

BOOK REVIEWS

Of Gems and Rhinestones

Colours of Loneliness: Short Stories from Urdu and the Regional Languages of Pakistan. Edited by MUZAFFAR IQBAL. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999. xvi, 405 pp.

THIS is a thick book: 405 pages with 38 short stories. Out of the 38 stories, there are 19 from Urdu, 6 from Pashto, 5 from Punjabi, and 4 each from Balochi and Sindhi. Only 6 are by women.

As a literary critic and scholar focusing on South Asia, I am always looking for translations of Pakistani literature that I can include in my courses on South Asian literature. However, I don't think I will be using *The Colours of Loneliness*.

Translations are always a labor of love and I do appreciate the work that must have gone into putting together this anthology. However, a translation is also a window on a new world, a world that its readers need help in understanding. I, for instance, do not know a great deal about Pakistan's literary history, its major writers, the critical reception and context of their work, the schools of writing, and so on. The editor, Muzaffar Iqbal, fails to provide any information of this sort. Instead, the introduction is wasted on making broad generalizations about "literature":

[L]iterature acts as a bridge between succeeding generations and ensures continuity of tradition by linking the present with the past. This ability of literature to forge a link between human beings living centuries apart, in different climes and circumstances, transcends geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, providing humanity a common ground for sharing its diverse experiences and aspirations. (p. ix)

On the one hand, the editor himself modestly disavows any representativeness in his selections, candidly telling us that the anthology "reflects the literary taste and preferences of its compiler" (p. viii). On the other hand, the author of the dust jacket blurb claims that "at the same time it holds up a mirror to the rich diversity of Pakistan's multicultural and multiracial society." I am not sure how far I can trust that a match exists between the editor's taste and the diversity of Pakistani society. For instance, I notice that only nine names are common between the anthology under review and an anthology called *Fires in an Autumn Garden* which also appeared in 1999 from the same publisher. Even with my

limited knowledge, I can figure out that writers like Ali Baba, Altaf Fatima, Farkhanda Lodhi, Khalida Hussain, Zahida Hina, Yasmin Marri, Nasim Kharal and Mirza Hamid Baig are important writers. Including some of them would have helped reduce the imbalance in the gender and regional representation in *Colours*.

An outsider like myself can only wonder whether the exclusions and inclusions of these two anthologies represent the political and ideological divisions of Pakistan's literary circles. Not having access to that information, I can only comment on the stories included in *Colours* at the level of my own response to them, reflecting my own "literary taste and preferences."

Seven stories stood out at my first reading. These were stories that made an impression on my consciousness because of the subject matter and its treatment. Amar Jaleel's "History" is a very powerful story that questions the disjunction between Islam's precepts of equality and Islam as it is practiced in contemporary Pakistan. In an understated narrative voice that reports with the objectivity of a camera lens, Jaleel unmasks the racism and classism of Pakistan's élite. There should be no class or race differences in a mosque, and yet, a poor black man is denied his wish to offer prayers in the front row, called names like "nigger," "habshi," and "monkey," and brutally kicked and dragged out of the mosque. The story marks the disjunction between the past and present by invoking Ayaz, the African slave of Mahmood Gaznavi who always prayed with the king in the front row.

My next favorite story was Nilofar Iqbal's "The Bell." Built around the family dynamics of three generations, it portrays how the strain of looking after a terminally-ill old man impacts on the members of his family. The writer deftly presents the points of view of both the sick and the healthy. While the reader feels sorry about the gradual weakening and isolation of the old man, he also empathizes with the man's son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. The story draws attention to the added burden on the family because the old man's other children have left for the Middle East and the States. His daughter from the Middle East has sent a few gadgets, like an electric massager and a juicer, but what the story subtly points out is that these gifts are useless in the absence of additional help for the daughter-in-law, who is made to run up and down by the bell the old man's son has so lovingly installed in the patient's room. Without blaming anyone directly, Iqbal vividly portrays the strains on a middle-class family, particularly on the wife, in a metropolitan city. And this is a story that will make many an expatriate feel guilty.

Ashfaq Ahmad's "The Shepherd," is set in the 40's and describes a Hindu character, Dauji, who knows his Holy Qur'an and his Persian literature better than the Muslim characters in the story. Presented from the point of view of a narrator remembering his childhood, it portrays a Pre-Partition town where Hindus and Muslims live in harmony and a syncretic culture flourishes. This Eden-like memory is ruptured by history: the town changes character during

independence and partition. Refugees take over Dauji's house and he barely escapes with his life.

Manto's "Coward" and Hasan Manzar's "Mitthal Shah's Yard" depict the double standards of society as far as sexuality is concerned. Javed, "in desperate need of a woman" (p. 214), thinks of women stereotypically as virgins and whores. The first type is associated with moonlight and flowers, and the other with filth and muck. Hasan Manzar's story portrays a young girl, Cheemi, who is first arrested on a charge of prostitution and later written about in the newspaper. Manzar satirizes the hypocrisy and sexual repression of society by using a narrator who reports on the incident from the point of view of a young boy who does not understand the charges or the legal language they are couched in. The young narrator reads the newspaper report to the members of Cheemi's family, who are all illiterate and overjoyed at seeing a large photo of her in the newspaper: "Arrested for public display of indecency....Yesterday, in the darkness of the evening, young couples...engaged in shameful acts were apprehended by the police" (pp. 235-6). The story suggests that young men and women can be arrested by the police simply for walking together.

Qudratullah Shahab's "Mother" is a tribute to a mother whose needs in life were few. But the power of the story lies in its ability to connect the individual with history. This mother's story is also the story of her father's displacement at the time of the "digging of the Sarhind canal."

Her father's meagre holding fell in the area through which the canal was to be laid and it was, therefore, taken over... [I]t was only that he was such a simpleton that he could never quite find out where that office was located and what formalities were necessary to get his money. (pp. 301-2)

The story reminded me of ongoing displacements of people from their land, such as in the Narmada Valley in India.

Ghulam Abbas's "Overcoat," Intizar Hussain's "The Lost Ones," Khadija Mastoor's "Embarrassment," Mumtaz Mufti's "Apa," Bano Qudsiya's "Many Faces of Truth," Fazle Haq Shaida's "Mahtaba," Rif'at's "Ascetic," and Zamiruddin Ahmad's "Wrong Number" were stories that I found interesting, but not as memorable. Hussain's "The Lost Ones," for instance, has an important theme, but I found it too repetitive and abstract. Shaida's "Mahtaba" is excluded from being a first-rate story because at times it is difficult to keep its chronology straight. It may have something to do with the quality of the translation. I also wondered about translation issues with Zamiruddin Ahmad's "Wrong Number." For example, the editor informs me that the story "selected for this volume" is called "Purvai." No reason is given for the title change. Since to me "*purvā'i*" means "easterly wind," and since "Wrong Number" has no reference to "*purvā'ī*," I wondered whether certain liberties had been taken with the transla-

tion.¹ While I admired many aspects of the story—its satiric tone, its ironic juxtapositions, its highlighting of the contradictions of the Pakistani military élite—it ended with many loose ends. Who were the robbers? Were they the friends of the Brigadier’s daughter? Was there a connection between the wrong number calls and the robbery? These questions were not resolved for me and that left my reading experience of “Wrong Number” less than satisfactory.

Khadija Mastoor’s “Embarrassment” also has some narrative information missing. Although I figured out, after my third or fourth reading, that Dadi Anna was probably the family’s retired ayah, the following sentence, which appears at the end of the very first paragraph, makes no sense and renders a very important part of the story incomprehensible:

It was this childhood love which was responsible for her leaving the house, never to return once father had died, although once or twice a month she would make enquiries about her well-being. (p. 182)

“Childhood love” cannot refer to Dadi Anna, but it is she who leaves the house. Also, the story never clarifies why “childhood love” caused Dadi Anna to never return after the protagonist’s father died.

