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Locating Pakistan, Islam, and the West in Anglophone Pakistani Fiction

Aroosa Kanwal, *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 223 pp., \$90.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781137478436.

Aroosa Kanwal's *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11* is the first book-length critique of contemporary Pakistani fiction in English authored by a Pakistani scholar since Tariq Rahman published *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* in 1991.¹ Works of this nature from abroad include American scholar Cara Cilano's *National Identities in Pakistan: The 1971 War in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction* (2011) and *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State* (2013). While the more recent of Cilano's books addresses such a wide-ranging selection of works that it lacks a cohesive account of themes and tropes common to Pakistani literature, *National Identities in Pakistan: The 1971 War in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction* is much more focused on the interplay between literary and historical accounts—reporting, for instance, on the fall of Dhaka and including literary works in Urdu as well. Kanwal's book continues in the later vein as it also attempts to analyze literary production as a product of socio-historical context.

Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction, despite its encompassing title, focuses on Anglophone Pakistani fiction written by second generation authors, among them Mohsin Hamid, H.M. Naqvi, Kamila Shamsie, and Nadeem Aslam. The purpose of writing this book, the author asserts, is neither to correct Pakistan's image (3) nor "to offer any rant against Western stereotyping of (Pakistani) Muslims and Islam" (76). Rather, Kanwal seeks to show how war-on-terror rhetoric has changed the "definitions of home and identity...both in Pakistan and in the diaspora" (1). Although the book sotto voce does engage in a great deal of image correction, it nevertheless provides a balanced critique of the nexus between the historical blunders of Pakistani and other governments in the region and the post-9/11 propaganda of Anglo-American governments and media, which have together, in the author's opinion, contributed towards fueling Islamophobia.

Despite the book's stated goal to study shifting conceptualizations of identity both at home and abroad as they emerge in contemporary Pakistani fiction, Pakistan is not the focus

¹ Acknowledgment: I would like to express my gratitude to Kira Hall for her insightful comments on early drafts of this review.

of this book. The spectrum of literary identities addressed by the author ranges from national to international, but most attention is given to Muslims who identify themselves as part of a global *ummah* that does not require any specific home as such. This, however, is true only of the diasporic writings that Kanwal studies. At home, by contrast, owing to Pervez Musharraf's influential slogan, *Sab se Pehlay Pakistan* (Pakistan first), a state-led reawakening of a nationalist identity became the dominant form of identification during the decade and a half after 9/11. The reawakening called for a clear break from past dreams of building Islamic blocks and from the desire for a *milli* (global Islamic) identity. Indeed, Pakistan's recent decision to refrain from sending Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia to combat Yemen's Houthis—a decision unanimously endorsed by the democratically elected parliament and hailed by the masses—is a clear indicator of the rise of Pakistaniness over and against global Muslimness. Kanwal's proposition of a post-9/11 global *ummah* thus seems valid only for those in the diaspora, not in Pakistan.

Kanwal's severe critique of Nadeem Aslam's representation of certain tribal practices as Islamic, which she considers "uneducated" (178), suggests that she has an "affiliation with...Islam" (3) as well as sound knowledge of its practices. However, her theorization of a flexible global *ummah*, if analyzed in the light of Islamic theology, is a concept that is in no way inclusive of persons termed as "non-practising [*sic*] Muslims" (176)—a phrase used in the book euphemistically for "cultural Muslim" (175) and "atheist Muslims" (176). With this highly abstract yet unrealistic identification paradigm, Kanwal seeks to contest the imaginative and irrational construction of a homogenized Muslim community that is based in terrorism, as well as the binaries that revolve around distinctions of "us" versus "terrorists" (6).

Additionally, Kanwal assumes that the authors of the works studied are both Pakistani and Muslim based on their origins alone. She draws heavily and unnecessarily upon Amin Malik's and Olivier Roy's conceptualization of a Muslimness that is based as much on civilization as on faith—despite the fact that some of these authors have themselves defined and propagated their identities otherwise.² This approach enables her to argue that there is great intra-Muslim diversity and that the fictional works she studies are insider accounts. Yet a more comprehensive reading of creative works written in Pakistani languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Brahvi, and Saraiki suggests a very different reality than what is seen in the English-based diaspora narratives cited by Kanwal. Such works more realistically represent the post-9/11 turmoil of people at home and the identity crisis they experienced. These works have been critically analyzed in Urdu scholarship, such as *Pakistani zuban-o-adab per 9/11 ke asrat* (The Impact of 9/11 on Pakistani languages and literatures, 2011),³ and *9/11 aur Pakistani Urdu afsana* (9/11 and Pakistani Urdu Short Story Genre, 2011).⁴

Just like many of the works it studies, the book is a "challenge to the centrality of 'culture talk' surrounding Islamophobic narratives after 9/11" (198). Kanwal historicizes 9/11 in a series of temporally distant as well as recent events, deconstructing it as a political construct

² For instance, Hanif Kureishi, in an interview with Kenan Malik, declares that he came from a Muslim family but was an atheist (See: Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy* [London: Atlantic Books, 2009]). In another interview, with *More Intelligent Life*, he asserts: "I'm well aware of how dangerous religions like Islam can be. It's ridiculous to think it's racist to attack a religion. In fact, it's racist not to attack a religion" (accessed at: <<http://moreintelligentlife.com/blog/john-paul-omalley/qa-hanif-kureishi-author>>).

