

Alamgir Hashmi

FROM BILL SHAKESPEARE'S LAUNDRY BILLS TO THE BAN ON *IVANHOE*: ENGLISH STUDIES IN PAKISTAN

"I doubt any work is being done at the moment."

"No. But the works will be there. I only want to see something our men from Aiyéro have helped build in Cross-river, something to reassure me that all that is happening now cannot add up to zero."

Season of Anomy

When the present writer began his university teaching career in 1971, Departments of English in Pakistan were much the same as they had been in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ Not much had changed since Independence, except that there were fewer British or American individuals on the Faculty. We had become, it was commonly said, more English than the English, implying the redundancy of such personnel and of any earnest preaching to the converted.

The leading Departments were structured along British lines, modelled on the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London. Part of the reason for this was that many Pakistani members of the Faculty had been trained at those places, only sometimes at others; less obvious factors were embedded in the history of educational development since the mid-19th Century. The colonial university existed largely to create a mind that possessed the requisite skills but did not ask certain questions. The syllabi, the teaching methods and the *style* conformed to the demands of a covert agreement to disagree, and literary knowledge as a commodity was an essential part of the transaction to create the colonial subject (as a person). In Pakistan English was a subject for the aspiring élite; it was not uncommon at all in those days for many pursuing studies in the humanities and the social or natural sciences to have first been turned away by the English Department. Indeed, the centrality of English in intellectual life and among disciplines was so evident that fervid convictions about its cultural significance and its enduring value as a social force could easily be taken for granted. Most of those with a degree in English would go on to join the Civil Service and become (or at least be treated as) what Farid Ahmad, a member of parliament in the 1960s from the then East Pakistan, called "the ruling princes of Pakistan". The rest formed the entourage. They also formed the higher cadres of the military and filled the modern professions while working for large feudal or mercantile interests, often serving the country with fair distinction and cutting a figure in society. "Git-bit" and the degree in

English had a lot to do with it. Lord Macaulay² was correct—up to a point—but his main idea proved infertile: English-trained bureau gentlemen rarely made it to the pinnacle, to become scholars: in more slovenly dispositions, they proved neither to be “gentlemen” nor “sahibs,” just babus.³ There were very few “ladies” to speak of, little industry or organised labour (just the depressed peasantry), no media consciousness, insufficient reliable information and minimal academic contact with the world at large. Towards the end of the 1960s the system was crumbling.

The denouement came quickly when the link with East Pakistan snapped, about 1971. English had been the link language, but the Bengali language movement in the former East Pakistan, increasing regional rumbling in the West, constitutional reshuffles, industrialisation, wars with India, the Bangladeshi secession, attempts at land reforms in the rural areas and the impact of international intellectual movements—as well as the youthful optimism of the times, particularly in the urban centres—left a deep mark on society. They produced social formations and a sensibility which were to have a profound influence on all walks of life. Literature (in all languages of Pakistan), the institutions, and the professions, were to reflect this altered state to a significant degree.

English Departments in Pakistan had until then taught standard medieval-to-modern survey courses, with a particular focus on the Greats, while students were generally expected to fill in the blanks themselves and read up on the lesser lights in their own time. It was the pre-xerox era, so there were no unread photocopies to be seen lying around. As the paperback revolution had not yet reached the shores of the Arabian Sea, most books were hardbound, and “tutorials” and “sessionals” were transcribed with fountain-pens, often by an ink-stained hand. (The other hand, usually with a white handkerchief, wiped the sweating brow.) Exam questions demanded wide reading and appeared to address a far more comprehensive syllabus and a more rigorous reading regime than was evident from the University calendar or any other official document. Very few tried any medicine not provided in the test prescription; still fewer ventured outside course lists and such inventories. The invisible syllabus was much larger than was ever expected. The Honours Course through to the M.A. was both intensive and exhaustive, and allowed specialisation. To go further than that, to examine archival material for example, required transportation (not for life) to Europe or America.

