SOME INCHES OF IVORY: THE INFLUENCE OF THE BRITISH LITERARY TRADITION ON THE NOVELS OF BINA SHAH

Nadya Chishty-Mujahid

Abstract

This essay examines the influence of canonical British literature, such as Regency era and nineteenth-century novels on fundamental stylistic (and related thematic) aspects of Pakistani author Bina Shah's three most recent novels—The 786Cybercafé, Slum Child, and A Season for Martyrs. Shah's work, like that of her noted forerunner Bapsi Sidhwa, was partly born out of an extensive study of canonical English classics as well as from the literary tradition that has impacted the pedagogical development and reading tastes of many South Asian writers. These influences have persisted in creative writing long after the departure of the British from the subcontinent. By highlighting these specific aspects of Shah's endeavours and noting how recent critical assessments would have been considerably enhanced by an examination of them, the author's central arguments implicitly help to demonstrate that the long-term survival of postmodern Commonwealth literature depends to a considerable extent on acknowledging the literary heritage that contributes towards shaping it. Dictated by political as opposed to intellectual and aesthetic concerns, postcolonial criticism has often failed to take into account this aspect of style; however, using Bina Shah's work as a point of focus this essay attempts to underscore the importance of stylistic analysis when it comes to addressing the general position of Commonwealth literature relative to the canon.

The purpose of this essay is to examine certain stylistic aspects of Bina Shah's recent novels, namely *The 786 Cybercafé* (2004), *Slum Child* (2010), and her most recent novel, *A Season for Martyrs* (2014). In doing so the author shall bring to the forefront the undeniable influence on Shah's writing of the British literary heritage that has shaped and informed the novels of virtually every Anglophone Pakistani writer (regardless of their generation) ranging from Bapsi Sidhwa to Sorraya Khan. One of the more commendable aspects of Shah's writing is that her books are all distinctly unique; there is nothing remotely formulaic about them. Yet each one of

them has decided patterns and motifs that owe much to the British literature of the Regency period and the nineteenth century, and occasionally to British history. This interpretive angle, while by no means exhaustive, provides a good starting point in helping to contextualize Shah's position not just within the annals of English language South Asian fiction but also as regards the broader English canon in general.

As a recent study on Pakistani post-colonial fiction, *Where Worlds Collide* has highlighted, the new millennium has witnessed the publication of a plethora of books of fiction in English by enterprising Pakistani writers ranging from Nadeem Aslam and Kamila Shamsie to Uzma Aslam Khan[1]. For reasons partially related to limitations of space, Waterman's work is deficient in some important areas; for instance, he has been unable to include any analyses of the fascinating literary works of Bina Shah and the genre fiction of Omar Shahid Hamid. While any writer can be forgiven omissions that arise due to constraints beyond their control, committed academics who wish to expand their knowledge of burgeoning fields certainly need to look beyond introductory overview studies in order to do justice to the unplumbed depths. Moreover, Waterman's work appears to be driven by a dominant, but limited, desire to explore the geo-political aspects of Pakistani fiction. While such considerations are undoubtedly important as Cara Cilano's excellent pioneering work *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English* (2013) has aptly demonstrated[2](prior to the publication of Waterman's works), this essay contends that the analysis of the stylistic aspects of postcolonial fiction are as vital for doing justice to the literary merits of texts as are political ones. Regarding her overarching thesis and intrinsic objective, Cilano claims that she wishes "to specify how [her] analyses conceptualize idea, nation and state. In the Pakistani context, these three terms interrelate"[3]. Although her efforts at underscoring the role of literature in shaping nationhood are laudable, both her work as well as Waterman's fail to comment on how British history and literary tradition have proved subtly, but unmistakably seminal to the creation and furtherance of writing styles within postcolonial fiction in general and Pakistani literature in particular. Thus, this author uses her

[1] David Waterman, *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[2] C.N. Cilano, *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[3] Ibid, 2.

analysis of three of Bina Shah's novels as a lens to elucidate the crucial links between her (Shah's) personal postcolonial narrative style and the British tradition that has contributed towards its development.

Shah was greatly influenced in the early stages of her literary career by the novels of the Pakistani author generally considered the godmother of Pakistani fiction in English, Bapsi Sidhwa; the latter's greatest strength as a writer is her ability to capture the attention of the reader by means of local narrative. Sidhwa's narratives captivate the reader almost from their commencement till the end. Many of her books have Pakistani protagonists. Notably, however, Sidhwa belonged to the Parsi (Zoroastrian) community, a Pakistani minority that, prior to Sidhwa's debut novel *The Crow Eaters* (1978) had been virtually unknown to the Anglophone reading population. Written in a classic picaresque tradition, the novel recounts the amusing and enterprising, often downright hilarious adventures of its Lahore-based Parsi central character Freddy Junglewalla[4]. Sidhwa herself was influenced by the satire of Jane Austen, having received schooling in the subcontinent where emphasis was placed on the study of British classics. That Bapsi Sidhwa does not take herself too seriously is evident from an interview with David Montenegro (1990) where the novelist comments on the influence of her writing on the general public. She states:

> I do think that a writer can at least place facts so that people recognize themselves and stop taking themselves too seriously or start seeing themselves in a more realistic light. We all are so prone to see ourselves as a little better than the other person. Some readers have commented, 'Oh, you made me see myself.' Or 'I'm an Oxford or Harvard educated person, and I find that my thinking is no different from that tribal gentleman's in that tribal landscape you've portrayed.' And I feel that my writing is at least making some people aware of what they are. That's going to have some impact[5].

