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Urdu Literature in Pakistan: A Site for Alternative Visions and Dissent

Iqbal's Idea of a Muslim Homeland—Vision and Reality

To a great extent Pakistan owes its existence to the vision of one of the greatest Urdu poets, ʿAllāma Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938). Not only had Iqbāl expressed the idea of a separate homeland for South Asian Muslims, he had also formulated his vision of the ideal Muslim state and the ideal Muslim. These ideals are at the core of his poetry in Urdu and Persian. Iqbāl didn't live to see the creation of the independent state of Pakistan and was thus unable to exert any influence on what became of his vision. Nevertheless, he has been celebrated as Pakistan's national poet and as the spiritual father of the nation ever since the adoption of the Pakistan Resolution by the All-India Muslim League in 1940. In Fateḥ Muḥammad Malik's words: "In Pakistan Iqbāl is universally quoted, day in and day out from the highest to the lowest. His poetry is recited from the cradle to the corridors of power, from the elementary school to the parliament house" (1999a, 90). Anybody dealing with Pakistan is sooner or later exposed to this official version of Iqbāl. Presumably much less known is the fact that soon afterwards, Pakistani writers and poets started to question the legitimacy of this appropriation of Iqbāl by representatives of the Pakistani state, by educational institutions and the official media. Several Urdu poets wrote parodies of his famous poems, not to parody Iqbāl's poetry as such but to highlight the wide gulf between words and deeds, between the proclaimed ideals and Pakistani reality. Let's, for example, have a look at the following extracts taken from Iqbāl's "Baččē kī Duʿā" ("The Child's Prayer") and Majīd Lāhōrī's parody "Amīr Baččē kī Duʿā" ("The Rich Child's Prayer"), both translated by Tariq Rahman.

Like the flower is that of the garden my God.
Let me champion all life the cause of the poor

My task be to love them—the afflicted, the weak
and the poor.
Let my being be the decoration of my land my
God

Save me from evil forever my God
And keep me ever constant on the path of virtue
O God.
(Iqbāl, quoted in Malik 1999a, 99)

Let my life be like the fabled Qarun O Lord!
May the National Bank be forever my love O
Lord!

Let me live forever supporting the wealthy
And hating, despising the underdog so earthy.

And save me from VIRTUE above all O Lord!
Keep me ever on the path of iniquity O Lord!
(Majīd Lāhōrī, quoted in *ibid.*, 100)

Saiyid Muḥammad Jaʿfarī, among others, wrote a parody of one of Iqbāl's most popular poems, "Shikva" ("Complaint"), under the title "Vazīrōñ kī Namāz" ("Ministers' Prayers"; for text and translation see *ibid.*, 96–7). As stated above, these parodies are not primarily aimed at Iqbāl but at the misappropriation of his work. However, one cannot fail to notice that Iqbāl's lofty style and pathos lends itself to parody very easily. Thus, similarly to Majīd Lāhōrī in the example quoted above, "… Jafery [Saiyid Muḥammad Jaʿfarī] has maintained a close resemblance to the original by an imitative use of the words, style, tone, and the subject-matter of the original" (*ibid.*, 97). A few words changed here and there are enough to bring the tone down from the lofty to the ridiculous. The ancient weapon of humor is used to ridicule and thereby in a way defeat the high and mighty.

However, this particular form of social criticism via parodies of Iqbāl's verses constitutes only a small segment of the vast body of literature which voices discontent and dissent. Parody and satire have always been part of the poetic tradition in Urdu. Poetry constituted an important field for voicing public opinion. Mīr Jaʿfar Za allī (1659?–1713?), for instance, is

said to have paid with his life for attacking the Mughal ruler Farrukh Siyar in his ghazals which were sung by commoners in the streets. Another famous example is Akbar Allahābadī (1846–1921), who, in his verses, ridiculed the petty bourgeois values and the blind imitation of a Western lifestyle exhibited by some of his contemporaries. He mostly used the ghazal form, but for a more poignant expression of critical opinion or political comment the form of the quatrain (*rubāʿī*) became very popular. It is still a regular feature of many Urdu newspapers and journals. See the following example by Mirzā Maḥmūd Sarḥadī (1914?–1968):

> We have to conquer Kashmir,
> that is, we have to stand/face another test (of
> time).
> You are a leader, what is it to you—
> you just have to deliver speeches.
>
> (Shāhid 1991, 111)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, along with poetry, journalistic writing and other prose forms developed into vehicles of implicit or explicit social and political criticism.

A History of Criticism and Dissent

The partition of India and the Two-Nation Theory on which it was based was unacceptable to a great number of intellectuals and writers. Among them, Saʿādat Ḥasan Man ō (1912–1955) is one of the best-known. As is well-known, he rejected the division of men along religious lines and compared a divided India to a madhouse in his famous story "Tōba Tēk Siñgh̲." After circumstances had compelled him to leave Bombay and settle down in Lahore, he described the cultural and intellectual atmosphere in the new country in his satire "Allāh kā Baṛā Faẓl Hai" ("Great is Allah's Grace"; 1950, 121–7). I paraphrase some of its central points: Thanks to the grace of Allāh, the new country is free from curses such as poetry, music and dance (121).[1] It is also free from revolutionaries and all subversive elements who led the people astray. Thank God we are now ruled by the mullās (122). There are no painters left, and those few who are left had to sacrifice their fingers to prevent them from engaging in infidelity (*ibid.*).