I’m unsure whether it is the selections themselves or the quality of the translations that make me feel that almost 60% of the stories in this anthology are forgettable. And although I didn’t mind reading most of them, there were some that bored me to death. Being a stubborn reader, I went back and re-read them, despite feeling that my brain was constantly distracted, and I came to the conclusion that they truly were impositions on the reader’s patience and comprehension. Muzaffar Iqbal’s “The Cave,” Farooq Khalid’s “A Few Hours in an Alien City,” and Enver Sajjad’s “The Garden of Delight” put me to sleep many a time. Their symbolism was impossible to decipher and there did not seem to be a story line. Reading “The Garden of Delight,” I wondered what the difference was between “maiden virgins” and “virgin maidens” and why they were in a separate pool from “naked men and women.”

Dur Muhammad Kasi’s “The Jackal” could have been an intriguing story about the life of Pakistan’s élite, except I couldn’t figure out the symbolism associated with the jackal. At first it seemed as though the jackals were more ethical than the humans in Islamabad (I presume). But then the narrator said:

O God! my hands, my ears, my body—I, too, a jackal! No!, a dog! No, a hyena!—God forbid! forgive us, before the curse, before the Day of Judgement, forgive us—the apes, the bears, and the boars, they were also

¹“*Purvā*” is the title of another story by the author; the editor of the volume has apparently confused it with the present story which is, in fact, called “*Rāṅg Nambār*” (i.e., “Wrong Number”). —*Editor*.

human beings— but these jackals...jackals—what are they? (p. 145)

I was completely baffled by these last lines of the story.

Abdul Qadir Junejo's "Weeping Darkness," Sher Muhammad Marri's "The Mad Man," and Muhammad Nawaz Tair's "Who Was to Blame" all deal with star-crossed lovers. I found all of them flat. Their folktale-like narration, which renders them "timeless" and "placeless," dulled my response to the violence unleashed against these lovers.

I am sorry to say that in these 38 stories there was not a single female character that struck me as memorable. I found a few of them quite upsetting. Ibne Adam's "The Sinner" lays blame on the mother because the son has become a thief and a killer. Qazi Khadim's "The Return" depicts an unnamed wife who doles out money to her gambling husband without complaint. Mumtaz Mufti's "Apa" sits hunched by the stove, her entire existence devoted to pleasing a man who is interested in another woman. As to why she declined the chance for higher education, no explanation is given. Mumtaz Shirin's "Descent" is a soppy portrayal of a clerk's wife who lies in a hospital bed after a stillbirth and dies like an angel, surrounded by her husband and children.

Marginalized as Pakistani literature is, editors and translators need to ensure that anthologies are representative in terms of region, ethnicity, language and gender, and that the works selected are introduced in terms of their historic and literary context. Perhaps my response to many of the stories included here is hampered by a lack of context and by the quality of the translation. For instance, what am I to make of statements like the following in Hamid Sindhi's "Dry Earth":

He would smile and tell her: "Queen! There is an eternal relationship between the rain and the earth. We are the junior masters of the earth. If we don't get intoxicated, who will? And don't you feel the same in this season? Do the raindrops create no new sensation in your body?" (p. 352)

A few lines later, the same character says: "No, Queen, when I put on the bridegroom's headwear and thy hands are red-hymeneal red-then this ring will be my fortune" (p. 353). I can only speculate whether the wooden quality of the dialogue is imparted by the translator or whether the original itself is to blame.

But then, "Dry Earth," and three other stories in the anthology have first been translated into Urdu and then into English. What is the relationship of the original to this doubly-removed translation? Why did the editor have to resort to this strategy? Does it say something about the status of regional languages in Pakistan? The editor should have explored these questions.

I kept looking for a short story entitled "Colours of Loneliness," given that an anthology is often named after one of the stories included in it. Since there is no story in the anthology with that title, one needs to be informed why the anthology title is appropriate. What are the colors of loneliness? Are all the stories

in the anthology about loneliness? Is it an individual loneliness or a societal loneliness?

Another aspect of the anthology that bothered me was the scant biographical information about many of the writers. While some authors received almost three quarters of a page, others got a single sentence. There were dates of birth and death for some writers, but not others. No information was given about the publication dates of the original stories. Since the order of the stories is alphabetical, I did my first reading in a very confused state of mind. Only after making my own lists, by language, by dates of birth (when available), and by gender, could I make some sense of the context of the stories. I would have liked the editor to do this work for me.

I am also unhappy with some of the remarks found in these biographical sketches. Rif'at's characters, we are told, "are drawn from the lower classes and through these characters, she shows the reader the hapless image of a Pakistani woman" (p. 398). Sahir Murad's "characters are generally steeped in the rich Baloch traditional life-style" (p. 398). Touché, Mr. Editor!

Finally, in the "Editor's Note," Iqbal informs us: "Certain excellent stories in Pakistani languages are simply impossible to translate into English because of the fact that their peculiar linguistic patterns, vocabulary, and syntax cannot be rendered into English" (p. vii). That is a breathtaking statement and raises many questions about Muzaffar Iqbal's philosophy about what can and cannot be translated. Why are the stories anthologized here more translatable than the ones excluded? Who made that decision? What process was used for selecting the stories for this anthology and for inviting translations? (All that we were told at the outset was that the stories reflect the taste of the editor.) Since there are so few stories from the regional languages and from women, does this mean that there aren't any "excellent" stories in those categories, or does it mean that the editor is not aware of them?

Despite all the hard work that must have gone into putting together this lengthy anthology, I did not find it a rewarding reading experience overall. To find the few excellent stories, I had to wade through a lot of pages of "so-so" at best, and hair-pulling boredom at worst. It is certainly not an anthology that I would select for my students as a text. □

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Drinking at Khadija Mastur's Well

KHADIJA MASTUR. *Cool, Sweet Water: Selected Stories*. Translated by TAHIRA NAQVI. Series Editor, MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON. Karachi: Oxford University Press, Pakistan Writers Series, 1999. xl, 187 pp. New Delhi:

Kali for Women, 1999. xxxviii, 188 pp. Rs. 200.

KHADIJA MASTUR'S *Cool, Sweet Water* is part of the Pakistan Writers Series being brought out by the Oxford University Press of Pakistan. It is the third volume in this exciting series and is the first by a woman. The book includes 12 short stories and 3 excerpts from Mastur's novels, *Aangan* (The Courtyard) and *Zamin* (Earth), all translated by Tahira Naqvi, making the work of one of the best writers of Pakistan available to the English language reader.

Prior to reading this book, my only familiarity with Mastur's work was a short story, "Embarrassment," anthologized in *Colours of Loneliness*. I'm not sure whether it was because of the translation or because of the author's treatment of the main character, who is described as "the woman," but I didn't particularly like that story. The short stories and the excerpts from Mastur's novels in *Cool, Sweet Water*, on the other hand, are absolutely captivating. As Naqvi says in her long and informative "Introduction," Mastur's "fiction flows as pure narrative, a river of events and emotions in which the reader is hurled along..." (p. xi). Mastur knows how to tell an engrossing story, and the reader laps it up.

One of the most endearing aspects of Mastur's work, particularly for a woman reader like myself, is her realistic portrayal of women's lives. She center-stages women's thoughts, women's feelings, and women's experiences in a way that does not happen in works by male writers. (Pardon me for what some might consider an overly-broad generalization.) Their women are either idealized or objectified. That certainly was my experience when reading two large anthologies of Pakistani short stories comprised mostly of male writers. The women in those stories came across as shadowy figures, tangential to the drama of the male characters' lives. Mastur's portrayal provides a corrective to these male (mis)representations of Pakistani women.

