

## Exploring the Place of Creative Writing in the Literary and Educational Landscape of Pakistan

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### **Abstract**

*The formulation of a pedagogical praxis in the teaching of creative writing has been a vibrant research area for some years now. Yet, despite a remarkable increase in the writing courses offered at college level all over the globe, there has been little research concerning how creative writers can actually contribute to facilitate the process of skill development in higher education learners, or how the experience of creative writing practice by literature teachers might influence their own methods of instruction, especially in Pakistan. In an effort to institutionalize the establishment of creative writing as an academic field, especially in the context of current university education, there has emerged a variety of distinct practices and strategies attempted by scholars in different parts of the world.*

*Keeping in accord with the need for the institutionalization of creative writing as an academic discipline, as proposed by Harper & Kroll (2008), this article addresses the necessity for research in creative writing studies, and the implications thereof.*

**Key Words:** Writing – Writing Fiction – Creative Writing – Creative Writing Studies – Teaching – Creative Practice – Creative Writing Pedagogy – Higher Education – Pakistani English Novelists – Pakistani Fiction in English – Publishing Industry in Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

In the modern world, fiction is one of the most prominent genres associated with literature. It is a form known not only for its life-like and socio-political handling of ancient or contemporary life, but also for the imaginative prowess through which it transports the reader to dimensions hitherto unheard of (Tolstoy, 1997; LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Additionally, since non-native speakers of English

frequently find themselves in many situations where they have to use this language, being a dominant mode of communication across a large spectrum of professions and academic institutions, (Akram & Mahmood, 2007), English fiction has become one of the means through which they can attain fluency and better ways of communicative comprehension of this language (Rustam, 2010). Unfortunately, especially in Pakistan, while on the one hand the presence of English novels and short stories is deeply felt as something of a habitual trend in households, (Hubbard, 2009), not a lot is being done to make people perceive the importance of attaining creative writing skills in English language (see for instance Imtiaz, 2010a; Khan, 2011; Siddiqui, 2007). In our part of the world, Kamila Shamsie propounds the presence of a vast majority amongst us who aspire to compose literary fiction in English, so as to promote Pakistani culture throughout the world as many cultures have been doing for a long time. Driven by their personal interest in the arena of creative writing, she believes many among the average Pakistani masses possess some degree of innate natural talent necessary to create fiction, yet are still unable to do so due to limited exposure to proper creative writing skills, especially when it comes to the English language (Shamsie, 2004a).

Contrary to the situation hinted above, numerous other scholars from all over the world have realized the significance of training learners in how to acquire better creative writing skills, so they can explore various dimensions of their thought process pertaining to their particular traditions. In their research, these academics have concluded how a proper pedagogical model can provide higher education learners with a motivational context where they can develop themselves as writers (see for instance Bell & Magrs, 2001; Clarke, 2008; Harper & Kroll, 2008; Mansoor, 2010; Monteith & Miles, 1992; Stern, 1991; Khan, 2002). Often this line of research involves a collision of the twin areas of creative practice and creative pedagogy (Murphy, 2011; Sheppard & Thurston, 2002-2003), with numerous scholars systematically contriving to label Creative writing training as unnatural, the process comprising of complexities that can neither be understood nor taught (Atkinson, 2003a; Gallaher, 2009; Evans, 2009), which other scholars would like to dismiss as a 'myth' (Bell & Magrs,

2001, p.1; Donovan, 2008; Neale et al., 2009; Oates, 2003), followed by still others who believe in the presence of laws, rather than rules, that describe how fiction is processed, and the only thing academics could do is guide students to establish an understanding of those laws, through practice (Cox, 2005; Haven, 1999). Recent work by Bell & Magrs (2001), Burroway (2003), Corbett (2007), Harper & Kroll (2008), Khan (2002), Mansoor (2010), Monteith & Miles (1992), and Vanderslice (2011) has begun to explore how a properly managed outcomes-oriented creative writing training through various exercises could be a useful means to achieving further good practice. In this context, to what extent does such a training workshop pay off?

