**Pakistan: here and now**

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Essay writing as a genre has not evolved in Pakistan. If you try to count the number of essay writers that Pakistan has produced over the last seven decades, you will hardly be able to count close to seven writers. And a majority of them don’t prefer to develop an argument that goes against the grain of the dominant narrative in the country.

There is no agreement on the definition of essay either, which may include articles, pamphlets, and papers. Although you may find a plethora of such writing in hundreds of ‘academic journals’ produced by higher education institutions in Pakistan annually, there are serious questions about their logical organisation and seriousness of purpose.

In Europe, there has been an established tradition of essay writing, from Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe, Francis Bacon, John Locke, Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison to Michel de Montaigne, Richard Steele, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Malthus and Aldous Huxley. Their essays played an important role in the intellectual transformation of European society.

In a majority of developed countries, essays have become a major part of formal education. Students cannot improve their writing skills unless they learn how to structure their writing in an essay format; especially in the humanities and social sciences fields, essays play a significant role. On the other side of the spectrum, the education system in Pakistan does not encourage critical essay writing by students or teachers and prefers them to regurgitate the official narrative. Here I introduce you to a fresh collection of essays ‘Pakistan: here and now’, which is a book with a personal element in it.

Nasir Abbas Nayyar, Sherry Rehman, and Tariq Rahman have endorsed this collection with their glowing approval. Harris Khalique and Irfan Ahmed Khan have edited this book that gives us insights into Pakistan’s culture and society. Rivets Learning Islamabad has published the book with a foreword by Adnan Rafiq who is currently serving as the country director of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). This collection comprises seven detailed essays covering topics ranging from culture and films to language and music. Although each essay has a unique focus, in this column I will just highlight a couple of the best essays that I found in the collection.

Most people know Navid Shahzad as an academic and actor; she is a reputed author and a renowned director too. Her recent book ‘Aslan’s Roar’ is a dissection of Turkish TV and the rise of the Muslim hero on screen. For ‘Pakistan: here and now’, she has penned an essay titled ‘The Language of the Heart’. This piece of writing offers a broad perspective while discussing two of the greatest poets of Pakistan and Turkey: Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Nazim Hikmet. She begins with the concepts of nation and nationality and carries us through the process of colonisation, discussing how it affected the world and its languages and literature.

Linguistics define a ‘speech community’ as one which uses the same linguistic code. According to them, a ‘discourse community’ refers to the common ways in which members of a social group use language to meet their social needs. If you apply that to Pakistan, there is no scarcity of speech communities, the problem perhaps lies in the near absence of discourse communities. Our behaviours and thinking patterns appear to have more influence from speech communities as the discourse itself is put in a straitjacket. That is one reason why discourse is declining whereas speech is thriving.

After giving us an overview of writers such as Bakhtin, Chinua Achebe, Dante, Edna O’Brien, Edward Said, Samuel Johnson, and Wallace Stevens, Navid Shahzad brings us to Faiz and Nazim Hikmet. What Hikmet who “spent the better part of his life either in prison or living abroad, missed most of all was the sound of his language”. Hikmet’s citizenship was officially withdrawn for what were seen as ‘anti-state’ activities by the Turkish government. His poem titled ‘23 Sentlik Askere Dair’ (on the soldier worth 23 cents) particularly drew the ire of the Turkish state.

During the Korean War, former US secretary of state John Foster Dulles had revealed that Turkish soldiers received 23 cents per month compared to the lowest ranking US soldier’s payment of $750 per month. One wonders about people’s reaction in Pakistan if somebody raises a similar question about the services to the US by dictators – from General Zia to Musharraf – to please the US and satisfy its interests in this region. Navid Shahzad finds many similarities between Faiz and Hikmet by highlighting their common streaks of anti-imperialism which landed them both behind the bars.

The essay by Zahida Hina was in Urdu, and Hussain Sajjad rendered it into lucid Urdu. ‘Religion and Statecraft in a Muslim Society’ is an indictment of those who have been using religion for political purposes in the Subcontinent. “The way churches and monarchs were safeguarding each other’s interests in Europe, the royal courts in Muslim countries were the institutions where scholars’ religious interpretations and rulings provided basis for the tyrannical decrees of monarchs.” Those who tried to console hapless people were deemed by monarchs as thorns in their sides.

Starting from how the library of Ibn Hazm was set ablaze and how Ibn Rushd suffered the wrath of the rulers and the people alike, Zahida Hina discusses how religious divide grew in India, in the 19th century. She gives a detailed account of the British role in fanning religious hatred in India and how some Hindu and Muslim politicians started using religion for their political advantage that resulted in riots that killed over a million people with 17.5 million people becoming homeless in a short span of time, in the late 1940s.

She dilates upon why Pakistan could not emerge as a nation-state and concludes that one of the foremost reasons was that its creation was based on religious nationalism rather than a modern nation-state perspective. Another reason was that of the 2.5 million Indian soldiers enlisted with the British army during World War II, around 40 percent were Muslims – the majority from Punjab and North West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Britain reckoned that Pakistan would inherit the powerful army that it had created to serve as a safeguard against the Soviet Union.

There are other pretty informative and interesting essays such as by Hasan Zaidi and Salman Asif. ‘Certain Uncertainties: The cultural confusion of Pakistan’ by Hasan Zaidi is an incisive piece that discusses how culture in Pakistan has come under the influence of religion, under the patronage of the state. While highlighting the names of various Khayabans in Karachi’s DHA – a majority of which are named after kings and warriors of yore such as Babur, Faisal, Ghaznavi, Khalid, Tariq, Tipu, and Qasim –with a sprinkling of poets such as Khusro and Rumi – Zaidi enlightens us about the inclination of the state in Pakistan.

Salman Asif’s essay ‘Construction of Familiar Others on Celluloid: Representation of religious minorities in popular Pakistani cinema’ is a treat to read. This is a topic that has hardly received any attention by academics and cinema critics in Pakistan. Asif’s sweep is broad, and he covers over a century of cinema in this region. Discussing Pakistani films from the 1950s – ‘Qatil’ directed by Anwar Kamal Pasha, which had all Hindu characters, and Pakistan’s own version of ‘Devdas’ released in 1965 – Asif brings us to the present age of Pakistani cinema.

The book also features insightful essays by Fatimah Ihsan ‘The Raag of Inclusion and the Ras of Love’ and by Harris Khalique ‘Diaspora and the Desire to Fix the Native Country’.

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