

AIPS Program – Final Report – Mushtaq Bilal

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Information

Name: Mushtaq Bilal

Affiliate Institution in the U.S.: Binghamton University, NY

Affiliate Institution in Pakistan or Outside U.S.: N/A

Location of Program: University of Wisconsin-Madison (Conference held online)

Research Field: Humanities (Comparative Literature)

Title of Program: 49th Annual Conference on South Asia

Program Dates: October 21-23, 2021

Summary of Program and Significance to Pakistan Studies:

I organized a two-part panel titled, “Writing Pakistan: Literature, Nationhood, and Identity,” as part of the 49th Annual Conference on South Asia held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The title was later changed to, “Identity and Nationhood in Pakistani Literature.” The panel brought together established academics and graduate students from both inside Pakistan and the US to discuss and debate how Pakistani literature relates to the issues of Pakistani identity and nationalism.

Initially, eight speakers were meant to be on the panel: Sameera Abbas, Rajender Kaur, Zain Mian, Ambreen Hai, Muneeza Shamsie, Mushtaq Bilal, Cara Cilano, and Nasir Abbas Nayyar. However, Cara Cilano could not attend because of a scheduling conflict and Nasir Abbas Nayyar because of poor health. Ulka Anjaria served as the discussant. The panel was attended by a number of academics and graduate students working on Pakistani literature and South Asian studies.

Below are the titles and abstracts of the six papers that were presented:

Allegory and Ruin as tools of De-mythification in Mohammad Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*

by Sameera Abbas

This paper seeks to bring out Muhammad Hanif’s exposition of General Zia as a baroque sovereign, in his novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by engaging with Benjamin’s concepts of the baroque, the sovereign, and the martyr in his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Owing to its dark humor, Hanif’s novel has often been hailed as a satirical and comic work but by employing coordinates that Benjamin uses, this paper intends to revisit the novel from a perspective that might bring out new possibilities of identifying its genre more accurately.

Hanif's novel revolves around the circumstances surrounding the assassination of General Zia, who became the 6th president of Pakistan after overthrowing with military force, the democratic government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Though the general interpretations of the novel consider the Pak Air Force Pilot Ali Shigri as the protagonist, who in order to avenge his father's murder is on a mission to kill General Zia, this study by relying on the concept of the baroque sovereign in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book will be looking at Zia as the protagonist of the novel. Like the protagonist in the mourning play (*trauerspiel*), Zia as the main character emerges as the sovereign who acts as the "chief exponent of history" and almost as its "incarnation" (Benjamin 46). But unlike a tragic hero who derives his importance from rank and myth, Zia as the baroque sovereign comes face to face with the consequences of his actions and the indecisiveness resulting from his weakness. Though he holds historical happenings in his hand like a scepter (Benjamin 49), overwhelmed by angst and melancholy he turns out to be desperately weak and indecisive when a decision of exception is needed.

Mapping Peshawar in Deep Time:

Decentering Islamic Nationalism in Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone*

by Rajender Kaur

Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014) is impelled by a powerful recuperative impulse to animate Pakistan's layered multi-cultural history, especially its rich Buddhist heritage, to counter the majoritarian logic of Islamic nationalism in Pakistan. By positioning Peshawar as a critical locus of colonial violence, *A God in Every Stone* interrogates the Islamophobia current in contemporary social and political discourse. The narrative locates Peshawar in deep historical time by gesturing to its pre-Islamic history as the famed city of Caspatyrus on the fringes of Darius's Persian empire flanked on the other edge by ancient Caria in present day Turkey in an expansive spatial imaginary that links the fabled Indus River with the Aegean Sea. By reminding us of Peshawar's storied past as a cosmopolitan trading post on the silk route, and a center of Buddhist cultural efflorescence during the reign of the Kanishka in, 127 CE, and more recently in the 20th century as the site of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's pacifist red shirts anti-colonial movement against British rule, *A God in Every Stone* denaturalizes the connection of this region with Islamic terrorism that is common in the western media.