The medium of instruction and the language accepted for all written or oral assignments, *viva voce*, etc., was, and has remained, English. But the country stood aloof from developments in the discipline worldwide, and probably was deliberately kept isolated from them. Despite the occasional noise, there was a

refusal to move past neocolonial status towards an equivalent national intellectual/imaginative reference and a postcolonial⁴ culture. The situation was an ironical if adequate illustration of Fanon's theory (apropos *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952; *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961), as it went against the grain and threatened for a while to undermine our value system. Colonial disparities had trained the colonised to accept that nothing of their own was respectable, be they words or objects. Besides, the *vieux jeu* fare made no new academic or intellectual demands; classroom notes were passed on as heirlooms. "English Literature" meant British literature. There was a smattering of Old English for the extra-keen and diligent; other developments, particularly following Chaucer and Shakespeare, usually highlighted the various crises and achievements of the Nineteenth Century. As regards the Twentieth Century, the student barely got past the hem of Edwardian or Georgian mores. So the situation in Pakistan was not exactly like the one at inter-war Oxford, where the latest poet taken seriously was Matthew Arnold.⁵ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse* did not seem very old to us; and in fact Q's anthology was quite good enough. Helen Gardner's *New Oxford Book of English Verse* had yet to appear, so we could rest content largely with treasures selected up to 1900. In poetry, drama and prose, full-length works were read and selections made to match the criteria outlined there, with courtly caution and Victorian generosity as to the genres—and the lengths.

Critical and pedagogical methods were of the period. Q and his generation were influential as critics, though we did witness their quarrels with their younger contemporaries. Overall, Leavis held sway. The New Critics were too new. Later would come an unwritten law against structuralist goondas. If the *biographies* of authors—Shakespeare's laundry bills written up by some local dhobin—were over-valued, courses were still guided by horse sense and by Cambridge-style close reading, leading to worthy examples of "Practical Criticism." The objective and the subjective could be neatly separated, and each could be found to have a logical, integral relationship with the other. Cartesian assumptions could be elaborated by Hartley, and the two got along fine: in the body of the text, reason made sense. The Faculty orientation, albeit never so embattled or influential as in England or America, was more liberal than imperial. The classroom could have existed anywhere in England (if not in Ruritania or Spookystan), and seemed to have nothing much to do with the life around. Hence what (if anything) happened there never went beyond the academies. Subsequent national and cultural developments (or disasters)—all of which took place with English-educated individuals in command at all levels—proved the incapacity of an English education to keep the civil society from collapse, let alone to promote or sustain it. But there was no holocaust. Language knew no silence. World War II never took place. It was a good world that way.

Since then English *teaching* in particular has been affected by the policies adopted by successive governments mainly to assert Pakistani Independence and, thus, measure up to certain dated and imperfect European notions of nationhood. These bovine measures have been generally negative and restrictive *vis-à-vis* the role of English in Pakistan, and have supported its replacement with the country's *lingua franca*, Urdu. For example, as the government of the late General Zia-ul-Haq attempted to transmit democracy to Afghanistan during the 1980s (while suspending the fundamental rights of Zia's own countrymen in Pakistan), it found in certain pseudo-religious political lobbies and Urdu enthusiasts ready allies in its appeal to nativism and to a phoney nationalism that denied status to English and all the other languages of Pakistan. As a result of such policies the standards of English underwent major changes during the 1970s and 1980s: the subject was defined as even more *elitist* than before, and demand for it increased for this reason. Other factors affecting demand were the privatisation of education, the power of the English media, and the general pull towards a global economy. Thus a main feature of the 1980s regime was a grudging "Yes" to English language but a definite "No" to English literature as a cultural preserve. The University Grants Commission at this time became the main conduit for creating the new cadres, and it was convinced that literature was to be done away with. Such coyness at the time of the country's complete absorption in the Cold War economy as a frontline state against the Soviet Union offered a remarkable gloss on the Orientalism of the Orient. Western agencies involved in planning with Pakistani officials even relished the smirk as a *modus vivendi*, as it seemed to promise both greater spread and wider engagement of the educated unemployed of Britain and the U.S.A. As no other sector of life, Higher English studies in the country had to pay the price of Oriental affectation and Occidental complicity. On the one hand, such stringencies and larger cultural developments which impinged on the subject caused the decline of English literature teaching but, on the other hand, the jolt the discipline received caused it to reconsider what it was all about, and this was salutary. The experience helped to relocate the classroom in the postcolonial state of Pakistan⁶, and as the medium of instruction itself became a subject of debate, language studies and language-teaching matters became substantial areas of research. This coincided with a generational succession to national leadership, whereby a large number of those involved in the teaching of English had been trained in Pakistan and in the United States, Britain, or another Commonwealth country.

