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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Routledge Companion to
Pakistani Anglophone Writing



Edited by Aroosa Kanwal and Saiyma Aslam

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Pakistani fiction and human rights

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-12>

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Published online on: 04 Sep 2018

How to cite :- Esra Mirze Santesso. 04 Sep 2018, *Pakistani fiction and human rights from: The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing* Routledge

Accessed on: 16 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315180618-12>

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11

PAKISTANI FICTION AND
HUMAN RIGHTS*Esra Mirze Santesso*

The earliest works of post-Partition Pakistani anglophone fiction tended to focus on two subject groups: British colonialists (as in Zulfikar Ghose's first novel, *The Contradictions*, 1966) and the emerging elite class of the new country (as in his second novel, *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, 1967). More recent literature coming out of Pakistan, in contrast, presents a striking thematic and aesthetic diversity that echoes the country's 'plurality and cultural commingling', which Muneeza Shamsie describes as essential to numerous 'dimensions of Pakistani life: from the structures of power and class, to natural disasters, daily struggles and cricket' (2010: 649). This emphasis on heterogeneity has generally been examined in the context of a departure from the traditional formal realism of the Western novel, or else in the context of an ongoing effort to complicate the representation of the South Asian experience by moving away from colonial stereotypes. I wish to examine Pakistani literary pluralism instead as evidence of a growing interest in scrutinising the nation's record of human rights violations under political Islam. As several scholars have noted, the relationship between theology and politics has never been well-defined in the Islamic tradition, just as the divide between the secular and non-secular has never been self-evident in the Qur'an – many revelations are fundamentally legalistic and clearly paved the way towards developing *sharia*-based law in Muslim societies. Therefore, the Islamisation of civic and political life in many Muslim states – what is commonly referred to as 'Islamopolitics' – has presented significant technical and legal problems for emerging democracies such as Pakistan.

The relevance of plurality and discourses of human rights to Pakistani literature is partly a legacy of the nation's long engagement with religious nationalism and authoritarianism. The era of Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1977–1988) was a particularly crucial and bitter one, marked by an unprecedented degree of despotism (with links to religious fundamentalism, moral corruption, economic disenfranchisement, and political suppression). Zia named himself head of the state after a military coup, and ushered in a series of *sharia*-based laws that threatened the secular structure of the post-Partition state in an effort to reignite Islamopolitics. Islamopolitics, or political Islam, 'draws on that inseparable link between religion and politics by endorsing a fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an and accepting *sharia* decrees as the legal basis for state power' (Santesso 2017: 8). While it would be short-sighted to assume that Islam is permanently incompatible with secular governance, it would be equally unwise to ignore the

fuller connotations of Islam as *din*, which signifies an entire way of life with no differentiation between the spiritual and the political – an idea which Zia exploited fully in redefining Pakistani citizenship.

Zia's reign marked a turning point in Pakistani literary history as well: for numerous authors, his repression of Pakistan's inherent diversity, his closing of cinemas and banning of Western culture, and his introduction of Hudood and blasphemy ordinances demanded the adoption of a new approach to literary fiction. Traditional realism would no longer do; now, styles that lent themselves more easily to absurdist representation (magic realism, etc.) seemed to be called for. Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), written during Zia's regime, for example, employs magic realism, perhaps to enforce the idea that 'the art of governmentality in Pakistan is a form of magic, in which people mysteriously vanish in a puff of smoke' (Morton 2007: 54). Rushdie focuses upon the disconnect between Zia's ruthless and ultra-pragmatic approach to geopolitics and his carefully constructed religious persona. Yet he adopts a more sombre attitude – similar to the style of poets such as Habib Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, known to be vocal critics of Zia – when he condemns the tyrant as a hypocrite; in the novel, Hyder (representing Zia) appears on TV the day after the coup as part of a well-orchestrated political theatre:

On the morning after the coup Raza Hyder appeared on national television. He was kneeling on a prayer-mat, holding his ears and reciting Quranic verses; then he rose from his devotions to address the nation. [...] What, leatherbound and wrapped in silk, lent credibility to his oath that all political parties, including the Popular Front of 'that pluckiest fighter and great politician' Iskander Harappa, would be allowed to contest the rerun poll? [...] Raza Hyder, Harappa's protégé, became his executioner, but he also broke his sacred oath, and he was a religious man.

