

BOOK REVIEWS

AZRA ABBAS. *Mērā Bačpan*. Karachi: Jadīd Klāsik Pabliharz, 1994. 80 pp. \$60.
Kicking Up Dust. Trans. by SAMINA REHMAN. Lahore: ASR Publications,
1996. 93 pp.¹

WHEN I tried to order a few copies of Azra Abbas's book of childhood memories from Pakistan for a students' seminar at Heidelberg in spring 2001, I was informed that both the Urdu original and the English translation were out of print, but that a second Urdu edition was under way. And shortly afterwards, the second edition was published by Āj kī Kitābēñ, Karachi. Though the first print run may have been quite low (on average between 500–1000 copies for Urdu books), this demand for a second edition/imprint surely is an indicator of the popularity of the book. One might speculate why this slim volume is in such demand—is it because of the fame of its author or because of its intrinsic qualities, or both? No one can really answer this question; there can be no doubt, however, that the expectations of those readers who know and appreciate Azra Abbas the poet are fulfilled and, to my mind, more than fulfilled in places. Let me explain how this happens.

Azra Abbas, born in 1950, mother of four, has carved out a space for herself as one of the most radically modern Urdu poets. Radical not so much in her political or feminist expression—in those spheres Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz are probably more outspoken and direct. But in contrast to the other women poets, she has uncompromisingly shunned the conventional forms of poetic expression in Urdu. No ghazals, no classical metaphors and similes. What we find in her poetry instead are household items, everyday experiences of ordinary women as lovers, mothers and wage earners, the pain and glory of a creative writer expressed in down-to-earth words. We may safely call her an iconoclast of poetic forms. It goes without saying that this radical break with the poetic tradition is linked with an equally radical refusal to accept conventional role models for female behavior. She has thus built up a certain image and renown, and it is obvious from her childhood memories that she was anxious to underpin this image and transport it back into her childhood. How far she was conscious of

¹Page numbers of Urdu text refer to the first Urdu edition. English translations unless otherwise mentioned are by Samina Rehman. Words omitted by the translator are occasionally added in square brackets.

this interpolation/manipulation of memory is difficult to say. It is common knowledge that our memories are tainted by our later experience. No innocence is possible in this regard, much less so when a conscious attempt is made to systematize and order memories into a cohesive whole, to make sense of memories of the self. Facts and fiction inevitably intermingle. Every autobiographical utterance is prone to these contradictions. Let us see how Azra Abbas handles them.

In the very first sentence we encounter both of these conflicting elements: the author stresses the need to control memory (*yāddāsh̄t par qābū pānā*, p. 5) to tell the story (*kahānī*, *ibid.*). The term “story” itself already comprises the ambiguity of fact and fiction. One episode is thus introduced by the sentence: “Another memory which has turned into a story” (p. 14). Further comments on the purpose and the technique of the text are interspersed between patches of memory. The author claims:

I am not making a conscious effort to recall any of this while I write. I live surrounded by memories and am able to link each new event to a previous one. I often recount my memories to others, at times with joy and at other times with sorrow. (*ibid.*)

On the other hand, a conscious effort to uncover memories from oblivion is described in the following simile:

Memories are like objects in the dark which *you probe with the help of a light*. They surface in the stark glare with a startling immediacy as if the strong incandescence had succeeded in locating and making visible all that had disappeared into nooks and crannies. (p. 3; emphasis added)

In the passage that follows, the English translation, to my mind, somewhat obliterates or weakens the sense of the original text which is:

Main unbhēn andbhērē mēn ṭaṭōl rahī hūn. Kuṅh tō yūn sāmnē parī haiñ aur mujhē hērat mēn dāl rahī haiñ. Aur khud mujhē daryāfi karnē mēn mēri madad kar rahī haiñ. Kīn kīn čizōn nē mujhē mil kar banāyā hai. (p. 8)

Here, the act of remembering is expressly linked to probing the self—memories help the writer to understand her self and what went into the making/building of that self. In Samina Rehman’s rather diluted translation: “I am still searching for objects in the dark. Some are before me and I am astonished at the strength of the attraction which draws me to them. How many different experiences have gone into the making of the self?” (p. 3).

Azra Abbas claims to write down her memories spontaneously, without imposing an order on them: “Many scenes are before me but some I’m not able to place in a time frame. Did they happen prior to certain other events or not? I am writing them down as I recall them” (p. 6). This may hold true for some of her reminiscences, but as a whole her narrative reveals a chronological order,

starting with the earliest childhood memory and ending with an episode that hints at the onset of puberty (first menstruation). All these short comments are clearly addressed to the reader. Otherwise, the author does not speak directly to the reader, does not try to involve or to fraternize with her or him.

So far we have dealt with the arrangement of the narrative as compared to the author's claims of spontaneity. As we shall see now, despite all her claims to the contrary the remembered episodes are eventually selected and ordered in a certain way so as to produce a desired result: to reveal the making of the rebellious Azra ("an urban guerrilla with a mission" in Samina Rehman's words, p. i) from early childhood onward and to present a consistent picture of her personality which corresponds with her present image as a writer. This tendency gets more and more pronounced as the narrative proceeds—contradicting the author's claim of spontaneity.

In the first part of the book we encounter a number of short episodes depicting a wide range of experiences. Some are intense emotional or sensual impressions, such as fear at night in the lonely house, a severe illness, the death of her grandfather, the loss of her silver ink pot, and her first night in a new house. Small details (mostly visual images) are remembered with vivid immediacy and trigger a chain of associations:

I am climbing the stairs. My mother is climbing in front of me. I watch my mother's footsteps as they go up and place my feet carefully on each stair. This is my first day at school. Even today I recall my mother's feet climbing the stairs. (p. 4)

(The translator dropped the final clause: "which were taking me to school for the first time"—"*jō mujhē pahlī dafā' iskūl lē jā rahē thē,*" p. 10.) Others deal with explorations of her immediate surroundings and the interaction with family, neighbors, teachers and friends, or with early disappointments at the injustice of adults. Soon enough we are introduced to Azra the rebel: The children are gathered in the kitchen before going to school.

My mother fills bowls of milk and places them before my brothers and the expression in her eyes mirrors her faith that they are embarking on some great enterprise. Cups of tea are placed before us sisters. I remember how before this day I had fretted as I drank my tea, but that day I don't know what came over me. As soon as my mother placed the bowls of milk before my brothers I stood up and with one kick overturned both bowls. (p. 13)

This scene is evocative in many ways. Earlier episodes had already shown Azra as a wild, unruly child, but here for the first time we encounter her endowed with a mission: she stands up against injustice, against the discrimination toward girls in the family, perpetrated by her own mother. We may regard her action as

the first foreboding of her feminist agenda. At the same time, it provides her with an opportunity to speculate about her mother's attitude:

I never understood my mother. Sometimes there would be anger in her eyes and at other times she would look at me with fear. There were times I felt her silent praise for my deeds. Despite all the fuss she made and all her diatribes against me, I would [often] glimpse the ambivalence in her eyes. (p. 14)

It is difficult to judge whether the child was already able to discern this element of appreciation in her mother, or whether this is a retrospective interpretation by the author. It may comprise elements of both. The ambivalence she sees in her mother's eyes is mirrored in (and/or mirrors) her own ambivalence toward her mother. Azra likes her mother tending the flowers in the courtyard, telling stories in the evening, wearing white flowers in her ears, and she loves her hands and her clear large eyes (p. 24). She also remembers her mother as a "very hard-working woman" (p. 17). In a very affectionate tone she describes her mother's joy when her father presented her mother with a gold necklace:

The glow from the necklace lights up my mother's face. Although in the days to follow I never saw that necklace around my mother's neck again but whenever I admired my mother's looks I would again recall the light the necklace had thrown on her face. (p. 29)

Azra, however, is offended and deeply hurt by her mother's preferential treatment of the boys:

But there was a silent running battle going on with my mother over the expression of her passionate love for my brothers. She would visibly shower them with love. I would silently fret as she would save more food for them, get them more clothes, blow on them after saying her prayers to ward off the evil eye. I would try to do all that my brothers did. I would play like them and study more than they did but her lack of concern for me and my sisters was very obvious. (pp. 24-5)