But the factors responsible for this development were not just internal to Pakistan or anterior to the present professional configuration. Widespread as it was, English now had current literary usage and weight in many cultures; the objective situation had superseded the colonial rationale and colonial

inhibitions about its dissemination, and now demanded different approaches. In the early 1970s in Lahore I was part of the first committee to take steps to mend the postgraduate English syllabus of the University of the Punjab and its affiliated colleges. That was when the "Commonwealth Literature/American Literature" option was introduced. My association with the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation also led to an on-going on air lecture series in British, American, and Postcolonial literatures, as well as to a broadcast English literary journal which was Pakistan's first outside print. I continued the academic work begun in Lahore during my years of exile in the West, where I taught British, American, and Commonwealth/Postcolonial literatures, and writing. In the meantime, the student intake of the universities in Pakistan was also changing, with students coming from more diverse social and academic backgrounds, and improved gender ratios confirming a 1970s trend. The increasing popularity of the A Level and O Level courses, particularly since the 1970s, underlined the British and Commonwealth aspects of the discipline, raising awareness at crucial points. Language and linguistics became nearly as strong as in the 1960s. It was realised that comparative studies involving the literatures of Pakistan, other less well-known literatures in English, and European literatures, in addition to that of the British Isles were now more pertinent areas of study within English Departments. The Government College and the Forman Christian College in Lahore⁷—premier seats of learning in Asia since the Nineteenth Century—along with some other institutions were engaged in developing programmes along these lines in the 1970s. Their impact was unmistakably conducive to revisions elsewhere. By the 1980s, Departments of English all around the country were planning specialisations in areas of their choice.

From the south to the north, the picture across the universities was kaleidoscopic. As modern and postmodern literature was not much studied, links between postmodern and postcolonial features of Twentieth Century writing remained rather vague to the Pakistani student. But if little advance was made there, other avenues were explored and some new ground was broken. Karachi already had a programme in British and American literature and linguistics—it kept to that and added ELI. The Department of English in the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, under the headship of the present writer, wrote out a syllabus with concentrations in British, Postcolonial, and language studies. Multan found language-teaching studies and British and Commonwealth literature to be of particular interest. Quetta continued with British literature and expanded its language programme. Shortly before his sudden death in 1987 Daud Kamal at Peshawar had planned a re-designed M.A. and M.Phil. programme in English, Commonwealth, and Postcolonial literature. In the mid-1980s a larger but a similar programme was begun within the ambit of English and Comparative Literature at the Quaid-i-Azam

University (University of Islamabad); it offered specialisations at the M.Phil./Ph.D. levels in such areas as Canadian, U.S., African-American, Caribbean, Latin American, and African literatures. There was a further plan afoot to commence studies of Asian and Pacific literatures. Bahawalpur and Sindh continued with their mix of British and American courses and, from time to time, expressed an interest in Pakistani literature, as have some training institutes and academies for the professional and administrative cadres. Generally the approaches have been postcolonial rather than antediluvian. There is no Department of Postcolonial Literature(s), nor as yet a place for film and media studies to look into the increasingly important interactions and permutations between verbal and visual texts. However, postcolonial studies, initially imported into most English Departments under the "Commonwealth" or the "Comparative" rubric, are here to stay⁸—even though they may sometimes be placed on the official guest list.

