

## Notes for *Pakistaniaat* about *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*

By David Waterman

Readers of *Pakistaniaat* may be interested in the journal *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, appearing twice each year as the official publication of the Society for the Study of Commonwealth Countries / Société d'Etude des Pays du Commonwealth, based at the Université Paris III / La Sorbonne Nouvelle, <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/commonwealth/>

While of general interest, the current issue (Volume 31, number 2, Spring 2009), largely consecrated to Anita Desai, also has two items sure to appeal to a Pakistan-specific audience, the first an article by Muneeza Shamsie, entitled “Covert Operations in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction,” and secondly a review of *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women*, edited by Muneeza Shamsie, by French researcher Laetitia Zecchini.

The abstract for “Covert Operations” reads as follows: This paper explores the American-Pakistan-Afghanistan encounter portrayed in three recently published incisive Pakistani novels: *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Moshin Hamid, and *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam. Together they mirror the region’s history across thirty years and challenge the polarization of nations (15).

*Exploding Mangoes* (2008) tells of Zia’s last ten days in power, before the mysterious air crash which killed him, the American Ambassador Arnold Raphael, and many Pakistani generals. Nearly everyone seems to have had a possible motive for the assassination, carried out by a bomb concealed in, as the title suggests, a case of mangoes. As it turns out, other conspiracies to kill Zia were brewing, including a saber attack during parade, although the most serious plots are, as usual, credited to the CIA and ISI. The CIA’s so-called war against the evil empire of communism resurfaces in *Wasted Vigil* (2008) as well, through the representation of ruthless agents and American complicity with dictators, and in *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) an American agent has come to Lahore to track down, and probably kill, Changez, in retaliation for his subversive activities. While the paper does wander occasionally from its “covert operations” thesis, there remains plenty of information and insight to be gleaned as concerns three of the best current Pakistani

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novels and the historical matters they take as their subject. Shamsie rightly arrives at the conclusion that Aslam, Hanif and Hamid “reveal a new generation of writers which does not flinch from revealing unpleasant truths [and] engage with some of the most pertinent issues of today” (24).

This same unflinching regard for contemporary history is also the subject of the women writers who are collected in the anthology, *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women*, edited by Muneeza Shamsie, and reviewed for *Commonwealth* by Laetitia Zecchini of France’s CNRS, the national scientific research center. The review is largely positive, as it should be (see the review of *And the World Changed* in the current issue of *Pakistaniaat*), although I must disagree with one point made by Dr. Zecchini when she asserts: “The most successful texts are indeed those which do not try to make a political point, whether feminist, progressive, or “post-colonial,” but instead resist the temptation of *translating* Pakistani reality for a Western audience” (155). There is indeed a dominant notion in France of what literature “should” be and where it should remain, a notion which often isolates literary representation from larger domains such as Cultural Studies, an approach which encourages readers to look beyond the text. Personally, I’m more than willing to accept, on equal footing, a text which is less literary in favor of a text with a political imperative or a journalistic argument, but this is, of course, a reflection of my training in the US. This minor disagreement aside, many thanks to Laetitia Zecchini for an excellent review.