How desperately and unsuccessfully she tried to attract her mother's attention is illustrated by the following episode:

I remember one day my brother was sleeping on the bed next to mine. I heard my mother say, "Look how he sleeps just like his father." I had woken up as she said these words. I saw my brother was sleeping in the same pose that I had been in but my mother had eyes only for him. That day I lay for a long time in that position. Maybe at some time my mother might observe me sleeping like my father. (p. 25)

In the passages quoted above Azra's mother appears as a perfect impersonation of society's role model for women. Her role is restricted to household and family affairs, and she seems to aspire to the same role for her daughters. She has completely internalized the evaluation of males as superior. Naturally, then, Azra has to get into conflict with her when she starts to revolt against those role models and values. Initially her father is the ally who gets her educated, and also her closest attachment: "My father was closer to me than my mother. My father was my friend" (p. 17). There are many episodes which illustrate the close and very special relation between father and daughter, most beautiful perhaps is that of Azra staying awake alone on the night before 'Īd to wait for her father's return. "That night my father leaves everybody sleeping and takes me out alone with him. I remember my father and the lights that dazzled me strolling in the bazaar as I make my purchases today" (p. 22). A further memory:

I remember that my father would often not eat without me. Even if I had eaten earlier he would wake me up from my sleep as he came in and eat with me and the conversation that he had at those times was exclusively mine and would linger in my mind long afterwards. (p. 35)

A somewhat clumsy translation. Their intimacy ends suddenly when Azra grows toward puberty:

I am going somewhere with my father. Today my father is not holding my hand as he walks besides [*sic*] me. He is trying to stay a few paces ahead of me. But I keep running to catch up with him. Sometimes he turns his head to give me a strange glance. I also lift my head and match his gaze, dragging my slippers. I am a little astonished. Why is my father turning around to look at me so often? He suddenly stops.

"Walk behind me. Don't walk besides [*sic*] me. Can't you see how people are staring at you?" I look at the people with different eyes at my father's bidding. They are looking at me. Why are they looking at me? I keep puzzling over it and walking behind my father. So my father is offering me the protection of his back to shield me from peoples' eyes. That day back home I was quiet for a long time. (pp. 55–6)

The roles of mother and father as brought out in these childhood memories are typical of women's autobiographies and autobiographical fiction. Despite the considerable time gap, we find very similar patterns in Ismat Chughtai's autobiography *Kāghazī hai Pairaban* (A Paper Garment, published in 1994 but written much earlier) and in her novel *Ṭēr̄hī Lakīr* (The Crooked Line, 1945). As small girls both Ismat and Shaman, the heroine of the novel, are as mutinous as little Azra, and all three girls are indulged and encouraged by their fathers. They want to be treated on the same par with their brothers. It is the fathers who see to it that the girls are educated. Though the mothers differ in many ways, all of them

are restricted to the house and represent socially accepted norms of gender roles. As such they are not fit role models for their daughters who strive for equality and freedom. In contrast to the image of the mother in Ismat's two books, however, where the interaction between mother and daughter is restricted to reprimands and beatings by the mother, Azra describes moments of intense, but silent communication. Despite all the frictions and frustrations, the atmosphere pervading the family is warm and loving.

Azra's rebellion against discrimination flares up repeatedly throughout the book. It is most pronounced where gender roles are concerned. Azra refuses to embrace socially accepted models of female behavior and commits numerous encroachments into the male sphere: She has her head shaven clean after the model of her grandfather (and with his amused consent). She ignores her father's warning not to jump into a dirty canal and experiences the joy of swimming. She carries a banner in a Muharram procession although this practice is restricted to male mourners. She takes over the role of the provider when her father is away. When her father and brother forbid her to leave the house alone she tries to sneak out of the house instead. She dumps all the dupattas in the house into the rubbish bin when she is ordered to always keep her chest covered. When her mother and brother insist that she should have her ears and nose pierced she shouts at her brother: "Yes and why don't you get yours done?" (p. 61).

Other episodes serve to illustrate her strong will, her ego, her stubbornness, and her sense of pride. Azra does not give in to a teacher's pressure to abandon writing with her left hand, which eventually earns the teacher's respect. By a very complicated scheme she covers up the fact that there is no money in the house to buy her a particular schoolbook. Though running a high fever, she insists on playing with her team in a decisive match. The author's comment: "On reaching home I found my family wringing its hands over my action as it had over others in the past" (p. 60). This is one of several instances where her family's reaction is mentioned to highlight Azra's unruly actions. Comments of this kind, as well as the accumulation of episodes with a similar tendency, add a touch of complacency to the narrative. The reader feels as if he is being addressed directly: "Look what an outstanding, extraordinary child I was!" And so she certainly was, but if her image is repeatedly presented in such a manner, the reader may soon get weary of it.

There are of course numerous episodes of a different nature. For example, narrating childhood disappointments and recalling the new bodily sensations connected with the experience of growing up. The changes that take place in a girl's body during puberty are described as a source of embarrassment, and even of fear, because young girls are completely unprepared for these bewildering experiences. Azra's mother, who ought to have been the most appropriate person to prepare her daughter for what is going to happen to her body, is of no help at all. Sexuality is a taboo, therefore any question related to the transformation of the female body is met by her with silent consternation or with a slap. When

Azra's breasts start to grow and hurt, neither her mother nor her father explain to her what is happening. Instead they put her off by promising to get her some medicine to ease the pain. Her experience of puberty brings out in all its cruelty how social norms, enforced by one's own family, serve to estrange girls from their bodies and make them feel ashamed. They try to subdue young girls into silent submission. Azra's experience gives expression to the frustration and anger of generations of women. We get a glimpse of what it feels like to be treated in this way. No spectacular events are related, just the ordinary social conditioning of a girl child. Azra leaves no doubt about her elders' good intentions. They truly love her and care for her, but of course they also think of the family's *'izzat* (honor) which a wild girl like Azra threatens. The conflict between love and affection on the one hand, and the need to uphold and preserve social norms and the family honor on the other, results in painful experiences which the girls are often not able to understand.² All of this is only hinted at in the text through the brief narration of two or three episodes.

The theme as such is nothing new, but the factual, unemotional presentation of those existential experiences differs from all other childhood accounts by Urdu writers. Just think of the autobiographical writing of Ismat Chughtai, Quratulain Hyder or the poet Ada Jaffery, and the contrast becomes obvious. Of course there is a vast difference in canvas between these writers and Azra Abbas's brief account. Her text is stripped of all contextualization—we get no information about the historical or political situation, the time and place, or the social background of her family. This very conscious limitation may disappoint readers who are looking for exactly those features of a narrative text, and at first it may appear strange to any reader. But as the text gradually exerts its effect on the reader, this very narrow perspective sharpens the focus on the characters and their interactions and it intensifies the impact of every small detail, functioning almost like a zoom lens. In this way the author succeeds in creating an interesting tension between extreme intimacy and the detachment of her diction. This particular style sets her prose apart from most other Urdu writers.

The very laconic, almost dry language of the narrative has been criticized by some reviewers. But Samina Rehman aptly writes:

The simplicity of vocabulary, the short staccato sentences, the bald, unadorned statement is as crafted as the most elaborate constructions, refuting the criticism that her work is all surface, straightforward narrative lacking depth and resonance. (p. ii)

To me, too, it is obvious that the author made a conscious choice of style to create the effect of authenticity and immediacy—as if the memories were related

²For example, the episode quoted above from pp. 55–6 of the English edition.

without any censuring and evaluating on her part. The above examples demonstrate that this is not the case. The choice of events and the wording produce a consistent, and by no means neutral, portrayal of the author/narrator. Repetitions in the texts may be partly due to a lack of revision, but on the whole they contribute to the overall picture of a strong, unbending, yet very sensitive character. Moreover, the individual, concise episodes are complete in themselves, are as easy to remember as a couplet, and may thus leave a lasting impact on the reader. They provide enough blank spaces to be filled in by the reader. For an elaboration of specific themes we can turn to Azra Abbas's other writings, both poetry and prose. An interesting case in point is the short story "Khushbū" (The Fragrance). Based on a childhood experience which is related in just thirteen lines (English tr., pp. 4–5, Urdu p. 11), this story presents a poetic, highly imaginative treatment of the same material. In this particular instance, the transformation from fact into fiction becomes visible. *Mērā Bačpan*, on the other hand, despite its factual posture, creates, in its totality, the fiction of the almost linear development of a character. We may call it fiction in the guise of fact (or fiction interspersed with fact), which is more or less true of all autobiographical writing.

