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The Routledge Companion to  
Pakistani Anglophone Writing



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### Competing habitus

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# COMPETING HABITUS

## National expectations, metropolitan market, and Pakistani writing in English (PWE)

*Masood Ashraf Raja*

Now that Pakistani fiction writers are better known in the West, it seems, at least to South Asian literature scholars in metropolitan cultures, that Pakistani writing in English (PWE) has finally ‘arrived’.

The case of any postcolonial author, and that includes Pakistani writers in English, is peculiar: these authors use native raw materials to write works aimed at metropolitan audiences. Such writing is thus strongly overdetermined even before a book is conceived, written, and published. The expectations and interests of the metropolitan reader are, in a way, preinscribed in an act of writing performed by a postcolonial author. These pre-existing determinisms that decide the kinds of work about and by authors of the global periphery being published in the metropolis are wonderfully explained by Aijaz Ahmad:

Analogous procedures of privileging certain kinds of authors, texts, genres and questions seem to be under way now with regard to ‘Third World Literature’ [...] The range of questions that may be asked of the texts which are currently in the process of being canonized within this categorical counter-canon must predominantly refer, then, in one way or another, to representations of colonialism, nationhood, post-coloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions, and so forth.

(1992: 124)

In the same work, Ahmad also goes on to suggest that because of this metropolitan practice of privileging certain specific tropes in Third World writing addressed to metropolitan audiences, certain other works ‘which do not ask those particular questions in any foregrounded manner would then have to be excluded from or pushed to the margins of this emerging counter-canon’ (1992: 124). Ahmad was writing at a time when postcolonial studies had just started to emerge as a viable academic field of study; one could say that we have now reached a stage in Third World cultural production where no demands need to be made of postcolonial authors: those attempting to address metropolitan audiences have already, in most cases, internalised the expectations of metropolitan publishers and readers, and their writings are overdetermined by these internalised concerns. These determinisms play an important role in all acts of cultural representation, and while writers might find it apt and well within their authorial rights to compose such stories, the native reader’s expectations of these texts become

irrelevant. There is, therefore, a tension between national expectations of PWE and its reception beyond the nation. Most Pakistani authors writing in English must traverse this perilous terrain of two binaristic and often contested domains: national expectations and the demands of the metropolitan publishing market.<sup>1</sup> Some general examples of this contested terrain can be seen in the works of leading contemporary Pakistani authors: Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), for instance, comes laden with all the expected tropes – the military dictator, supine politicians, and the like. Similarly, of all the characters to choose from in the city of Lahore, Mohsin Hamid's Changez, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), offers yet another simplistic take on the transcultural aspirations of a Pakistani male subject: if America fails you, your only option is to become a 'reluctant' fundamentalist. In Daniyal Mueenuddin's highly acclaimed short story collection, *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* (2009), we encounter feudal Pakistan with all its ills and possibilities. Though Mueenuddin's stories do complicate the existential choices within the power dynamics of rural Pakistan, the major metropolitan tropes of oppressive patriarchs, feudal men, victimised women, and struggling peasants still seem to be centre stage. Of course, not all PWE relies on these general tropes, but in one way or another these metropolitan-preferred tropes do find their way into most, if not all, works of PWE.

This chapter builds on my previous work on this subject and attempts to articulate a mode of reading and writing about PWE with an understanding of both these poles of representation and reception within the nation and abroad.<sup>2</sup> In other words, one could argue that while Pakistani writers use Pakistani raw materials to compose their fiction, they inhabit a peculiar transnational habitus and their Pakistani readers, on the other hand, read the same works with the predetermined expectations of their own particular habitus. This leads one to account for the most important conundrum of PWE: what constitutes these two competing habitus and what is at stake if we do not account for the authorial and reader expectations governed and constructed by these two overlapping but distinct habitus? To explain my point better, I will use the concept of habitus as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu in reading the works of Pakistani writers published in the special issue of *Granta* on Pakistan edited by John Freeman (2010), with a specific focus on one story. First, my discussion of habitus, which Bourdieu defines as:

both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted.