The stories and excerpts in *Cool, Sweet Water* span a period of about 20 years, beginning with the Partition of the Subcontinent in 1947. The first story, "They are Taking Me Away, Father, They are Taking Me Away," is a heartrending account of a woman's abduction and gang rape immediately after the Partition. What is so special about the story is the way it is framed as the suppressed memory of the witness-narrator who recalls the incident while watching soap suds flowing down the drain after his bath. By channeling the narrative in this way Mastur subtly draws out the deep trauma experienced by those who lived through the cataclysmic events of the Partition. Another clever touch is provided by the title which uses the famous lament of Heer as she leaves her natal home. Both women are victims of male brutality, their bodies are not their own.

Having crossed the border as a refugee myself, at the age of 11 months, and having spent my early childhood absorbing secondhand the trauma undergone by my parents, I was haunted by "They are Taking Me Away, Father," and by "The Miscreant," the next story in the collection. "The Miscreant" is a well-meaning person named Fazlu who unleashes a wave of violence and terror against the

Hindus and Sikhs after being deceived by the landlord of his village. Stories like “The Miscreant” help explain Partition-related violence. As in Khushwant Singh’s “Train to Pakistan,” we see the sudden transformation of ordinary, well-meaning people into bloodthirsty killers.

Many people on the Subcontinent are still grappling with the enormity of this sudden transformation in the psyches of seemingly ordinary people which resulted in such a holocaust. Kamal Haasan’s film, *Hey Ram*, deals with a character similar to Fazlu. Both Suchet Ram and Fazlu have to live with the consequences of their momentary madness for the rest of their lives. Both Mastur and Haasan take us through the events that lead up to this madness and then end their stories with the moment of repentance. They provide no catharsis for the characters or for us. Instead, they grab us by the collar and take us back to that moment of horror in our joint history, forcing us to remember it anew, despite our attempts to suppress it.

The excerpt from *Aangan* deals with Partition as well, not at the ground zero level of mass slaughter, but at the breakup of families and the leaving of homelands. That these wounds continue to fester was brought home to me by a vivid dream I had after reading Mastur’s Partition-related texts: I dreamed about the home my family had been allotted in Tikamgarh. The home had been abandoned by a Muslim family that had quietly left for Pakistan in 1955. When we went to see it before deciding whether to rent it (my father had refused to buy it from the custodian), we found the kitchen cupboards full, clothes were hanging in the closets, and the rooms and furniture looked as though the family was going to return any moment. Before we moved in my father demanded that the administration take out all the possessions of the previous occupants/owners.

I lived in that house for five years. It was demolished 20 years ago and yet, from time to time, less and less often, my sleeping brain takes me back to this house of my childhood. Mastur’s stories of rapes, killings and uprootings, of the terror of survivors, revived my memories of a refugee childhood. I kept mulling over the intensity of that vivid dream, which made me wake up very tired in the morning. What do these memories mean? Especially to my young son who does not share them, so different is his life experience from mine.

Perhaps the point I am making is that Mastur’s ability to depict that period of our history in a stark, truthful manner is masterful. She not only helps us grasp the agony and helplessness of the ordinary people who were caught in that catastrophe, she also speculates about the causes. In “Miscreant,” she points the finger at the village landlord and the corrupt police. The excerpts from *Aangan* and *Zamin* explore the chain of causation again. Although the excerpts are very short they demonstrate the power of Mastur’s storytelling by making the reader thirst for more. I hope that some day soon they will be available to us in full.

The second excerpt from *Zamin* deals with political repression in Pakistan. Again, the reader is struck by Mastur’s courage in tackling such perilous subject matter in such a straight forward manner, that is, without the benefit of using

allegory as many Pakistani writers have done in speaking about such matters. Nazim was jailed and tortured for his beliefs: “His liver and his intestines had both been damaged while he was in jail” (p. 37). He seems to be a living corpse now, broken in body and mind. The excerpt portrays the complex feudal relations in the village where the bloodsucking Zamindar Sahib is also solicitous of Nazim’s well being. And it also depicts the violence perpetrated against the Qadianis by recording the lament of women whose sons come back home as dead bodies.

Naqvi informs the reader that Mastur is unparalleled in the boldness of her subject matter: “As far as I know, Mastur is the only writer who has dealt with the treatment of minorities, specifically the Qadianis” (p. xxii). But after choosing the subject matter comes the question of how it is handled by the author. It is that which places Mastur in the company of superb storytellers. Like the Ancient Mariner who grabbed the wedding guest and prevented him from going to the feast, Mastur grabs our attention and manages to inform us about subjects that we would prefer to turn away from.

What is her secret? I think it is her ability to choose the precise details that stick in our minds. In *Zamin* a lot of information is provided about the terror-soaked atmosphere through the keening of Sajida’s neighbors:

Women standing around the rope cot were beating their chests and wailing. As they pounded their chests they challenged the young men. “Go, go and kill ten to avenge the death of one and become martyrs.” (p. 39)

Later on Zamindar Sahib sends a box of sweets to Sajida with a message:

“Your brother says that the CID is still after Nazim *Sahib*, he shouldn’t have so many people gathered here at one time and they shouldn’t be talking so loudly because in the quiet of the evening the voices travel far. And here, keep these sweets. Nazim *Sahib* can’t move about too much, you can serve these to your guests with tea.” (p. 41)

Here again Mastur supplies a lot of information with a few strokes of her pen. And her words serve multiple functions: they paint the scene, provide vital narrative information and convey how the characters live and suffer. Not having access to the complete novel, I can only imagine its power.

“Cool, Sweet Water,” the story which provides the title of the volume, is an excellent example of Mastur’s ability to bind contradictions together and produce meaning out of them. This story deals with the 1965 India-Pakistan War. Once again Mastur recounts the events using the frame of recall. The war is over; the trenches have been filled. “The hustle and bustle of life makes you forget everything easily” (p. 43). The story is autobiographical and Mastur uses the real names of her children, encouraging the reader to view it as true, rather than fabricated. Its power rests on a superb irony. An old man envisions that a crater

caused by the enemy's bomb can serve as a well to provide "cool, sweet water." He sits there, with a cloth spread out in front of him, asking people for donations so that a well can be dug. I think all warmongers should read this story. They spend billions of dollars making weapons of mass destruction without giving a thought to people, like the old man in the story, and their basic needs.

Naqvi recalls the 1965 war in her introduction:

The soldiers on their way to the front wrenched our hearts. I remember vividly that we rooted for them, spent long hours preparing care packages for them, knitted them sweaters, prayed for them, and wept for them. (p. xxiv)

Ironically, I and my fellow classmates did the same things. The "*jawan*" was the great hero for us. I have often wondered in hindsight how such euphoria is created and how such a consciousness is formed. Indian television created similar images of heroism during the Cargill conflict. Perhaps a good antidote for such war euphoria might be to publish Indian and Pakistani writers' works on such matters in companion volumes which must be read together.

Among the remaining stories, "The Hand Pump," "The Heart's Thirst," and "Bhooray" recall Partition by tracing their characters' pasts back to the undivided Subcontinent. Chunni Begum ("The Hand Pump") and Bhooray ("Bhooray") had come to Lahore in search of jobs before Partition and lost contact with their families after the upheaval. "The Heart's Thirst" describes the life of a mother and daughter who are reduced to penury after Abba dies of cholera in a refugee camp. However, these stories are not so much about Partition and what happened at that time, but about the later life of these characters. Chunni Begum is a resolute, self-reliant old woman who has always earned her own living. She refuses to accept charity even when she is on the verge of dying from starvation.

These and the remaining stories are remarkable for their multi-layered texture and their depiction of women as three-dimensional characters. One of the most remarkable aspects of Mastur's women is that they work! Chunni Begum began to work as a cook and kitchen helper at the age of eleven. Sajida of *Zamin* is a low-paid schoolteacher. Suriya of "Suriya" is a child laborer "of about eleven or twelve" who cleans the narrator's house (p. 49). Kaneez of "Harvest" is aptly named for her occupation: she is married off on short-term contracts to take care of her employer/husband's household. In "Bhooray" Zahooran, again, serves as a domestic worker in bungalows where the *babus* first rape her and then compel her to have abortions. Set within a women's hospital, this story also provides cameo portraits of women doctors.

