

EVENTS, INQUIRIES, NEWS, NOTICES, REPORTS

A NUMBER of Urdu writers and patrons left us during the past eighteen months, among them: (2003) Ismail Azar, Kafil Azar, Sarshar Bulandshahri, Muhafiz Haidar, Muhammad Hamidullah, Ibn-e Farid (Mustafa Mahmud Siddiqi), Mehandar Kapur (M.K. Mahtab), Abdullah Malik, Syed Naimuddin, Abul Faiz Sahar, Bhisham Sahni, Zaka Siddiqi, Mohsin Zaidi; (2004) Najam Fazli.

I

The following is an inventory of scholars and the papers which they presented at conferences, seminars, and symposia:

Anita Anantharam (University of California, Berkeley): "The Body Lacerated: The Poems of Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed," University of California, Berkeley, 18th Annual South Asia Conference, 14-15 Feb. 2003.

Elena Bashir (University of Chicago): "na and nahII in Hindi and Urdu," University of Texas at Austin, South Asian Language Analysis Roundtable XXIII, 10-12 October 2003.

Huma Dar (University of California, Berkeley), "Umra'o Jan Ada: Partitioned, Nationalized, Fetishized and Sanctified," University of California, Berkeley, 18th Annual South Asia Conference, 14-15 Feb. 2003.

Karline McLain (University of Texas, Austin): "Tears of Freedom: Recasting Women and the Nation in Wajeda Tabassum's Urdu Short Stories," 2003 Annual Meeting of Association for Asian Studies, New York, 27-30 March 2003.

Christina Oesterheld (University of Heidelberg): "Urdu Literature in Pakistan: A Site for Alternative Visions and Dissent," Columbia University, New York, New Perspectives on Pakistan: Contexts, Realities, and Visions for the Future, 11-13 April 2003.

Guriqbal Sahota: "Towards - *Rumanviyat*. Altaf Husain Hali and Urdu Romanticism," 2004 Annual Meeting, Association for Asian Studies, 4-7 March 2004.

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New Perspectives on Pakistan: Contexts, Realities, and Visions for the Future (Columbia University, New York, 11–13 April 2003)

Christina Oesterheld (University of Heidelberg): “Urdu Literature in Pakistan: A Site for Alternative Visions and Dissent.”

Maggie Ronkin (Georgetown University): “*Izzat se Bai The hue, Allah kii Raah par lage.*”

Amina Yaqin (SOAS, University of London): “What is Pakistani Culture?”

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32nd Annual Conference on South Asia (Madison, 23–26 October 2003)

Anis Ahmed (New York University): “The Trauma of Division and Negotiating Normality in Rushdie, Hyder and Ghosh.”

Aditya Behl (University of Pennsylvania): “Guilty Pleasures: Nazir Akbarabadi and the Urdu Literary Canon.”

Mehr A. Farooqi (University of Virginia): “Such Highs, Such Lows: Issues of Stylistics in Modern Urdu.”

Syed Akbar Hyder (University of Texas, Austin): “Urdu’s Progressive Wit: Sulaiman Khatib, Sarvar Danda and the Subaltern Satirists Who Could Speak Up.”

Priya Kumar (University of Iowa): “Partition, Gendered Violence and the Literary Imagination.”

Christopher Lee (Canisius College): “That’s Mushaira Poetry ... It Won’t Go In My Book!: Performed and Written Ghazals in Contemporary Banaras.”

Ali Mir (William Paterson University, New Jersey): “The Crowded Margins of Progressive Urdu Poetry.”

Raza Mir (William Paterson University, New Jersey): “Progressive Poetry in Pakistan: A Tradition Survives.”

Robert Phillips (University of Wisconsin): “Writing the Self: Khudnavisht as Literary Form in Urdu.”

Frances Pritchett (Columbia University): “Ghalib’s Poetics: Classical Urdu Ghazal in Performance.”

Daisy Rockwell (University of California, Berkeley): "Particularities of Partition Literature: Looking Beyond the Master Narratives of Partition Studies."

