

Journal of Postcolonial Writing: Special Issue on Pakistan, Edited by Muneeza Shamsie

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In the absence of official narratives regarding Pakistan's traumatic history – especially Partition and the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war – the current generation of Pakistani writers proposes to fill those gaps where there has been only silence. Muneeza Shamsie has (once again) masterfully assembled a diverse assortment of these writers and scholars in the most recent *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, a special issue divided into six parts: articles, interviews, memoirs, fiction, poetry and reviews. Contemporary Pakistani writing in English is nothing if not politically engaged and historically informed, attracting much critical acclaim and scholarly attention, nurtured by a "Pakistani imagination" which is not only pre- and post-colonial, but "linked to the wider Islamic world" as well (Shamsie 119).

Five scholarly articles account for the first half of the *Journal*. Claire Chambers takes a comparative approach, placing Pakistani literature in English within a larger Muslim context, to include writing from Greater Asia, the Middle East and East Africa, not to mention the European diaspora, concluding "The intertextual referencing of a long history of Muslim artistic work refigures the category 'Muslim' as a springboard rather than a constricting box" (131). Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is examined by Peter Morey, who argues that Hamid's novel represents a deterritorialization of literature, "which forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, 'Them and Us' and so on – those categories continuously insisted upon in 'war on terror' discourse" (138). Incidentally, Peter Morey has recently published, with Amina Yaqin, the highly commendable "Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9 / 11." Bruce King then presents a survey of Kamila Shamsie's novels, and their underlying theme linking family with national

culture; despite the variations between and among Shamsie's five novels to date, she is, King insists, "always a writer of political fiction" (149). Shamsie's *Kartography* is the focus of Caroline Herbert's article, and her analysis coincides with King's, bringing politics into the family and the nation, in this case the lingering effects of Partition and especially the 1971 war; Herbert suggests that two non-narrative forms, Urdu lyric poetry and mapping, combine to form what she calls "lyric mapping" as a means of negotiating traumatic experience many years after the fact (159). The final article is devoted to what Ananya Jahanara Kabir calls "deep topographies" in Uzma Aslam Khan's recent novels, *Trespassing* (2003) and *The Geometry of God* (2008); she argues that Pakistan owes its cultural sense of identity less to Islamic heritage than to its pre-Islamic past (174), what in *Geometry* is called "ancient land, ancient water" in reference to Gandhara / Indus civilizations pre-dating Islam (see Kabir 175). Although taking up only a bit more than sixty pages, these five articles, taken together, make for an excellent overview of some of the best of current Pakistani writers and their political / historical fiction which is receiving much well-deserved critical attention.

Two interviews follow up the scholarly articles, one with Mohammed Hanif and the second with Moniza Alvi. The author of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* recounts to Iman Qureshi the difficulties he had when writing his novel, difficulties which were finally resolved as he learned to separate the rules of journalism from the rules of fiction writing (186-187). Given the novel's setting in the Pakistan army, the interview then goes into the question of gender relations in contemporary society; Hanif understands perfectly the key word 'relations:' "Pakistan's men are not only drowning in testosterone, but they're taking women down with them" (189). Religion too comes up, as it must, when discussing Pakistan, and its current role within the political framework, especially the overwhelming power wielded by groups who are in the minority in terms of electoral credibility; Hanif reveals himself as compulsively optimistic regarding the future in such a context (191). Muneeza Shamsie explores dualities with the poet Moniza Alvi, beginning with the kind of duality that Kamila Shamsie has elsewhere called the "sociological fact" of middle and upper-class Pakistanis who are also part British (or part American). Alvi conveys her long-distance influence from Pakistan, resulting in the poem "Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan," and

goes on to mention how her first “Pakistani” writings were in fact completed before she had ever been there (195). Alvi’s more recent poems have treated the themes of post-traumatic stress disorder and Greek mythology.