Although my exposure to Pakistani literature is limited, I have rarely come across portrayals of working women in the material I have read before now. Naqvi quotes a long passage in her introduction, where Mastur talks about women's oppression: "[W]omen still can't find jobs, and if they do find work, they're still given the status of women, not of a participant or a hard-working

person” (p. xiii). Many of the stories in *Cool, Sweet Water* describe the suffocating lives of women who are used as slaves by their families and denied both love and respect, not to mention education. Mastur does not present these women as passive victims however. They are speaking subjects and they give voice to their oppression.

Bittan in “Springtime of Life” is 26 years old and waiting for a marriage her family has forgotten to arrange. Meanwhile, her family is using her as a household servant. When Bittan’s mother and sister-in-law complain about her behavior as unbecoming of an unmarried woman, she scandalizes them by demanding, “Why have you kept me at home like this? Why don’t you marry me off then, who’s stopping you?” (p. 134). While Amma and Bhabi beat their chests at such effrontery and talk conspiratorially with her brother in the courtyard, Bittan “saw them all and felt satisfied, as if a large stone had been lifted from her chest” (*ibid.*).

Mastur’s women have passions and desires. They demand love and fidelity, which, alas, the men fail to provide. They yearn for the color and beauty which their poverty often denies them. And they take what they can. Razia, of “Trust,” falls in love with Safdar after her husband begins to ill-treat her. And Kaneez of “Harvest” tries to seduce Din Muhammad, her contract husband, even though he is totally devoted to his terminally ill wife. Mastur writes about her female characters’ sexuality openly. “In Stealth” describes a woman who gets pregnant by her young servant. Naqvi suggests that stories like “In Stealth,” where Mastur exposes the double standards of her society which can easily forgive a man’s debauchery while criticizing his wife for her lack of devotion, were not well-received by critics.

Naqvi quotes Mirza Adeb who described Mastur as a rebel and a revolutionary. The pages of *Cool, Sweet Water* bear that out. Mastur’s is a bold and powerful voice. In Naqvi’s words, “there is very little in Mastur’s work that fails to leave a mark on the reader’s consciousness” (p. xxxiv). She writes about difficult subjects and yet makes it seem effortless. That is a sign of her remarkable power as a storyteller. The narrative takes us in and keeps us absorbed. It is only afterwards that we ask, “How does she do it?”

Naqvi has done justice to Mastur’s work in her translation. There are only a few false notes in the entire collection. For instance, I wondered whether the record “There’s a thief after your purse, traveller, beware” mentioned in *Aangan* (p. 28) is “*Tērī gat̤h̄rī mēn lāgā čōr, musāfir jāg jarā.*” If so, it deserved a note, given that it was a popular song of Kabir, sung by K.C. Dey. Similarly, the use of the word “cottage” to describe Rafique’s two-roomed dilapidated house in “Lost and Found” (p. 183) will likely evoke an inappropriate image in the mind of a North American reader. However, not knowing Urdu myself, I cannot comment on the choices that have been made by the translator or on what may have been lost in the translation.

Naqvi’s long introduction provides extremely useful contextual information

about Mastur's life and her affiliation with the Progressive Writers Association. But, while I found the introduction very valuable, I wondered if the detailed summaries of the short stories given there were really necessary. I would have appreciated more quotations from Mastur's critical essays instead. One last quibble I might mention is that Naqvi has not provided the original dates of publication for the stories and the novels.

However, these are very minor blemishes in a work obviously carried out with deep respect for the writer. Tahira Naqvi has given a wonderful gift to the reading public by making Khadija Mastur's work available in English. I hope that OUP will soon be publishing the translations of *Aangan* and *Zamin*. □

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AHMAD NADEEM QASIMI. *The Old Banyan and Other Stories*. Translated by FARUQ HASSAN. Series Editor, MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON. Karachi: Oxford University Press, Pakistan Writers Series, 2000. xxxiii, 229 pp.

IT is a truism that great literature transcends time and space. But does that mean that whatever is rooted to a particular locale is not great literature? Are there essential markers of a national literature? These questions become crucial for countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh which share a common history and mythology. A sensitive individual while reading, say, Shamsur Rahman or Humayun Ahmad knows immediately that the author is a Bengali writer from Bangladesh; similarly, an individual reading Ibn-e Insha or Bano Qudsia can immediately sense that they are Urdu writers from Pakistan. It is by becoming genuinely "local" that these writers acquire global significance. Or, to use a popular phrase from the open market, they become "glocal."

These reflections were occasioned by a collection of Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi's Urdu stories which have been translated into English and published as the fourth volume in the Pakistan Writers Series put out by OUP, Karachi under the general editorship of Professor Muhammad Umar Memon. Before this we have had one volume each of the writings of Abdullah Hussein, Hasan Manzoor and Khadija Mastur. Ahmad Nadeem Qasimi is somewhat of a father-figure in Pakistani literature. He has long been an active member of the Progressive Writers' Movement, guiding the course of Pakistani literature, along with fellow writers, by engaging in debates and discussions defining its contours. An autodidact, Qasimi is a poet, a fiction-writer and a columnist who has left his distinctive mark in each of these genres. Between 1940 and 1995 he published nine volumes of poetry and sixteen collections of short stories. All of his stories are written in the realistic mode, alternating between the omniscient and the first person point of view. The lush romanticism and baroque description of his early

work gives way to subtle, restrained and sometimes austere narratives in the later period. This collection is fairly representative of Qasimi's fictional oeuvre, covering the entire range of his thematic concerns. Qasimi is not interested in narrative inventiveness and hence there is not much stylistic variety. However, within the limitations of the realistic mode, the narrative energy displayed by him in the telling of these tales is compelling.

The collection begins with "A Sample," a touching story of self-deception. Mrs. Skoda dwells in her glorious past and all her efforts are geared towards keeping up appearances. She resorts, along with her son, Robert, and her daughter, Dora, to lies, deception and subterfuges of all kinds just to give the impression that they belong to a genteel family of yore. Yet, despite their almost unselfconscious dishonesty, they are harmless, well-meaning people who would do anything to please and help others. Through his ironical portrayal of the Skoda family, Qasimi poses the question of maintaining moral integrity in the face of declining fortunes. All the members of the Skoda family are touching in their innocence and nostalgia; nevertheless, they display a serious moral lapse in their inability to face up to the misfortunes that have befallen them.

"The Burial" deals with the complex psychology of human relationships. Ghafoora, a hardscrabble farmer from the village of Chuniya, comes to Lahore for his wife Kalli's delivery. After the delivery his wife dies. Ghafoora is so poor that he does not even have the money to buy a shroud. It is at this point that Mian Saiful Haq enters the story. He has an emotional debt to pay to his son Hamid who has died without receiving a decent burial. In his mind, Ghafoora's wife becomes a substitute for Hamid and he arranges for her burial in as befitting a manner as he would have done for his own son. Ghafoora is grateful. However, he loved his wife deeply and, the moment he is able to do so, he insists on paying back the cost of the shroud. When Mian Saiful Haq adamantly refuses, Ghafoora says:

"Listen, Mianji, please don't get angry at me. You have done me the greatest favour that anyone could do. I am not a low wretch to forget that. But the thing is, Mianji, that you had buried Hamid that day in place of Kalli. My Kalli was still left lying by the roadside unburied. You may throw these rupees into the gutter if you wish, but it's only today that I have lowered my Kalli into the grave." (p. 31)

"Lawrence of Thalabia," written in a humorous vein, evokes the tenor of life in the pastoral countryside and exposes the exploitation of the tenants who are treated like serfs by the landowners. Qasimi's depiction of the tyrannical senior Malik and his son, who, despite his education, is complicit in his father's ruthless, evil practices, leaves no doubt as to where the author's sympathies lie.