(1984: 170)

To unpack this, a habitus both produces the system of judgements (of taste and art etc.) and provides a classification, or hierarchy, of these judgements. For example, the distinction between high and low art would, in this sense, be constituted by the habitus and then explained and formulated within the same logic of the habitus. And, as Bourdieu suggests, it is within the gap between these two corresponding functions of the habitus that one can learn the governing system of appraisal within a specific lifestyle. This aspect of the habitus is important to bear in mind while dealing with PWE and its reception within and without Pakistan.

Obviously, then, a question arises: where does the habitus itself come from? Bourdieu's explanation of the term suggests that habitus is, in a way, produced by the living conditions of a certain time and space, but acknowledging the existence of a habitus as a productive and evaluative force enables one to understand the given positions and tastes of individuals within a life

field. In a schematic diagram provided in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu suggests that 'Objectively classifiable conditions of existence create a habitus, which in turn generates systems of schemes generating classifiable practices and works and taste. These classifiable practices and works then constitute a lifestyle' (1984: 171).<sup>3</sup>

But, in essence, the whole movement is, to me, circular, though ascribing our cultural practices and values to a habitus makes it easier to understand differences in tastes as well as in the reception and evaluation of various works. Bourdieu further argues that the 'habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions', and if we agree with this premise then it is easier to agree with Bourdieu when he suggests that 'different conditions of existence produce different habitus' (1984: 170), and these differences in habitus end up affecting our judgements and evaluations of works of art.

With this cursory discussion of habitus, I would like to suggest that PWE and its critique within Pakistan can be better understood by taking a deeper look at the habitus that determines writing and that which structures the expectations and aspirations of Pakistani readers critical of PWE.

Not only are most Pakistani authors writing in English determined by a particular habitus – I call it the 'cosmopolitan habitus' – they also unconsciously forestall and incorporate the expectations of the metropolitan market within their writing. Thus, while they may physically inhabit their social and class habitus within Pakistan, their imaginative habitus, which sometimes overdetermines their writing, is already placed in an elsewhere, an elsewhere that comes across as natural but is determined by the metropolitan publishing industry and its financial and artistic imperatives. These writers, I suggest, are not actively seeking to write in a certain way: instead they write from within the logic of this habitus, and their actions, therefore, must appear to them natural and uncontrived.

Similarly, Pakistani readers who find these representations unfair, anti-Pakistani, or unpatriotic also bring to bear upon these texts the value judgements and critical expectations pertinent to their particular habitus which, for want of a better word, I will call the 'nationalistic habitus'. Note that using 'habitus' instead of 'class' already broadens the two constituencies of readers and writers, as sometimes readers from drastically different classes share the same value judgements about PWE. For example, in my conversations with highly educated Pakistani students, who would normally have aesthetic 'tastes' inspired and shaped by a Westernised canon, often find the works of Pakistani authors deeply troubling as, in their opinion, they tend to represent Pakistan very negatively. Now, class alone cannot explain these views, for the same people who pose this problem are also from the so-called Westernised upper middle class. Only a deeper understanding of habitus can render their views somewhat understandable. My ensuing discussion, however, is not based on any empirical research into the reading habits of Pakistani scholars and students. In fact, the structuring of my entire argument is based on these two large philosophical abstractions: the nationalistic and the cosmopolitan habitus.

Let me first explain the nationalistic habitus. A majority of Pakistanis do not or cannot read anglophone fiction. It would be safe to suggest that only the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie educated in what is termed the 'English medium' system of education can read PWE. Traditionally, as has been asserted by so many postcolonial scholars, when colonised natives acquired the language of their colonial masters, they also acquired and internalised their aesthetics and often their politics. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o expresses this impact of colonial education as follows:

In my view language was the most important vehicle through which the power [of the colonizers] held the soul [of the colonized] prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation.

(1986: 9)

Thiong'o further illustrates this argument by pointing to his own experience as a colonial child in a colonial school, where the children were forced to speak in English and any act of speaking in the local 'vernacular' was derided and often punished (1986: 11–12). Thus, while colonial children learned British or French language and literature, they also internalised certain aspects of this experience as natural: that the colonial languages were superior, and thus the cultures of those languages were also somehow superior to native cultures. These children also internalised a certain distrust and disdain for their own primary cultures. One could say that the colonial educational system was acting as a 'habitus-shifting' mechanism, with which it achieved what Lord Macaulay had hoped for: the creation of human subjects who are 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' (2005: 130). The Pakistani bourgeois elite are, in my opinion, in so many ways still part of this colonial legacy, at least when it comes to their fascination with English literature and language, and their cultural and literary tastes can be attributed to this particular habitus and its attendant tastes and aesthetics. This 'training' of cosmopolitan methods of education and reading habits can be surmised from the English department curricula of most Pakistani universities, which still privilege the traditional English canon.

