

*Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity,
Nationhood and Fiction*

Reviewed by Dr. Munazza Yaqoob

Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction.
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Mushtaq Bilal's *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction* (2016) is a collection of conversations that he had with ten contemporary writers of Pakistani fiction in English. These include Bapsi Sidwa, Musharraf Ali Farooqi, Uzma Aslam Khan, Aamer Hussain, Mohammad Hanif, Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid, Bina Shah, Bilal Tanweer and Shehryar Fazli. The book is divided into ten chapters, each containing an interview with one of the authors.

In the introduction, Bilal draws our attention to the increasing popularity and visibility of Pakistani writers of English fiction in the global literary market. He informs his readers that this 'boom' is due to the geopolitical position of Pakistan in the context of 9/11 and the 'war on terror.' He believes international readers are interested in learning about a country on the frontlines of the war on terror and the dynamics of its society and culture, which breed religious extremism and patriarchy. He explains that writing about Pakistan has become equal to making political statements about Pakistan. Pakistani fiction in English, therefore, is perceived as politically engaged by international readers. He supports this argument by suggesting that despite the fact that the country has no publishing houses that specifically publish English fiction, and English is still regarded as the language of the elite with a very small community of speakers, it is

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growing and attracting Western readership. Therefore, he is interested in exploring how these writers represent Pakistan, address the nation, and construct its identity. He desires to find out whether these writers dismantle or perpetuate the Western constructed stereotypes of Pakistani society and people.

This book's major strength is its focus on selected dynamics in a vast subject, which helps the author get his point across to his intended audience. The interview questions are formulated dexterously as they focus on very pertinent issues related to Pakistani fiction in English. The questions include subjects such as: The position of Pakistani writers of English fiction as 'citizens of a Postcolonial state,' their responsibility to represent Pakistani society and subvert stereotypes, the possibility of using fiction as a form of cultural diplomacy between the West and Pakistan, self-censorship and writing fiction in the English language.

Almost all of the Pakistani writers interviewed assert that they are not engaged in 'rewriting the social history' of Pakistan. They disagree with the general perception that their fiction represents Pakistani society and assists in the construction of a national identity. They consider fiction to be an art form and are mainly concerned with the process of writing stories and creating characters. They write for informed readers who have the ability and aesthetic education to appreciate the merits of their works and are not merely reading it to draw political insights about Pakistani society and its relationship with the West. They want to be appreciated as writers of fiction rather than 'cultural diplomats.' They reject the 'reductive frameworks' used to interpret their works and want their readers to appreciate the complexity of Pakistani society and culture and the place of English fiction in the Pakistan's literary culture.

In response to a question about their intended readers and audience, all of the authors declare that they simply want to write good stories and create good and memorable characters. Being fiction writers, they consider it restrictive to have a particular audience in mind while writing. However, Mohsin Hamid and Bina Shah say that

they are happy to play the role of intermediaries or cultural diplomats because as writers, they are making an effort to 'build bridges between Pakistani culture and the rest of the world' (185) and 'disarm' some of the wrong perceptions about Pakistani society (161).

What makes this book compelling is the commentary of the writers on their popular works. It is interesting to note how their works have been interpreted in light of their own intentions. The general readership of this fiction within Pakistan and abroad considers it to be politically engaged and written for the global Anglophone community. The sudden popularity of this fiction after 9/11 and during the war on terror serves as strong evidence to support this perception. However, the writers interviewed in this book deny this observation and encourage readers to develop alternative viewpoints and use alternative frameworks to read their works. Their comments on their own works may be convincing enough to get readers to read with a different set of eyes.

In terms of self-censorship, almost all of the writers assert that they are free to write whatever they want and as fiction writers, their only obligation is to be true to their own ideas. Indeed, writing a good story is their 'first responsibility.' However, Mohsin Hamid admits that he likes to 'self-censor' in all of his writing because 'words are powerful' (172). Most of the writers say they regard the label of 'postcolonial writer' to be an academic construct because scholars need to group writings into certain categories and use certain labels in order to design courses and conduct researches. The authors are simply interested in writing stories that entertain their readers.

One of the most important issues discussed in all of the interviews is the use of English language. Uzma Aslam Khan thinks English is one of Pakistan's languages because 'it is a part of our culture now' (76). The other writers also agree with this viewpoint and think that their English fiction is actively 'engaged with issues that are characteristically Pakistani' (12). The use of English does not prevent them from representing Pakistani reality; instead, it helps them 'explain Pakistani culture and society' (191). Shehryar Fazli

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thinks that English helps Pakistani writers reach an international audience (222) and Musharraf Ali Farooqi similarly considers it an effective medium to ‘share our literary culture with the rest of the world’ (57).

I am particularly appreciative of the interview questions that were used in this book. These questions keep the reader focused on the pertinent issues, help to organise the content of the book, and make complex theories and terms easier to understand. Bilal's approachable tone engages the reader in the conversations, and his comments help to explain the viewpoints of the writers. In addition, as the Bilal asserts, ‘these interviews not only contribute to literary but also to various cultural and political debates going on in the contemporary world’ (21).

This book adds to academic scholarship on Pakistani fiction in English by providing useful insights into the works of ten popular contemporary writers. The conversations compiled in this book inform us about the writers' beliefs, their preferred writing processes, their observations of and views on Pakistani society and the relationship between Pakistan and the West. The conversations also touch on the status and role of Pakistani fiction in English under the labels of postcolonial literature and commonwealth literature. These conversations can serve as soft landing spots for readers when studying fiction by these writers. I believe this book deserves a special place on the bookshelf of anyone who appreciates Pakistani fiction in English.

About the Author:

Dr. Munazza Yaqoob is Associate Professor in the Department of English, Woman Campus, International Islamic University, Islamabad. She is author of two books and numerous research papers published in national and international interdisciplinary journals.