

Alamghir Hashmi, ed.
THE WORLD OF MUSLIM IMAGINATION
Islamabad: Gulmohar, 1986. Pp. 270

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PAKISTANI LITERATURE: THE CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH WRITERS
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Reviewed by Amin Malak

When the Egyptian novelist Najib Mahfuz (also transliterated as Naguib Mahfouz) was awarded the 1988 Nobel Prize for literature, the non-Arab literary world has a long last become aware of the merits of this astonishingly creative writer. As if anticipating this inspiring event, the 1986 anthology of short stories, poetry, and critical essays entitled *The Worlds of Muslim Imagination*, edited by Alamghir Hashmi, contains the English translation of one of Mahfuz's early short stories, "The Mummy Awakes." First published in Arabic fifty years ago, the story bears the distinct hallmark of Mahfuz's artistry: the blending of symbolism with realism, of subtle irony with harsh political satire, of nationalism with religious humanism, all this while remaining always lucid and accessible to the average educated reader. In addition to Mahfuz's "The Mummy Awakes," the anthology contains four other short stories from different parts of the Muslim world: one written originally in English by the Kenyan Ali Mazrui; one by Danarto, translated from Indonesian; and two translated from Urdu, written by Khalida Husain and Muhammad Salimur R Rahman.

While one doesn't know the criteria for selecting specifically these five short stories, one can nevertheless detect a common concern with social and political issues; moreover, subtle or explicit religious motifs run throughout these stories. Of particular interest is Khalida Husain's "Story of the Name" in which the author illustrates gently but effectively the loneliness and anxiety that permeate her heroine's life.

The final part of the anthology contains six critical essays, four of which deal with fiction. The four represent lucid and perceptive analyses of selected works: P.J. Stewart's and Roger Allen's essays deal respectively with Mahfuz's impressive novel *Children of Gebelawi* and "The Mummy Awakes"; Bruce King's contains quick commentaries on the novels of Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, Zulfikar Ghose, and Salman Rushdie; and Adele King's deals with Islam in Francophonic West-African fiction. I find the latter particularly informative because it introduces a topic on which not much is available in English.

Alamghir Hashmi's other anthology, entitled *Pakistani Literature: The Contemporary English Writers*, follows the same format as of *The Worlds of Muslim Imagination*: a selection of short stories, poetry, and critical essays. Relatively slim, this anthology focuses (for no clear reason) on works done after 1965; however, in the preface to the 1987 second edition, Hashmi states that the

year 1947 "seems an appropriate time mark to locate the beginnings of Pakistani literature, though important work by Shahid Suhrawardy and Ahmed Ali antedates the national tradition by no less than a decade" (1).

The anthology contains five fictional pieces of varying tones and motifs. Ahmed Ali's "Under the Juniper Tree" is an excerpt from his latest novel *Of Rats and Diplomats*, published in 1986: essentially a diatribe against the hypocritical shenanigans of diplomatic life, its narrator's acerbic tone rivals that of V.S. Naipaul's. Athar Tahir's "Encounter" is a Chekhovian story tinged with irony about the angst of sexual suppression in a restrictive society. Shuaib bin Hasan's "Shore Leave in Port Said" is the most enjoyably humorous of the five narrative pieces in the anthology; it renders sensitively and compassionately the experience of migration and return. The only story that sticks out as the odd choice is Zulfidar Ghose's "With Dmitri Tiomkin: A Short Story"; set exclusively in the Southern U.S., it does not relate to the anthology's Pakistani context. The same thing can be said about one of the two essays in the "commentaries" section: Beatrice Stoerk's "New Fiction by Zulfikar Ghose" which deals with Ghose's experimental Brazilian trilogy. (The other essay is Carlo Cappola's "Recent English Poetry from Pakistan.")

It is indeed difficult, in this swift survey, to render fair credit to the cardinal merits of some of the works published in these two anthologies, most of which are not easily accessible to the average reader in English in the West. Despite a few understandable shortcomings (such as typographical errors and the omission of the original date of publication for most of the items) such a valuable effort should be continued by Hashmi and others to bridge the grand cultural divide between the Western and the Islamic worlds: a tough task and a tall order indeed, but they have to be fulfilled.