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The Image of the United States in Three Pakistani Novels

BRUCE KING¹

Mohsin Hamid. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007. pp. 184, £14.99, ISBN 9780241143650.

Feral Ali Gauhar, *No Space for Further Burials*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007. pp. 192, Rupees 250.00, ISBN 8188965316.

Kamila Shamsie, *Broken Verses*. London: Bloomsbury. 2006, pp. 338, £7.99, ISBN 0747578931.

The recent outburst of writing from Pakistan and Pakistanis has many of the same sources as the international Islamic revival that makes the front pages of the newspapers every day. Oil wealth, decolonisation, increased education, international jobs, nationalism and the struggle over who will control what, are themselves aspects of an Islamic world struggling for its identity and place during a time of rapid globalisation. Islam is flexing its muscles once more after having been frustrated by European nineteenth-century imperialism. Within this ferment Pakistan is perhaps unique in being both a new nation, created by the violent partition of India in 1948, and having, because of its Indian past, a long history of English-language culture as well as an easier access to the English-language world and its ways than most other Islamic nations. That Pakistan is supposedly an American ally means that many Pakistanis are educated in the United States, have worked there, and sometimes live dual lives travelling between the two nations. It also means that one finds the tensions that result from disappointed expectations, tensions that have sharpened since Islamic terrorism has replaced Soviet Communism as America's enemy.

The three excellent novels under review here are written by authors who live or have lived part of their lives in the West, so that the books have a natural, unforced, range of reference to such lives as well as to the Islamic world. This implies, however, that they are perhaps more concerned with identity and insecurities than the authors acknowledge.

Hohsin Hamid attempts to face this problem directly, or at least as directly as someone can when involved in the fantasies and indirections of fiction, and the way art disguises autobiography. The narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has a CV much like Hamid's. A Pakistani from Lahore who graduated from Princeton University and subsequently found employment as a business consultant in New

York with a high salary, the narrator seems to have achieved the good life desired by immigrants to the United States. However, home-sickness, sensitivity towards possible racial, religious and cultural slights, a blighted love life, and an envious distaste towards the world of wealth and power in which he now exists, lead to identification with those who want to see America humiliated, and his return to Pakistan. Here, in his new life as a university lecturer, he leads his students in militant protest against the United States, and becomes terrorist suspect.

While a disaffected Hamid also left the United States (and became a British citizen), he has not gone as far as his narrator. Anyone, however, who takes the trouble to read the articles and interviews he has republished on his website will find that the author's dislike of the United States preceded American involvement in Iraq. The specifics of his distaste are widespread, but he is primarily angry with the American power, self-assurance, unilateralism and a concern for its own national security at the expense of others. He is a protesting third-worldist who sees capitalism exploiting developing nations, and an ecologist (Americans consume too much; he is against the freedom of 'one nation with just 4% of the world's population to satisfy its desire to consume a quarter of the world's energy'²). He also recycles other, now common, complaints against 'the West'.

He, however, is unlike most other intellectuals in his support for General Musharraf in Pakistan. He has written in support of Musharraf and defended voting for him in a widely boycotted election. Hamid feels that America's obsession with its own interests hurts the process in which the liberal Eastern Pakistani secular elite engages with the conservative clans of Western Pakistan. Reading through his articles and interviews I see little distinction between Pakistan and what he terms 'the Muslim world', nor recognition that any of the trouble faced by such a 'world' has been caused by it. He assumes that a liberal democratic Islam is possible and argues that, by allying itself with the West, Pakistan risks tearing itself apart. He accuses the United States of not standing by Pakistan when it was threatened by a possible Indian attack following the bombing of the Indian parliament, but he does not acknowledge that Pakistan was involved with the terrorists who carried out the bombing.

On an almost daily basis I read in the newspapers about conflicts between Islamists and others in Dafur, Somalia, Nigeria, Thailand, Algeria, you name it, but Hamid sees only the problems caused by American or Western or capitalist imperialism. A secular, liberal Muslim, he refuses to look at what his religion has produced, and instead repeats an anti-American litany that goes at least as far back as the liberation of Europe when Simone de Beauvoir, unprotesting at the German occupation, would scribble 'Americans go home', while she and Sartre ignored all the evils of Stalinism and every other supposed progressive tyranny. Yes, I am suggesting that Hamid and the Muslim world inherited the anti-Americanism of part of the Left.

But trust the tale not the writer. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a much more sophisticated work than Hamid's occasional journalism. Listen to the narrator's admission of his resentments, that his feudal family has come down financially in Pakistan after independence, that he resents the power and assurance of the wealthy Americans he wants to be part of, his shock in finding that other places like the Philippines have progressed in modernisation much further than Pakistan, and his happiness when the United States is humiliated by 9/11. The novel is not just a study in resentment; the title has a double significance, since the narrator is trained by his American employers to focus

only on economic fundamentals. In becoming a possible terrorist leader he has changed sides from one fundamentalism to another, and, like Hamid, he acknowledges that there is much to be attracted towards in the United States while being against it.