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[1]Translations and paraphrases from the Urdu throughout are the author's.

All filthy words have been excised from the dictionaries (123). The completely senseless, so-called realistic literature has been abolished, literary journals are no longer published. A single, the official, newspaper is sufficient because there is no news to be reported, no political themes left—no party rivalries, no discussion of women's rights, no election campaigns, etc. (125). No scientists are left to study this transitory world and to claim equality with the Almighty (126). The piece ends on an interesting note: There is a news item in the paper that a man has been arrested because he demanded that Satan be invited into Pakistan. The man quotes a Persian verse by Iqbāl to the effect that a world with God but without Satan is devoid of attraction. Now the government is wondering how to get the culprit sentenced—there is no court left in the country! But news has it that at least a prison has been built and so the problem is solved (127).

Compare this quite early (albeit satirically exaggerated) statement on the state of affairs in Pakistan with later writings and you will not find too much difference! But even then, Man ō was too pessimistic as far as the intellectual and art scene in Pakistan was concerned. Music and dance certainly suffered a lot. Critical literature, however, flourished in Pakistan despite repression and censorship, and—more often than not—was actually inspired by them. It could take on the form of the lyrical ghazal or of agit-prop poetry, of the short story or the satirical essay, of drama or novel, and appear in the realistic, romantic, symbolic or surrealistic mode. Lack of social justice and personal freedom, political oppression, hypocrisy of the ruling classes, the preservation of feudal structures in rural areas, the misuse of Islam, sectarianism and racism, gender inequality and atrocities against women—these have all been recurrent themes from 1947 to the present day. During times of censorship, literary texts often had to act as a substitute for the public discourse which was banned in the media.

As mentioned above, committed literature could use various modes of expression, from the direct to the abstract or oblique. The problematic of commitment in literature had been a point of debate since the 1930s and was provoked above all by the overtly ideological guidelines of the "Progressives," which seriously impinged on artistic freedom. The debate goes on to this day, with extremist positions pro and contra commitment at the fringes, and somewhat moderate positions pleading for a committed literature without ideological and aesthetic prescriptions somewhere in the middle. When we look at the literary scene in Pakistan it appears, however, that the urge for quite open, unmasked, direct social and political critique in literature is still felt by many writers in all the Pakistani lan-

guages.[2] Presumably there is also a demand for this type of writing among certain readers. This may perhaps be explained by the sheer amount and urgency of the problems Pakistani society faces. Value judgments which are based on aesthetic criteria are bound to dismiss such works as unliterary. They should better be viewed as an important part of the public discourse on social and political evils and on values—or the lack thereof—in Pakistan, as an outlet for discontent and critique, as a vital, mobilizing medium of political and social activism.

As far as novels are concerned, one of the best-known examples of ideologically inspired writing is *Khudā kī Bastī* (God's Settlement, 1957) by Shaukat Ṣiddīqī (b. 1923).[3] With its straightforward social criticism and its utterly utopian interludes, the novel is a good illustration of the aforesaid. While on the one hand we see greed, profiteering and ruthless exploitation of the poor, and especially of women, on the other, we are introduced to a group of idealists who try to better the lot of the poor. They eventually fail in their attempts, but idealism is again invoked at the end of the novel. The novel obviously succeeded in capturing the sense of disillusionment which started to spread in the 1950s. It created quite a stir at the time of its publication and is considered to be one of the important literary works in Pakistan's early history.

At the other end of the spectrum we come across subtle, artistically refined modes of dealing with reality in Pakistan, which usually focus on individual experience. These more aesthetically rewarding works are better represented in the English translations of poetry and prose which have been published for the last two or three decades.[4] But, beyond this, a vast corpus of Urdu fiction still remains unexplored. For the present study I have chosen a novel by the travel writer and TV entertainer Mustanṣar Ḥusain Tāraṛ (b. 1939), who is not only very much a part of the culture

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[2]This fact is amply illustrated by an anthology of Pakistani short stories in English translation edited by Muzaffar Iqbal under the title *Colours of Loneliness: Short Stories from Urdu and the Regional Languages of Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[3]This novel is available in an English translation by David Matthews published under the title *God's Own Land: A Novel of Pakistan*. (Kent: Paul Norbury Publications/UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, 1991).

[4]Special mention should be made in this context of Frances Pritchett and Muhammad Umar Memon, to whom we owe a great deal for their translations and editorial work, and of Oxford University Press Karachi for publishing the Pakistan Writers Series.

Industry of Pakistan and a popular media figure, but has also won recognition as a novel writer in the 1980s.

