

Pakistani Literature in English 1993 and 1994: A Critical Survey

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The literature during these two years gave the impression of a bumper crop without any real buyers. *The Medal* (as John Dryden might have said) for this anomaly should be pinned not on any particular John but on the decreasing means of taking stock and weak institutional utility complicated by confused educational policies.

Numerous newspaper articles and editorials through the two years were indicative of the relevant if reheated debates on the language and education issues that have preoccupied us for many decades, without a comfortable resolution. The most recent controversy was caused by a decision of the Government of the Punjab to introduce English in Primary Schools from Class One. Implementation of this decision requires a high degree of commitment and skills, which the educational authorities did make an attempt to provide on both a provincial and national basis. As English schooling in the private sector has gained further ground, the government schools and universities will need to do much more for themselves to be competitive.

One main reason for the fact that serious creative and critical work has been flourishing is that it is mostly done outside the academy. The novel even appears, at least for the time being, to have moved abroad. Bapsi Sidhwa, who now lives in the United States, called her fourth novel *An American Brat* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 1993) and found both in the United States and in South Asia a ready audience, which already half-knows by now the culture-clash cacophonies and the discrepant banalities involved in "travelling" ill-prepared to the distant realms but has not ceased to indulge the aching ludicrousness of it all! Feroza Ginwalla, the Pakistani Parsi girl "brattened" by American ways in the United States despite (or perhaps because of) her watchful uncle, Manek, is a better developed character than the rest and Sidhwa finds room, in the narration, for broad observation of both the Pakistani and American societies. For example, in Pakistan: "Most catastrophes

were converted into jokes. How else could ordinary people tolerate what was happening to the country and them?" And about Salt Lake City: "He [Manek] left it to them [his family in Pakistan] to assume that a community that forbade even coffee was not likely to permit promiscuous sex" (138-139). The observations may be genuine or interesting but the writing is undistinguished, the scheme anecdotal, which cannot save the novel. Yet the ethnic chic is not lost upon the market and Penguin have reissued it in India (1994).

Nadeem Aslam, who lives in Britain, has published *Season of the Rainbirds* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1993), a first novel of merit whose perceptions are contained within the characterisation, dialogue, and social detail of small-town Pakistan. Azhar, the deputy commissioner, for instance: "So every Tuesday there was a barrage of people congesting the arches outside the courthouse, as they waited to see him: there were those who needed passports and identity cards for departures to the Arab countries; others offering bribes to secure a favourable outcome of cases; fathers of unemployed sons, mothers of nubile daughters; sharecroppers needing loans to buy oxen. For the rest of the week these people would leave messages and gifts outside his house-baskets of fruit and vegetables, sides of meat, embroidery and lace, cakes of white perfumed soap, cages of songbirds. Once there was a fighting cock with a plucked neck and a tiny canvas muzzle over its beak, and once, even more surprising, there was a large bouquet of flowers. In the beginning Azhar used to send these things to the mosques but then it began to seem easier just to drag them over the threshold" (126-127). Such is the rhythm of life against a backdrop of the disturbing past of this town, an assassination, a pouch of lost letters turning up after nineteen years to threaten the surface calm, the change of governments, the active presence of evil, and rising intolerance, which Maulana Hafeez's noble words alone cannot help subdue. Aslam touches on major themes as they affect ordinary lives and calls up an atmosphere instead of leading motive to conclusion and resolving anything between the coincidence of monsoon and moral confusion or past memory and present turmoil.

