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9/11 and Urdu Literature: A Sociopolitical Study of Urdu Fiction and Poetry in Pakistan

THE HISTORICAL RECORD is full of occurrences that altered the course of history as much as the perspectives, paradigms and values of the contemporaneous period. Such events leave their mark not only on the political and governmental system, but also on the social life, art and literature, and their effects are felt for centuries to come. Individuals and nations are swept away by the tides of change that result.

The events in New York City on 9/11 prompted a significant amount of multidimensional research and literary activity in the West, especially in America. The events themselves have been depicted, narrated, presented and analyzed through more or less every form of literature and the performing arts. It is interesting to note that the storyline for most of the American novels written against the backdrop of 9/11 revolve around the issues of incompatibility, dissatisfaction, alienation, or even hostility between husband and wife.¹ Is it just coincidence or is this an allusion to a greater international social and political reality in which the East and the West are seen as two conflicting and clashing, yet complementing entities? The symbolism of an intimate but antagonistic relationship between spouses reflects the increasing divide between East and West and the hidden desire of both to completely annihilate the other. But if history has taught us anything, it is the fact that despite centuries of conflict and war, nations cannot wipe out other nations.

In this context, 9/11, despite having taken place thousands of miles away, has had a massive impact on the politics, economy, society and peace of Pakistan and has been fully presented and reflected upon in Urdu poetry

¹Examples include: Delillo 2007, Kalfus 2006, O'Neill 2009 and Updike 2006.

and fiction. Urdu literature has manifested a notable sensitivity to this issue and has expressed various dimensions of the post 9/11 scenario. Literary magazines, newspapers and media widely and thoroughly discussed the events and their aftermath. A literary magazine *Dunyāzād* (Karachi) published special numbers devoted to the issue, raising its voice against imperialistic oppression and tyranny. *Funūn* (Lahore) and *Niqāt* (Faisalabad), along with a few others, took special interest in the issue. This collective response initiated a trend of neo-resistance in Urdu literature.

However, it is quite obvious that the Pakistani Urdu literary response to 9/11 is somewhat different from the American response. This resistance is not aimed at any specific government, group or ideology; rather, it opposes all types of political, economic, religious and cultural exploitation and remonstrates against the humiliation of human beings and the debasement of their dignity. It depicts the impact of 9/11 on the individual as well as collective lives of the Pakistani nation and in a way represents the voice of the masses.

The literary response to 9/11 in Pakistani fiction and poetry is quite diverse and represents several views, belief systems, myths and rationales. It portrays the shock and fright experienced by American Muslims, the wave of violence and terrorism caused by the Taliban as a result of Pakistan's alliance with the U.S. in the war on terror, the political instability and inefficiency of the State in dealing with the issue of 9/11 in a manner acceptable to the general public, the incidences of extremism that have spread as a result of social and economic inequality, and criticism of America's discrimination and political policies regarding Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. This literature also depicts both the rational and the emotional responses of Pakistanis, in particular, and Muslims in general, to the outcomes and effects of the events of 9/11 on national as well as global political, social and economic conditions. Thus Urdu fiction and poetry in Pakistan reflects a broad spectrum of responses.

The Reaction of American Muslims

Understandably, the first reaction in Urdu fiction to the events of 9/11 addressed the situation of American Muslims, who, after being absorbed into America's cultural pattern and despite having no sympathy for the militants, became aliens in their society overnight. They were rejected and humiliated simply because of the color of their skin and, ultimately, have had to rediscover their roots in Muslim history and culture. Mas'ūd Muftī's "Shanākht" (Identity; 2002) and Iftkhār Nasīm's "Pardēsī" (Outsider; 2002) are two prominent short stories dealing with this theme.

Muftī very adroitly presents the metamorphosis of American Muslims. They had wholeheartedly embraced the American culture of freedom, with all its intricacies, and had allowed their children to grow up severing their ties with their past. Suddenly they become the “other” and discover there is no way out except by reverting to the tradition they had subdued and the identity they had surrendered.

The protagonist of Nasīm’s story goes through the same experience, concluding that the world around him is turning into a huge orphanage, full of children cut off from their family line, having no descendents. He spends forty years living in American society—acclaimed sanctuary of equality and justice—only to find that he is still an outsider. He laments the fact that the planet has been divided up in the name of race, nationality and politics and these smaller identities have limited universal access to its natural habitat and deprived him of a true and collective identity as a human being.

However, this theme needs to be analyzed critically and carefully. The incidents depicted in these two stories may not represent the attitude and mindset of the entire American nation and can be regarded as exceptional and extreme events which occur in most social settings. In this theme we can also find traces of the romantic theories of a resurgent past, which have been very popular in the East, especially among some Muslim revivalists.