Thus, one would imagine that this particular class of Pakistanis, being so deeply immersed in the so-called Western way of things, would not be so troubled by PWE. One would usually assign negative views of PWE to more atavistic and Urdu-speaking citizens of Pakistan. But in my discussions about PWE with Pakistani students and scholars, most of the people from this particular social class tended to express deeply critical views of PWE texts and authors. This can only be explained in terms of their nationalistic habitus and not simply in terms of class. Let us dwell a little on the particulars of the nationalistic habitus. What could it possibly mean and what kind of cognitive and meaning-making structuring does it perform?

The nationalistic habitus works as both a structure and a structuring mechanism; it constructs not only the expectations of its inhabitants about the nature of their national identity, but also how that national identity is represented and perceived elsewhere in the world. In this structuring, national anxieties become part of Pakistanis' collective view of themselves as Pakistanis. Thus, those enmeshed in this particular habitus do not experience PWE simply as literary representations, they also see it from the point of view of its reception in the world and in terms of the kinds of national stereotypes which such representations normalise for metropolitan audiences. It is no secret that within metropolitan circles a view of Pakistan as a 'dark place' or as a place riven with despotic patriarchy, terrorism, and interethnic conflicts already exists. In fact, this view of Pakistan had already been normalised by major postcolonial authors. Salman Rushdie, for example, suggests that he couldn't have written *Shame*, his novel about Pakistan, in the same style as *Midnight's Children*, for 'that kind of exuberant, affectionate book about Pakistan [...] would be a false book' (Haffenden 2000: 54). So, it seems that there is no shortage of negative stereotypes of Pakistan, either in Europe or the rest of the North Atlantic world.

Against this pre-existing literary stereotyping of Pakistan, the nationalistic habitus forces the reader not just to dwell on the text, but to ponder more over what the text does. What does it normalise? Any work of fiction produced by PWE thus becomes suspect, as it either represents Pakistan in congruence with its current stereotypes or simply represents Pakistan in overly damaging terms. Needless to say, this way of receiving PWE is deeply connected to issues of recognition, but also to issues of national anxiety as a nation and as a people within the world. This reaction, however, does have a silver lining: readers, even though sceptical of the representation itself, in challenging the representations unconsciously concede the importance and significance of literary representation, for if they did not recognise the importance of PWE, they would not assign it the power of representation that they find troubling.

The question of authenticity is also often posed: I have had to answer questions about these anxieties over 'authentic' representations of Pakistan in many a public talk in Pakistan. For my interlocutors, authors not living permanently in Pakistan somehow lack the capacity or, in some cases, do not have the right to write about Pakistan. This approach confuses the act of 'living' with the act of 'dwelling'. And it presupposes that if one were to live in Pakistan, one would be more attuned to the nuances of Pakistani culture, which is partially true. But even those living in Pakistan cannot always write experientially, for those living in Islamabad probably have absolutely no idea about the lives of people in Gilgit-Baltistan or Kashmir. In all such representations, even when writers residing in Pakistan travel to areas they might want to represent, writing would still involve an act of imagination; and besides the lived experience, they would also have to learn about these Pakistani subcultures through textual research. Authenticity, on the other hand, is also a myth, for if our views of culture are determined by our lived experience, then the particular habitus that we occupy sometimes overdetermines our own views of the real and material world.<sup>4</sup>