Certain resolutions, however, are reached in Nazneen Sheikh's second novel, *Chopin People* (Toronto: Lugus Press, 1994), in which Italian and Polish immigrant characters discover through the power of music the more intangible pleasures of life-beyond the body, the borders, and the society's institutions. Sheikh, who lives in Canada, has deliberately moved away from the strictly Pakistani-Canadian material but not from the vibrations of the "old country" theme, and has written a jocular book this time to probe the inner lives of her characters, enabling them (and us?) to listen to the music "from within". In a way, it is the next logical stage in the "immigrant's" journey to the new country and the settlement it affords; add to it the health-food regimen and sexual politics following a marital breakdown, and you nearly have a politically correct "naturalisation" of the earlier "look homeward, angel" syndrome. At least Stacey Malik, in Almas Khan's first novel *Chapati and Chips* (Castleford, W. Yorkshire: Springboard/Yorkshire Art Circus, 1993), does not have to go through such gyrations. She was placed differently. Born of mixed parentage in England, she makes the necessary trip to her father's original country, Pakistan, and learns to be content with her English existence-what with all the half-familiar places and kind relatives in Pakistan! Thus Almas Khan, who lives in Bradford, writes a very basic story about

developing a socially viable identity, blazoned even by the Yorkshire vernacular here and there, and definitely contributes towards the corpus being described as Black British Writing. That way, Sheikh is trying to be rather colourless.

Of the three strong short story collections, two were published by writers settled abroad: Iqbal Ahmad's *The Opium Eater and Other Stories* (Canada: Cormorant Books, 1992) and Aamer Hussein's *Mirror to the Sun* (London: Mantra Publishing, 1993); in the third collection, Shahwar Junaid's *Survivors of Many Sorts: A Collection of Short Stories* (Rawalpindi: Publishing Consultants, 1993), 'The Enchanted Vision' is a particularly well-told story. Several fine short stories also appeared in magazines.

At least half a dozen collections of verse received wide and often wide of the mark-press coverage and they all make resounding claims about the power and use of poetry as an art-form, as also the varying trends, styles, and levels of accomplishment. They cannot be discussed at length here but it may be appropriate to mention the more successful and representative poems in each volume: 'The Games I Invent', 'A Hundred Drooping Trees', 'The Cartoonists', 'Blight of the Sacred' by Riaz Ahmad (*The Dwindling Nomads: A Collection of Poems*. Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1991); 'A Dream', 'My Darling Grandchildren', 'The Love Marriage' by Anna Molka (*52 Poems by Anna Molka*. Lahore: Privately published, 1993); 'Song of a Tiny Bird', 'The Dream of the Unattainable', 'One More Reprieve', 'Sadness, Be With Me', 'Grown Smaller', 'Let Us Celebrate', 'Embrace of Silence', 'The Remembered Sunrise' by Ejaz Rahim (*The Dreaming Clayjar: Poems by Ejaz Rahim*. Islamabad: Leo Books, 1993); 'Peapods of Love', 'Somali Warlords', 'Palestine', 'Youth of Kashmir', 'Hired Assassin', 'Surf-Rider' by Ejaz Rahim (*The Imprisoned Air: Poems by Ejaz Rahim*. Islamabad: Leo Books, 1993); 'The Crucifixion', 'The Thing Not Known', 'I Am Dust', 'The Hills of Home', 'Two in My Garden' by Omar Tarin (*A Sad Piper: Poems*. Islamabad: Leo Books, 1994); 'Dust Storm', 'Karachi 1994-Business as Usual', 'Winter Games', 'Favouritism', 'Sweet Death', 'I Rage for My Future', 'Pillow Talk', 'About Kashmir', 'Gandhara, at the Taxila Museum' by Omar Tarin (*The Anvil of Dreams*. Islamabad: Leo Books, 1994); 'Lost in Time', 'Meditation', 'Because', 'Tightrope', 'After Sunset', 'Where No Road Goes', 'A Loadshedding Thought', and 'What's To Be Done?' by Jocelyn Ortt-Saeed (*Burning Bush*. Lahore: Stillpoint Books, 1994); not to overlook the severe whimsy of *Of Hungry Cats and Immortal Pigeons* (Arundel, Sussex: Woodfield Publishers, 1993) by Farman Yusufzai, and Alys Faiz's very committed as well as personal poems in a full section of her autobiographical prose work noted among the non-fiction titles.