Fractured Images of Contemporary Pakistan: Mustansar Husain Tarar's Novel *Rakh*

Largely ignored by academics outside Pakistan, Tāraṛ has presented a sequence of three novels on Pakistan over the last 15 years, starting with *Bahā'ō* (The Stream, 1987), and followed by *Rākh̲* (Ashes, 1997) and *Qurbat-e Marg mēñ Muḥabbat* (Love on the Brink of Death, 2001). In Pakistan *Rākh̲* received much acclaim. It was declared best novel of the year and the author received the Prime Minister's Award carrying one lakh rupees from the Pakistan Academy of Letters. Fateḥ Muḥammad Malik saw "the restless soul of Pakistani nationalism/nationhood" (*Pakistānī qaumiyat kī bēqarār rūḥ*) embodied in the novel's character Mardān, and he even went so far as to call "national existence" (*hamārā qaumī vujūd*) the central character which is oppressed by its rulers' constant and deliberate digression from the (original) concept of Pakistan (1999b, 24) The short story writer Muḥammad Manshā Yād congratulated Tāraṛ on the creative and skillful literary treatment and remarked that Tāraṛ obviously wrote straight from his heart, "and I'm happy that everything is true also and every sensible and thinking person will arrive at the same conclusions" (2003, n.p.). Hence, my discussion will center on the questions how Pakistan and Pakistanis are portrayed in the novel and what may be the reasons for its success.

The frame story of the novel (or the present level of the narrative) spans a period of roughly thirteen months sometime in the 1990s. It revolves around the main protagonist Mushāhid, his wife Brigitta, Mushāhid's younger brother Mardān and Mardān's adopted daughter Shōbh̲ā. Mushāhid is alarmed by the first signs of impending old age and by a growing crisis in his relationship with his wife. Through numerous, intrinsically layered flashbacks (flashbacks within flashbacks, etc.) the author extends the canvas of the novel back into the immediate post-Partition years, through the 1950s and 1960s and into the early 1970s. We accompany Mushāhid, (who bears some biographical traits of the author), to England where he undergoes training as an engineer and experiences his first love affair before returning to Pakistan. There he opens a small hosiery factory

and settles down in Lahore. Together with Mardān, we live through the last days of East Pakistan and the first days of Bangladesh and the violence in Karachi during the first half of the 1990s. We learn that Brigitta was born into a low-class family of *čūhars* in Pakistan but was adopted by a Swedish couple right after her birth. We thus travel in time between 1947 and 1995, and in space between England, Pakistan, Denmark and Sweden (and later Bangladesh), and within Pakistan from Lahore to Karachi, to the outskirts of Lahore, to the Swat Valley and to other locations in Pakistan's Northern Frontier region.

Summing up the themes addressed in the novel, we get a long list of problems related to Pakistan, its history, its self-image, its religious and cultural policies:

- the racism of Pakistanis (contempt for dark skin color)
- the trauma of East Pakistan, which questions the legitimacy of the Pakistan movement
- religious intolerance (violence against Hindus after 1947; persecution of Ahmadis and Christians, blasphemy laws; neglect or destruction of Gandhara art)
- ethnic discrimination
- the distortion or curtailing of history in Pakistani textbooks
- bonded labor, child labor
- discrimination against women
- the horrors of war set against an ideology which glorifies war (examples of the 1965 Indo-Pak War and the war in Bangladesh)
- the corruption and selfishness of Pakistani politicians
- the neglect of the cultural heritage (old mansions in Lahore, historical buildings in the country as a whole)
- environmental pollution.

This rather long list suggests that *Rākh̲* is a highly political novel. It certainly is, but, barring a few instances, not in a sledgehammer style. Tāraṛ, admittedly, has included almost every topic on the current political agenda, which in places overburdens the novel. At the core of the novel, however, are the personal relationships between the characters and the doubts and questions that Mushāhid faces. In the opening scene of the novel we share his experience of impending old age (indicated by the loss of a wisdom tooth) and the fears created by this realization. The novel thus begins on a very personal note. Visual impressions during an early morning duck-hunting expedition outside Lahore create the back-

ground for and intensify the hero's brooding mood. He's alone in a boat surrounded by fog and silence. Questions about happiness, about the meaning of life, about the "end result" (14)[5] of all ideals and sacrifices, spring up quite naturally in this environment. In a similar way, reflections and reminiscences of the other characters are triggered by particular experiences, by sounds, smells or visual impressions. It is not historical events, but human relations that provide the basic framework for the novel: relations between husband and wife and between men and women as lovers, the extraordinarily close relationship between Mushāhid and his brother Mardān, the almost equally close relationship during his adolescence between Mushāhid and his friend Bābū, the strong tie between Mardān and his adopted daughter Shōbh̠ā, etc. In various ways the reader is led to conclude that human ties, however painful and complicated, are what really count in life. Human relations, especially the intense bond between Mushāhid and Mardān and between Mushāhid and his closest friends, transcend common modes of perception and communication. The magic moments which occur throughout the novel are all linked to the intensity and the harmony of thoughts and feelings shared by two or three persons.

