Chapter 11

From a Slave Garden into Cyberspace: Mirza Athar Baig’s Novels _Ghulām Bāgh_ and _Ṣifr Se Ek Tak_

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A Most Unusual Bestseller: _Ghulām Bāgh_

In recent years, some novels by Pakistani writers, all of them originally written in English, have made it to the international book market. As is the case with the success of some Indian writers, which perhaps prepared the ground for the Pakistanis, this exclusively English-language group, however, eclipses a whole range of authors writing in other languages, some of whom would easily deserve as much attention among English-language readers as their colleagues.

Although in Pakistan Urdu is the mother tongue of only a small part of the population, Urdu publications—books as well as periodicals—by far outnumber those in all other languages, including English. The highest sales rates are recorded for digests and popular novels, which fall into three main categories: social/romantic, thriller, and historical/Islamic novels. Some authors are also quite successful in the more sophisticated (and higher-priced) sort of fiction that transcends the categories mentioned above.

After the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period in which Urdu fiction had been dominated largely by critical social realism, a phase of experimentation set in which became most prominent in the short-story form. Since then, various modes of expression have evolved and have been coexisting more or less peacefully in all genres. Under the influence of Latin American writers, and simultaneously equipped with indigenous narrative traditions, Urdu writers started to include elements of magical realism. Here it needs to be stressed that Urdu fiction is perhaps expected to be parochial by outsiders, but contemporary Urdu writers are usually well read in English and are aware of the state of the art in international fiction, as far as it is available in English. And not only this—many authors are well aware of recent theoretical debates, be they postcolonial, poststructural, postmodern, and so forth. The novels to be discussed here are ample proof of this fact.

Mirza Athar Baig was born in 1950. He has published a number of short stories in literary magazines and written approximately one hundred TV plays and fifteen drama serials, but basically his output is academic. He has been teaching philosophy since the 1970s and is now chairman of the philosophy department.
at Government College University, Lahore. His first novel Ghulām Bāgh (The slave garden [2006]) became an instant hit and saw three editions within two years. Mohammed Hanif of Exploding Mangoes remarked in the introduction to an interview with the author: “The novel has found a loyal readership outside the literary circles, as well, and has in fact achieved cult status, so much so that some of the readers have named themselves after the characters in the novel.” He also reports that by some “it has also been described as the confusing rants of someone who has spent too much time trying to teach philosophy to Punjabi students.”1 And indeed this success comes as a surprise considering the fact that according to Arif Waqar it is “not an easy read,”2 a claim, however, that the author refutes. It is considered a highly philosophical novel, with long stretches of reflections and ruminations about almost everything (or, as Baig says, about nothing), and particularly about human communication, language, and writing, aggravated by sprinkling “outlandish jargon here and there.”3 The author, tongue in cheek, also describes the novel as follows: “Well, I have made a little effort to understand the totality of our collective experience as reflected in my personal experience,” and later on, more seriously, “So the illusion of Ghulam Bagh being about everything springs from my belief in the limitless textual and cognitive possibilities inherent in this wonderful genre of the novel.”4 In the interview with Arif Waqar he summarizes the most obvious theme of the novel as the “phenomenon of dominance, ranging from intersubjective and intra-subjective levels of the individual to their collective manifestation at the historical, cultural and civilisational planes.”5 He also defends his novel against the criticism that there is too much philosophy and too little of the other paraphernalia of a novel by stating: “There’s philosophy behind every piece of creative writing. The end product does not always have to be understood easily and by all. Fiction that can involve its readers by making them a part of the writer’s inquiry into what’s happening in the story is good fiction. I have attempted to do just that by changing the meanings we associate with words, idioms and philosophical premises, the terms of reference we use to communicate.”6

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3 Baig, “Some friends have ended all contact with me after the publication of the novel.”
4 Ibid.
5 Waqar, “Writing Philosophy That Sells.”
6 Ibid.