

## BOOK REVIEWS

*A Letter from India: Contemporary Short Stories from Pakistan.* Edited by MOAZ-ZAM SHEIKH. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2004. 184 pp. Rs. 200.

ACTUALLY it is a whole lot of letters from men and women whom I have never met and am only vaguely aware of their stature as writers of prose, fiction and poetry. I have an insatiable appetite for everything produced in the country which was once my homeland. I went through the entire menu offered by *A Letter from India: Contemporary Short Stories from Pakistan*. Some were originally written in English, others translated from Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi and Pushto.

My first reaction was that the two-nation theory, which was the basis for the demand for Pakistan, was, and is, a lot of hogwash. Pakistanis are not only the same race as we Indians, they eat the same kind of food, speak the same language and have the same emotional reactions to inter-human relations as we Indians. However, Partition ushered in some differences in our respective linguistic maps. In India, English retains its predominance as the language of communication for the entire country. In Pakistan, English has receded into the background and Urdu has effectively replaced it as the national language—a status Hindi has never attained in India. In India, regional languages flourish in their own areas; in many states like Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, the regional languages have overtaken English. In Pakistan, regional languages like Sindhi, Saraiki, Punjabi and Pushto have dwindled and Urdu reigns supreme. As a consequence, Urdu has produced better poets, short-story writers and novelists than all the other languages put together.

Moazzam Sheikh's compilation, including his own story—an excellent piece of writing—relies heavily on Urdu contributions. The most outstanding among them is "A Letter from India" by Pakistan's leading writer Intizar Husain. It is based on a long letter from one Qurban Ali living in some small town in Madhya Pradesh, dated 15 October 1974. They are a Shia family which has seen better days during the raj. The focal point is the family cemetery where their forefathers sleep in their graves festooned by *hār-singhār* creepers ever in full bloom. Along comes Partition and some members of the once closely-knit family go to seek their fortunes in neighboring countries: Pakistan, East Bengal (later Bangladesh) and Nepal. Some fall in battlefields, some are killed in Hindu-Muslim riots in India, some in Shia-Sunni riots in Karachi. Others just fade away into the unknown. The world also changes: some women discard their burqas and modernize themselves, and, horror of horrors, some even marry non-Muslims. *Hār-*

*singhār* flowers wither over crumbling graves. Remnants of the family that had lived in peace with its Hindu neighbors sense a growing hostility towards themselves. Qurban Ali has much to reminisce about and mourn. He does so in terse, beautifully written prose. It is about the best that I have read on the tragedy we call Partition.

Two other things about the compilation impressed me. A fair number of contributors are women; of them two stand out: Soniah Naheed Kamal's story, "Papa's Girl," written in English, is as open about sexuality as any I have read. And Fahmida Riaz's "Hieroglyphics" is as subtle as her poetry. The other pleasant surprise was to see two Pakistani Hindus included in the collection. Unfortunately, neither makes good reading.

Another two things I learned are from the introduction. First, according to Moazzam Sheikh, before the Gurmukhi script was evolved by the Sikh Gurus, Punjabi was written in a script called Shahmukhi. And second, the most popular lines in Waris Shah's *beer*—*Doli charhdian maarian Heer Kookan, manoon lai chaley Babla lae challey* (As she got into the bridal palanquin, Heer cried out to her father, they are taking me away)—were not composed by Waris Shah but by some other poet many years later. □

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New Delhi

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MUNSHI PREMCHAND. *Courtesans' Quarter*. A Translation of *Bazaar-e Husn*. Trans. with notes by AMINA AZFAR. Foreword by RALPH RUSSELL. Introduction by M.H. ASKARI. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003. xv, 260 pp. Rs. 350, \$14.

PREMCHAND (1880–1936) occupies a very special place in modern Urdu and Hindi literature. Of the twelve-some novels that he wrote, his last, *Godaan* (The Gift of a Cow), is the most widely read and appreciated. It also has the distinction of having been the only Premchand novel available in English translation for almost half a century. The dearth of Premchand novels in English was first addressed with the translation of *Nirmala* by Alok Rai (1999), followed by Christopher King's translation of *Ghaban* (Stolen Jewels, 2000), and now by the welcome addition of *Bazaar-e Husn* (Courtesans' Quarter).

The last few years have been extraordinarily rich for Premchand scholarship. The National Council for the Promotion of Urdu (Government of India) was finally able to approve the project for the publication of a scholarly edition of the complete works of Premchand. The works span twenty-two volumes arranged in

the following manner: volumes 1–8 (novels), 9–14 (short fiction), 15–16 (plays), volume 17 (letters), 18–20 (miscellaneous writings), and 21–22 (translations). Madan Gopal, a well-known Premchand scholar who introduced the author to English readers with his monograph *Premchand* (Lahore, 1944), is the editor of the series. Volumes 1 through 18 have been published from the year 2000 onwards.

