

URDU TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: THE SELECTED ESSAYS OF C. M. NAIM. By C. M. NAIM. pp. 273. Delhi, Permanent Black, 2004.

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For the past forty years C. M. Naim, now professor emeritus at the University of Chicago, has been, along with the late Annemarie Schimmel, Ralph Russell, Frances Pritchett and Muhammad Umar Memon, a leading scholar of Urdu literature, explaining its joys and its genius to a world increasingly ill-equipped to understand it. This book contains essays embracing the range of Naim's interests, from the traditions of humour relating to Akbar, his sidekick, Raja Birbal, and Mulla Do-Piyaza, through to the impact of the war of 1965 on Urdu literature in India and Pakistan. Several themes run through the essays. Three, for instance, deal with reading, translating and understanding poetry, the *ghazals* of Ghalib, the "pseudo-dramatic" poems of Iqbal, and the art of the Urdu *marsiya*. In the last case, through careful textual analysis we are shown how the recitation of the Shi'i tragedy of Karbala is designed not to leave the listener in despair but in exultation. Other essays reveal how a sense of self-disgust as political decline, sharpened by the influence of "Victorian values", has led many from the late nineteenth century onwards to fail to value justly the literary forms of the courtly era, whether it be the *rekhti* genre in which the poet, usually male, adopts an exaggeratedly feminine voice "full of linguistic, social and bodily details specific to women", or the ready acceptance of pederastic love in the "pre-modern" *ghazal* in which the attributes of a boy on the brink of manhood might have an especial erotic charge – "no pleasure", declares Abru, "lies in kissing the lip that has no 'verdure' of the down." Two essays celebrate the courage of those who gave voice and action to women. There is his study of the prize-winning novels of Maulvi Nazir Ahmad in which he elucidates Ahmad's unprecedented storyline of women as bearers of a protestant ethic and sustainers of family and community. There is also his notable article in which he rescued one Bibi Ashraf from obscurity, and tells of how in the mid-nineteenth century, against all the odds, she taught herself to read and write, and later on through sheer grit sustained herself as a widow, passing on her skills to other women.

Throughout this collection there is Naim's scholarly mark: all current readings must be approached with a proper scepticism. In dealing with the Akbar, Birbal, and Do-Piyaza stories, he illustrates the extreme care needed in making any deductions from these folk traditions, showing how they have matching models in the Islamicate lands of West Asia and how the very same stories were in use in some of the Hindu courts of southern India. Through most of the essays as well there is the sense of trauma experienced by the Urdu-speaking world in the half century after the Mutiny uprising: the pain as Urdu writing moved from a highly-developed courtly art to an activity benchmarked against British criteria of usefulness, a pain which led Altaf Husain Hali in his *Musaddas* to dismiss the poetry that had gone before as "worse in stench than a latrine". It is a pity that essays as good as these, and by a scholar acutely aware of the importance of "context", should not themselves have had the benefit of an introduction adumbrating their own context, intellectual and otherwise. An index would have been welcome as well. This said, the ready availability of such an important body of work within the covers of one book is greatly to be welcomed.

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