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David Waterman, *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* (Karachi: Oxford U. P., 2014), 260 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-940032-4

Reviewed by **Daniela Vitolo**

As a consequence of the fact that the first relevant group of Pakistani authors writing in English appeared only in recent times, their works still represent a new field of academic studies. Examining the Pakistani narrative written in English implies that, from the thematic point of view, the whole body of works that falls under the definition of Pakistani Anglophone fiction is characterised by a number of recurring elements. Indeed, the plots of the novels and short stories focus on historical events and current political facts showing how they affect the lives of the common man. Therefore, it seems that the authors aim at stimulating the readers to reflect on certain political and social issues. Like all the major studies on the subject, David Waterman's *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* also develops around the central themes of history, politics, memory, nation and identity. It analyses the narratives written in English by Pakistani authors in the last fifteen years devoting each chapter to the discussion of novels by Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, H.M. Naqvi, Mohammed Hanif, Uzma Aslam Khan and Sorayya Khan. Meanwhile, the last chapter moves from Kamila Shamsie's essay *Offence: The Muslim Case* to provide a brief history of the events that have determined the life of Pakistan and to restate one of the main points of the book. It claims that in such a literary production the inseparable relationship between history and narrative is manifested in the fact that the second is "very often fiction informed by history and operating as social critique" (15).

In the introduction the author distinguishes between a 'first wave' of writers, constituted by Bapsi Sidhwa and Sara Suleri, and a 'second wave', which is the object of his work. While, on the one hand, Waterman analyses the novels as a powerful means to deal with a common memory that is at the foundations of today's Pakistan, on the other hand, he looks at the ways in which other contemporary issues – like migrations and the role of Islam in politics and society – are dealt with in fiction. According to the author, the *trait d'union* between novels based on different themes is the family, not only because individual lives are always influenced by the family network, but also because the family appears as a metaphor for the nation. "The story of the family", he writes, "is ultimately the story of Pakistan; the two cannot be separated, and given that much of contemporary Pakistani fiction is historical fiction, the family is ultimately the foundation of the history of Pakistan" (5). Therefore, it seems that *Where Worlds Collide* chooses as *fil rouge* of the book the issue of the relationship between history

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and individual life experiences, as they are lived inside family contexts. However, it seems difficult for the reader to trace such a *fil rouge* within the work. It also seems that the author uses the term 'history' when he refers both to the still-open questions arising from the past and to a series of political issues pertaining to a contemporary phase. Another point that emerges from the approach chosen by Waterman is that the issues related to history and politics, represented through the perspective of individuals and their family networks, is always related to questions concerning personal or collective identity. Indeed, as the studies conducted on the subject have frequently pointed out, Pakistan's identity crisis is one of the main issues that subdue the whole literary production. It seems, in fact, that the social criticism of the novelists refer both to Pakistani and Western society, and is related to a need to discuss the personal and the collective Pakistani identity.

Waterman proceeds in the dissection of the narrative works using a rich amount of theoretical tools. The presence of so many references to varied theories and theoretical fields does not simply allow the author to support his assertions, but also opens to further reflections about the novels. Notwithstanding, at times the theoretical references are simply touched upon and the reader might find it difficult to contextualise them within the discourse. As this might affect the reader's complete comprehension of the text, the same thing can be said about the fact that at some points a reader not acquainted with the works discussed, might have some difficulty at understanding the plot of the novels. As Muneeza Shamsie notices in the forward to the book, the chapters concerning the literary works are not arranged according to a grouping that might have a chronological base. At the same time, it seems that neither are the chapters organised following a thematic logic nor do they follow any other clear structure. As a consequence, on the one hand, the whole work can appear to lack a solid structure that the author might have determined in finding deeper connections among the novels. For example, he might have chosen to look at the ways in which different forms of border crossings, frequently related to political events, contribute to the shaping of identities. On the other hand, as Muneeza Shamsie says, this can allow the author to "interweave ... broader linkages of concept, perception and identity" (x) thus constituting a possible base for further studies.

As Waterman focuses on the frequently discussed relationship between history, family and identity, his book undeniably introduces new points in the discussion of such issues. Notwithstanding, as the author himself says in the introduction, Pakistani literature in English offers more food for thought. As the most evident elements emerging from this narrative have been analysed in several works and will be focus of new discussions, new studies might move beyond this evident network of related issues to explore other questions that can be found in these same narrative. For example, they could focus more on how gender issues are treated or on the ways in which the novels depict the construction of personal and communal identities as related to urban spaces. Above all, Waterman's study analyses the

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Anglophone narrative as detached from the literary context within which it has been produced, thus following the path opened by other previous works. Nevertheless, it seems necessary at this point to begin to study such narratives within a broader perspective. Given the rich number of literary traditions developed in the different languages spoken in Pakistan, both the ‘first wave’ and the ‘second wave’ of writers should be placed within the local literary context. Furthermore, it would be useful to look at the Pakistani fiction in English within an historical perspective. It would mean not only to discuss how it has developed since its beginnings, but also to consider in which manners it has been influenced by other past literary traditions and movements.