Although Premchand (born Dhanpat Rai) had written three or four short novels under the assumed name of Navab Rai, these novels went practically unnoticed. His first “real” novel was the one he began writing in 1916 which was finally published in Urdu as *Bazaar-e Husn* in 1922. The story of the publication of *Bazaar-e Husn*, as resurrected by Madan Gopal in his preface to volume 2 of the Collected Works, is interesting but convoluted. Ostensibly, *Bazaar-e Husn*, though originally written in Urdu, was published first in Hindi in 1917 (translated by Premchand himself) under the title *Seva Sadan*. Thus *Bazaar-e Husn* or *Seva Sadan* can perhaps be regarded as the “first” novel of the author.

As the Urdu title suggests, the novel’s theme is the space the courtesans’ quarter occupied in society in a time of cultural disjuncture. It is also an exploration of Premchand’s approach to the question of women’s freedom. The question of women’s freedom was particularly relevant in the context of the Freedom Movement since many women had stepped across the threshold of their homes to participate in the struggle for emancipation from colonial rule. His heroine Suman envies the freedom enjoyed by the courtesan and compares it to the confines of a loveless marriage. She is bold and dynamic and capable, yet when she falls from the pedestal of respectability she is eventually saved by none other than her erstwhile husband.

Suman and Shanta are two beautiful and educated daughters of Gangajali and Darogha Krishan Chandra. The elder and prettier of the two, Suman, is married off to an older man, Gajadhar, because of unfortunate circumstances. Gajadhar is a low-paid clerk with a mean temperament. The beautiful Suman is the envy of the neighborhood but this only makes her husband jealous and possessive. Across the street from their house lives a courtesan named Bholi who wants to befriend Suman. Wealthy and influential men of the city frequent Bholi’s house, making Suman wonder about the status of the courtesan in the world of men. A chance meeting in the public gardens brings Suman close to Subhadra, the wife of Padam Singh Sharma, a rich lawyer. However, Suman’s husband disapproves of the friendship, suspecting his wife of flirting with Padam Singh. One night when she returns home late after a function at Subhadra’s, Gajadhar refuses to allow her back into the house. Tired of her unloving husband’s callous nature and the dinginess of her environment, and refused shelter by her friends for fear of scandal, Suman chooses to become a courtesan. She soon realizes the humiliations that this life entails. The glitter of luxury and the “freedom” cannot compensate for the loss of respectability.

The seemingly simple plot of the novel becomes complex and unsettling as Premchand artfully weaves many subplots into the narrative: the zealous concern of society for the fate of a Brahmin woman, Suman's love for Padam Singh's nephew Sadan, the intersection of her sister Shanta's life with hers, and so on. The absorbing narrative buttressed with passages of tender poetic quality build up Suman as a tragic heroine trapped in the complexities of a milieu through no particular fault of her own. Suman's journey from the courtesans' quarter to her assumption of responsibility as the administrator of an orphanage, Seva Sadan, is told with didactic overtones. Nevertheless, Premchand's humanism breathes life into the characters.

The narrative is so compelling that one demurs to put down the book. Azfar's choice of English idiom can be described as "Indian or Pakistani." It is at times quaint or even archaic and is occasionally wooden, yet it creates a "middle" English path that goes well with the style of the original:

There were comings and goings between the two families [...] (7)

She felt on her heart, the heat of strong sunlight arising from behind a cloud of grief and regret. [...] (9)

Your sword is forever hanging out of its scabbard. [...] (31)

Other times the translation is simply too awkward, inaccurate or meaningless. For instance, and this is just a random example, she translates "*Voh patt'har k'ha kar pacā saktā thā, lekin kisī kī bāt pacānē kī t̄qat us mēn na thī*" as "(Jitan) He was one of those who could keep down a rock but never gossip [...]" (229).

In fact, Azfar's text is so transparent that a reader who knows Premchand's style can form a visual image of the original Urdu/Hindi from the translation. For example, she adheres to the original text's style of reporting conversation, a style that is common in Urdu/Hindi narrative but disconcerting in English. Such a style of speech narration in English is used in the written text of plays:

Suman: I will not live with you.

Bholi: Why, will that give you a bad name?

Suman: (embarrassed) No, it's not that.

Bholi: Would you be bringing disgrace to your family? (41)

In his foreword Ralph Russell draws the attention of the English readers to this form of narration and hopes that they will find it less unsettling than he did when he first encountered it in Urdu. This compels one to ask who the readers of the English Premchand are, and why there is such a flurry of translations? The majority of the readership is probably made up of South Asians who don't read Urdu or Hindi, or who don't read it fluently enough to go through an entire novel yet can enjoy and appreciate the flavor of ethnicity from the tone of the

text and the scattered so-called untranslatable words from the original that are retained in the translation.