What might have caused the appeal this slim volume seems to have for readers in Pakistan? Is it interest in the figure of this rather well-known feminist author? Is it the popularity of her feminist attitude? Or is it the exceptional diction which so markedly deviates from the more common, rather florid prose style of Urdu? Perhaps all three factors combine to attract readers. The extraordinary character of Azra the child as well as Azra Abbas the writer surely provides one of the main attractions of the book. But the fact that this extraordinary character grows up in a very ordinary urban middle-class setting will easily evoke associations in most Pakistani readers, which may in turn make them feel at home in Azra's family. The tension between familiar circumstances and the unfamiliar view of them seen through the lens of Azra's probing mind heightens our sensitivities. Her intense curiosity reveals facets of life which adults would rather hide from children: madness, poverty, sexuality. Perhaps it is because such mixed feelings as empathy, nostalgia, but also rage are evoked by the text, that it doesn't fail to touch the reader. And, last but not least, the numerous taboos again touched upon by Azra Abbas (as was to be expected after reading her poetry!) surely don't fail to attract readers in an environment where women's equality, the female body and female sexuality are still anathema to a considerable section of society. □

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ZAMIRUDDIN AHMAD. *The East Wind and Other Stories*. Trans. and introd. by SHAMOON ZAMIR. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002. xxxvii, 207 pp. Rs. 295.00.

THIS is the seventh volume in the Pakistan Writers Series being brought out by Oxford University Press, Karachi. Felicitously translated, attractively packaged and affordably priced, the series has turned out to be an excellent introduction to fictional literature in Pakistan from its birth in 1947 to the present day. The credit goes largely to Muhammad Umar Memon, the General Editor, who conceived the series, scouted for good translators and contributed his own substantial input to each volume.

Zamiruddin Ahmad was a sparse writer. His entire output is limited to 42 short stories and an unfinished novel of modest length. It is remarkable that despite this scanty output, Ahmad has left his indelible mark on post-independence Urdu fiction. He was born in India (which always remained “home” for him), migrated to Pakistan at the time of Independence and then moved to England. In this respect he is typical of a generation of Urdu writers from India who followed more or less the same trajectory in their literary careers.

Selected and translated by Shamoan Zamir, the writer’s son, who is a scholar of American studies, the volume under review presents 10 short stories and an excerpt from the unfinished novel. In his comprehensive “Introduction,” the translator highlights the contexts in which the works were produced. Having that rare insight into his father’s mind that only a son can have, and yet resisting the temptation to read his biography in his works, Zamir provides a delightful and nuanced reading of Ahmad’s fictional *oeuvre*.

The volume appropriately begins with “First Death.” This is a story about the loss of innocence of the child protagonist and his first taste of the duplicitous adult world. When the unnamed protagonist saw Entawa, the bully, torturing the old man Maddan and dragging him over stones for a “lousy ten rupees” and no one protesting, he hit Entawa with a brick to save Maddan from the inhuman torture. Rather than praising him for his righteous act his parents give him a drubbing for sticking his nose into others’ affairs. He knows in his heart that he has done nothing wrong, yet he has to ask his father’s forgiveness in order to escape the punishment of being deprived of food. He has to promise that he will never do it again. This promise is nothing less than moral death for him. Something vital dies within him, unknown to his parents, and his moral vision becomes warped for all times to come.

Quite a few of the stories in the book deal with life in middle- and lower-middle class Muslim families in Pakistan and pre-Partition India. One recurring motif in these stories is the suppressed romantic/sexual aspirations of women who are compelled to live a cloistered life within the four walls of their households. Given the fact that Ahmad produced a volume of literary criticism, *Khāṭir-e Maʿṣūm*, where he studied the status of the beloved in Urdu’s classical poetic tradition, this concern can be seen as a continuation of his literary preoccupations. “Unheard Lament,” “Dry Rains” and “The East Wind” are all concerned with their protagonists’ longing for satisfying sexual and emotional relationships.

In “Unheard Lament,” the wife of a court clerk is bored by her elderly husband and her restricted life and seeks release in a relationship with a poet. “Dry Rains” shows an elderly woman reliving her days of youthful passion as she notices the telltale signs of lovemaking between her daughter and son-in-law. Towards the end of the story we find her soaking her naked body in the cool rains in an effort to calm her urge for the touch and companionship of a man. “Wind and Rain,” which deals with the fragility of married life, depicts a wife divided in her loyalty between her husband and his friend.

In “The West Wind,” supposedly inspired by Camus’ “An Adulterous Woman,” we find a wife, apparently happy with her husband and son, whose passions are triggered by the visit of a man from her past. This story also comes closest to Camus’ prose in its stark, minimalist style. However, the boldest of the stories in the volume is certainly “The Other Side of the Mirror” which depicts sexual fulfillment as a kind of divine grace leading to a blessed state. Five years ago, the narrator, Riaz, who lives in Karachi, had visited his friend Sajid in Lahore. At that time his friend’s wife struck Riaz as an embodiment of beauty and contentment. The husband and wife presented a perfect picture of domestic bliss. Sajid’s wife knelt regularly in prayer to show her gratitude to God. But when Riaz visits them again after a gap of five years he finds Sajid’s wife a ghost of her former self. She has no interest in the world or in herself. She has also given up prayers. Sajid is away, and it is not clear whether he has abandoned her. Slowly, the narrator’s relationship with her develops, finally culminating in passionate lovemaking. Following is the scene after they spend their first night together:

Sajid’s wife was saying her prayers on a prayer mat spread out on the lawn right in front of me, oblivious to the world’s distractions. Grace was falling like fine rain on her face, a face as fresh as the roses in the flowerbeds all around her. And every now and then she shone out from this fine rain, like a sparkling firework. (p. 154)

The stories, in their skillful use of imagery and their subtle suggestiveness, foreground the author’s view that love and sex are inseparably bound up with a woman’s well-being, a fact that is not given adequate recognition in the patriarchal structure of South Asian society. The author passes no petty moral judgment, and his total empathy with his characters makes all his women incredibly human in their vulnerability. We do not think of them as adulterous women but as victims of a social structure that does not offer them adequate space for self-expression. These stories, and others like them, e.g., “The Path of Righteousness,” with their minute and rich cultural details, recreate the life of North Indian Muslims at a particular historical epoch. To that extent they will also be an ethnographer’s delight.

Ahmad deals with other contemporary issues as well. “Inferno,” ostensibly about the vulnerability of domestic happiness, deals obliquely with communal

violence, a theme no Muslim writer in India can probably avoid since it impinges on his life so mercilessly. The way things are going in this country these days, very soon hardly anyone will be left who hasn't lost a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, or a colleague in some communal riot or other as they continue to occur with painful regularity. It is ironical that as the size of the techno-industrial-commercial middle class swells in India, newer forms of brutal violence are gaining acceptability, unable to disturb the cocoon of self-deluding assumptions in which that class lives. In the story, Meher's failure to give birth to a normal child, despite several pregnancies and acute labor pain, becomes a telling metaphor for the contemporary situation.

The excerpt from Ahmad's novel *On the Banks of the Ganges* is largely a reworking of the themes dealt with in his stories. Zamir says appropriately that it can serve as an opening frame for the stories. However, what comes out clearly here, but only obliquely in the stories, is the writer's sadness and anger at the gradual decline of the syncretic Indo-Muslim culture which was so much a part of North Indian life in pre-Partition India, and the marginalization of Urdu which was a vehicle of that culture. The sectarian tendencies in both the Hindu and Muslim communities have fostered greater exclusionism which has led to great impoverishment in their respective cultures.