However, the formal academy of today is extremely weak, and its intellectual lethargy is cushioned by the limited or irrelevant membership of its advisory bodies. A shortcoming of the university apparatus has been that only teachers and serving government officials hammer out the syllabi and examine candidates for degrees; they have little contact with other universities or with current scholarship or writing outside the academy, an academy which still largely persists in its neo-colonial posture. The moral bankruptcy of the institutional structure is another major issue; the man who abrogated the constitution of Pakistan in the late 1970s was awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) shortly after the perpetration of the deed. Both acts were symptomatic of a deeper malaise: John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* was *externed* from the syllabus in the 1970s; Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" was considered too tempting in the 1980s and "deleted from the syllabus"; Byron's *Don Juan*, Lawrence's *Women in Love* and Russell's *In Praise of Idleness* were treated likewise; and the Government of Pakistan followed suit by proscribing Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.

These are but a few examples of the whim of authority—more than that, fanaticism⁹ has had a free rein and has constrained good sense. Frequent changes of educational policy in the country, together with the 1980s crisis in the universities, have resulted in some major setbacks to development. Several English Departments have gone under with faint hopes of recovery, while others float on, aided by a raft or two left from the olden times. The journals have gone down, too, and all that we have published here since the 1970s can now be found in the back-files. As a result the importance to Pakistan of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Kunapipi* and *World Literature Today* can hardly be overemphasised: these journals have continued to promote scholarly interest in postcolonial literatures, including Pakistani literature,

around the world. As guardians of *cordon sanitaire* we have the responsibility to reorganise and to start again, and again. In twenty-five years' teaching, this writer is glad to say that he has learnt to be hopeful about the least bit there: anon—inshallah.

Islamabad
10th June 1996

Notes

1. Universities in Pakistan no longer conduct undergraduate teaching, which is mostly carried out at affiliated undergraduate colleges and colleges which also offer graduate studies. Some universities admitted students for the B.A. Honours Course until the early 1970s, while the (B.A.) Pass Course was taught entirely at the colleges. That practice has been discontinued since the general abolition of the Honours Course. In terms of the Western university system, the universities and the colleges affiliated to them together form our system of tertiary or higher education.
2. "Minute on Indian Education" (1835), *Thomas Babington Macaulay: Selected Writings*, edited by John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
3. Shuaib bin Hasan many years ago invoked the pedigree traits of the neocolonialists in the Dickensian formulation of "baboo and/or baboons," reversed, excepting the anomalous category of writers. See his "Pakistani Practitioners of English Verse," *The Ravi*, 65:2 (April 1974), 53–71. It can be argued, though, that the neocolonial state never allowed much genuine scholarship.
4. In this precise sense, this writer quite agrees with Edwin Thumboo that Britain is a postcolonial state (as is the U.S.A.), which discusses or alludes to itself centrally in order to describe the world, or any part thereof. The coloniser (British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, etc.) as such also experiences postcoloniality, both from chronology and condition. The progression/regression is conceived here as given above: colonial, neocolonial, postcolonial. For Thumboo's views on the subject, see his "Essential Space and Cross-cultural Challenges," a paper presented at the Crossing Cultures conference, Canberra, 6–9 November, 1995.
5. See F.W. Bateson, *Essays in Critical Dissent* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Ltd., 1972).
6. See the first chapter of my *The Commonwealth, Comparative Literature and the World* (Islamabad: Gulmohar Press, 1988).
7. Notwithstanding its current *fin de siècle* phase, the city has been an important centre for a long time and has attracted such visitors over time as Daniel Jones, Oliver Elton, Ian Jack, Angus Wilson, A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, Elizabeth Sewell, Anthony Thwaite, William Stafford, and A.R. Humphreys. Rudyard Kipling, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, Victor Kiernan, and J.R. Firth also worked here for some time.

8. The major shift from earlier contrary opinion has been indicated by a sizeable volume of recent critical writing. By the late 1980s even the late Eric Cyprian, a staunch believer in the mother-tongue and the regional languages, came round to the view that both excellence and cultural authenticity/viability were attainable in a second, third, or fourth language—even in a language with an imperial past. See Eric Cyprian, "A New Vision for Commonwealth Literature," *The Nation* (Lahore and Islamabad), 23 November, 1990, 5.
9. The tendency has been popularised and institutionalised as a phoney-nationalist alternative in order to refurbish neocolonialist structures and to thwart postcolonial development.