(1983: 235)

The novel illustrates the link between despotism and religious fundamentalism based on visual and linguistic engineering, which turns politics into a kind of well-crafted performance art. Here, Islam is used strategically to silence, to demand not only the spiritual but also the political surrender of the individual. In this production staged for the masses, the Qur'an becomes a prop to convey Hyder's moral and political authority – but as a servile disciple rather than a menacing dictator. His meticulously tailored image as a religious devotee is essentially 'an editorial project of culture' aimed at increasing his credibility as a morally righteous leader (Abbas 2014). Such self-fashioning captures not only Zia's determination to redefine citizenship on the basis of religious belonging, but also the deeper insinuation that Pakistani individual consciousness can no longer be separate from the religious *ummah*.¹ More recently, in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) Mohammed Hanif similarly captures the theatricality of politics as he describes Zia by way of a visual conceit. The character studies a portrait of himself that conveys his virtues as a Muslim – but a Muslim with military power at his command:

I am a soldier of Islam appeared under his official portrait, in which he was wearing his four-star general's uniform. *And then, as an elected head of the Muslim state, I am a servant of my people* was the caption for the third picture.

(2008: 102)

Sadia Abbas describes this self-aggrandisement as an aggressive image-building campaign 'executed through the control of language, and more significantly, through an attempted transformation of forms of devotion – forms fully entangled with the most ordinary actions and

objects of life' (2014: 151). Zia's self-invention is motivated by a desire to homogenise the population and quash democratic dialogue: politics is now no longer a sphere for debate. By transmuting and suspending the law, he hopes to bolster his own autocratic rule. In *Shame*, Rushdie also picks up on this alliance between Islamisation and despotism:

people respect [religious] language, [and] are reluctant to oppose it. This is how religions shore up dictators; by encircling them with words of power, words which the people are reluctant to see discredited, disenfranchised, mocked.

(1983: 266)

As religious language oozes into the political discourse in the form of fundamentalism (which ironically suggests a direct and literal reading of the sacred text – even in nations where literacy rates are particularly low), it threatens individual autonomy and erases political agency. Opting out of the divine law, to put it differently, necessitates the suspension of secular law, and repudiates the rights of the individual to privilege a majoritarian and populist will.

It is perhaps because of the centrality of Zia's regime in the philosophical reimagining of Pakistani identity, rights, and individuality that more recent authors continue to return to this period. Both Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* and Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* (2005) choose this particular era in order to scrutinise the government's complicity in human rights abuses. Portraying Zia's rule as a period of repression, they highlight the marginalisation and victimisation of the dissident individual, who refuses to be interpellated into 'a population infused with a particular kind of piety through the implementation of punitive laws' (Abbas 2014: 164). This new generation of authors (which includes also Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam to name two) participates in the new, global literary tradition of 'human rights narratives' – narratives that convey 'particular kinds of stories – strong emotive stories often chronicling degradation, brutalization, exploitation, and physical violence' (Schaffer and Smith 2004: 4). These narratives treat human rights as 'a subset of individual moral rights which are distinguished in terms of their connection to basic human needs, are connected to political legitimacy, and place constraints on the permissible exercise of power by states' (Zoana 2011: 198). Both Shamsie and Hanif partake in a rights-oriented form of storytelling, which 'functions as a crucial element in establishing new identities' based on resistance (Schaffer and Smith 2004: 19). They ultimately characterise Islamopolitics as a threat against democratic ideals outlined in the 1956 constitution as well as a disavowal of human rights issues based on a narrow definition of citizenship that serves to intensify the fault lines between secular and non-secular factions of society.

Central to this rethinking of identity in the context of human rights is the notion and symbol of silence. By drawing attention to the experiences of the 'violated' as a way to recognise their struggles, Shamsie and Hanif both imagine Islamopolitics as a form of political theatre that essentially legitimises and codifies fundamentalism. This validation of literalism in Islam transforms the subaltern class by integrating them into the national sphere – giving them a voice – while silencing the middle-class, secular elites as threats and targets. The triangulation between dialogue, language, and violence in both narratives points to the state's transgressions in the degradation and dehumanisation of the individual for political capital. In creating these stories as narrative petitions with the intent to establish an ethics of recognition of those abandoned by the law, both authors put forward an argument that Pakistan – a society which at a certain point stopped building bridges between its diverse communities – needs a new type of literature to aid in rebuilding those bridges for the future.