The English translations by Zamir are lucid and immensely readable. Where puns or culturally embedded terms or allusions are involved he has added footnotes that have limited the translation losses to a minimum. In the "Introduction" he discusses the challenges of bringing out the tonality of the original in English, but his location in England and his deep and affectionate engagement with the text have helped him produce a rendering in English which is idiomatic and yet preserves, to a large extent, the "alterity" of the original text. □

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ISMAT CHUGHTAI. *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. Trans. and introd. by TAHIRA NAQVI. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001. 284 pp.

As Tahira Naqvi says in her "A Note on Ismat Chughtai's Nonfictional Writings," these pieces by one of Urdu literature's most well-loved and popular women authors of the twentieth century "take the reader on a journey to this era in the hope of rediscovering and regaining a very special moment in the history of modern Urdu literature" (p. xi). This is true; for those who do not read Urdu, this is a unique opportunity to get a genuine feel for Ismat Chughtai's life, and the life of Urdu writers in South Asia during the build-up to Independence and after. Chughtai writes about Partition, the effect of communalism on the writers' community, about being a Progressive writer, about visiting Pakistan, as well as

about her childhood. She provides sketches of her fellow writers, a poignant memoir of a difficult brother, as well as a sad glimpse of her mother's old age. Chughtai's opinions on writing are riveting, and the personality that she reveals is compelling. It is the personality that so clearly led to what she wrote—she was incapable, as she said, of simply remaining silent. And her need to expose, to comment and to uncover meant that she wrote, in that time and place, what had thus far been unwritten and unsaid. She is very funny, and very sly, in the best sense of the word.

There are twenty-one pieces in the book, organized into three groups: "Essays, Reminiscences and Portraits." Some of them have been published earlier in the *Annual of Urdu Studies* (No.15, 2000). Of those, "From Bombay to Bhopal" and "My Friend, My Enemy" are gems. The first, a wonderful sweep of writers heading by train towards a writers' conference, reads like an Urdu version of David Lodge's *Small World*; while "My Friend, My Enemy" captures, even in its very title, her complex and varied reactions to a major Urdu writer, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, whose writings were at least as influential and controversial as her own. This collection adds to the claims made by pieces published earlier in English: her experiences as a writer are of consummate interest to anyone concerned with South Asian literature. Perhaps because the essays repeat certain thoughts, and address certain material more than once from different vantage points, reading them resembles a conversation with Ismat Chughtai lasting over decades. One can certainly hear mockery, outrage and curiosity in her voice, and sense her overwhelming need to observe and to remark on those observations, come what may. There is also her own admitted fascination with rebels. She remembers as a child looking at a woman robber:

A very beautiful, dashing woman in britches and coat, with the eyes of a hawk, a supple waist and long black hair accompanied him. I had been very impressed by him. (p. 133)

Chughtai's own thoughts on her famous trial for obscenity, for the story "Liḥāf" (The Quilt), are worth the price of the book. She combines domestic details and scenes from her intimate family life with the story of the legal and public attack on what she had created. The courtroom scene is quite funny, though one marvels at how she stood up to the pressure. She was also a new mother at the time of this famous trial, and her picture of the myriad roles she was forced to play is almost too painful to read. But there is much more in these essays than just valuable recollections. Chughtai has insatiable creative energies, and she tries to explain where they come from and how they developed. In recounting her childhood trauma over the story of Kerbala, and her obsessive questions probing for the details of the story, we can see the grown-up author in the child. She discusses how, after books, the desire to talk has affected her the most:

Next to books are chatting and conversing. Our family is very chatty and when we get together we forget everything else, talking and eating and walking about all at the same time. ... I like talking to everyone, to shopkeepers, to taxi drivers, even to beggars. Teasing elderly men and women and hearing them break into profanities afford me a strange kind of pleasure. (p. 124)

In some of the most amusing (on the surface) essays she plays off her writer's persona against her role as "ordinary" woman, juxtaposing intellectual pretensions with the quotidian:

The day after the conference I got a chance to chat with Safia, but there was some muttering and whispering going on in the adjoining room so we couldn't really have any fun. The sounds were strange and mysterious—a few whispers followed by loud, boisterous laughter. Safia and I decided to go into the gallery and eavesdrop. The only problem was that there was a good chance our children would arrive there ahead of us and announce our presence, and then we would not be able to unravel the mystery. With great difficulty we coaxed and cajoled the children, and entrusting them to the care of the servants, we ourselves huddled in one corner of the gallery. What we heard left us dumfounded. Some of the members of the Progressive Writers' Conference, their heads together, were reciting verses on the very same topics that were the subject of Chuttu Jan's jokes that she was asked to tell by many of the older married women in our households! (p. 90)

This is a classic Ismat Chughtai situation, which repeats itself in many of the pieces. She is a spy, or at least curious. She is hampered by domestic duties and responsibilities. Her attitude when she uncovers hypocrisy is a kind of amused outrage, or at least an outraged amusement. There is an entire galaxy of characters—the friend, the children, the servants, the men (in the process of excluding the women) and the memory of the old *tavā'if*. Then, Chughtai takes the experience one step further. Suddenly all the froth is no longer funny, as she next says,

I don't know why, but when I heard the men talk I was reminded of the processions in the Punjab in which women were paraded naked; images of rape on the streets and the horrifying destruction of women swam before my eyes. It was as if the riots and the jokes being shared in the adjoining room had stemmed from a single, common sentiment. (p. 91)

She does this in other essays, in the same way—ratchets up the social and political implications of a scene, until what was amusement, curiosity and irritation turns into something much, much larger. This is, of course, the very way her short story "Liḥāf" (The Quilt) builds its effects. Her portrayal of Krishan Chan-

dar, in “The Lamps are Lit” constructs itself in the same way—she moves from the story of their friendship and his early work to a searing representation of the price one pays for love and fame. It is utterly authentic, and utterly compelling.

Finally, the running diary of her first visit to Pakistan in 1976 captures the unreality of seeing people—ones’ family and old friends—after almost three decades. There is much in this account, for it illuminates the cruel division of families and friends that official histories are so happy to obscure. The sheer difficulty of a citizen from India visiting Pakistan and vice versa is a shameful situation both governments perpetuate so that the “external enemy” is the focus, not failed domestic policy. One thinks of the early sense of “Partition” when most people imagined that the countries would have porous borders—and indeed, for a generation, writers tried to function as if they did.

There are many more riches to be had here, and it was a pleasure having them accessible in a single attractive volume. I am grateful to Tahira Naqvi for taking on the task of making them available. This brings to mind the review I read of this book last year in *The Hindu*, written by Ashley Tellis. This review (17 June 2001) must be challenged. Tellis’s attack on Tahira Naqvi is unwarranted. It gives no examples of Naqvi’s alleged “wrong English,” nor of any of her other supposed faults. But for Tellis to state that Ismat Chughtai is the “most disappointing” thing about the book is just silly. Why would a reader not want to know what Chughtai the author thinks? In fact, it is Ismat the person—with her almost bizarre courage—and Ismat the writer—with her equally bold tales, that intrigue. What is the source of Ismat Chughtai’s remarkable strength? Her non-fiction writings tell us, or attempt to do so. Why disparage them? Tellis even devalues Chughtai’s impressions of writers. *Kyā bakvās!* If one wants to discourage translations, especially translations from Urdu, there is no better way to do it than with a negative and hostile response like Tellis’s.

