

BOOK REVIEWS

Do You Suppose It's the East Wind? Stories from Pakistan. Edited and Translated by MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009. xx, 296 pp. Rs. 299. ISBN 978-0-14-306354-4. Paperback.

THERE IS FAR MORE TO THE TRANSLATOR'S ART than meets the eye. Along with the word by word mediation between a text and its foreign alter ego, there are a league of choices involved—the choice of *which* texts to translate, *when* a text is ready for a foreign audience, *how* it should be framed and juxtaposed with other texts, *where* it should be published and read—choices that emanate from the ultimate question of *why* translate a text in the first place. Muhammad Umar Memon writes in the introduction to his latest short story anthology *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?* that “the ambition of this text is fairly modest: To present a glimpse of Pakistanis in the act of living” (xx). And this, considering how often in contemporary media Pakistanis are presented in the act of dying, is an achievement whose import far exceeds the modesty of its author.

There are few who have been more instrumental in the translation of twentieth-century Urdu prose than Memon, who has brought a constellation of writers including Naiyer Masud, Intizar Husain, Abdullah Hussein, and Hasan Manzar to an English-speaking audience. Memon also introduced generations of college students to Urdu prose at the University of Wisconsin, where I was fortunate enough to attend many of his lectures. As unlikely as it might have seemed in the frozen dairy lands of the Midwest, Professor Memon was able to utterly captivate his students with Urdu prose, interweaving the story at hand with a spellbinding meta-narrative that might include his meetings with the author, his encounters with the texts over time, and his thoughts on the dynamics of writing. His courses were a kind of living translation in the truest sense, an ongoing construction of a scaffold of meaning in which the stories could live and breathe for a new audience. *Do You Suppose It's the East Wind?* similarly constructs a scaffold of meaning, but here it is the architecture of the anthology itself that builds the context, while the meta-narrative that holds them together is created in the mind of the reader.

The bringing together of disparate stories from various authors into an anthology that reads like a whole is no small achievement. I seldom read a short story collection all the way through—I get derailed on the first story that doesn't seem to fit, and then start skipping around. *East Wind* is a rare anthology that feels like more than the sum of its parts; each story connects to the others in intriguing ways, and the collection as a whole creates a powerful overall impression. The most prominent element throughout the anthology is the bittersweet

emotion of *regret*, which infuses each story uniquely and binds them all. “Why are all these long-lost matters returning to me, like an old pain suddenly come back to life?” wonders Altaf Fatima’s narrator in the title story *Do You Suppose It’s the East Wind?*. “It’s because after much smoldering heat and burning sun, a cool breeze has finally started to blow” (58) she concludes, after she has been wafted out of her sterile office and into the emotionally rich world of her childhood friendship with an oddball boy named Robby Dutt. Indeed, the east wind seems to blow through all of the stories in this anthology, uncovering old wounds, exposing many different facets of regret, loss, and longing.

Regret is almost visceral in Abdullah Hussein’s “Sunlight,” which opens the collection with the return of a man to his childhood village. We never know exactly why he left, nor do we need to—we feel the physicality of a return that assaults his senses with the smells, sights and sounds of childhood memories, juxtaposed with the equally physical shock of time’s passage as seen in the face of his long ago first love. “Sunlight” does not dwell on the reasons for regret but rather allows us to feel its power as it surfaces and bursts in the encroaching rains. Regret and longing become excruciating in Jameela Hashimi’s “Banished,” infusing every second of the narrator’s life and forcing her into a constant tension between her love for her child and the loss of the life she could have lived had she not been a captured bride. And, working in muted tones that are all the more painful for their quietude, Ashfaq Ahmad’s “Havens” unfolds the hopeless regret of a man who was an inadequate and unloving father to his now dead son.

