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12

DIVERGENT DISCOURSES

Human rights and contemporary Pakistani anglophone literature

Shazia Sadaf

The rise of human rights literature

Pakistani anglophone literature has come of age at a very crucial point in the geopolitical history of modern civilisations. The role of these writings is both valuable and disputable, as is reflected in its widely divergent reception by global and local audiences, and in its ambivalent position *vis-à-vis* universal human rights debates. Therefore, an examination of how Pakistani anglophone literature speaks to the global reader is not only timely, but valuable for its insights.

After the events of 11 September 2001, human rights have become an increasingly important area of enquiry with changing perceptions of the US involvement in the War on Terror and the ensuing global questions about the human cost of this project. This has led to a simultaneous rise of three areas of scholarly interest: 9/11 literature, human rights discourse and War on Terror studies. The resulting intersections between literature and human rights, foregrounded by an overarching narrative of terror, have opened a new line of interdisciplinary enquiry broadly classed under the label 'human rights literature'.

Lynn Hunt's (2007) historiography of human rights as an 'invention' stemming from the Western literary tradition, Joseph Slaughter's (2007) work on the relationship between law and literature, and Elizabeth Anker's (2012) views on human rights discourses that validate Western values are recent theoretical works that have urged an exploration of the complications that arise when the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* becomes complicit in the projects of globalisation and neo-imperialism. Besides fiction, non-fictional genres like memoirs have prompted readings of 'life narratives and human rights campaigns as multidimensional domains that merge and intersect at critical points, unfolding within and enfolding one another in an ethical relationship that is simultaneously productive of claims for social justice and problematic for the furtherance of this goal' (Schaffer & Smith 2004: 2). Such diverse and complex readings of both fiction and non-fiction writings have required academics to address urgently the pedagogical challenges in the effective utilisation of this literature in the classroom (Moore and Goldberg 2015).

Anker's recent essay 'Teaching the Legal Imperialism Debate over Human Rights' calls attention to the increasing focus on the postcolonial world in human rights discourse, which makes humanitarianism and human rights activism synonymous with Western foreign aid projects. By extension, it judges postcolonial nation states' respect for human rights as a

measurement of their civilisational progress (2015: 39). Anker warns that challenging human rights in a literature classroom requires the instructor to be unusually circumspect because of the general resistance to a critique of its motives, and that a delicate balance must be maintained between the interrogation of rights and larger considerations of social justice (2015: 40). One of the techniques she proposes is to introduce students to the cultural imperialism¹ debate in human rights, and to frame texts within a history of colonisation (2015: 41).

A broader contextualisation of contemporary literary texts within the colonial history of the Indian subcontinent can yield important insights into the current contradictions within human rights debates in the post-9/11 period: for example, the contradiction of how the logic of universal human rights discourse can coexist in a world in which undefinable² enemies are excluded from the same rights through legal codification. The continuity of such 'states of exception'³ can be traced in the usage of terms like 'Subjects' instead of 'Citizens' during empire, to 'illegal enemy combatants'⁴ instead of 'prisoners of war (POW)' in the recent War on Terror. In both cases, human rights exceptions have been justified: on moral grounds of the civilising mission in the former case, and in the interest of national security in the latter. Therefore, in response to these suggestions, it is important to foster a nuanced approach for the teaching of Pakistani literature through a human rights lens, in the light of the geopolitical history that complicates its role in the global War on Terror.

A helpful introductory note for intersectional scholarship in human rights literature, 9/11 writing and War on Terror studies is the idea of human empathy. It is interesting that the English term 'empathy' has its origins only in the early twentieth century. From its initial usage in the field of psychology, the word entered popular vocabulary around the same time as the formal articulation of human rights in the 1940s. British psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener first translated the word from the German *Einfühlung* ('in-feeling')⁵ as 'empathy' in 1909.⁶ The shift from the concept of sympathy, which stood for 'aesthetic feeling' in the nineteenth century, to the coining of the term 'empathy' in the twentieth, which is associated with 'social understanding', has meant that the latter is used synonymously with altruism and social justice (Swanson 2013: 128). The application of this word has also expanded from psychology into social sciences and the humanities.