Qasimi's special strength lies in his portrayal of characters. With a few deft, masterly strokes he brings to life characters who leave an indelible impression on the mind of the reader. This is particularly evident in the title story, "The Old

Banyan,” which deals with the unassailable bond that exists between Amjad Hussain and the old banyan tree that “has witnessed four generations” of his family. While Amjad Hussain regards the tree as a benign presence providing shade and shelter, his son, Socrat, considers it an eyesore that conceals their gorgeous mansion from public view. Socrat is also upset that his friends make fun of him. “[T]he world, they say, has entered the atomic age, while our family still hasn’t come down from the tree” (p. 58). Amjad Hussain cannot be persuaded to part with this old friend and says bluntly that the tree will only be cut over his dead body. When his crafty daughter-in-law and son contrive to remove the tree and replant the area with exotic flowerbeds during his long absence from home, the shock is too great for Amjad Hussain to bear. He cannot rest until he has taken revenge upon his unfeeling daughter-in-law by destroying the flowerbeds in the darkness of the night. However, this is not a simple story of revenge. It depicts man’s deep bond with nature and his differing perceptions of good and evil. It is also an excellent study of the conflict between the values of the old and new generations. The irony deployed by Qasimi makes the story strongly suggestive. For example, only a master storyteller could have written a locus classicus like the following:

“Father, face it. You are too old now. You don’t seem to fit in this palatial bungalow. You scare the leaves off the trees and sadden the golden rays of the sun when, stretching in the reclining chair, your legs resting on a footstool, you begin to snooze with the newspaper spread over your face. Even the servants walk about stealthily as though a dead body were lying in the lawn. It’s totally unacceptable. So, please make a final gesture of parental affection: drink this cup of poison and die. You educated me, you made me civilized; now do me this last favour.” (pp. 56–7)

Another story which moves along the axis of the triangular father-son-daughter-in-law relationship is “The Unwanted.” Qasimi’s central concern here is to examine how the cordial relationship between a son and his parents subtly changes when he brings in a wife and must begin performing a delicate balancing act between his spouse and his parents.

Non-Urdu readers are no doubt already familiar with the story “Parmeshar Singh” which has been extensively anthologized in volumes dealing with Partition narratives. Here Qasimi pits the Muslim ethos against the Sikh. The central character is a Muslim boy, Akhtar, who gets separated from his mother while fleeing from India to Pakistan. Parmeshar takes the boy home thinking it will bring consolation to his bereaved wife for the loss of their son, Kartar Singh. However, prejudice and hatred against Muslims is so deep-seated in his wife and daughter that they cannot think of accepting a Muslim boy as their own. The house they are now occupying was formerly owned by a Muslim and whenever Akhtar offers his *namaz* or recites the Qur’an, they become terribly frightened. As Akhtar’s hair grows longer Parmeshar makes him a Khalsa Sikh and names him

Kartar Singh. His wife's hatred gradually subsides. Although Parmeshar Singh protects Akhtar against all odds and showers him with love and affection, he is not able to obliterate Akhtar's hatred of Sikhs. "You're a Musalla" yell the Sikh boys, and Akhtar retaliates by shouting "Sikhra" at them. These are not simple or innocent invectives hurled at each other by children. They carry with them the baggage of cultural alienation and prejudice accumulated over generations. Qasimi displays his mastery when depicting the tenor of life in the Punjab countryside. A whole ethos comes alive, though his depiction of the endemic and irreversible communal hatred and mistrust seems rather unsettling.

"Praise Be to Allah" is a partly comical, partly ironical story that revolves around the character of Maulvi Abul Barkaat, a dashing figure before marriage but gradually reduced to penury by a growing number of children, all girls. With the hold of religion on people becoming weaker, the votive offerings at the mosque dwindle, but the Maulvi refuses to change his lifestyle to go along with this change of circumstances. His family's survival comes to depend on Fateh Dad's munificence. With great difficulty he marries off his eldest daughter, but when a son is born to her the Maulvi is so destitute that he cannot buy a gift for the boy. At this juncture Chaudhari Fateh Dad dies. The Maulvi momentarily sees a way out of his impasse as he anticipates the rewards and offerings which will be given to him at the funeral, and he is ecstatic. However, his ecstatic outbursts soon give way to stunned despair when he realizes that in the absence of the Chaudhari's munificence, his family is destined to doom. Qasimi is distinctly Chekhovian in his portrayal of the enveloping gloom cast over its victims by poverty.

The dehumanizing potential of poverty is also the subject matter of "The Rest-house," "Sultan, the Beggar Boy" and "Theft." "The Rest-house" also depicts the diabolic potential of human beings. Fazloo, the caretaker of the rest house at Sakesar, lives in this isolated hilly area with his wife, Maryan, and son, Sheroo, whom he loves dearly. Yusuf, a rich *sahib* from the city, comes to Sakesar after wandering through many lands trying to forget his dead wife, Maryam. As Maryan resembles his dead wife, he begins to lust after her. He plays a cunning trick on Fazloo, making him agree to persuade some woman to spend the night in the rest house with him, for which he will pay one hundred rupees. Fazloo brings two women on two separate nights but the *sahib* merely looks at them without so much as touching them. This emboldens Fazloo who then attempts to persuade Maryan to do the same. She agrees on the condition that if the *sahib* even touches her, she will have nothing more to do with Fazloo. The *sahib* not only touches her, he does all he wished to do with her. But Maryan, though heartbroken, cannot muster enough courage to leave her son and gullible husband behind. The narration here is taut and the story moves inexorably towards its tragic end. However, the author falters at this point and fails to exploit the full potential of the ending. In "Sultan, the Beggar Boy" a blind man uses his grandson to beg for their subsistence. The old man is helpless, but he is also cruel. The

boy is not only denied all the pleasures of childhood, his emotional growth is stunted as well. Qasimi here takes an unforgiving look at the South Asian social system which allows such injustice to be perpetuated. Every decent society should make adequate provision for looking after the infirm, the incapacitated and the children, and should not leave them neglected and victimized. In “Theft” the themes of poverty and injustice are taken up again and even the village imam is shown to be in league with the wealthy in perpetuating injustice.

Among the rest of the stories: “Old Man Noor” recounts an old father’s endless wait for a letter from his son who worked in the army and has long been dead; “The Pond With the Bo Tree” exposes the superstition associated with religion; “The Thal Desert” chronicles the building of the railways across the Thal Desert and a British engineer’s desperate struggle to overcome the local superstition opposing this venture; “A Mother’s Love,” written against the background of the Second World War, depicts the experience of an Indian prisoner of war in Hong Kong; and “A Wild Woman” is a lovely portrait of an illiterate, boorish, but energetic village woman.

All of Qasimi’s stories firmly foreground common men and women with their little joys and sorrows, their disappointments and gullibility. Qasimi plumbs the depths of their despair with tenderness, humor and pitiless irony. Above all, he crafts a distinct life for each of them, without falling prey to the narrowness of moral preaching or the tedium of political correctness, and gives them the dignity of being autonomous individuals. The stories are deeply rooted in the writer’s own culture and locale, and besides providing a good read they also offer an occasion, as mentioned in the beginning, to reflect on the writer’s symbiotic and sometimes complex and intriguing relationship with his surroundings, his culture and his literary-aesthetic concerns. The translations by Faruq Hassan are close to the original and are extremely readable in English. There is no attempt to adapt the stories in English or remove them from their native environment, as one finds with some modern translators, notably Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. □

—M. ASADUDDIN
Jamia Millia Islamia

A Pit Full of Honey

RALPH RUSSELL *An Anthology of Urdu Literature*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2000.
Paperback. 312 pp. £9.95. 1-85754-468-4.

