Muneeza Shamsie, ed., *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women*

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REFERENCES


1 This American edition of twenty-five stories by Pakistani women, which is a longer, modified version of the Indian collection first published in 2005 by Women Unlimited, then reprinted by OUP in Pakistan, is remarkable in the range, diversity, and talent of the voices included. This path-breaking volume is the first and only collection of creative texts written originally in English by contemporary Pakistani women writers.

2 Most of the original excerpts from novels have been replaced by short stories, introduced by concise biographies and insightful analytical summaries, which provide a cultural context for American audiences. The introduction has been expanded to put Pakistani women’s writing into a broader historical and political perspective. Muneeza Shamsie traces its lineage back to Indo-Anglian women writers in British India and moves on to consider defiant Muslim women authors in independent India. She explores the history of English education in South Asia, the problematic status of English as a colonial, vestigial “language of power”, its acquisition as a creative vehicle for emancipation, the fratricidal trauma of Partition, and the complex process of nation-building in Pakistan. She also outlines the various trials of the women’s movement in a Muslim country and the gradual empowerment of women in the exclusively male domains of journalism, politics, and literature. The aim of the volume is indeed “to reveal how Pakistani women, writing in a global (albeit imperial) langage,
challenge stereotypes that patriarchal cultures in Pakistan and the diaspora have imposed on them, both as women and as writers.”

3 But these stories, which weave together personal trajectories, family sagas, and the national history of Pakistan, reveal that and much more. The wounds of colonization, of communal hatred and of gender-based violence, the difficulties of integration in the West for diasporic communities suspended between cultures, and the necessary negotiations of these cultures to shape a novel identity “between East and West” are a common thread in many stories. Emigrants’ uneasy dialogue with representations of home, homecoming, and exilic belonging are also recurrent motifs for communities that often continue practising age-old customs and wrestle with the fear that accompanies the loss of cultural moorings, as well as with the disjunction between generations that this fear entails. The difficult conciliation between sexuality, tradition, and emancipation in a society where women have sometimes internalized patriarchal values and the question of honor is intimately linked with that of womanhood, is a recurring theme as well. Yet the women portrayed here also challenge these values in the daily fabric of their lives. This anthology admirably sheds light on the various means of resistance and assertion by which women construct their identity and create a space for themselves. The characters of these stories who are either forced to inhabit several worlds while living abroad, or who have to cope with the extreme pressures of external reality and of traditions, continually unsettle normative expectations of what it means to be a Muslim woman today.

4 One might regret that the anthology opens with a rather poor short story by the famed author Bapsi Sidhwa. The most successful texts are indeed those which do not try to make a political point, whether feminist, progressive, or “post-colonial,” but instead resist the temptation of translating Pakistani reality for a Western audience and forge poetically their own voice by composing dialogically and wrestling with the multiple parameters which fashion the plural identities of many Pakistani women. The stories with a truly singular perception of the world and of language may then bridge the distance between the cultural-specific and a type of “embodied” universalism. In this anthology of writers who are still barely known to the general public, a surprising number of these contemporary Pakistani women authors fall into that superior category. Bushra Rehman’s “The Old Italian,” for example, explores the misleadingly plain anecdote of the killing of a kitten while addressing issues of racism, violence and immigration through the eyes of children in less than ten pages. Also, the bitter-sweet, humorous and evocative narrative of Sara Suleri Goodyear’s “Excellent Things in Women” conjures up the womanly world of her childhood in Pakistan, “where history is synonymous with grief.”

5 In the present-day context of the “war on terror” and the demonization of the Muslim world, this American edition of Pakistani writing shatters reductive stereotypes and reveals the multi-faceted ways of belonging for many Pakistani individuals as well as the complex modulations of womanhood.
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Laetitia Zecchini completed her PhD on the political dimension of contemporary Indian poetry in English and in Hindi in 2007. She is now working as a tenured researcher at the CNRS in Paris. She is co-editor of La modernité littéraire indienne: Perspectives postcoloniales (Rennes: PUR, in press) and has published articles on Indian poetry and on postcolonial theory. Her research interests include the politics of poetics; the representation of the subaltern in literature, specifically poetry; strangeness in Indian writing; and the literature of the Dalits. She has co-translated the poetry of Kedarnath Singh into French and is currently translating Arun Kolatkar’s Kala Ghoda Poems.