Literature's capacity to evoke empathy in readers has been identified as a key factor in the recognition of human dignity and humanitarian action (Hunt 2007; Slaughter 2007, 2012; Barnett 2011; Anker 2012; O'Gorman 2015). As Amy Kaminsky reminds us, 'the right to produce, circulate, and read literary texts is a subset of human rights, literature constitutes a piece of the very stuff of human rights' (2009: 44). Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees freedom of expression and the right to 'receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (1948: n.p.). In a fractured post-9/11 world, literature has the potential to re-establish humanitarian connections. Mohsin Hamid's belief that 'the core skill of a novelist is empathy', because 'the world is suffering from a deficit of empathy at the moment' (2007: n.p.) reflects the conscious movement of new Pakistani writers towards bridging cultural divisions through fiction. Nadeem Aslam shows a similar commitment when he says, 'I must find what I have in common with others. Not what sets me apart [...] then the book will have a better chance of connecting with others' (2010: n.p.). This heightened sense of responsibility to emphasise sameness rather than difference is a key feature of contemporary Pakistani fiction.

The rising interest in this area can be gauged from a recent scientific experiment carried out at the University of Toronto to investigate literature's potential to increase empathy in readers (Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu 2013). The results, published in *Scientific Study of Literature*, suggest a positive role for literature in facilitating the development of empathy. Yet, human

rights literature sets itself a difficult task simply because human rights concerns can have shifting perspectives in a culturally diverse world under the pressures of globalisation. Despite the post-Cold War era being dubbed the period of 'solidarity' in human rights, and despite all efforts to promote a global human rights awareness, international forums are still divided about what these rights are, and how they will be enforced. To date, the largest obstacle to attaining human rights ideals is different interpretations of the term in various regions around the world.

Historians and writers, however, have responded differently to the stalemate. Unlike political theorists and activists, who champion cultural relativism and level charges of cultural imperialism against human rights discourse, the onset of globalisation has spurred literary historians to look beyond the particular/universal divide by focusing on the nuances of the political language of human rights in different cultural contexts (Cmiel 2004: 119–120). The point is to look at local histories of human rights that make 'universal claims'. Taken in this sense, 'human rights talk communicates across cultures in ways similar to money, statistics, pidgin English, or a discussion of soccer' (Cmiel 2004: 126). As far as writers' contribution to these debates is concerned, the future of international human rights can only be meaningful if there is a careful balance between representations of local cultures and the globalised world, and if regional political movements are not completely neglected in the face of larger political claims.

A new turn in Pakistani anglophone fiction⁷

It is perhaps significant that concurrently with the development of human rights literature as a distinct field, a new wave of Pakistani writing emerged on the anglophone literary scene. Indeed, authors including Kamila Shamsie, Hamid, Aslam, Daniyal Mueenuddin, Muhammad Hanif, and Jamil Ahmad have attracted significant international accolades and literary prizes. These emerging writers, jokingly dubbed the 'Pak Pack' by Shamsie (quoted in Shah 2010), have captured more attention post-9/11 than at any prior time, mainly because the event caused an identity crisis within the country which the Pakistani intelligentsia has felt a responsibility to address in a more globally accessible language medium; but also, with international focus turning to Pakistan's role in the War on Terror, Pakistani anglophone writers have found a more receptive publishing industry in the West that is ready to capitalise on the global curiosity about Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan. Even though his tongue-in-cheek exasperation is clear, Mueenuddin realises the benefits of seizing the world market:

When it comes to Pakistani writing, I would encourage us all to remember the brand. We are custodians of brand Pakistan. And beneficiaries. The brand slaps an extra zero onto our advances, if not more. Branding can be the difference between a novel about brown people and a best-selling novel about brown people. It is our duty to maintain and build that brand [...] people from all over the world have come to know and love brand Pakistan for its ability to scare the shit out of them. Whatever you write, please respect this legacy. We're providing a service here. We're a twenty-storey straight-down vertical-dropping roller coaster for the mind. Yes, love etcetera is permissible. But bear in mind that Pakistan is a market-leader. The Most Dangerous Place in the World™.

(2010a: n.p.)

Mueenuddin's dark humour, however, does not undercut the seriousness with which fiction writers have taken this opportunity to produce narratives that offer an alternative approach to 9/11-related themes and which shift perspectives on human rights in relation to the War on Terror.