Let us now move on to what I have termed the 'cosmopolitan habitus' which, in my view, sometimes overdetermines the kind of literary works that are offered to the world by PWE. I am drawing on the work of Bruce Robbin who, besides a thorough discussion of the concept of cosmopolitanism/cosmopolitics, gives us a succinct understanding of it as a world view, according to which 'we value the move away from ethnocentrism' (1998: 260; emphasis original). Pakistanis writing in English are, in so many ways, determined by the structuring imperatives of the cosmopolitan habitus. Thus, while their place of writing and the setting of their works happen to be Pakistan, the stories they tell come across as meant only for a transnational, cosmopolitan audience. This emphasis on the audience also forces them to choose topics that should, in one way or another, interest their metropolitan reading audiences. Hence, it is no surprise that one finds in PWE the very tropes that Ahmad lists in his critique of postcolonial and, in this case, cosmopolitan writing. Writers, of course, have an absolute right to represent what they deem important, and critiques of national cultures and politics are an established genre within postcolonial studies. Thiong'o, for example, provides a convincing reason for representing the national ills to a larger audience in the opening pages of his novel *Devil on the Cross* (1982). The novel uses the figure of a *gīcaandī* player as the narrator and a framing device, which forestalls any critique of exposing national ills to a global audience; he proffers the following reason for telling the story:

Certain people in Ilmorog, our Ilmorog, told me that this story was too disgraceful, too shameful, that it should be concealed in the depths of everlasting darkness.

There were others who claimed that it was a matter for tears and sorrow, that it should be suppressed so that we should not shed tears a second time.

I asked them: How can we cover up pits in our courtyard with leaves or grass, saying to ourselves that because our eyes cannot now see the holes, our children can prance around the yard as they like?

Happy is the man who is able to discern the pitfalls in his path, for he can avoid them.  
(1982: 1)

In the same vein, one could argue that if Pakistani authors write about the ills of their national or regional cultures, it is part of their job as socially engaged artists and writers. But, sadly, these ills are also stereotypical views of Pakistan upon which depend global perceptions of Pakistan. Furthermore, my Pakistani critics would argue, the Urdu novel and other generic forms are already offering, and have always offered, potent critiques of all forms of oppression

and injustice within Pakistan. But when this act of critique is performed in Urdu, only the immediate Urdu-reading audience is aware of it, which is precisely the audience that can read a text within its specific context without generalising it into a whole and uncomplicated view of Pakistani culture. Thus, by writing in English, some authors take the risk, even when they are genuinely challenging national ills and highlighting the complicity of Western nation states in what goes on in the global periphery, of either being misread or blamed for being in service to metropolitan, cosmopolitan audiences. Hence, not all PWE is somehow complicit in the project of empire, and even a cursory look at the huge variety of PWE is enough to disprove any simplistic assumptions. It is, however, quite obvious that when a work does rely heavily on the expected tropes and stereotypes of Pakistan, it is likely to further concretise pre-existing perceptions of Pakistan and Pakistanis stereotypes, as such works come across as more authentic because they are written by so-called 'authentic' cultural informants.

With these two competing habitus at work, it is easier to understand the conflictual nature of PWE: the writer's right to represent and the reader's right to object to such representations. The most striking example of this 'choice' to represent Pakistan as if nothing other than bad things are happening in Pakistan, is evident in the special issue of *Granta* published in 2010.

Let us think about it: an esteemed magazine dedicated to the creative arts offers selected authors from Pakistan a chance to offer some 'representative' Pakistani writing for a global audience. There is no need to unconsciously write overly determined narratives to appease that global audience. The selected authors, it seems, must have had the freedom to write about Pakistan any way they liked: they could have resented Pakistan as a place where so many other things, some life-affirming things, were also happening besides the daily bombings, beheadings, and terrorist attacks. What the authors chose to represent on a global stage, therefore, is not just fiction and art, but art that has the power to concretise or complicate views about Pakistan. In this case, sadly, most of the stories included in the collection ended up supporting the very stereotypes about Pakistan that need to be challenged and disrupted. Here is a rough catalogue.

The collection includes a story of enduring love framed around a ritualistic, transgenerational gang rape (this is the lead story that I discuss below in detail); another about Kashmir and its 'Forever War'; an essay by Intizar Hussain, one of the great Urdu novelists, about the incremental erosion of Pakistani civic society; and yet another story by Hamid, entitled 'A Beheading'. The general picture of Pakistan that emerges through a reading of the collection is that of a nation on the brink, with degrading civic norms and little hope for the future. This gathering of bleak fictional and non-fictional 'representative' texts was obvious to pretty much all the early reviewers of the collection.