I have a few caveats about the collection and one regret. Each essay needed to be clearly dated, and the original Urdu sources cited. This is done for some of the essays, and there is some such discussion in the “Note,” but complete citations (or reasons for their omission) would have made everything clear. I notice also that other, perhaps relatively minor, explanations are sometimes absent. For example, if readers do not know what a “*miṣra’ ʿarḥ*” (p. 85) is, they will miss a fairly interesting point made in “From Bombay to Bhopal.” In the same essay, Chuttu Jan morphs temporarily, and confusingly, into a “he” (p. 88). The earlier version of “From Bombay to Bhopal” published in this *Annual* was more carefully edited; there are other similar examples throughout where a gloss would have been useful. My regret is this: even the South Asian reader who comes to *My Friend, My Enemy* without sufficient background knowledge about Urdu literature will not be able to enjoy some of the material. The essays are very elliptical. One really needs to know a bit about the literary fights and controversies of the thirties, forties and fifties, and even more about the poets and individual writers of those times, to connect with the essays. This is no particular fault of

the translator, indeed, she is to be congratulated for forging ahead and providing the material in English. This material will be invaluable for cultural historians, and it is certainly enjoyable for Urdu aficionados. Yet one really wishes there were more capsule biographies, more extensive introductions to the pieces and more explanation—it would have made a rich trove even richer. The existence of *My Friend, My Enemy* in English makes one hungry for other works like it, from other Urdu authors, right away. □

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KHADIJA MASTUR. *Inner Courtyard (Aangan)*. Trans. from Urdu by NEELAM HUSSAIN, with an Introduction by SAMINA CHOONARA. Lahore: Simorgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre, 2000. 274 pp. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001. 274 pp.

OVER THE PAST ten years, a number of major Urdu novels have been translated into English. *Āngan*, translated as *Inner Courtyard*, was first published in Urdu in 1962, and it now joins *Basti (Basti)*, *River of Fire (Āg kā Daryā)*, *The Weary Generations (Udās Naslēñ)*, among others, as yet one more testament to the creativity and vitality of Urdu novels published in the three decades following Independence. These works are very different from one another, but all of them present unusual challenges to translators. First, there is clearly more than one readership for such translations. The English-centric readership might know nothing of the novel's world, and the translator needs to provide that reader with some comfortable means to access that world. The South Asian readership, on the other hand, might know the novel's world well, but be unable to read Urdu. With both readerships, it isn't enough for the translator to convey the correct words and meanings; the translator must evoke literarily whatever it is the author evokes, with the least amount of cumbersome explanation.

In *Inner Courtyard*, that English-centric reader is exposed to a world which is perhaps the world farthest away from his or her own experience. And even for many South Asian readers, the exigencies of purdah and the effects of the Independence struggle on middle-class families may be only dimly imagined. *Āngan* invites both types of readers into this usually inaccessible world, for it is set in the private spaces of a Muslim household, and much of the action is propelled by the effects of political struggle. Since the story is told from the perspective of Aaliya, a young woman who lives in a purdah environment for most of the novel and thus rarely leaves her home, the "inner courtyard," the translator must work within that environment.

In spite of these challenges of multiple readerships and the constricted environment of the central character, the translator, Neelam Hussain, does a very admirable job of bringing *Āngan*, the "inner courtyard" out to a wider audience;

in fact, at times the story is as gripping as the harrowing tale of a prison break. Hers is a translation that benefits from the relative simplicity of the original Urdu prose, though she argues in her “Translator’s Note” that the simplicity is deceptive. She does indeed keep very close to the Urdu cadences, which she says was her intent. Khadija Mastur writes for the most part in the voice of a woman keeping a diary, or, when using the third person, in a very closely-observed, almost journalistic style. Since one does not expect a great deal of literary embellishment with this type of narrative voice, the combination of the colloquial with the somewhat stiff English expressions in the translation mimic the sound of a journal, or of someone reminiscing, and thus capture the tone of the original novel.

Neelam Hussain says that the absence of stylistic conceit “is belied by ancillary voices which create a complex textual weave within the fluid, potentially inconclusive, yet time-bound terrain of the realist novel” (p. 7). And she is right: this is a much denser and more complicated novel than it first appears, for the intersections of tradition, change, political activity, money and love form a very potent narrative mix. The characters, too, are not stereotypes, but are minutely observed individuals, with very distinct voices.

Aaliya, the young woman, lives in three different households during the time frame of the story: her father’s, until he’s arrested; her paternal uncle’s, after the family is impoverished by that arrest, and her own, which she makes for herself and her mother in Pakistan in the last pages of the book. The novel is divided into “The Past,” which she remembers at night at her uncle’s before she goes to sleep, and “The Present,” which takes her from her uncle’s house to Pakistan. Aaliya’s relationships, with her mother, her father, her sister, other female relations, her male cousins, servants and neighbors, form the novel. Nothing happens offstage; only what Aaliya sees, hears and remembers is recorded. Khadija Mastur draws her relationships in obsessive detail, conveying the contradictions, the power struggles and the passions that gain strength with such close physical associations, with so little access to the wider world or to economic independence.

Aaliya is never portrayed going to a store, seeing a film, or even walking on the street, though a woman in purdah might occasionally have such experiences. For the purposes of the novel, Aaliya’s world is the courtyard. Even her school days are represented by the visit of a British teacher to her home, not by classrooms or by interactions with other girls. Of all the Urdu novels translated recently, *Inner Courtyard* captures most realistically the dusty reality of living, working and encountering all one’s emotional relationships within a limited physical space, in the midst of extreme financial hardship, and with a narrowness of vision and ambition. What Aaliya sees and hears, she sees and hears only from the courtyard—clouds, rain, snatches of songs, the sound of birds. In the courtyard the objects themselves—like the metal chair which is reserved solely for Jamil, a male relative in the household—take on a kind of hallucinatory reality.

In focusing on the complications of relationships, from the illegitimate offspring living in the home, to the behavior of the family's maidservants, and to the snobbish English-educated aunt, *Inner Courtyard* spotlights numerous political and social issues, beyond simply the issue of women in purdah. Khadija Mastur never loses the political thread that she weaves through the story, though she wields a light touch and refrains from too didactic an approach until the last few pages. The fallout from political activity, the serious divisions that existed within Muslim households in the lead-up to Independence, are fully explored, and these remind the reader how little official histories capture from these struggles. When Nehru went to jail, the women of his household did not face hunger. No chocolate cake here! *Inner Courtyard* shows how the "outside" political activity affected the private lives "inside," altering them, reworking them and sometimes ruining them, without regard for the emotional attachments and relationships shared by the inhabitants of the inner courtyard.

In fact, Khadija Mastur tells a story so bleak, so unrelievedly grim, that it's only the purity of the narrative voice, the forthrightness of the tale-teller that encourages the reader onwards. It is depressing reading. No mercy can be shown: between husbands and wives, between the legitimate and the illegitimate, or towards those who transgress the rules of behavior. Right at the beginning of the novel, Aaliya recalls the story her mother tells of how her cousin came to be in the household. Aaliya's mother hates this cousin, Safdar, and Aaliya remembers the story in the hate-filled, frightening voice of her mother. Her mother recalls how her husband's sister (the mother of Safdar) disgraced the family:

"Who knows what action your grandfather would have taken, but that very day, your father came home on a few days leave and shamelessly argued on Salma's behalf. Shame at his behaviour incapacitated me. Your grandmother walked up and down the room in anger, but out of deference to her son's manhood, did not say a word. Your grandfather, on the other hand, did a strange thing. That day, he turned his mistresses out of their homes and ordered them to leave the village. When your grandmother heard of this, she gave orders that only the women be allowed to leave. The children were to stay as they were of her husband's blood.

"And so the three boys came to the haveli. God forgive me, the very sight of their faces turned my stomach. The younger two whimpered like pups all day long but the older boy tried to ingratiate himself and ran to do everyone's bidding.

"They were inordinately greedy, the younger boys, and they died of cholera within a week of their arrival. They had been sucking flyblown mango stones from the rubbish heap. Thank God they died! Otherwise, who knows. Your father would have sent them to college too ... like Safdar!" (p. 21)

Hair-raising stuff, indeed. The moral of her mother's story is clear, of course: death is the punishment for any expression of love unsanctioned by the family. And not only does the reader witness the death of Aaliya's aunt in the memory of her mother's story, Aaliya's Hindu neighbor is punished by death for her transgressions, and Aaliya's own sister commits suicide on the eve of her marriage because she is in love with Safdar. While all of this might seem melodramatic, it is the simplicity of Aaliya's reminiscing voice that renders this kind of violence completely believable. Meanwhile, the focus of the disagreement between Aaliya's mother and father oscillates between money, land, the presence of the illegitimate cousin and disagreement over the fight against the British presence in India.