Like Sidhwa, Shah's greatest strengths as a writer are well-defined storytelling and characterization. Given the importance of these factors in

[4] Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Crow Eaters* (Lahore: Ilmi Printing Press, 1978).

[5] D. Montenegro and B. Sidhwa, "Bapsi Sidhwa: An Interview", *The Massachusetts Review* 31, no. 4 (1990): 532.

determining whether a work survives over the course of time, it is safe to assume that at least a couple of her novels, like Bapsi Sidhwa's *Crow Eaters* and *Ice-Candy Man* (1991), will eventually find their way into the South Asian literary hall of fame and possibly even the broader, overarching Anglophone canon.

The techniques of narrative aside, politics appears to be an inherent part of the agenda of many South Asian novelists in general and Pakistani ones in particular. Although this is not ostensibly the case with the *Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa's third novel *Ice-Candy Man* (also published from India in 1992 as *Cracking India*) focuses on the partition of the subcontinent, and thus undeniably has a political angle[6]. While contemporary Pakistani politics is alluded to in both Shah's *The 786 Cybercafé* and *Slum Child*, her most nationalistic work remains *A Season for Martyrs*, whose subject matter interweaves the history of Sindh province with relatively contemporary politics[7]. Given that the English-speaking Western world is far more curious about Pakistani politics as opposed to the nation's culture and society, this incorporation of political material is understandable on the part of authors writing in English (particularly those that have a global readership and are published by international publishers). Very rarely do such authors attempt to write about anything completely unrelated to their homeland, although novels such as Monica Ali's *Alentejo Blue*(2007) and *Untold Story* (2012) are notable exceptions. Writing in English as opposed to the vernacular may limit a book's reception by the domestic audience; however, this invariably circumvents problems that might arise from a serious clash between an author's unconstrained agendum and a work's reception on conservative home turf. For instance:

> [there] is the case of Taslima Nasrin, the outspoken Bangladeshi feminist whose 1993 novel *Lajja* [Shame] was banned in her home country for it's [sic.] strongly worded denouncement of religious fundamentalism and communal politics in the region. Faced with death threats and constantly under attack in the press and by the government and clergy, Nasrin went into hiding and was ultimately forced to accept political asylum in Norway in

[6] Bapsi Sidhwa, *Ice-candy Man* (Milkweed Editions, 1991)

[7] Bina Shah, *The 786 Cybercafé* (Islamabad: Alhamra Press, 2004); *Slum Child* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2010); and A *Season for Martyrs* (New York: Delphinium Books, 2014).

> order to survive the *fatwah* issued against her in Bangladesh. Like Nasrin's novel, which was written in Bengali, much of the writing produced within the subcontinent and within Indian diasporic communities is not written in English, and this needs to be clearly acknowledged[8].

While this linguistic trend has changed over the course of the past few years, especially (as David Waterman and Cara Cilano's respective books attest) with the advent of the new millennium, as more authors using English as a medium have emerged in the subcontinent, *fatwahs* can be issued against books written in English as well, as in the famous case of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. However, one should note that the language in which a novelist chooses to project his or her ideas generally depends less on personal political inclinations and more on the medium of their education. At her book launch for *A Season for Martyrs* at the February 2015 Karachi Literature Festival, when questioned about why she chooses to write in English, Bina Shah candidly admitted that English is the language in which she expresses herself with ease. The choice of English has certainly endowed her work with a universal appeal that stems from the essential linguistic fabric of her novels as opposed to any political significance they may be infused with.

A pedagogical critic writes that "Teachers of Commonwealth literature often comment on the difficulty of offering their courses. There is, first of all, the struggle to have the subject accepted, which parallels the earlier difficulties surrounding the introduction of American and other national literatures to a British-dominated curriculum. There is the difficulty of providing an accessible context to literatures of which students are initially ignorant"[9]. Shah's work circumvents many of these problems, firstly by espousing universal themes as opposed to simply cultural ones, and secondly (and more importantly) imbuing her work with the very spirit of the British (and, to some degree, even American) tradition which serves to enhance her writing rather than creating inherent and distracting conflicts within it. No one who has appreciated Charles Dickens and Jane Austen

[8] R.M. George, "At a Slight Angle to Reality: Reading Indian Diaspora Literature", *MELUS* 21, no. 3 (1996): 179-193.

[9] K. Goodwin, "Studying Commonwealth Literature", *College Literature* 19, no. 3 (1992): 149.

