

COLUMNS

Culture: Our Literary Clubs

LET THE FALCON of fantasy fly fast and let the dolphin of drollery dive deep to fetch us the following delightful scenario:

Mirzā Ġālib, after a lapse of 135 years, makes up his mind to descend from Paradise to have a look at our cultural scene. He betakes himself, incognito, to one of the prestigious literary clubs of Karachi and presents a ghazal for the usual critical appreciation. The exalted company, after giving a patronizing hearing to the stranger's couplets, find a number of flaws in his lines, graciously offer a few improvements, and then dismiss him as a struggling versifier.

Next comes a woman who also recites a poem for literary appraisal. "The young lady is a very gifted poetess," begins a wizened guru in a vibrating tone, "and it is indeed a great wonder that she can write these exquisite lines, full of beauty and meaning, at such a young age. But perhaps it is no wonder at all in view of her family's splendid literary background." A couple of other hoary sages join him to shower encomiums upon the beaming little lady. "Thank God that I am dead," whispers Ġālib to himself and leaves.

We complain (and with full justification) of corruption and favoritism in government departments, in our administration, business and industry, and even in our educational institutions. But why do we forget to include Pakistan's literary establishment in the nation's roll of dishonor? The spectrum of corruption boasts of so many bands, all shading into one another. One of them—nepotism and cronyism—has always bedeviled all walks of our national life. But this evil is assuming a special significance in our cultural sphere, thanks to the feverish glamorization of poetry and fiction through the media—the most important of which being the ever-multiplying TV channels, national and international. In the past, men of position and wealth shunned literature as an unworthy pursuit, but today we are amazed to see those ministers, diplomats, tycoons and political chieftains falling over backwards to gain recognition as poets and humorists.

Naturally enough, power centers, represented by clubs, have sprung

up in all segments of the literary domain. Such a club or literary circle is usually controlled by a luminary, most probably a retired college professor or a grand old versifier, with access to the media moguls and *mushā'ira* tsars. Although the apparent objective of the club is to serve literature, the real aim is the promotion of poets and writers belonging to the inner circle of the votaries. If you are in, your work is sure to be praised lavishly and you will be accepted as an authority on literary criticism, even though you may not be familiar with the rules of prosody and literary conventions, nor have any command over language and form. As the resident critic you would assume a pontificating attitude, fiercely assail most of the poems and stories presented, solemnly refer to modernism, post-modernism, structuralism, and invoke Kierkegaard, (Jean-Paul Sartre having now been worn out). Given this state of affairs, it is certainly not enough to become a good poet or a good fiction writer. You must also be an expert apple-polisher, adept at ingratiating yourself with the literary bosses. Perhaps a college of sycophancy and flattery would serve a great purpose by offering helpful training to budding writers and poets seeking literary honors.

A very encouraging sideshow, however, is the growing female participation in the nation's literary activities. Women seem to be asserting themselves with a vengeance. What literature lover would fail to be impressed by the dozens of glittering digests (ladies' home journals) that flood the news stalls every month and earn huge profits through an abundance of advertisements, whilst their impoverished brothers, the literary periodicals, find it increasingly difficult to continue publication.

An uplifting literary ritual is the launching of a book by a poetess-cum-short-story writer. It is a gala event, with food and drinks, held in a posh hotel or social club, presided over by a minister and seconded by a professor or two. Speeches are made by the bigwigs and rhyming tributes paid by ever-ready versifiers. Nobody reads the book and no one buys it, but the book is extolled as a great success.

It must, however, be acknowledged that despite glaring shortcomings, our literary clubs (and our digests) do serve a commendable purpose by keeping the flame of enlightenment burning.

—A. QAVI SHAKOOR

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A Linguistic Study of Urdu

THE BOOK I'm going to talk about may be regarded as a charge-sheet against Muslim writers of Urdu as a whole. In fact, in it the literary tradition of Urdu has itself been dubbed as one with a deep bias against Hindus and their religion and mythology.

This book cannot be dismissed as the figment of the unhealthy imagination of some religious crank. The man who has brought out this charge-sheet is the distinguished Urdu scholar Dr. Giyan Chand Jain, who commands great respect in Urdu circles because of his valuable contributions to research on Urdu. In fact his newly-published book *Ēk Bḥāsha, Dō Likḥāvat, Dō Adab* (One Language, Two Scripts, and Two Literary Traditions) was meant to be a study of Urdu language with reference to its linguistic relationship to Hindi.

