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A Critical Reading of Hajira Masroor's "Bhag Bhari" (Student Paper)

HAIJIRA MASROOR'S "Bhāg Bhārī" appears in the recently published *Short Stories from Pakistan* edited by Intizar Hussain and Asif Farrukhi. In the introduction the translator, M. Asaduddin, points out that the selection of stories was "initially done primarily for the Urdu readership of the Indian sub-continent" (Hussain and Farrukhi 2003, ix). It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the majority of the readers are South Asian and, as such, familiar with the cultural background of not only "Bhāg Bhārī," but also the other short stories, written in various South Asian vernacular languages, which make up this collection. These readers therefore enjoy the privilege of "the immediate recognition of shared responses within the language community" (Holmström 1990, xv).

In spite of the fact that Salman Rushdie, in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947–97*, claims that "Indo-Anglian" (English-language Indian writing) literature represents "perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (1995, x), it has been argued that the true strength of the Subcontinent's literature lies in the work being done in its regional languages. Indeed, by not using the metropolitan language as a norm, these languages serve as a means to break away from the established canon. It would also be unfair to accept Rushdie's contention that the subject matter of literature written in the regional languages is too narrow or limited and that "parochialism is perhaps the main vice of the vernacular languages" (*ibid.*, xv). The work of such writers as Sa'adat Hasan Manto or Intizar Hussain immediately negates this sweeping generalization.

The question of whether or not to write in English has raised controversial and heated issues concerning the appropriation and interpretation

of postcolonial literature; indeed English-language Indian writing may be considered by some to be a postcolonial anomaly. It is clear, however, that writers in English generally enjoy a higher profile than those writing in the regional languages, and that literature in English permits greater accessibility, even at the cost of being accused of “pandering to the expectations of Western readers” (Bery 1997, 37). Relatively few Western¹ readers (myself included) have any knowledge of a language of the Subcontinent, yet to read only work written originally in English can lead to the danger of misinterpreting the culture(s) of the Subcontinent and indeed the Subcontinent itself.

Returning to the translator’s comment: it is clear that this preselected South Asian readership does not imply the exclusion of the Western reader. However, when such a reader does examine a Pakistani text like “Bhāg Bhārī” there are bound to be certain difficulties, or at least differences, in its interpretation compared to that of the anticipated Urdu reader. Bearing in mind that it is the reader who constructs the text, Felicity Hand draws attention to the fact that literature, in this case a short story, is fictitious and, as such, an interpretation of the author’s imagination. The reader, therefore, in the act of reading, reinterprets an already interpreted situation. If the reader is from another culture his/her interpretation may obscure or distort the culture that is the original object of study (1998, 42).

Ideally the Western reader should read texts by and about people from other cultures with what Hand has described as “gentle anthropology,” that is to say, without appropriating the discourse or representation of such people (*ibid.*). It is all too easy for Westerners to take their own values as universal, forgetting, for example, that “whiteness is another racial category, despite the fact that white people have created the dominant images of the world” (Dyer 1997, 9).

This Western norm of whiteness leads to considerations concerning the problematic use of the popular yet nebulous term “ethnic,” which in many Western discourses has come to represent a politically correct, modern, version of an acceptable Other. Is “Bhāg Bhārī” an ethnic text? Returning to the question of Urdu/Western readership, “Bhāg Bhārī” may be considered ethnic if one takes into account that the term is generally

¹I use the term Western in the geographical and cultural sense of the word rather than that whereby some writers codify “Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western.” (Mohanty 1995, 259).

used in the context of a non-white alien culture, and particularly so in the case of the reader not forming part of the anticipated Urdu readership referred to previously. It is important to remember, however, that “ethnicity,” whatever it may (correctly or otherwise) represent, is not a homogenous concept. A clear example of diversity encapsulated within what could be regarded as ethnic literature is the previously mentioned collection *Short Stories from Pakistan* in which the stories have been translated from Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushto and Saraiki, and articulate a multiplicity of voices and experiences.

