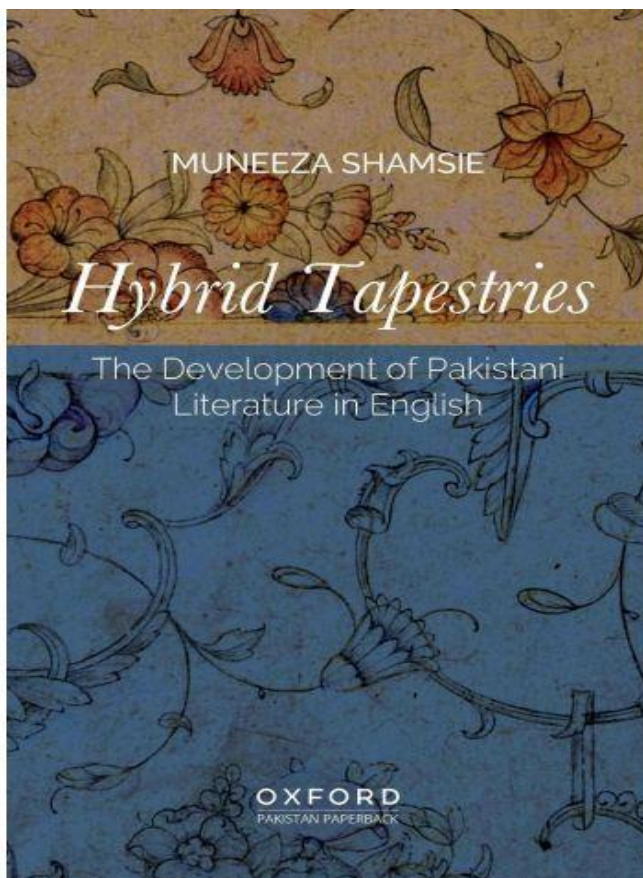


Muneeza Shamsie, *Hybrid Tapestries: The Development of Pakistani Literature in English*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2024. 648 pp. First published in hardback, 2017.



Pakistan has a thriving Anglophone literary tradition that goes back to the early twentieth century. In *Hybrid Tapestries: The Development of Pakistani Literature in English*, Muneeza Shamsie gives a detailed account of its development in two parts. The first part considers the senior writers in the “Pioneering Writers” while the second part, “Developing Genres,” covers a growing body of contemporary writing encompassing writers based in Pakistan as well as Pakistani transnational/diasporic writers in three continents. Pakistan emerges as a major force in Anglophone South Asian, postcolonial, and world literatures.

Muneeza Shamsie is a veteran literary critic who has devoted a lifetime of loving attention to the growing body of Pakistani writing in English. She has for some years now been meticulously monitoring fresh additions to the tradition

in her annual bibliographical essays in *Literature, Critique, and Empire Today* (formerly, the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* [JCL]). She has also edited four anthologies covering it; one of these, *Dragonflies in the Sun*, is a well-thumbed volume in my library. The present volume distills the author's critical appreciation of the entire Pakistani Anglophone corpus, from pioneers like Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy (1890–1965) and Ahmed Ali (1910–94) to the numerous contemporary writers who tend more often than not to be transnational, scattered over three continents.

The critical industry dealing with Pakistani Anglophone writing too has been quite prolific. Tariq Rahman's *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1991) was a pioneering study. In recent years, several significant volumes of criticism have appeared from Routledge, signaling growing international interest in the subject: *The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing* (2019), edited by Aroosa Kanwal and Saiyma Aslam, and including Muneeza Shamsie's perceptive and even handed treatment of a sensitive subject, "1971: Reassessing a Forgotten National Narrative;" *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State* (2013) edited by Cara N. Cilano; and *Contemporary Pakistani Speculative Fiction and the Global Imaginary: Democratizing Human Futures* (2023), edited by Shazia Sadaf and Aroosa Kanwal. Muneeza Shamsie's *Hybrid Tapestries*, at a whopping 614 pages of jargon-free literary historical and critical discussion stands out as a remarkable single-author production.

Muneeza's twenty-page Introduction is a charmingly written, historically informed, and critically astute delineation of the background to Pakistani English writing, a flourishing century plus-old tradition that "confirms the universal truth: all good literature is trans-geographical." This, in my opinion, is a sound bite we need to take to heart. Muneeza surprises me, and other readers too, I'm sure, with the factoid that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records "the pilgrimage of two British monks in 883 CE to the shrine of the apostles St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew in India."

South Asian writing in English of course didn't emerge until nearly a millennium later, with Deen Mahomet's *Travels* (1784) and Derozio's *Poems* (1828) pioneering, respectively, Indian English prose and poetry. In the two countries on the subcontinent's periphery, Anglophone writing began in the early twentieth century: among East Bengalis with Begum Rokeya's "Sultana's Dream" (1905), and in Pakistan with Atiya Fyzee-Rahamin's (aka Atiya Begum) *The Music of India* (1914).

I am inclined to take issue with the two-part structure of Muneeza's study. Part I, titled "Pioneering Writers," contains separate sections on thirteen writers. From a literary historical perspective it should have been split into two

segments. The first seven writers deserve the “Pioneering” label since they reached maturity before the partition of 1947: the travel writer and musicologist Atiya Fyzee-Rahamin (1877-1967), her playwright-artist husband Samuel Fyzee-Rahamin (1880-1964), the poet-art critic-translator Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy (1890-1965), the novelist-poet-translator Ahmed Ali (1910-1994), the diplomat and writer Mumtaz Shahnawaz (1912-1948), the literary critic and memoirist Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah (1915-2000), and the short story writer Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah (1921-2000).

