

Muneeza Shamsie's *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women*

Reviewed by David Waterman

And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women. Edited with an Introduction by Muneeza Shamsie. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2008. 386 pages. ISBN: 978-1-55861-580-9.

The first of its kind, *And the World Changed* is a collection of twenty-five creative texts originally written in English by Pakistani women, some living in Pakistan, some abroad. This anthology developed, Muneeza Shamsie tells us, from two previous works, *A Dragonfly in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writing in English* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Leaving Home: Toward a New Millennium; A Collection of English Prose by Pakistani Writers* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Arranged chronologically by year of the author's birth, this collection effectively spans two generations of Pakistani women, lesser-known writers finding a well-deserved place alongside more established writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri Goodyear, Uzma Aslam Khan and Kamila Shamsie. The texts in this volume are unified by their elaboration in English, itself the result of the authors' education both in Pakistan and in a country in the West, thus creating what the editor calls "multilayered [. . .] stories of reclamation, a charting of territory across two worlds" (15), stories which retain a social / political imperative, some openly, some in more discreet literary style.

Muneeza Shamsie's introduction provides the reader with a helpful context, briefly reviewing Pakistan's history – before and after Partition – while supplying benchmarks regarding the evolution of women's experience and writing during this period. Special mention, for example, is made of the first South Asian English novel of Partition, *The Heart Divided* (Mumtaz Shahnawaz, 1959), Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's memoir, *From Purdah to Parliament* (1963), or Bapsi Sidhwa's first novel, *The Crow Eaters* (1978), which marks, according to the editor, the beginning of contemporary English writing by Pakistani women.

The stories themselves, as one would expect, very often deal with the trauma of Partition. "Defend Yourself Against Me" is Bapsi Sidhwa's tale of expatriates in Texas, still haunted by the atrocities committed by Muslims, Hindus and

Sikhs during Partition, and the necessity of forgiveness if one is to continue living. Roshni Rustomji also takes a long view, the mass migrations of peoples following Partition and the lingering effects through sixty years of contemporary history, culminating in Benazir Bhutto's assassination in 2007. Minority communities are often the subject of these stories, such as Dina Lal of Sorayya Khan's "Staying," who refuses to leave Lahore even as it is in flames, going so far as to buy the mansion of the wealthy railway chief, an Englishman who has of course fled, a state of denial which is a futile attempt to turn back history. Muneeza Shamsie's own "Jungle Jim" throws the colonial subject into a no-man's-land of identity, those colonial subjects who do not genuinely belong either in London or in the colony: "What are we?" I asked her. 'We are British,' she said. But whenever I said this to people, the British looked blank and Indians and Pakistanis laughed" (98).

The ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan finds expression in Sabyn Javeri-Jillani's "And then the World Changed," describing peaceful life in open-minded Karachi, a feeling of tolerance and goodwill which disintegrates after the 1965 war with India, news of which reaches the residents by way of the radio in Bobby Uncle's car. Sehba Sarwar's "Soot" follows Zahra from Karachi to Kolkata, by way of graduate school in Chicago, as she completes her internship; her diverse friendships along the way help give a new perspective to her priorities, especially vital poverty relief, going well beyond the superficial political and ideological differences which no longer seem so important. The clash of cultures comes to the fore in "Meeting the Sphinx," Rukhsana Ahmad's portrait of a British academic struggling to come to terms with new points of view, imported, perhaps not so ironically, from Britain's own former colonies. Ahmad allows for optimism, however, as the embattled university professor swallows his pride in order to put an end to the students' hunger strike, giving ground in order to save human lives, a gesture which earns him the admiration of his Asian colleague. Superstition is explored by Tahira Naqvi, whose protagonist, fearing for her husband's safety and influenced by her dreams, makes a vow to God that her husband shall marry their servant girl, Jeena, a practice hardly in step with their contemporary situation, and refused by her husband. Islamic folklore is captured in Shahrukh Husain's "Rubies for a Dog," and is important not so much for the details of this particular fairy tale, in this case a daughter who makes a long, perilous journey to salvage her father's reputation, but rather as an indication of modern Pakistani culture, informed by a multitude of influences and traditions, both East and West.

Sexual politics and arranged marriages do not escape critical treatment either. In "The Optimist," Bina Shah's protagonist announces to her husband, just after their marriage decree has been signed, that she can't stand the sight of him; she has agreed to the marriage only because of family pressure, while conversely

the parents of the bride in Qaisra Shahraz's "A Pair of Jeans" call off their son's planned marriage after seeing the girl dressed like a decadent Westerner. In "Run-away Truck Ramp" Soniah Kamal charts the journey made across the USA by an American woman and Pakistani man, and their difficulties finding common ground in terms of conflicting sexual norms and customs; while they separate after only a few days, the impact of this journey remains: "These are the one-night stands that determine the future of the rest of our nights" (298).

Universal experience / unity-in-diversity are highlighted by Fawzia Afzal Khan and Maniza Naqvi, while the tale of a mother and her handicapped daughter in "Mirage," by Talat Abbasi, is disturbing for all readers, regardless of their particular cultural origins. Two of the stories in this collection deal with the recent conflicts surrounding the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda: Humera Afridi's "The Price of Hubris," set in New York just after 9/11, and the sudden vulnerability felt by the Pakistani protagonist (a situation reminiscent of Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), and Bushra Rehman's "The Old Italian," set in a contemporary immigrant neighborhood in Queens. The editor has also included a student work, "Clay Fissures" by Nayyara Rahman, one of the winners of the 2004 British Council initiative, "I Belong International Story Chain."

And the World Changed comes at a good time, when the current geopolitical situation places Pakistan very high on the list of the world's most dangerous places. Through all of these representations of the trauma of colonialism and Partition, Indo-Pakistani relations, gender conflict and cultural clash are portrayed human beings, individuals certainly, but more important, human beings as members of humanity, each related to one another, linked by the same dreams and the same worries which the women writers of this anthology address with such clear vision. We look forward to more first-rate inspiration from the forthcoming *Oxford Companion to the Literatures of Pakistan*, also edited by Muneeza Shamsie.