One could go even further and ask whether “Bhāg B̥hārī” is a post-colonial text. If the concept of postcolonial is understood as signifying “an umbrella term, a way of bracketing together the literatures written in those countries which were once colonies of Britain” (Boehmer 1995, 4), then “Bhāg B̥hārī” fulfills this condition. Yet the term postcolonial has also been taken to imply a literature that not only emerged from the experience of colonization but also “foregrounds the tension with the imperial power” and emphasizes the differences between the colonial subject and the imperial center (Ashcroft, Gareth and Tiffin 1989, 2). From this perspective “Bhāg B̥hārī” is not postcolonial: the subject matter (life and death in an isolated haveli) and the Pakistani characters portrayed are neither directly concerned with colonialism nor reflect European imperial domination and its effect on modern literature. In addition to which, returning to the controversial debate over writing in English, the story was not originally written in English, it has been translated from Urdu. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest in this paper that if one closely examines the narrative of the protagonist of this story, a “lady” doctor from Lahore, it can be seen that she is appropriating discourses that are considered to pertain more to the world of “colonizer” than the “colonized”; moreover, by placing herself at the center of the narrative, the imperial center, and thus establishing the norm, she is acting as a substitute for the metropolis that once dominated the colonial narrative. From this perspective it can be seen that “Bhāg B̥hārī” may indeed be read as a postcolonial text, albeit distorted, or even as a neocolonial one.

It is the protagonist, a Pakistani, who draws both on the discourse of Orientalism—aptly described by its creator, the late Edward Said, as “the corporate institution for dealing with the [East]” (1995, 88)—and on a form of Western feminism which hegemonically groups all Third World women together into a species of deprived sisterhood.

On a first, superficial reading of this short story, one’s sympathies may be drawn to this young doctor who, summoned from her surgery in

Lahore by a feudal lord, Data Malik Gulnawaz, travels to a distant village in order to deliver his wife's first child. Once there, the stagnant rural life, the claustrophobic air of the zenana, the casual rape of a young servant girl, B^hāg B^harī, by the feudal lord, and the girl's eventual murder, cause the doctor to flee back to the city as quickly as possible.

A closer reading, however, reveals that through the appropriation of the imaginary construct of the East by the West, as dictated by Orientalism, the protagonist, by contrasting her world with that of the "uncivilized" haveli, firmly identifies its inhabitants as the Other(s). Furthermore, the women of this rural backwater are not only identified as the Other(s), they are also subjected to a Western feminism which "sympathetically" reduces them to uniformly passive and inarticulate subjects at the mercy of patriarchy.

At the opening of the story, when the doctor reluctantly embarks on her journey, the shabby car she had assumed would transport her to the "far-flung village" proves to be a brand new Cadillac (66).² This makes her regret not having asked for a higher fee, indeed, money is the major motive not only for her going in the first place, but also for her prolonging her visit in spite of her later unease.

Moving from the harsh capitalism of Lahore, the scene is romantically set. At dusk the doctor reaches the end of her journey, the isolated haveli, and enters "a totally different world" (66) of "the Orient ... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (87). When she comes face to face with the feudal lord, the Other, he fulfills all expectations. He is presented as a paradigm of Oriental splendor: heavily mustached, adorned with a large turban, surrounded by hunting dogs, and with a falcon on his wrist. Even the doctor is forced to admit she is impressed by his regal air.

This image of robust, public masculinity contrasts with the privacy of the "wild roes" (68) secluded within the zenana, the women's quarters. Within this area, described by Nilufer E. Bharucha as "the architectural enclosures of a misogynist patriarchy" (1998, 93), lies the dark windowless mahal, the birthing room. By situating her patient, the feudal lord's wife, within this most representative of female spaces, on the point of giving birth aided by "a dirty-looking crone" (68), the doctor presents her as the archetypal Third World woman. On entering the zenana, the doctor, who is free to pass between both worlds, public and private, male and

²All references to the text of the story are taken from Masroor 2003.

female, comments on the underlying antagonism of its inhabitants toward her: “They looked at me in such a way” (69). And their hysterical reaction at seeing a syringe merely confirms her opinion of their being uneducated and backward.