³ Sohail Ahmad, ed., *Pakistani Zuban-o-Adab per 9/11 ke Asrat* (Peshawar: Idara Adbiat-e-Urdu, Farsi, Lisaniaat, University of Peshawar, 2010).

⁴ Najeeba Arif, *9/11 aur Pakistani Urdu afsana* (Islamabad: Poorab Academy, 2011).

that continues the unfinished business of the cold war (6). By examining how 9/11 emerges in contemporary Pakistani fiction and polemical writings as just one of many “marker[s] of changed perceptions about Muslims and Islam” (6), and by exploring a shift from “orientalist epistemology” to what has been termed as “terrorist ontology” (3), *Rethinking Identities* successfully deals with several aporias in popular discourses. Although Pakistani fiction has been categorized as “post-9/11 fiction” and “retrospective prologues to post-9/11 fiction” (7), Kanwal demonstrates creative rebuttals to the idea of 9/11 fiction and situates the literary representations she analyzes within a variety of socio-historical contexts that include post-1947 violence, honor killings, feudalism, and the Islamization of the 1980s. In so doing, the book suggests the existence of links among current Western imaginings of Muslims, past sectarianism in the Islamic world, and the United States’ historical manipulation of Pakistan during the cold war. The interdisciplinary nature of the book makes it a compelling study of how contemporary history and fiction are deeply embedded in Pakistan’s relationship with Islam and the West.

Written by an insider the book also provides a bold criticism of “Zia’s ruthless Islamization” (18) as well as the post-Ziaism of the works under study. On the one hand, the book criticizes various forms of extremism in the Muslim world, and on the other, it foregrounds Anglo-American foreign policies also “as a form of terrorism” (2). The book therefore not only expands the scope of the term *Muslimness*, as mentioned above, but also the term *terrorism*. This clear break from popular Western conceptualizations of these politically charged terms and concepts can be witnessed at several points in the book. The author’s definition of jihadists, for instance, is: “freedom fighters rather than terrorists” (183). Similarly, when rejecting Rehana Ahmed’s interpretation of the silence of Aliya (a character in Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron*) in response to a cab driver’s judgmental comment as “global subalternity” (131), Kanwal suggests a reconsideration of Spivak’s the subaltern-cannot-speak theory. In contrast, she reads Aliya’s silence as a “voiced” silence that “discombobulates the powerful presence of the West” (131-132) and “marginaliz[es] the West in its own territory” (131).

At a micro level, the book provides novel reflections on various themes and issues that surface in the works it reviews. For example, Kanwal gives insights into the way Suleri’s *Meatless Days* is “a feminist account of the national history” of Pakistan (26); how Sethi’s *The Wish Maker* “charts...the tumults within Pakistan’s political and social history from the 1947 Partition to the post-9/11 era” (49); how Gauhar’s novel *No Space for Further Burials* features post-war Afghanistan as a land with no space left for further burials (62); and how Uzma Aslam Khan’s novels have gendered the war on terrorism with the presence of strong women (105). Furthermore, Kanwal reveals how Shamsie’s Pakistani and migrant characters struggle with their hyphenated identities and stigmatization on the basis of faith (112), arguing that the process of rerouting guarantees Shamsie’s diasporic characters a return to roots and thus dismantles the East-West binary (128). She critiques Aslam’s novel *Wasted Vigil* for erasing important differences between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (186) and failing to contextualize the post-9/11 mushrooming of the Taliban as US policy “shift[ed] from pro- to anti-Taliban” (188).

Like most works, the book carries a few minor errors regarding historical facts that are worth noting, though these do not detract from the book’s value. For instance, in the first sentence of the second chapter, when quoting Arjun Appadurai’s *Fear of Small Numbers*,⁵ the

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

author mentions the secession of East Pakistan from West Pakistan as occurring in 1973 instead of its actual date in 1971. Similarly, on page 75, Musharraf's regime that in fact sprawled nearly a decade (1999-2008) is described as lasting only a year (2007-2008). Finally, later in the same chapter, the author states: "During Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's reign in the early 1970s, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in Sindh championed the cause of the Sindhi community, while the MQM supported the Urdu-speaking Muslim *muhajir* and the Muslim League Noon (Nawaz group) favoured [*sic!*] the Punjabi community" (77). In fact, the MQM was established much later in 1984 and the Muslim League (Nawaz Group) only in 1988.

Kanwal's post-9/11 critique of Pakistani fiction in English is an important read for teachers and researchers of postcolonial literature in general and of Pakistani fiction in particular. A major contribution to critical works on diasporic literature and identity studies, the book also stands as a significant work on Pakistan's history and the nation's relationship with the West, Islam, and the Post-9/11 world.

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