'Silence' is Shamsie's muse in *Broken Verses*. Inspired by Azhar Jaffery's black-and-white photographs of members of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) marching against the newly

passed 'Law of Evidence' in 1983, Shamsie 'piece[s] together a collage of different images' (2013: 12) to create a larger-than-life female heroine:

As a novelist, I was interested in silences – those periods of history that don't enter official narratives or are pushed to the margins – but thereafter I started to say that I was interested in the missing pictures [...] pictures that exist but weren't in the newspapers at the time they should have been the main story. [...] I could swear that it was in the moment of looking at those images that the character of the activist mother in my novel *Broken Verses* started to form.

(2013: 11)

Broken Verses focuses primarily on the silencing of women by a regime that authorises patriarchal repression. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not include specific language about women's rights, Article 2 guarantees that everyone is 'entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (1948 n.p.). As Charlotte Bunch notes,

feminists redefine human rights abuses to include the degradation and violation of women. The specific experiences of women must be added to traditional approaches to human rights in order to make women more visible and to transform the concept and practice of human rights in our culture so that it takes better account of women's lives.

(1990: 487)

Shamsie captures this spirit by giving an account of a female political activist, Samina Akram, whose personal and political life mark her as a feminist; not only does she defy state authority by organising women's protests, she also goes against social expectations by entering into a highly public post-divorce relationship with a dissident poet, Ashiq. Her story is relayed posthumously through the first-person narration of her daughter, Aasmaani, who is forced to confront her past after receiving a series of cryptic letters. Remembering Samina's legacy fuels an ethics of recognition initially denied to the women protestors in the photographs. Such an homage is testament to the novel's desire to act as a narrative petition, to destabilise official history and make room for women victimised by the patriarchal order. Their refusal to be silenced essentially reflects their desire to establish women's rights as human rights.

Thematically, Shamsie approaches the concept of 'silence' by complicating Gayatri Spivak's earlier theorisations of 'speaking' as a way to discover one's voice or agency in entering into a dialogic exchange. In her influential essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak famously examines the way the 'third-world subject is represented within Western discourse'; paying specific attention to the subaltern subject, the economically dispossessed and politically disenfranchised peasant, she attests that even though the subaltern can *talk*, they cannot *speak*. *Speaking*, in her terminology, is 'a transaction between speaker and listener' (2010: 49): subaltern *talk* does not attain what she calls the dialogic level of utterance. *Broken Verses* expands on the idea of transmission, arguing that when theological language becomes the medium of exchange, the power dynamics shift in a way that makes it possible for the subaltern classes to gain greater visibility in the national sphere. In an ironic reversal, under Islamic regimes, it is the uneducated, often illiterate, subaltern classes who find their fundamentalist views legitimised and authorised by the state: in the new Pakistan, Shamsie writes, 'religion [comes] out from behind its veil of privacy

and into the realm of politics' (2005: 91). Shamsie describes the *ummah* as consisting mostly of 'young, idealistic, confused, angry, devout, ready-to-be-brainwashed boys', who become pawns to be disposed of in the war in Afghanistan – a military campaign presented to the pious as 'a matter of religious duty' (2005: 285). State-sponsored Islamisation succeeds in giving voice to the subalterns by hailing them as agents of change; as the novel illustrates, Islamopolitics mobilises historically marginalised social and economic groups by appealing directly to identity politics. Indeed, the calculated valorisation of the subaltern classes carried Zia to victory in the 1984 referendum, where 94% of the voters expressed support for the government's Islamic agenda.

In contrast, the educated elite, shocked by the desecularisation of the constitution and wary of expressing any objections, is condemned to silence. Indeed, for Shamsie the silencing of the traditional ruling groups is so complete that even the language of democracy is taken away from them, co-opted by those who ultimately wish to end it:

The battle-lines were so clearly drawn then with the military and the religious groups firmly allied, neatly bundling together all that the progressive democratic forces fought against. Now it was all in disarray, the religious right talking democracy better than anyone else.

