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Politics and Prose

Shandana Minhas

Panel: Politics and prose. The author discusses how the current political landscape affects their work.

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By Shandana Minhas (Pakistan)

Politics in Pakistan is different from politics in most other places. We don't just talk about politics, we experience it in real time. In light speed. In shock waves. It happens in bedrooms, it happens in cars, it happens in classrooms, it happens in parks. There have even been unconfirmed reports of it happening in parliament. For us, politics is not just a question of life and death. It's a question of life, death and the afterlife. Everyone has an opinion, and an agenda, and often, a gun.

In a climate like this, it is hard to remain a simple storyteller. There is the temptation, even the responsibility, to become an activist or an ambassador. Because somebody needs to speak for the dispossessed and the disenfranchised. Somebody needs to counter the dominant, insular narrative. Someone needs to tell the world we're not a rogue nation, we're a nation of loveable rogues.

So it is that in a perusal of the columns, essays and blogs I have been writing since 1997, I see that I started out writing about clean air, the black market in quality mutton, the natural superiority of the Chinese DVD player, what happens to empty perfume bottles, how cricket is the silliest sport known to man...but for some years now have been writing instead about why fundamentalism, sectarianism, patriarchy, intolerance and injustice are bad things. It isn't just my subjects that have changed, my style has changed too. The joy with which I once skipped merrily through fields of gleaming, healthy words with pigtailed and a basket, has been replaced with cynicism, anger, despair and a scythe. If met me in a bar I wouldn't buy me a drink. Unless I thought the perfect end to the night would be to go home and shoot myself in the head.

But there is an easy fix to this particular malaise, and it is evident in the way I have chosen to jump in and out of public discourse back home. The truth, as Orwell once pointed out, is that politics corrupts language. The longer a writer stays exposed to the 'slogans and clichés' that permeate political landscapes, the higher the chances of permanent damage to the writers own structural integrity. Prolonged exposure results in a lessening, a weakening, a diminution.

Sensing this, I initially kept the political reality around me out of my fiction. My early work was all about the internal lives of women. Women with absolutely no interest in politics, even if it was evident to even the most careless reader that their lives were ruled by it.

But, in the last few years, that has changed. My second book is about two little boys who go camping with their parents, end up getting lost in Afghanistan, kidnapped in Pakistan and arrested by Americans on suspicion of being terrorists. It's a comedy.

The novel I am working on right now is about a Punjabi who comes to Karachi and for the first time finds himself on the wrong side of the ethnic divide.

The political landscape, it seems, has finally crept into my fiction. And put its feet up. And won't give back the remote. I think I can tell you when I first realized it was already in the room and decided to look it in the eye. November 10, 2010. When a suicide bomber struck a little too close to home, and people I loved narrowly escaped death.

They rebuilt their home, but I've never put that wall I'd erected in my heart against stories of violence, loss and survival back up again. I could tell you why I built it in the first place, but I'm a writer, not a blurb.

I cannot talk about how the political landscape affects my work as a writer without talking about how it affects my life as a reader. I'd like to read books from other countries, without the equally burdensome baggage of malice or good intention, or the stamp of the religious and cultural identities of their authors.

Unfortunately, the political landscape still largely dictates what we will find on bookshelves and in libraries, and who we will meet at our festivals and our conferences. In a landscape like that, it is hard to learn. And in a landscape like that, it is seductive to ascribe, to the act of writing itself, a certain nobility.

I still can't tell you which of those is politics' biggest attack on prose.

Let me leave you with a bittersweet truth. There *is* a way in which proximity to chaos, uncertainty, power games and bloodlust enriches as well as diminishes Pakistan's writers. It has done so since 1947, when Saadat Hasan Manto was alive, and it will continue to do so when we are dead, buried or being whitewashed off walls. This gift that keeps on giving is an unforgiving, savage sense of humor. We have long since moved beyond 'laughter in the dark', and now inhabit – happily – laughter AT the dark.