Any critical engagement with this new wave of Pakistani fiction must address three areas in which it makes a significant contribution. Besides its role as a valuable counter-narrative to 9/11 writings in the West, and its position in the War on Terror debates, Pakistani fiction seeks alignments of vision towards a future beyond recent events. This shifts the focus from 9/11 as a site for trauma writing, to include the equally calamitous issues of human rights that have resulted in its global aftermath. Fiction has the potential to achieve these ends by evoking empathy and encouraging a broader contextual understanding of past events leading to the current situation. At the same time, it must also counter the unidirectional creation of knowledge about Pakistan and Islam by the larger volume of Western 9/11 narratives available to a global readership.

A pertinent point here is to delineate the two different kinds of anglophone writings by Pakistani authors that have met with an avid reception in the Western literary market in the post-9/11 period. Both strains connect with human rights discourse, in divergent ways. Firstly, there are biographical works, mostly by women, often written in collaboration with journalists, which are intentionally geared towards rights awareness; secondly, there are works of fiction which have the potential to be read as rights narratives that problematise commonly understood interpretations of human rights. The fact that these publications have elicited very different responses at home and abroad epitomises the ideological divide of Pakistani society caught in a flux between a nationalistic defensiveness and the pressures of globalisation.

In the post-9/11 period, forces of cultural imperialism have inspired a pronounced nationalist reaction in Pakistan, because of which reading locally produced works of fiction as human rights narratives has become doubly problematic. Pakistani authors find themselves navigating the paradox of conflicting responsibilities: to write about present-day injustices caused by the failure of the state without being accused of subscribing to Western agendas that promote the same instances of violence to justify military aggression in Pakistan.

The reaction of readers in Pakistan to recent fiction has been complicated by the rise of a nationalist sentiment precipitated by the 'us vs them' rhetoric of the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11. Pakistani authors, on the other hand, are not only sensitive to reader's sentiment in Pakistan, but also demonstrate an awareness of their responsibility to bridge cultural barriers through the written word, increasingly making a mark in global academia. Novels like Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2013) are read in postcolonial courses at universities around the world as an example of 'writing back' to the West, and as such are classed in the confrontational postcolonial category. Others, like *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) by Aslam, or *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Shamsie, which speak directly to the War on Terror and its effect on Pakistani identity, are read as examples of contemporary transnational literature emerging from countries previously grouped as 'postcolonial'. Because the move from the term 'postcolonial' to 'transnational' as a course title for global anglophone literature study favours a 'bridging' role of works from countries with a colonial past, it problematises the role of Pakistani writers in that their fiction oscillates between a defensive tone and one of optimism about overcoming differences in a period marked as a 'clash of civilisations'. Their writings are, consequently, divergent discourses.

From Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to his recent novel *Exit West* (2017), the effort to both write back and write beyond 9/11 is evident. In his latest work of speculative fiction, through the story of Saeed and Nadia, who are citizens of an unknown country, Hamid moves beyond a clinging colonial past and hurtles into an immigrant future. What is interesting in this fairy-tale world is the presence of magical 'doors' that open into destinations around the world, literally defying the 'borders' that divide people today. These doors that allow access, unchecked by barbed wire and walls, are wormholes through the border security concerns that have hampered cross-cultural understanding in recent years.

Hamid himself points to the importance of Pakistani literature's unique offering, in that it is location-specific yet pluralistic, in contrast to the dominant discourses of globalisation:

I think Pakistan matters, not just to myself and other Pakistanis, nor only because it is beset with terrorism and possesses nuclear weapons, but because Pakistan is a test bed for pluralism on a globalizing planet that desperately needs more pluralism. Pakistan's uncertain democracy and unsteady attempt to fashion a future in which its citizens can live together in peace are an experiment that mirrors our global experiment as human beings on a shared Earth. The world will not fail if Pakistan fails, but the world will be healthier if Pakistan is healthy.

(Hamid 2014: 5)

Yet, at the same time, Hamid also feels that it is time for writers' attention to turn to the future:

I think we need to radically reimagine the future. Citizens, artist, writers, politicians, everyone. What's happening now is our failure to come up with radical new futures that we think could maybe come in to [*sic*] existence. If we don't, then that space is abandoned to people who are peddling nostalgic disasters.

(Hamid qtd. in Milo 2017: n.p.)

It is interesting that Hamid's idea of a radical change is to stop writing cyclically from within a disaster site, which is primarily what 9/11 literature does.

