

BOOK REVIEWS

Fires in an Autumn Garden: Short Stories from Urdu and the Regional Languages of Pakistan. Edited by ASIF FARRUKHI. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997. xxxi, 407 pp.

THIS anthology demands to be read differently than a usual anthology of short stories. Published as part of the Jubilee Series of Oxford University Press of Pakistan, the book attempts to capture, according to the editor, “the experience of living inside and going through the various stages of the country’s growth and development, a ‘progress of the nation’ as it were; Pakistan’s ‘his-story’ as told by its fiction writers” (Introduction, p. xxii).

I do not think I grasped “the various stages of the country’s growth and development” as I read through the volume. As I responded to individual short stories based on their subject-matter and treatment of the theme, I failed to see their significance as representations of “the ‘state of the nation’ at some critical juncture of its historical existence” (p. xxi). Nor could I agree with the editor that “Going through them, one notices that there is a sequence to these stories” (*ibid.*).

I was further mystified to read in the “Introduction” about the book being divided into three sections. The editor claims that the stories are grouped together “either according to thematic links, or by being nearer to each other in time and spirit” (p. xxvi). He goes on to describe the logic of the tripartite division in considerable detail. However, this tripartite structure of the volume was obviously eliminated at some stage, since the stories are numbered from one to thirty-four consecutively, the principles behind their ordering not explained anywhere. In fact, I spent a considerable amount of time making my own chart to see if I could trace chronological or thematic or stylistic principles at work in the ordering, but to no avail.

So while I felt that many of the stories in the collection are exceptionally powerful, I felt frustrated by the lack of clear organizational and selection criteria. I am not satisfied by the explanation given in the “Acknowledgements” about the criteria used by the editor to exclude or include writers:

While making the selection, I have aimed at particular stories in keeping with the overall theme, rather than make efforts to ensure that all important names or major trends are covered. I was also not prepared to add stories merely in order to represent a particular language or region, in the way government quotas work. The inclusion of material removed from the

spirit of the best stories seems to be a far graver sin than omission. (p. x)

This explanation leaves me more puzzled than ever since I am not convinced that the 34 stories adhere to an overall theme. I would rather have preferred more regional and linguistic diversity than what is provided: 19 stories from Urdu, 6 from Sindhi, 3 from Punjabi, 2 from Pashto, and 1 each from Balochi, Bengali, Siraiki and English. I cannot but wonder why Urdu stories were closer to the editor's idea of his overall theme than stories from other regional languages of Pakistan.

I am also at a loss as to the order in which the stories are arranged. Why does the collection begin with Ali Baba's "The New Prophets" and end with Aamer Hussein's English language diasporic story "Painting on Glass"? For hasn't the editor excluded other expatriate authors writing in English on the basis that they write from "a different perspective, the outsider's and the casual onlooker's view of Pakistan's history, a point of view outside the scope of this selection" (p. xiii). As far as I can see, "Painting on Glass," too, can be said to be from an outsider's perspective, concerned more with the problems of living as an expatriate outside Pakistan than with Pakistan per se.

I also remain unenlightened as to the significance of the title, a phrase chosen from "Painting on Glass." While it is poetic and sonorous, what does it mean? The narrator in the story says that a saxophonist's music "reminds him of fire in an autumn garden" (p. 392). The allusion here seems to me to remain on the private level and I wish that the editor had explained its significance.

While the editor's theorizing in the "Introduction," "Acknowledgements," and the biographical notes on individual authors seemed heavy handed to me in its claims about "an overall theme" and "a sequence" that emerges in an orderly fashion, Intizar Hussain's "Preface" provides a good antidote to it. Hussain challenges Farrukhi's desire to see the stories as "reflective" of "the state of the nation" and finds such insistence limiting. He asks:

Why should we insist that our fiction should necessarily be, in one way or the other, reflective of a relationship with the nation and the country, and that if such a relationship is not apparent, we must have an assurance that it is stirring somewhere beneath the surface? This is not a very healthy attitude. (pp. xviii–xix)

I must say I strongly agree with Intizar Hussain's sentiments. While I admired the amount of work Farrukhi has done in putting together a diverse collection of stories from various languages and regions of Pakistan and providing detailed biographical and critical introductions to each author, I felt frustrated at his persistence in reading many stories as "national allegories" despite his disclaimer to that effect. I remain unconvinced, for want of further proof in the way of contextual information, that Ghulam Abbas's "Fancy Haircutting Saloon" is

an allegory about the early days of Pakistan: “While tongues wag and scissors go snip-snap, they come to realize that setting up anything, be it a shop or a country, is fraught with unforeseen difficulties” (p. xxi).

The introductory notes to Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi’s “Countrywoman” quote two other critics who, like the editor, see the story as a protest against Pakistan’s reliance on foreign aid. The old woman, we are told, “should be understood as a symbol of our country and the coin which she was given out of charity, foreign aid” (p. 79). This sort of interpretation, I feel, fails to do justice to the experience of the old woman in her own right. The moment one reads her as a symbol of Pakistan, the humiliating experience she undergoes at the hands of urban, more privileged Pakistanis need not be taken into account. Why, I wondered, should I not read it as a story about class warfare or rural urban divide?

While some stories do lend themselves to an allegorical reading, others seem diminished by it. Altaf Fatima’s “The Lion’s Mouth” is about aging, about passage of time, about frightening changes in one’s immediate surroundings. But Farrukhi insists that the treatment of time in the story “defines some of the interactive possibilities between the short story as a form and the experience of contemporary history” (p. 33).

I fail to understand why Farrukhi is so keen to tie down the interpretive possibilities of these stories to definitive moments of Pakistan’s history. When he claims that Mohammed Salim-ur-Rahman’s apocalyptic story, “The Ashes,” takes its theme from “the country’s recent history” (p. xxi), I must disagree strongly. It seems to me that “The Ashes,” working on our fears of a nuclear holocaust, transcends national boundaries, linking itself to works like Rachel Carson’s *The Silent Spring*, Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*, and Janet Frame’s *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. The sinister reference to “ashes of white men” (p. 333) suggests that the final war to end all wars was fought in Europe and the narrative leaves the impression that the characters we meet there are living out their last days on earth.

This is not a particularly Pakistani nightmare, but a nightmare shared by millions of human beings on earth today. Hasan Manzar’s “A Requiem for the Earth” taps similar fears when it proposes that women across the world can no longer conceive female babies due to genetic experiments made during the last several decades. As I read this story, I could not help comparing it to Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s novel *Handmaid’s Tale* which posits a hypothesis about a general decline in men’s and women’s ability to reproduce due to man-made pollution.

Farrukhi’s comment that “the story presents a recurrent and persistent pattern in Pakistan’s history” (p. 352) does not do justice to this and other stories’ multifaceted hermeneutic possibilities. Nuclear weapons and Frankensteinian scientific experiments are global anxieties in today’s world and stories like “The Ashes” and “A Requiem for the Earth” will therefore have resonances for a diverse audience.

Asif Farrukhi's own short story "Allergy" is another story that does not need much contextual information to be understood and enjoyed. As an individual condemned to attend umpteen boring meetings on a daily basis, meetings where tall claims are made about their importance but where warding off sleep is the most important challenge for the participant, I could not help identifying with the protagonist's dilemma:

A group of people on one side and another group across the table from them—a committee in session, spawned by regulations and clauses, filled with files and yawns; seconds, minutes, and hours piling up like a mound of coins; neverending talk, boring and sleepy. (p. 369)

Intizar Hussain's "In the Dark Woods" and Zamiruddin Ahmad's "Inferno," again, are stories that could easily have happened in a riot torn Indian city. They capture the anxieties and anguish of people who live in constant fear of violence. Since riots and curfews are quite frequent occurrences in India as well, many Indian writers have tackled themes similar to the ones treated in these stories. I found it highly ironic when a character in Hussain's story mentions the letter of an Indian Muslim who believes "that people in Pakistan are having a very good time" (p. 294).

That comment highlights for me the transnational appeal and special relevance of these stories for both Indian and Pakistani readerships. As Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal say in their book, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), "Despite a much longer shared history, marked by as many commonalities as differences, post-colonial India and Pakistan have for the most part been treated as two starkly antithetical entities" (p. 201). While not denying that Pakistani readers will find them replete with local and specific meanings, I would like to suggest that these stories by Pakistani writers also have a lot to say to readers across national boundaries, particularly to readers from India. Mirza Hamid Baig's "The Dead Traveller," underscoring the ease with which ethnic divisions are created and experienced has tremendous resonances for an Indian readership. Nasim Kharal's "Thirty-Fourth Gate," about the response of the police to the discovery of a female corpse with an almost severed head in the thirty-fourth gate of the dam, again, seemed very familiar to me. The Indian police are equally good at not filing FIRs [First Informations Reports] about murders of women by their relatives.