The editors of the Oxford University Press have chosen not to italicize non-English words. Instead, these are marked with an asterisk and explained in the glossary along with some other words and phrases. I found the use of asterisks arbitrary and annoying. Some rather esoteric words such as *maulood* and *khasdaan* (16) don't have asterisks. Azfar seems unaware of the correct pronunciation of Hindu (Sanskritic) names. The name of the novel's heroine Suman is spelled as Saman, Subhadra as Sobhdra, Uma as Oma, and so on. One wonders which edition of the novel the translator worked with. It would have been helpful if Azfar had provided something in the nature of translator's notes or a preface describing what prompted her to translate *Bazaar-e Husn*, which edition she used, whether she compared the text with the Hindi version, and so forth. The chronology she provides at the beginning of the book is incomplete and error-ridden. One might also have expected the editors at Oxford to include a few sentences introducing the translator, Amina Azfar. Indeed, the book's formal introduction by M. H. Askari leaves this reader curious about the full name of its writer, especially since M. H. were the initials of Muhammad Hasan Askari, Urdu's most eminent critic, fiction writer and translator.

The second half of *Bazaar-e Husn* focuses on the debate surrounding the dismantling of the courtesans' quarter within the city and its relocation outside the city precincts. This was precisely the theme of Ghulam Abbas's famous story "Anandi,"<sup>1</sup> written in 1940. From reading *Bazaar-e Husn*, it becomes obvious that "Anandi" was simply an "inspired" rewrite of Premchand's story. The brilliance of Premchand's later novels put his earlier work so much in the shadows that its reclamation is as surprising and pleasurable as finding a hidden treasure. Translator Amina Azfar and the editors at Oxford University Press deserve to be congratulated for the publication of *Bazaar-e Husn*. □

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*Short Stories from Pakistan*. Edited by INTIZAR HUSSAIN and ASIF FARRUKHI.  
Trans. from Urdu by M. Asaduddin. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2003.  
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<sup>1</sup>An English translation of this story by Griffith A. Chaussée appeared in the *AUS* 18, pt. 2 (2003), 324–39. —*Editor*

As a distinct literary form, the Urdu short story is of comparatively recent origin, but it has left its indelible mark on the map of Urdu literature and has now become a primary vehicle for literary expression, a staging ground for a vision of national life both in India and Pakistan. “Urdu is in fact unique among the major literatures of South Asia in the emphasis it places on the short story as the primary genre of narrative fiction, even over the decades after partition.”<sup>1</sup> Though there were practitioners of the short story before him, it was really Premchand who created the right conditions in which it could find its place as an independent genre. After Premchand, those who made notable contributions to this literary form were, among others: Krishan Chander, Sa’adat Hasan Manṭō, Rājinder Singh Bēdī, Iṣmat Čughtā’ī, Ghulām ‘Abbās, Intiẓār Ḥusain, and Aḥmad Nadīm Qāsimī. Their stories grapple with contemporary issues, depict cultural and psychological truths and explore newer dimensions of reality and deeper recesses of human relationships.

*Short Stories from Pakistan* contains thirty-four stories in English translation, twenty-three of them written originally in Urdu and eleven from the regional languages of Pakistan—Sindhi, Punjabi, Saraiki, Pushto and Balochi. The stories, written after Independence, “chronicle,” as the blurb states, “the birth of the Pakistani nation in traumatic circumstances and its chequered history over the past fifty years, through depicting the ‘desires and aspirations, fear and horror, pride, shame, helplessness and a thousand other unnamed feelings’ of their protagonists.” Also on display here is the entire gamut of narrative modes—from the traditional realist mode through the impressionist, the symbolic, the stream of consciousness and the postmodernist self-reflexive—indicating the formal sophistication that this genre has achieved in Pakistan. The volume endeavors to narrate the Pakistani nation in the fictional spaces offered by a wide range of gripping narratives. In addition to lovers of literature, this collection will be of equal interest to historians, sociologists and ethnographers.