It is appropriate that Ikramullah’s “Regret” is the centerpiece of the anthology. More a novella than a short story, “Regret” portrays a time span before and after Partition, providing an extended landscape that gives context to the other stories. A bildungsroman that explores the relationship of the narrator with an eccentric boy named Ehsan, the story rests on a childhood friendship developed in slow walks along the train tracks in the baking sun. Time speeds up as the boys get older and events more dire, and we watch through the eyes of the narrator as Ehsan’s youthful ideals of socialism and freedom come under the hammer of reality. In the multitude of possibilities one cannot pinpoint exactly what the narrator regrets most—The destruction of his childhood community? The loss of his first love? The failure of Ehsan’s idealism? Instead of being pointed at a particular subject, regret infuses the story in its very language, and even the most charming scenes of growing up, such as when Ehsan falls in love with a gypsy girl, are infused with the sadness of loss.

As an Urdu writer who has lived long in the United States, Memon seems to have an instinct for balancing the familiar and the foreign in a translated text, a balance that can keep the reader involved in a new narrative landscape while providing anchors of understanding and empathy. While he provides an overview of Urdu literature in his introductory notes, Memon allows the stories to unveil themselves without explaining what they “should” mean. I particularly like that the book does not gloss every untranslatable word, allowing the characters to tie a *rakbi*, play a sarod, or taste a Surkha without the interruption of constant footnotes. I am led to recall Nabokov’s translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene*

Onegin, which provided an entire volume of notes for one slim novella, explaining every nuance of the language and at the same time completely alienating the reader from the text. In a rare act of trust, Memon allows his audience to learn from the experience of reading itself. As a narrative traveler, the reader of a translation does not always want to feel “at home,” and part of the pleasure of reading is in encountering the unfamiliar. These pleasures occur often in *East Wind*; for example, in Abul Fazl Siddiqi’s “Gulab Khas” the intoxicating enthusiasm for mangoes and the bewildering number of different varieties may seem alien at first; yet as the story progresses, the reader develops such a passion for the fruits that he or she can almost taste the rose-scented *gulab khas*. Ghulam Abbas’s “The Lure of Music” describes a middle-class man whose repressed love of music causes the downfall of his family; and while the musical culture of the story will be unfamiliar to many readers, the magical attraction of music is understandable to all. Some readers might be surprised to find their stereotypes of “spiritual India” deflated by Manto’s wry tale of pointless self sacrifice in “For Freedom’s Sake,” where the characters discover that self denial can be a denial of their humanity. And while Asad Muhammad Khan’s portrait of the contentious Ma’i Dada refers to Pathan culture, the portrait of the belligerent and proud old man is somehow universally endearing.

As the stories progress, a whole environment is formed with its own variegated locales, trees, foods and mores—not as a result of any individual story but as a result of their interaction in the mind of the reader. Readers will be drawn in by the play of weather across the texts, where the baking heat is described in such detail that readers will join the characters in welcoming the wind and the rain, understanding instinctively that they bring cleansing and renewal. Regret, yes, but a purifying regret that offers the possibility of hope, or at least the possibility of a possibility. A lovely finale to the collection is Tasadduq Sohail’s “The Tree,” a story of a solitary old man in the winter of life, which ends the anthology with the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa. And the reader, having crossed through the landscapes of regret, is left with the mystery of hope—hope that persists even in the face of the often brutal circumstances of life.

This volume of moving and accessible stories, beautifully translated into vibrant, glowing language, is a gift to English-speaking readers, and one hopes that with anthologies such as this Urdu literature will become more prominent in the college world literature cannon. There is no way to underestimate the need to expand the narrative worlds of Urdu literature for the English-speaking world. Narrative worlds fill the two-dimensional outlines on the map with characters, images, and ideas. In my teaching, I have found that most American college students do not know that Pakistan was ever part of India, or imagine that Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs ever lived together as neighbors and friends. They draw only from present media culture and their mental maps are filled with wars they assume to be the eternal clash of civilizations between Muslims and everyone else. Narrative worlds of the type created by this anthology offer powerful counter images and answer the question of *why* it is so important to translate Urdu literature, and *why* to present “Pakistanis in the act of living” is a

significant, and even radical, literary contribution to the twenty-first century. □

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SUVOROVA, ANNA. *Early Urdu Theatre: Traditions and Transformations*. Lahore: Research and Publication Centre, National College of Arts, 2009. 208 pp. Rs. 300. ISBN 978-9-669251061.

ANNA SUVOROVA, a professor at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, is already known to Urdu literary circles for her earlier *Masnavi: A Study of Urdu Romance* (2000) and *Muslim Saints of South Asia* (2004).