Stories that deal with censorship and persecution of writers, stories like "A Dream with an Old Man," "In Camera Proceeding," and "The Empty Frame," are perhaps most closely allied with Pakistan's history and it is these stories that respond most to the elaborate editorial theorizing of the "Introduction." I assume (I wish the editor had given dates of publication for each story) that they were written during the martial law period and can only deal with the reality of repression in an oblique and surreptitious manner. While I can guess at the response of

Pakistani readers to these stories, particularly during the time when they were initially published, I find them somewhat flat and predictable. Khalida Hussain's "The Cart" and Chaudhari Shaukat Ali's "The Open Sewer" were also too emblematic for me. Once the reader has figured out that the permeating stench is the stench of corruption and oppression, it is hard to sustain the suspense. Nevertheless, I do realize that writing on such themes is an act of tremendous courage and these stories need to be seen as testimonials of a troubled time in the country's history. Thus while Enver Sajjad's "Conspirators" is only three pages long and evidently about the conversation between some prisoners about their hometowns and women, the story gains in poignancy when we read that the author wrote it after his release from jail.

Amar Jaleel's "The Heir to a Severed Arm" manages to keep the reader interested despite its obviously allegorical structure. While the plot of the story is simple, a severed arm in the mortuary which a whimsical magistrate wants to return to its true owner, it is the clever satirical portrayals of the bureaucrats that draw the reader in: "The SP's belly protruded without rhyme or reason and betrayed his affluence" (p. 243).

It seems to me that allegory functions as a distancing device. So while this story and others like it deal with such terrible subjects as murder and torture, their schematic nature cushions our sense of the horror. Zaheda Hina's "To Be or Not to Be," on the other hand, is overwhelming in its impact as the narrator, a military wife, discovers her husband's complicity in the detention, torture and murder of her leftist friends.

I would have liked to read more stories by women. Out of 34 stories, only 6 are by women. If the editor had difficulty finding women contributors, he should have acknowledged it.

Not knowing the original languages from which the stories have been translated, I cannot make comparative judgments about the differences between the originals and their translations. Nevertheless, most of the stories read well. The only story I had trouble understanding was Ahsan Wagha's "Turning Deserts into Rivers." I wonder if my comprehension problems are caused by the transmutations wrought by the process of translation.

Finally, I would like to make note of two instances of racial stereotyping. Mirza Athar Baig's "Decoy" describes its character Manzoor's feelings of revulsion by using Africa as a trope of savagery (p. 281). Intizar Hussain's "In the Dark Woods" presents the Gonds, the aboriginal people of central India as the antithesis of civilization. Such portrayals, also present in Indian writers, only go to show that we South Asians, targets of racist portrayal in colonial discourse, also need to unlearn our own internalized racism.

Despite all my reservations, *Fires in an Autumn Garden* is a valuable contribution to the small body of Pakistani literature that is available in English translation. For readers like myself who do not know Urdu, Sindhi or Punjabi, it provides an invaluable access to Pakistani literature. As a person who was born in

pre-Partition Lahore and who was taken across the border by her parents at the tender age of ten months, I hunger for representations of Lahore, Sialkot, Lyallpur and Gujranwala, cities that figured so often in my elders' stories, the cities of their youth and joy, also cities that came to be invested with irretrievable loss. Books like *Fires in an Autumn Garden* help me connect with my severed past, across borders. Most of the stories in the book are about tremendous pain and horror. By writing about the tremendous human tragedies happening in South Asia, on both sides of the border, these writers force me to face some harsh truths about my home land and my history. I thank Asif Farrukhi for making them available to me. □

—ARUN P. MUKHERJEE
York University

Ghalib: The Poet and His Age. Edited by RALPH RUSSELL. Reprint. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. 132 pp. Rs. 195.

THIS book is one among the modest crop produced on the occasion of Ghālib's death centenary celebrations in 1969. Two of the five papers included in this volume were presented at a seminar held the same year by the School of Oriental and African Languages, London University. The publishers had probably wanted the paperback reprint to coincide with the second birth centenary of Ghālib in 1997 which, however, failed to produce substantial new critical work on the poet and remained generally rather dull in comparison with the tremendous efflorescence and enthusiasm seen around 1969.

Though Ghālib's fame rested primarily on his poetry he was a remarkable man in many other ways. He was noteworthy for his handsome appearance, dignified deportment, rapier-sharp wit and repartee and his frankness and friendliness. He was a compulsive letter writer, an engaging conversationalist and a mentor to would-be poets. The first essay in the volume, "Ghalib: A Self-Portrait," by Russell, brings out all the above qualities fairly well. He mentions about Ghālib's love for a *ḍōmnī* (probably the only abiding experience of love he had), his lack of reverence in not observing the more demanding commandments of religion, his bankruptcy due to a lavish lifestyle, the unfortunate events leading to his imprisonment, which lasted three months, his relative prosperity following his appointment as poet-laureate, and the last eleven years of his life which were spent in intense loneliness after the upheaval of 1857. Russell, by and large, lets the story unfold through Ghālib's own works, particularly his letters. All in all, it is the portrait of a great man and a myriad-minded poet who had his "spots of commonness" that made him more human, lovable and endearing.

The next essay, "Ghalib's Delhi," by Percival Spear, the noted historian, pre-

sents a comprehensive picture of Delhi in the nineteenth century, touching upon its political, economic and cultural aspects. “The Delhi of Ghalib’s youth was the center of a district torn by anarchy and strife.” Spear describes how the British restored order and how the comparatively sympathetic rule of Charles Metcalfe, resident at Delhi, narrowed the fissures that had developed between the British and Indians. Among Metcalfe’s staff there were several officers, the most notable being Charles Fraser, who loved Indian culture and Urdu poetry. Drawing on Hindu and Muslim festivals, poetry assemblies, fine arts like calligraphy and painting, Spear offers a vivid picture of Delhi and shows how the court, even if tawdry at that time, exercised a positive influence in the sphere of manners and etiquette. “Long after Delhi had ceased to be the Paris of power it continued as the Versailles of good manners.” Ghālib’s range of interest included not merely the literary and intellectual circles of Delhi but also extended to the whole aristocratic circle in the city and on to the imperial court. However, with the upheaval of 1857, the world of Ghālib and his contemporaries lost all its glory.

The next essay, P. Hardy’s “Ghalib and the British,” deals with the relationship that Ghālib’s family, with its military tradition, had with the British, and the interminably long battle for pension on the death of Ghālib’s uncle, Naṣru ’l-Lāh Bēg Khān, on whom both the poet and his brother Mirzā Yūsuf Khān were dependent. Ghālib traveled to Calcutta, the capital of British India, in 1828 in pursuit of the pension. In spite of winning friends among the British, the pension eluded him. Ghālib’s actions and campaign in this matter bespeak his attitude toward the British and the institution of patronage. Hardy’s illuminating comment sums it up:

As a member of a declining aristocracy, what he came to resent was British inability to give gracefully, for that inability inhibited his ability to receive gracefully, as a gentleman should. (p. 57)

Ghālib-admirers are rather fond of arguing endlessly whether his Persian verse is better than his Urdu verse. Ghālib’s own seemingly contradictory statements about this further complicate the issue. A. Bausani, an acknowledged authority on Persian poetry, treats Ghālib’s entire oeuvre in Persian in his “Ghalib’s Persian Poetry.” For this he uses *Kulliyāt-e Ghālib* (Naval Kishore edition, 1925), which was first published in 1863 when the poet was still alive. Bausani places Ghālib in the context of other Persian poets from India and Iran. In particular Bausani refers to Bedil’s decisive impact on Ghālib. He also shows how Ghālib’s Persian *ghazals* are more regular according to the rules of the classical *ghazal* and how, on the other hand, his Urdu *ghazals* show a more flexible approach to the genre. Bausani’s study of the commonality of themes and vocabulary in Ghālib’s Urdu and Persian poetry is very insightful. A companion piece to Bausani’s study is “Ghalib’s Urdu Verse,” the closing essay by Ralph Russell. Russell starts off with the observation that Ghālib’s own statements about the

comparative merits of his Persian and Urdu verses should be taken with a grain of salt and must be judged with reference to the context (Russell explains the contexts) in which they were uttered. Then he defines the *ghazal* for those who are not familiar with Urdu, its merits as a form of poetry and its theme(s). Coming to Ghālib's poetry he enumerates five distinctive features. Russell's treatment of his subject is rather brief here. Interested readers will find a fuller treatment of Urdu poetry in Russell's *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (1992) and *Hidden in the Lute: An Anthology of Two Centuries of Urdu Poetry* (1995).

