BOOK REVIEW

Annemarie Schimmel; PAKISTAN-EIN SCHLOSS MIT TAUSEND TOREN (Pakistan—A Castle with a Thousand Gates), published by Orell & Fussli Verlag, Zurich, 178 pages.”

“A castle with a thousand gates, numberless windows-wheresoever my eyes turn, I see the splendour of the Lord.

This verse of Shah ‘Abd al-Latif of Bhit has not only provided the title for the book under review, it is truly the leitmotif of this introduction of Pakistan to the German reader. Professor Annemarie Schimmel, Doctor of Comparative Religions and Ph. D. in Islamiyat, Sitara-e-Quaid-i-Azam, needs no introduction to the Pakistani readers. On a number of visits to this country she has lectured on Iqbal and her recent talks on Ghulib (televised in February 1969) left a lasting impression on her audience. Arabic-knowing readers cannot but adore her for the superb editing of ‘Fikrun wa Fann’, leading cultural magazine in our Prophet’s language. Its latest issue is dominated by her penetrating study of Ghalib, beautifully illustrated by large colour reproductions of Sadequain’s sketches. As a German, Professor Schimmel has thus introduced Ghalib to the Arabs as she had previously introduced Iqbal to the Turks (with her Turkish translation of Javid Namah’).

The book under review is addressed to a general public of well-educated readers. In many ways it is a very personal account of her experiences in Pakistan during five visits with extensive journeys through practically all parts of the country. From the first page onwards it is evident that the author cherishes an intense love for the Indus Valley. The book is much more than a sincere expression of gratitude to a people that has welcomed her with unique hospitality. The still young orientalist is emotionally tied to Pakistan at least as much as she is to her homeland or to Turkey where she taught Islamic literature and history for four years at Ankara University. This fact is all the more noteworthy since Professor Schimmel is a widely travelled scholar with a knowledge of at least seventeen languages and their literatures. At present she is running an institute of Indo-Muslim culture at Harvard University.

Prelude

Her skill as a writer is evinced in the very prelude entitled Bhambhore. The author took part in the ceremony that marked the beginning of excavations at this historic site—“the birth — place of Pakistan”. Her immersion in Oriental literature naturally adds to the beauty of presentation: Mr. Mumtaz Hasan’s fluent recitations of Baladhori’s Arabic narration are reproduced in a clear and elegant German. The reader gets the feeling of being present at the occasion, a feeling that continues to the end of the book.

It is difficult to say where Professor Schimmel’s work reaches its climax. The charm of Quetta in springtime, the historic splendour of Lahore with its captivating gardens, the fascination of Gandhara and the chivalry of her sons, the poetic sweetness of Bengal with its music-loving people and majestic crocodiles, the promise of the ever-
expanding Karachi, which is as much a metropolis of cultural life as it is of commerce. But one thing is sure, the author’s proper home in Pakistan is Sind. Not that she does not feel bothered by the afflictions that make life in this part of the world miserable at times: heat, dust, and flies are mentioned time and again. But all that becomes immaterial against the background of history, the beauty of architecture, and the people’s love for their cultural heritage and admiration of learning. And then there is the romance of the river, the Indus. Its healing waters have their spell on the writer who loves to return to them, especially in winter, to seek refuge here from the snow and icy winds of her Northern abode. The lovely tombs at the banks of the ancient river Indus with their ever-blue tiles have so much charmed Professor Schimmel that she even wishes to be buried here. Sindhi was the first Pakistani language she learned. She took to Urdu only when studying Ghalib. Now, after translating Ghalib she has, of course, attained to mastery in the national language too.

Since her stay in Pakistan was mainly devoted to the study of Iqbal, the chapter on the ‘Allama is a profound treatise which could be published as a separate study. It is so to say, a summary of her many speeches, articles, and prefaces on the subject. This notwithstanding it fits perfectly well into the flow of her narration. Shāh ‘Abdul Latif Bhitāī, however, is her first love. Her mystic relationship to him stands above the intellectual pursuit of the philosopher’s thoughts.

But she has done equal justice to the aspirations of the Muslim masses, to the history of their struggle for a separate homeland. The endeavour to give the new State a truly Islamic constitution is well recorded with an outstanding perception for the essential issues as well as for the more subtle implication. Although the whole presentation is of a conversational type it is, nevertheless, well documented. The author lets many important personalities speak and even Maudoodi has his say.

As a lady-visitor to Pakistan Professor Schimmel was in the enviable position to meet many women of import in all spheres of life. Her account of the emancipation movement is, therefore, of greater relevance than that of most other foreigners who have written on the same subject. The author makes a brief reference to each of the leading women, starting with Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiya, Razia Sultana, Gulbadan, Nur Jehan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Nadira Begum, Zebunissa, and Sharafunissa to the Rani of Bhopal, Fatima Jinnah, Begum Liaquat Ali Khan, Atiya Begum, Begum Fida Husain, Lady Abdul Qadir, Begum Bashir Ahmad, Begum Shahnawaz, Mumtaz (Tazi), Princess Abida Sultana, Begum G. Ahmad, Begum Shaista Ikram Ullah, Mrs. Dr. Salim Khan, Anna Molka, Zubaida Agha and many others. Always eager to do justice to all, the writer quotes also Maulvi Ihtesham al-Haq and the quotation is certainly one of the most appealing things the Maulvi ever said. In the sympathetic German translation of Professor Schimmel, Ihtesham al-Haq’s words sound almost agreeable.

