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Urdu Fiction from India^{*}

NOTWITHSTANDING PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S delightful disclosure that he likes Urdu poetry, few in the West know anything about this language and even less about its otherwise vibrant literature.

The partition of British India in 1947 took its tragic toll not only in human lives and displacement, but also in culture. Like everything else, the Urdu language, an unmistakable product of India, in which all Indians participated without regard to religion or creed (of the three most celebrated Urdu fiction writers of the twentieth century, one was a Hindu, the other a Sikh, and the third a Muslim), also split apart in the frenzy of linguistic nationalism, with distinct religious identities foisted upon it. So now it is a language of the Muslims and Pakistan—Indians believe that and, worse, even Pakistanis believe that. Nevertheless, Urdu is very much alive in contemporary India. And not just among its Muslim minority, roughly the size of the population of Pakistan, but also among the expatriate South Asian communities in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. The total tally of those who can speak Urdu runs into several hundred million, a greater number than the combined speakers of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.

The stories that follow present the fictional work of just a few Urdu writers from India. It would be futile to look for any major differences between these writers and those from across the border who are now, rightly or—in this writer's opinion—wrongly, the only heirs of Urdu. Futile because the twins, even though surgically separated in the ill-conceived wisdom of the 1947 partition, sprang from the same mother, similar not just in external appearance but also in many cultural assumptions and traditions. Still, one tendency among the Urdu writers of India does stand

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out: they often deal with political and communal issues that preoccupy their minds due to their haunting nearness and dreadful immediacy. The Babri Mosque incident, the massacre at Ahmadabad which witnessed the tragic desecration and demolition of the grave of one of Urdu's major early poets Valī Daknī (1668–1707), the rise of Muslim and Hindu fundamentalism, the Bombay bombings of 2008—have all found their expression and resonance in Indian Urdu fiction far more than in Pakistani. What gives this fiction its edge is the writer's self-view as a concerned Indian, not as part of the universal Muslim *Umma*, and certainly not as a fifth columnist or disguised agent serving the interests of a foreign power. It is an Indian problem and the writer must deal with it as an Indian, and deal with it without maudlin self-pity. Whether such riots and the attendant death and destruction by themselves can be valid subjects of literature may or may not be debatable; what is unquestionably evident is that unlike much of the Urdu fiction produced in the wake of India's partition, this fiction does attempt, and often succeeds, in turning the subject into a literary experience, and steers clear of any kind of overt or implied hortatory motives.

In the midst of the overwhelming enmity between Hindus and Muslims witnessed today, Zakia Mashhadi's delightfully crafted, though tragically painful, story surprises us with the knowledge that life was not always so riddled with crippling considerations of identity, that love had a way of subverting, so gently, so tenderly, the strictures imposed by religious differences. In a much more somber mood, Salam Bin Razzaq turns the experience of palpable fear into a veritable breakdown of the human ability to feel, feel anything at all. Only a retrospective glance uncovers the true extent of the loss—the loss of the mutual trust vital for holding a multireligious society such as India's together. And Sajid Rashid's duo—the nameless hardworking and brilliant Muslim youth whose life takes a 180-degree turn the day he meets a fair, dreamy-eyed man with a long, light brown beard (vividly reminiscent of Ṭāḥā and Shaikh Muḥammad Shākir in Egyptian novelist 'Alā' al-Aswānī's *Imārat Yāqūbiyān* (The Yacoubian Building)—tells us how decent human beings are eventually transformed into terrorists by the endemic corruption in their own societies and the hubris and intervention of foreign powers.

In a lighter vein, Anwar Khan's young woman, in a capricious moment, is overpowered by the onslaught of a sudden desire to escape her oppressively confining life by walking into a store's display window to take on the role of the mannequin herself, while Siddiq Alam writes with a touch of humor the poignant story about two old coots who meet in a public park every evening and end up irritating each other, much like the two long-term residents in Somerset Maugham's "Sanatorium"—cantan-

kerous, but lovable all the same.

Rajinder Singh Bedi, one of the three most celebrated Urdu short-story writers of twentieth-century India, was often described as the Indian Chekov, writing about the common people and the common incidents of life with engaging realism. "Methun" (copulation) has a lot to say about human nature, and it does not shy away from taking a potshot or two at the Hindu and Muslim mentality, at least as a Sikh perceives it.

And in her "Of Fists and Rubs," Ismat Chughtai masterfully describes the travails of two menial hospital workers, blending together autobiographical material and socio-political commentary to produce an incredibly deft narrative of Indian life.

Qurratulain Hyder, the foremost woman Urdu writer (her *River of Fire* was recognized and recommended by no less a person than the Nobel Laureate J. M. G. Le Clézio), with a phenomenal memory and an acute, perceptive observation of Indian life across most of its classes, captures here the last gasp of the British Raj (and its aftermath) in its richest colony, with an undertone of delightful irony. □