

PAKISTANI ENGLISH LITERATURE – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION, 1947 TO THE PRESENT BY OMER TARIN, ILYAS KHAN, AND K. MAJIED

Posted by [PrachyaReview](#) | Dec 30, 2015 | [Article](#) | [0](#) |

According to the late poet Taufiq Rafat "A fair number of Pakistanis write in English... [so] we may point to a distinct Pakistani-English Literature". This statement, made back in the 1980s, has even more force today. Since Pakistan came into being as a separate state, out of a part of former British India, in August 1947, there always was and has been, a 'presence' of writers – mostly people belonging to a certain class or educational and social background – who have written and continue to write in English, as their preferred means of literary/creative communication. Indeed, over the last 20 years, this number has grown manifold as Pakistan's dynamic educated middle class has expanded, and so has the number of expatriate Pakistanis (or people of Pakistani origins settled in Europe and North America who still identify themselves as a 'Pakistani diaspora') who have been at the forefront in popularizing Pakistani writings in English.

To carry out a detailed and in-depth survey of this unique literature, a Pakistani English Literature, would be a very long and onerous task; so we have chosen not to undertake it. Instead, we are simply presenting this brief introduction to those readers of this esteemed e-zine, who would like to know more about this literature, its historical evolution and eventual growth. For those seriously interested in studying this topic in depth, we would strongly recommend Dr Tariq Rahman's classic work, *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* (originally published in Lahore, Pakistan, by M/S Vanguard Books, in 1991) as this remains, to date, the best and most comprehensive volume about this literature.

The origins of Pakistani English Literature; or Pakistani Literature in English, or by whatever name you would call it, goes back to British Colonial times. At that time, in the 19th century, English linguistic and literary studies were introduced in the Indian subcontinent (now modern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) as a means of producing certain 'useful' Indians, of a certain mindset and belonging to a certain class 'loyal' to British interests, to fill up certain posts in the colonial government. Most people who have any idea about South Asian history, or Postcolonial Studies, know about Lord Macaulay's infamous 'Minute on Indian Education', which to all intents and purposes, laid out these initial basic parameters for the study of English. Yet, in time, in the Indian subcontinent, as in other

parts of the British Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries, a process took place whereby the language of the colonizers, the British (i.e. English) was in a sense 'appropriated' by the colonized. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, the earliest writings by Indians, was mostly imitative for quite some time, mostly intent on copying and emulating British and/or Western modes and styles, that too of a somewhat archaic, Victorian type. However, later on, by the 1920s, British India began to develop its own literary concerns – mostly connected to the nascent freedom struggles against British colonialism, and strongly dictated by a sense of nationalism and an almost Romantic spirit that spoke of "inspired revolution" (in the phrase of late G F Riaz, another Pakistani poet); that articulated, for a small but vocal and politically educated class or section of society, their dreams for independence and freedom. Some of the earliest writers of this stamp included Chattopadhyay, M A Rashied, Raja Rao, Sarojini Naidu, Mumtaz, Shahnawaz and others. Exceptions were there also – for example, the earliest English travelogue by Sake Deen Mahomet (1759-1851), and of course, the fine and original translations of his own Bengali writings by Sri Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) the Nobel Laureate. By the 1940s, when writers with a more innovative approach such as R K Narayan were writing, British India was formally partitioned and two nation-states, modern India (Bharat) and Pakistan, came into being, parting ways on many levels.

The Early Phase of Pakistani English Literature; 1947 to 1960s

The first two decades of Pakistani English writings were mostly restricted to a small handful of writers, all of them from elitist 'English medium' educational backgrounds, and mostly writing for a very small and limited audience, within their own intellectual, liberal circles, in many respects cut off from the larger Pakistan freedom movement, and other post-independence political and social issues. One noteworthy writer was scholar, writer and diplomat Ahmad Ali (1910-1994) who wrote elegant prose, fiction and poetry, and his most significant work *Twilight in Delhi* (pub. 1940) reflects an old, lost world of Mughal glory . Other writers of this period, although not really exceptional, wrote sensitively and well, within their own limited ambit – writers such as Shahid Suhrawardy, Shahid Hosein, Zeb un Nisa Hamidullah and a special talent was Zulfikar Ghose, whose novel *The Murder of*

Aziz Khan (pub. 1967) caused quite some furor, and who moved to the USA, where he taught for many years and continues to write fine fiction and poetry, even now.

The 1970s and 1980s

While Pakistani fiction was yet to develop and achieve any sort of viable comparison with that from neighboring India, or from other parts of the British Commonwealth, Pakistani poetry was gradually coming into its own, indeed comparable to the best poetry anywhere. This was the time when the 'Big Three' of Pakistani English poetry– Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998), Daud Kamal (1935-1987) and Alamgir Hashmi (born 1951) were in their best form, and writing exceptional verse. Rafat's *Arrival of the Monsoon* (pub. 1987) is probably the most important poetry collection of this time, one which, in the words of several critics, established a firm 'Pakistani idiom' in English poetry; while Professor Hashmi wrote some exceptionally fine verse, and also made prodigious contributions to literary criticism and critical studies at home and abroad. Other important writers at this time, in Pakistan, included Maki Kureshi, Hina Faisal Imam, Anna Molka Ahmad, Kaleem Omar, G F Riaz and Sheheryar Rashed ; while expatriate writers included Hanif Kureshi, Imtiaz Dharker, Adrian A Husain and Sara Suleri.