The collection begins appropriately with “Open It” by Sa’adat Ḥasan Manṭō, the irrepressible and pitiless chronicler of Partition. The story can be read as symbolic of the birth pangs of the new nation of Pakistan and offers a striking example of Manṭō’s uninhibited realism, his economy of narration, and his masterful deployment of irony. Without striking a sinister note obviously, the narrator obliquely hints that some catastrophe has struck the world as well as Sakina—the seventeen-year-old girl who becomes separated from her father Sirajuddin during their catastrophic migration from India to Pakistan. During his search for his daughter, Sirajuddin, struggling desperately in the chaotic envi-

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<sup>1</sup>Aamir R. Mufti, “A Greater Story-Writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India,” in *Community, Gender and Violence: Subaltern Studies XI*, edited by Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1–36.

ronment, meets eight young male volunteers and implores them to trace her. Finally one day she is carried into the doctor's camp from near the railway line where she was found lying unconscious. She has been raped repeatedly by the very volunteers her father had begged to find her. The experience has so attuned her consciousness to the phrase "open it" that, even in her semi-conscious state, she unties her waistband on hearing the doctor say "open it" (meaning open the window). The ending skillfully juxtaposes the irrevocable extinction of essential human goodness and the hope that courses through Sirajuddin's veins when he shouts, "My daughter's alive."

The other story that refers to Partition, though only indirectly, is Ghulām 'Abbās's "Fancy Haircutting Saloon," which is a classic of its kind. Four barbers come together in an unnamed city following their dislocation during the Partition. They are allotted a barber's shop which they run to mutual profit and satisfaction till greed and betrayal enter the picture. Here is a narrative of deception and betrayal that could be extrapolated onto the contemporary situation.

Intizār Ḥusain, a stalwart of the Urdu short story in contemporary times, is represented here by "The Boat" which, characteristically enough for its author, combines Christian, Islamic and Hindu myths and legends to construct a universal narrative of human struggle, of conflict between good and evil, and of the nature of human life on earth. The small segment of humanity sheltered in the boat amidst the universal deluge symbolizes the desolation and loneliness that is attendant upon the human situation. All the inmates in the boat are existential exiles banished from their native land and they shudder at the mention of the word "home." Thematically, this story has affinity with Rasheed Amjad's "City Grown on a Flower Pot."

Aḥmad Nadīm Qāsīmī, another veteran of Urdu short fiction, is represented in the volume by "The Thal Desert." This story depicts the social transformation of a sleepy hamlet following the intrusion of the colonial economy. The consequent industrialization and urbanization lead to the upward mobility of the agricultural workers, who then discard outmoded traditions and beliefs and embrace the dubious processes of development and progress.

Ashfaq Ahmad's "Gatto," written in a candidly genial and delightfully humorous style, describes a human situation which is full of deep pathos and reveals the exploitative nature of officials.

Quite a few of the stories in the collection deal with the life experience of women, their doomed destinies and fractured lives. These stories both construct and critique the patriarchal male gaze that has imprisoned women in traditionally-defined roles which help perpetuate their subjugation and oppression. "Open It" shows how in times of war and during clashes between different communities, the female body becomes the site for the appropriation, contest, and control of the adversary. Shireen in Shaukat Siddiqi's "Bhagwandas Darkhan" becomes the pawn to be sacrificed as part of the bizarre custom among the Balochis of offering a kinswoman to the aggrieved party as a redemption for murder. Similarly,

“Bhagbhari” (Hajira Masroor), “Soul-Weary” (Bano Qudsia), “The Thirty-fourth Door” (Naseem Kharal), “The Crooked-footed Witch” (Afzal Ahmad Randhawa), “Cinderella” (Anwar Sajjad), “Matarani” (Ikramullah), “Millipede” (Khalida Hussain), and “The East Wind” (Zamiruddin Ahmad) highlight different facets of women’s lives—their innermost longings, their powers of endurance, and their potential for survival.

The crop of stories included in this volume from the regional languages of Pakistan seem even more interesting than the mainstream Urdu stories inasmuch as they bring into focus terrains of sensibility unexplored by the latter. “History’s Shroud” (Amar Jaleel), “The Thirty-fourth Door” (Nasim Kharal), “The Horse-rider” (Nasir Baloch), “The Wolf” (Farooq Sarwar), and “The Day of Judgement” (Ghaus Bahar) are powerful narratives that touch readers on the raw. What they lack in formal sophistication is amply compensated for by their thematic boldness and originality.

The English translations by M. Asaduddin are lucid and immensely readable. As he points out in his “Translator’s Note,” he knows the challenges of transferring culturally-rooted texts from the Indian subcontinent into English. In his translations he seems to have struck a balance between the extremes of “domestication” and “foreignization.” In order to preserve symbolical, metaphorical, social and cultural meanings, he retains selected lexical items from the source languages and weaves them into the target text dexterously so they do not seem jarring to the ear nor hamper readability. Stories like “Fetters of Time” (Mumtaz Mufti), “Matarani” (Ikramullah) and “Honour” (Jamal Abro) abound in expressions which defy adequate transference. Nevertheless, except for sundry exceptions, Asaduddin renders such expressions competently and adequately. In short, this is a volume to be savored and treasured, especially when it comes at such an affordable price! □

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