Hamid cleverly gives the novel a double perspective and a sensational ending. The narrator converses with an American who may or may not be a military man or secret agent on a mission. During the conclusion it is not clear what is happening, who might be assassinating whom; perhaps the narrator, who seems increasingly insane, is misrepresenting everything. The form and tone of the story is consciously chosen to create such ambiguity. Hamid's model for this short novel is obviously Albert Camus' complex novella *La Chute* in which the speaker, making use of many details from Camus's own life, seems an example of bad faith until we understand that such an interpretation is also a parody of the criticisms Sartre directed against Camus. While *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* makes use of many details of Hamid's life, including the recognition of his and other Muslim resentments of the USA, it is an ambiguous story open to varied interpretations.

A motif that runs through the novel is the narrator's assumption that Afghanistan is the victim of an American invasion and that Afghanistan is somehow part of Pakistan. There is no recognition of how the Taliban caused the United States to invade Afghanistan, nor of how the Taliban treated others, such as liberal and secular Muslims. Hamid sees the American presence as part of a long history of foreign invasion. Well, yes, but how did Islam get there in the first place?

Feryal Ali Gauhar's *No Space for Further Burials* has similar blind spots while it also aims for balance. Here the narrator is an American Army medical technician in Afghanistan who is captured and left at an insane asylum, perhaps until he can be ransomed. Part of the novel's strength is the lack of clarity about why events happen outside of the asylum in contrast to its intense focus on the suffering of those inside who fear the rebels, looters and the Americans. Despite its realistic details the novel requires words like 'symbolic', 'allegorical' or 'Kafkaesque' to describe the way it makes a small, enclosed world representative of a nation being destroyed by seemingly irrational forces. Although the worst threats are the bombs dropped by Americans who mistake the asylum for a military target, the rebels and looters rob, rape and kill without mercy, and as deaths and seasons follow each other, there soon is no more space for further burials inside the asylum – an emblem for Afghanistan.

Although it is obvious that insanity and madness apply to the situation of Afghanistan as well as the asylum, a strength of the novel is the way the various individuals' histories are pieced together by the American soldier, although the poetic language he uses seems unlikely for someone unversed in Urdu. The stories show that Afghanistan has a culture of extreme brutality, in which a schoolteacher suspected of communism is blinded and disfigured by an Imam throwing acid at him; and a daughter who runs away with a labourer is hunted by her father, who murders her husband and smashes her skull with an axe. Each of the characters tells of similar horrors, is crippled and barely survives. As awful as the insane asylum is – lacking medicine, food, clothing and water – it provides temporary refuge from a world of purposeful cruelty that keeps intruding. While several characters speak with pride of how their ancestors fought against previous invaders, it is difficult to see how an American withdrawal would end the horrors inflicted by Afghans on each other, horrors committed in the name of honour, tradition, patriarchy and Islam.

The author is especially concerned about the mistreatment of children and women in traditional culture: the young boys are raped and they and the women are mutilated, starved and made to beg. The novel is published by Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, and the author, a documentary film maker and teacher of filmmaking in Lahore, is a United Nations representative to Pakistan where she lectures on the mistreatment of women and children.

Although well-written, *No Space for Further Graves* fails to ask what brought Americans to Afghanistan, or how that is connected to the evils that are shown as common to local life. The author says nothing about the rebels that the inmates fear, although they are obviously the Taliban, nor does she make any connection between them and the traditional culture that created a need for the asylum. The blurb on the back page suggests that this is a novel about the effects of the American invasion of Afghanistan, but such a description fails to capture the criticism being made of traditional Islamic culture in the book, a culture which long preceded 9/11.

In reviewing an anthology of writing by women from Pakistan I could not help but notice that authors living abroad seemed concerned with affirming their origins even when criticising Pakistan and its traditions.³ Hamid, Gauhar and Shamsie are as much products of elite America and its values – including a distaste of American vulgarity and the military – as of Pakistan. Hamid's alma mater, as he reminds us, is Princeton University, and he is a graduate of the Harvard Business School and remains a management consultant; Gauhar graduated from McGill in Canada and then studied film at the University of Southern California; Kamila Shamsie did her first degree at Hamilton College where she now teaches a semester of each year.⁴ Between them they have so far published eight novels, and both Hamid and Shamsie are multiple prize-winners. Each of these authors is critical of the USA, yet none of the three seem willing to examine the causes and effects of radical Islam in Pakistan and the Muslim world.

It is as if Islamisation were a topic to be avoided, although it seems unavoidable if one is concerned with women's rights or any secular rights. The paradox was inherent in the creation of Pakistan, which was intended both as an Islamic and a liberal democratic nation, a conflict between two opposing mentalities which has long seemed unresolvable within the Muslim world.