Criticism of American Policies

The second most important theme in Urdu poetry and prose has been the censure of American policies and double standards. Writers and poets representing the public voice consider America’s obsession with power the root cause of unrest and turbulence in society. They address this theme symbolically using a metaphorical and allegorical style to convey the idea that the war on terrorism is essentially a by-product of the strategic plans of the major world powers concerning the region. Namely, that in pursuit of their own selfish objectives and to control a region full of natural resources, the major powers have themselves encouraged the militant trends in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan by exploiting innocent and illiterate poor people of the region in the name of religion.

Two short stories by Nīlōfar Iqbāl—“Āprēshan Mā’is” (Operation Mice; 2003) and “Surkh Dhābbē (Āprēshan Mā’is—Dō)” (Red Spots, Operation Mice 2; 2004)—touch on the theme skillfully. “Operation Mice” [“Āprēshan Mā’is”] depicts America’s revenge after 9/11, which resulted in the invasion of Iraq. Narrated in the past tense and set in the household of one General

Mercy, the story seems to encompass both the present and the future. It has been woven using a network of symbolic names, metaphorical incidents, irony and paradox. General Mercy, the custard-hearted husband of Martha, is deeply in love with his dog Blaire and cannot bear causing it any pain. He plans to brutally kill the Arabian Mice, who breed too fast and can eat up all the black wealth of the Arabian deserts. Martha represents the marginalized and less acknowledged segment of humanity who can think and can understand the situation but cannot influence the self-assertive, arrogant minds of their “men.” The plans for the next one hundred years and the desire to reap manifold benefits point towards the future of mankind on earth as designed by the policymakers of the world’s main superpower.

“Surkh D̤abbē” portrays the next stage of the plan, where the American nation becomes divided over the issue of wielding unbridled power, and this rift is reflected in the dialogue between two young American officers participating in the Iraq war. The metaphor of “fried chicken,” used by the mob to describe the burned corpse of Tony, is very significant and exposes several dimensions of the psychology of weaker nations. Sometimes suppression gives rise to another kind of power which fosters aggressive, combative action. Weakness and absolute hopelessness can in turn trigger unrestrained wrath and violence.

The poem “Majāl-e Khvāb” (Daring to Dream) by Dr. Rashīd Amjad (2008) symbolically presents a journey through the graveyard of history. All the tombstones have similar stories about rising and falling yet no one seems to have learned a lesson from these stories. The guide explains that absolute power intoxicates in a manner that blocks all intellectual faculties.

Urdu poetry has manifested the effects of 9/11 in a totally different style from prose. In contrast to the discursive approach of Urdu fiction, Urdu poetry is sentimental and emotional. Keeping in mind the intrinsic differences of the two genres, this is understandable. The creative experience is revealed in a different manner in poetry, where extreme sensibility can find full expression and logical, analytical coordinates can be easily suppressed.

With respect to 9/11, two different tones and approaches are clearly discernible in Urdu poetry. One comes from accomplished, senior poets such as Ahmad Nadīm Qāsimī. It is firmly rooted in tradition, expressing grief over modern-day exploitation and mourning over the helplessness of the nation. In his poem “Aishyāʾī” (Asian; 2002b) he addresses the cruel one and tries to remind him of God’s revenge.

In another poem, “Abhī Band Muṭṭhī na Khōlnā” (2002a), Qasimī cautions that the unbridled use of technology may cause massive destruction and there will be no one to mourn the extinction of life on the planet. He

warns the “Super Power” to refrain from using nuclear power as a weapon against underdeveloped nations. In the poem “Z̄ulm-e ‘Az̄īm” (Great Iniquity; 2003) he claims that the arrogant will have to bow down and the powerful will be embarrassed as this is the law of Nature.

Amjad Islām Amjad claims to defeat the tyrants not by combating but by submitting (2002).

This approach is deeply rooted in the belief that contemporary political conflicts are, in fact, based on a clash of faiths and beliefs and not on economic interests and the power game. In such poems wailing and complaining against exploitation and oppression has also been portrayed with God being held responsible for protecting the weak and exacting their revenge. Two poets have written in this vein using the same title “A-Lam Tara Kaifa Fa‘ala” (Did You Not See What Your Lord Has Done). Both poems convey more or less the same meaning. The gist of them is that there is a war against Islam and miracles will happen to save the faithful from the infidels (Jāvaīd 2002; Shāh 2003).

On the other hand, poems written by younger poets exhibit a new mature sensibility reflecting a deeper understanding and a greater awareness of contemporary global issues. In these poems too, America’s political maneuvers and policies have been rationally analyzed and her imperialistic designs have been openly criticized. A poem by Nasīm Saiyad, “Bambārī sē Zarā Pahlē” (Just Before the Bombardment), exposes the so-called impartiality of the global media, which has become a tool of the Superpower and a means for achieving its political goals. The poem exposes the media for showing aircraft dropping food packets for Afghan children, while it does not show them dropping the bombs that put those children in that condition in the first place (2003).