Now, that may sound quite trivial, but here Tāraṛ successfully steers clear of sentimentality and cheap effects. There are a good number of dramatic and emotional situations where understatement or irony prevents the narrative from turning melodramatic. The horror of the war in East Bengal and of the war-like situation in Karachi is presented in naturalistic detail, sometimes making reading almost too painful to continue. Yet one feels that these gruesome stories are not told for their own sake—they have to be endured in order to understand why the protagonists have lost faith in heroic ideals, in politicians, and in any ideology which preaches the necessity of sacrificing human lives. With Mushāhid this motif of doubt is introduced very early: as a child he sees how one of the Hindu neighborhoods of Lahore is burned down and the ashes of the fire fill the sky—hence the title of the novel (*rākh̠* meaning "ashes").

> What type of ashes are these that are smeared on the face, and yet those whose faces are completely covered by ashes can't even see them. They don't realize that their faces are smeared with ashes, they don't look like they did before, their appearance has changed …. They look at each other,

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[5]All quotations are from Tāraṛ 1997. Translations from the novel are the author's. Words which appear in English in the Urdu original are set in italics.

> see their ash-covered faces, but say nothing. They don't tell each other [what all they see], don't ask anything, because this is what is called a conspiracy of silence. (72)

The memories of these ashes and of the days of killing and looting will haunt Mushāhid for the rest of his life, filling his mind with doubt. He remembers the refugees arriving with murder on their minds:

> [O]n their bewildered faces was written *Murder shall breed murder*. Yes, murder will breed murder, till the end of history ... and always in the name of justice, justice, which is the most destructive and deceitful word in human history.
>
> And in those days the seed of doubt was sown in Mushāhid's immature mind. (73)

When Mushāhid visits Berlin in 1959, the ruins of the Second World War remind him of the destruction he has seen in Lahore, because all ruins look alike. He feels ashes on his face, but when he wipes his face his handkerchief remains white (255). Again he is reminded of those days when he had lain sleepless in his bed after getting the news of Bhutto's death:

> Burned pages of registers and books floating in the hot August air like black birds with clipped wings. The sky over Shāh ʿAlāmī and the crackling of fire. *Dust into dust and ashes into ashes.* So what will be the *end result* of it all? Traces, traces [or: doubt, doubt,] stains of ashes settled on faces. (464)

In the last sentence the author exploits the double meaning of the Urdu word *shā'iba*, which may denote "doubt" as well as "pollution, stain."

In a way, this childhood experience alienates the protagonist from his surroundings for the first time. His years in Great Britain take him further away from his origins. He adopts a Western lifestyle and Western values and finally decides to settle down in the UK. The early death of his father, however, forces him to return to Pakistan.

The following years in Pakistan add to his disenchantment with his country. Bhutto's failure to live up to people's expectations is a major disappointment for Mushāhid and Mardān, who had both regarded him as their hero. A few scenes vividly illustrate the charisma of Bhutto as well as the arrogance which finally precipitates his fall. Despite this, Mushāhid is shocked when, during a business trip to Switzerland, he learns that

Bhutto has been hanged. He expects the Himalayas to weep, but of course they have more important things to do (465). In despair he postpones his return to Pakistan because he suddenly feels homeless. (In the end this results in his trip to Göteborg, Sweden, where he meets Brigitta.) Mushāhid is thus alienated from Pakistani society in a number of ways: by his critical detachment from the fundamentals of the official ideology, by his liberal Westernized value system and also by his unconventional, somewhat detached attitude toward life. On the other hand, he is attached to the soil, he loves Lahore, and he cannot stand any abuse of Pakistan by outsiders. When a Bengali lady who had collaborated with West Pakistan says that she abhors Pakistan, Mushāhid thinks: "What is she saying? I can call my motherland anything, but ... but Mrs. Ḥusain—what right does she have?"(470). He thus faces a very common dilemma: he loves his country but not its rulers or its governing ideology.

Mardān, who had started to dream of a military career in his early boyhood, goes to East Bengal as a young officer when the situation is already heading towards war. The atrocities he witnesses there shatter all his ideals, his trust in the military command and in humanity as such. What is the idea of Pakistan as a homeland for South Asian Muslims good for when Bengali Muslims are not treated as human beings, when they are slaughtered like animals? How can he forget the gruesome death of his fellow soldiers who are massacred by the Mukti Bahini in revenge? When he sees them hung upside down, with their noses, ears and members cut off, he thinks:

> They had not yet learned what the Pakistan Movement meant, and what the meaning of Pakistan was [*Pakistān kā Maṭlab kyā*, the title of a famous poem by Ḥabīb Jālib]. Tilting my head I was trying to recognize not these dead bodies but the Pakistan Movement—in an attempt to figure out its sacred meaning. And then I saw ʿAlī Shēr.… (380)

At the same time, Pakistani generals continue to live in their old, lavish style, dallying around with beautiful women and talking about poetry and music. The cynicism of it all makes Mardān realize that there is no future for him in the army. Yet he is unable to surrender along with the Pakistani high command. He prefers to risk his life attempting to flee across the border. When Mardān returns to Pakistan he is a broken man, both physically and mentally. He leads a quiet life as a school teacher on the outskirts of Karachi, bringing up the Bengali girl Shōbẖā whom he had brought to Pakistan as a baby. Shōbẖā is the daughter of a Bengali

girl Mardān had once adored, before the war put an end to all his dreams, and who was raped by a high-ranking Pakistani officer. When he is questioned by his very frank sister-in-law about his sex life he tells her that the events in East Pakistan have left him sexually impotent.