Perhaps the first novelist to lay the groundwork for what fiction written after 9/11 was to achieve was Ian McEwan. Just a few days after the events of 11 September 2001, he wrote about the loss of life in the attacks for the *Guardian* (15 September 2001), making the connection between creative empathy and being human, the main characteristic of human rights literature: 'Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality' (2001: n.p.). He also made another important point about the failure of the American public to look beyond their personal and national traumas to the 'policy failures, or geopolitical strategy' that may have led to this catastrophic event. Despite the importance of his points, McEwan attributes the power of empathy only to the American victims, for whom he uses the pronoun 'we' in the essay. He distinctly excludes the attackers from this capacity because of what he sees as their 'dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy' (2001: n.p.). McEwan's approach thus curtails the very use of empathy in overcoming differences by making it exclusive to one side of the Us versus Them divide. Similarly, 9/11 fiction in the West invites a one-way empathy towards American victims, while denying a claim to empathy to the victims of the global reverberations of the consequent War on Terror.

One of the reasons why contemporary Pakistani writers like Shamsie are important in this regard is that their writings make a more balanced appeal to humanity. In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie defends the bleak view of all nation states, including America, that justify horrors through a rhetoric of war:

Too many people seem to think I'm making a particular comment on America, but really I'm talking [*sic*] about nations in wartime and the particular inhuman logic they start to follow when they decide what is an acceptable price for some other nation's people to pay.

(Shamsie interviewed by Singh 2012: 160)

As Daniel O’Gorman points out, writers from countries like Pakistan have attempted ‘blurring the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign in a way that draws attention to the element of the other within the self, as well as the self within the other’ (2015: 6). They invite more than just a unidirectional empathy that only perpetuates difference; instead, they draw a pluralistic response that questions the very existence of these divisions.

Thus, Shamsie reminds readers that there is a prior history that feeds into the events of 9/11 and that she has striven to write a novel that does not regard ‘that one date as if history proceeds from it but doesn’t precede it’ (Shamsie interviewed by Singh 2012: 158). Instead of being limited to the cinematic trope of the falling tower popular in the American 9/11 novel, Shamsie’s work is what can be termed a ‘widescreen’⁸ novel, which stretches out horizontally across a wider historical timeline. From the Nagasaki bombings of 1945 to the Partition of India in 1947; from post-Partition Karachi to the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war, *Burnt Shadows* builds up to the attacks in New York in 2001. Significantly, instead of ending there, the narrative engages with the War on Terror and takes the reader to Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba and the present day. Through a widescreen technique Shamsie stretches the canvas for a historicised perspective on the attacks.

The prologue to Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* starts with a nameless character in Guantanamo Bay prison, stripped simultaneously of his clothes and his human dignity. His desperate rhetorical question, ‘How did it come to this?’ (2009: 1) reflects the disconnectedness of people, and the loss of human empathy in the world. The divergent answers to this question offered by different characters in the novel, caught in a sway between optimism and pessimism, represent the ambivalence of Pakistani anglophone writers regarding the geopolitical future of the world beyond 9/11. Indeed, there is a sense of desperation in the hyphenated identities of Shamsie’s characters and in their musing like, ‘Whatever might be happening in the wider world, at least the Weiss-Burtons and the Tanaka-Ashrafs had finally found spaces to cohabit in, complicated shared history giving nothing but depth to the reservoir of their friendships’ (2009: 282). Even in the protagonist Raza’s fluid identity, Shamsie tries to cast a wider net for empathy, and emphasises the futility of nationalist identities by making him a biracial child who looks confusingly like a Hazara, is mistaken for an Afghan, and who is a polyglot speaking the languages of the world. The wish to bridge gaps and the nod to transnationalism are obvious.

Although it is in an altogether different style to Shamsie’s, Jamil Ahmad’s *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) is largely driven by a similar commitment to historicity. However, Ahmad’s work is retrospective⁹ in its method and content. His interconnected short story collection highlights a long-continuing trend of misunderstanding regarding the ancient tribal ways, from the colonial ways of the British Raj to a postcolonial, post-Partition Pakistan, and beyond to the neo-imperialist US interference in the Soviet-Afghan war. Ahmad’s main purpose in writing these stories was to bring about an awareness of the need to preserve these traditional communities against modern warfare, succinctly dubbed ‘Global War on the Tribes’ by Akbar Ahmed (2013). Ahmad thinks that in sweepingly grouping all tribal people of Pakistan as extremists, the West has only done itself a disservice:

One thing is very clear, that you see a lot of mistakes have been made in the recent past. [The drone attacks] are, in a way, destroying a system which was a strong countervailing system to [...] [terrorism and] all [that] [...] is happening today.

