Book Review

Shamsie, Muneeza. *Hybrid Tapestries: The Development of Pakistani Literature in English*. 676 pp., Oxford University Press 2017

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The main title of Muneeza Shamsie's recently published work of literary history—*Hybrid Tapestries*—announces what ends up being one of the volume's most valuable critical contributions to the growing scholarly interest in Pakistani English-language literary production: namely, the relevance and necessary belonging of English as a language of literary production in Pakistan. Put another way, Shamsie's careful work of literary history helps locate abiding critiques of literary production in this language as aspects of larger sociological dynamics that can invest national identity with a set notion of "culture" or divest it with a sensitivity to the changes—in language, form, genre, audience, etc.—wrought by history.

At first glance, the structure Shamsie's developed for her history may appear as though she has adopted an exclusively biographical and formalistic approach. Part I, for instance, introduces Pakistan's "Pioneering Writers" in English and lists thirteen proper names. Part II structures discussions around poetry, the novel, the short story, drama, and literary non-fiction. Yet, in no small part due to Shamsie's introduction, "Hybrid Influences," as well as how she approaches biography and genre, the sections possess an historical and sociological richness that expands well beyond personal biography and literary convention.

"Hybrid Influences" observes that English language literary production finds its base in colonial South Asia and asserts that the impulse behind the language's use in this earlier historical moment was one of cultural appropriation. The appropriation at this early juncture, though, was by colonialists themselves. Organisations such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal founded by Sir William Jones in 1784 advocated for the mastery by agents of the East India Company of Sanskrit and other languages used in South Asian commerce and courts. Further, Jones promoted the translation of important South Asian texts into English so that the British could learn about the peoples and cultures they were conquering (Shamsie 5). Over the subsequent centuries, English functioned as a medium for South Asians to counter Orientalist representations and to "modernise" their economic and cultural stakes (Shamsie 8-9). That English's rooting in South Asia, which long preceded the creation of Pakistan in 1947, connects directly to colonialism does not, in Shamsie's reckoning, determine or damn its use by Pakistani writers. Rather, English's historical status in the subcontinent posed a challenge: "accommodate[ing] the nuances of South Asia and its many cultures" (Shamsie 15). In Shamsie's view, the writers she chronicles in her history "broadened the canons of traditional English literature and gave it a new voice" (18). Note the cultural and historical agency she identifies in these writers' efforts. Throughout the rest of the book, Shamsie pays careful attention to writers who are particularly innovative with language and form to give substance to this claim.

Shamsie's identification of colonial history as an ineluctable element of literary production in South Asia calls forth Aamir Mufti's argument in *Forget English!* Mufti asserts that efforts to indigenise Hindi as a Hindu language grounded in Sanskrit and Urdu as a Muslim language derived from Arabic and Persian constituted a "massive rearrangement of a layered, performatively contigent, and dynamic linguistic reality into a structure of binary oppositions" (127). This rearrangement of the languages of literary production in colonial India attempted to suture religious identities to linguistic ones (Mufti 99-145). Further, this process of differentiation, which reduced the dynamism to which Mufti refers to an either/or identification, necessitated a greater intimacy with the identities and languages being "rendered" by this logic as "foreign and alien" (127). For Mufti, the history of language debates in colonial India mean that a "postcolonial *philology* of this literary and linguistic complex can never adequately claim to be produced from a position uncontaminated by the language *polemic* that now constitutes

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it and can only proceed by working through its terms" (128). Shamsie's work invites just such a working through as she connects writers across decades, languages, and continents.