### **Creative Contribution by Pakistani Novelists in English Language**

Salam (2011) sees the trend of creative writing practice, not to mention its publishing market, as a rather recent development in Pakistan, even though he feels the same has been institutionalized in much of continental India, and the rest of the globe for quite some time now. As such the notion of ‘creativity’ in terms of developing its corresponding association with ‘academic writing’ is something that has not yet widely spread to every corner of the nation (Naeem, 2010). Having said that, Azam (2010) believes we cannot, however, undermine the vivid significance of the fact that we are surrounded by a huge network of writers who have given creative practice a firm grounding, especially in the context of popular fiction in English. Drawing on research encompassing the contribution of Pakistani novelists over the last century, Hashmi (1990) claims that numerous writers all over the country have acquired impressive creative skills that make it possible for them to compose ‘vibrant and fine body of writing in English, whose generic and formal traditions go far back into the nineteenth century British fiction worthy of receiving international recognition’ (p.48). Singh (2009) agrees with Hashmi when he reflects on the presence of a ‘more derisive and richly empathetic feel’ about Pakistani English fiction, especially when compared to the vast bulk of contemporary Indian writing in English. To top this off, Hubbard comments how it’s high time for Pakistan to commemorate its rapidly increasing fictional ventures, and to take pride in ‘the beginning of a new love affair – mature and thriving ...

the Pakistani writers can no longer be treated as literary stepchildren – they have found, through vision heart and sheer talent, a unique and beautiful voice of their own’ (Hubbard, 2009).

In the world of creative writing, therefore, Pakistan has made a kind of progress that can be deemed worthy of consideration. ‘From Zulfikar Ghose’s *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967) – “the first cohesive, modern English novel written by a writer of Pakistani origin,” (Azam, 2010, p.8), to the work of Bapsi Sidhwa, Adam Zameenzad and Sara Suleri, to the present-day novels of Kamila Shamsie and Mohsin Hamid, there has been a gradual blossoming’ (Tranquebarindia, 2011). A vast majority of female writers of Pakistan have been successfully able to study and scrutinize this ‘sixth most populous country in the world (the second most populous Muslim majority nation), and the beholder of rich and unique cultures’ (Manaf, 2006), through their English novels and short stories. These writers deal with the multifarious issues of Pakistan such as its rising poverty, its idiosyncrasies and immobile government policies that they encountered in their daily lives (Manaf, 2006). Coupled with this wide array of thematic concerns is their varying choice of narrative techniques; from Realism to Allegory, from fantasy and fairy tales to Surrealism and the Stream of Consciousness mode, Manaf (2006) asserts how professionally they have employed it all.

With her novels like *Ice Candy Man*, *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa goes to show the various phases Pakistan has gone through, starting with its partition from India (Singh, 2005). Her portrayal of different communities that existed in the pre-partitioned subcontinent of Indo-Pak, such as the Parsees, the Sikhs, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians, reveals how each culture dealt with the issue of partition in their own terms (2005). Through her description of characters from every walk of life, servants, governesses, butchers, knife sharpeners, gardeners and zookeepers to the rich, and powerful politicians; from radio broadcasted speeches of political leaders, ‘scraps of news gleaned from newspaper headlines and adults quoting Nehru, Gandhi or Jinnah without really knowing what the words mean;’ from educated and sophisticated individuals, to a world of juvenile delinquents, her works reveal the Pakistan in its existing political and religious environment

(Manaf, 2006). With his works, states Ahmed (2009), celebrated filmmaker, novelist and short story writer, Hanif Kureishi, highlights the twin issues of ethnicity and patriotism. His novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* won Whitebread Award, and was also telecasted as a BBC series. Likewise his *Intimacy*, a passionate family oriented novel based on the aftereffects of parental tensions on their two young sons, was made into a movie which won two Bears at the Berlin Film Festival in 2000/2001. If we take a look at the contemporary scene, a rather recent writer like Khadija Mastur, author of *Cool, Sweet Water* (1999) and *Inner Courtyard* (2005) incorporates widespread concerns, based upon indigenous as well as universal issues such as domestic violence, Pakistani immigrants living abroad, and the shortcomings of hasty industrialization and its effects on communities. Due mention should be given to Sara Suleri, who is currently a professor of English at Yale University. Born and bred in the pre-partitioned subcontinent of Indo-Pak, she talks in her memoir, *Boys Will Be Boys* (2003), about her personal life as she spent there, while simultaneously presenting an elegy of her father, and several details pertaining to the subcontinent's socio-political history (Manaf, 2006). Shehryar Fazli, a graduate of McGill University and the creative writing program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has marked the beginning of a new era with his debut novel *Invitation*, which has been 'received with much enthusiasm' (Tranquebarindia, 2011).

