widowhood. Attiya recalls the moment with immense pain, "I could not bear to see the desolation on her face brought about by the absence of the jewel, and my heart was brimming over with rage and sorrow. I thought to myself that I would never wear a nose ring over which I would not have full control."

A bright and defiant child, she was happiest when allowed to be a tomboy in the village lanes. Happy childhood memories revolve

around her pet calf and accompanying her father to the local landlord's house for poetry recitals, where she was singled out for her promise and often rewarded with a packet of biscuit for her participation. "Even to this day when someone praises me warmly for a poem or an article, I feel the taste of *Energy Food Biscuits* on my tongue," writes Attiya.

The reader is reminded how attaining secondary school education in rural Sindh can never be taken for granted and to attend Nawabshah Government High School for Attiya meant living at the house of her half sister where her in-laws treated her as an unwanted guest. Managing life with very little money and hand-me-downs from her grown up nieces throughout her youth, Attiya not only had little money to spend on clothes but little interest in them as well and it was only after her marriage that she received her first gift of readymade outfits from her husband K. B. Abro. So new was this experience that she had to be gently reminded by a friend to get rid of the price tags when she wore them.

She asserted her financial independence after matriculation by taking up different jobs, as school teacher, sales representative, factory supervisor, receptionist and insurance salesperson, to name a few, till she found her niche in journalism and publication. This enriched her life with new friends and urban encounters. A thread that runs through this period is her low threshold for unfairness as she constantly voices the concerns of her co-workers, sometimes at the cost of her own employment.

In the book she exposes the silence surrounding exploitation of women colleagues in ideological bastions such as the Communist

our romance and it brought us friends so close that we were like a family." Never one to believe that friendship should be restricted by gender, Attiya made many close friends in the male-centric Sindhi Adabi Sangat and earned their professional respect. When an inner power struggle began to subordinate its vision, she recounts the difficult choice to distance herself from the organization.

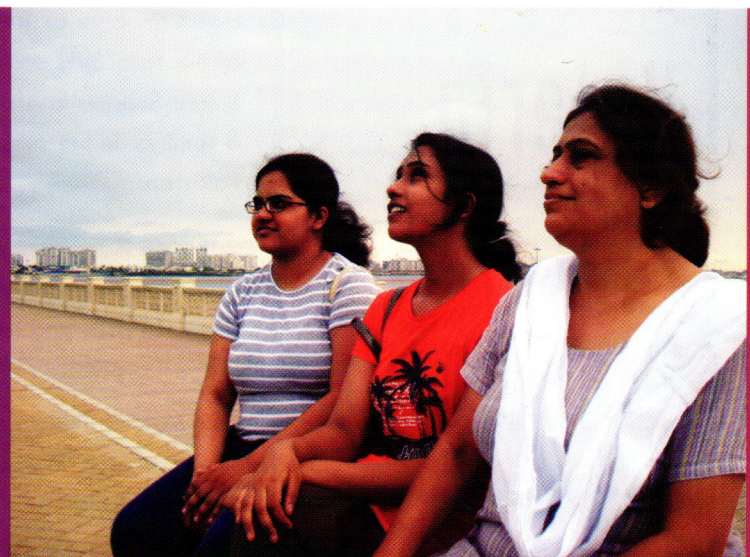
The autobiography provides an account of a middle class Sindhi woman's struggle that counters the portrayal of silent victims in the field and *baveli*, and stands apart as a symbol of social transformation. Viewed through this prism, the context of the lives of other women achievers from the hinterland can be better understood, particularly artists like Mussarat Mirza and Rehana Mangi. The daughter of a school teacher from Larkana, Rehana financed her education from her earnings as a seamstress, and Mussarat Mirza, whose family responsibilities have anchored her to the ancestral home in Sukkur, is away from the art centers, and she has always had to work harder to leave a mark on the national and international scene.

What stays with you well after you have read the book is the emotional resilience of Attiya. The trauma of losing her father and early physical abuse at the hands of her sister-in-law has left her neither angry nor bitter, or inhibited her capacity to establish passionate bonds. The gift to turn her vulnerability into strength by experiencing life to the fullest and treating hardship in such a matter of fact way, gives Attiya an endearing quality.

Her unconditional love for a married man who she decides to leave in order not to violate the code of life she advocates, is told



Soon after my marriage to Abro, 1989



With daughters, Soonha and Suhaee

Party, where equality and justice is often pushed aside, when male members use their power and camaraderie to sexually abuse women. Attiya is seen emerging both as a feminist writer and feminist activist as she proactively supports vulnerable women in their struggle for equality.

The readers who are keen to read more about Attiya's own perception of her evolution as a poet and her process of creativity may get disappointed. The chapter devoted to Sindhi Adabi Sangat however does briefly touch upon her interaction with the literati of Sindh. According to Attiya "Sindhi Adabi Sangat was

in a frank and touching manner. She lays bare the inner turmoil, the painful decision of separation to build a new life with Abro, the anxiety to live up to his trust. Writing it must have been cathartic for the writer as she tries to come to terms with all the conflicting emotions without holding anything back.

Images in My Mirror reflects the true grit of a determined woman and the emotional messiness of a life lived with passion. All the fraying and loose ends are left by relationships that take a life time to understand and resolve. Attiya tells it all with an honesty of emotions that connects her to the reader. ■