Bapsi Sidhwa (born 1938), still living and writing abroad, was one very important fiction writer from Pakistan who started publishing at this time, with the success of *The Bride, The Crow Eaters* and *Ice Candyman* – probably one of the first Pakistani expatriate writers to take up in detail various larger issues such as the trauma of Partition in 1947, the poor treatment of religious minorities and growing intolerance, and the suppression of women in a society increasingly turning to a rigid, fanatical Wahabi-style 'Islam', under General Zia ul Haq's dictatorial military regime, and at a time when a 'Jihad' was supposed to be going on in nearby Afghanistan, against the Soviet invaders. Was, perhaps, Sidhwa better placed abroad to view these matters objectively and write about them safely and fearlessly? Why did most Pakistani writers and scholars, especially those writing in English, at this time, stay so quiet about these subjects? These are matters that we are sure future scholars and critics shall certainly look at, in detail.

An important Pakistani scholar, Dr Tariq Rahman, also started writing some important critical/literary works at this time, in addition to his world-acclaimed linguistic studies, which writings have continued till today.

The 1990s to the present

The 1990s saw a sudden, beautiful blooming of Pakistani English Literature, which has since grown and evolved and expanded so much. As Pakistan's middle class has expanded and adopted English more and more as a global language, of business, of Internet usage, so has a sort of 'cross-pollination' amongst cultures, freed the creative imagination and allowed a larger and more aware segment of Pakistani society to take part in the creative writing, literary process. This is something that is still going on, and newer talent is emerging all the time.

In poetry, in addition to Alamgir Hashmi who is still writing, Omer Tarin, Ejaz Rahim, M Athar Tahir, Ilona Yusuf and Hariss Khaliq are significant, writing in Pakistan; while Moniza Alvi and Waqas Ahmad Khwaja are keeping alive the tradition of poetic excellence in the UK and USA, respectively.

But it is in the world of fiction, that Pakistani English Literature really came into its own from the mid-1990s to the present – apart from Bapsi Sidhwa, already mentioned, who still writes, some amazing new talent came to the fore and garnered much international and national acclaim: perhaps the most well known are Mohsin Hamid, with his novels *Mothsmoke* (2000) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007); Kamila Shamsie, with *Salt and Saffron* (1998), *Kartography* (2002), *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *A God in Every Stone* (2014); Mohammad Hanif, with *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) and others; and Bina Shah with *Where They Dream in Blue* (2001), *The 786 Cybercafe* (2004) and *Slum Child* (2010). There are many others, too, and it all augurs well for the future of Pakistani English Literature.

Finale

According to Professor Alamgir Hashmi (1978), Pakistani English Literature refers to literature in English that has developed and evolved in Pakistan, as well as among members of the Pakistani diaspora who write in the English language. English is one of the official languages of Pakistan (the other being Urdu) and today, it occupies an important and integral part in modern Pakistani literature, broadly. This literature, in the estimation of Dr Tariq Rahman and other Pakistani scholars of literature, can be recognized as a distinct

style or English literature, which has (a) a special, unique Pakistani idiom and voice and (b) at some level reflects the Pakistani roots and origins of the writers, even though in many cases where writers are living and writing abroad, issues of identity are frequently problematic and complex. It is, however, quite certain, whatever the case might be, that there is certainly a body of increasing literature, written in English, recognized globally as 'from Pakistan' or 'by Pakistani/s'. It is also certain that this will, in years to come, remain an integral part of the vast body of literatures being written in English, in South Asia, Africa, South/Latin America as well as more traditional 'sites of production' such as the UK, North America and Australia, and flourish and provide us much to enjoy and think about.

Further reading

* "Prolegomena to the Study of Pakistani English and Pakistani Literature in English" (1989), Alamgir Hashmi, in "Pakistani Literature" (Islamabad), 2:1 1993.

* Pakistani Literature: The Contemporary English Writers edited by Dr. Alamgir Hashmi (New York: World University Service, 1978; Islamabad: Gulmohar Press, 1987) (2nd ed.). ISBN 0-00-500408-X (OCLC #19328427; LC Card #87931006)

* Dr. Alamgir Hashmi, Commonwealth Literature: An Essay Towards the Re-definition of a Popular/Counter Culture, 1984.

* Dr Tariq Rahman. A History of Pakistani Literature in English Lahore: Vanguard, 1991 (republished 2005)

* Muneeza Shamsie (Ed). A Dragonfly in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writing in English (1997) ISBN 0-19-577784-0

* Leaving Home: Towards A New Millennium: A Collection of English Prose by Pakistani Writers (2001) ISBN 0-19-579529-6