Taken together, the five essays help us understand Ghālib—the man and poet—and his age in a meaningful way. However, the essays stand alone. We have no helpful information about the occasion of the essays and their context in the nature of a “Preface,” “Introduction,” “Suggested Reading,” etc., which are so characteristic of Russell's other books. The absence of these somewhat minimizes the value of the book. If the aim of the publisher was to make Ghālib accessible to that large audience which is aware of his greatness but can approach him only through the medium of English, they should have made every effort to enrich the book in its paperback incarnation. □

—M. ASADUDDIN
Jamia Millia Islamia

[Gratefully reproduced from the *Indian Review of Books* (16 April–15 May 1998), pp. 24–5; edited for the *AUS*.]

Hoops of Fire: Fifty Years of Fiction by Pakistani Women. Edited by AAMER HUSSEIN. London, Saqi Books, 1999. 176 pp.

THE present anthology is a valuable contribution to the literature of the subcontinent, as it provides a wonderful insight into the work of the country's leading women writers. Indeed, it is only now—more than fifty years after Partition—that one can look back at the Urdu literature of Pakistan and make some sense of its development and direction. This anthology is particularly interesting as it offers insights not only into the development of literary forms but also into the way that political history has affected the lives of the region's people—particularly its women.

As Aamer Hussain, editor of this anthology points out: Pakistan's “fictions are the literary mirror of a turbulent history and the partition of a language.” Thus although the stories here have not been chosen on the basis of feminist ideology, they all highlight the plight and status of women in some way or the other. This collection brings together the work of major women writers from Hijab Imtiaz Ali and Khadija Mastoor to Fahmida Riaz and Azra Abbas. Here are

stories of domestic change, political upheaval, espionage, political exile, socialist struggle and domestic discord. Some are narrated realistically, others in more complex and symbolic ways. But although the stories vary in style and content, one major concern does seem to link them: the vulnerability of women in a society which measures them in terms of “sexual virtue” and regards them as essentially irrational and wily beings.

Women’s lack of control over their lives is made all the more acute by the emotional bondage that is motherhood. This state increases women’s vulnerability in ways that can be exploited with ease. In Khadija Mastoor’s “Godfather,” the central character “repudiates her womanhood,” resorts to a life of crime and insists that she be called Dada (criminal warlord/Godfather), yet her final action reveals how terrible are the emotional wounds she suffered at the loss of her child (her husband throws her out, but keeps the baby). Godfather tries to transcend the limitations of her sex. She says “I curse the female species” and she exists in a life of crime and dope. This story of a restless, impoverished girl who tries to challenge her circumstances is deeply moving. It is significant that her original name—before she rejects her womanhood—is Kaneez; she is a slave, a hand-maiden. Mastoor, who died in 1982, tells a story that rings as true today as it did at the time it was written, and which reflects both her feminist and left-wing concerns.

In Jamila Hashmi’s “Exile,” it is again the chains of maternal emotion that consolidate an abductee’s place in her abductor’s village. The narrative is the haunting, grief-filled monologue of a girl abducted amidst the madness of rape and slaughter following Partition. Memories of her family and recollections of her early dreams and expectations fill up her thoughts, but her dreams of rescue are abandoned when she decides that she can never return, that her place is now with her children: “the soldiers came to Sangrao to fetch me. Besides being Bhai and Bhaiya’s sister, I’m also Muni’s mother. And I wondered “Who knows what that land is like?... The Land of my dreams crumbled to dust and vanished in front of me.” Hashmi’s narrator tells a tale tinged with sorrow and longing, suffering and resignation. The child separated from her own family has become the mother who cannot bear the same thing to happen to her daughter. Moreover, her abduction lays her open—like the legendary Sita—to suspicions about her “virtue.” Hashmi’s story of a Muslim girl relocated in a Hindu milieu stresses the common cultural heritage of both communities as well as the great distrust that can divide them, a theme also dealt with in Farkhanda Lodhi’s “Parbati.”

Lodhi’s Parbati is an Indian agent who crosses the border to spy for her country. But there she, unexpectedly, finds love, marries and begins a new life. Her domestic bliss is short lived: she is soon discovered and returned to India. Her Indian husband, a colonel, is tormented by her supposed loss of “honor,” i.e., her relationship with another man. He wants her to get rid of the child she carries, but all of Parbati’s efforts are now directed towards the protection of her child. The story begins and ends with violence: the defense of their countries’

borders by army men like both of her husbands, is more important than the human lives lost in the crossfire.

The terrible human cost of political turmoil and war (1971) is also the subject of Umme Umara's "The Sins of Innocence." The sole survivor of a family looks back with anguish at a happy childhood and at the terrible violent events that swept away their lives. The metaphor of delicate *bela* flowers being trampled on by a frenzied mob is used effectively and this evocative story raises many interesting questions about migration and belonging, culture and language.

The stories by Fahmida Riaz and Altaf Fatima have a contemporary, near documentary feel to them. In Riaz's "Some Misaddressed Letters" an Urdu poet and her husband live out their exile in India, trying to cope with the guilt and helplessness of the political refugee. How to react to events in their own country and how to reconcile themselves to their own impotence and irrelevance to political events "back home" is their greatest difficulty. Politically marginalized and tortured by their own irrelevance, the couple try to avoid any sign of permanence in their temporary refuge. The "Misaddressed Letters" of the title refer to their sincere but misdirected efforts, their arrows which fail to hit the right mark, their inability to separate their personal lives from the political struggle they so believe in. It is a wry, cynical comment on the depressing limitations of their efforts—whether political or literary.

Altaf Fatima's "When The Walls Weep" uses the technique of multiple narrators and tells of a mountain woman's seduction and abandonment by a western "anthropologist." There is a sense of journalistic protest and radio narration in this story. The child that is the result of this union is in need of protection, yet endangered species of animals probably get more media attention than unprotected children. Again, suspicion of "virtue" and the affliction of motherhood weaken rather than empower women in this social context.

Razia Fasih Ahmed's "The Inferno" is set in a similarly patriarchal setting: a lively young woman seeks to escape an oppressive marriage and life by running away with a British tourist. They are caught and the woman is made a prisoner in a section of her husband's home, unacknowledged and, for decades, unknown to her son. After a lifetime in this inferno, the woman is finally able to turn the tables on her husband by using his notions (he is an Afridi Pathan) of honor and virtue to destroy his peace of mind. Hijab Imtiaz Ali's story "And He Had an Accident" is rather lightweight compared to the others in the collection, but this account of a man's desperate bid for his wife's attention is an interesting little psychological study in male perceptions of women's reactions. This sort of limited domestic milieu also figures in Mumtaz Shirin's "The Awakening" where a young woman agonizes over meeting her once beloved teacher/mentor again. But Shirin's other story in the collection is quite different and moves away from the world of affluent drawing rooms and georgette saris to the wretched existence of the overworked and underpaid. "Descent" begins and ends with two people on a flight of stairs and it recounts the last miserable days of a poor man's wife, the

pain, the anguish and the social humiliation that must be the couple's lot.

Less narratives and more interior monologues the stories by Azra Abbas and Khalida Hussain are not immediately appealing as stories. Abbas's "Voyages of Sleep" is more a series of images than anything else and too sketchy to be called a story. True, the evocative prose and poetic imagery convey a sense of longing for liberation, but that comes several readings later. The dreamlike quality of the piece does, however, convey the power of the imagination, its ability to defy boundaries, rise above physical and social restrictions, and wander where it will without shackles. Hussain's story "Hoops of Fire" is also demanding reading. Although it conveys a sense of the narrator's discontent and increasing social alienation it is not a story that is easy to comprehend. Yet on some level it is possible to regard both these works as defiant and assertive; the writers live a free and unrestricted life of the mind, an oppressive society is unable to monitor their interior lives.