Additionally, 'in the present day trends of creative writing, works in English language have a special place. More and more young writers have shown willingness to write in English language' (Nazaria-i-Pakistan, 2001). Much of this in turn is supported by Singh (2009) on similar grounds, as well as the South Asian Observer, which endorses 'its boom-time for fiction in Pakistan' (Shamsie, 2010).

### **Pakistani Fiction in English and the Global Literary Landscape**

In the first decade of the 21st century alone, quite a number of Pakistani English novelists have been reported to have attained numerous international awards, with a minority having been shortlisted for similar honour (see for instance Urdu Art: Cultural Heritage of Pakistan, 2011; Daily Jang, 2011). Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) won the Betty Trask Award and was a finalist for the

PEN/Hemingway Award. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) was also shortlisted for the Booker in 2007. Kamla Shamsie was shortlisted for the John Llewelyn Rhys award for her third novel, *Kartography* (2002). Uzma Aslam Khan was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia region) for her second novel, *Trespassing* (2003). British-Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam won the Kuriyama Prize for his second book, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) (Urdu Art; Cultural Heritage of Pakistan, 2011). In the same vein, Tranquebarindia (2011) establishes Mohammad Hanif as an impetuous writer whose *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) won the overall Commonwealth Best First Book Prize in 2008. Bina Shah, the renowned author of two novels *Where They Dream in Blue* (2001) and *The 786 Cybercafé* (2004) and a collection of short stories, *Animal Medicine and Blessings* (2000), has given us the *Slum Child* (2010), published in Italy where it reached No.3 on the paperback bestseller lists. Her latest work of fiction is *A Season for Martyrs*, which won the 2010 Un Mondo Di Bambini literary award in Italy (Flipkart, 2011). Singh (2005) sees Kamila Shamsie as a prodigy, having published four novels by the age of 32. She is the author of three novels, *In the City by the Sea*, *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography*. She has received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature (Pakistan) and has twice been shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys/ Mail on Sunday Award (UK) (Shamsie, 2004a).

In short, today Pakistani literature is being extolled with terms such as 'a corona burst of talent' (Tranquebar, 2011), its writers being commemorated on the basis of their voraciously frenzied work, which is admired by critics all over the world. Hence a lot has been done in the field of Pakistani fiction in English. Yet for some the writings in English still lack both in substance and in variety, as the analogy made on the current situation by Pakistani author Shehryar Fazli goes, 'Well, from the looks of it, it is still high noon for Pakistani authors' (Salam, 2011).

### **Dearth of Pakistani Novelists Writing in English**

Despite the apparent onslaught on Pakistani fiction, there is still a visible scarcity of novelists writing in English in Pakistan. It's a nation where, 'one is accustomed to seeing a handful of the usual names

tossed around (namely Bapsi Sidhwa, Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie) when talking about English fiction written by local authors' (Imtiaz, 2010a; 2010b). Likewise, in his response to an essay on Pakistani literature by Muneeza Shamsi, where she has presented her readers with a long list of forty-four Pakistani writers in English (Kamal, 2005), Amardeep believes the classification 'contemporary Pakistani writers in English' embraces something which is a kind of 'geopolitical marker,' perhaps failing in the test of compatibility to the actual corpus of Pakistani English texts, since the list is Anglo-Pakistani in nature (Singh, 2005). What is of particular importance here is the fact that the majority of the writers mentioned in Shamsie's list, if not all, aren't even based in Pakistan. They belong to a privileged class of the Pakistani society, who have received higher education in foreign institutes, and have been active abroad. See also for instance (Shamsie, 2007b; Ahmed, 2009).