Aamer Hussein writes a similar memoir of duality, growing up as he did in two languages, English and Urdu, and his resistance to being classified as a “living bridge” between the two in his English-language writing (203). Robin Yassin-Kassab’s memoir describes his search to find the “true face” of Pakistan, concluding that Pakistan has not yet “found the institutions to represent it,” still waiting for its moment of self-realization (209). “Tribal law, tribal lawlessness: A New Yorker reminisces about her family’s ancestral village in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa,” by Humera Afridi, presents a before-and-after picture of village life, especially the climate of fear and violence in the wake of 9/11 and the Afghan war, an incomplete tattoo serving as the memory link between then and now.

Irshad Abdul Kadir’s short story, “Clifton Bridge,” is a Dickensian tale of artful dodgers, yet more frightening as children are snatched and sold to become unwitting organ donors, lives saved and lost in this milieu of abject poverty. “Wild Thing” by Sidrah Haque is the touching tale of a provincial old woman, riding the bus to see her son and, for the first time, his new wife; her enthusiasm and impatience make her forget propriety in ways that endear her to readers.

Poetry lovers will find much of interest in the current issue of the *Journal*. Adrian A. Husain begins with “Elegy,” dedicated to Benazir Bhutto, then follows up with two works highlighting memory, “Iron Trunk” and “Iris.” “Conjunctions (Mostly)” is Dohra Ahmad’s playful tribute to language, while Ilona Yusuf contributes a longer and darker political / historical work, “Swat.” Moeen Faruqi’s “Winter Visit” speaks of the shadows of ancestors, and his “Photographs in evening papers” mourns the victims of ethnic riots in Karachi. “Daylight” dissects the fine line between ‘new’ and ‘news,’ while “Misplacing,” both by Sadaf Halai, seeks treasure where there is no X to mark the spot. Salman Tarik Kureshi’s “Death of a Leading Citizen” regrets how the passions of the “overarching mind, spirit [...] had been stilled in a derelict body” (238). Shadab Zeest Hashmi’s three poems move from colonialism in “Gunga Din’s Revenge” to mourning a lost child, “She breaks her fast with a pinch of salt,” ending with

“Bilingual,” wordplay in the butcher’s shop. “Christmas Eve” completes the poetry section, Shireen Z. Haroun treating of things there and not there.

Several book reviews round out the volume, two by Bruce King, *In other rooms, other wonders* by Daniyal Mueenuddin and *The geometry of God* by Uzma Aslam Khan, two as well by Muneeza Shamsie, Masood Raja’s *Constructing Pakistan: foundational texts and the rise of Muslim national identity 1857-1947* and Cara Cilano’s *National identities in Pakistan: the 1971 war in contemporary Pakistani fiction*. Humaira Saeed reviews *Making words matter: the agency of colonial and postcolonial literature* by Ambreen Hai, followed by Kavita Daiya’s *Violent belongings: Partition, gender and national culture in postcolonial India*, assessed by Nirmala Menon. Lizzy Attree examines Ranka Primorac’s *African city textualities*, and Lucy Collins then reviews *Ireland and postcolonial studies: theory, discourse, utopia* by Eoin Flannery, followed up by Jennifer Lawn’s critique of Christian Stachurski’s *Reading Pakeha? Fiction and identity in Aotearoa New Zealand*, and finally Om Prakash Dwivedi presents *Thinner than a hair* by Adnan Mahmutovic.

This special “Pakistan” issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* is remarkable in many ways, not least the quality of writing and research which is presented, as well as the creative genius of the fiction writers and poets. The diverse range of form, from scholarly articles to memoirs and interviews, prose and poetry, is sure to please not only confirmed South Asia scholars but a more general readership as well, especially readers who seek fictional representations which have something to say about the world we live in. Guest Editor Muneeza Shamsie has succeeded brilliantly, as we’ve come to expect, in foregrounding the very best of current research and creativity; under Shamsie’s guidance, the concrete, everyday concerns of ordinary human beings never lose their place at the center of discussions – too often abstract – of politics and violence.