This book joins a growing collection of modern Urdu literature in translation and the anthology's editor is hopeful that it will "urge other editors and translators to make their much needed contribution to the field of translating contemporary Pakistani fiction" (Foreword, p. 8) It is important that there should be such activity: many readers will recall indignantly Salman Rushdie's comment that "the prose writing ... produced by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than what has been produced ... in the so-called vernacular languages."¹ Rushdie acknowledged, in passing, that part of the problem is the poor quality of translations available—a very valid point.

"Hoops of Fire" also suffers a little on account of the varied quality of translation. Shahrukh Husain's translations ("Godfather" and "Exile") are, without doubt, the best of the lot and she is closely followed by Samina Rahman. But if Urdu literature is to now gain the kind of popular readership that Latin American writing enjoyed two decades ago, then it should read well independently; the convoluted structures and tone of the original have to be rethought in its English form.

Although this anthology includes brief biographical notes about both the writers and the translators, one wishes more information about the stories had been included—where each story first appeared, in what year and so on. A publication date should definitely have been included as such documentation is both helpful and important.

All in all though, *Hoops of Fire* is a thought-provoking and instructive collection. And since it does indeed provide interesting "perspectives on social, political and psychological issues that official histories ignore," it is mandatory

¹In Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, ed. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* (Vintage, 1997), p. x.

reading for anybody interested in Urdu literature or Pakistan's socio-political development. □

—UMBER KHAIRI
London

ASAD MUHAMMAD KHAN. *Ghuṣṣe kī Na'ī Faṣl*. Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, Kutub Khāna Paperback Series, 1997. 240 pp. Rs. 90.

MUHAMMAD ASIM BUTT. *Ishihār Ādmī*. Lahore: Fiction House. 112 pp. Rs. 90.

MUHAMMAD KHALID AKHTAR. *Lāṭain aur Dūsrī Kahāniyāñ*. Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, Kutub Khāna Paperback Series, 1997. 270 pp. Rs. 110.

HASAN MANZAR. *Sō'ī B'ūk*. Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, Kutub Khāna Paperback Series, 1997. 234 pp. Rs. 90.

IT is nearly impossible not to enjoy Asad Muḥammad Khān's pyrotechnical fiction. Brilliant and effervescent in an effortless way, it makes an effective use of characters, situations, images and diction. The dialogue sparkles. He is a writer with a pronounced sense of drama. The stories unwind, frame by frame, with a cinematic clarity.

Unlike some writers whose first novel or collection of stories is their best and what they do afterwards is either a rehash or an uninterrupted decline, Asad Muḥammad Khān seems to improve with age. His latest collection of short stories—reminiscences and a handful of translations—is possibly his best so far. In any case, it can't suffer by comparison with his earlier efforts. But even better things may be in the offing. He is said to be working on a novel. If it turns out to be as good as some of the stories in the present collection, we would be in for a treat.

These plaudits aside, what is he actually trying to show us? He has a strong sense of reality. His keen observation and his ear for dialogue would bear this out. But he doesn't reproduce the real world as if with a sharply focused lens. What we observe is a half-animated version of reality, where it is not always simple to tell the photographs apart from the colorful drawings. It is a chimerical view, a little impish also, in which mockery is in step with warm-heartedness. Rather paradoxical all this, at first sight. Yet no matter how ludicrous or villainous the people, they are human also, a fact which rarely escapes Asad Muḥammad Khān's attention. Underneath the mockery, the laughter and the strange animation, there is a deep calm, perhaps of forgiveness. He knows that in the last

analysis we are all uncomfortable in our self-created orphanages, waiting, often subconsciously, to be loved, needed and wanted.

At least two stories “Sarkas kī Sāda sī Kahānī” and “Vaqa’ Nigār” have symbolic ramifications. For all his cleverness, Asad Muḥammad Khān finds it difficult to avoid transparency or particularity so far as his symbolic intent is concerned. Nevertheless, he adroitly conveys an anguish which seems contemporary and familiar. The lack of ambiguity is a depleting factor. The characters are trapped in an intrigue or mystery which is squalid and debasing and can’t find a way out. They, like most of us, know what is happening but are hard put to explain why it is happening and who can ultimately be held responsible for it. If, at most, we can reason out the *whys*, the *who* remains inscrutable, for the simple reason that the impossible-to-spot-who is ourselves. By assuming that the mystery lies outside, in others, we never solve it. Of the two, the story about the circus is better, satirizing Pakistan’s feudal lords, venal politicians and power grabbers.

In some other stories he implies that there are persons who only act out rôles they have assumed for themselves. Disenchanted with their own humdrum lives they strike a pose which, they believe, would appeal to others, would either intrigue or annoy them. But living out an unfamiliar rôle can have unintended tragic consequences, as in “Hiṭlar, Shēr kī Bačča,” where a good-natured prisoner’s clowning leads him into an impasse which costs him his life. Clown or no clown, when the crunch comes he doesn’t flinch from taking a grave risk. The moment he stops acting and makes an existential choice he is shot dead.

There is one other story here, “Sēlūn,” so deep-rooted in a particular cultural ethos as to be virtually mystifying to outsiders. A down-to-earth wrestler comes close to death because his Shaikh is displeased with him. It is unlike a Sufi master to behave like this but he wants to teach the wrestler an important lesson, that is, everyone, regardless of whether he or she is a good person or not, is worthy of our loving attention. Once the lesson is learned the crisis disappears.

The most refreshing part of the book is the author’s historical or what is in fact quasi-historical fiction. No one else in Urdu writes quite in this vein. The stories are set in the era of the Pathan kings. Asad Muḥammad Khān is not bothered by historical exactitude, though I daresay that the details in general conform to facts and the total effect throughout is one of miniature-like scintillance. He is more interested in creating a vivid and remote whereabouts and giving his imagination a free rein. “Ghuṣṣē kī Na’ī Faṣl” is an excellent piece of writing with a remarkable twist at the end but “Ēk Sanjīda Ḍiṭkṭiv Iṣṭōrī” is absolutely sensational stuff. It must be read in order to savor fully its haunting atmosphere and minatory posture.

“Ṭūfān kē Markaz mēn,” an eccentric reminiscence, chronicles the various phases of Karachi’s history and the city’s fall from grace, as observed from a very personal point of view. They are very touching and very readable.

It would only be fair to point out that the production of the book is excellent. It is almost error-free. At least one publisher in Urdu is knowledgeable

about punctuation and sees to it that the proofs are read with great care.

*

THE work of Muḥammad ‘Āṣim Baṭ, a young writer who has just made his mark, occupies the other end of the spectrum, as his characters are wrapped, more often than not, in a hushed lonesomeness. Whether together or alone, they always seem to be stepping into or walking out of a dream-like sequence, unsure of the nature of their experience. Is the reality they fare through more of a dream or more aptly a nightmare? The distinction is invariably a little blurred. No clear-cut parameters can be established.

Nothing new here, one might be tempted to think. The issues of alienation, lonely crowd, dehumanizing metropolis, loss of identity or hope, rootlessness, the impossibility of communication, the hazards of establishing close relationships, have been, as most critics and readers would wearily admit, so thoroughly thrashed—some would say trashed—as to reach a terminal point in threadbareness. Yet there is something out of the common in Muḥammad ‘Āṣim Baṭ’s stories, perhaps a very personalized vision, an anguish maybe, which demands to be taken notice of.

For instance, the first two stories in the collection (incidentally it has only half a dozen) probe so tenderly at peculiar problems that what follows them seems a volte-face. “Tēz Bārish mēñ Hōñē-vālā Vāqī’a,” a bizarre story, told in a deadpan manner, smoothly turns our notion of linear time on its head. It is fantastic fiction, minus the melodrama. “Shikāri” is a gentle and coolly crafted fable about the creative process and the indefinable hope and fear which knit the life of a creative person.

“Khvāb-Kahānī,” on the other hand, as the title leaves no room for doubt, is about a story the author believes he wrote in a dream and in the end is not sure if he brought it to a conclusion. On the face of it, the narrative deals with two over-acclaimed film actors. One is a monstrous villain. The other is equally savage but has enough guts to put an end to any mischief the villain is capable of. Essentially a parable of good and evil, its message is an uncomfortable one. For us good and evil have become equally theatrical, so much so that it is hard to tell them apart, or, which amounts to the same thing, quite meaningless.