THE Urdu language is one of the most powerful symbols of the cultural identity

of nearly 250 million Pakistanis and Indian Muslims. It is also the second most widely spoken language in Britain. Urdu has one of the richest literatures of all South Asian languages, to which Hindus as well as Muslims have contributed; it deserves the attention of those interested in forms of literary sensibility and in the cultural heritage of South Asia.

The word Urdu is derived from the Turkish “ordu” meaning camp, from which comes the English word “horde” as applied to Mongol hordes or camps. The language grew out of the interaction from the thirteenth century between the Turkish- and Persian-speaking rulers of India and the local population; it was the language of the camp, the Muslim rulers of India spending as much time in camp, imposing their will on their subject peoples, as in settled mode.

From the fifteenth century, Urdu became established in the Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan as a medium of poetry and some prose. From the eighteenth century, it gained major force as a language as it came to be widely used in northern India, and most particularly in the great political capitals of Delhi, Lucknow and Lahore. From the nineteenth century, the language gained from the patronage of the British, who called it Hindustani and used it instead of Persian in government offices. In the late nineteenth century, it developed as a symbol of Muslim identity in northern India as opposed to the Hindi of Hindus. There was irony in this. Urdu and Hindi are at bottom the same language, sharing the same grammar and syntax. The differences are that Urdu has many Persian and Arabic words, while Hindi has increasingly embraced Sanskrit ones; Urdu is written in the Persian script, Hindi in Devanagari.

For more than fifty years, Ralph Russell has been teaching Urdu language and communicating his understanding of its literature with a rare passion; in South Asia, and among cognoscenti across the world, his name is synonymous with love of the language and the scholarly study of its literature. Russell’s first encounter with Urdu came during his war service when he was attached to the Indian army. From 1951, he taught Urdu at the School of Oriental and African Studies, pioneering the modern teaching of the subject and producing major scholarly works, such as his treatment of Ghalib, greatest of all Urdu poets, with his friend and collaborator, Khurshidul Islam. From the 1970s, he took the lead in pressing for the needs of Urdu-speaking communities in Britain to be more adequately met, and particularly for the language to be taught in schools. He also initiated the teaching of Urdu to English-speakers who worked with Urdu-speakers. In 1981, he took early retirement to devote himself to this community work.

Russell’s anthology, therefore, is the outcome of a lifetime’s intense engagement with Urdu, its speakers and its literature. The work was first published in 1995 under the poetic title *Hidden in the Lute*, which effectively hid its existence from this writer. Now, republished under a prosaic but more helpful title, it merits review. No one in the West today speaks with such authority about Urdu or is better able to communicate its pleasures to those who do not read the language. Because communication is at the heart of Russell’s concerns, he has no space at

all for the greatest Urdu poet of the twentieth century, Iqbal; he “is above all a Muslim poet, and makes his most powerful appeal to his fellow Muslims.” In fact, he begins his anthology with a selection of twentieth-century short stories, as these were much influenced by Western literature and should be readily accessible to the English-speaking reader. Among his choices are three stories by women writers, Ismat Chughtai and Rashid Jahan, both of whom caused a stir by testing the boundaries of the permissible. In 1941, Chughtai was tried for obscenity.

No less accessible are Russell’s selections from the popular literature which can be bought at railway and bus stations all over northern India and Pakistan in cheap booklets printed on newsprint: stories of Akbar, the Mughal emperor, and his Hindu minister, Birbal, Mulla Dopiazza (“Two Onions”), the prophets and so on. Their flavor, and particularly their dependence on ready wit, is evident:

One morning Akbar said to Birbal, “Birbal, last night I dreamt that I had fallen into a pit filled with honey, and you into one filled with refuse.” Birbal at once replied, “Lord of the World, I too had just such a dream, but in my dream I was licking you and you were licking me.”

Poetry is the greatest literary expression of Urdu; it is certainly the one on which Urdu-speakers place most value. The poetic genre both most highly prized and most popular is that of the *ghazal*, or love poem. Major monographs on Urdu’s love poets have been at the heart of Russell’s scholarly work and their essence is distilled in this book. He explains the central importance of understanding the context from which the *ghazal* emerges; it is a society in which all romantic love is illicit, and doomed to end in tears. The lover is fated to be consumed by love and to lose the beloved.

When once our hearts catch fire no power
 avails to save us from our fate
Like lamps that burn throughout the night we
 are steadily consumed.

My eyes still see you; *you* live in my heart
Though years have passed since you would
 come and go.

Russell explains the interplay, as in much European medieval poetry, between earthly and spiritual love. “The *ghazal* poet,” he declares, “is clear that true love for God is as compelling and all-embracing as human lovers’ love for each other,” which leads on the one hand to a religious understanding which is profoundly humanistic, and on the other to a contempt for those who are religiously orthodox and self-righteously observe the requirements of their faith:

If pilgrimage could make a man a man
 Then all the world might make the pilgrimage.
 But shaikhji is just back, and look at him—
 An ass he went: an ass he has returned.

Russell also explains elements of wordplay, multiple connotation and contrast, which are largely lost in translation:

Your long tresses come to mind and glistening
 teardrops dim my sight.
 And all is dark; the rains have come; the fireflies
 glimmer in the night.

We learn that in the rainy season the clouds are really dark and that it is the romantic time of year, and also discover the interplay between long black tresses and dark night, tears and rains, glistening teardrops and glimmering fireflies. And then we are told how to listen to a *ghazal*. It is bound by a very strict unity of form, with a well-defined single meter throughout and the requirement that the poet introduce his pen name into the final couplet. On the other hand, each couplet is separate, and there will not normally be a unity of theme throughout the poem. It is poetry designed to be heard, not read. Its pleasures lie in “the shape and sound” of each couplet. It is meaningful music made with words. In just under sixty pages, Russell supplies us with an outstanding introduction to this complex and sophisticated art form. The book is well worth buying for these pages alone.

This said, the anthology also introduces us to the work and thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98) and his followers of the Aligarh movement, who tried in all aspects of life to build a bridge between Indian Muslims and their British rulers. In Urdu literature it meant a revolution. In prose, it led to the emergence of a much more straightforward style and new forms of every kind: essays, literary criticism, biography, the novel, the short story. Russell cannot resist quoting from the satirist, Akbar Ilahabadi, who launched many a verse attack on Sir Sayyid’s efforts:

Akbar does not deny the need for moving with the times
 But understand that loyalty has its importance too.
 Why feel so proud because the times have changed you?
 True men are those whose efforts change the times.

The anthology also offers a taste of the novel, Rusva’s *Umrao Jan Ada*; the wonderful letters of Ghalib, including the magical one in which he recalls his love for a long-lost mistress; Farhatullah Beg’s re-creation of the last *mushaira*, or poetic symposium, held in Mughal Delhi before the catastrophe of 1957; and the maxims of poets on poetry: “poetry,” declared Ghalib, “is the creation of mean-

ing, not the matching of rhymes”; for Mir, “poetry is a task for men whose hearts have been seared by the fire of love and pierced by the wounds of grief.” This anthology is a most accessible gateway to the world of sensibility, metaphor and imagination of the mother culture of Britain’s largest linguistic minority. Its literary forms were in part crushed by British rule, but gained new shape and power as they responded to it. From the headwaters of South Asian Urdu runs one of the many streams which inform and enrich British literary culture today. □

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Urdu for Children: Book One (Teacher’s Manual, Part One, Part Two, Workbook). Chief Editor, SAJIDA S. ALVI. Coordinators, FARHAT AHMAD, ASHFAQ HUSSAIN. Writers, HUMAIRA ANSARI, FIRDAUS BEG, RASHIDA MIRZA, HAMDA SAIFI. Illustrator, RASHIDA YOUSUF Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997. 155 pp.