In a *New York Times* review entitled 'Midnight's Other Children', Isaac Chotiner finds the collection lacking 'the whimsy that Americans simplistically identify with India', and describes 'Granta's Pakistan' as 'a country of jihadists, anti-Americanism and increasingly misogynistic and brutal forms of Islam'. Chotiner nevertheless acknowledges that 'for all the violence and brutality, the reader does get glimpses of a less visible Pakistan' (2010: n.p.), by which, I guess, he means a Pakistan of natural beauty and some cultural value. In another review in *The Wall Street Journal*, entitled 'Tales of Love and Gore', Mira Sethi opines that 'Violence – physical, emotional, state-inflicted – preoccupies nearly every writer here' (2010: n.p.).

Even the editorial description on the collection's Amazon listing is instructive of the kind of expectations created in its reading audience:

Brought into nationhood under the auspices of a single religion, but wracked with deep separatist fissures and the destabilizing forces of ongoing conflicts in Iran,

Afghanistan and Kashmir, Pakistan is one of the most dynamic places in the world today. It is also at the forefront of a literary renaissance.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the metafictional aspects of the collection already suggest that, despite the problems that Pakistan faces, the ability of its writers to produce fiction is somehow, in itself, a redeeming quality, for it proves the exceptionality of the authors themselves. One could also argue that this collection offers itself as a testament to the creative arts and their possibilities, even under adverse conditions. One could also read it as a redeeming narrative of the resilience of Pakistan, which manages to produce world-class authors even under such harsh problems both ordinary and current. What is not clear, of course, is whether Pakistan can be represented without these attendant modifiers. But if one views the readers' comments in the same Amazon entry, one can guess that most people read the collection as an accomplishment in itself from a country that might be courting disaster but can still produce art. One online reviewer, for example, offers the following view:

Wonderful writing gives a glimpse into this complex and often misrepresented country. The rawness of many writings reflects the turmoil this country has been in and the suffering its inhabitants go through every single day of their lives. It is a description of a country of contradictions, loaded with nukes, insane religious fanatics, non-existent education or infrastructure and the resilience of its people who continue to produce world-class writers and artists!<sup>6</sup>

It seems that the actions of writers become larger than a nation of over one hundred and seventy-five million people: they become the ultimate redeeming quality of an entire nation. Of course, nowhere in such descriptions can one see that, despite these problems, Pakistanis live rich lives, love and care for each other, and maintain normal day-to-day relations.

While I completely understand that Pakistanis writing in English have the absolute right to represent Pakistan as they see fit, I am, as a teacher of these texts within a metropolitan public university, more concerned with what these texts do. How do they come across to our students? Most American students are required to take at least two world literature courses; these courses are often not taught by specialists, but rather by either part-time adjunct professors or graduate students. While I acknowledge that most of these teachers are hardworking, enthusiast teachers, not many of them are trained to teach beyond the text. Thus, what PWE authors write has the potential to become the ultimate window into Pakistani culture for many American students. The chances are that these students will encounter only one or two stories about Pakistan, and what their reading construes from these stories will to some extent inform their views about the country. While no one story or work of art can 'carry the burden of an entire culture',<sup>7</sup> most of the stories included in the *Granta* collection are likely to take on a life larger than mere works of fiction. In this sense, then, I understand the concerns of those Pakistani readers who are sceptical of PWE, for the reason that instead of informing the world about the complex and rich realities of Pakistani lives, some of these writers end up offering rather more plausible stereotypes of Pakistani culture to an already hostile audience of global readers.

The question that Pakistani critics of PWE should be asking is not whether these works are authentic, for authenticity itself is socially constructed, but rather, to misquote Stanley Fish, 'what do these texts do?' (1980).<sup>8</sup> I hope this is also the question that PWE authors ask of themselves whenever they proffer their works to their global audiences. Only this complex way of looking at their own creativity would enable these writers to foresee the kinds of stereotypes that their works mobilise and then crystallise in the minds of their metropolitan readers.



