

Modern Muslim women writers of the subcontinent

And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women, edited by Muneeza Shamsie, City University of New York: The Feminist Press, pp386, 2008, PB, \$15.95.

This book consists of twenty-five short stories written by contemporary Pakistani women writers. The most interesting thing about this book is that all the contributions were originally written in English and, as such, it is the first ever anthology of creative writing by Pakistani women since 1947 – the year in which the Islamic republic of Pakistan was established. Although not of Pakistani origin myself, I am nevertheless very fond of literature and poetry in general and therefore it is interesting to know that there exists such a rich tradition of English fiction writing by contemporary Pakistani women. Muneeza Shamsie, a literary critic, short story writer and the editor of this anthology, has also written a very useful and informative introduction to this volume wherein she attempts to contextualise the tradition of English writing in Pakistan as well as the creative literary contributions of Muslim women of the subcontinent as a whole, focusing on the contemporary period.

In the editor's own words, "What you hold in your hands is the only anthology of creative texts written originally in English by Pakistani women, ever. This may come as a surprise, since from the creation of Pakistan in 1947, there has been a tradition of English writing by Pakistanis, and English has remained the language of government. The fanning of migrants into the English-speaking diaspora, accompanied by the facility of travel and the growth of the electronic media, has provided an impetus to Pakistani English literature; it reaches a broad Anglophone audience but in Pakistan it has a much smaller readership than indigenous languages and literatures, which are much more widely spoken and read. Thus, Pakistani women who employ English as a creative language live between the East and the West, literally or figuratively, and have had to struggle to be heard. They write from the extreme edges of both English and Pakistani literatures." (p1) In fact, this argument is equally true of women English fiction writers of Indian and Bangladeshi origin, too.

As it happens, in tracing the history of Muslim women writing English fiction in the sub-continent, the editor states, "During the early half of the twentieth century, fiction writing by Muslim women in English remained a rarity. Among the few exceptions was Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), who grew up in Calcutta (now Kolkata) where she received a traditional education in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian, and with the support of her husband, taught herself English and Bengali – now the national language of modern Bangladesh. In 1905, she wrote her first and only story in

English, the 12-page “Sultana’s Dream” (Hossain 1988, The Feminist Press): one of the most radical of early feminist writings. She went on to write in Bengali and attack the *parda* system and traditional attitudes toward women. She set up schools for girls, but continued to observe *parda* to allay Muslim parents’ great fear that education would encourage their daughters to discard the veil.” (p5) Although it is true that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (better known as Begum Rokeya) is today rightly considered to be a pioneer of education and freedom for Muslim women in India in general and the Bengal in particular, a closer study of her life, work and achievement proves that she was far from being a ‘feminist’ in the sense that many contemporary Bangladeshi and other sub-continental secularist writers and intellectuals would have us believe.

As a devout and practising Muslim women, Rokeya was determined to improve the social, cultural, economic and educational condition of Muslim women in early twentieth century Bengal but it is factually inaccurate to suggest that she attacked the *parda* system as being a barrier to female emancipation, advancement and freedom. On the contrary, my research into Bengal’s Muslim history, literature and heritage suggests that pioneering sub-continental Muslim women like Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani, Begum Rokeya, Shamsunnahar Mahmud, Jahanara Shahnawaz, Khujistha Akhtar (the daughter of Ubaidullah al-Ubaidi Suhrawardy) and Shaista Ikramullah, among others, were not only great champions of women’s education and freedom, they were equally fond of their faith and tradition as an important and enduring source of inspiration and stability in their lives and societies (see, for example, *The Mussalman Patrikai Rokeya Proshanga* edited by Laila Zaman, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994) Unfortunately, this point is frequently overlooked by the contemporary sub-continental secular feminist activists and writers. I am disappointed that the editor of this important anthology of creative English writing by contemporary Pakistani women appears to share this inaccurate view.

Nevertheless, the editor is right to argue that “in the 1980s a university education became the norm for many young women from the professional families in Pakistan, and a number of careers opened to them, including ones in the civil service. At the same time, in Pakistan’s low-income groups, education remained – and still remains – a privilege, not a right, regardless of gender, but boys were and are far more likely to be sent to school than girls although schools for girls have grown and expanded, particularly in urban areas. The disadvantages of the tiered educational system, inherited from colonial times – one English, the other in Urdu, and a third in provincial languages – created schisms in society that have been continuously and fiercely debated since 1947, but Zia-ul-Haq’s attempt to do away with English as the medium of instruction met with great resistance. Instead, the demand for English grew: It became the language of global power, global knowledge, and the new electronic media.” (p12)

The same is true in India where English-medium education has always been extremely popular but the situation in Bangladesh is a truly depressing one. Following the formation of that country in 1971, Bengali was actively promoted by the new ruling elites of the country and they did so at the expense of English-medium education which, as expected, has created serious problems so much so that today the majority of the Bangladeshi university lecturers and professors are far from being competent in English. Likewise, I have read most of the English language newspapers

and magazines published from Dhaka and the quality of writing and editorial skills leaves a lot to be desired, to put it mildly. By contrast, in India and Pakistan, the tradition of English-medium education has always been very strong and this, of course, is reflected in the high quality of English writing, journalism and publishing that today exists in those countries. In the editor's own words, "The beginning of this century has seen women firmly assert themselves in Pakistan as leading English-language editors, journalists, and publishers. In turn, publishers have begun to actively seek out new writers of Pakistani English fiction and poetry, many of them women, almost all of whom are represented in this anthology." (p13)

Although the twenty-five contributions included in this volume are no more than samples of creative English writing by contemporary Pakistani women, however, the themes and topics covered by the writers are so varied and wide-ranging that this volume, along with the editor's two other published anthologies of writings by contemporary Pakistanis, represents nothing short of a remarkable and impressive contribution to contemporary Pakistani English literature. The other two volumes are *A Dragon in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writing in English* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Leaving Home: Toward a New Millennium: A Collection of English Prose by Pakistani Writers* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Collectively, these three volumes will enable the readers to acquire an insight into the rich tradition of English fiction and non-fiction writing by a large number of outstanding and gifted writers of Pakistani background. As such, I have no hesitation in recommending this anthology to all lovers of literature, irrespective of one's culture, gender or linguistic background.

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