Similarly, the landlord’s wife, heavily adorned with jewels and diamond nose studs, is portrayed as being pathetically grateful to the doctor when her son is born, but too ignorant to appreciate the doctor’s real status. When the wife offers her some dresses the doctor feels she is being treated as a midwife or a maid. “They [do] not understand one’s status,” she observes (72).

In this way the relationship between doctor and patient is rewritten; the wife is represented as leading the essentially restricted and truncated life of the Third World woman in contrast to the doctor’s self-representation as the modern, educated and superior First World woman. She is reiterating what has been referred to as “The Third World Difference”—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries (Mohanty 1995, 260). Yet it was the wife herself, reluctantly supported by her husband, who went against her mother-in-law’s wishes and insisted on having a doctor from the city. The wife also later demonstrates that beneath her passive veneer lies a desire for restitution that is only satisfied with her killing a servant girl.

Demonstrating once again that the world of the doctor is quite distinct from that of the haveli, the landlord’s workers celebrate the child’s birth all night with gunshots and trumpet-blowing. The doctor finds their behavior “quite interesting” (70), nevertheless it is not enough to convince her that the world of the haveli resembles anything more than a rural grave in which the inhabitants are depicted as being stubborn and noisy. She draws a sharp distinction between the world of the city and that of the country, where she believes even a city dog would die. This portrayal of rural life as stagnant and monotonous reflects the kind of nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotyping which maintained a strong belief “in the cultural stasis of the subcontinent” where everything was ageless and nothing changed (Suleri 1992, 105).

The doctor’s boredom is interrupted by the sudden and violent, yet casual, rape by the feudal lord of the young servant girl. The reactions of the other women—who not only justify his behavior: he is a man, furthermore their lord, and consequently within his rights; but also blame the girl for her mere existence as a possible target for male violence—serve to underline the doctor’s apprehensions that she is indeed in another world. When Bhāg Bhārī’s mother protests, she is reminded by the other

women that she too had relations with the feudal lord, albeit willingly, when younger, and, after all, “the heavens [have] not fallen” on her daughter’s head (74). Even the feudal lord’s wife, when informed of the incident by the doctor, does not seem to be unduly alarmed or surprised and merely tells the doctor to tend to the girl. The passive acceptance of their fate, and their refusal to assign guilt to the feudal lord, reinforces the image of the so-called Third World woman.

The baby’s clothes, a symbol of innocence and purity which contrasts with the violent episode that took place within the zenana, are brought in a procession led by a “strutting and swaggering policeman”(76). This figure, representing law and order, is the only sign of modernity within the haveli. Nevertheless the protagonist implies, at the end of her narrative, while justifying her breaking of the “fetters” that bound her to the haveli and leaving, that the policeman must have been corrupted by the stagnant rural air.

While the noisy procession outside advances, in the secluded mahal the doctor finds that the wife has strangled Bhāg Bhārī. At such a crucial moment, the climax of the narrative, the two women, wife and servant girl, are described by the protagonist in terms of childbirth. It is as though this metaphor is the true definition of their being: the older woman is suffering as if from the pain of labor, while the younger one is at peace as if she had just given birth. It appears that the fates of the two women are inextricably linked to the common denominator of procreation.

From the doctor’s discourse the reader may deduce that the fictitious women portrayed in “Bhāg Bhārī” (with the notable exception of the protagonist), and all women living in similar circumstances, are inarticulate, passive subjects at the mercy of patriarchalism. Leaving aside the undeniable question of worldwide oppression in its multiple forms, modern Pakistani writers such as Fahmida Riaz, former editor and publisher of *Āvāz*, or Kishwar Naheed, former editor of *Māh-e Nau*, disprove this Western feminist discourse concerning Third World women. These feminist³ women demonstrate that they are far from being inarticulate and reject the “passive virginal model in favour of a living, throbbing, vocal and passionate reality” (Ahmad 1990, 23). In the words of Fahmida Riaz:

³Feminist in the sense of demonstrating “an awareness of the disadvantages and constraints faced by women in a traditional society and a recognition of their need or the desire for freedom and change.” (Ahmad 1990, 7).