(and to some extent the major Renaissance authors) can fail to enjoy Shah's novels, especially on careful reading. Some might argue that novels that pay both explicit and implicit homage to a British pedagogical tradition reinforce colonial stereotypes long after the age of empire; however, taking such a polemical stance can be both reductive as well as educationally counterproductive. One cannot ignore the impact of decades of history on the culture and literature of any nation or society, regardless of whether that nation was colonized or not. Assigning syllabi containing modern Anglophone literature (such as Shah and Sidhwa's novels) encourages reading of literary writings in schools, for these implicitly combine canonical influence with indigenous concerns. It is safe to assume that near-native speakers of English cannot reach required levels of proficiency by reading only modern Anglophone literature, their skills can be best nurtured by intense engagement with the language through perusal of fine canonical English works (especially nineteenth-century novels). However, novelists such as Bina Shah whose educational background has provided her a grounding in such classics as well as post-modern North American and British literature, have the ability to present their unique ideas in sound and grammatically correct English. This proves invaluable when it comes to the revamping of school literature and language curricula in schools in South Asia with the aim of making these more suitable for contemporary needs and tastes. At the higher education level, graduate students benefit more from acknowledging the fair historic import of British literature on present-day literature as opposed to dwelling at length on deliberately politicized aspects of it (such as the slave trade that built the fortune of Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park*). Edward Said's essay on the latter in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) though well-written simply presents a specific, skewed, view of the novel[10]. Thus reading, appreciating and interpreting *The Crow Eaters* and *A Season for Martyrs* renders more of a pedagogical service to young students by allowing them to observe the manner in which the British tradition (to which works such as those of Austen are undeniably seminal) shapes the very linguistic (and thematic) structure and modes under which Shah and Sidhwa necessarily operate.

We will now move to discussing some examples taken from Bina Shah's work in support of the arguments in this article. Shah's early novel *The 786 Cybercafé* was written in 2004, and while it is based in a post 9/11 Muslim

[10] Edward Said, "Austin's Mansfield Park", *Culture and Imperialism* (USA: Knopf, 1993).

country (Pakistan), politics do not tend to overwhelm its plot and characterization. A young college dropout, Jamal Tunio dreams of setting up his own cybercafé on Tariq Road, a prosperous shopping area in Karachi, and by dint of sheer determination and financial help (from the father of his conservatively Islamic but well-meaning friend Yasir) succeeds in doing so. Passionate and driven, Jamal is a far more free spirit than his mature and responsible older brother Abdul. Their youngest sibling Mustafa is only ten years old. Their mother having died some years ago, the boys have a loving but complex relationship with their father Ahmed Tunio, whose dreary and diligent existence working for a publishing press appears to have taken much of the good humour out of him. Far more upwardly mobile than his world-weary father, Jamal battles the challenges associated with being a small-business entrepreneur with verve and aplomb. In spite of his middle-class background he is determined to make enough money to be able to call the shots in a society and city known for their greed, ruthlessness, and corruption. There is an amusing romantic sub-plot centering on a *burqa*-clad (veiled) young woman named Nadia, whose innocence, femininity and sweetness prove alluring for Jamal even though she is always very conservatively attired.

What is remarkable about this book is that while any British literary influences are not immediately apparent, a discerning reader eventually begins to perceive similarities between Shah's narrative technique and Jane Austen's style and humorous interludes. Austen's earliest published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* revolves around three sisters and their widowed mother. Elinor Dashwood is reliable and moderate in temperament, a marked contrast to her passionate and creative younger sister Marianne, whose desire to marry for love underpins the main plot of the novel. Having lost their ancestral home, Norland, after the death of their father and left with next to no fortune due to the machinations of their avaricious sister-in-law and hapless brother, the girls move decidedly downwards in society in material terms. The genders of Shah's main protagonists are opposite to those of Austen's novel, and as the author of this article has already noted Jamal strives to become richer than his father through sheer hard work (romance ranks secondary to his ambitions). Yet given the sensitivity with which Shah portrays close familial relationships in her book, in structural terms *The 786 Cybercafé* comes across as a type of 'inverted' *Sense and Sensibility*. Like Elinor, Abdul is steadier and more practical than the spirited Jamal, and both brothers demonstrate the type of sibling

protectiveness for Mustafa that Elinor and Marianne have towards Margaret, their youngest sister. In a manner similar to Mrs. Dashwood, Ahmed Tunio suffers much from the loss of a spouse on whom he was heavily dependent (emotionally, if not financially). The Dashwood sisters, like all of Austen's heroines, see marriage as holding out the promise of emotional and financial security, though Elinor is to be admired in settling for what William Shakespeare termed a marriage of true minds as opposed to seeking a prosperous life partner. Abdul and Jamal are compelled to see money as essential for their well-being; Abdul is academically gifted enough to make it, and Jamal learns how to utilize it to maximum advantage. The protagonists of both novels pursue definitive objectives. Austen's central characters hanker primarily after romantic fulfillment, and Shah's after financial stability and security. Moreover, just as Marianne has to face numerous challenges in her quest for romantic fulfilment, Jamal finds that the road to riches is anything but smooth. Even arson dramatically threatens his business, and while the author of this essay has no intention to give away the plot of the book, perceptive readers will no doubt find uncanny similarities between Shah's narrative style and Austen's storytelling.