(NPR interview 2011: n.p.)

Although Ahmad refrains from making direct political statements, he feels disappointed about the destruction of the tribal leadership as a result of Pakistan’s and the United States’

sponsorship of the Afghan *mujahideen* against the Soviet occupation. In his opinion, this lies at the very root of the escalating problems in this region today: 'I'm angry about it. I could call them [the *mujahideen*] Frankensteins, these monsters who were created and they stood by and watched the tribes being decimated' (*The Nation* 2012).

Ahmad's stories restore the dignity of the ancient communal ways of life seen in the West as uncivilised. By providing a historical understanding of the tarnished tribal belt that is now widely popularised in the Western world as a hub of the Taliban leadership, high-tech warfare, and the target for US drone strikes, the stories offer rare insight into the Pashtun tribal principles that have puzzled the West. These tribal areas bordering Iran and Afghanistan are often reported as 'lawless' and dangerous in the international media. Ahmad's depiction reveals that the nomadic code of life values the collective tribal community over individual identity. This is the main cause of the clash between tribal honour codes and state laws, and the collision between tradition and modernity.

Ahmad's stories, which are based in his real experiences living amongst the tribes as a civil officer, respond to the demonisation of the tribal areas in Pakistan in the post-9/11 period in three significant ways. Firstly, the stories reveal that the history of Pashtun¹⁰ resistance to Western interference is older than their defensive stance on the War on Terror, and their extreme antagonism needs to be contextualised to facilitate better understanding and effective reconciliation. Secondly, that the locals of tribal areas in Pakistan are not radical Islamists. Their allegiance is to the code of *pashtunwali*¹¹ before religion. Contrary to Western understanding, the ancient code of *pashtunwali* is not directly connected to Islam, but is much older. In fact, the *jirga* system of justice at times contradicts *sharia* law. The third point that Ahmad makes is that, contrary to the view propagated by the UNESCO Charter of the Book, which equates illiteracy with backwardness and places the 'writing man's burden' on the civilised world to educate the non-reading nations (Brouillette 2012: n.p.), the oral traditions of the 'illiterate' tribal groups are grounded in a different, yet highly sophisticated sense of justice that has been practised successfully for centuries. The stories exemplify the complex unwritten laws of the tribes.

It is important to mention that fiction writers in Pakistan have taken a two-pronged approach to human rights in their work: to highlight violations of Pakistani citizens arising from international geopolitical interferences (Shamsie, Aslam, and Hamid), but also to expose failures of the Pakistani state to protect the rights of its citizens, especially women, the underprivileged, and minorities. Examples of the latter would be Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2012) and Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2010b). Both these works of fiction lay bare issues like acid attacks against women, power politics, police incompetence, gross neglect of patients in hospitals, discrimination against minorities, and rampant corruption. This work is important for its representations of Pakistani women, their rights, and the limitations of their agency.

In his latest novel, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, Hanif says he wanted to create a 'female superhero flying around and kicking ass' but soon felt uncomfortable with the idea (Hanif interviewed by Filkins 2016: n.p.). His wish to create a powerful woman figure reflects recent conceptual developments about female identity in the Pakistani imagination. One example is the success of the animated TV serial of well-known singer Haroon, which is also about a Pakistani superheroine, a schoolteacher who turns into Burka Avenger to fight the Taliban, who stand against female education. Another parallel is the recent induction of fully veiled women commandos by the Pakistan army, trained to fight terrorists. Contesting views about these veiled figures offer insights into the difficulty of legitimising a Pakistani super-heroine figure, one that fits within the religious and nationalist ideologies of post-9/11 Pakistan. That is why, in trying to find a more relatable Pakistani female figure whose dedication in the face of adversity and hardship

appeared to Hanif to be equally heroic, and why he fashioned the eponymous Alice after the nurses he had seen take care of his ill mother in a Karachi hospital.