I am the one you needed to bury alive
 to feel fearless as the wind again
 For you never knew
 that stones can never suppress a voice.
 (in *ibid.*, 43)

It is interesting to note that when Fahmida Riaz was charged with sedition and forced to flee to India, and Kishwar Naheed was accused of obscenity for publishing Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, they were not the first feminist writers from the Subcontinent to have angered the authorities; Ismat Chughtai preceded them by quite a few years when, in 1945, she too was charged with obscenity (albeit by the British) for her short story "Liḥāf" ("The Quilt").

Returning to the question of the so-called lack of articulation of Third World women, it is worth pointing out that Rukhsana Ahmad, the editor and translator of the anthology of feminist Pakistani poetry *We Sinful Women*, believes that "the most innovative, the most radical and the most interesting Urdu poetry of our times is being produced by women and not by male poets" (*ibid.*, 6). In spite of the fact that such women constitute a minority, it is still a comment that disproves the concept of a muzzled homogenous mass of oppressed South Asian women.

As to whether or not "Bhāg Bhārī" is a postcolonial text, it should be born in mind that if one reads the story as such one of the pitfalls of postcolonial literature is that it may be regarded as "a social phenomenon which reflects absolutely the cultural perspectives of the people involved" (Hand 1998, 50). From this perspective, "Bhāg Bhārī" is guilty of mirroring a hegemonic rural world split into two distinct environments: the public male world and the private female world. Due to her professional status and her status as a First World woman (which she considers herself) the protagonist is free to cross the borders of gender and enter both domains. From her privileged viewpoint she is able to observe and judge both the world of the women and of the men.

The inhabitants of the women's quarters are pictured as passive and inarticulate, completely at the mercy of their feudal lord, despite the fact that his mother exerts considerable influence over him in questions of tradition. The women, by accepting their fate, are guilty of perpetuating the violence they suffer, not only at the hands of men, but also from each other. A lack of sorority is demonstrated amongst these women as they self-perpetuate a cycle of violence, both that which has been imposed by

male dominance (male/female) and that which is self-imposed (female/female). By presenting these women as a hegemonic mass, the protagonist is reiterating a form of Western feminism whereby the Third World woman is portrayed as being uniformly voiceless and inactive—a discourse which concurs with Orientalism in that it “generally promotes an idea of the colonised subject as passive, silent and incapable of resistance” (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 51). Nevertheless, the example of modern day Pakistani feminist poets, not to mention earlier figures such as Ismat Chughtai, disprove this concept.

The world of the haveli is therefore described in terms of this monolithic feminist discourse while being viewed through the prism of Orientalism which characterizes it as “variously—voiceless, sensual, female, despotic, irrational and backward” (*ibid.*, 39).

When the protagonist begins her journey she does so with preconceived ideas, although not all her assumptions are correct; for example the car is more grandiose than she had expected. The feudal lord, however, lives up to her Arabian Nights’ expectations and even her fantasies: “Tell me what you want and your desire will be fulfilled,” she imagines him saying when they first meet (67). Her description of their first meeting “in the declining sunlight” (66) reflects an indolent decadence with an underlying cruelty symbolized by the image of the falcon eating a freshly-killed dove.

The doctor returns to her home in the city with her assumptions about rural life and its inhabitants not only intact, but possibly even strengthened. Behind her she leaves an unreal vision of an isolated haveli run by a strangely fascinating yet violent and tyrannical feudal landlord who wields his power over subservient women and rural lackeys.

In conclusion, returning to the concept of “gentle anthropology,” the protagonist of “Bhāg Bhārī” has appropriated two very specifically Western discourses to describe the rural world of the haveli. The anticipated reader familiar with South Asian culture(s) may find this viewpoint ingenious and transparent; for the Western reader, however, it may lead to the danger of misinterpretation and confusion, and to the interpretation of this rural palimpsest as the reality that makes up modern Pakistan. □

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