Earlier in this essay, Shah's ability to underscore universal concerns by means of her writing has been mentioned. Regarding another famous Parsi writer's works, a critic gives the following assessment:

> [Rohinton] Mistry's meteoric career cannot … be credited altogether to the exotic nature of the Parsis. Instead, he has turned their lives into a metaphor that stands for the human experience: the fears, and joys, the ambitions, and failures, the terror and the conflicts, finally the sense of balance that once attained will allow the characters to withstand the outer world, a world awash with dangers to personal fulfillment and identity[11].

This apt and pithy summary is equally applicable to the challenges faced by Shah's and Austen's main protagonists, regardless of whether they ultimately attain happiness or not. Despite her obvious practicality, it is Elinor who marries for love; Marianne experiences great romance but

[11] R. L. Ross, "Seeking and Maintaining Balance: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction", *World Literature Today* 73, no. 2 (1999): 239-40.

settles for a less passionate man than her first love (though her marriage does offer her financial security). Jamal too savours of success, but like Marianne also experiences the corollary failures that are often associated with reversals of fortune. Moreover, insofar as the aforementioned quote is concerned Shah's personal *oeuvre* is far more variegated and diverse than Mistry's in that, although Sindhi herself, not all her novels are inspired by her ethnic background. Mistry (like Sidhwa) generally writes about the Parsi community. However, Shah goes a step beyond both the South Asian writers by dwelling on issues that are as universal and diverse as ambition (*The 786 Cybercafé*) and extreme poverty (*Slum Child*). In short, she does not consider herself rigidly bound to ethnic matters. Indeed, though Jamal is Sindhi, his ethnicity is of negligible significance as compared to his importance as a character study in ambition.

Even in the humour of Shah's *The 786 Cybercafé* and Austen's debut novel there are similarities. The author will now focus on a closer reading of episodes from both books to demonstrate the contention. In *Sense and Sensibility* there are some truly hilarious moments, most notably one that takes place (in Volume II, Chapter 40) between Mrs. Jennings and Elinor during the sisters' visit to her home in London[12]. Although she is there, Mrs. Jennings owing to the loud, distracting sounds of Elinor's piano performance is only able to catch bits of the quiet exchange between Elinor and Colonel Brandon. She assumes though, with characteristic enthusiasm, that Brandon has proposed marriage, and when Elinor says she needs to write to Edward Ferrars about the matter, Mrs. Jennings perceives this to be a delicate situation. She considers it appropriate that Brandon should himself contact Edward if he wishes the latter to officiate at his marriage to Elinor. It transpires that Brandon has offered a small parsonage's living to Ferrars and wants Elinor to let him know; once the misunderstanding is cleared up both ladies naturally laugh heartily about it. In a strikingly similar misunderstanding with a comic vein, in Shah's novel Nadia's sister Saira begins to confide in her about men being after "one thing, and one thing only"[13]. Naturally Nadia assumes that Saira is alluding to sex "the biggest secret she could have imagined"[14]. The comic tension builds up, and Saira is horrified when she finally realizes the direction in which Nadia's mind has been wandering. The aghast Saira clarifies that the 'thing' that

[12] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, Vol. II (London: Thomas Egarten, Whitehall, 1811).
[13] Bina Shah, *The 786 Cybercafe*, 201.
[14] Ibid.

men are after happens to be a girl's phone number! In early satirical novels by authors who are influenced by the classics of English literature it is common to use humorous misunderstandings as narrative devices that provide comic relief; Bapsi Sidhwa's own Austenian-style humour and satire owes much to British influences on her development as a writer.

Therefore, one may consider it to be a plausible hypothesis that Jane Austen's (and Bapsi Sidhwa's) techniques have influenced Shah's early attempts at novel-writing. Of course, one may certainly argue that many other English-language novels by authors who do not possess a similar pedagogical background may demonstrate the same type of humour and narrative structure. While this point is well-taken, given that Shah now counts as a fairly prolific author (she is currently working on her fifth novel) one can examine other works by her in order to ascertain whether canonical influences can be discerned in various samples of her writing. To prove that this is a pattern, we can now examine a scene from Shah's novel *Slum Child.*This novel is about a pre-teen girl called Laila from one of the poorest districts of Karachi, whose adventures take her all the way from the slums to domestic service in Defence, one of Karachi's most elite suburbs. The novel's opening scene is rather reminiscent of the first few pages of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, where the young Pip Pirrip encounters and assists the fearsome convict Abel Magwitch to escape capture. Laila is likewise terrified by the sight of a demented-looking man clad in rags whom she observes injecting himself with heroin. She becomes almost paralyzed with fear until the impulse to escape forces her to run from him. The derelict, Haroon, eventually proves to be a rather positive influence on Laila's life (as Magwitch ultimately proved to be for Pip) assisting her when she finds herself friendless. Such dramatic scenes as the one noted above are characteristic of Dickens' major novels (including *Oliver Twist*) and indeed, as the author will demonstrate shortly, *Slum Child* implicitly pays tribute to the nineteenth-century British tradition in more ways than one. It may appear understandable to some that Sidhwa (who like Rushdie was actually born in British India) would be influenced by British canonical literature as well as the horrors of Partition; however, her work diverges thematically from that of authors who were writing during the late British Raj. Writers such as Salman Rushdie