Z̄āhid Mas‘ūd’s poem, titled “9/11,” is cold in tone and portrays the trauma of the people suffering from the consciousness of complex international deceits and schemes all over the world. From Hiroshima to Nagasaki and from Sarajevo to Baghdad, Kabul and Gaza, children playing in the streets smile at the poet and haunt him as the blood flows in the streets (2005, 165).

Religious Extremism in the Third World, Especially Pakistan

The third and most important feature of neo-resistance literature is that it deals with the role of the political and military powers in the region, especially in Pakistan. The secular, liberal and moderate segment of Pakistani society considers its corrupt government solely responsible for the poverty, illiteracy and extremism in the country. This approach has been

presented forcefully in both fiction and poetry. Democracy, which has become a cliché but has yet to prove its utility in countries such as Pakistan, has been a topic of heated discussion throughout Pakistan's history. The country's military and its secret agencies have also played a significant role in developing a sense of insecurity and uncertainty in the country. This topic has been the favorite of writers who generally belong to the left. They have gone to great lengths to describe the dreadful experiences and fright perpetrated by the secret agencies against their political and intellectual opponents.

Urdu literature has also responded sensibly to the wave of organized extremism that has emerged out of the social, political and economic inequalities and exploitations. A loud and bitter protest against the policy of using religion as a tool for exploiting the masses and for creating illusions about objective realities has been vigorously launched in Urdu fiction and poetry. Religious fanaticism and extreme radicalism have been soundly and cleverly condemned in Urdu fiction despite the threatening contemporary situation.

Khālidā Ḥusain's short story "Ibn-e Ādam" (Adam's Son; 2009) portrays the torture suffered by freedom fighters. 'Irfān Aḥmad 'Urfī has built his short story "Riyālī Shō" (Reality Show; 2008) on the border between imagination and objectivity reality and the reader is not able to discern until the end whether this is reality or illusion. The conflict between democratic governments and the military, as well as between the global powers and the Third World has been depicted quite deftly. The main questions raised by the writer are: Who runs the show? Who is the real director of the play? Is the one who is seemingly the director just an actor who repeats his lines? Who has written the play? Though no one knows, everyone has a clue.

A short story titled "Ēk Sā'iklō-iṣṭā'il Vaṣīyatnāma" (A Cyclostyled Will) by Manshā Yād (2009) discusses the critical issues of extremism by questioning the intellectual, spiritual and economic exploitation of the lower-middle classes which squashes hope and renders life meaningless. The story describes how poverty and hunger contribute in turning young boys from the lower strata of society into extremist militants. In addition, it also sheds light on the militant organizations which use innocent people in the name of jihad and Islam. The will of the suicide bomber has been cyclostyled, suggesting that there are numerous copies of the same will that are distributed by the militant organization to the families of the bombers. This indicates an element of compulsion in the act and alludes to the drama being played out behind the scenes.

Muṣṭafā Karīm's "Ajā'ib Ghār" (The Museum; 2009) is a satire on self-

servicing interpretations of Islam and attempts to impose such interpretations on others by force.

In his “Chaudhviñ Rāt kī Sarč Lā’iṭ” (Search Light of the Night of Full Moon; 2006) Farrukh Nadīm divides humans into three categories: herbivores, carnivores and omnivores. The most interesting character is the one in the third category through whom Nadīm alludes to the leaders of the Third World countries who behave like herbivores before the superpowers and like omnivores before their own public.

“Kārgar” (Effective; 2009) by Fārūq Khālid is also among the prominent symbolic short stories written in the context of military versus civil regimes. The imagery of graveyards, dearth, barren lands, ghosts, the milkless breasts of mothers, the sound of heavy, leather boots, cities with no light or sound, people who walk in the streets like corpses and a barter system being used for trade as there is no currency in the market, add depth to the narrative and extend the range of meanings.

Kishvar Nāhīd tops the list of the poets who have written consistently on these issues. She has published a complete collection of her poems devoted to the topic with the self-explanatory title: *Veḥsbat aur Bārōd mēñ Liṭṭī Hu’ī Shā’irī* (Poetry Wrapped in Fright and Gunpowder). In one poem of the collection, “Amrīkī Bḥaiñsē” (The American Bulls), she cries over the brutal conduct of the Superpower with the prisoners (2009, 16–17).

Fahmīda Riyāz, Shāhida Ḥasan and ‘Aṭṭiya Dā’ūd have also dealt with the present-day political milieu in their poems, but the poems written by Āftāb Iqbal Shamīm and Zīshan Sāḥil, specifically, hit the core of the issue in a very delicate and subtle manner. In “Giyāra Sitambar” (Eleven September), Shamīm expresses his grief over the death of his fellow human beings in the events on 9/11, but also criticizes the blind lust for power that caused this tragedy (2003a). In another poem, “Dōrāhē Par” (At a Fork in the Road), using the metaphor of Alexander for George Bush, he criticizes the threat presented to countries such as Pakistan by the American government: “If you are not with us, we will consider you with them” (2004).