(2005: 73)

The nation has in effect erected a 'democratic façade', reinforcing the idea of Islamopolitics as political theatre with only certain characters allotted speaking roles (2005: 73). By empowering the subaltern classes at the expense of the secular elite, Islamopolitics blocks any possibility of dialogue between different segments of the society: 'This move towards theocracy sent violent tremors down the spine of the women's movement, which knew that Zia's Islam concerned itself primarily with striking down the rights of women and befriending fundamentalists' (2005: 138). After she witnesses the introduction of Hudood in 1977, which criminalised 'immoral' behaviour by women (by making offences such as fornication and adultery punishable by stoning to death and amputation), Samina realises that women of all walks of life will be robbed of their ability to speak for themselves.² This is consistent with what Bunch describes as a fear-mongering tactic for the gendered body: 'The message is domination: stay in your place or be afraid' (1990: 491). When Samina finds out about the imprisonment of Safia Bibi, a thirteen-year-old rape victim who could not prove her assault due to her blindness, she understands that women are to be reduced to an utterly abject position not just beyond expression, but beyond choice and will.³

Silence eventually leads to violence, which finds its grimmest expression in the torture and killing of Ashiq. The literal silencing of the poet – who was known, ironically, as 'the voice of resistance' – shows how individuals in this new and silenced version of Pakistan morph into mere bodies to be disciplined, re-educated, and exterminated once they become threats. Aasmaani recalls reading about the poet's torture and death in the tabloids:

Here were details, graphic details, of the broken bones, the features smashed beyond recognition, the purple bruise that his face had become.
No teeth remained inside his mouth.
His tongue was a stump of muscle.
[...]
Smashed beyond recognition.

(2005: 168)

The individual stripped of rights becomes an inanimate, fragmented, and mutilated body. The violated body as spectacle showcases the calculating and dispassionate banality of state brutality as a control mechanism – what Marjorie Agosin and Janice Molloy describe as ‘The body in pain as property of state’ (1988: 181). This type of brutality is clearly a sign of ‘the structural relationships of power [and] domination’ symptomatic of government corruption (Bunch 1990: 491).

More intriguing is the way silence is presented as contagious. Violent silencing, in other words, begets more, self-inflicted silence as a response: Samina, unable to cope with the death of the poet, commits suicide. Her self-willed silence spreads to her daughter as Aasmaani distances herself from her mother’s world by embracing an apolitical, apathetic persona – her numb, robotic detailing of Ashiq’s killing further signals her emotive disentanglement. Rather than idealising the previous generation’s ambitions and emulating them, she perceives them as ‘victims of a mullah dictator’ (Kanwal 2015: 138) whose lives present ‘a lesson in futility’ (Shamsie 2005: 287). If her narrative is supposed to provide a testimony to the insuperable idealism of Zia’s victims, Aasmaani comes across as an unwilling pseudo-witness.⁴ Such detachment points to ‘the total usurpation of one’s personal life by the dictatorship in an atmosphere of asphyxia and terror. The individual exists or ceases to exist according to the whim of the state’ (Agosin and Molloy 1988: 187). Redemption is only available through an acknowledgement of her own voice: Aasmaani ends her silence only when she is able to come to terms with her mother’s suicide, and work towards making that voice public by speaking about her mother’s story in a documentary.⁵ Her recuperated agency asserts the idea that ‘words continue [...] to be both the battleground and the weapon’ (Shamsie 2005: 222).

Silence plays a similarly potent role in Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. Obsessed with Zia’s death in a plane explosion, Hanif, then a news correspondent working for BBC London, starts investigating the President’s assassination as a journalist. When he realises that he will be unable to solve the crime due to the reluctance of eyewitnesses, he turns to fiction: ‘What if, fictionally, I raise my hand and say, “Look, I did it”?’ (Filkins 2016: 31). This role-playing is the premise behind the author’s ‘satirical thriller’ in which Zia appears as a self-aggrandising narcissist (as opposed to fear-inducing despot). Shamsie describes Hanif’s belittlement as poetic retribution: ‘Hanif is essentially saying, let’s not see Zia as a big man, as a monster – let’s see him as a pathetic man. [...] This book feels like revenge’ (2013: 32). The plot, switching between first- and third-person narration, thickens as more potential murder suspects materialise – including not only plausible aspirants such as political rivals, a rape victim named blind Zainab (a nod to Safia Bibi), or the members of the sweepers union, but also magic realist avatars including a crow and ‘tunneling’ worms (Hanif 2008: 95).