Although the best Pakistani work in the genre during these two years appears to have been published in the periodicals, such as *Poetry Review* (London), *The News* (Rawalpindi), *Pakistani Literature* (Islamabad), *Yatra* (New Delhi), *The Rialto* (UK), *The Literary Review* (USA), *Journal of South Asian Literature* (USA), *Contemporary Review* (London), *Kunapipi* (Denmark), and *The Honest Ulsterman* (UK), besides a few anthologies published abroad, two British poetry collections with a Pakistani connection also deserve serious reading. Both were published in England. Moniza Alvi, author of *The Country at My Shoulder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), is a young British poet with relatives

in Pakistan; while the other author, of *Nailing Dark Storms* (Flitwick, Bedfordshire: Hub Editions, 1993), Saqi Farooqi, is a well-known Urdu poet now settled in England and also writing occasionally and quite effectively in English. It may be instructive to put this work side by side with the poems named above or, say, with Inam-ul-Haq's *Collected Poems* (Lahore: Pak Books Empire, 1993) and be able to see the comparative contexts of poetic technique and sensibility derived from different dialects, languages, milieux, and cultural traditions.

A welcome development is some serious play-writing undertaken within the country, as good original theatre has mostly originated from Pakistani sources abroad. Khalid Ahmad, author of *Come and See My City from Here* (*Yatra* No. 2, New Delhi), is already well-known as a playwright in Urdu. This particular play is in English and, breaking a long hiatus in the genre, skilfully focuses attention on violence born of socio-political issues. Need it be stated that he is based in Karachi?

Translations of Urdu fiction and poetry are now proliferating and, as in any widely subscribed activity, the quality varies from excellent to insufferable. One has literally to sniff up before actually tasting the fare; but it's worth the risk. The following titles, in fact, made a worthwhile contribution towards making Pakistani literature in Urdu both well-known and accessible more widely: *The One Who Did Not Ask* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), a novel by Altaf Fatima translated by Rukhsana Ahmad, *Leaves and Other Stories* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1993) by Intizar Husain translated by Alok Bhalla and Vishwamitter Adil, *Contemporary Urdu Short Stories: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1991, reissued in paperback, 1992) selected and translated by Jai Ratan, *The Man with the Mask* (Lahore: West Pakistan Urdu Academy, 1994), short stories by Razia Fasih Ahmed translated by various hands, *In Her Own Write: Short Stories by Women Writers in Pakistan* (Lahore: ASR Publications, 1994) edited and translated by Samina Rehman, apart from the poetry, fiction, and drama translations presented in such journals and anthologies as *The Annual of Urdu Studies* No. 8 (1993), *The Annual of Urdu Studies* No. 9 (1994), *Literary Olympians* edited by Elizabeth Bartlett (Boston: Ford-Brown & Co., 1992), *Yatra* No. 1 (1993), *Yatra* No. 2 (1994), *Yatra* No. 4 (1994), and *Modern Poetry in Translation*, New Series, No. 5. Comparatively, there was very little offered in the period from the other Pakistani languages.

Non-fiction, as usual, occupied a large space, with voluminous contributions by journalists, scholars, generals, politicians, diplomats, and creative writers; all kinds, and of all manner; memoirs, essays, biographies, autobiographies, newspaper columns, society humour, formal speeches, and philosophical and current debates of historical or general interest which have a bearing on our literary culture. These included *Over My Shoulder* by Alys Faiz (Lahore: The Frontier Post Publications, 1993), *Mian Fazl-i-Husain: Glimpses of Life and Works 1898-1936* edited by Azim Husain (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1993), *A Passage to Pakistan* by Shuaib bin Hasan edited by Aamer Rashid Sheikh (Lahore: REMA/Nadeem Book House, 1993), *Puppets on a String* by Afzal Iqbal (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1993), *Memoirs of Lt. Gen. Gul Hassan Khan* by Gul Hassan Khan (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1993), *Hopes, Dreams & Realities* by Mahnaz