> … provide a marked contrast to an earlier generation, such as Ahmed Ali and Attia Hosain, for whom English was the

> creative vehicle to convey nationalistic messages. Hosain's partition novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) gives a panoramic view of an elegant Indo-Muslim court culture of Lucknow, but highlights its glaring inequalities of class and gender. Hosain links India's struggle for independence and modernity with that of her privileged narrator, Laila, an intelligent young woman, for self-empowerment[15].

In contrast, Bina Shah's Laila in *Slum Child* is markedly disadvantaged from a social perspective; and Shah like many postmodern writers shifts the focus of her narrative machinations from the type of nationalistic angst (noted by Shamsie) to character development reflecting personal angst. Ironically, by doing so Shah's characters begin to appear similar to those of English nineteenth-century novelists for whom the matters of novelistic character development and relationships held paramount importance.

Laila's older and more capable sister Jumana suffers from tuberculosis, and since the family is too poor to get adequate medical treatment for her until it is too late, the girl succumbs to the disease after much lingering agony. There are striking similarities between Shah's depiction of Jumana's rapidly deteriorating health followed by her death and Helen Burns' tragic demise in *Jane Eyre*. In fact, the relationship between the sisters also parallels the young Jane's dependence on the stoic Helen Burns. It would be unfair to say that Shah consciously uses tuberculosis as a novelistic trope in order to enhance the sentimental aspect of her narrative. However, it is an undeniable sociological fact that the disease is as deadly a killer in the present-day slums of Karachi as it was in the congested London of the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, the social panorama evident in numerous works by Dickens finds sundry parallels in overpopulated Karachi where beggars, thieves, and prostitutes abound, jostling with each other to scrape a meagre living. It has been noted that:

> … [the] late Pakistani poet N. M. Rashed, who by his own admission was never a progressive, even though many of his fellow Urdu writers were, freely admits that progressivism has affected writers today. In his own view 'they cannot afford to close their eyes to their social

[15] M. Shamsie, "South Asian Muslims: Fiction and Poetry in English", *Religion and Literature* 43, no.1 (2011): 151.

> environment and to the problems of man as a whole.' This orientation may not seem unusual to westerners, but when one considers the lengthy tradition of courtly poetry and other art-for-art's (or patron's)-sake literature, the contributions of South Asian progressivism are more obvious[16].

As opposed to the courtly culture depicted in Attia Hosain's most famous work[17] (to which Shamsie also alludes above) Shah, like Dickens, often appears committed to a socially realistic and progressive agendum; for instance, critics will easily find undercurrents of progressive modern feminism in *A Season For Martyrs*. Weir (1992) generally posits that socialist realism views literature and politics as inextricably linked. Though Shah's work does not subscribe expressly to this rigid tenet the realism underlying her writing often denies unequivocal happy endings to most of her protagonists. Thus, she eschews literary romanticism in favour of more realistic conclusions. Her conclusions often remind one of those favoured by the American-born, late-Victorian writer Henry James, who (almost perversely) never granted a happy ending to any of his heroes and heroines, except perhaps (equivocally) in *The Golden Bowl*.

Shortly after Jumana's death Laila's stepfather plans to sell Laila into prostitution, causing her to run away from home. Though Shah's knowledge of *Jane Eyre* as well as the major works of Dickens works its way into the manner in which the natural drama of *Slum Child* plays itself out, one may contend that East and West rarely blend seamlessly in Anglophone writing. However, David Mason sensibly opines that successfully interpreting and negotiating cultural matters depends on being receptive and open to the point that very few things are unreservedly culture-specific. He notes that:

> … [the dhow] reminds me of ways in which East and West meet each other's gaze with real difference, but it also makes me wonder about such differences. Even those distinctions—East, West, Europe, Asia, America—are simplifications of experience that hardly seem workable,

[16] A.L. Weir, "Socialist Realism and South Asian Literature", *Journal of South Asian Literature* 27, no. 2 (1992): 144.

[17] Attia Hussain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column: A Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

> especially in the evolving Global Village. Cultural difference is real enough, but so are the traits all human beings have in common. Just because some of our experience is culturally determined does not mean *all* of our experience is[18].

To Shah's credit, while much of her work has a definitively Eastern flavour, like Sidhwa, Mistry, Dickens and Austen she never neglects the importance of universal human and emotive elements in her writing. This explains why despite being set in Karachi, both *Slum Child* and *The 786 Cybercafé* can be easily appreciated by any receptive reader, regardless of his or her cultural background.