IT was at the request of Dr. Sajida Alvi herself that I undertook to review this material. I am sorry to have to say that I know she will be greatly disappointed with what I have written.

Two impressions. First, it gave me great pleasure to see such beautifully produced books, and the laudable role which the Canadian government plays in making such books possible is very satisfying. The second impression was a very different one. I glanced through Part I and found that it ended with Ḥālī’s poem “*Kahnā Bayōñ kā Mānō*.” “Oh God,” I thought. “All that money wasted on serving up once more that boring rubbish which has been inflicted on children for the last hundred years and more.” A paraphrase of the essentials of the poem, using only words which the poem itself uses, would run “Simple children, you haven’t the least idea of what’s good and what’s bad for you. So if you want to be great, and live with honor in the world, do as your elders tell you.” Not only boring, but pernicious. Children need to be taught to question anything anyone says, no matter who says it, (though “question” does not necessarily imply “reject”). And many parents are no less “simple” than the children. It was a “simple” child who saw, and said, that the Emperor had no clothes. And to say that children haven’t the least idea of what’s good for them is absurd. They may not always know, but then neither do their elders always know.

Fortunately this is not typical of the material as a whole. For example, “*Nādiyā kā Bhā’r*,” taken from an English source (no attribution given) and translated by Firdaus Beg, portrays a real difficulty which many young children

experience and shows how this difficulty is dealt with.

If Hālī's poem is exceptionally bad and “*Nādiyā kā Bhāṛī*” exceptionally good, much of the rest is, to say the least, uninspiring, and it is quite surprising that the compilers have written very little of the material themselves, relying instead, most inappropriately, on materials produced in Pakistan. No less than six of Ferozsons publications have been drawn upon, as well as works from two other Pakistani publishers whose copyrights have been acknowledged. Somewhere we should have had a list of which pieces come from where, but no such list is provided, so one doesn't know exactly how many of the 42 pieces come from Pakistani publications. To one who recognizes the names of the authors, which in many cases I do, the provenance of many of these pieces is at once obvious. Only 26 are written by the members of the production team and these, by and large, are the best—which makes it all the more surprising that more consideration was not given to the fact that materials produced for Pakistani children in Pakistan are often not at all appropriate for children born and raised in Canada.

One or two of the good pieces are spoiled by the introduction of inappropriate features. For example, there is one about a big carrot which begins very well, except for the fact that the setting is said to be “in a village.” Why in a village? Most Pakistanis resident in Canada live in towns and, presumably, many of them grow vegetables in their gardens. The conclusion of this piece, based upon a European folktale, is also not at all appropriate here. The whole piece could have perfectly well, and much better, been an entirely realistic one.

A number of the pieces reflect a rather inappropriately patronizing attitude toward the child reader. For example, the idea that the onset of winter needs to be made interesting to the reader by pretending that it causes the elephants to put on hats is absurd. A straight description of what winter brings would be much more appropriate.

Some of the questions listed at the end of the pieces are too banal for words. For example, on page 24 of Part I the children are asked “Ought one to play with fire?”

I read with interest and approval Farhat Ahmad's statement in his piece headed “About This Book”: “Thus in this course, as in the teaching of English language in the public schools, learning to read and write Urdu does not begin with learning the alphabet. At an appropriate time in the course, however, the children will be taught the letter names of the Urdu alphabet.” But why “the letter names?” Why not “the alphabet?” And there is no indication anywhere in this material of how and when this task is to be undertaken.

There ought to be. My own view is that lessons on the script should be interspersed with the other lessons included in the book. There is no reason whatsoever why they should not be. The obvious method of teaching is the one I have been practicing for decades, and which is written up in Part IV in my *New Course in Urdu and Spoken Hindi*. The fact that no one has taken the slightest notice of it, let alone used it, doesn't alter my conviction that it is sound and

valuable, and generations of my students have learned to read and write quickly and effectively using it. It begins with an account of how the script works, and then proceeds to tell learners how to write it, one brief sentence at a time, consisting of words which learners already know the meaning of, and introducing only those letters and forms of letters needed to write the sentences in question. For example:

mērā nām [name] *hai*, which introduces

for “*mērā*” — initial *mīm*, medial *yē*, *rē* and *alif*,

for “*nām*” — initial *nūn*, final *alif* and detached *mīm*

for the name — whatever letters are needed

for “*hai*” — initial *ḥāfī* *hē* and final *yē*.

When all the letters and all their variants have been covered, a full statement of the letters in alphabetical order follows.

So my opinion of these materials is, I regret to say, a very poor one. To which I must add that it seems that the output of the production team is a remarkably slender one considering all the money and other facilities placed at their disposal for this work.

I still hope I may live to see the day when those who prepare teaching materials will get it into their heads that the first essential quality of good teachers is that they think carefully of who it is they are teaching, accord them both love and respect, and think what it is they want and need to learn and what they neither want nor need. This applies just as much to teachers of children as it does to teachers of adults, and teachers who think that they can work all this out without consulting the children had better think again. One has to conclude with regret that Sajida Alvi and her colleagues have not yet grasped the essentials.

But to end on a somewhat more positive note, a cursory reading of *The Teacher’s Manual* impresses me favorably. The guidance to teachers on to how to use the materials in the course is detailed and helpful. □

—RALPH RUSSELL
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Glimpses of a Lost World

Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet Mir Muhammad Taqi “Mir” (1723–1810). Edited and trans. by C.M. NAIM. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. 214 pp. £10.99. 0-19-564588-x.

ONCE the Shah said to Enayat, "My heart lusts for a nice virgin boy." Enayat went out and returned with a little woman. "You wretch," the Shah said, "I asked for a tender youth but you bring me a tiny woman." Enayat said, "She has 'both.'" The Shah said, "But I wanted to play with the boy's balls." "Do the doing with this woman," Enayat rejoined. "And as for the 'playing,' grab my balls."

This is among the fifty-five jokes with which the poet Mir Taqi Mir concludes his autobiography. The Shah in question is Abbas II of Iran (d. 1660); Enayat is his sidekick Enayat Gul. They were frequent interlocutors in the jokes of northern India in whose courts, in the eighteenth century, large numbers of Persians sought their fortune. Such jokes were part of the armory of poets, whose task was to be good company for their patrons as well as the crafters of words into "strings of pearls." Telling and enjoying jokes was an important feature of Muslim society and is well supported by the traditions of the Prophet. Indian editors of printed editions of Mir's autobiography, so we are told, left the jokes out; they did not coincide either with "Victorian values" or with the image of poetic genius. Mir, however, clearly wanted to share them with his readers. "Now the pen has on its tongue some witty tales," he wrote, "which it lays out for the friends' sake." We, moreover, must be thankful to C.M. Naim for including them. They are among the several ways in which his translation of Mir's autobiography, and the rich scholarly support which he appends to it, enables us to savor what it was to be human in the cultivated Muslim world of eighteenth-century northern India.

Mir was the greatest poet of his age. His work was known throughout the Deccan as well as in the north. He was the only poet whose verses travelers would take to offer as gifts to their hosts. His fame rests in particular on his ghazals, or love poetry, which make him one of the leading love poets of world literature. "His Urdu ghazals," writes Naim, "are noted for an immediately recognizable voice almost luminous in its intensity, an intriguing mix of self-mockery and self-assertion, a beguiling simplicity of expression that soon reveals its layered quality, and an economy and preciseness of language that reflects Mir's dazzlingly confident use of the different registers of a vernacular."

Mir lived at a time when the court poets of India wrote in both Persian and the vernacular. He spoke most powerfully, as he put it, in the language that he heard "on the steps of the Jama Masjid," Delhi's Friday mosque. Through his art he was helping to forge that language into the great literary vehicle it has become today.