Sawnet (2011) provides us with a list of writers who are Pakistani by birth alone, and sometimes not even that. Thus for instance, Aamer Hussein was bred in India, and moved to London. Bapsi Sidhwa lives in Houston, USA; Nadeem Aslam lives in North London; while Moniza Alvi, brought up in the UK, now tutors for the Open College of the Arts and lives in London. Additionally, Moazzam Sheikh is currently a librarian in the Art/Music/Recreation department at the San Francisco public library; Soniah Kamal was born in Karachi, Pakistan, but has been actively staying at various other places in England, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and all over the United States. Talat Abbasi studied at the London School of Economics, and has since 1978 been living in New York, where she works for an international organization; Tahira Naqvi currently resides in the United States, as a teacher of English for nearly fifteen years; she also taught Urdu at NYU and Columbia; Sorayya Khan was born to a Dutch mother and a Pakistani father in Vienna, Austria, grew up in Islamabad, Pakistan, and went to the USA to receive her undergraduate education, and is residing in Ithaca, New York (Sawnet, 2011). Humera Afridi, was born in Pakistan, raised in the UAE and is now based in New York; Sabyn Javeri-Jilani lives in London; whereas Shehryar Fazli spent many years in North America (Tranquebarindia, 2011).

Surprisingly enough, a writer such as Zulfikar Ghose has been described as the first modern English writer of Pakistan, when 'his only association with Pakistani nationality is the fact that he was born in Sialkot, and is a Muslim,' but has never lived in Pakistan, and is currently lecturing the University of Texas in America (Singh, 2005). In an interview with Jussawalla & Dasenbrock, he clearly points out that he does not write about a particular culture at all. He is unable to comment on what he does write about, if anything. He admits to being forced into exile, since his childhood, and it's a condition thoroughly imbued in his mind set to such an extent that he can never have a homecoming; and lastly, he has no attachments to any country, nationalistic or otherwise, and is not at all fostered with any concerns to the world either (Jussawalla & Dasenbrock, 1992). If the only criterion for recognition as a Pakistani author is birth, then Singh (2005) believes renowned Indian author Khushwant Singh, and Pakistani author Saadat Hasan Manto, should be recognized as vice versa as each was born in the others' territory. Ahmed (2009) builds a similar argument for majority of Pakistani English Novelists, in that his list also includes writers publishing in the UK and USA, i.e. and not Pakistan (Post-Independence/ Post-Colonial Pakistani Fiction in English: A Socio-political Study with Focus on Twilight in Delhi, The Murder of Aziz Khan, Ice-Candy Man, and Moth Smoke, pp. 57-62).

### **English Fiction and the Publication Market in Pakistan**

Speaking in terms of creative publications in English, Shamsie informs us about the presence of numerous printing houses that publish Paki-English language fiction in Pakistan today. Unfortunately, their print runs are small, and distribution limited (Shamsie, 2007b). However, in all of this, Shamsie still discerns the importance of a slowly emerging 'home-grown' publishing base, which has already launched the careers of several writers (2007b).

Over the past few years, Pakistan has witnessed a pervasive emergence of national journals, weekend magazines, and English Dailies that showcase creative output of writers. Thus we have the *Literary Review*, and *The Life's Too Short Literary Review* (Imtiaz, 2010a), *The Herald*, *Pakistani Quarterly*, *The Nation* (Lahore), the *Muslim*, the *Frontier post*, *The Star* and *Eveningstar* from Karachi,



and *Dawn group of Newspapers*, to name a few (Naeem, 2010). Additionally, publishing houses associated with *Asian Institute of Fashion Design Karachi*, British Council Arts project titled *Literature Matters*, *PENPC (P.E.N. Pakistan Centre)*, and *ASR Pakistan*, not to mention some university journals, such as *The Journal of the English Literary Club* (University of Peshawar), *Venture* (University of Karachi), and the twin journals titled *Ravi* and *Explorations* (Government College Lahore) (Naeem, 2010) have also come to the forefront to publish the works of Pakistani writers and even critical articles and reviews of those works. Even in India, as has been reported by Chiki Sarkar, who is the editor-in-chief of Random House in India, ‘Pakistani writing in English’ has currently entered the publication market, thus pointing to its widespread access among the readers in the Indian subcontinent as well (Singh, 2009).