During her stay in her uncle's house, Aaliya confronts this same deep divisiveness and this same bitterness, and indeed these same quarrels, only now, different characters play out these poisonous stories. The mistreatment of another illegitimate relative at the hands of the maid obsesses her, while her mother's venomous treatment of her husband's relations is a continuous torment. It is here that she learns of her father's death in prison. Now, only her education can save her, and she knows it. The novel is punctuated by study and learning: the aunt who flaunts her English, Aaliya who dedicates herself to this means of escape, and Chhammi, the illiterate cousin who rebels against her own ignorance but is unable to overcome it.

In the Introduction, Samina Choonara makes the point that this novel "remains relevant" (p. 3). In fact, novels like *Āngan* have assumed much more significance over time than they perhaps had at their initial publication. *Āngan* was written for an Urdu audience with no thought of a larger readership, and with no self-consciousness about the situations it was portraying. New readerships have expanded its audience, from the South Asian diaspora to academics listening for "the subaltern's voice." Aaliya's mother, with her pro-British tirades is only one of these remarkable voices. Neelam Hussain should be commended for tackling the task of translating the work, for *Inner Courtyard* is worth reading if only to highlight just how many and complicated are the voices of those with no economic or political power. This is not a novel that has been cleaned up or dusted off for a Western audience—the subaltern voices don't always say what we today might like to hear. There are no happy endings, and if the society has deep flaws, so do the characters. Like other survivors of Partition—like those in *Bastī*, like Champa in *Āg kā Daryā*, Aaliya comes to some kind of realization about autonomy, but cannot be happy.

The cover illustration, by Nusrat Latif, done in the style of a traditional miniature painting, is more than charming. Women, in minutely observed detail, are portrayed taking part in various activities in a courtyard. This picture beautifully and succinctly presents them drinking tea, chatting, resting on pillows and doing their embroidery, with the narrator peering down into the space. The painting is a very delicate evocation of a violent and passionate story of survival—the almost sentimental domestic details mask matters of life and death.

One can juxtapose this English translation, with its beautiful cover and the academic discussion that both frames and introduces this searing tale, with the original Urdu volume. It's true that the translated story is the same, but somehow the gritty little Urdu volume hints at a different reality. Published on now-yellowing acidic paper, and printed with that inimitable blotchy calligraphy, *Āngan* appeared in an edition of "Ēk Hazār" in 1962. Khadija Mastur dedicated the original volume to her mentor, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, with the affectionate, daughterly and dutiful expression "To Nadeem Lala." One thousand copies in a first edition—and yet, all over Pakistan, elderly women can tell you when and where they were when they read it. Just as the little, badly-printed volume tells its Freedom Struggle tale of life and death, of the survival of political ideals and the violence of love, one realizes how it transcended its own story, and gave voice to real dreams of real women. The beautifully-presented translation can only be an artifact of that experience. Yes, the translation is accurate, and for readers who want to achieve a deeper understanding of South Asian women's lives in our century, *Inner Courtyard* is a valuable key. The original Urdu novel, on the other hand, did what novels can do when they are reflections of their time and place—it gave worth and meaning to readers' immediate experiences. It spoke to them and for them. One hopes that this new and more diverse audience for the elegant, English, *Inner Courtyard* can hold the image of the small Urdu book in its mind, and understand the relevance of both. □

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TARIQ RAHMAN. *Language, Ideology and Power: Language Learning Among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002. xix, 689 pp.

THIS LARGE VOLUME is the latest, and the most important so far, of a series of studies on language and society in Pakistan by Dr. Tariq Rahman of Quaid-i-Azam University. It capitalizes on his previous work,¹ as well as the work of many scholars of the earlier history of Urdu, and introduces new data from his own recent detailed research. The result is a volume of outstanding value.

In 689 pages (which include very useful indexes) the author covers each of the languages that have been politically significant in Pakistan, including a chapter on Arabic. The work is introduced with a discussion of the various arguments for relating any historical development in language teaching or learning to socio-political dynamics. At the end it is topped off with a chapter on the worldview

¹*Language and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Language, Education and Culture* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

that emerges from the different types of material that are published in Urdu. Although Urdu does not appear in the title, it is of course the central concern throughout. But it is treated always in its socio-linguistic context, in relation to the other languages with which it has competed for speakers and writers in Pakistan and North India over the past two hundred years.

The whole is well organized, well written, and openly argued, a pleasure to read. In a work of such scope it is not necessary to agree with all the author's conclusions and interpretations, and it covers so much that has to do with language in South Asia since around 1800 that it is difficult to do justice to it in a brief review. It is the type of book where the reader with a general interest in the subject matter may note the overall framework and read either the whole or parts, agreeing or disagreeing with points the author makes, and gaining additional insights on the way. In what follows I select a few points that seem specially worthy of comment, and also suggest further interesting lines of enquiry.

While there is much of interest in the author's discussion of Arabic, Persian, Pashto, Sindhi, Panjabi, Siraiki, Baluchi and Brahui, and they are necessary to the main objective, it is of course the story of Urdu that is central. He discusses Urdu before Partition, first in relation to Persian, then in relation to English; after Partition he deals with Urdu in relation to Hindi in India and in relation again to English in Pakistan. Although the subtitle signals that the book is about "language learning," the word "learn" is ambiguous. He attempts to clarify it in the introduction. It is possible that substituting the word "study" might remove more of the ambiguity. Languages are of course learned passively as well as actively, especially in South Asia, and in informal as well as formal institutional situations.

It is the latter that this book is mainly concerned with, and which is particularly interesting and tangible from a socio-political point of view. For example, building and elaborating on what Frances Pritchett, among others, has noticed, he documents not only that Urdu was first actively taught by the British, as a correlate of their policy change, formalized in the 1830s, from "Orientalism" to a more active and self-consciously British imperialism, but that it was unpopular and that it remained so even into the 1870s. More importantly from the socio-linguistic point of view he shows that it was not the language itself that was unpopular—after all it was rooted in common speech—but the idea that it was a language that should be actively and professionally taught, on a level with Arabic and Persian. For us, now, a language is a language. (But when was English first professionally or academically taught?) Now (but not generally in the nineteenth century) we consider a language worthy of study because people speak it, not because of what has been written in it. More recently still, since a generation ago, the only reason why one language finds a place in the curriculum and another not, has to do with demand: how many students want to study it? It is well to remember that fifty years ago (before Title VI, and public sponsorship of

foreign language instruction) only languages of established literacy were taught academically, languages without a heritage of literacy generally were not.

Introducing a language into the curriculum changes its social status. In India in the nineteenth century the introduction of Urdu into the curriculum equated it with Persian and Arabic, which probably seemed ludicrous if not objectionable. The British turned to Urdu, and gave it a public role, because they saw it to be the *lingua franca*, the most common language of communication, in its various registers, for written and oral communication throughout northern India. But the koine, the recognized language of literate discourse, was Persian. The ability to communicate in some register of Urdu was considered natural, almost innate. Persian had to be actively learned. Why should anyone study Urdu? Arabic and Persian were the languages you studied, because they were languages of literacy and administration. Under the British, English was easily included in that status.

It is not surprising, therefore, that until well into the 1870s Persian classes were more popular than Urdu. However, the situation had begun to change a decade or more earlier. As India became more consciously one society and connected to the larger colonial and European world, the significance of language in relation to identity was taking on a new configuration, related to the beginnings of modern struggles for identity—what has now become generally known as “identity politics.”

As socio-political awareness rose in the course of the nineteenth century, especially after 1857, it was associated for Muslims with Urdu. Urdu, unlike Persian, was their own vernacular. The British action—the first of a series of paradoxes—promoted this role for Urdu. Gradually, but with increasing speed, it became the language of South Asian Muslim identity, the language of ethnicity, of nationalism, leaving behind Arabic and Persian, which though they retained high cultural value, suffered reduction in arenas of usage. Urdu, which in its highly Persianized literate form had emerged as the day-to-day language of the Muslim *élite*, was becoming the language of general Muslim identity.