One wonders if Hanif was being sarcastic when he said he wanted to write about a super-woman figure when he so obviously ends up creating a female saint. Or perhaps he started out with this aim, but discovered during the process the difficulty of such a project. The latter is more likely since the novel shows how Alice is systematically crushed, and Hanif himself comments, 'Alice may have been a superhero, but in Pakistan not even female superheroes can prevail' (Filkins 2016: n.p.). As far as the connection between human rights and literature is concerned, the novel simultaneously succeeds and fails. It succeeds in giving the poor and disadvantaged Alice-the-woman the capability and drive to do what she wants, which challenges the stereotypical image of the subaltern Pakistani woman, while at the same time demonstrating male insecurity through Teddy-Butt-the-Pakistani-man's precarious position in a traditionally patriarchal nation. But the novel fails in that Alice's success is passive and does not derive any action or change through the novel's plot that might stimulate Pakistani readers towards taking concrete steps in real life. Neither does it successfully agitate the universal human rights idiom for Western readers by proposing particular solutions, or local resistance to violence through other characters.

The interlinked stories of Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* open a door into contemporary Pakistan. The female characters come from a broad cross-section of the Pakistani society and do not portray their subjugation under a patriarchal system in isolation, but balance it with the many ways in which they practise their agency within the class divisions. By extension, these stories reflect a society shaped by a traditionally understood concept of masculinity faced with conditions of rapid social and political change. In Mueenuddin's work there is a subtle undercurrent of a threat to this sustained sense of masculinity.¹² Through the complex dynamics between male and female characters, these stories communicate a slow erosion of Pakistani masculinity and highlight the resistance of women to patriarchy within the societal limitations they face. The portrayal of strong women in these contemporary stories challenges the post-9/11 stereotyping of Pakistani women as non-agentic and controlled by men, which is often projected in popular media reporting on the war on terror campaigns in this region, and through literature that sustains these views.¹³ International human rights reports have repeatedly presented instances of violence against women as failures of Pakistan's government (Human Rights Watch (2015; 2016)). Instead of a sweeping condemnation of state policies that overlooks most underlying causes of human rights violations, Mueenuddin's stories point at the recent precariousness of masculine identity in Pakistan as a factor which has contributed to increased violence and failure to protect the rights of women and the underprivileged in society.

The controversy of memoirs by Pakistani women

Compared to fiction, biographical works published after 9/11 are more contentious in their articulation of human rights. In the case of memoirs,¹⁴ increasingly regarded as the most effective conduits for human rights awareness because of their testimonial value (Schaffer and Smith 2004), recent Pakistani works have generated the most debate. Biographical works, specifically directed at a particular cause, makes them not only political but often controversial in nature, because there are contesting claims about human rights that emerge from their writing and circulation. Therefore, making a general case for contemporary post-9/11 life writing as a straightforward instrument for the promotion of human rights is not only simplistic, but dangerously optimistic in a period touched by the War on Terror. It is mainly for this reason that memoirs like Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* (2015) and Mukhtaran Mai's *In the Name of Honour* (2007),

despite their wide international acclaim, have garnered a largely negative reaction among the general population in Pakistan.

Such memoirs, mostly written in collaboration with Western journalists, have been criticised by Pakistani fiction writers like Fatima Bhutto (2013) because one is 'never sure whose voice is leading whose', or whether its 'message will be colonised by one power or other for its own insidious agendas' (2013: n.p.). Often read by Western readers in a prescriptive manner dictated by school curriculum outcomes, or end-of-book-discussion questions popular at book clubs, these memoirs influence the shaping of public opinion by limiting knowledge about Pakistan to its most negative aspects. The reader¹⁵ thus becomes unwittingly embroiled in configuring what Lila Abu-Lughod calls a 'new common sense about going to war for women' (2013: 81), which gains its authority by employing a human rights idiom that has been affirmed internationally and made synonymous with freedom of choice and its value. The language of human rights has become so important in defining a 'universal metric of humanity', that drawing upon women's rights discourse brings validation to other public discourses in America and Europe through its strong emotional appeal (Abu-Lughod 2013: 81). Academics have voiced concern about this trend:

Since 9/11 and the ongoing 'war on terror', narratives by and about Muslim women have been increasingly commodified, circulated and uncritically consumed, particularly in the West. As part of this process, a proliferation of books promising to take the Western reader 'behind' or 'beyond' the veil of Muslim society and 'demystify' the lives of Muslim women have been fodder for a fetishistic voyeurism rooted in the Orientalist and Western feminist preoccupation with 'unveiling' Muslim women's bodies and lives. Of particular interest and concern to this special issue [of *Intercultural Education*] is the predominant paradigm framing the production, circulation and reception of these narratives.