To further elaborate my point, I will discuss the lead story, 'Leila in the Wilderness' by Nadeem Aslam, taking a two-pronged approach. First, I will discuss the conceptual inconsistencies within the story, which indicate that even the author fails to grasp certain subtleties of his own social culture, and in turn allow him to proffer certain unacknowledged stereotypes, stereotypes that metropolitan readers would immediately accept as 'truths' without having either the tools or the knowledge to dwell on the conceptual inconsistencies of the statements or utterances of several characters.<sup>9</sup> My point here is not to prove that the author has somehow not represented the truth, for truth itself is also contextual and socially and ideologically constructed, but that some of the assertions in the story are incongruous with the particular religious ideology assigned to the characters. Such inconsistencies, I suggest, would not have been possible within an Urdu story, as the reader would have immediately grasped them and pointed them out, but in a story written in English, proffered to a Western audience, the same inconsistencies add an additional layer of intrigue to the characters.

Secondly, I will read and discuss the story in terms of its reception within the metropolis and focus primarily on the kind of perceptions of Pakistan that the story instils or reinforces. By far, the setting of the story is the most perplexing aspect and also prone to making the story into an ideal exoticised and orientalist representation of Pakistan: since neither a specific place nor a specific time is indicated, the story places its characters, and by extension Pakistan, into a timeless and unchanging place where modernity has had no impact on day-to-day life. Of course, this view of the orient, and the rest of the Muslim world, is, à la Edward Said, an established trope in orientalist writing, but now that a so-called cultural insider is representing his own culture in the same vein, without any irony or playful parody, this view of Pakistan and its 'unchanging' culture comes across as authentic and valid. For the metropolitan reader, then, this story is likely to become unmoored from its spatial and temporal context and thus serve as an allegory of Pakistani culture in its entirety, whether or not such was the intention of the author.

Similarly, the simple plot includes an oppressive feudal lord married to a young woman who cannot produce male children and is thus treated brutally. Instead of offering an incisive critique of a specific locus or class of Pakistani culture, the story comes across as an allegory of the entire patriarchal culture of Pakistan, and that is how it is likely to be read by metropolitan readers. The conceptual inconsistencies also end up distorting or misinforming the reader about the nature of religious practices in Pakistan. For example, at one point, while talking about the 'miraculous mosque', the mother, Razia, suggests that Timur should 'find a way to get the Saudi Arabians involved', for they, according to her, are a 'blessed race' (Freeman 2010: 18) and thus could lend the kind of support that Timur needs to sustain the miraculous mosque. However, in the real-life cultural divide of Brelvi and Wahabi sects, a Brelvi would never suggest seeking the support of the Saudis, as the Brelvi believe in the intercession of saints and their miracles and the Saudis are opposed to any such worship of miracles or shrines. While this incongruent insertion within the text may seem pertinent and display how Pakistani people view the Saudis, it also ends up sanctifying an erroneous belief about the nature of Saudi involvement in Pakistan.

Similarly, at one point, while describing the people flocking to the miraculous mosque, we find the 'gentle mendicants as well as *jihadists* who fantasized about nothing but what they'd do to the American president if ever they got hold of him' (2010: 22). This, of course, is a stylistically convenient but absolutely misleading and ill-informed assertion, for *jihadi* groups are known for their hostility to this form of mystical Islam, and Sufi shrines often become their targets. So, scattering these 'gems' throughout the narrative might serve some aesthetic purpose, and they are flagged up by neither critics nor reviewers because the story is primarily proffered

to and written for a Western audience, most of whom will not pick up on these subtle slippages and inconsistencies.

So, what we learn is that Timur had just suddenly ‘picked’ Leila to marry, just as she was fleeing her would-be rapists. And this brings me to an entirely other dimension of the problematic back story that the author creates about Leila and her mother’s past.

In my opinion as a scholar working at a metropolitan university and engaged in teaching literary texts from the global periphery, there are several problems with the back story about Leila’s life up to the moment she is randomly picked by Timur, all of them connected to the question of reception and perceptions of Pakistani culture among my metropolitan students and general readers of the story.

What we learn is that Leila’s father has died in debt, and as a consequence: ‘The [village] council of the wise and the powerful [...] decided that, to make up for the loss, the men of the moneylender’s family could possess the debtor’s widow one hundred times’ (2010: 28). To be clear, what we are being told, in a normative, non-alarming and matter-of-fact way, is that the men from the moneylender’s family have been granted the right to rape the widow – Leila’s mother – one hundred times as payment of the debt owed by her husband. This rationale is offered nonchalantly in the most benign statement possible within the story. The tone does not offer this as an aberrant or abhorrent act, but rather an everyday occurrence within this generalised picture of rural Pakistan. What are we to make of this?

