

Review, *Granta* Special Issue on Pakistan

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Special issue on Pakistan. *Granta. The Magazine of New Writing* 112 (2010) pp. 288. £12.99. \$16.99.

The gorgeous cover of the volume *Granta Magazine* has recently devoted to new Pakistani writing was designed by truck-artist Islam Gull from Karachi. Gull used the vibrant colors seen on decorated vehicles everywhere in this part of the world to capture a sense of home, or rather a sense of homecoming to the snow-capped mountains of Pakistan where wooden houses snuggle around rice paddies and lakes are so bright and blue they almost hurt the eye. On the back cover, fortified walls topped with ancestral guns are inserted in a green mosaic of birds and flowers, the dominant color inscribing an obvious reference to Islam, and the many conflicts that have been waged in its name in a country born in 1947 out of the need for an independent Muslim homeland.

The notion of a tradition in motion is implicit in the landscapes on the front and back covers, but also in the range of works collected in this impressive issue. Gathered together are eighteen pieces of fiction, literary journalism, memoir, and poetry—originally in English or translated from Urdu—interspersed with reproductions of works by Pakistani visual artists. Special mention should be made of “High Noon,” the central section introduced by novelist Hari Kunzru, and in which a selection of cutting-edge visual art is reproduced in collaboration with the London-based gallery Green Cardamom. Diversity in genre and provenance testifies to the development of contemporary Pakistani creation along increasingly transnational lines. In the context of globalization, Pakistani writing cannot be envisaged without due reference to the experience of arriving and growing up as a young immigrant in Britain, a common memory evoked in the bitter-sweet chronicles of Aamer Hussein’s “Restless,” and Sarfraz Manzoor’s “White Girls.” But the issue also leaves room for reflections on Pakistan from the outside with two reportages by Western press correspondents Jane Perlez and Declan Walsh, respectively on the father of the nation Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and on the political conundrum of Pakistan’s tribal belt. These two pieces communicate a wealth of information on the historical confrontations that have led to the challenges Pakistan now has to face, by setting them in the successive frames of the colonial involvement of Britain in Pakistan and neighboring

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Afghanistan, the American endeavor to foster and fund a resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and, finally, today's struggle against the Taliban. The in-depth surveys of Pakistan's fields of historical contest stand in fine balance with the investigations of other scenes of conflict, at home and abroad, as in Basharat Peer's moving article on "Kashmir's Forever War," and Lorraine Adams and Ayesha Nasir's collaborative investigation of the terrorist attack planned by Faisal Shahzad on May 1, 2010 in Times Square, New York City.

Criss-crossing perspectives on and from Pakistan never let the reader forget that this special issue is primarily *about* Pakistan. In this respect, the careful architecture of the volume deserves praise, as a great deal of attention has evidently gone into the arrangement of texts and pictures so as to create strong associations between the verbal and the visual. The enlargement of a tiny framed miniature (1.1 x 1.5 cm) showing the curvy belly of a faceless, pregnant woman thus greets the reader about to begin "Leila in the Wilderness," the opening novella by Nadeem Aslam. Leila's tale reads like a contemporary Arabian Night gone awry, as her husband Timur orders the young bride's baby girls to be killed, birth after stubborn birth, the instant they have taken their first breath on the banks of the Indus River. Nadeem Aslam's indictment of female infanticide is all the more effective as his story depicts a Pakistan teetering on a widening chasm between the legacies of legend and the reflexes of modernity. Magic-realism acquires a disquieting bitterness when Leila grows silver wings to escape her tormentors, only to have them nailed to the ground, and chopped off by the local butcher, while Timur is kept informed by mobile phone of his wife's condition so he can reach the next scene (of labor) at the appropriate time in his air-conditioned SUV. The permanence of the community-destructive violence exerted against women and their tender ties is also prominent in "The Sins of the Mother," the short story by Jamil Ahmad that concludes the volume. The hieratic tale of two lovers hounded for years by the woman's clan across the wastelands of northern Pakistan is imbued with such a stark beauty that readers will no doubt feel encouraged to find out more about this new writer who has just published a *début* novel entitled *The Wandering Falcon* at the age of 80.

Granta 112 gives us a bracing overview of the plurality of voices that make up contemporary Pakistani literature at home and abroad. Some of them have familiar names such as Fatima Bhutto and Kamila Shamsie who both surprise us with refreshing memories of growing up in a country interrogating its traditions, and inventing new ones with the emergence of pop idols on their way to earn diasporic fame in the 1980s. But most of the artists and writers selected for this issue are still in the process of attracting an international attention, and their names need to be commended to the potential reader with a keen—although by force lacunary—interest in the cultural productions of the English-speaking

world. Mohammed Hanif's "Butt and Bhatti" is one of the gems to be signaled to those among us who may have missed his 2008 novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. The short story is told with such sardonic humor that its ambivalence endures long after its last sentence has been relished. It begins with Teddy Butt taking a Mauser to do his declaration of love for him. Teddy is a man of few words but complicated yearnings. Without spoiling the ending, one can admit that Teddy's relative inarticulacy is perhaps less responsible for the subsequent turn of events than Sister Bhatti's literal mindedness, and her failure to decode the fears underlying male swagger. The semiotic tragedy causes a whole city to erupt in violence because the characters on either side of the gender divide have long ceased to be able to decipher the signs they tentatively address one another. Signs, however, are taken very seriously in Uzam Aslam Khan's "Ice, Mating," a short story partly set in the Kaghan Valley in the North West Frontier Province and in the United States. High in the Himalayas, the populations from different villages still engage in the ritual of ice-seeding. A female block of ice is chosen from a village where women are renowned for their accomplishments while its male counterpart is picked in another village where the men are deemed equally worthy. The ice-bride and her groom are brought together in the cleft of a cliff where they are left to lie for five winters. When the time of gestation has elapsed, the cycle of freezing and thawing will have started the crystallization process out of which glaciers begin their stately course, bringing freshwater and irrigation to the valleys below. The story combines together ethnographic observation, landscape writing and a dash of romance so as to probe the effect certain locations—the River Kunhar but also the Bay of San Francisco—have on our sense of place. The result is superb and it is likely to fascinate all readers, no matter where one comes from.