

Ali Seth's *The Wish Maker*

Reviewed by David Waterman

The Wish Maker. Ali Seth. New York: Riverhead Books / Penguin, 2009. 421 pages. ISBN: 978-1-59448-879-5.

Ali Seth's first novel is a homecoming, familiar to readers of contemporary Pakistani fiction, of the young adult who has been abroad for a period of university study, and returns to a world which is at the same time "going in circles" and "Basically it's all changing [. . .] it's all up for grabs" (12; 22). The protagonist Zaki Shirazi grows up without a father, an Air Force pilot killed in a flying accident, in a house of strong-minded women; his mother is a politically active journalist who is "friendly with unusual women. Most drove their own cars and went to offices" (56), while Zaki's cousin Samar Api finds herself navigating the space between the conflicting roles of rebellious adolescent and conforming young woman. In fact, it is for her wedding that Zaki returns to Lahore, and much of the political struggle described in the novel has to do with the situation of women, whether educated journalists who step on toes or household servants sacked for not remembering their place. *The Wish Maker* relates the saga of this largely feminine family in the context of domestic and geopolitical turmoil in Pakistan, going in circles while forever changing. Zaki himself is compared to Benazir Bhutto, who provided much hope to these same women, and who also was young when her father was killed (63).

Pakistan's social and political situation receives much attention, as various elections and military coups are described, sometimes in detail, sometimes assuming basic knowledge of contemporary Pakistani history, such as the reciprocal nuclear tests of India and Pakistan in May 1998 (328), or the censorship of PTV during martial law (333). This kind of reflexive, "knee-jerk" censorship is not limited to periods of military rule, as the recent Lahore High Court's instructions to the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority to block Facebook and YouTube sites illustrate (see *Dawn* 21 May 2010)¹. The 1971 war and the secession of Bangladesh are not left out either: "'They want their own country,' Mabi had said after reading the newspaper. 'They are asking for it.' Papu said, 'They won't get it.' 'Mabi said, 'It's ridiculous.' And it was one of those moments when, by belittling the desires

of other people, they had happened to agree with one another.” (77). The sentiment of unity based on a common enemy is not lost on Ali Seth.

Memory plays an important role, not only in the structure of the novel’s narration, with recollections of time past and family history, going back to before Partition yet later describing television images of 11 September 2001 (395), but within the larger context of Muslim history as well, as Zaki and his mother tour the Alhambra castle in Spain: “‘this is what Muslim culture used to be about: art, music, architecture. It used to be progressive’ [. . .] ‘So what happened?’ [. . .] ‘I don’t know,’ she said, looking around at the roaming tourists, who were mostly white. ‘I suppose they forgot where they came from. They forgot their history, their culture. It happens to people sometimes. They forget’” (281). Collective memory (and collective forgetting) go hand-in-hand with individual experience, an intrinsic and intimate connection which Ali Seth exploits masterfully throughout the novel, but which comes more visibly to the surface from time to time: “News from home makes you aware that the flow of memory has stopped. A life you no longer live is a life you no longer know. But you rely on memory to inhabit, however falsely, what now lies outside your experience; and every homecoming involves the puncture of memory’s airy bubble” (413). Memory thus escapes the bonds of simple nostalgia and souvenirs, locked away in an airtight compartment, and becomes a key element in the structuring of human experience, the creation of meaning, even the construction of reality itself, however unreal the building blocks of memory may be. Daadi, now the matriarch, understands this perfectly, as she ruminates on the nebulous zones between memory, dreaming and reality, after having seen images of the military coup on television: “She thought it was a dream [...] But when she returned she was filled with dread. If she slept now she would dream again, and she knew that it would lead to mutations of the things she had seen in the day, which were mutations of the things she had seen in her life” (346).

Memory and history intersect as well, making the link to political, even geopolitical, turmoil in Pakistan. Although Partition and the 1971 war appear only briefly in the novel, these events nevertheless provide the background whose presence is understood yet goes without saying, the foundational violence in which the country came into existence in its current form, and which plays such an important role in defining national identity, or what it means to be Pakistani. As an adolescent, Daadi experienced Partition directly, losing her best friend Amrita in the process: “The Hindu family next door, the Parsi gentleman who lived in the secretive double-story house and ran the laundry on Mall Road, and Amrita’s family, a Sikh family – all of them had locked their houses and gone away” (347). Daadi’s personal experience is linked almost immediately to the larger issue of political realities: “By summer the madness was everywhere. The British were leaving and

there would be two countries, India in the center and Pakistan on each side – a long strip to the left called West Pakistan, and then to the right, after one thousand miles of Indian territory, another Muslim land called East Pakistan” (351). While many other factors, including economic fairness and even-handed political representation, come into the formula of dissention and the desire for separation, it is clear that the geographic divide of 1947 set the stage from the beginning of Partition for tension between Pakistan’s two wings. Direct mention of the 1971 war is limited to one page, where we are reminded that Indira Gandhi, “an evil genius,” had sought Russian aid on the international front, while on the home front Daadi and her family seek shelter in an L-shaped trench they’d dug in the yard (367). Such understatement in no way diminishes the significance of these events, but rather highlights their status as social representations; everyone within this particular socio-historic context seems to understand what is meant without the need to explain or justify what goes without saying. Partition and the war were of course traumatic events, leaving indelible traces on individual and collective memories, transmitted across generations, and often recollected with difficulty and a pervasive sense of loss.

The Wish Maker succeeds, as does much contemporary Pakistani fiction, by not dwelling on the large-scale trauma as such – it becomes too easily abstract – but instead by examining their effects on a human scale, especially on the family. At the end of the novel, the rebellious adolescent Sami has become a young woman, getting married in the traditional style, despite having been nurtured in an environment of unconventional women. Zaki has come home for the wedding, and illustrates his profound understanding of the complex web of social forces and personal fulfillment with a simple question to Sami: “‘You love him?’” She contemplates a while before answering, and her reply shows an equally insightful understanding of what is happening: “‘He loves me,’ she said, ‘and I’m happy.’ I said, ‘Good. As long as you’re happy.’ ‘I am,’ she said. ‘Good.’ It was over, and we were quiet.” (420). It was over, going in circles and forever changing, and nothing else needed to be said.

Notes:

1. <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/editorial/19-facebook-furore-150-hh-09>