What happens in Pakistan in the 1970s is depicted as something brought on by the conduct of Pakistanis themselves. The American hand in Afghanistan and American support for Zia-ul Haqq are not part of the story. The episodes in East Pakistan reveal the colonial attitude of most West Pakistanis toward Bengalis. And finally, the social divides inside Pakistani society (occasionally overlapping with ethnic and denominational differences) are shown to be more destructive than any postcolonial or neocolonial predicament. Only a short, one-sentence comment on the disastrous effect of a Non-Governmental Organization's (NGO) interference hints at the manipulative powers of Western money. (We have to keep in mind that the novel was written before America launched its attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan with all its ensuing consequences for Pakistan.) It also has to be stressed that neither Mardān nor Mushāhid question the Two-Nation Theory as such. Rather, they hold that Pakistan lost its legitimacy by following misguided policies and by failing to live up to its professed ideals.

Aiʿjāz Aḥmad outlines the shift in orientation which occurred after the secession of Bangladesh: Because Pakistan could no longer claim to be the home of the majority of South Asian Muslims, it turned its back on the multireligious Subcontinent and started to look to the religiously homogenous Islamic Middle East for orientation. It is only then that Pakistan felt the need to stress its Islamic character (1999, 178–9). It can be argued that similar tendencies had existed before. Moreover, the Pakistani population itself is divided in this regard. While Punjabis and Sindhis tend to feel culturally related to the Subcontinent, Balochis and Pathans feel closer to Iran and Afghanistan. Religiosity is defined not only by family background, class, education, etc., but also by this cultural conditioning. In *Rākh* we find this difference exemplified in the urban Punjabis Mushāhid and his school-time friend, the art dealer Zāhid Kāliyā, on the one hand, and the somewhat stereotypical rural Pathans who provide Zāhid Kāliyā with Gandhara art, on the other. The Pathans are portrayed as staunch, narrow-minded Muslims who adhere to every injunction of their faith. When they don't sell artifacts from the Gandhara period, they destroy them, because they consider them non-Islamic. In contrast, Mushāhid and Kaliya don't meddle with other people's religious affairs. For a long time they even fail to notice that their mutual friend Dr. Arshad

is an Ahmadi. Mushāhid has witnessed religious frenzy as a child and again in the early 1990s when a Hindu temple in Lahore was pulled down as retribution for the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. Therefore, in his understanding only tolerance can bring peace and guarantee the survival of the country. These two different positions are painted rather black and white in the novel, but this is quite understandable given the Islamist rhetoric in the country.

No less pronounced is the anti-war position of the hero. A few quotations will illustrate this point:

> So outside was the blackout of '65. The inhabitants of Lahore enjoyed this exciting game of war, only because it was being played for the first time. They were not yet acquainted with the total destruction of a total war. They didn't know what would happen if the war were extended from days into months and years; what would happen if Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar turned into ruins. A limited war is a kind of emotional romance in which you can play out your patriotic feelings without any danger, and you feel the easy pride of your country's war of freedom. (389)

> The borders of B. R. B. ... There was much dust and much fear. The word "war" fills even the yellow color of a mustard field with dread. (*ibid.*)

> The first Indian jet fighter which had come to this side. The pilot's blood half blackened on the metallic shine of the scrap in the mild sunshine ... the sight made Mushāhid sad. What is the end result of all wars? Zero plus zero …. (390)

> Outside there were helicopters, and the war machinery was in full swing, without any ethics, because to this day no war had been fought in compliance with the Geneva Convention. (429)

A third central thread in the fabric of the narrative is the story of Brigitta and her married life with Mushāhid. It links their middle-class milieu with a family at the very bottom of society. Stigmatized by their skin color (black), their hereditary profession (sweeper), their poverty and their status as a religious minority (Christian), these *čūhars* are endowed with every imaginable disadvantage. Brigitta's precarious position as the Swedish-speaking, liberal-minded wife of a respectable citizen, and yet easily recognizable as low-born by her black skin and her features, brings the prejudices of the Pakistani middle and upper class into sharp focus. Brigitta's father and the rest of the family are described without false romanticism or cheap sympathy. The story leaves no doubt about the fact

that the gulf between these two strata of society cannot be bridged by goodwill or idealism. One of Brigitta's nephews is freed from bonded labor in the carpet industry and educated with the help of an NGO, but he is killed when he starts to agitate against bonded labor. (As an aside we are informed that his death brings a lot of foreign money into the treasury of that NGO which is then used to ruin the Pakistani carpet industry—a dig at ill-informed help by foreign donors (446).)