George Bush becomes a symbol of autocracy and tyranny in the Urdu poetry of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Zīshan Sāḥil’s poem “Zindagī kē Kōnē par” (At Life’s Corner) captures the atmosphere of the contemporary situation in a satirical manner. He thanks George Bush for giving new meanings to old phrases and generously allowing poor countries to survive on his conditions (2003, 173).

Muṣṭafā Arbāb states in his poem “Dunyā Khūbšūrat Hō Saktī Thī (The World Could Have Been Beautiful) that life could have been beautiful if George Bush had become President of the United States in his childhood (2008a).

The Crests and Troughs in the Pak-Afghan Relationship

Pak-Afghan relations have gone through multiple phases in the course of history. However, the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan have always felt themselves bound by the threads of the Islamic brotherhood. The reaction in Urdu literature to the situation in Afghanistan corresponds to this sense of brotherhood as well as to political decisions taken by the Afghan government which cause instability in Pakistan.

The major expression found in Urdu fiction is of anger, grief and distress over the devastation and destruction in Afghanistan and the exploitation of the Afghan people. The letter to the U.S. President written by a young Afghan girl in the short story, "Niñd kã Zard Libãs" (Sleep's Yellow Apparel) by Zãhida Hĩnã (2009), is both a wail and a protest against the brutalities of the American military forces. 'Afiya Saiyad in her story "Balqiyãn kã But" (Balqian Idol; 2003) discusses the hypocrisy exhibited by the so-called saviors of cultures and civilizations when they slaughter the real owners of those cultures and civilizations. The story is set in the war-affected areas of Afghanistan.

Another angle or viewpoint can be seen in the description of the uncertainty and sense of insecurity in Pakistan caused by Afghan policies in stories like "Lã Vaqt meĩñ Ēk Munjamid Sã'at" (A Frozen Hour in Non-Time) by 'Afiif Salĩm (2006) and "Dehshatgard Ćhuṭṭĩ par Haiñ" (The Terrorists Are on Vacation) by 'Alĩ Hãidar Malik (2006).

Many poems have also been written on issues related to Afghanistan by authors such as Aḥmad Nadĩm Qãsimĩ, Āftãb Iqbãl Shamĩm, Muḥammad Izḥãru'l-Ḥãq, and Vazĩr Āghã, as well as many younger poets. The focus is on the horrors of war and on exposing the double standards and hypocrisy of the U.S. The traumas suffered by children and by innocent civilians have touched the hearts of Urdu writers continuously and intensely as we see in the poem "Ēk Afghãn Baĉĉẽ kã Savãl" (The Question of One Afghan Boy) by Aiyũb Khãvar (2002).

Salĩm Kaušar comments on this hypocrisy in his poem "Na'e Manzar-nãmẽ ka Dũsrã Bãb" (Second Chapter of the New Scenariõ; 2003).

Reaction to the Destruction of Iraq

Iraq has always been a part of our fantasies and provides the background for classical as well as modern Urdu fiction. It staged a comeback in Urdu fiction following the American invasion of Iraq. Baghdad, which was once associated with beauty and exquisiteness, is now a living graveyard of charred bodies and the ruins of libraries, hospitals and schools. The nar-

rator in the story titled “Ye Jañgle Katnēvālā Hai” (This Jungle is About to be Chopped Down) (Zāhidī 2008, 137–47) finds himself at the intersection between past and present. He compares the devastation caused by the American invasion to the destruction that resulted from the attack of Hulagu Khan and finds no difference either in the brutalities and callousness of the two armies or in the objectives. Both invaders were after the riches offered by Iraq, albeit in different forms.

In poetry, Āftāb Iqbāl Shamīm’s “Suqūṭ-e Baghdād” (Fall of Baghdad; 2003b) and Adīb Suhail’s “Har Zamānē kē Hulākū” (Hulagus of Every Age; 2003) underscore the same theme. In the poem “Ēk Amrīkī Faujī lā Khaṭ” (Letter of an American Soldier), Shāhnavāz Zaidī (2003) describes the emotions of an American soldier who writes a letter to his parents expressing the same emotions that an Iraqi or Afghan soldier might feel in a similar situation. These poems basically protest the brutality of war and the hypocrisy of the political policies, as Muṣṭafā Arbāb says in his poem, “Hamdardī” (Compassion; 2008b).

Thus Urdu fiction and poetry have both explored the multiple facets of the local and global issues arising from the events of 9/11 and have addressed them with courage and understanding, with due reflection on the changing paradigms of the contemporary period. □

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