Simona Sawhney (University of Minnesota): "Aaj Ka Paath: Reading Literature and Politics, Post-Ayodhya."

II

For the mini-conference "Arts and Modernity," sponsored jointly by the Center for South Asia and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin, 27–28 June 2003, famous Urdu fiction writer Jeelani Bano, winner of the Padamshree Award, Government of India, was invited especially to speak about her career as a woman writer.

III

Stephanie Lonsdale successfully defended her Minor Thesis, "From Partition to the Diaspora: An Introduction to Pakistani Literature," at the Department de Filologia Anglesa i Almeanya, Universitat de Barcelona, and has now started work on her Ph.D. dissertation.

IV

Address on the Occasion of "An Evening with Intizar Husain" Writers' Forum, Toronto, October 2000

Intizar Husain

First I should thank the organizers of the Writers' Forum who thought of a down and out writer like me and honored me by inviting me to come and speak to you in this foreign land.

There is no point in hiding this from you; the truth is that I'm just a writer of stories. I'm nothing more than this and nothing in addition to this. In fact, neither some great undertaking of service to the nation or to its people, nor any memorable demonstration of Islamic sentiments can be attributed to my person. Nor do I lay claim to a service to Urdu language or literature. My list of good deeds contains only the stories, good and bad, all of them. If I am to be saved, it is these stories that will be my salvation. Indeed, I have no other effects to offer for salvation.

But why do I offer you this explanation? If I had been born in the time of Mir and Ghālib, it would not have been at all necessary to provide this explanation.

Mir and Ghālib were poets and poets alone. And this was a status they were proud of. Their readers and listeners were also connected to them only on the basis of their poetry. But now the demands made on a writer by friends and strangers alike have greatly increased. Now no one regards just writing poetry or just writing *afṣāna* (short story) enough. In keeping with these demands, the writers must explain what national, social, and public service they have rendered through their writing. Actually what happened recently was that a short story writer who is a contemporary of mine and who had been known until now as a revolutionary and had accused me of intransigence, suddenly raised a cry of *nizām-e muḥammadī* and, while suggesting this as a prescription for Pakistan's welfare, became a member of a religious party. This event transpired at a time when I regarded his Marxist views as more of a boon than the Islam touted by the Taliban. Now I'm really bewildered because "when I became a kafir that kafir became a Muslim."

But there's one thing we cannot deny—that in this day and age writers have received immense adulation. Evenings with writers are common, receptions are thrown in their honor, festivities are arranged for them, invitations come for them from across the seven seas, medals and awards are bestowed upon them, their pictures and statements are published in newspapers, their interviews are aired on television. And, as it developed and expanded, the mass media in Pakistan lavished so much attention on writers that they have now become part of show business. I won't say anything about someone else, I'll tell you my own story. A very smart, tall young woman came to see me. She mentioned a Karachi fashion magazine and said she had been sent to interview me. I looked her up and down, made note of her accent and mode of speech and then asked suspiciously, "Which Urdu writers have you read with special interest?" She said casually, "I'm not really familiar with Urdu literature." I remarked, "So then you haven't read any of my stories. How will you interview me?" She replied, "I've come from Karachi. My boss said go and interview Intizar Husain. You have to guide me." If the interviewer had been a young man, my reaction would have been different. Well, consider it my weakness if you will that I did indeed guide her. Let's put it this way—she spent less time taking the interview and I more time giving it. Later a copy of the magazine was sent to me. The paper was glossy and my interview was embellished with photographs taken from different angles. I started reading it. Where I had made a reference to Krishan Chandar, his name had been reproduced as "Krishan Lal." I didn't have the courage to read any further.

A few days back a newspaper journalist was interviewing me. The photographer was busy clicking away. I asked my interviewer friend, "You need only one photograph, why are you taking so many?" He replied, "No *janāb*, all these pictures will be published." I said, in surprise, "Oh? So many of my pictures will be published? But what about my *afṣāna*?" He remained silent. Indeed he should have remained silent.