This study is very evident in the book, but, unfortunately, it has been overshadowed by the emotional outbursts of this esteemed scholar. No doubt he has a case to fight for. However, while raising serious questions about the biased attitudes of some Muslim writers, who are not in short supply, he could not keep his cool. Setting aside the objectivity a scholar is expected to possess, he allows himself to be swayed by anger and partisanship. How unfortunate that this book, which was primarily intended to be a linguistic study of Urdu in relation to Hindi, will now be read in a different light.

It seems that something bitter was brewing long in the heart of Dr. Jain. He had an acute sense that Hindu writers, who happen to be in the minority in the literary world of Urdu, fail to get the recognition and appreciation they deserve because of the bias of the Muslim writers who enjoy a majority. And he tells us that Kalīdās Guptā Razā, a distinguished Ġālibian scholar, also shares this feeling with him.

Dr. Jain is also very unhappy with those Hindu scholars and intellectuals who are held in high esteem in Urdu circles, such as Dr. Tārā Čand, Dr. Mālik Rām, Sir Tēj Bahādur Saprū, and Jagan Nāth Āzād. Recalling that at one time Maulānā Abu 'l-Kalām Āzād was branded a show-boy of Congress, he brands these personalities show-boys of Urdu. Dr. Tārā Čand stands condemned because of his being, in Dr. Jain's estimation, pro-Muslim and pro-Islam. As for Mālik Rām, Dr. Jain observes, "I will not call him an imposture. Rather he is a coward."

While talking about the origin and development of Urdu, Dr. Jain says that we need not turn to Arabic and Persian in this regard. Urdu as a language is rooted elsewhere. We are required to trace back its roots in

Prakrits, Uppharinsh, Pali, and Sanskrit. Hindi scholars, according to Dr. Jain, have probed deeply into these sources and, as a result, have produced studies of high merit, while, in comparison, Urdu researchers appear “Jāhil-i-Muṭṭāq.” He confesses that he too carried with him this legacy of ignorance. It was only after reading the works of Hindi scholars that he has been able to shake it off to some extent.

In fact, here he is seen giving vent to his belated anger against Urdu-wallahs for what he regards as their intolerant attitude during the pre-Partition Urdu-Hindi controversy. He has, in particular, censured Maulvī ‘Abdu ‘l-Ḥaḡ for what he sees as a vilification campaign against Gandhi-ji on the basis of a concocted statement attributed to him. Gandhi-ji is supposed to have said that Urdu is the Muslims’ religious language. It is written in Qur’ānic letters, so it is for Muslims to preserve and promote it if they feel concerned for it.

Dr. Jain asserts that Gandhi-ji never said this. Maulvī Ṣāḥib, he says, was hard of hearing. One of his associates thought fit to concoct this statement and convey it to Maulvī Ṣāḥib, who readily believed it. But who was the mischief monger? Dr. Jain quotes Mushfiq Khvāja saying that the man who made the mischief was Ḥakīm Asrār Aḥmad Kuravī, the younger brother of A‘zam Kuravī.

Dr. Jain has not confined himself to the present times alone. Writers of the classical period too have been subjected to scathing criticism. In fact, the whole literary tradition of Urdu appears to be in the dock. His scholarly studies of classical writings have helped him considerably in proving his point. He has dug out a number of couplets from ghazals and *maṣnavīs*, and prose pieces from *dāstāns* which, according to him, are evidence of these Muslim writers’ derogatory attitudes toward the religious beliefs of Hindus.

Such are the charges leveled by Dr. Jain against Muslim writers in Urdu. I have tried to reproduce these charges in a nutshell here, avoiding any comment on my part. Of course, I did seek comments from Shamsu ‘r-Raḥmān Fārūqī who has been referred to time and again in this charge-sheet. “Yes I have read the book,” he said, “and have plainly told him ‘Jain, *tum nē jhāk māri hai*.’”

“But he has raised some serious questions which ask to be taken seriously. Do you intend to write a response to the challenge thrown out by him.”

“Yes, I will write about it.”

As this was a telephone conversation we could not discuss the book in detail.