I have outlined only a few of the social, political and ideological problems that are broached in the novel. In its own way, the novel can serve as an illustration of Hafeez Malik's résumé of Pakistani history:

> Pakistan's political, social and religious life today is in glaring contrast to what the founding fathers—Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948) and Dr. Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938)—had aspired it to be. Contemporary reality would be disappointing to both.
>
> Today's Pakistan is filled with the stench of sectarian violence, rabid religious fanaticism, the law of blasphemy, which has spawned an oppressive milieu against minorities, and the rush to pass the fifteenth amendment. [...] All this is done in the name of Islam! (2001, 1)

And the main protagonists of the novel would subscribe to the ideal of Pakistan which Hafeez Malik formulates in the following paragraph:

> Jinnah and Iqbal espoused Muslim nationalism, and envisaged for Islam a progressive role: an Islam at once tolerant, and respectful of non-Muslim citizens and their faiths, enabling them to live in Pakistan as equal citizens, suffering from no legal or political discrimination. They expected Pakistan to be a democratic state under the rule of law, not to be periodically ruled by Martial Law, imposed by the so-called "historical scavengers." Pakistan was expected to be a prosperous state, where science and technology (instead of theology) were to flourish. Pakistan was to be a beacon of enlightenment and progress in the Muslim world. (*ibid.*)

To these ideals we may add that of a peaceful Pakistan which would not glorify heroism and war, but would use its resources to improve the life of its citizens, maintain its historical heritage and take care of the environment.

These ideas have been voiced time and again in the English language print media of Pakistan, in scholarly writings, and in many literary texts, both prose and poetry. Repeating them alone would not make for a good novel. Nor can we do justice to a literary text by listing the topics it deals

with. These can at best be abstractions, drawn from the text for a particular purpose. The qualities of the novel have to be explained on another level. *Rākh̲* succeeds in creating vivid images of human beings. It makes us realize how it feels to live under oppressive, unjust, sometimes even inhuman conditions, and yet to carve out a space for love, maintain freedom of thought, and practice tolerance, in one's life. But all this is done in a very complex manner. I have already mentioned the complicated temporal structure of the narrative. Equally complex is the fabric of a multitude of threads which nevertheless add up to a composite whole. Each episode is related to the rest of the story, although this often becomes evident only much later. Sometimes the (impersonal) narrator deliberately withholds information to create suspense; sometimes he informs us of later events beforehand to create special effects. Throughout, we don't get any coherent historical, political or other relevant information. Comments by the narrator are rare and very brief. Whatever we learn about Pakistan, we come to know partly through the action, but mostly through the protagonists' eyes or minds. Naturally those images are fractured by the frequent changes in perspective and by the jumps and ruptures in the characters' associations, reflections and memories. The views on Pakistan I have tried to outline above are derived from those fragments of information, but do, in no way, cover the wide range of themes and motives of the novel.

From the above one may get the impression that *Rākh̲* is a predominantly negative and depressing novel. In parts it certainly is, and it also ends on a tragic note. But this sense of doom and failure is to some extent outweighed by the warmth and intensity of human relations. Thus, Mardān's death at the end is somewhat balanced by the good news that Brigitta is expecting and by the hope that this good news may mend her almost broken marriage. Another very important factor which rescues the novel from despair is the love of life in its particular Punjabi expression, that is, the love of food (and drink), of music and dance, of adherence to the motto "Live and let live," and a down-to-earth approach to life. Some of it may be part of a cliché of *panjābiyat*, but Tāraṛ brings these stereotypes to life in a very convincing manner. And he successfully depicts Mushāhid's deep attachment to Lahore, to the river Ravi and to the Pakistani soil. Detailed descriptions of places in Lahore or of various landscapes and places in the north are testimony to the author's powers of observation—and to the high value he attaches to the preservation of Pakistan's natural beauty and its architectural heritage.

A second, very important feature of *panjābiyat* is the abundant use of

Punjabi words in the narrative and the numerous quotations from Old Punjabi poetry. Punjabi words in dialogues give them a homely touch. They also fit well in the narrative and descriptive passages. Where Punjabi poetry (by Khvāja Farīd, Miyāñ Muḥammad and others) is quoted, it is either in an erotic or mystic context. Khvāja Farīd's verses, as sung by Punjabi folk singers, form a contrast to the narrow, materialistic concerns of the audience in a private concert arranged by Kāliyā. They add a touch of the transcendental, which is augmented by the setting—a moonlit night in the desert (416–22). A detailed study of *panjābiyat* and Punjabi as used by Tāraṛ, would, however, require a separate essay.

A third feature of the novel which needs to be mentioned here is the use of humor to provide comic relief. We encounter various forms of humor in the novel: wit, irony, parody, sarcasm. Very enjoyable is the mild irony with which Mushāhid's childhood reminiscences are narrated. In a way this irony prevents the sense of nostalgia (and perhaps also sentimentality) from becoming oppressive. At the same time, it shows Mushāhid's amused detachment from his childhood follies. Despite some sad experiences, we get the image of a happy childhood. Very different from this type of humor is the sarcastic use of the invocation *Bismillāh* by Kāliyā before he takes the first gulp from his whiskey bottle or when he announces the performance of dancing girls. But even such—by orthodox standards—almost blasphemous acts might be interpreted differently: for example, as an expression of reverence and gratitude for the blessings of wine and music in line with a poetic or Sufi mindset. We may thus take Kāliyā as a present-day *malañg* or *malāmatī*, who defies religious sanctions but who, in his heart, is deeply devoted to Islam. (His devotion is attested to by his response to Sufi verses and, later on, somewhat melodramatically, by his private shrine: a hidden collection of precious Islamic artifacts from the Subcontinent.)