How would this passage come across to an unwary or ill-informed reader? In other words, what does this text do to the reader’s perception of Pakistani culture? It offers, in one simple statement, a generalised Pakistan as the story has no specific location, a place where powerful men can sanction the mass rape of a woman without any legal or moral consequences, and the men so permitted would then openly descend on the woman to exact their ‘due’ share of her body. Here is how this act of potential gang rape is described:

The seven boats that converged on her bore a total of thirty men, silhouetted in the fine grained vapour. Some of them leaped over the water like panthers even before the boats connected. She fought them, surrounded, numbed by shock but with her eyes screaming the outrage of her solitude. The only escape was upwards and that was what she had chosen, willing the wings into existence upon her body, the emptiness of mist closing behind her as she rose.

(2010: 28–29)

Let us unpack this carefully. A woman’s husband has just died in debt in an unknown, possibly rural, location in Pakistan. The village elders have given their verdict that the moneylenders can claim payment of their ‘debt’ through an act of collective rape against the widow. The widow, being sexually assaulted by thirty men, has no recourse to any worldly systems of justice or cultural norms and her only escape is to somehow ‘magic’ herself out of this world. The magic part of the story is quite understandable, as it is an acceptable trope in the specific genre of magical realism, but I find the realistic part of the text quite far-fetched: a whole village council ordering the rape of a widow. Have there been instances of such acts of collective rape in Pakistan recently? Yes, in very remote areas and always as a cultural transgression and an aberration, never necessarily as a norm. The case of Mukhtaran Mai is one example of such a brutal transgressive act (see e.g. Masood 2017). But within the story, this transgressive act of sexual violence is offered as an accepted and normalised practice, and thus to any unaware reader, Pakistan becomes a place where such things happen not as extraordinary acts of violence but as a normative practice of tribal justice. Furthermore, as the story develops, we learn that since

the mother could not pay the debt and ‘magically’ escaped the verdict, the same men are given another option: ‘The council of the wise and powerful decided the moneylenders must wait for Leila to grow up to be compensated – with the interest on the original debt accumulating till then’ (2010: 29). Thus, we learn that since the mother escaped this raw justice magically, the daughter now must ‘legally’ become the gang rape victim-in-waiting. And this, to any reader interested in Pakistan, is supposed to be the everyday ultimate reality of the state of women’s rights in Pakistan: it certainly becomes so within the logic of the story. Thus, it is while escaping her would-be rapists that Leila is ‘seen by Timur’ and, we are told, ‘they were married within ten days’ (2010: 29).

So, Leila’s entire life, until we meet her at the beginning of the story, is based on choices that have already been made for her by powerful men in her culture, which is not far from the truth, but the brutality of the elders, as well as that of her husband and mother-in-law, also serves to sanctify one important stereotype of Pakistani patriarchal society generally believed in the West, and even though a Pakistani is writing the story, the story still serves the purpose of normalising Western views of Pakistani culture. Of course, the author has the right to represent what he or she deems appropriate and important, but Pakistani writers in English, if they care about politics of representation and reception, cannot hide behind the absolute right to represent; they must also bear in mind the cultural and political consequences of their acts of representation, especially since their works are proffered to metropolitan reading audiences.

So, within the cosmopolitan habitus, all these authorial choices make perfect sense: on the one hand, a writer has the right to represent all aspects of his or her culture and he or she must guard this freedom at all costs; on the other, though, the nationalistic habitus structures not only national expectations about representation but also anxieties about perceptions of the nation elsewhere in the world. To those who can read them from a nationalistic habitus, the stories come across as a sort of cultural violation, as they present to Western audiences what is already considered the stereotypical view of Pakistan. Thus, to such Pakistani readers, PWE becomes yet another instrument in the hands of the metropolitan culture and publishing industry to bash Pakistan, but now with the added advantage of using native voices to do so.