“Ishtihār Ādmī,” arguably his best fiction so far, is a deft exploration of the psyche of an introverted, laconic character. Fixated on the beautiful female models he sees in the ads in magazines or on TV he is unable to bear the company of his friends whose chatter seems to him unbearably unreal and crude. He lives for, and in, and because of, ads. It is a state of self-hypnosis, induced by the models he is obsessed with. He begins to believe that not only can he communicate with some of them but also play the rôle of a knight-errant rescuing damsels from distress. It is impossible to say with any certainty whether an existence reduced to fulfillment through ads is in any way preferable or satisfactory to the chaotic ugly reality around it. We can neither pity nor look askance at this person

as he retreats deeper into his posters and frames. To all intents and purposes he seems to have reached an unenviable nirvana.

*

MUHAMMAD KHALID AKHTAR is an original. Much to his credit he has introduced a strange new tenor into Urdu prose. To read his prose is to grapple with a syntax that has an exotic charm. Yet the settings of his fiction, his characters, their primary conflicts, are profoundly indigenous. This amalgamation of the unusual with the familiar gives what all he writes—short stories, novellas, travelogues—a distinctive flair which in our age of the proliferation of look-alikes and see-alikes, is refreshing, to say the least.

His prose has been the subject of comment. He writes as if his thought processes were all in English and he was indulging in some arm-twisting to make a foreign idiom and syntax conform to the regimen of Urdu. If he were a mere trundler of journalese this shot-gun wedding of two unrelated languages would have produced a bumbling Caliban. But he is a creative writer, confident of his reach, making creative use of Urdu. His anglicization of Urdu prose, far from being awkward, is a resolute and shrewd gesture of appreciation. He has learnt a great deal and to considerable advantage from his favorite English writers, and the best way to incorporate his acquisition was to metamorphose it. His peculiar style adds to the syntactical strength and possibilities of Urdu and is, no matter how much the purists fume and fret, an enduring achievement.

A romantic at heart, with a strong sense of what is idiosyncratic or ludicrous even in the most common of lives, he looks at the foibles and follies of his fellow human beings with a forgiving light in his eyes. This is what most people are like, he seems to say, making a sad or merry mess of their brief mortality. Although he believes and portrays effectively that goodness resides even in ordinary souls and that people, living in abject circumstances, can still retain a core of humanity, he is quite aware that life has its seamy side, its dark nooks and corners, that we live in a world where there is too much of injustice, inequality, ingratitude and suffering.

For obvious reasons, in the fictional world fashioned by Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar eccentricity is seen as a positive value. It is acknowledged whole-heartedly, if not actually prized. Perhaps we should see it as a gesture of defiance, making light of life's monotony. We all have our little obsessions and quirks. The eccentric accentuates his obsessions to such an extent that they loom larger than life, seem to exist on their own and lift the obsessed above the common crowd. For instance, the cheerful boy rower in "Nannā Māñjī" is a brave, little eccentric but the story implies, rather brutally, that he is too good for a world as damned and foul as ours.

There are eccentrics everywhere. In "Hōnē-vālā Bādshāh," a man, in all sincerity, believes that he would soon ascend to a throne somewhere. In "Miqyāsu 'l-Muḥabbat," a luckless doctor invents what he thinks is the world's first

“amorometer.” In “K̄h̄ōyā hu’ā Ufaq,” a down-and-out woman leads a life full of illusions, hoping against hope, to be loved once more for her sake. Even in “Lāṭain,” with its gruesomely happy conclusion, the old, lecherous money-lender is an eccentric of a different shade. So is the doctor in “Miṭṭ̄h̄ī kā Lā’ēsenshiyēt,” a dislikable, self-centered male, whose love of literature is a mere sham, a veneer covering up a streak of greed and sadism. The best story in the collection is “Zindagī kī Kahānī,” with its strikingly stark simplicity and tragic ending. It too has an eccentric in it. “Muskurātā hu’ā Buḍḥ” is a thriller, a rare thing in Urdu. The characters are interesting enough, the pace brisk, but the conclusion somewhat forced. It is high time someone published the collected works of Muḥammad Khālid Akhtar. He is now one of our grand old masters and richly deserves a more substantial accolade.

*

WITH Ḥasan Manẓar we immediately move to a different world which is essentially realistic, unsparing and candid. Without any doubt he is one of the finest practitioners of short fiction in Pakistan and his canvas is vast. He is not invariably attached to realism, as anyone who comes across his three earlier collections of short stories would note. But he is at his best in those stories in which the outward layer of straightforward realism conveys impressions of psyches disturbed by complicated and ambiguous drives. It is the undercurrent that carries the weight, terrorizing or coercing people into doing things they have no explanations for. No one is secure. For the victims the oppression is awfully real. But even the oppressors sometimes look behind or around them in fear. It is a scenario that radiates alarm.

In “Boumedienne” he has written a story of seminal magnitude. No other uncompromising indictment of the psyche of the people who inhabit the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent is possible. It is a psyche which, whatever the reasons may be, knows no remorse. The story has to be read carefully to grasp the implications. It raises a very basic and horrifying question: Why is it that people who kill, rape and mutilate without compunction, kill even infants and rip out fetuses, never afterwards have a nervous breakdown, never turn into psychotics, don’t need any psychotherapy? By now millions have been killed or injured in riots on the Subcontinent. Not a single person has ever been tried or convicted for these crimes. That is to be seen as official apathy or impotence. But there is another judge no man or woman can avoid and that’s one’s conscience. However, in our case it seems that conscience itself is either dead or in abeyance. Ḥasan Manẓar should know. He is a qualified psychotherapist. It is not a pleasant story to read but demands attention. Have we ritualized violence? Is there any hope for us, one wonders? Perhaps none. Meanwhile the killing goes on.

Almost every story in this new collection is readable. A few are outstanding. “Ēk Maut jis par Kō’ī Nahīn Rōyā” is about the closure of a library. By implication it makes nonsense of our priorities. No one would mourn indeed for a

library in a country so calculatingly intolerant of literacy. “Khadsha” is masterly in its portrayal of a lower middle-class slum and has a flash of black humor, something rare in Ḥasan Manẓar, at the end.

He is at his best in the longer pieces. In “Rocking Chair,” almost a novelette, a young woman behaves like an automaton while carrying on a clandestine affair with a man of her age group. However, as soon as they get married, she sees her lover for what he is, a shabby, diffident exploiter, shrugs off her submissiveness and comes into contact with her authentic reality. The dénouement is startling and persuasive.

Even better is the “Būrḥā Maḡarmačḥ,” set in South Africa. Its depiction of the Asian community is remarkable. Authenticity such as this is in a class of its own. Ādam ‘Īsā Qāzī, the old croc, is a good-for-nothing alcoholic who can’t control his tongue once he has had a bit too much. A pitiable creature, he makes the life of his family too miserable for words. It is likely that all his drunken gossip, mostly about his exploits as a womanizer, is a make-believe but the damage it causes is real enough. He is a victim of self-deception. But so are his family members, for whom keeping up appearances is not an option but a self-imposed obligation. The deceptions generate fear. And the general aura of fear makes the main characters feel more insecure than they really are. □

—MUHAMMAD SALIM-UR-RAHMAN
Editor, Savera (Lahore)

[Gratefully reproduced from *The Friday Times* (26 June–2 July 1998), p.22; edited for the *AUS*.]

Mir Taqi Mir: Selected Poetry. Translated by K.C. KANDA. Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1997. 318 pp. Rs. 395.

THE life of Mīr Taqī Mīr (1723–1810) spanned a century of tragic and momentous events, of the transformation of the social, economic and political structure of society. An embodiment of dignity and self-respect, Mīr held his head high in an age that saw the high and mighty bite the dust. In an era when Persian enjoyed prestige and status, he adopted *Rēkhṭā* (later known as Urdu) and took it to great heights. Indeed he made it the vehicle of exalted expression. He imbued his poetry with profound humanism and cherished the renaissance concept of man—man as the receptacle of infinite possibilities:

Meet one who is a man and keep his company
Who does not pride himself on knowledge and ability

When eloquent, a world may flock to hear him speak
 When silent, in himself a whole world he should be.

Mir is primarily a love poet. No other Urdu poet experienced such pain and anguish of love and demonstrated such profound understanding of this sentiment. In fact love is the *raison d'être* of Mir's life and his poetry as he makes evident in his semi-autobiographical Persian work, *Zikr-e Mir*. The six *divāns* (collections) of his *ghazals* treat different facets of divine and secular love, and as many as four of his *maṣnavīs* are devoted to this Grande passion. *Maṣnavīs*, one might point out, are poems in rhymed couplets. They may be long tales of romance or quite short poems on various aspects of the quotidian. All Mir's *maṣnavīs* are of the second kind.