Central Theme

Islam is one of the central themes of this book. How could it be otherwise? An extremely wide read Islamist writes about an “Islamic” state. The reader gets an idea of ‘Allāma Mashriqi, of Ghulām Ahmad Qādīnī, Ghulam Ahmad Parvez, of Jāvid Iqbal and of the Islamic Research Institute. The author is particularly well — versed in matters related to the Sufi Tariqas, but besides, she has a special gift to characterise modernists like ‘Ubayd-Allāh Sindhi in a few sentences or even a few words which are very much to the point.
And again and again poetry and songs! Wherever the author was impressed by a poem or enrapt by a song she noted it down, no matter in which of the numerous languages it was presented. What a tremendous labour there is in these poetic translations that are, like precious gems, studded in the text of this book. Another factor that adds to the charm of the description of the writer's Castle is her subtle humour. In the world dominated by men and very often by Maulvis, Annemarie Schimmel found herself many a time "non-existent", i.e. she was completely ignored. At such occasions, instead of feeling irritated she always availed herself of the opportunity to absorb the beauty of a scenery, the sublime calligraphy of an ancient manuscript or any other worthwhile object, quite often the enormous black, white or red beard of the respective Maulvi which never failed to impress the German professor. There are also several narrations depicting humorous types of the people she has come to know so well.

Three Obstacles

In spite of all the undisputable qualities and merits of the book it is difficult for many a German reader to appreciate it for all it is worth. There are three major obstacles:

First, the author is a scholar of international repute who has, moreover, rendered valuable services to Pakistan. She is, therefore, received with a sort of glamour by the high society and all those dignitaries who flock around her with deep-felt admiration. Besides, it is undoubtedly a special feature of the young ideological state that those who assist it in the promulgation of its ideals abroad are welcomed with overwhelming affection. When Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto calls the charming professor "my favourite lady" (not mentioned in the book:) he is at the height of his patriotism as a Pakistani and a Sindhi — and probably he is more sincere than with other ladies whom he may call so for various reasons. As a scholar and a litterateur Professor Schimmel mostly moves in the circles of intellectuals. As a poet and connoisseur of oriental music a major portion of her sojourn in this part of the world is spent in adabi functions. Thus her level of experience differs considerably from most of her compatriots who visit the country for more mundane purposes, be it as technicians or as modern diplomats who envisage their function primarily, if not solely, as that of businessmen with a mere superficial concern for the ulterior components of the personality of their Pakistani partners.

But throughout the book there is no pretension that the author's level of experience is the only one a visitor to Pakistan could have. On the contrary, the writer consistently points to the individuality of her impressions, e.g., when she begins her description of Karachi with the words: I loved this vivid city (italics are mine), or when she says! I loved particularly the private musha'aras, I loved to be in Hyderabad (not: it is lovely to be in Hyderabad) and about the Pakistan Historical Society: "I liked this circle and was glad to participate in the sessions of the Historical Conference whenever I could make it."

Although Professor Schimmel is enamoured with Pakistan, she does not glorify it unnecessarily, as some German critics want us to believe. She presents a moderate picture. While writing on Pakistani women she deplores the lavishness and the snobism in some well-to-do families. But she avoids to formulate the criticism herself. Instead, she relates how members of those very families criticise their own sisters for unsocial conduct. The depressed status of women among some sections, especially in certain regions, did not impress her favourably. But being a historian of mark she views
these evils as temporary aberrations from the proper aspirations of a real Islamic society. Due to her basic sympathy with the Pakistani people her criticism is devoid of that offensiveness which too often characterises the comments of Western writers.

All this notwithstanding, it is a fact that few of the foreigners who lived in Pakistan will be reminded of their own sojourn. Anyone who reads the book before coming here will have to make serious efforts to reach the soul of the soil the way the author did. Only then can he use this book as a guide. Not that this would be so difficult, but it cannot be achieved in the isolationism of embassies or foreigners' colonies, and not without a knowledge of at least one of the national languages.

Second obstacle: the book is written in the best traditions of the Iranian 'Safar Namahs' with which the author is well acquainted ever since she began to take interest in oriental literature during her early youth. Not long ago this fact would have gone to her credit as there was a phase in German literature when such polished travel accounts, interspersed with highly learned reflections about politics, literary developments, religious trends, and social changes were very much in demand. Heinrich Heine and, of course, Goethe became the models of perfection, Now Professor Schimmel writes about Pakistan very much the way they wrote about Italy. But under the dominion of far less exacting present-day star authors like Heinrich Boll and Gunther Grass, there is only a very restricted circle of readers who can relish a book like Annemarie Schimmel's Castle, in spite of its up-to-date expression and attractive style.

Specialised Parts

Third, whereas most of the book is easily understandable to any educated reader, provided he is really interested, some parts are highly specialised. They are practically incomprehensible to a reader who is not of the author's discipline. Especially the chapter on the tombs of saints requires a profound grounding in mysticism, otherwise it is not possible to accompany the writer in her exaltation. Many of her colleagues will welcome this chapter as an important contribution to their science. They might, however, consider a number of parts as irrelevant to them, like the one about the tea-gardens of East Pakistan or the bazars of Peshawar and Landi Kotal. We should hold, though, that there is little in the book that is not in one way or the other of benefit to the specialised scholar as well. This beside the fact that it makes such good reading.

"The Castle with a Thousand Gates" is richly illustrated. It is a real pity that there is not a single coloured picture in the book. If only the photo of the tile from the Talpur tombs were in colour it would immensely enhance the artistic touch of this presentation of Pakistan.

Detlev Khalid