

Final Report – Revisionary Political Historiography in Contemporary Pakistani Literature

The topic of my presentation was ‘Revisionary political historiography in contemporary Pakistani literature’. Contemporary fiction that coming from Pakistan is a socio-cultural document of an era of hope and hardships. For most of Pakistani fiction writers, act of writing is an act of breaking silences, reinterpreting and reconstructing history, recovering the collective heritage of the nation and thus redefining the role of an author in a society where denial and erasure are primary tools of historiography. I discussed two novels in this presentation: ‘Kartography’ by Kamila Shamsie and ‘A Seasons for Martyrs’ by Bina Shah. Where ‘Kartography’ deals with war of 1971 which led to a military confrontation between India and Pakistan and ended in creation of Bangladesh as East Pakistan severed from the western wing during the military regime in Pakistan, ‘A Season for Martyrs’ focuses on turbulent political times in Pakistan of 2007, when former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan from exile and got murdered during the military reign of General Parvez Musharraf. Both these novels blend the personal lives of characters with subtle political flavor as all the characters in these novels undergo emotional trauma and suffer directly or indirectly owing to the situation and circumstances surrounding them.

In Pakistan, the official history tends to stifle the painful facts of history, and fiction writers are trying to address such issues in their novels, thus trying to retrieve that which is lost. Literature is usually seen as an artwork that is only meant for aesthetic pleasure. This changing trend in Pakistani fiction, that addresses the collective grief by mingling personal with political, is an urgent attempt by fiction writers at lending the readers an insight into their past from which a lesson can be drawn for the present and future.