Looking at the different components of Mushāhid's identity as it unfolds in the novel, we may describe him as a liberal, middle-class (or bourgeois) Muslim with humanistic ideals, but also with many doubts about the possibility of putting these ideals into practice. By his very nature he tends to lead a reclusive life. As an adult he keeps aloof from politics, enjoys nature, is interested in art and literature, and abhors all forms of censorship and regimentation, in culture as well as in religion. He detests the greed for power and wealth. He is not devoid of spirituality, but keeps it his strictly personal affair. And Mushāhid, like the author, is a traveler. Much space in the novel is devoted to his travels, both in Pakistan and abroad. Sometimes one gets the impression that he travels

through life. He lives in his ancestral home, which is in disrepair, as if in a caravanserai.

Mushāhid is a patriot in the sense that he loves his country with all its assets of nature and culture. To him Pakistan's history does not begin in 1947, but includes all previous cultures and civilizations on Pakistani soil. Here we also find a link to Tāraṛ's novel *Bahā'ō*, which is a conscious attempt to lay claim to this part of history. Mushāhid is full of mistrust for the ruling circles of Pakistan and he hates their war rhetoric. He equally detests religious zealots of all denominations. Does this portrait represent any particular type of Pakistani citizen, or an ideal of the author?

Mushāhid is probably a more or less idealized representative of a certain type of sensitive, liberal, Western-educated, reasonably well-off male Pakistani. He is not heroic, he doesn't rebel against conventions (except in his marriage), he doesn't implement any big scheme of social uplift, etc. Yet he tries to live as a decent human being, to respect his fellow human beings, to tolerate their beliefs and attitudes, and I think this is exactly what he also expects others to do (Kant's categorical imperative!). Reading *Rākh̲*, one gets the strong impression that with Mushāhid, Tāraṛ has created a counter-image to the selfishness, bigotry, greed, violence, and narrow-mindedness he sees rampant in Pakistani society. Intellectually, Mushāhid's ideal place is the market for secondhand books in Anarkali/Lahore:

> This footpath was the only place in the country where you could find complete democracy. Here you could read anything, buy anything. There was no censor, neither official nor religious. If you wanted to buy Philip Hitti's banned *History of the Arabs*, you would get it without any problem. If you were looking for the *Satanic Verses*, after some searching and whispering you would find even that. But one fact was very strange on those footpaths. There were very few religious books. You would find everything you might think of, but not much religion. (305)

To whom might such an atmosphere appeal? Certainly not to those sections of Pakistani society for whom religion in all its aspects—including every observance and ritual—is a central concern and a cornerstone of their identity. Their reading matter, namely religious books, would of course also be available in Anarkali, but in a different corner. In the novel, the Ahmadi Dr. Arshad is much more committed to his faith than are his friends Mushāhid and Kāliyā. Both respect and tolerate Dr. Arshad's attitude, but they are not really able to understand him. Is Mushāhid's more

secular worldview the result of his exposure to Western education and to life in the West, as is the common accusation of Islamists? Or can it not equally be traced back to the tradition of Sufis and poets? In any case the passage quoted above illustrates that proponents of these two different outlooks on religion and its place in public life occupy different spaces in Pakistani society, not only metaphorically, but also in the literal sense of the word. The narrator's comment clearly indicates how happy he is about this limited space for freedom of conscience and thinking, and how glad he would be to have more of that space.

As indicated above, this ideological position is otherwise not stated explicitly in the text. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that the main characters' stance is informed by a value system which is more or less based on a liberal, secular bourgeois society and thus very much in line with the dominant metropolitan ideology, including postmodern uncertainties about those very ideals and values. Thus, Mushāhid, for example, criticizes the ruthless exploitation and pollution of nature; he clearly realizes the "threat of the possessive individual will" (White 1991, 3) that is so strongly developed among Pakistan's ruling élite; he has experienced the failure of the project of Pakistan as a secular, democratic state which would enable the social uplift of the poor and downtrodden; and, as a result, he feels a deep sense of homelessness. The tension between the desire for a society ruled by rationality, tolerance and peace, and progressing toward more social justice on the one hand, and profound doubts about the practicability of any such ideals on the other hand, is one of the main features of the novel. Hence its melancholic overtones.

Tāraṛ does not use metropolitan language, but his novel is in line with contemporary writing in English of which the author is certainly aware. Urdu occupies a medial position between English and the other languages of Pakistan. As the language of education and all written transactions, it had been favored by many of the colonial administrators and increasingly by the Muslim élite of the Punjab from the last decades of the nineteenth century onward. Today, Urdu also mediates between "high" English culture (Pakistani and foreign) and local culture in the Punjab. In a way, Urdu as a non-regional language is still a language of hegemony, at the cost of Punjabi in our case. But as we have seen above, hegemony and the powers-that-be may be questioned or subverted also in the language of hegemony itself, and Urdu can also serve as a link language for supra-regional social and political protest. As a language of the medium level, Urdu, in any case, is closer to the lower strata than English.