Mir's life spanned the effective destruction of the Mughal Empire. He was born in 1723 at Agra, during the reign of Muhammad Shah, the "voluptuary"; it was a time when the Mughals could still imagine that their authority reached over the greater part of the Subcontinent. Born into a family which claimed descent from the Prophet, his grandfather had been a high-ranking official of the Mughal court. After his father's death, when Mir was seventeen, he went to Delhi where he found service with prominent nobles. He witnessed the great

calamity which befell the imperial capital in the mid-eighteenth century: its sack by Ahmad Shah Abdali of Afghanistan in 1760. For much of the following ten years or more, Mir was supported by Shah Alam's finance minister, Nagar Mal. From 1771 he lived a life of great privation, until he was able in 1782 to get himself established at the court of the Mughal successor state of Awadh.

For a time, under Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah he received a handsome pension. Nothing, however, was forthcoming from the Nawab's closefisted successor, Saadat Ali Khan, and in 1810, Mir died poverty-stricken in Lucknow.

As compared with biography, and in particular with collective biography in which are recorded the contributions of the learned and holy, or the poetically gifted, in sustaining and transmitting the core values and skills of Muslim civilization, autobiography is a poorly developed genre in Islamic literature. Indulgence in autobiography suggests a too highly developed sense of individual worth as against the deference which the individual owes to wider community purpose. Notable exceptions are the autobiography of that great intellectual and spiritual figure, al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) and the memoirs of those remarkable Mughal emperors, Babur (d. 1526) and Jahangir (d. 1628). Indeed, autobiography as a genre does not begin to be practiced at all widely in the Muslim world until the twentieth century when it came to be powered both by a growing sense of individualism and by Western influence. Mir's autobiography, therefore, has a special interest as a rare example from the eighteenth century. Naim most helpfully places it in the context of two other autobiographical works written by leading poets whom Mir knew, Anand Ram Mukhlis (d. 1751) and Shaikh Muhammad Ali Hazin (d. 1766). He shows how similar to the latter Mir's work is, not least in the substantial narrative of political events.

This said, Mir wittingly and unwittingly tells us much else. Nearly a third of his book is devoted to establishing his father as a leading sufi; the centrality of spiritual devotion in his life is set out and the impact of his spiritual presence on others is made clear. Naim comments that we have no record of Mir's father as a leading sufi, and suggests that Mir is burnishing the reputation of his father, so that he is at least the equal in background of leading rival poets such as Kwaja Mir Dard.

Whatever Mir's reasons, it does cause him to place in his father's mouth a fine set-piece statement on the power of love. It is what any sufi might have said, but it loses none of its force for that:

My son, practise love, for it is love that holds sway over everything.

But for love, nothing would have taken shape. Without love, life is a burden. To give one's heart to love, that is perfection. Love creates and love consumes. Whatever exists in the world is a manifestation of love. Fire is love's ardor; wind is love's agitation.

Water is the flow of love; earth is the repose of love. Death is love's inebriated state; life is love's sober state ... The state of love is above the

states of worship, gnostic knowing, asceticism, companionship, sincerity, desirefulness, friendship, or being loved.

All agree that the movement of the heavens is raised by love—they keep going round in circles and never reach their desired ones.

Something of the life of the poet emerges. In Delhi Mir would hold his *mushairahs*, the assemblies at which poets would show off their paces, trump their rivals, and seek patrons, on the fifteenth of the lunar month. This would have been full moon, which suggests that they were held outside and attendance was probably large. “Suddenly I found myself in the neighbourhood where I had lived,” Mir writes on returning to Delhi after the devastation of the Afghan invasion, “where I gathered my friends and recited verses, where I lived the life of love and cried many a night; where I fell in love with slim and tall [beloveds] and sang high their praises ...” Throughout his autobiography, there is the constant search for patrons. Poets needed patrons to keep body and soul together; patrons needed poets to project their reputations in the most powerful medium of the day. Turbulent times, unfortunately, meant that the political and physical mortality of patron was high.

Mir’s account of his life enables us to glimpse intimacy between people such as can otherwise be sensed only in painting. “When I was a little child,” he writes, “my nanny, as she would wash my face [and doubtless to make him look up] would say to me ‘Moon! Moon!’ and I would look up in the sky ...” His father seems to have been the very model of a “new man,” hearing all the young Mir’s needs, eating with him, sleeping next to him. “Live happily, keep smiling,” his father would say; “you should know that I am always ready to fulfil your every desire ... Do not clench your brow like a bud; smile, open up like a flower That is how he talked to me every day and nurtured me with great care.” Furthermore, Naim brings to his scholarly commentary insights from Mir’s poem *Incidents of Love*, a record, perhaps, of intimacy with the mistress of a patron.

Verbal flirtation becomes physical flirtation:

She places her feet on his chest. She crushes his fingers with her foot and then rubs them better.

At his bidding, but only after coquettish delay, she transfers a wad of pan from her red-stained lips to his.

It is a rare treat to be given access to such examples of human tenderness in eighteenth-century Muslim India.

Mir loved Delhi: “The seven climes are in its every lane,” goes one of his couplets; “Does Delhi have its equal anywhere?” A good chunk of his account is given over to the sack of Delhi in 1760 and its aftermath:

In the morning—which was like the morning of Doomsday—the armies

of the Shah and the Rohilla [Najib-ud-Daulah] poured in and set about looting and killing. They knocked down the doors of the houses and tied up the owners, and some they burned while others they beheaded. A world was destroyed. They did not let up for three days and nights ... I, who was already a beggar, became poorer still. I was left destitute and penniless, and my humble abode, which was on the main road, was levelled to the ground.

Returning to Delhi the following year, he noted: "at every step I shed tears and learned the lesson of mortality. And the further I went the more bewildered I became. I could not recognize my neighbourhood or house. There were no buildings to be seen, nor any residents to speak to." So much attention is devoted to the destruction of Delhi, one suspects, because it meant the destruction of the world in which he had matured and which had sustained him. The power of the Mughals was at an end, and he must seek his fortune at the courts of their successors. The tone of his writing and the nature of his descriptions bear excellent comparison with the accounts of the leading Urdu poet of the nineteenth century, Ghalib, of the pillage and destruction of Delhi by British troops in 1858, as they suppressed the Mutiny uprising. This was, of course, another defining moment for north Indian Muslims, which on this occasion forced them to face up to the reality of British power.

The British make their first appearance in Mir's account as "Christian traders," who had been settled in Bengal for some time. As they move into the affairs of Upper India, they are made to appear just as players in the game of politics, who by Mir's account play the game rather well; they receive none of the opprobrium, for instance, that he reserves for the Sikhs. In another fine set-piece, Mir describes the festivities during the visit by the Governor-General, Warren Hastings, to Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah at Lucknow in 1784. He goes to town describing the food, the fireworks, the flowers, the lavish entertainments; "a firangi dance was held, a lovely scene—a house of joy, filled with joy." He concludes:

What a splendid guest! What an exemplary host! ... The guest, a man of perfect sagacity; the host, an embodiment of hospitality. Their likes had never been seen by the eyes of ages, nor heard by the ears of sages. In that manner they continued to meet for six months, day and night, and conversed and exchanged thoughts.

It is probably a good thing that Mir did not realize that the "splendid guest" had a different view of the occasion. Hastings wrote to his wife of the debts of the Nawab and of the horrors which three years of famine had brought to the streets of Lucknow.

There is some grim prescience in the juxtaposition of these two very different understandings of the same event. As the British asserted their power over

India, the courtly world which sustained Mir's poetry of love was in large part to be destroyed. As Muslims sought to succeed under the British dispensation, his high-flown Urdu was to be modified in a more workman-like direction. We are deeply grateful to C.M. Naim for enabling us to savor something of the human world of Muslim northern India, before all became enveloped by the British and their utilitarian purposes. □

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