This was the period of the emergence in South Asia of larger identities, which some called national. “Imagined communities” (as Benedict Anderson has characterized nations) became more important than local communities and were symbolized by language. Such languages made it possible for governments to create a “communication environment” and “[t]his is done by making people literate but the problem in multilingual countries is, in which language?” (pp. 4–5). Rahman quotes from a UNESCO study published in 1953: “It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue” (p. 248). This, like much of the thinking that underlies UNESCO’s work on literacy, is questionable. (Modern French and English, which are two of the most successful, are products of exactly the opposite strategy.) But it is a powerful idea and its origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

Later, after Partition, in which Urdu was further politicized, the situation changed again. In India, Urdu was in a sense disestablished by the establishment

of Hindi as the primary official language, alongside English. Urdu in India was protected by certain legal provisions, but they were not always effective. "The UP government did, however, agree to providing safeguards for Urdu-speaking children" (p. 247). One wonders what might have been the differences in speech at that time between Urdu-speaking and Hindi-speaking children. Surely the most important difference between them was not one of speech but of script preference and social identity. And the confusion has to do with the changed orientation to language study in general in the past century, from written to spoken. When they speak of a language they are in fact speaking primarily of a way of writing the language, rather than a way of speaking it. But they do not make the distinction, or not explicitly.

After 1947 Urdu in Pakistan has had a similar history to Hindi in India. In India, Urdu along with other "national" languages has suffered in relation to Hindi. But the more influential speakers of these languages have promoted English, and the continued use of English has been to the detriment of Hindi as a modern language of full competence. In Pakistan also, despite the public status accorded to Pashto and Sindhi in particular, and also (but to a lesser extent) to Baluchi, Brahui and Panjabi, these languages have been at a disadvantage in relation to Urdu. But the continued official use of English has proved a barrier to the emergence of Urdu as a language of full modern competence.

Both Hindi and Urdu may be usefully compared in this regard to Persian in Iran. A half-century ago Persian, which was the language of classical literacy and local scholarship but gave way to a variety of vernaculars at the level of local speech, also gave way to first French and then English among the *élite* as the medium of participation in the larger world. Now, assisted perhaps by the experience of the revolution in 1979, it has emerged as a language of full modern competence, satisfying all communication needs at all social levels. Since Urdu easily draws on Persian as well as both Arabic and English for new vocabulary, this difference cannot be explained exclusively in linguistic terms, but only in terms of the various socio-linguistic options. Nevertheless the growth of literacy in Urdu in Pakistan and in Hindi in India have helped their native speakers at the middle and lower levels of society, as distinct from those who have learned them as second languages. At the same time, no Pakistani language (and probably also not Hindi in India) can do for its speakers what English can do.

It is, however, important to remember that in both India and Pakistan English is impotent unless paired with some competence in Hindi or Urdu. The Urdu of Benazir Bhutto and the Hindi of Sonia Gandhi provide examples. Full linguistic competence in public situations requires English, Urdu (or Hindi) literacy, and the appropriate local vernacular, which may be a distinct language. But rather more than the other languages, Urdu in many cases conveys political messages, of which the most obvious are nationalism, militant Islam, and class conflict. Each of these is dealt with interestingly in the book, and at some length.

This discussion of the political dimensions of language use and language policy is enormously valuable, and one can immediately think of other countries where such a study is needed. But we need to ask also: is language preference always linked to power? Since “power” has over the past generation become such a frequent component of book titles, the question arises easily. It is true that the author is by no means militant or insistent on it, and he does deal with resistance (“The exercise of power creates its own reaction” (p. 241).) On the other hand he does not do much to explore other possible explanations of his material. Do all people in fact consciously or unconsciously make their decisions to study any language for basically the same reason: power, in one or another of its manifestations—advancement in the political or economic arena, or perhaps, in the case of Arabic, salvation? Power presumably does not explain the preference for Persian in the 1860s.

The historical spread of one language at the expense of another is notoriously difficult to explain. Why does Brahui survive in Baluchistan in communities that were not originally Brahui-speaking (as Georg Morgenstierne first showed us²)? Why does Sindhi survive in part of Iranian Makran? Why do some Pashtun communities in northern Baluchistan now speak Baluchi?³ Most significantly why does Turkish continue to spread as a vernacular in Iran to the point where it is spoken by perhaps half the population, even though it is not written, or taught in schools, and all government and public affairs are conducted in Persian? Questions like these are rarely addressed by linguists. But knowledge of a few such comparative cases opens up a range of possibilities for the explanation of language choices that are difficult to account for in terms of political dynamics, and appear not to be related in any direct way to social advantage.

In general, therefore, it can be said that a larger comparative context would have been useful. But that would have made an already long book even longer. One cannot argue with the sober statement that opens the conclusion: “the foregoing account of language-acquisition among the Muslims of Pakistan and north India has made it clear that power is a useful referent for understanding why people learn and why polities are made to teach certain languages” (p. 529). We might add that certain language combinations might be more significant than the particular languages themselves. Pakistan, and India, are multilingual societies. The monolingual are at a disadvantage, at all levels. Similarly, we are dealing with a society where literacy has special values, more special perhaps because (though

²In his *Report on a Linguistic Mission to North-Western India* (Oslo: Aschehoug & Co., 1932).

³See Fredrik Barth, “Ethnic Processes on the Pathan-Baluch Boundary,” in *Indo-Iranica, Mélanges présentés à Georg Morgenstierne à l’Occasion de son soixante-dixième anniversaire*, ed. G. Redard (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1964), pp. 13–20.

steadily increasing) it continues to be a scarce resource. And why did the British switch their backing from Persian to Urdu? Could they not have achieved their political objectives just as well, perhaps even with less trouble, by staying with Persian? By switching to Urdu did they not in fact contribute energy to the dynamic that eventually forced them out? Paradoxically, also, however, the British decision to move in the direction of the vernacular reinforced a tendency to diglossia, replacing the Persian-Urdu divide with the more categorical English-Urdu.

Overall the book is a rich resource, for both material and ideas, for thought and discussion, concerning the political dimensions of language in South Asia. It will provide a useful reference for such discussions for some time. Where at the end the conclusion switches modes from the study of the way things are, or have come to be, to proposals about how they ought to be, perhaps the book will succeed in feeding information into policy and government as well as academia, leading to renewed opportunities for study of the relationship between political and linguistic processes. □

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FAHMIDA RIAZ. *Reflections in a Cracked Mirror*. Trans. by AQUILA ISMAIL. Karachi: City Press, 2001. 113 pp. Rs. 180.

FAHMIDA RIAZ, feminist, poet, prose-writer and translator, is known for her innovative techniques for transforming blasé accounts of ordinary everyday human misery into scintillating and unforgettable renderings of extraordinary fortitude and love. In *Reflections in a Cracked Mirror*, originally published in Urdu under the title “Karā’ī” in a special issue of the quarterly *Āj* in 1996, Riaz has skillfully interwoven the genres of travelogue, reportage and interior monologue into what appears to be a longish prose poem, with little morsels of facts and figures thrown in sporadically to add that journalistic touch of authenticity. *Reflections* explores the “theme of political violence along linguistic, ethnic, communal and caste lines in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh” (p. 7).

The personal dilemma for Riaz in this book is a political one confronting all South Asian societies—warring nations, better known for the hungry millions they can afford to feed but don’t, for their plump defense budgets, for every hue and shade of political treachery imaginable, nations teetering on the brink of economic collapse, who can plainly see that to live in mutual harmony would be far more beneficial than to engage in mutual warfare—can they, Riaz wonders, despite all their differences, come to respect and tolerate those differences? In short, can peace ever become a reality in South Asia?