In the collection under review, K.C. Kanda presents English translation of 108 *ghazals* of the poet, culled out from the *divāns* and excerpts from four of his *maṣnavīs*. But, unlike David Matthews and Christopher Shackleton in their *An Anthology of Classical Urdu Love Lyrics* or Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam in their *Three Mughal Poets*, Kanda does not mention the source of the originals. He also doesn't say anything about his principle of selection—whether it is chronology, theme or any other criterion. Whatever that principle may be, the fact remains that he is not very rigorous in his selection. Moreover, inserting a *rubā'ī* here, a *qit'a'* there isn't really the ideal way to introduce poetry to an uninitiated readership. He could have put them in different sections with appropriate headings.

The production of the Urdu text, its Roman transliteration and the English translation itself all need comment. But given the constraints of space, I can allude to them only briefly here. The volume has been organized as follows: the Urdu text appears on the left page, followed on the right page by its translation into English and transliteration in Roman. The translator's introduction gives some biographical facts and the poet's major preoccupations in poetry. There is a select bibliography at the end.

Obviously Kanda has endeavored to make the book as reader-friendly as possible. However, the Urdu text is marred by numerous mistakes and plain misreadings and misrepresentations. A few samples are as follows: the famous line "*dil vo nagar nahīn ke p'hir ābād hō sakē*" has become "*dil woh nagar nahin jo abaad ho sakē*" ("*dil vo nagar nahīn jō ābād hō sakē*") (p.21). Likewise, "*sau ab hua hai fan hamara*" ("*so ab hūvā hai fan hamārā*") (p.29) and "*na peena jo kuch thā*" ("*na pīnā jō kuch thā*") (p.16) should have been "*so p'habrā hai ab'ī fan hamārā*" and "*na pīnā thā jō kuch*" respectively. Other errors include: *phirtē* (*phirtē*) (p. 20) for (*phirtī*), *kisi* (*kisī*) (p. 18) for (*kasū*), *isi* (*isī*) (p. 34) for (*isī hī*). In the popular line "*jānē na jānē gul hī na jānē bāgh tō sārā jānē hai*", a "*thau*" has been added after the phrase "*jānē na jānē*" (p. 39), and a question mark (?) after the word "*dēkhā*" in "*dēkhā is bīmārī-e dil nē ākhir kām tamām kiya*." These are serious lapses which lead to distortion, misrepresentation and expansion or reduction of the textuality of the original.

The transliteration of Urdu words in the Roman script still remains to be standardized in a formal way, yet it does follow certain common practices. Thus it is *divan* or *diwan* (*divān*), not *dewan*; *kulliyat* (*dkulliyāt*), not *kulliat*; *zīkr* (*zīkr*), not *zīkar*; *sukhan*, not *sakhun*, so on and so forth.

Translation of Urdu *ghazals*, and that too by a classical poet like Mīr, is a formidable task, given the constraints of form and the subtle and rich cultural context that informs them. To illustrate, let's take the couplet "*Agar̄che gōshaguzīn hūn shā'irōn mēn Mīr / Pe mērē shōr nē rū'-e zamīn tamām liyā.*" Kanda translates it as "Though I am a hermit, Mīr, fighting shy of fame / Yet my poetic works enjoy a worldwide acclaim." Several things may be noted here. First, "recluse" would have been a better word than "hermit" for "*gōshaguzīn*." Second, the translator leaves out the phrase "*shā'irōn mēn*" (among poets) and adds the phrase "fighting shy of fame." But a more serious lapse has occurred in the second line where "*shōr*" has been translated as "poetic works" whereas "lament" or "fame" would have been closer to the original as they contain both meanings—plaint as well as poetry. Further, the sharp irony in Mīr's couplets has come a cropper at many places in the translation. For instance, the couplet "*Mīr Ṣāhib, zamāna nāzūk hai / Dōnōn hār'ōn sē ṭhāmiyē dastār*" has been translated as "The times are hard, O Mir beware / Guard your self-respect with care." And here is how Russell translates it: "Mīr Sahib, take care! the times are critical / You need both hands to keep your turban on." It is obvious that Russell's version is not only closer to the original, but also retains the irony, the cultural nuance and the tonality of the original. In fact, at many places, Kanda sacrifices the angularity and the vigor of the content for the sake of some specious rhyme. Then he resorts, though less frequently, to over-translation. In the process he loses the brevity, and the translation sometimes reads not as poetry but as paraphrase.

I guess I have been quite harsh on this work. But some of the lapses could easily have been avoided. Despite these inadequacies, the volume, I trust, will create some interest in Mīr's poetry, and this, in turn, will impel the reader to delve deeper. Meanwhile I would urge the publishers to rectify the errors in the next imprint. □

—M. ASADUDDIN
Jamia Millia Islamia

[Gratefully reproduced from the *Indian Review of Books* (16 June–15 July 1997), pp. 46–8; edited for the *AUS*.]

CHRISTOPHER SHACKLE and JAVED MAJEED. *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. 262 pp. Rs. 395.

ON JUNE 10, 1879, from Park Hotel at Simla, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan wrote to Alṭā Ḥusain Ḥālī:

Your gracious letter and five copies of the *Musaddas* arrived. I could not put the book down from the moment it reached my hands till it was finished. It would be absolutely correct to say that with this poem begins the modern age of poetry. It is beyond me to describe its elegance, beauty, and flow. I am amazed that this factual theme which is devoid of lies, hyperbole and far-fetched similes—the things poets take pride in—has been delineated by you in such an effective and eloquent manner. There are several stanzas here that I could read only with tears in my eyes. ...

I thank you for what you say about me [in the introduction]. ... Verily, I was the cause of this book, and I consider that my finest deed. When God asks me what I had done in the world, I would say: “I did nothing except that I had Ḥālī write the *Musaddas*.” ...

I thank you for offering the copyrights to the College, but I do not wish that this poem which mirrors the *qaum's* present condition and is a threnody on its sad state, be made restricted in any manner. Let it be printed any number of times—I'll be that much happier. Let it be published far and wide. Let urchins go about singing it in the streets; let courtesans sing it in intimate surroundings; let *qavvāls* sing it at shrines. ... I'll be that much happier.²

High praise indeed, also prophetic. Ḥālī's poem—its full title was, “*Madd-o-Jazr-e Islām*” (“The Flow and Ebb of Islam”), but it came to be known simply by its stanzaic form—went through seven printings in as many years, and it was in fact recited from pulpits and stages,³ while portions of it became a fixed part of school syllabi for generations of Muslim children. And though it found several

²Shaikh Muḥammad Ismā'īl, ed. *Makātīb-e Sar Saiyad* (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1959), pp. 312–3. (My translation.)

³Maulvī 'Abdu 'l-Ḥāq once attended a rural wedding in Punjab at the turn of the century where several courtesans performed all night long. Near dawn, the last singer got up, and cast a glance at the vast crowd, mostly of farmers and farm-workers; then she began to sing the *Musaddas*. “There was dead silence while she sang; some people were swaying, as if transformed, while some others had tears in their eyes.” (Quoted in S. M. Ikrām, *Mauj-e Kauṣar*, [Delhi: Adabī Duniyā, n.d.], p. 125.)

detractors, it also found many imitators. This overwhelming reception surprised the poet as much as it gratified him, for Ḥālī had many misgivings concerning the stylistic blandness of his poem and its didactic tone. He had also started to feel that he had been a bit too pessimistic—the poem ended on a note of quiet despair which went against Ḥālī’s true intentions. Accordingly, he brought out a revised second edition in 1886, with a substantive number of additional verses. These took note of the signs of awakening and regeneration which Ḥālī felt he could discern in Indian Muslims. He also added a separate poem addressed to the Prophet of Islam, thus bringing his book to a prayerful and more optimistic conclusion.

Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914) was born in a *sharīf*—i.e., not belonging to any artisan community—but poor family in Panipat. Married early, he ran away to Delhi because he keenly desired to educate himself, and though he had to return home after only eighteen months he never lost that desire. He returned to Delhi some years after the Mutiny and found employment as a tutor in the household of Navāb Muṣṭafā Khān “Shēfta.” Shēfta was a highly learned man, and a prominent figure in Delhi. Through him Ḥālī came to know Ghālib, and also Syed Ahmad Khan. After Shēfta’s death, Ḥālī moved to Lahore, where he found employment in the Punjab Government Book Depot. His work as an editor of instructional books brought him significant exposure to Western educational and literary ideas. Eventually he returned to Delhi, to teach for twelve years at the Anglo-Arabic College. In 1887 he retired to Panipat after being granted, at Syed Ahmad Khan’s behest, a modest pension by the Nizam, where he continued to write both verse and prose. Among Ḥālī’s major works in prose are two biographies (Ghālib, and Sir Syed) and a book on Poetry and Poetics;⁴ likewise there are several outstanding poems too, but the *Musaddas* is his towering achievement.

By the time Ḥālī came to write his poem, the genre of *musaddas* (a substantial poem consisting of six-line stanzas, the first four lines of each stanza sharing one rhyme, the last two sharing another) had become, at the hands of Mīr Anīs and Mīrzā Dabīr, and their literary descendants, almost the normative form for the elegies (*marṣiya*) on the martyrs of Karbala. In other words, the genre was by

⁴Much of Ḥālī’s book on Ghālib’s life is included in translation in Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Ghālib: Life and Letters* (London, 1969); an independent complete translation is *Yadgar-e-Ghālib* by K. H. Qadiri (Delhi, 1990); *Hayāt-e Javād*, Ḥālī’s biography of Syed Ahmad Khan, has been translated by K. H. Qadiri and David Matthews (Delhi, 1979); for Ḥālī’s ideas on poetry and their profound influence on Urdu poetry, see Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley, 1994).

then not only well known but also carried an aura of gravity. Ḥālī's imitators further enhanced that. The culmination was in the two best-known poems of Muḥammad Iqbāl, *Shikva* and *Javāb-e Shikva*, "Complaint" and "Answer," whose thematic concerns too could arguably be traced back to Ḥālī's poem.

With the rise of nationalist sentiment in India, particularly after the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, people such as Sir Syed and his senior friends, such as Żakāu 'l-Lāh, Nażīr Aḥmad, Ḥālī, and Muḥsinu 'l-Mulk, were often pejoratively labeled as "loyalists." That view, of course, ignored the actual experience and mental framework of these people, for whom the English, by virtue of physical conquest, were as "natural" a ruler of India as the Mughals or the Marathas. These men did not belong to the soldiering class which had been marginalized in the changed political circumstances. Their religion also urged them to "obey those who held command over them." Most importantly, they had also experienced that *pax Britannica* which had brought relief to the vast majority of the people of Delhi and western U.P. after a full century of marauding by hordes of Afghans, Rohillas, Jats, Sikhs, and Marathas. No wonder then that Sir Syed, in his numerous articles and speeches, Nażīr Aḥmad, in his novels and lectures, and Ḥālī, in his *Musaddas*—and even the great poet Ghālīb before any of them—saw the English rule as a moment of opportunity. They, of course, were rudely shocked by the events of 1857, first by the violence and upheaval caused by the *khākīs* and then by the barbarity of the vengeful *gōrās*. However, given their previous experience, they could not help but perceive in the new structures of civil administration, justice and education—particularly the latter—much progress and hope for the future.

Following Sir Syed's example, Ḥālī wished to address his people in order to inspire them, to make them as aware of their own potential and the opportune moment, as their sorry state. No easy task. Ḥālī felt he couldn't accomplish that without invoking the past and reminding his fellow Muslims of their forbears' achievements.

Ḥālī's use of Islamic history beyond the borders of India, his listing of the great centers of Islamic learning and cultural flourishing in Spain, North Africa, Central Asia, Anatolia, and Eastern Europe no doubt expanded the mental horizons of his readers both vertically, on the scale of time, and horizontally, on the scale of place. But it was not—as Shackle and Majeed suggest—that any awareness of the "Greater Islamic Lands" had been completely missing. People had surnames—Shīrāzī, Tirmizī, Bukhārī, Shāmī, Nīshāpūrī, and so forth—that proclaimed remote connections and earlier histories. Certainly if that awareness had been missing, Tipu Sultan would not have sought and obtained his robes of accession from the Turkish Caliph, nor would the British have used the same figure in a vain attempt to quell the furies of the Mutiny. The distinctive signifi-

cance of the *Musaddas* in this regard lies in the fact that it placed the names of Baghdad, Cordoba, and Samarqand even on the lips of school children. (Some credit must also be given to the colonial authorities, for they prescribed the books and anthologies that were read by generations of pupils.)

The invocation of the past, however, was not meant to bring back the earlier power structures. Ḥālī, and his mentor Sir Syed, had no delusions about kings, navābs and rājās. In the “Supplement to the *Musaddas*” and other poems, Ḥālī explicitly stated that the days of “one man rule” (*shakhṣī ḥukūmat*) had ended and that “public” had to be acknowledged as the rightful repository of authority. Ḥālī’s emphasis on practical knowledge, for example, agriculture, was also anti-feudal, and similar to the spirit in which Naẓīr Aḥmad, through both word and example, urged Indian Muslims to pursue commerce, and Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī—better known as the “Rusvā” of *Umrā’ō Jān Adā* fame—similarly tried to make manual labor respectable in the eyes of *sharīf* Muslims.

The book at hand presents Ḥālī’s epic poem primarily for the benefit of those who cannot read it in the original, but there is also much in it that may be read with benefit by any Urdu scholar. The book’s center piece is the poem in its revised version, facing an English translation in simple prose.⁵ The changes from the original version, however, have been noted and commented on in an appendix. Though the supplemental verses that Ḥālī composed for the second edition have been left out, they are sufficiently discussed in the introduction. Ḥālī’s own two prefaces, however, are reproduced and translated. The translators’ introduction gives a history of the poem and its reception, including much on Ḥālī’s imitators and detractors; it then identifies and comments upon the poem’s major themes. A bibliography, and a useful glossary and index at the end round out the book. Like the earlier titles in the “SOAS South Asian Texts” series, this too is a finely organized book. It is also attractively produced, except for a very few blemishes: (1) some errors in the transliteration of Urdu verses in the introductory sections (pages 42, 53, 54, 59, 66, 68), (2) misarranged translated verses on page 127, and (3) the loss of a couple of letters in the reproduction of the Urdu text on page 154. The translation throughout is accurate and lucid, making the poem totally accessible. I noted only one serious error. The fifth and sixth lines in

⁵ There are two other English translations of the *Musaddas*. An anonymous version titled *Musaddas-e-Hālī* was published in 1975 (?) by Peermahomed Ebrahim Trust, Karachi. This is in straightforward prose, with a detailed introduction and copious notes by the translator. The other, by A. Rauf Luther, is titled *Truth Unveiled* (Lahore, 1978); regrettably, it is in verse and utterly unreadable. Neither translation was available to Shackle and Majeed.

stanza 234 presently read: “The theories of the Greeks are implanted in our hearts, but we do not believe in the revelation presently granted us.” They should be, “The theories of the Greeks are so deeply engraved on our hearts that we wouldn’t accept the Revelation itself were it to happen now.”

The heart of the editors’ contribution is the insightful section which carefully identifies and names the poem’s major themes: “Decline and progress,” “Smelting and historical refashioning,” “The economics of time and bodily illness,” “Deserts and gardens,” “Globalization, the written word and literary propriety,” “Carrion progress,” “Chaos and order.” The writing is earnest, but thankfully not overloaded with jargon, and only infrequently do they read back into the poem literary fashions of today. The detailed explorations of the extended metaphors of “garden,” “smelting,” and “illness” in Ḥālī’s poem are particularly illuminating. With reference to the first, for example, they not only point out the obvious—pre-Islamic Arabia a desert, post-Islamic Arabia a garden—but also the less obvious: gardens in the promised paradise; Mughal gardens; and colonial irrigation projects, such as in the Punjab.⁶ Then they usefully add, “... the weaving together of desert and garden in the poem evokes in part the imaginary landscape of Arabia and the symbolic geography of Persian gardens. Both can be seen to represent the two major strands of Islam, namely the now increasingly central strand of Arab Islam, and the soon to be marginalized Persianate heritage of Mughal India” (p. 61). They, however, begin to lose me when they transform what to me is an idiomatic expression into something portentous. The lines in question read: *Na kuḥ aisē sāmān thē vān muyassar / Kaival jis sē khil jā’ēn dil kē sarāsar*, “Nor were there obtainable there [in pre-Islamic Arabia] the requisite materials necessary for the lotus-flowers of the heart to open fully” (p. 62). The authors’ comment: “This image of a lotus flower blooming in the desert makes abundantly clear the poet’s identification between cultivation—both material and spiritual—and civilization generally.” And this, they feel, proves their earlier statement that the poem “seems to value ... the cultivation of exotica in hitherto inhospitable environments.” Their use of the word “exotica” then leads them on the one hand to juxtapose it with Ḥālī’s use of the English word “natural” in his new poetics, and on the other to what they call “the exoticization of Islam” in late nineteenth century. To my mind that is placing an overly heavy exegetical burden on an ordinary idiomatic expression for

⁶They could have also mentioned the tremendous impact on the people of Delhi when the canal that coursed through Chandni Chowk was cleaned up by the English and again flowed with water, reviving a sense of security and prosperity.

