

LETTER

Dear Editors:

I FULLY ENJOYED Ralph Russell's zestful arguments on "How Not to Write the History of Urdu Literature" (*AUS* #6). Much of what he states is to the point, but he puffs up the matter by imputing to Messrs Saksena, Bailey, and Sadiq a "childish desire to show off" (p. 5) their knowledge of English and world literature or "the constant pointing of contrasts between Urdu literature and English—always to the detriment of Urdu" (p. 2). It is not *always* so, though comparisons can (and often did) reasonably lead to such an effect.

The main reason for the way these historians of Urdu literature wrote their histories was not their attitude, as Russell implies, to Urdu; but rather (1) the general intellectual and literary milieu and (2) their individual training as scholars and historians of literature were responsible for their methods.

They were English-oriented critics with a deep interest and insight into Urdu literature, and they shared in the first half of this century the two worlds of the East and the West in a way which has become rare, if not extinct, in the latter half of twentieth century—an irony, as also perhaps a consequence, of the age of communication. Their medium was English, and their scholarly training drew more on the European tradition than any other. Comparisons to European literature, as such, came easy, were not forced (to them), and were part of the mental and cultural frame of the time.

As there was so little proper history-writing concerning Urdu literature otherwise, they were the cosmopolitan pioneers, exploring and defining the field, and less assertive of the latter-day forms of indigenization and local pride; even so, given the general colonial context of their scholarly work, to a certain extent, the Indian-European comparisons may have been the critical modalities of self-definition, cultural authenticity, and value (rather than for the detriment of Urdu). They looked outward, from the inside. Elsewhere, too, such broad perspectives have had their parallels. Eighteenth-century English critics and dramatists had looked to,

emulated, and bettered the French. Until recently, histories of American literature nearly always sought comparisons with their British and European counterparts and ancestors. And the Australian “cultural cringe” still makes Australian critics and writers look out for what is happening in Europe, America, and Asia. (In fact, the Australians have just realized that they have a “cultural cringe.”) A healthy thing altogether; for the stark opposite is redneck chauvinism of the sons of the soil. “Saksena, Sadiq, and Co.” (p. 5), however, were very positive critics within the culture that produced them, and which they helped form, and expressed, in their critical discourse; a culture which can disappear easily in more egocentric times. Sadiq, particularly, was unique in having held both the Chairs of Urdu and English at the government college, Lahore, my own *alma mater*. His and his “Co.’s” achievement, in its particular qualities and as an eloquent expression of the period, cannot be taken lightly by any scholar of Urdu literature. Theirs may not be perfect, but the outline example Russell offers of how it should be is like holding half a candle to the sun.

—ALAMGIR HASHMI