Similarly, what is done to Leila, under both religious and cultural registers, while giving one a convincing picture of her victimhood, also normalises certain other views of Pakistani culture. I am not suggesting that any critiques of the ills of the patriarchy are sacrosanct, but rather that by offering such brutal treatment of a female protagonist without contextualising it within a specific spatial and temporal setting, the representation takes on the aura of ‘authentic’ universality. The reader, therefore, will read it not just as an aberrant situation of violent and oppressive males against powerless women, but rather as an allegory of Pakistani culture where the man stands for all men and the woman stands for all women. Thus, there is no room in the story to even imagine a Pakistani life that is not brutal and in which women are not victimised by powerful men. The simple question one must ask is whether there is a possibility of kindness, love, and compassion within Pakistani culture? Such possibilities are never really explored, and since the story has no viable physical or temporal habitus, it becomes an all-encompassing representation of Pakistan; and thus, while the reader might marvel at the mastery of the writing style, the represented space, because of its lack of specificity, it is likely to be generalised to the whole of Pakistan.

So, as a concluding thought, I would like to suggest that there is a need in Pakistan to develop the kinds of reading and writing practices where those within the nationalist habitus acknowledge the rights of those within the metropolitan habitus. Only this kind of nuanced understanding of the act of writing and representation would enable the reader to read PWE more sympathetically and further equip writers to write with a better understanding of their

own responsibility as writers and of the consequences of their authorial works for general perceptions of Pakistan in the world.

Within the global arena of cultural representation there are no unmotivated texts or transparent representations; all acts of representation come with cultural and political baggage and are read and consumed within the larger context of socially produced knowledge about broader and specific cultures. Writers, of course, have the absolute right to write what they deem important and there is always a need for critique of the ills of the nation, a job that most PWE addresses quite well. But within this realm of cultural exchange, Pakistani writers of English must also bear in mind that the stories they tell are not just stories but also windows into their primary culture, and these windows cannot just be opened onto the very worst vistas of that primary culture, they must also provide a wider and deeper look at what is loveable and salutary about that culture.

### Notes

- 1 This binaristic division of reception of PWE is completely arbitrary and should not be taken as a fixed and immutable position. As far as the national expectation is concerned, my views here are based in the public and private conversations that I have had with several Pakistani scholars and students of literature about the issues of representation of 'their' nation to a global audience.
- 2 I have argued in a previous article that both Pakistani writers and readers need to be aware of more nuanced modes of writing and reading in order to experience PWE in a fair and balanced way. For more details, please see Raja (2014).
- 3 Here I am rendering elements of the schematic diagram in simple paragraph form. For details of the entire diagram, please consult Bourdieu (1984).
- 4 This way of perceiving the real through ideology is quite similar to Althusser's explanation of ideology and 'transposition' of the real through ideology. I think the major difference here is that, for Bourdieu, this transposition is larger than individual acts of agency. Thus, a habitus is a structure but also a structuring structure which can, in my opinion, subsume individual acts of agency and somewhat overdetermine them.
- 5 *Granta* 112: *Pakistan*. <[www.amazon.com/Granta-112-Pakistan-Magazine-Writing/dp/1905881215/ref=sr\\_1\\_fkmr0\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1498931061&sr=8-1-fkmr0&keywords=granta%3A+pakistan+is+sue](http://www.amazon.com/Granta-112-Pakistan-Magazine-Writing/dp/1905881215/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1498931061&sr=8-1-fkmr0&keywords=granta%3A+pakistan+is+sue)> [1 July 2017].
- 6 Shakil's review, 'Pakistani writing (English) at its best'. 7 February 2012. [www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2LYAL4DT7RWYS/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_d\\_rvw\\_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1905881215](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2LYAL4DT7RWYS/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1905881215) [4 July 2017].
- 7 Kobena Mercer discusses the question of the burden of representation with reference to the first ever Black Arts Festival organised in England. In his study, it becomes obvious that the diasporic population somehow expected the organisers to carry the burden of the entire African cultural tradition, and so people faulted them for not thoroughly representing Africa. In Mercer's view, this expectation is peculiar to those groups who have traditionally been on the margins of a dominant culture. For further details on the concept of the burden of representation, see Mercer (2016).
- 8 This is a slightly rephrased version of the very question that Stanley Fish poses in his most famous work, 'Interpreting the Variorum' (1980), about reader response criticism and the role of readers and interpretive communities in construing the meanings of a work.
- 9 In a 2013 survey conducted among Americans by the Pew Research Center, only about 10 per cent trusted Pakistan. See Wike (2013).

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