Not that Dr. Jain's accusations are irrefutable. Frankly speaking, the esteemed scholar with his excessively sensitive nose smells out something derogatory about the Hindu Faith even in places which hardly bear any trace of it. But the crux of the matter is that a scholar, after a lifelong study of Urdu literature, has arrived at some conclusions characterizing Muslim writers as bigots with a derogatory attitude towards Hindus and their religious beliefs.

He invites contemporary Muslim scholars to correct him if they feel that he is wrong in his findings. That may be seen as a challenge couched in polite words, so we had better leave it to our distinguished scholars to take up the questions raised by him seriously and meet the challenge in a scholarly way.

—INTIZAR HUSAIN

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Hālī, the Great Feminist

WAS MAULANA HALI a feminist? Yes, he was. More than that, he was the first feminist in the social history of South Asian Muslims. That is how Maulānā Ḥālī has been projected in a feministic volume, *Feminism aur Ham*, compiled by Fāṭima Ḥasan and published by Wa‘da Kitāb Ghār (Karachi).

Forgetting feminism for the moment, I am thinking in pure literary terms. How strange that a writer or a literary trend is treated for so long with indifference, and even with disdain, but then one fine morning, after some significant passage of time, he, or it, attains a new significance and is recognized as most relevant to the spirit of the age.

During the years following the catastrophe of 1857, Maulānā Ḥālī, with his concern for the fate of the Muslims in India as enshrined in his *Musaddas*, rose to new heights of prominence. The popularity of *Musaddas* knew no bounds. But the response to the poems speaking of his concern for the plight of women in Indo-Muslim society remained subdued. Now, with the emergence of feminism as a popular trend, Ḥālī's poems “Čhup kī Dād” and “Munājāt-e Bēva” have gained a new significance and, more than any other poet of the past, Ḥālī appears in tune

with the spirit of this age, which seems carried away by feminism.

In fact, seen in this context, this whole period of Urdu literature, as represented chiefly by Hālī and Deputy Nazīr Aḥmad, has regained a new relevance. This period can be distinguished from those preceding it because of its recognition of women's place and possible role in society. This recognition led writers to place emphasis on female education. Fiction writers played a leading role in this respect.

Feminists in general like to believe that each and every male has been in the past and is in present times hostile to them. Female writers have their own whims. They strongly believe that male writers have always conspired to ignore their precious contribution to literature. But now, a few female writers have gotten rid of this obsessive feeling and have felt inclined to probe into the past social and literary history. Sughrā Mehdī from Jamia Millia Islamia has discovered in Maulānā Hālī a great feminist who was not content to fight for the cause of women through writings alone. He managed to establish a girls' school in Panipat. But Muslim parents' prejudice against Christian teachers thwarted his project to provide female education. Muslim lady teachers were not available, so the school had to be closed.

Sughrā Mehdī has also presented a survey of the Urdu novel from a feministic point of view. According to this survey, the early novelists Nazīr Aḥmad, Sharar, Rusvā, 'Allāma Rāshidu 'l-Khairī, and Fayyāz 'Alī all appear to be feminists in their own way. They raised their voices against purdah and against males' second marriages and they pleaded for the English education of girls. But of all these novelists, Rāshidu 'l-Khairī appears to me to be the most devoted and the most ardent feminist. He not only wrote novels depicting the sad plight of Muslim women, but also did practical work. He inaugurated two women's magazines, *ʿIṣmat* and *Banāt*, and made arrangements for female education and training in handicrafts.

How interesting that Fahmīda Riāz, who is known to us as a poet, has, in her feministic fervor, turned into a research scholar. Her research tells us that in contrast to the Hindu period, the Muslim period in India has the distinction of having female participation in the administrative affairs at various times. In the very beginning of this Muslim period we see Sultan Altamash nominating his daughter Razia, who was later known as Sulṭānā Razia, as his heir-apparent. As for the Mughals, they, during their long rule and glory, were in fact indebted to the political wisdom of Zahiruddin Babar's *nānī ammānī* [grandmother].

When Babar succeeded his father in Farghana, he was just a young-

ster. It was his maternal grandmother Aḥsan Daulat Bēgam who protected him and thwarted every attempt of his ambitious adversaries to dethrone him. In later years, a role of the same kind was played by Babar's elder daughter Khānzāda Bēgam. Her sister Gulbadan Bēgam needs no introduction. She is well known to us as the author of *Humāyūn-Nāma*.