The protagonist of the novel, Ali Shigri, closely resembles Aasmaani – a disillusioned army recruit plagued by his father’s suspicious death. Suspecting Zia of orchestrating his father’s suicide, he resolves to poison the general during a ceremonial military exercise. Cognisant of Ali’s plans, Obaid, a close confidant and love interest, steals a plane in the hopes of delaying Zia’s visit to the base. Set in ‘a cocooned military world’, the novel gestures towards a Gramscian idea of the subaltern, placing various military personnel in plainly subordinate and voiceless positions (Shamsie 2009: 17). The symbolic silencing of the militarised subaltern is reinforced by the two characters’ involvement with the ‘Silent Drill Squad’, in which commands are given non-verbally. Silence is introduced as a form of self-restraint and, ultimately, power: according to the lieutenant, ‘A drill without commands is an art. When you deliver a command at the top of your voice, only the boys in your squadron listen. But when your inner cadence whispers, the gods take notice’ (2008: 21). At the same time, those at the bottom of the hierarchy are denied their right to remain silent: both Ali and Obaid find themselves prisoners in a state facility used for torture. There, they are forced to confess to whatever ‘the gods’ desire – and revert back to

silence once they fulfil their part. The military and the prison are the ultimate spaces in which silent obedience is required of all individuals – to the extent that the individual is defined no longer on the basis of agency but on the basis of their complicity with the rituals imposed by the higher-ups.

The prison, a space removed from normal human rights expectations and structures, ultimately complicates the basic idea of silence and introduces the idea of ‘unspeakability’ – a concept that obfuscates the line between humanity and monstrosity. Hanif’s detailed description of the state’s torture chambers at the fort, a historical site turned into a secret government facility, effectively unveils the ‘traumatic side of history’ (Kozol 2012: 175). Ali finds himself in a group of detainees whose rights have been suspended indefinitely as they await charges for their alleged crimes. His anticipation of torture normalises the state’s lawlessness: he accepts that it will treat the prisoners as punishable and perishable bodies to be disciplined and, if necessary, exterminated. Ali’s torture begins in a filthy bathroom:

That terrible smell of the closed toilet, which has not seen a drop of water for ages, welcomes me, my head hits the wall, and a thousand-watt bulb is switched on. So bright is the light, so over-powering the stench, that I cannot see anything for the first few moments. [...] There is a hole in the ground so full of indistinguishable faeces that bubbles are forming on its surface.

(2008: 87)

Hanif skilfully uses sensory images to convey this form of ‘soft’ torture in which the reader ‘becomes a participant’ by ‘enter[ing] into a world of human brutality and violence’ (Agosin and Molloy 1988: 191). In this environment, Ali is reduced to mere animal biology as he struggles to remain in charge of his bodily functions surrounded by excrement. Despite his drowsiness, he forces himself to remain on his feet so that he does not ‘give these butchers the pleasure of watching [him] lie down in this pool of piss’ (2008: 88). Even though he is determined to appear in control – just enough to preserve his autonomy and dignity – his physical needs soon take over: first, he urinates in his pants (‘soaking wet’), then, as fatigue takes over, he is subsumed by the environment, becoming indistinguishable from the filth.