Pakistan is not only a new nation, its English language literature is newer still. Many of the supposed Pakistani authors of the past were Muslims born in India or were the children of immigrants to England with only tangential relationships to Pakistan. It is difficult to regard Attia Hosain, Salman Rushdie or Hanif Kureishi as Pakistani authors, unlike Kamila Shamsie who, although she lives part of each year in the USA and England, writes detailed stories about Karachi, its elites, their children and the effects of national and international politics on their lives. In each of her four novels the intense focus on individuals, their emotions and their relationships to others is impacted by history and national politics; although the political events are mostly off stage the results show that the personal cannot be kept separate from the public. Affection, love, personal rights, how one acts, society and its manners and morals, are always being influenced and shaped by who governs and how. Often regarded as a novelist of manners, Shamsie is also a writer of political fiction, although the kind of story she tells and the way of telling are unlike that of most political novelists.

Broken Verses is the closest she has come to writing a novel which might be read as a national allegory. It tells of a feminist activist and her poet lover during the

1980s, as recalled almost two decades later by the woman's emotionally frozen daughter – one who blames her condition on being abandoned, who refuses to accept their deaths and who fantasises that her mother left her after seeing the futility of political action. Her mother's story and that of the poet is told in relation to such public events as the overthrow of democracy by the military, the various ins and outs of who replaced whom as head of state, and how this affected human, especially women's, rights, and how the fundamentalists kept gaining strength as the military needed their support. The consequence was the passing of laws taking away the rights of women while dissent was brutally suppressed. The poet was beaten to death, his tongue ripped out, and the manuscript of his final work destroyed before it could be published. Almost two decades later no one dares seek his killers as they or their backers are still in power. Shamsie also sees Pakistan's degeneration from democracy to its present military rule within the context of international politics, such as the effect of America's backing of its military because of the Cold War and its use of the fundamentalists against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

My summary may make *Broken Verses* seem a primer for understanding 60 years of post-Partition Pakistan, but this would misrepresent a richly textured, eventful story about how a young woman's life is obsessed by the past and her relationship with the dead. Her emotions range from anger at being neglected and the wish to be left alone to fantasise that her mother and the poet are still alive. There is also a parallel story about the neglected son of a famous actress friend of her mother which results in another tale that eventually takes over the foreground of the novel; the neglected son falls in love with the feminist's daughter and tries to gain her attention. This may seem an obscure way to explain the story, but *Broken Verses* makes good use of suspense; the striking twists and turns in the plot should not be revealed by a reviewer.

Shamsie is a storyteller, someone who obviously delights in narrative, and the techniques of presenting a complex tale. Her complexity, art and ease in bringing together various literary traditions remind me of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, which also displayed a surprising range. She has renewed the traditions of how to tell stories within stories so that they seem naturally complex, modern fiction rather than oral folk and epic conventions. She also has a surprising feel for the poetic in exploring the origins of words, making puns, using figurative language or reshaping older myths to apply to her story. Conventions of Urdu and related literatures reappear in Shamsie's writing in new guises, such as the retelling of allegorised myth as a stage play about the poet and feminist which then becomes a metaphoric way to allude to them, or the way Shamsie's novels make use of overwhelming desire for the unobtainable beloved, which no longer alludes to the One or God.

Her novels tell a history unnoticed in the West, such as the strong women's rights movement in Pakistan and other Islamic nations during the 1980s and the heroism of such women. All of this is excellent – and Shamsie is one of the better young novelists of our time – but I keep wondering why none of these writers finds room to show the rise of fundamentalism, its causes, and how it influences national and international politics. It is almost as if there were an inability to look directly at the problems caused when Islam becomes political; instead there is the recycling of clichéd criticisms of the United States, colonialism and capitalism.

The authors themselves exemplify the close connection between the re-assertion of Muslim identity and the spread of an American-led globalisation of

popular culture (which the authors are proud to demonstrate that they share), education, the job and economic markets, along with the liberalisation of manners and morals. As the world becomes Americanised, it also creates opposing nationalist and pan-nationalist movements. I suspect that one reason why the three novelists avoid addressing this theme of cause and effect directly, although it is a subtext of their novels, is that it would call into question their own assertion of identity. Hamid comes closest to recognising this when his narrator admits to resenting how his feudal family has come down in the modern world. Another reason is that it is more dangerous to criticise Islamic fundamentalists than Americans, a distinction fogged over in the three novels. Indeed, it is thought that Musharraf allows a free press only as long as it keeps its nose out of the Talibanisation of the North West and other matters involving Muslim extremism. That the novels do not become involved in such issues may explain their art, including the use of untrustworthy narrators, concern with language and lack of detail whenever Islamic fundamentalism appears in their stories.

Notes

1. Bruce King is author of *Three Indian Poets. Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes*. (Madras: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2001).
2. Mohsin Hamid, "Gunning for War", *TIME Asia Magazine*, available at: <http://www.mohsinhamid.com/gunningforwar.html> (last accessed 17 April 2007). The other opinions to which I allude can be found on the same website.
3. See Bruce King's review of Muneeza Shamsie (ed.), "And the World Changed", *Wasafiri* 49 (2006), pp.71–3.
4. Reviews of, and articles by, Kamila Shamsie can be found on the Bloomsbury website, www.bloomsbury.com.