Instead, in foregrounding the ec-centric city of Peshawar the home of the Pashtun people famed for their fierce tribal loyalties, Shamsie turns our attention to its fragrant orchards of pomegranate and apples, the majestic beauty of the Hindu Kush valley in a salutary narrative that counters more narrow ethnic and religious imaginings of the nation state in contemporary Pakistan. The text foregrounds Peshawar as a once hallowed seat of Buddhist learning, and the home of the pacifist protestors, the Khudai Khidmatgars, committed to a progressive agenda of education and reform and a pacifist non-violent anticolonial resistance.

No Country for Errant Pens:

Hasan Askari, Sāqī, and the National Writer in Early Pakistan

by Zain Mian

The emergence of Pakistan in 1947 inspired immense debate on the potential of a Muslim national culture, one in which the writer was to be a key figure. This paper explores the idea of

the Pakistani writer as it emerges in the work of the notable literary critic Muhammad Hasan Askari. Writing for the literary magazine *Sāqī*, Askari positioned the writer in close proximity to the Pakistani nation. Askari believed that Pakistan would grant the Urdu writer self-confidence and a belief in their own power to be universal once they occupied the centre of their own national public. He envisioned the national writer as a guiding figure who would channel the historical consciousness and emotional force of Pakistani nationhood among the masses through their narratives. Overall, this paper will show how a certain conception of Pakistaniyat, Islam, and authorship accompanied each other in Askari's thought.

**H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* as a Response to 9/11
and to Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

by Ambreen Hai

In this paper, I want to explore how H. M. Naqvi's 2009 novel *Home Boy* offers both a response to 9/11 and its aftermath, and an implicit critique of another Pakistani post-9/11 novel, Mohsin Hamid's acclaimed *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In many ways, I will argue, Naqvi offers a critique of the US backlash to 9/11—the racial profiling, unlawful detentions, widespread Islamophobia, etc. It presents the experiences of four young Pakistani men living in New York City before and after 9/11 occurs, and offers not one narrative, but a complex variety of narratives that push back against stereotypical notions about Muslim and Pakistani men prevalent in mainstream American culture.

While Hamid's novel has rightly been hailed as a critique of American imperialism and responses to 9/11, and as an attempt to counter dominant western notions of Islamic fundamentalism, it has been insufficiently critiqued for its representational or narrative strategies that undermine its ostensible purpose. In particular, I would cite three problematic areas: the protagonist's gladness when he first sees the twin towers fall (on television news); the menacing quality of the protagonist-narrator; and the ending which leaves it unclear if the protagonist narrator is in fact a militant terrorist. By contrast, I want to argue, Naqvi uses very different representational strategies to counter these problems: his narrator-protagonist is clearly credible and endearing, and thus works more clearly to invite trust and empathy; his experience of 9/11 is rendered very differently; and his ending serves to push back against Muslim men, instead of inviting reconfirmation of suspicion. Hence, I will argue, Hamid takes on more fully the responsibility as a global Pakistani writer of countering prejudice and Islamophobia in this continuing post-9/11 era.

The Pakistani English Novel: Influence, Impact, Identity

by Muneeza Shamsie

Pakistani English literature has grown from a small, little-known genre to a leading star in World Anglophone literature. New and acclaimed writers continue to emerge every year. In Pakistan its audience is largely an Anglophone, or bi-lingual, elite. However, the recent Urdu translation of Mohammed Hanif's celebrated 2009 novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* caused a furor: intelligence agents raided his publisher and seized the Urdu copies.