Yet it is in Shah's most recent novel, *A Season for Martyrs*, that the influence of tradition and heritage may be discerned most prominently. This recent prizewinning book counts as Shah's most ambitious in scale and scope. It is also her most mature work. As part of her narrative technique for *A Season for Martyrs* she intertwines two disparate, but equally effective, strains of narrative in order to give greater structural dimensionality to her novel. One of the narrative threads depicts the adventures of a young, modern protagonist Ali (from an affluent Sindhi family), who finds himself caught up in the wild political fervour surrounding Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan (prior to her tragic assassination). The other skein consists of a series of intriguing vignettes about the history and mythology of Pakistan's fascinating province of Sindh, from which Shah herself hails. Subcontinental culture has always relied heavily on folklore and oral narratives. As Cohen pointed out, "Western Europe's most fateful literary debt to the East is secondarily a series of storylines but *primarily the idea of the frame tale collection*. The relevant tradition can be traced back to Indian oral folk narrative of the mid-first millennium"[19]. From this perspective, Shah's structural considerations for *A Season for Martyrs* merit closer attention since the work incorporates both the tale/storyline basis of a novel as well as interspersed semi-independent vignettes.

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[18] David Mason, "The Dhow's Gaze: Some Thoughts on Postcolonial Studies", *The Hudson Review* 53, no. 2 (2000): 242.

[19] W. Cohen, "Eurasian Fiction", *The Global South* 1, no. 2 (2007):100.

The two skeins overlap at significant points in the novel but nowhere more so than the bit about Benazir's childhood, when she is taken by two servants, for what is intended to be an amusing outing, to a street fortuneteller in Karachi's Abdullah Shah Ghazi Mazar (shrine). Using a soothsaying parrot (a common device for Pakistani fortunetellers) the diviner predicts that she will grow up to be the mythical "eighth queen" of Sindh following the seven great heroines/queens that have been written about in Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry[20]. The child is overwhelmed and the servants hastily take her back home, but the prophecy comes true over the course of time. Mythmaking is central to Bina Shah's overarching agendum (especially insofar as the historical vignettes are concerned), and though the eighth queen is a figment of the author's imagination the trope works remarkably well as a narrative device that, within the novel, places Benazir firmly at the helm of mythic nationhood.

There is a very marked similarity between Shah's elevation of Benazir to a mythical status, and the manner in which Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser aligned the national image of Elizabeth I with the allegorical Gloriana, the fairy queen of his famous poetic epic celebrating British Protestant nationhood. Although Bhitai did not himself immortalize an eighth queen in his poetry, Bina Shah creatively extends his imagery to endow Benazir with a mythical and regal presence that will not just dominate the province of Sindh but also shape Pakistan's political history. In the third book of Spenser's 1590 *Faerie Queene*[21] (the Book of Chastity) it is the fabled enchanter Merlin who prophesies that a royal virgin (Elizabeth/Gloriana) will reign over territories loyal to the Protestant cause. Elizabeth is portrayed as representing the culmination of a long line of monarchs stretching as far back as the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus and the legendary hero Aeneas of Troy. In underscoring Benazir's position as the eighth queen of Sindhi legend the soothsayer affirms that she will represent the glorious culmination of a long line of Sindhi heroines who have been immortalized in historical legend and poetry.

Given that Benazir is now regarded as not just a heroine but one of Sindh's major *martyrs* (*Shaheed* Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto), Bina Shah's narrative manoeuvres to place the late prime minister between the textual poles of glorification and sainthood. This was exactly how Elizabeth I wished herself

[20] Bina Shah, *A Season of Martyrs*, 249-50.
[21] Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Vol. III (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1845).

to be perceived by her people, and her royal cult gradually came to replace even the strong cult of the Blessed Virgin in Renaissance Europe. By doing so Shah makes a radical break with the harsh manner in which previous subcontinental writers (especially in the late twentieth century) depicted feminist issues and feminist figures. For instance, in "her story 'Going to Baltistan' (first published in 1998/1989), [Talat] Abbasi innovatively expresses her ironic treatment of the painful limits of female solidarity and the blind-spots of middle-class feminism through the second-person viewpoint. By placing the reader immediately and directly into the position of a young female Pakistani academic about to interview a prominent, yet hypocritical upper-class, Pakistani women's leader for her book on women in Pakistan, Abbasi forces the reader to at least momentarily literally abandon her/his academic distance and to engage in an increasingly uncomfortable dialogue"[22]. There is of course nothing wrong with following this type of gritty and determined feminist agendum (indeed many South Asian writers may feel perfectly justified in doing so), but Shah goes a step beyond general feminism in affiliating Benazir with an exalted concept of *universal* heroism that reaches its apex at the conclusion of the novel. Ali falls under Benazir's spell, and given the pains that Shah takes over establishing the prime minister's image this is not in the least surprising. In fact, it appears so natural, that Ali's fascination testifies to the skill with which Shah establishes links between the most thematically disparate of her novel's characters. Moreover, she is not restrained or limited in her viewpoints, for her depiction of masculinity is as well defined as the clearly feminist aspects of her novel. Notable for creating sound male characters (such as Ali's formidable father) as well as intriguing female ones, in depicting Ali's understandable fascination with Benazir, the "eighth queen" of Sindhi culture, Shah moves gracefully from a socio-political to a mythical dimension without compromising the position or significance of the female characters in her book.