However, other than these, as Imtiaz (2010a) and Sikandar (2010) state, we hardly have a noteworthy publishing market or substantive critical books on creative writing practices in Pakistan, a state that even our writers seem to be aware of (Imtiaz, *A Short Story of Fiction*, 2010a); ‘the writings about creative writing being a precious few and far between, are mostly unavailable in libraries, with only the odd good article or review in a publication actually getting at its subject and putting the reader in a frame of mind appropriate to the reception of an event’ (Hashmi, 1990, p.48). Likewise, Naeem (2010) deprecates how ‘there is very little Pakistani criticism of this new literature in existence,’ a thought also echoed by Ahmed (2009) who claims frustration at the ‘lack or absence’ of critical studies on Pakistani English fiction. In addition to this we are similarly informed about literature only in odd newspaper reviews or brief commentaries here and there, while researchers are constantly being hampered by an unavailability of a ‘systematic study’ to conduct their research on creative fiction (Ahmed, 2009, p. 16). What is worse according to Naeem (2010) is the unintelligibly vague nature of publications on creative writing practices in English, which renders it practically impossible for anyone to follow all English fiction that is being published in the country. Consequently, the majority of our future writers belong to classes whose only link to English literature is either their teachers, or pirated copies of English works, or even to some

extent television media that airs English plays based upon the writings of some great literary author. These students have hardly been able to avail enough opportunities to mingle with creative thinkers of the Western World, just as they have occasionally had thought provoking exposure to the writing skills involved in any creative process. Hence there is a serious need to involve more and more young writers in creative writing activities and projects (Ghafoor, 2012). Given that a majority of our young creative talent cannot avail an opportunity to go for creative writing workshops, or get feedback regarding such trainings being offered anywhere within Pakistan or elsewhere in the world, we are inevitably left with a few concerns. Is there any way we could still be able to get such students trained so that in the near future we may be able to beget English writers of lesser-privileged Pakistani stock? And if there were indeed a possibility, then how?

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to consider how research in the field of creative writing in Pakistan stands at a crossroads. On the one hand we have a crossway that leads us to view any research based on development of creative writing modules and students' creative writing skills as 'an academic anomaly' (Tate, 1964, p. 182), since the field, as Donnelly (2012b) informs us, may provide us with something entertaining, but does not necessarily generate anything new in our existing knowledge banks. Since it's merely a shuffle or a re-arrangement of a prior knowledge that we already have, and since development of creative writing course modules may not necessarily supply us with something new, the concept of research becomes a blur. Furthermore, it seems to be a discipline that does not follow 'the same research requirements (or research methodologies) of its neighbouring disciplines in literary and composition studies' (2012, p. 2). On the other side of the road, we have a group of scholars who believe that Creative Writing possesses a rather complex and distinctive character, which renders it impossible for the field to be connected to a 'particular type of learner or learning' (Harper, Introduction, 2006, p. 1). The same applies to its content for research as well.

### Implications

It may not be feasible to see Creative Writing as solely a 'Western Higher Education phenomenon' to be traded to the non-West (Harper, 2006, p.1). The implication here is ideas relating to the field could be imported from the non-native English speakers from elsewhere as well. The same applies to its content for research. In universities and colleges all over North America, Australia, the United Kingdom, 'and elsewhere beyond the Western world,' the field has seen gradual change in its genetic and research makeup (Harper, 2006, p. 1). The purpose behind such research, according to Donnelly (2012), is to provide us with new knowledge 'adding operational significance to the field' (p.2). Donnelly supports contemporary research to be conducted on Creative Writing pedagogy due to three reasons.

- a. Any research in developing creative writing course material, and the ways they should be administered in higher education institutes, will 'welcome intellectual analysis that may reveal new theories' (Donnelly, 2012, p.2)
- b. Such research 'will have important teaching implications and insights into the ways creative writers (from diverse backgrounds) read, write and respond' (2012, p.2).
- c. Even though a set 'curricular design of creative writing programmes continues to offer value-added writing and reading strategies' for students who want to develop their writing/reading skills, Creative Writing still remains in its 'nascent phase' and must therefore 'undergo necessary inquiries and research into its field in order to fully develop and be measured as an academic discipline' (p.2).