Unlike Shamsie’s poet, who is physically tortured beyond recognition, Ali is tormented through wordless degradation; his symbolic transformation into waste not only signals his dehumanisation but also his delegitimisation as a citizen under the protection of the state. Hanif is careful to present a form of torture that specifically targets Ali’s dignity, denying him the human quality that requires the preservation of moral and legal rights.⁶ As tortured bodies, the prisoners at the fort remain outside the protection of the law; thus, they are disqualified from their status as citizens. Reduced to a subhuman category incapable of political exchange, these prisoners are discarded by the state as unfit for assimilation. Torture, the very act that forces people to speak to implicate others, is also a way of silencing the suspect, and robbing him/her of humanity by denying a voice. And of course torture removes the victim’s ability to determine the nature of his/her own narrative: the subject of torture ultimately ends up voicing whatever story their torturers wish them to articulate. Removing one’s ability to narrate one’s own story is like removing one’s connection with humanity; for Maria Gabriela Zoana, ‘Human dignity consists in having one’s own story to tell and in not subsuming one’s own point of view to the impersonal needs of the legal system’ (2011: 197).

As in *Broken Verses*, silencing as an act of exclusion proves contagious: like Aasmaani, Ali eventually embraces a self-willed silence, a form of escape and a strategy to avoid confronting his complicity in another’s pain. In an unexpected twist, when Ali is released from his cell, and

is invited to have tea in the garden of the fort, he sees Obaid in the distance with the other detainees. The physical signs of torture are evident on Obaid's body: 'the fuckers ironed his head' (2008: 224). Trapped inside his deformed body, Obaid is no longer a human being but a spectacle; not a sovereign subject, but an object to be manipulated by the state. Still, it is not the embodied experience of torture or the corporal infliction of pain that immediately triggers Ali's desperation. Rather, it is the psychological torment that stems from his own treachery: 'I signed a fucking statement because you were dead. I cut a bloody deal because you were supposed to have been blown to bits because of your own stupidity' (2008: 224). Knowing that he betrayed Obaid under pressure augments Ali's sense of dehumanisation as he becomes complicit in the torture of another. Unable to confess his remorse, Ali is condemned to a guilt-ridden silence.

Ultimately, the motif of silencing has ramifications beyond the suppression of individual agency; it is also a repressive state apparatus used to reinforce an anti-intellectual climate in which science is cast aside for the benefit of religion – a point elegantly explored in Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2009). In the novel, Khan introduces multiple narrative voices to depict national fractures and conflicted allegiances: a scientifically minded young woman, Amal; her blind, highly intuitive sister, Mehwish; and their admirer, Noman, who is burdened by his father's political ambitions to expose Zahoor (the girls' grandfather) as a heretic due to his propagation of Darwinism. Amal fears that her grandfather's obsession with palaeontology will make him a target:

Nana has been angering a lot of people at the university where he teaches. He points out what others overlook. While the Soviets bomb Afghanistan for the seventh year, Pakistan Television no longer broadcasts weather forecasts because predictions of rain have become witchery. Science and history books are being rewritten. Teaching evolution is banned. Nana says to learn is to search for what isn't written, or rewritten. He has become a dangerous man.

(Khan 2009: 41)

The state's 'cultural war' against secular intellectuals, who are invested in articulating a cosmopolitan Pakistani identity backed up by archaeological evidence, is an attempt at flattening the national history (2009: 115). Zahoor understands that Zia's Islamisation of civic and political life will essentially 'change knowledge [...] irreversibly' and redefine public memory to render it consistent with religious nationalism (2009: 15). The juxtaposition between 'the scientific methods of palaeontology and religious obscurantism' essentially masks the state's 'deeper anxiety' about cultivating a multidimensional Pakistani identity that negates religious purity (Kabir 2011: 175). As Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes, 'Through *prehistory*, [...], Aslam Khan navigates an identity politics beset with violence and uncertainty. Palaeontology, an intellectual endeavour, becomes the means of extracting this knowledge' vital in producing 'counter-Islamic' foresight (2011: 180). Extracting unbiased, scientific knowledge, then, is the true antidote to silencing.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, Pakistan not only sided with the original majority and signed the declaration, but also openly disagreed with Saudi Arabia's early critique of Article 18 (which affords the individual the right 'to change his religion or belief') as violating basic tenets of *sharia* law. With that agreement came a commitment from member states to recognise that 'the inherent dignity and [...] the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world' (1948 n.p.). Indeed, the 1956 constitution embraced life and liberty as paramount values of civil rights, and included clauses on freedom of speech and expression, as well as assembly and association. It was not until 1973 that

the early signs of Islam's impact on the law became clear; Article 19 made provisions on the freedom of speech, stating:

Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court.

(Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, art. 19 1973)

Pakistan's support of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights continued to waver over the years as a result of Zia's influence, eventually culminating in the signing of the 'Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam' in 1990. This new agreement affirmed Islamic law's primacy in matters of religious freedom and gender equality, launching an alternative set of rights based on *sharia* ethics.

What is abandoned by the law is preserved in the works of fiction writers. Hanif's Ali wonders how he will be able to leave his prison cell as he is being fed: 'You want freedom and they give you chicken korma' (2008: 147). But that food symbolises the uncertainty of his fate, and the indefinite duration of his incarceration. Contemplating his situation with his next-door neighbour, he observes:

We sit in silence for a while. The absence of any prospects of freedom in the near future hangs heavy in the air. Suddenly, this plate of rich, hot food seems like the promise of a long sentence. I feel the walls of this dungeon closing in on me.

(2008: 156)

Similarly, Aasmaani reflects on the meaning of freedom by showing the disconnect between what the constitution says and how it is implemented by the state: 'Freedom of speech was all very well, but there was no need to exercise it against a government that was helping in the fight against Communism' (Shamsie 2005: 54). In his meeting with an old acquaintance, the value of freedom is reiterated: 'You must have freedom, even in times of war and barbarity' (217). Both Shamsie and Hanif show the challenges of incorporating the subaltern class into the national sphere via the state's populist politicisation of religion. In many ways, their efforts express a desire to define the modern individual by articulating the relationship between one's body and autonomy. As Judith Butler reminds us, 'essential to so many political movements is the claim of bodily integrity and self-determination. It is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense our own and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies' (2004: 25).⁷ At the same time, Shamsie and Hanif make the case that a direct consequence of Zia's regime is the refocusing of Islamophobia within the Muslim homeland: in this context, Islamophobia becomes the province of the secular elite, who care little about heresy, but fear that their basic rights as citizens are under attack – as we see in the case of Zahoor, who does not oppose religion but fears its manipulation under corrupt regimes.

If in totalitarian regimes the individual loses the ability to defend him/herself against injustices, the task falls to the writer to expose the state's wrongdoings and to create a forum in which the victims can speak. In this regard, storytelling becomes a way of questioning the legitimacy of the state. If there is no accountability, if there is no way of restoring the positive rights of the individual when those rights are violated in the name of religion, then, in Hannah Arendt's words, we face 'expulsion from humanity altogether' (1976: 297).

Notes

- 1 As Kanwal notes, 'There is no denying that Islamic radicalism and the culture of intolerance inaugurated by Zia continue to have significant social, cultural and political momentum in contemporary Pakistan' (2015: 8).
- 2 According to Maleeha Aslam, 'Misogyny was institutionalized in law [...]. The state started promoting *ulema* for political gains and to give Islam an "official" face. Maceration of the feminine side of Islam was indirectly allowed by a state that was driven by "militaristic machismo" and interested in promoting an "ulemasculinised theology" that was primarily "aggressive and violent"' (2012: 158).
- 3 The law that states 'an accusation of rape could only be proved in a court of law if there were four pious, male Muslim adults willing to give eye-witness testimony' (Shamsie 2005: 92).
- 4 Aasmaani writes: 'All those years she had fought against Zia's government – she and the poet – with rallies and speeches and poems. And it had got them nowhere. It had got him tortured and killed; it had got her – well, there were no words for that either' (Shamsie 2005: 139). This passage clearly reveals Aasmaani's inability to employ language to describe her mother's agony. But it also shows her reluctance get involved emotionally.
- 5 Madeline Clements argues that 'It is the living, spoken word, as expressed through contemporary and populist media – documentaries, drama, poetry, song – in which *Broken Verses*' strong-minded female characters invest greatest hope' (2016: 140).
- 6 As David Luban writes, 'Torture is among the most fundamental affronts to human dignity', which is essential in the preservation of moral and legal rights in democratic societies (2007: 163).
- 7 As Ignatieff notes, 'Human rights is a language of individual empowerment, and empowerment for individuals is desirable because when individuals have agency, they can protect themselves against injustice' (2001: 57).

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