(Zine et al. 2007: 272)

A Pakistani woman who ventures to write a memoir, especially if it reflects her experiences as a person facing restrictions on her freedom, or indeed physical or emotional violence, faces a daunting prospect. To project her voice beyond the society that is the primary source of her oppression, she needs to have the language and means to reach an international audience. This need places her in a vulnerable position, one that accentuates her already precarious condition. The problem of such a woman is complex because she 'enters a commercial book industry that on the one hand has begun to treat her texts as a hot commodity, and on the other hand has a limited repertoire for placing her work' (Kahf 2006: 78). In the post-9/11 market, there are only two 'Eurocentrically slanted slots' for Muslim women:

No matter how much a Muslim woman may have something different to say, by the time it goes through the 'machine' of the publishing industry, it is likely to come out the other end packaged as either a 'Victim Story' or 'Escapee Story.'

(Kahf 2006: 78)

To counter the appropriation of these life narratives by the West, several reading strategies have been put forward that suggest more cognisant ways of interpreting memoirs like *I Am Malala* (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Ryder 2015; Fitzpatrick 2017). While the critics generally agree that the publication and circulation of memoirs and biographies by Muslim women are politically driven, they all suggest more nuanced readings that move beyond what fuels global

narratives of power. Both Khoja-Moolji and Fitzpatrick believe that attention should be drawn to other issues like class division, corruption, and power which are revealed through Malala's story, while Phyllis Mentzell Ryder stresses that readers pay attention to Malala's comments about Islamisation as a political movement rather than a religious one. In Ryder's opinion, Malala consistently disrupts the appropriation of her story, even while she uses the Western media to relay her message, and that critics should pay attention to these disruptions (2015: 176).

Although strategies that encourage reading between the lines are likely to be more constructive, unless these memoirs are examined as testimonies as well as commodities that can be marketed in complex ways, their contribution to the universalisation of human rights remains questionable. To this end, it is crucial to highlight the ideological and geopolitical positions of the local versus the global readership in an effort to bridge these divisions. The recent volume by Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg makes important advances in the pedagogical field of human rights literature, suggesting that 'Teachers in human rights and literature classrooms [...] must present human rights through the scope of their own doubled optic: as a discourse and practice of social justice and as a vehicle or alibi for militaristic neo-imperialism' (2015: 5).

In conclusion, because Pakistani anglophone literature has begun to come into its own in the last two decades, there is a need for cogent study of these works in postcolonial and transnational literature courses because of their relevance to the most recent challenges faced by a global human rights vision. Due to their historical and political complexity, these writings can be most productively utilised in a cross-disciplinary classroom if students are encouraged to read them more perceptively from multiple perspectives, and they are taught within a contextual framework that allows contesting interpretations to emerge. Pakistani fiction and memoirs are important in their very ambivalence because they have the potential to identify the challenges faced by a universal vision of human rights in a post-9/11 world; only then can progress be made.

Notes

- 1 Universalism vs cultural relativism is a long-standing debate in human rights discourse. The universalist stance treats human rights as universal and applicable to all human beings equally. Cultural relativism argues that human rights are dependent on culture, and therefore no single definition of moral principles can be applied to all cultures across the globe. The general concern of relativists arises from the view that the principles upon which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is structured stem from Western political history. In response, Jack Donnelly proposes a multidimensional space that accommodates elements from both universality and relativity, which he terms 'relatively universal' (2013: 105). He believes that in the contemporary world relativity operates within the boundaries drawn by universal human rights.
- 2 Friedman writes: 'The individuals with whom the United States and its allies are currently at war defy easy definition, much less understanding' (2011). The 'enemy' in the War on Terror is an elusive entity defined by the United States' *Authorization for Use of Military Force* signed on 14 September 2001 as 'those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons' (Congress 2001).
- 3 A 'state of exception' gives a government, or a sovereign, the power to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good. It is increasingly becoming the norm, turning democratic states into totalitarian states. See Agamben's *State of Exception* (2005) for an examination of 'states of exception' in the post-9/11 period.
- 4 William J. Haynes II, JD, General Counsel of the US Department of Defence, wrote in a 12 December 2002 memo to the Council on Foreign Relations that: "'Enemy combatant" is a general category that subsumes two sub-categories: lawful and unlawful combatants [...] Lawful combatants receive prisoner of war (POW) status and the protections of the Third Geneva Convention. Unlawful combatants do not receive POW status and do not receive the full protections of the Third Geneva Convention.