This is the basic reason why, in the UK, students are now being encouraged to conduct scholarly research in Creative Writing not only in 'the traditional categories of poetry, fiction, and playwriting, but can also link it with science, critical theory, journalism, or the teaching of creative writing,' (Beck, 2005; cited in Swander, et al., 2007, p. 14).

The same stance on the need to conduct research in creative writing pedagogy is echoed by American practitioners, in order 'to determine the future direction of the way the subject is taught at all levels' (Dawson, *The Future of Creative Writing*, 2007, p. 87). In American universities, despite the widespread proliferation of Creative

Writing programmes following the Second World War, creative writing remains to serve as ‘a practical studio training for aspiring artists rather than a research oriented discipline for future intellectuals and teachers’ (2007, p.87). Due to this, the system has become subject to enormous criticism with regards to ‘the role of Creative Writing in the American academy and its impact on the scholarly and literary culture’ (p.88). Citing Kelly Ritter (1999, p. 208), Dawson supports research in Creative Writing that can ‘be re-configured towards teacher training, specifically the ability to teach undergraduates in the field’ (The Future of Creative Writing, 2007, p. 87). For him, ‘the future of this discipline resides in how it theorises and manages the traditional nexus between research and teaching in the modern university’ (2007, p. 88).

Other than in the British and American context, in the last decade or so, Creative Writing has increasingly and inevitably become the subject of research interest from the pedagogical point of view, in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and seems to be also developing in Asia-Pacific countries (Dawson, 2005). The researchers’ justification for the same is to draw upon current literary and cultural theory to develop new pedagogical methods, and to examine the role of Creative Writing in the contemporary humanities (Introduction, 2005, p. 1). Dawson also approaches Creative Writing ‘not as a practice (creativity), or as a synonym for literature alone, but as a discipline: a body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting this knowledge’ (2005, p.2). In India, as well as certain parts over the Middle East, research in Creative Writing Pedagogy has fostered at a gradual yet a surprisingly strong pace. See, for instance, Rollason (2006) and Azerbaijan University of Languages & UNESCO (2010).

Unfortunately, especially in Pakistan, while on the one hand the presence of English novels and short stories is deeply felt as something of a habitual trend in households, (Hubbard, 2009), not a lot is being done to make people perceive the importance of attaining creative writing skills in English language to composing the same (Imtiaz, 2010a; Khan, 2011). On a serious investigation into creative writing pedagogy in Pakistan, it would quickly become evident that this is one field that is not only marginalized within the literature

courses in universities throughout the country, but is in fact excluded altogether. Recent statistics indicate that the twin fields of Mathematics and Information Technology across Pakistani universities foster the highest number of applicants for postgraduate scholarship examination, while Creative Arts is left with the lowest number of applicants, which reflects on the state of education (both in terms of quality, and quantity) in this field (Siddiqui, 2007). 'There are very few institutions that impart education in Creative Arts and again they are limited to only major cities of Pakistan, i.e. Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad' (Siddiqui, 2007). Additionally, even in the cities mentioned above, Khan (2011) believes creative writing is mostly recognized in schools, and there also learners are neither 'being provided with sufficient classroom practice in various genres of creative writing' (2011, p.111) nor are their activities being assessed as per the assessment protocol of the creative arts.

Contrary to the situation hinted above, numerous other scholars from all over the world have realized the significance of training learners in acquiring better creative writing skills, so they can explore various dimensions of their thought process pertaining to their particular traditions. Through their research, these academics have concluded how a proper pedagogical model can provide higher education learners with a motivational context where they can develop themselves as writers (see, for instance, Bell & Magrs, 2001; Clarke, 2008; Harper & Kroll, 2008; Imtiaz, 2010b; Mansoor, 2010; Monteith & Miles, 1992; Stern, 1991). And this is what various future studies ought to be built on.

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