Riaz wrote *Zinda-Bahār* (based on her travel to Bangladesh) and *Godāvārī* (based, in part, on her reflections on India) in the early 1990s. *Reflections* is the

final piece in the trilogy in the Urdu Literature in Translation series published by City Press, Karachi. It encapsulates Riaz's grief over the cultural, political and social demise of her favorite city, Karachi. Many of us whose early years were nourished by the fresh sea-salt air, the soft sandy beaches, the vast uncrowded streets, the lights that never seemed to go out over the twinkling roads of Karachi even in the wee hours, can share her anguished cry for an answer to the debacle that Karachi has become in the past two decades. From a strident, unabashed, gay and lively city in the 1970s, its descent into a boorish, unpredictable land of violence and lawlessness in the 1980s and 1990s is a puzzle that all of us who in one way or another were nurtured by that city at some point in our lives want an answer to.

Which brings me to the disappointing and frustrating conclusion: *Reflections* is more of a quest than an answer, it's more about musings than meanings. Riaz has set forth in a sensitive and thoughtful manner laced with satire, the various incidents affecting the lives of innocent or maybe not so innocent Karachiites. But the incidents—murders, kidnappings, looting—are narrated one after another in no order, a maze through which the writer is trying to steer herself to clarity. Often there seems to be little explanation of why a certain incident is included at a particular point in the narrative. This haphazardness gives the impression that the text must have been penned in a hurry, perhaps to meet publication deadlines, the first draft having undergone little revision by the author. Events and incidents have no dates or chronological sequence to allow the reader to fit them into some frame of reference.

In the beginning is a plane journey. Riaz is unapologetically relieved to escape the shootings and daily killings going on in Karachi. She is off to the wintry Christmassy joyousness of London where she hopes to meet her daughter and granddaughter. Midway through the narrative the woman on the plane, the author, vanishes, only to resurface again towards the end. Earlier she was on the flight to Dubai, and now, presumably, she's on the flight from Dubai to London. As is typical throughout the narrative, there's no mention of what year this critical flight takes place. It is the symbolic flight of a creative mind from a space which suppresses the openness required for creativity to flourish. I suppose we have to content ourselves with some intelligent guessing and place it in the early 1990s. Riaz's sheer delight in soaring high above the troubled skies of her hometown seems emblematic of the solution those with money and visas can resort to—when the going becomes unbearable, unburden your soul in some serene, balmy spot in the West. During the plane journey, there's plenty of time for Riaz to chat with fellow travelers from India—a Muslim tailor employed in Dubai and a Hindu woman going to work as domestic help for some Sheikh—and to wonder why Karachi has become what it is. However, what she has to offer is the already familiar cocktail, or mocktail, of the secret “agencies,” the fallout of the Russian-Afghan War, the ever-present but overrated class struggles, the power skirmishes between the warring ethnic and political communities within Kara-

chi—the Sindhis, the (Mohajir Quami Movement) MQM representing the Muslim immigrants or “mohajirs” from India, the Jamaat-e Islami, and the People’s Party’s role in brewing the heady mix of unmitigated violence. Riaz has little in the way of political, psychological or sociological analysis to help us come to grips with the interrelationship between the various causes. The reasons Riaz cites are of the kind offered during coffee-table conversations educated Pakistanis have when they discuss Pakistani politics.

The issue Riaz doesn’t seem to address satisfactorily is that of timing—why the 1990s, why then and not before, have these same sets of underlying factors culminated in such a horrific and inexplicable extravaganza of violence? Riaz has some fatalistic reassurances to offer. So should we sit back and watch the unfolding drama of violence with the detachment of a theater audience?

“Why only Karachi? What’s happening in the whole world? Look at Bosnia. The history of this so-called twenty-first century will be written with ethnic conflicts, bloodshed, and prejudice. [...] Why are you weeping for Karachi like a coward? Why don’t you think of the Muslims of India instead? Will they not be completely destroyed?” (pp. 118–9)

The fate of the Muslims of Bosnia and of India seems even worse than the fate of the Muslims of Karachi. One is left wondering what, if any, agency does she attribute to the people of Karachi. Don’t individuals and groups of suffering human beings play any role in averting the raging tide against them? Or are they simply pebbles in a torrential flood which will sweep them downstream to damnation without their being able to change the course of the waters even a fraction? Riaz doesn’t seem to allow much room for individual or collective acts of heroism. Hers is a bleak landscape of terror where hopes of rescue shrivel like blades of grass under a merciless sun.

Are we witnessing the very difficult, complex and tumultuous period of transition from armed dictatorship to the democratic system of unarmed civilian groups? While the pillars of the old system are crumbling and falling on our heads and we are being buried in a mound of coarse rubble. While the powerful and cruel hands of the past, the present and the future are pulling the society towards it, violently shaking it, like a thundering, stormy wind shakes a strong tree and tries to uproot it. Who will be the victors in this fatal conflict? (p. 106)

A little later, Riaz seems to have answered the question:

In this pushing and pulling, in this tussle, which is wringing this God-forsaken city like the pangs of birth, tomorrow’s elite class is being born. Those who will make their right moves today will be the influential families of tomorrow. (p. 117)

Some consolation for the 9.99 million residents of Karachi who aren't the budding heirs of the nation's future first families.

Violence is often sexual in nature and often directed towards women. Therefore, all the more puzzling for me, as a feminist and women's rights activist, is the virtual absence in *Reflections* of the effects of the violence on the lives of the women of Karachi. For instance, I was amazed at no mention of how difficult it has become for women to move out of their homes without a chador and a male companion. This curtailment of the basic freedom of movement which women enjoyed to a great extent earlier has come as a direct result of the threat of violence against women and the fear of having their honor violated, but Riaz does not mention it. She relates a couple of incidents involving the lives of women, but there too, the presence of women is incidental, not fundamental. There is the story of Salmana Phupi who arrived as a "mohajir" in the post-Partition years and by sheer dint of hard work always put honest meals on the table and instilled sound values in her children. Her dreams for her children and her life's savings were consumed by the false promises of MQM. Then there is a rape incident in which it isn't clear who has been raped, or why. The author herself seems to be uncertain, titling the chapter "Rape—did it happen or not?"

Riaz often resorts to tongue-in-cheek humor to heighten the unfathomable absurdity and magnitude of the violence in Karachi. She relates an incident in which a clerk in her office is allegedly murdered. Analyzing the death of this man, whom she repeatedly refers to as "Zaid, Bakr, or Umar," she writes:

There were several possibilities: One, this was simply a case of dacoity and murder. Two, he was from the MQM and the Haqiqis killed him. Three, he was from the Haqiqis and the MQM killed him. Four, he was a Shia and the Sunnis killed him. Five, he was a Sunni and the Shias killed him. Six, he had become the unintended victim of an untargeted shooting in order to destabilise the conditions. (p. 22)

It seems a little odd that Riaz could not refer to this clerk even once by a single name, not necessarily his real name. Or perhaps in giving him multiple names she was making the point that this man's fate could be any man's. No man is safe on the streets of Karachi, especially if he belongs to the wrong class and lives in an unfashionable area like Landhi or Malir. However, the strategy of referring to him as "Zaid, Bakr, or Umar" every time begins to feel a little insensitive and distant, in addition to being irritating. The point could have been adequately made even after one repetition of "Zaid, Bakr, or Umar." But in the space of a couple of pages, she calls him that many times.

I would also like to add a few comments on the quality of the translation. Not having access to the Urdu original, I am not in a position to compare how faithfully Aquila Ismail has managed to transfer the essence of the writer's rhythms. Judging from the seamless reading of the English translation, I think she has done justice to the original. However, the appalling editing ruins the

pleasure of reading. Proofreading seems to have been dispensed with entirely. When one has to clench one's teeth and get past eyesores like "*baited* breath," guns pointed *to* the citizens," and "at times *with* a fast speed," one wonders why the publisher didn't invest in the skills of a good editor to enhance the quality of the translation.

For a quick read into the unimaginably violent decades that ruptured the cultural, social and psychological fiber of that golden city on the shores of the Arabian Sea, Riaz offers a collage, not necessarily a chronological progression of events—more a patchwork quilt of incidents of bloodshed and mayhem woven together with threads of humor and flashes of intelligence. But if you're after the bigger picture, an explanation of how and why the grains of sand make up the desert, you'll come away from the book deeply dissatisfied. □

—NIGHAT MAJID
Karachi