

Literature festival – literati descend on Islamabad

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I gave several talks at the Islamabad Literary Festival organized by Oxford University Press over April 30 and May 1. It was great fun. Here are some samples of what was written on my presentations.

ISLAMABAD: At the first day of the Islamabad Literature Festival, English literature by Pakistani writers figured prominently.

There were two sessions, on either side of Ahmed Rashid's lively non-fiction session. And it was revealed that he had also written poems in his more youthful days.

He chaired the session about 'English novels in the new millennium', as the talk and slide presentation by Muneeza Shamsie was entitled. She gave a beautiful presentation of a dozen writers with brief summaries of their main works, some 50 in all.

Ahmed Rashid was quick to ask why she hadn't mentioned Daniyal Mueenuddin, the author of the much acclaimed novel *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, and what about Mohsin Hamid's books? His book *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been filmed, and just released. It turned out, though, that Muneeza Shamsie was taken in by Mohsin Hamid's works, including the mentioned book and his latest one *How to Get Filthy Rich in Emerging Asia*.

A participant wanted to know if many of the English language writers belonged to the Pakistani diaspora living abroad. Muneeza Shamsie explained that the term is not clear; many writers live abroad for a while, then, back to Pakistan, and may be they go abroad again. In many ways, it is up to the writer himself or herself to define their own identity. "And, does it really matter as long as the literature is valuable?"

Openness was shown regarding different genres, too: poetry, novels, short stories and even non-fiction literature. In the past, writers and readers were more rigid and formalistic. In our time, with new media, everyone has become more open.

It is perhaps not obvious that a country like Pakistan, with at least half a dozen major languages, and many more vernaculars, should also have an English language literature. Yet, English is a major language in Pakistan, and Muneeza Shamsie explained that when she was young, in her teenage school years, she came to know that English was easier for her than Urdu.

Today, many youngsters attend English medium schools and are likely to feel more comfortable in that language than in the mother tongue, especially if they also continue further education abroad, in a globalised era.

Athar Tahir gave a brief historic overview of English literature in the subcontinent, explaining that in certain ways English had taken the place of Persian. There was also a debate about using the colonial language on English.

He drew attention to the vibrant late 1960s and 1970s and said schools should teach more about Pakistani writers who write in English.

"That is how they become great," he said. "We teach about African and Indian writers." Poet Harris Khalique underlined that, "It is not about language. Poetry is my passion, Pakistan is my country and South Asia my larger area."

"This part of the world has always been multilingual," he said, and added that he thought that young people had little interest in Urdu poetry, and less understanding of it. "It is important to use English, too," he said. "It

puts me in contact with the wider world. And if a Polish writer, for example, is translated into English, I can also read his works,” he said.

Ilona Yusuf emphasised the role of the publishing houses. “I was writing in isolation when I was young,” she said, expressing the hope that publishing houses could be contact points and forums for writers. Poet Harris Khalique also underlined this point.

Ilona Yusuf said she had appreciated the good work done by (the now defunct) Alhamra Publishing and its leader Shahiq Naz. Recently, a Canadian poetry journal entitled Vallum published as a special issue about Pakistani poetry, edited by Ilona Yusuf and Blain Marchand as guest editors. It was agreed that such efforts are important.

“Sometimes there is the notion that there is not a big enough market for English language literature in Pakistan. But I don’t believe that,” Muneeza Sahmsie said, and drew attention to the essential role of schools in giving more attention to the new literature.

Ahmed Rashid said there was a need for translation of English language literature into Urdu, which was more common earlier. He reminded the attentive audience of many hundred listeners that for that to happen there was a need for subsidies and sponsorship