The remaining six are well-known contemporaries who naturally form a distinct cluster: the poet-novelist Zulfikar Ghose (1935-2022), the poet Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998), the political activist, playwright, and novelist Tariq Ali (b. 1943), the novelist Bapsi Sidhwa (1938-2024), the memoirist and literary theorist Sara Suleri (1953-2022), and the playwright-screenwriter-novelist Hanif Kureishi (b. 1954).

Curiously, Salman Rushdie is conspicuously sidelined. Not only is he denied a chapter dedicated to his work; his name is missing from the index; and though there are a few scattered references to *Midnight's Children*, his mordant satire on Pakistan under military rule, *Shame*, is ignored, as are his other works. Is it self-censorship in order to avoid dealing with the controversies around this author? Or does it follow from Rushdie's own self-definition as an Indian, Brit, and American. In either case, an apology or justificatory passage in the introduction would have been apropos.

Part II, aptly titled “Developing Genres,” comprises five chapters devoted to specific genres: poetry, the novel, the short story, drama, and literary non-fiction. I must declare my preference for this part of the book over the previous one. This is because Muneeza is writing here about literary trends of her own time; she is like an embedded reporter commenting on literature as it unfolds. The style is more immediate, brisk, pithy, gliding from scene to scene, focusing on Pakistani-origin writers at home, in North America, and in the UK. We are plunged into the era of transnationality and globalisation, an era whose end we cannot yet foresee.

Many of the writers discussed by Muneeza, like Muneeza herself, are friends of mine or friendly acquaintances; I regard them as fellow members of the broader South Asian Anglophone literary community. Some are sadly departed and occupy a cozy corner in memory: the novelist Bapsi Sidhwa, and the poets Taufiq Rafat, Kaleem Omar, Daud Kamal, Jocelyn Ortt-Saeed, and Hima Raza who was introduced to me in London by Amina Yaqin (currently with the University of Exeter) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) shortly before her untimely death at age 27 in a car crash in 2003. Others

of my acquaintance, happily thriving creatively include poets Alamgir Hashmi, Adrian Husain, the Pakistani-Brit Imtiaz Dharker, and the Pakistani-Brit fiction writers Aamer Hussein and Rukhsana Ahmad. Of this list Kaleem Omar is the only one without a book to his name, even though he was a powerful and prolific poet. I don't know why he didn't collect his work but if he hadn't imposed an interdiction his literary executor ought to redress the lack.

I haven't made a count but a large number of the writers covered in this book possess hyphenated identities, an inescapable outcome of Pakistan's sociological configuration on the one hand and globalization on the other. Questions will no doubt be raised regarding their relationship with Pakistan's broader literary culture in which the vernaculars enjoy greater intimacy with the literate and, thanks to oral transmission, even illiterate masses. It's an undeniable fact that Anglophone writing in Pakistan (and even more in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) is produced by a (trans)national elite and perhaps enjoys better reception abroad. Among South Asian countries, India is the only one where English writing has a bigger share of the market than books in regional languages. My purpose in presenting these facts is simply to sketch a broad map of Anglophone South Asian writing.

A number of the younger novelists are justly celebrated internationally, among them Mohsin Hamid, Uzma Aslam Khan, the satirist Mohammed Hanif, and Muneeza's Orange Prize winning daughter Kamila Shamsie. It's worth mentioning that Muneeza, with a charming sense of critical integrity asks another critic, Shobhana Bhattacharji, to write the section on Kamila Shamsie. We can segue at this point to one of the crucial contributions of this study, and that is to a level-headed look at the Bangladesh independence war of 1971 in relation to Pakistani writing. The first significant novel on the theme was Sorayya Khan's *Noor* (2003), a moving account of the 'trauma and amnesia' associated with the war, something South Asian readers are familiar with from the large body of Partition literature. Kamila Shamsie in *Kartography* (2002) brings to bear an experimental technique to the subject with conspicuous success. An older writer-critic who has contributed to the literature of 1971, Tariq Rahman, it is worth mentioning, had resigned his commission in the Pakistan army because of his opposition to the military action and became an academic. Rahman's forte is the short story and one titled "Bingo" (a pejorative term for Bengalis used by West Pakistanis) that was published in 1973 is the first attempt to depict the war in fiction; Muneeza rightly characterizes it as "celebrated and courageous."

A special place must be accorded to the works of the Orange Prize shortlisted Roopa Farooki, daughter of a Bangladeshi mother and a Pakistani father, who in novels like *Bitter Sweets* (2007) and *Half Life* (2010) examines the

fraught issue of fractured identity. A novel of a very different sort by a Pakistani-Australian novelist and set in what was East Pakistan deserves mention; Wayne Ashton's *Under a Tin-Grey Sari* (2010) is the product of a year spent in Chattogram (Chittagong). A startling revelation in Muneeza's study is the sizeable and varied literary production of the late Raja Tridiv Roy: two collections of "essays, sketches, legends, and stories," and two memoirs, one of his time as Pakistan's ambassador to Argentina, the other including a history of the Chakma tribe. These are books that we can rightfully appropriate under the category of Bangladeshi writing in English.

The Pakistani novels, stories, and non-fiction works covering 1971 deserve to be studied side by side with those by Bangladeshi works within a comparative framework. It would be a worthwhile exercise for both Pakistani and Bangladeshi critics. Their comments should go a long way towards attaining the sorely needed 'truth and reconciliation' between their two peoples.

There are many more writers dealt with who deserve mention, including a number of interesting non-fiction writers, but the limitations of space imposed by editorial authority cannot be ignored. I will end by heartily recommending this scholarly and eminently readable study to everyone interested in South Asian literary culture, postcolonial literary studies, and the new category of world literature. I see this book as an open-ended work, and look forward (if fate is kind to the octogenarian author and this septuagenarian reviewer) to an augmented edition in another decade or so.

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