“heart’s desires” which Ḥālī could have as easily used in any other context.

Likewise, in the sub-section entitled, “Globalization, the written word and literary propriety,” the authors’ remark that “the *Musaddas* is acutely aware of what imperial power can command in archival terms” is precisely right, and they correctly identify how Ḥālī links “travel” with “knowledge” and laments the lack in his co-religionists of “scientific habits of observation and verification.” They do not, however, acknowledge the possibility that Ḥālī’s source of inspiration could also have been the numerous occasions in the Qur’an where God commands mankind to observe and reflect upon the Universe, and the *ḥadīṣ* that enjoins Muslims to seek knowledge even if it is to be found in far away China. Next they state:

Ḥālī assumes ... throughout the poem, a homogenous all-Indian Muslim identity. To a certain extent, this conception reflects the way the category was defined in the Population Census of India from 1871 onwards. ... The poem does not just assume the existence of an all-Indian Muslim community, bound together by a common historical experience of decline. The shift toward Arab strands of Islam, and the move away from Persian influences, signals an attempt to link the existence of an all-Indian Muslim community with a pan-Islamic one, whose center of historical gravity is to be found in the Middle East. (pp. 66–7)

For one, Ḥālī’s posited “center of gravity” was Mecca, not the Middle East or the Ottoman Caliphate, which was the case with the “Pan-Islamists” who came after him. Further, Ḥālī’s homogenous Muslim community was posited against the actuality of a community that viewed itself in sectarian terms and, more significantly, as consisting of *ashrāf* and *ajlāf*—upper caste/class people and lower caste/class people. It is this latter “egalitarian” spirit that distinguishes Ḥālī from many of his peers. But there is an obverse side too.

An intriguing line in the *Musaddas*, not commented upon by Shackle and Majeed, describes the Muslim “fleet” coming to grief on the shores of Ganges.⁷ Ḥālī does not offer there any explanation why the disaster occurred. But in another poem written nine years later—*Shikva-e Hind* (“Complaint to India”)—Ḥālī, while acknowledging India’s “hospitality,” charges it with the destruction of all that was noble and good in the immigrating/conquering

⁷Stanza 113: “That fearless fleet of the religion of the Hijaz, whose mark reached the extreme limits of the world, which no apprehension could obstruct, which did not hesitate in the Gulf of Oman, or falter in the Red Sea, which traversed the seven seas—sank when it came to the mouth of the Ganges” (p. 145).

Muslims. After coming to India, Ḥālī complains, the Muslims became ungenerous, socially and racially discriminating, non-egalitarian, and much worse. The implied but unnamed cause being the caste divisions and rules of untouchability within the “host” Hindus. The poem ends making a somewhat peculiar identification between the two “outsiders,” the Muslims and the British, while radically separating them from the indigenous people, presumably the Hindus.⁸ Here, Ḥālī’s definition of “his people” is primarily exclusive and not so liberal.

Ḥālī, however, was not blind to the everyday tyrannies of the colonial rulers. This comes out sharply in a poem entitled “The Medical Examination of a White Man and a Black Man.” An Indian, on horse back, and an Englishman, on foot, go to see the Civil Surgeon, to obtain from him a medical certificate that would allow them to go on leave. On the way they quarrel, and the Englishman severely beats the Indian. When the two finally see the doctor, he immediately certifies the Englishman as being ill, but denies the Indian.

“There must be something seriously wrong with a White whose blows fail to kill a Black,” the doctor explains, “but a Black who doesn’t fall down dead when hit by a White couldn’t possibly be ill.”⁹

In a section titled “Carrion progress,” Shackle and Majeed seek to highlight what they believe to be Ḥālī’s ambivalence towards his own iconic notion of Progress (*taraqqu*). “First,” they begin,

at one point in the poem progress is likened to the carrion corpse of a female dog (*murdar kuttiya* [sic]). Although the context here is the failure of Muslims to recognize what progress is, to describe progress as ‘carrion’ is more suggestive of enervating decline than invigorating progress. This is a clear instance in the poem where the value system of the text, apparently so much weighted in favour of progress, becomes blurred. (p. 73)

⁸The poem begins: “Farewell, India, the autumn-less garden. We, your foreign guests, have stayed enough.” It ends “Just as the snake-charmer keeps his distance from the snake, so will all your rulers from you. We shall leave behind many blessings of ours; and though we shall be gone others will be edified by what we experienced.” (Iftikhār Aḥmad Ṣiddiqī, ed. *Javābir-e Ḥālī* [Lahore: Kārvān-e Adab, 1989], pp. 314; 320.)

⁹*Op. cit.*, pp. 100–1. Sir Syed also wrote a scathing essay about an actual incident in which an English officer killed his groom.

But the correct context is two fold: first, the immediately preceding stanzas which praise Indian Hindus for being “progressive” and thus pre-eminent in all walks of life; and second, the archly sarcastic tone of the stanza which contains the phrase in question. The pertinent lines are: “We [the Muslims] still do not have even the slightest idea as to what sort of carrion bitch progress is” (p. 153) [*Nabīn ab tak aṣlan khabar ham kō ye b^hī / Ke hai kaun murdār kutiyā taraqqī*]. Here Ḥālī has used two idiomatic expressions—more precisely, an idiom and a proverb—commonly heard until at least fifty years ago, and both more closely identified with female speech and thus, in terms of Urdu culture, more intensely condemning of the all-male Muslim élites. Ḥālī merged the first expression, *murdār*, with the second, which he abbreviated as well as translated—the original expression being, “. . . *če kuttīst*.”¹⁰

Later in the same sub-section, they find ambiguity in Ḥālī’s laudation of European peoples’ “restless energy,” and declare that “the languorous pose of Indian Muslims [painted by Ḥālī] can almost seem positively appealing.” They cannot be faulted for finding languor appealing, but I must point out that Ḥālī is not ambiguous at least in the earlier lines they comment upon: “They [the Europeans] are racing so fast along the way of searching as if they had still very far to go” (p. 151). The correct reading, as the printed text shows, is *usī tarah* (“in just the same previous manner”), and not *is tarah* (“in the following manner”)—only the latter would readily allow their interpretation of *gōyā* (“as if”) as suggestive of something “illusory” in the Europeans’ race for progress.

Ḥālī, however, has a separate poem on Progress, which he presented in December, 1903, at Bombay at the seventeenth annual meeting of the Muslim Educational Conference.¹¹ It clearly indicates that whatever ambivalence Ḥālī might have had concerning the notion of progress—I, for one, see hardly any—it could lie only in what he perceived to be its twofold course: progress always came hand in hand with decline—one group’s progress inevitably meant decline for another. And that is why, Ḥālī insisted, all members of any group must hold together—they must hold collective benefit above individual gain. Ḥālī, in his own fashion, found that to be true in the case of the latest success story in world history: India’s colonial rulers. He could have been ambivalent toward the latter’s rôle in India, but there is only an absolute urgency in his call to his Muslim

¹⁰I can still recall a female relative’s remark concerning someone she regarded as shameless: *vō kyā jānēn sharm če kuttīst!* (“How would she know shame from a bitch?”).

¹¹It was later published under two different titles: “The Philosophy of Progress,” and “Progress and Decline.” (*Op. cit.*, pp. 367–71.)

compatriots to come together and launch themselves headlong down the course of progress just as their contemporary rulers had done.

To conclude, despite the traces of frustration in the immediately preceding remarks, I regard this book as a most commendable addition to our English language sources on the social and cultural history of the Muslims of South Asia, and congratulate Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed for their exemplary achievement. □

—C.M. NAIM
The University of Chicago

[Gratefully reproduced from the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35: 4 (1998), pp. 451–5.