Earlier in this essay, the author noted that taking a reductive Orientalist stance towards canonical literature is counterproductive when it comes to assessing the merits of South Asian fiction that often reflects marked influences of the British novelistic tradition. "What is most striking in [Edward Said's] study of Conrad is his *great empathy* with Conrad the exile, an understanding no doubt made greater by his own situation. We may

[22] Christiane Scholte, "Interpreters of Transnationalism: South Asian American Women Writers", *American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2006): 387-409.

even suspect that his reading of Joseph Conrad (his letters even more than his fiction) brought home to Said a deeper sense of the loss of his native land"[23]. This critical comment draws attention to the empathetic ease with which elements of Shah's work underscore her debt to a British literary (and historical) heritage, regardless of whether this debt is evinced by the "inverted *Sense and Sensibility*" structure of *The 786 Cybercafé* or the parallels between the mythmaking surrounding Elizabeth I and Benazir Bhutto. To Shah's credit she neither pointlessly struggles against this heritage, not does her writing suffer from any impedimentary self-consciousness regarding it. At the commencement of this essay the author also mentioned David Waterman's recent, groundbreaking work on Pakistani fiction of the new millennium, *Where Worlds Collide*[24]. In concluding this essay, the author deems it appropriate to underscore how the inadvertent omission of Bina Shah's novels from such an otherwise timely critical assessment is especially unfortunate. Therefore, in this essay, the salient features of Waterman's interesting book will be summarized and interspersed with the author's commentary on how Waterman's endeavour could have been considerably enhanced by the inclusion of works by writers such as Shah.

It should be noted, though, that in a day and age when the body of academe is hindered by political correctness, it is refreshing to have a non-indigenous writer such as David Waterman produce a work like *Where Worlds Collide* on diverse, young Pakistani writers ranging from Mohsin Hamid to Sorayya Khan. An academic based in France, who is well-versed in both French and English and can thus utilize textual resources in either language, Waterman presents us with a book (published by the noted Oxford University Press) that is a critical overview of contemporary Pakistani fiction and provides a specialized look at issues concerning identity, nationhood, oppression, history, and creativity. Much critical work prior to Waterman's centred on the endeavours of established subcontinental writers such as Salman Rushdie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Arundhati Roy, and Rohinton Mistry, two of whom have been briefly discussed earlier in this essay. Thus, this pioneering book does a special service to South Asian literature in general and Pakistani writing in particular by underscoring the efforts of the millennial, postmodern generation of new

[23] J. Weryho, "Under Eastern Eyes: The Relevance of Edward Said's Study of Joseph Conrad to his Critique of Orientalism", *The Conradian* 16, no. 2 (1992): 63-64.

[24] D. Waterman, *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* (OUP, 2015).

authors for whom their relationship with the country's present global image is inextricably linked to their writing skills. Both Muneeza Shamsie's foreword to the book and Waterman's own lengthy introduction provide a detailed chapter-by-chapter summary of the salient features of each writer's work examined by the author. Waterman examines novels (and, in the case of Kamila Shamsie, a manifesto as well) by Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, H. M. Naqvi, Mohammed Hanif, Uzma Aslam Khan, and Sorayya Khan, in that order. The sixteen-page bibliography, which covers a plethora of writers and critics from the subcontinent as well as the Western world, though obviously not exhaustive, is certainly comprehensive and will undoubtedly be especially beneficial to graduate students who wish to expand their horizons on post-modern South Asian literature and politics. Rather surprisingly, the author makes little use of chapter endnotes beyond including some block quotes by other critics that further expand on some of the points made in his main chapters; however, the latter are vital to the main arguments of his text (especially an excerpt from Jinnah's 1947 Constituent Assembly speech on religious freedom in Pakistan). Partly, the reason for Waterman's inadvertent neglect of commendable writers such as Bina Shah and the talented Omar Hamid is that these authors have not been critically examined in academe to the extent to which they deserve to be, and hence have not been highlighted as notable within the body of critical sources that Waterman draws upon.

Although he hierarchically arranges his chapters in order to give precedence to the work of the more famous (though not necessarily more talented) writers first, Waterman struggles with giving us an adequate description of either the specific political agendum of Mohsin Hamid or the manner in which Shamsie's craft reflects her deep personal knowledge of Karachi. In all fairness, this may well be because whatever Hamid's underlying agendum may have been as regards *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the novel's cultural impact has become larger than it originally was, thanks to the extensive hype surrounding 9/11 and Mira Nair's admirable film-version of the book. In the case of Shamsie's work, though Waterman does his best to highlight how *In the City by the Sea* and *Kartography* fictionally incorporate the complexities of Karachi's turbulent history and atmosphere, it is evident that he does not achieve more than a fleeting grasp on matters, possibly because Shamsie's erudition generally requires deeper analysis than a couple of brief chapters can offer. Also somewhat inexplicable is Waterman's focus (at the conclusion of his book)

on her manifesto *Offence: The Muslim Case*, especially since he lauds it for being a superb overview of Pakistani history. While Shamsie's political acumen is not under discussion, the works of a noted scholar and historian such as Ayesha Jalal would be a better source to look at for overviews of this nature. On a predominantly creative as opposed to rigidly historical level, given Bina Shah's expertise in portraying Sindhi culture and her positioning of it relative to Pakistani nationhood, Waterman's future critiques will undoubtedly benefit from an examination of *A Season for Martyrs*.