Rakh as a Modern Novel

Tāraṛ's novel not only opens up new terrain for his readers, his own writings also acquaint those who do not read English literature with current literary styles and fashions in English writing. I am not going to compare *Rākẖ* with any particular novel in English; what I am concerned with are general trends in contemporary novel writing in English, particularly in those of North American and Indian authors. My purpose is not to add prestige or value to Tāraṛ's writing by comparing it with that of famous writers in the English language because there is absolutely no need for that. Tāraṛ is a successful writer in his own right with a regular audience in Pakistan. Rather I want to demonstrate: (1) how pervasive literary trends are, and (2) how exaggerated the hype around some publications of recent years is, simply because they were published in English and marketed at high cost.

Rākẖ follows prominent patterns of modern novel writing which were developed in the twentieth century—a complicated time structure, montage techniques of different kinds, introspection, frequent changes in perspective, openness, a sense of the unfinished. Since the 1930s and 1940s, those techniques have been adopted and refined by Urdu novelists. Like numerous Urdu novelists before, Tāraṛ has included numerous verse quotations (here from Punjabi, Urdu and English poetry), references to news, historical events, etc. in the novel. As described above, he has successfully given the novel a distinct Punjabi flair. The dominant mode is realistic, but with some surrealistic effects. It is not clear to me whether Tāraṛ has included such episodes in the wake of Latin American magic realism, or whether these situations of heightened sensibility and magic happenings are simply Tāraṛ's specific image for an intensified spiritual communion between persons who are very close to each other emotionally and between man and nature. The first of these episodes is very convincing, but with repetition the device gradually wears out.

What strikes the reader is a constant repetition throughout the novel of several catchy "turns of phrase" (Toor 2000, 18)—in *Rākẖ* we find: "*čār murghābiyōñ kā khushī sē kōʾī taʿalluq nahīñ*" ("four ducks have no relation to happiness") repeated ad nauseam, that is, at least 17 times), "*čār čīzēñ haiñ* ..." ("there are four things ..."), and a few other less frequently repeated phrases. At first they make sense, but their mantra-like repetition is bound to create irritation and then annoyance in the reader. The first time this device annoyed me was while reading *Midnight's Children* (Salman Rushdie, 1981). It seems to have become a fashion with a number

of contemporary writers in English, which of course doesn't make it any better. In a similar manner, *Rākẖ* abounds in truisms that are announced like perennial wisdom.

Tāraṛ's writing also exhibits traits of "Indo-chic" as outlined by Saadia Toor with reference to the new urban élite in India: a combination of "cultivated cosmopolitanism and a self-exoticism" (*ibid.*, 22). Tāraṛ's cosmopolitanism shows not only in his experience as a globetrotter, but also in dropping the names of Western writers, artists, composers and the like in his works. Simultaneously, he cultivates his *panjābiyat* and extols the exotic charm of half-dilapidated Lahore havelis, of an old dancer, the beauty of the Gandhara artifacts, etc. While appropriating metropolitan culture, he also insists on his being different. We have to keep in mind that much of this "being different" is sanctioned by metropolitan culture. It is regarded as "chic." (Think, for example, of Nuṣrat Fateḥ ʿAlī Khān's success in the West.)

Moreover, as mentioned above there is too much topicality in the novel. It seems that the author wished to include whatever was on the political agenda: Ayodhya, the controversies surrounding bonded labor and child labor in Pakistan, the blasphemy case against an illiterate Christian boy, etc. Some of these news stories are masterfully incorporated into the plot, but in their sheer abundance they weigh too heavily on the fabric of the novel. In his attempt to take the politically correct stance in all matters the author went a bit too far.

And yet, I don't want to create the impression that Tāraṛ is an imitator of the latest fashion in Indian/North American English novels. *Rākẖ* feels authentic, rooted in Pakistan itself, but looking out in every possible/desired direction. It has its own tone and rhythm. Structure and language do not feel forced. After all, we may hope that it is not so much literary fashion but common experiences and concerns which link writing in different languages.

Conclusion

What really matters about a novel, and what we read it for in contrast to a newspaper article or an essay, cannot be captured in paraphrase. I would therefore recommend the novel to those who have access to Urdu. It takes us from an abstract image of Pakistan to the lives of, though imaginary, human beings, to a Pakistan which the author makes us smell, hear and feel.

But the question arises: why did the author get a very lucrative award

for a book which speaks in such unflattering terms of Pakistan's ruling élite? Was it because he is part of the (cultural) establishment? Do his critical books serve as an outlet for discontent and dissent? Can they find official approval because they are of no consequence anyway? Or is it that those in power silently approve of the basic tenets of the book? Since I do not know anything about the selection process, I cannot answer these questions. Tāraṛ's works in different genres, viewed in the context of Pakistani public culture and his role in it, could lead to a fascinating case study of how "popular" and "high" culture, the state and the media interrelate, as well as how the tradition of dissent is accommodated and, in turn, commercialized in modern-day Pakistan. ❑

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