Malik (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1993), *From Memory* by Firoz Khan Noon, second edition, reissued after some three decades (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1993), *The Beaming Soul* by Wasif Ali Wasif (Lahore: Kashif Publications, 1993), *Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan: His Life and Times* by Stanley Wolpert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), *Man's Destiny* by Al-Mashriqi edited by S. Shabbir Hussain (Islamabad: El-Mashriqi Foundation, 1994), *Lost from View* by Shahnaz Aijazuddin (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1994), *Defiance* by Mahnaz Malik (Karachi: South Asia Publications, 1994), *The Forgotten Years*, the memoirs of Sir Zafarullah Khan edited by Ashiq Hussain Batalvi (1994), and *On This Earth Together-Ahmed S. Bokhari at UN, 1950-1958* (writings/speeches by Patras Bokhari) compiled and edited by Anwar Dil (San Diego, CA: Book Service, 1994). Of particular literary interest among these were the volumes by Alys Faiz, Shuaib bin Hasan, Afzal Iqbal, and Patras Bokhari.

In any case, the pride of place belongs to Criticism, which is both abundant and excellent, reflecting current critical debates and approaches as well as rigorous and detailed scholarly studies of major topics, writers, and works. Outstanding work in the field included the first book-length study of Zulfikar Ghose, *Structures of Negation: The Writings of Zulfikar Ghose* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) by Chelva Kanaganayakam. Articles of note, chapters in books, and other critical writings of interest were as follows: "Ahmed Ali and the Transition to a Postcolonial Mode in the Pakistani Novel in English" by Alamgir Hashmi, *Journal of Modern Literature* 17:1, 177-182; "On Writing in English" by Anis Nagi, *The Nation: Midweek* (Lahore) 8 October, 1993, p. 4; "Pakistani Biographies in English" by Tariq Rahman, *Dawn Magazine* (Karachi), 8 October, 1993, p. 4; "Prolegomena to the Study of Pakistani English and Pakistani Literature in English" by Alamgir Hashmi, *New Literatures Review* No. 25, 1-15-this article is also in *Pakistani Literature* (Islamabad), 2:1, 245-261 and in *Major Minorities: English Literatures in Transit* (Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993, 99-110) edited by Raoul Granqvist; "What History?" by Alamgir Hashmi, *The Toronto Review* 12:1, 93-96; "Ahmed Ali 1910-" by various hands, in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 69 (Detroit: Gale, 1992, 19-32) edited by Roger Matuz; "Hanif Kureishi and the Tradition of the Novel" by Alamgir Hashmi, *Critical Survey*, 5:1, 25-33; "Post-Colonial Literature in Africa and Pakistan" by Huma Ibrahim *The Nation: Friday Review* (Lahore) 12 August, 1994, 5, 14; "'Cracking India': Minority Women Writers and the Contentious Margins of Indian Nationalist Discourse" by Harveen Sachdeva Mann, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29:2, 71-94; "The Poems of Alamgir Hashmi" by Burton Raffel, *The Literary Review* (USA) 37:4, 705-710; and "Ahmed Ali-A Tribute" by various hands, *The Annual of Urdu Studies* No. 9 (1994), 1-106.

Some useful publications in language studies were *The English Language in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1993) edited by Robert J. Baumgardner; "The Power of English in Pakistan" by Shameem Abbas, *World Englishes* 12:2, 147-156; "South Asia in English Lexicography: Curryng Up (Blood-Pudding) English Teek-Hai!" by Alamgir Hashmi, *Third World Quarterly* 15:1, 151-155 and (a shorter version) in *Chicago Review* 39:2, 108-113.

For literature studies, the point to start is "A Select Bibliography of Pakistani Literature in English" by Alamgir Hashmi, *Pakistani Literature* (Islamabad) 2:1, 263-270; also in *New Literatures Review* No. 25, 16-21. The short notes on Pakistani poets contained in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (1994), edited by Ian Hamilton, may prove quite useful. There are comprehensive and concise studies of Pakistani literature in the *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), edited by Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly, and one-time access to this work is likely to make it indispensable for any further reading or study of the subject.

With such substantial gains in particular areas, we also note how the writing might be strengthened in a number of genres; and there have been some real losses. But no loss was greater than Ahmed Ali's death in 1994.