The President has determined that al Qaida members are unlawful combatants because (among other reasons) they are members of a non-state actor terrorist group that does not receive the protections of the Third Geneva Convention. He additionally determined that the Taliban detainees are unlawful combatants because they do not satisfy the criteria for POW status set out in Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention' (ProCon 2008).

- 5 See Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994), eds. *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics*, 1873–1893.
- 6 See Mallgrave and Ikonomou (1994). Greiner (1909) offers a detailed etymological examination of the difference in meaning between 'sympathy' and 'empathy'. See also Jahoda (2005).
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of the critical views in this section, please see: Sadaf, S. (2018) 'Human Dignity, the War on Terror, and Post-9/11 Literature.' Special issue *Global Responses to War on Terror. European Journal of English Studies*, 22.2.
- 8 Increasingly, the term 'widescreen' is being used to describe trends in recent comic books. For the use of this term regarding novels, see MacConnell (2015).
- 9 In *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction: Beyond 9/11*, Aroosa Kanwal categorises fiction produced by Pakistani writers in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks as 'post-9/11 fiction' and 'retrospective prologues to post-9/11 fiction'. The first category foregrounds the 'repercussions of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the lives of Pakistanis in the diaspora and at home', and writings in the latter category 'look at political decisions and social factors in Pakistan from the late 1970s onwards that have contributed towards Pakistan's image as a terrorist land, particularly after 9/11' (2015: 7). Shamsie's novel falls in the first category, while Ahmad's novel falls close to, if not perfectly within, the second. Ahmad's stories are set in pre-1970s Pakistan, but identify an important connecting thread with a colonial past that still reverberates in tribal lives today.
- 10 Pushtun, Pukhtun, and Pathan refer to the same tribe, whose ancient mother tongue is Pushto (or Pushtu). This ethnic group is native to Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan.
- 11 For a detailed report on the Pashtunwali code as distinct from the Islamic *sharia*, see *The Economist* (2006) and Community Appraisal and Motivation Programme and Saferworld (2012: 7).
- 12 Maleeha Aslam's *Gender-based Explosions* (2012) is perhaps the only work offering a definition of Pakistani masculinity in a contemporary context by analysing qualitative data collected from samples taken from three social strata: low socioeconomic group, socially stigmatised and distressed, and university students and professionals. Chapter 7 of the book, 'Self-image, Social Expectations and Pressures', is about the self-sustained pressures and expectations to which Pakistani men subject themselves in order to uphold their masculinity. This role is increasingly hard to maintain as more women start to work outside the home. For a more detailed examination of Pakistani masculinity in Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, see Sadaf (2014).
- 13 Elizabeth Anker writes that 'Certain human rights best sellers, such as any of Khalid Hussein's novels, provide case studies that disclose how popular fiction both exoticizes the non-Western world and promotes coercive Western intervention within its crises', and are a part of 'the self-indulgent and consumer-based "armchair activism" fashionably marketed at the Western women's book club circuit' (2015: 42).
- 14 Some parts of this chapter are taken from my article, 'I Am Malala' (2017).
- 15 For the most part in this chapter, my use of the term 'readers' does not imply that there is always an 'ideal' (Culler 2006) or 'model' (Eco 1979) reader of human rights narratives in whom 'empathy' is evoked as a necessary response to stories of suffering. I also want to avoid the neat (though sometimes contested) distinction between 'lay' and 'professional' readers (Guillory 2000) of literary texts. I use the term for readers with preconceived notions that affect the reception of the book. Notions of 'location' and 'identity' (see Procter 2009), are important in this case, because they do influence reader response, hence the use of 'Western' and 'Pakistani' readers as a broad (if rather simplistic) distinction.

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