

## Literature in English and Politics

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Literature is not just good stories, smartly crafted plots, great words and heartfelt words in poetry and prose. Literature is much more, and genres are many, and even combinations thereof. In our time, we must include new and social media, in addition to the slightly older visual media of films and TV and the audio media of radio, records, tapes and CDs. Yet, the books remain special even in our multi-media world. This was underlined by several panelists and many participants at the second day of the large and most successful Islamabad Literature Festival yesterday.

In a session about “Pakistan in the Western Imagination: What are the Challenges faced by Pakistani English Literature”, the moderator Muneeza Shamsie asked Ahmed Rashid if he had considered using non-fiction in his work. He stressed that he was a journalist, not a writer, but he did mention that he was also writing poems, and he underlined that he read a lot of Pakistani, Indian and other literature. He explained that when he came of age as a journalist, he took particular interest in reporting about the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. He felt it an imperative to tell the truth and explain what was happening. For some periods and in certain places, he was the only reporter present.

“Even today, it is very important to tell facts and explain facts, yes, and search for the truth”, Ahmed Rashid said. “There is still little knowledge and much misunderstanding among people.”

Later, Ahmed Rashid stressed that to write about everyday issues, if we do good or bad to our neighbours, that is also political. Politics is not something that can be compartmentalized.

Poet Ilona Yusuf said that she was never a political person, but that she would also write about political items, such as her interest in writing about people sometimes avoiding seeing the truth. She also mentioned that she had written about the problems in Swat, and she recalled that when in south-western America, she had been surprised by people’s interest in and lack of knowledge about women’s situation in Pakistan, including violence against women and marring of women’s faces.

Shehryar Fazli, a political analyst who has also written non-fiction, said that he thought that poetry and the spoken word could travel a lot further than prose does. And Ilona Yusuf then underlined that in Pakistan that would only apply to Urdu, not to English. And she said that part of the reason for the power of literature is that great literature comes out of what is closest to oneself.

Furthermore, the panelists seemed to agree on the power of the written word, even in our multimedia time. Ahmed Rashid and Shehryar Fazli both underlined that we all remember the books we have read, especially in our youthful years, even more than the films we saw.

Many questions raised were about the image that was created of Pakistani in the West. Some participants seemed to feel that Pakistan was often given a raw deal, with emphasis on negative aspects rather than the positive and softer aspects. The journalistic view that was underlined was that reality could not be changed, it had to be reported. Ahmed Rashid said that the messenger, the journalist, should not be blamed. Also Ilona Yusuf also underlined that it was not the duty of the writers to soften images. It is their duty to write what they see, the way they see it, in a search for truth.

Although the impact of the English language fiction writers in the West remained inconclusive at the several sessions at the Islamabad Literature Festival, and one would have liked some academic and systematic analysis of the theme, the writers managed to give a good picture of the importance of the broad and varied English language literature at home and in the West, including such written by the Pakistani diaspora abroad. It was beyond the scope of the Festival to discuss concrete projects that in future could help give a more complete picture of Pakistan abroad. Yet, it may well be important to do that. Ahmed Rashid emphasized that he saw

Pakistan as a diverse country, needing multi faceted pictures painted.

In separate, political session entitled “Pakistan at the Crossroads” showed that perhaps writers are as good as scientists and analysts at debating Pakistan’s burning issues. Yet, insights were presented by the strong panel including Rasul Bakhsh, Rais, Mumayun Gauhar, Riaz Khokhar and the moderator Ashraf Jehangir Qazi. Yes, it was an all male panel, and that was a mistake in our time and age. It was emphasized that in the years to come, we should not only be critical to the politicians in the country. Ashraf Jehangir Qazi said that he thought the decentralization efforts had been very impressive, and he also thought that in the years to come, after the coming elections, many other achievements will be made. He also underlined the importance of the civic society’s role and people’s participation.

These two sessions, the latter one indeed serious and topical, were softened by an hour of selected readings in English by Zia Mohyeddin. The largest hall in the hotel was packed by hundreds of young and old participants. The elegant and sometimes folksy stories were first class Pakistani literature in English, engaging everyone. Many had come in particular for that session. And that was how it should be at a large literature festival: people come to receive inspiration and food for thought, get a smile on their faces, feel warmth and gain insight, yes, and simply enjoy the time. And then, perhaps make a visit to the bookshop on the way home, or one of the other days in the near future, and feel that literature gives all additional meaning to life.