The present book is a welcome addition to the small group of book-length studies of Urdu drama in English. It is comprised of eight chapters, excluding the “preface” and “epilogue.” There is also a bibliography listing sources in various languages, including Russian and German. The first chapter, “At the Threshold of Urdu Theatre,” describes the conditions under which theater emerged in South Asia. Like medieval Europe, South Asia too had religious drama as well as farce. In the former category were *Rasleela*, *Ramleela*, *Jatra*, etc. and in the latter were shows staged by the *Bhands* and the *Naqqals*. These latter were performances based on folk stories and epics called *Nautanki*, *Tamasha* and *Bhawai*. Among the Muslims, however, theater was underdeveloped, consisting mostly of *ta’ziya* processions in which the martyrdom of Imam Hussain was commemorated. Suvorova mentions a number of important books on the development of Urdu drama and seeks to develop an adequate theory to analyze it.

The chapter entitled “Born in Lucknow” describes how Vājīd ‘Alī Shāh (r. 1847–1856) promoted the theater. The crucial event in this context was the staging of Urdu poet Sayyid Āghā Ḥasan Amānat’s play “*Indarsabhā*,” written in 1851. This was a musical performance complete with traditional characters from tales—fairies, giants, princes, etc.—but it was staged and not merely narrated. Suvorova provides an outline of the story in this chapter to assist the reader. There is also an appendix which provides summaries of some major Urdu plays staged by the Parsi Theater.

“*Indarsabhā*” was a paradigmatic performance which inspired a number of such *sabhās* throughout India, including a major one in far-off Dhaka. As the theater of Dhaka has been ignored by earlier scholars, this chapter provides particularly useful information. One of the first dramatic companies in Dhaka was the *nāṭak sabha* and, like the court theater of Lucknow, it too gave men roles as female impersonators.

The most important development in the history of the Urdu drama—and, indeed, the precursor of Bollywood itself—was the Parsi Theater of Bombay. The English Bombay Theatre was opened in 1750 but provided European entertainment by staging the plays of Shakespeare. In 1845 other companies were established. Since Parsi entrepreneurs established these theater companies, this

type of theater is called Parsi Theater. The early plays were staged in Gujrati, the mother tongue of the Parsis, but soon they also started using Urdu because this was the language most used in North India.

Parsi Theater used traditional tales—Rustam and Sohrab, Heer and Ranjha—with all the melodramatic appeal of dialogue and acting. However, as Suvorova points out, the originality of the Parsi theater lay in its presentation of a comic element. As she explains, this was done through a combination of the traditional farce with parody and wit. Moreover, as Suvorova mentions, the Parsi theater companies also promoted Shakespearean drama which was translated into many South Asian languages including Urdu. The influence of Shakespeare was tremendous, extending to the work of Āghā Ḥashar Kāshmirī (1879–1935) who set up a theatrical company in Lahore called the “Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company.” And, indeed, Suvorova contends, Āghā Ḥashar’s plays in Urdu free verse are the best examples of European influence on the Indian dramatic tradition.

Parsi Theater is important because, as the author puts it, it “expands our vision of the South Asian transitional culture” (192). However, it is important even more so because it was the precursor of Bollywood movies, and this is something Suvorova has not touched upon. She has also not explained the unique combination of melodrama and magic (a term I use for coincidences, improbabilities and deus ex machina in addition to the preternatural) which are still part of Bollywood and soap operas. This has, of course, been mentioned by Suvorova, and parallels with the fantasy world of Elizabethan theater have been drawn, but the crucial question is why it is there at all? What social conditions create or demand such alienation from reality? In what way are these elements related to a premodern worldview? I have argued elsewhere that such elements in premodern Muslim literature of South Asia are connected with a particular worldview which supported autocracy, non-causal ways of ratiocination and fatalism.¹ Some proof along these lines with respect to drama would have provided more insights into the way our society functions.

Barring these minor deficiencies, this is a very useful contribution to the history of Urdu drama. I recommend the book to scholars of Urdu and of drama as a rewarding addition to our knowledge. □

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¹Language, Ideology and Power: Language-Learning Among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 526–27.