Fahmīda Riāz has listed a number of Mughal princesses who are known to us for their intellectual pursuits or for their participation in administrative affairs. The most prominent among them was Nūr Jahān. And in the south, Čānd Bibī distinguished herself as one who ably ruled Bijapur and put up a tough fight against the Mughals in defense of her state.

So, according to this analysis, South Asian Muslims, as compared to Hindus, have a better record in respect to a woman's place and role in society. But if so, then how would Fahmīda Riāz explain the reversal of that situation which we now see evident. In her analysis she stops short at the end of the nineteenth century. She seems evasive about analyzing the present comparative situations between women in these two communities.

—INTIZAR HUSAIN

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Manto and the Saint of Chakiwara

ONE OF THE least known tributes to Sa'adat Ḥasan Maṅṭō is a memoir written by the matchless writer Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar, author of that most delightful of books, *Čākīvāra mēñ Viṣāl*, not to mention the boisterous Čačā 'Abdu 'l-Bāqī stories. Sadly, the man who wrote about painting donkeys in order to palm them off to a circus as imported African zebras, died a couple of years ago, but not before the dawn of the twenty-first century that he was keen to see, I suppose, just to make sure that it did come in. His Maṅṭō memoir survives like the rest of his work that is now being republished in a collected edition by his friend and great admirer Ajmal Kamal of *Āj* (Karachi).

The Maṅṭō memoir was originally published by the literary magazine

the last sentence was incomplete. He did not believe in there being such a thing as mood or inspiration. He told us that before he went to sleep he tried hard to work out the plot of the story he was going to write the next day, but always without success. When he woke up the next day, he was still clueless about the kind of story he was going to write that day. However, in order to survive, he had to produce a story a day. “But then an idea strikes me while I am shaving or taking a bath. A plot springs up in my mind along with its cast of characters, which is when I sit down to write it out. It is the characters who actually write the story. It is not I who create them, but they who create me. I am at the mercy of my characters,” Manṭō always told his friends. However, once in a sketch he wrote about himself, “*Nuqūsh*,” he confessed that all that talk was “rubbish” or *bakvās*, his favorite word.

Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar met Manṭō several times after that. Once when he was suffering from a high fever, Manṭō walked into his home, pulled a bottle of brandy from his pocket and made him take several long swigs from it, assuring him that the brandy would set him right. He considered brandy the sure-fire cure for all ailments, from the common cold to gonorrhoea. One day, he took Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar on a round of Lahore’s film studios, where everybody knew him. Another day, he took him to meet two friends of his who were Khoja businessmen from Chiniot staying at Faletti’s, where they mixed their own marijuana with a silver grinder—something that greatly intrigued Manṭō. He wanted to write a story about them but didn’t.

Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar recalls a meeting with Manṭō in the winter of 1951. They met at a publisher’s office in Lohari Gate. Manṭō arrived by tonga with Aḥmad Rāhī in tow. He wanted to take Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar and his two friends from Bahawalpur home, but thought better of it because “Africa has landed there.” By Africa he meant some relatives who had arrived from Nairobi. Safia’s family was mostly settled in East Africa. The party finally ended up in the Lahore Hotel where one of Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar’s friends produced a bottle of Black and White [Scotch Whiskey], which Manṭō soon saw to. It was a long drunken afternoon. At one point Manṭō told Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar, “I’ve read your two-hundred-page novel and it’s rubbish, utter rubbish. What you have taken all those pages to write could have been said in just six pages. Write but don’t be prolix.” A better advice for a writer there cannot be. Another time he said to him, “Get me out of here, take me to the mountains.” Then pointing to the bottle he said, “I want to get away from

this demon.”

When Manṭō’s great story “*Mōzail*” was published, Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar wrote him a letter saying he was the greatest man alive in Asia. Manṭō’s answer was pure Manṭō. He cautioned his young admirer not to pump so much air into his balloon that he would rise to the sky and disappear into its immensity. He once told Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar that his own greatest story was “*Kḥōl-dō*,” the chilling tale from 1947 about a girl abducted from East Punjab, who is finally found by her father in a hospital where she lies in a traumatized state, raped not only by her abductors but the rescuers as well. In Manṭō’s world, inhumanity is not confined to a particular religion. Manṭō once said that a writer should not read because that puts an end to his originality. What he should read is the book of life. And, fifty years after Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Manṭō’s death, there is no question that few have read that book better than he did.

—KHALID HASAN

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