Waterman does meet with more success, however, when commenting on Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* and *Maps for Lost Lovers*. An utterly uninhibited writer, like Talat Abbasi, Aslam pulls no punches when it comes to depicting the gritty, ugly side of life (evinced, for instance, in one of his novels by a violent game of *buzkashi* involving a human victim). Regardless of whether he is writing about the lives of miserable and displaced expatriates or depicting characters based in Afghanistan, Aslam's hard-headed command over nationhood, global tensions, and psychology is more than adequately captured by Waterman's careful and lucid prose. Once again, it would have been beneficial for Waterman to have incorporated the manner in which Shah constructs her understanding of nationhood by means of the myth of the eighth queen. Indeed, her book has now been translated into French by the renowned publisher Actes Sud, who retitled it *La Huitième Reine* specifically to reflect the myth of the eighth queen. Since Waterman is an academic based in France, perhaps he might be prevailed upon in the future to take into account the novel's obvious popularity with both Francophone as well as Anglophone audiences.

Happily, the critic continues in a more measured literary vein for both Naqvi's *Home Boy* and Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* comprehensively underscoring the paranoia and persecution marking the former novel (a winner of the prestigious DSC prize) and the blurring between history and fiction that fuels the twisted action of the latter. Waterman's chapters on Uzma Khan's *The Geometry of God* and Sorayya Khan's *Noor* count as among the best in his book. Focused and astute, they respectively elucidate complex aspects of Islamic art and metaphysics and the connection between art and clairvoyance. Though less heavyweight than most of the preceding authors examined, both ladies owe gratitude to

Waterman in that he logically and clearly brings to the forefront the very essence of their work and contextualizes their unique writing against the backdrop of a nation "with a long and rich cultural history, which has only been a nation as such for sixty-five years yet has survived despite predictions of its failure". While it is undoubtedly vital to examine Pakistan as a whole, its provincial dynamics should also prove to be invaluable in helping to assess how regions such as Sindh (which is rich in both art and mythology) have shaped the nation's history in general and continue to shape the future of the country. It is for purposes such as this that Bina Shah's recent work becomes particularly significant to the South Asian literary corpus.

Pakistani Anglophone writers are indebted to the influence of British canonical tradition on their work, and the more successful ones have been consistently open to the manner in which this shapes their respective styles. The traditional schooling and reading tastes of such authors has undoubtedly contributed towards their ability to write in English with considerable ease and grace. Indeed, from the vantage-point of the author's aforementioned arguments one of the more unfortunate omissions of his text, insofar as its critical makeup is concerned, has to do with David Waterman's apparent neglect of the British literary heritage to which many of these writers owe their stylistic development. The point is not that either he or Muneeza Shamsie (in her foreword to Waterman's book) should have dwelt extensively on this; however, it would have been academically apt to have occasionally alluded to this matter, because it counts as vital towards shaping the general style and thematics of postcolonial literature. Regrettably, neither of them has touched upon this point. As this essay has indicated, the omission does a disservice to students and authors alike, since the issue of heritage underpins the achievements of several South Asian novelists, and Bina Shah's major novels certainly illustrate the point. On introducing his book Waterman pedagogically situates his text by noting in a forthright manner:

> It goes without saying that these narratives of Pakistan must compete in the West with the images, prejudices, and stereotypes engendered by political discourse and relayed by the press, generally focusing on Pakistan in terms of strategic security and framing Pakistan as a problematic partner in the so-called war on terror.

Be that as it may, if one reads Waterman as closely as he appears to have read the works of the Pakistanis about whom he has written, one finds that all of them without exception (though to varying degrees) demonstrate aesthetic stylistic talent (occasionally even genius) along with political insight.

In this author's opinion, and as contended in this essay, Bina Shah's work is important not simply for her finely-tuned knowledge of politics but also because of the aesthetic merits of her writing and craft – merits that owe a definitive debt to canonical British tradition. Jane Austen once likened the technical aspects of her craft to the process of intense labour on two inches of ivory with a fine brush – the metaphor may now seem dated and unfashionable, but that does not detract from its inherent beauty! On reading Shah's *oeuvre* one gets the impression that she too engages in the same type of painstaking labour in order to do justice to the fundamentally aesthetic aspects of creative writing. Such talent and efforts enhance, occasionally even transcend, the most pressing socio-political matters. It is this transcendence coupled with universally humanistic themes that enables literature to survive over the course of centuries. One should keep in mind that as worlds clash and collide within the realm of fiction, survival, timelessness, and canonicity invariably begin to take precedence once the geo-political dust settles.