With such a framing, Shamsie is able to double back, to fold into her treatment of "pioneering" authors and the others who emerged over the course of Pakistan's seventy years so that her history is not a chronology or even, despite the book's subtitle, a development but more a network or system of writers and contexts that traces influence and also calls for reconsiderations of earlier works. Shamsie's presentation of Zulfikar Ghose, a diaporic Pakistani writer, and Taufiq Rafat throughout this history shows how the chronology of part one folds in on itself in the second part, "Developing Genres." At the top of Part II's poetry section, "Between Isolation and Internationalism: Debut Writers: 1973-1997," for instance, Shamsie devotes space to English-language poetry's high point in the 1960s and 1970s, which was marked by the publication of important anthologies by Oxford University Press. With the political scene shifting radically in the late 1970s and 1980s, poetry changed, too, and Shamsie chronicles how, in this troubled time, the creation of groups and journals focused on sustaining a community of writers and readers (260-61). Of course, in her discussion of the important poetry anthologies, Shamsie returns again to Ghose's and Rafat's matchless contributions and ties them to other, younger poets, plotting a network of influence and collaboration that does not necessarily follow a straight temporal line.

Shamsie also uses her volume's two parts as complements to highlight how political vicissitudes and literary production interact. Her discussion of Ahmed Ali's association with the publication of *Angarey* and the Progressive Writers' Movement is a case in point. Of course the Progressive Writers pre-date the creation of Pakistan, and their dedicated purpose and use of Urdu bridged what became national boundaries even as they also informed authors working in the English language. Moreover, Shamsie's efforts to bring wife and husband Atiya Fyzee Rahamin and Samual Fyzee Rahamin back to readers' attention hinges upon how much more we still have to learn from their work. Shamsie notes that their home and belongings were confiscated by the Commissioner of Karachi in 1958 (Shamsie 35). At the time of Shamsie's writing, the Rahamins' papers and artwork were largely still inaccessible (46). The city government's obstruction of access to the Rahamins' work positions their writings and artwork alongside that of other writers who feared censorship, such as what Ali experienced, and also illustrates the shifting dynamics of public and political reception of Pakistani writers' work. In her chronicling of recent public sector efforts to reassert a literary space in Pakistan, such as the mushrooming Literature Festivals sponsored by Oxford University Press and the creation of features in the major national newspapers, Shamsie also marks the growing audience for literary production of all kinds and the power that this work can wield as it imagines realities (606).

The audience grows because the field grows, as Shamsie's conclusion attests. In her gestures toward creative and critical publications emerging in the twenty-first century, Shamsie cannily considers canon formation. In a meta moment of her own, Shamsie cites Neelam Srivastava's incite into the critical work literary anthologies do, noting in particular that such collecting and curating "'reveals the workings of genre, canon, and nation-formation to its readers'" (qtd. in Shamsie 595). Literary histories do much the same work as they select, relate, and narrate which writers matter and how and why. Implicitly, Shamsie's asking readers to wonder about the same matters in relation to the history she is presenting. For instance, Shamsie points out that textbooks, such as Ifor Evans' *A Short History of English Literature*, adopted in classrooms in Pakistan's early years "were steeped in a strong colonial and patriarchal bias. They offered absolutely no space for migrant writing, minority writing, or the Anglophone literature from Britain's erstwhile colonies […]" (594). Anthologising occurring in more recent decades, including much of Shamsie's own work, has certainly acted as a corrective to such exclusionary measures. At the same time, Shamsie's musings about the processes and politics of canon formation invite readers to query her own work along the same lines. In that spirit, I am particularly interested in the conclusion of *Hybrid Tapestries*. Here, Shamsie makes repeated reference to current critical work that situates contemporary Pakistani English-language writing "alongside the wider world of Muslim writers to which [Pakistani-English writers] belong" (596). The quick association of Pakistani English-language writers with a Muslim identity sparks many questions, including how writers themselves want to be received, whether the modifier "Muslim" refers to an individual's religious identity or a cultural milieu, and what investments do we forward and what do we constrain when we promote such an association?

Shamsie has contributed a much-needed and highly significant work to Pakistani literary studies. With this work of literary history, as well as her anthologies, bibliographical work, and special journal issues, Shamsie burnishes her reputation as an invaluable resource, enthusiastic promoter, and keen critic of the field.

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