A writer's personality can be of use to the mass media, but literature has no value for it. And the short story is a genre that can never come to terms with it. At the most a ghazal recited at a *mushā'ira* or the poems of Faiz sung by Mehdi Hasan or Iqbal Bano can be accommodated, but the poetry of Rāshid and Mirāji stands little chance of becoming accessible through the media.

The entire Pakistani society is incapable of providing the kind of handling that literature requires in order to be appreciated. As for mass media, it suffers from its own limitations. And as I said earlier, the writer can become part of show business, but not literature. In other words, all this leads me to believe that our times are projecting the writer and driving back literature. I mean, writers are honored these days, but literature is losing its worth.

As a writer I gained consciousness at a time when the idea of holding the writer in high esteem was inconsequential. Newspaper articles did appear, but these did not contain interviews with writers or their pictures. Every now and then a critique of a *she'r* or a collection of short stories showed up. Or, a poem or a ghazal was occasionally published in the weekly editions. This was a time when there was no such thing as *Pride of Performance*, and the notion that a writer might be given an award or a medal was something the writer never envisioned. Book launches never took place. When Manṭō's *Siyāh Hāshiyē* (*Black Margins*) was published, it created a furor and a great deal was said against it and in favor of it, but the book was never publicly launched. And since there were no functions to bring out a book, no minister or distinguished personage appeared in the company of writers, nor did he get an opportunity to tell the writers what kind of literature they should produce. This was a topic that the writers discussed amongst themselves. Take the Progressive Writers' Movement, for example. On one side were the modernists, on the other the traditionalists, and what fiery debates took place between the two. After the creation of Pakistan, 'Askari Šāhib raised the question of Pakistani literature, and thus began a new theoretical debate.

When these debates cooled down, a new issue seized the attention of the writers. Where does Pakistan's history begin? With Mohenjodaro or Harrapa or with the arrival of Muḥammad Bin Qāsim? When this discussion lost its power, a dialogue about allegorical versus abstract *afṣāna* commenced. And this issue had barely been resolved when the question arose whether prose poetry was even poetry. Well, there we were with a new quarrel.

And now I'm left with my lamentation for the city of desire. I recollect with nostalgia this entire history of literary battles. I pine for the debates and I also affectionately think of those who had accused me of being reactionary and had used that charge to attack me. Now I don't know who to fight with. Several of those who were co-combatants have died, while some, forsaking Marxism, have taken refuge in Islam and have become patriots.

There is no doubt that there should be debates in literature. Every society needs peace and harmony and the crisis in the present-day Pakistani society is

that this blessing has been confiscated from it. But absence of strife is not necessarily a good thing for literature. Literature is nurtured and cultivated by debates and conflicts. But it seems that writers have discovered some kind of a comprehensive solution to theoretical disagreements and literary quarrels. If any debate remains, it is the one that revolves around the question of who gets the award and who doesn't. Do you know that presently there are more than a hundred political parties in Pakistan, but no party is known by its ties to any particular viewpoint or mandate, and I'm terrified of the thought that the world of literature in Pakistan may assume a similar countenance one day.

I've just remembered something. Mir gradually became senile and then one day he reached a point when he

Saw a face in the moon
Which dimmed the light of the dream

And I saw with my own eyes a poet who used to roam the streets of Lahore. Talked a lot about the moon. I can't say with certainty that he too glimpsed a face in the moon, but such verses are an indication of his lunar restlessness:

I'm thinking since evening Nāṣir
Into which city will the moon descend

I don't know what kind of restlessness this was. Perhaps that which has been constructed from what is known as "divine discontent" in English poetics. In our part of the world, a wave of restlessness is evident in the traditions of poets from Mir to Mirāji and from Mirāji to Nāṣir Kāẓmī. Where has this wave gone? It is this very wave that illuminates literature. You may write voluminously, create rhyme and meter in poetry, or break down metrical conventions in the name of new poetic traditions. What difference does any of it make? All the wealth lies in this very restlessness.

And if not this then all are mere stories

—*Translated by Tabira Naqvi*

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NOTE: If you have read a paper or published an item or know of a piece of information of interest to Urdu-wallahs, please do not hesitate to send it to us for inclusion in the next issue of the *AUS*. —*Ed.*