This paper will comment on this and explore how and why the censors' attitudes differ between Anglophone literature and that written in Pakistan's other languages because the

latter can reach huge local audience – and foment revolution. The paper will touch on the 1960's ban on the novels of Ahmed Ali and Zulfikar Ghose and also comment on the widespread Pakistani perception that Anglophone literature should be a vehicle to “explain Pakistan” to international audiences and is criticized, if perceived to do otherwise. This extends to novels such as Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; it echoes attitudes dating back to colonial times, when English was used as a creative vehicle to convey India to the British Raj.

The paper will challenge the widespread perception that Pakistani English literature is confined to a handful of writers best known in the Anglophone world—Hanif, Hamid, Kamila Shamsie and Uzma Aslam Khan—and it will look at the diverse writings of H.M. Naqvi, Musharraf Ali Farooqi, Sonia Kamal and others. This will culminate with an exploration of “Pakistani identity,” since many Pakistani English writers live in the diaspora or have relocated to Pakistan after long spells in the US and the UK.

“Yes, I am Joseph Bhatti Choohra:” Reading Joseph Bhatti as a Palimpsest

by Mushtaq Bilal

Pakistani anglophone literature has received increasing academic attention in recent years. However, the portrayal of religious minorities in Pakistani literature has not been adequately investigated. This paper aims to address this gap in the existing scholarship by presenting a character study of Joseph Bhatti, a Punjabi Chuhra, in Mohammed Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. Chuhras in the Hindu caste hierarchy occupy the lowest position and are considered outcastes, ritually impure, and therefore untouchables. This paper explores how Hanif's fiction challenges the construct of “Pak-ness” (ritual purity), which is at the heart of the idea of Pakistan and the Pakistani national identity. Since Islam does not recognize the notion of hereditary impurity and untouchability ascribed to a particular group of people, this paper shows that the purity the word “Pak” in “Pakistan” invokes is essentially (and ironically) the Brahmanical purity.

I argue that Joseph Bhatti's character needs to be read as an intricate palimpsest of various historical, political, social, and cultural transformations in India – the Aryan invasion, the inauguration of the Varna system, the Muslim invasion of India, the British colonization of India – but more importantly his character brings to the fore the one thing that has remained a constant throughout these monumental transformations which is the impurity ascribed to the Chuhra people. In a similar vein, the word “Pakistan” too becomes a palimpsest of various cultural archives, semantic reserves, and political transformations superimposed on one another: “Pakistan” is acronymized in English, made semantically operative through Persian/Urdu to conflate the Indian Muslim identity with the notion of purity, which happens to be Brahmanical.

Outcomes and Deliverables:

Outcomes:

1. Scholarship on Pakistani literature is divided along linguistic lines, which is to say that those who work on Pakistani anglophone literature rarely interact with Urdu literature while scholars of Urdu literature seldom venture into the domain of Pakistani anglophone

literature. By bringing together scholars of Urdu and Pakistani anglophone literature together the panel created chances of much-needed scholarly collaborations in the future.

2. The panel put up-and-coming graduate students working on Pakistani literature in touch with Muneeza Shamsie – the Bibliographic Representative of Pakistan at the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. She publishes an exhaustively compiled annual bibliography of Pakistani anglophone literature. The interactions not only among the panelists but also among the audiences are going to create opportunities of mentorship for graduate students who will surely contribute significantly to the field of Pakistani literature.
3. Out of the 126 panels that were organized during the 49th Annual Conference on South Asia, this was the only panel that was dedicated exclusively to Pakistani literature. The panel, therefore, made an important contribution towards initiating a discussion within the field of Pakistan Studies that is centered primarily on the study of literature.

Deliverables:

Out of the six papers presented on the panel two are forthcoming in academic journals:

1. “H. M. Naqvi’s Home Boy as a Response to 9/11 and to Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist” by Ambreen Hai in *A Review of International English Literature (ARIEL)*
2. “Yes, I am Joseph Bhatti Choohra:” Reading Joseph Bhatti as a Palimpsest by Mushtaq Bilal in *Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World*

In addition, Sameera Abbas is in the process of workshopping her paper for publication.