

Research Proposal for AIPS Short-term Research Grant 2019

Objective:

Despite the iconic stature of Jaun Elia throughout the Urdu world, there has yet to be a sustainable critique of the poet's work. This lacuna is evident not only in the field of Comparative Literature, but also in Urdu scholarship more broadly. Contemporary Urdu critics find Jaun 'interesting' at most due to his exceptional persona and the sheer spectacularism in his poetic recitations but are quick to dismiss him when it comes to the poetic craft itself – it is indeed ironic that Urdu literary critics have shied away from poets who are considered *mushaira* (poetic gatherings) performers and only given consideration to texts. Be that as it may, Jaun, at the same time, continues to enchant adherents on both sides of the Sub-Continental border; his devoted readers organize events that foreground the reading and performance of Jaun's poetry. His poetry is also very widely circulated on social media platforms. This enthusiastic reception and circulation of a contemporary Urdu poet warrants engagement with, and reconsideration of, the territories that are currently being (un)marked by the burgeoning field of 'World Literature'. In spite of its, 'inclusive', and 'universal' ambitions, the field of World Literature continues to be dominated by Western texts and theoretical frameworks and only superficially engages with the Urdu, Hindi, and Farsi literary traditions.

Like many readers of Jaun Elia, I am drawn to the way in which the poet compels Urdu literary culture to reassess its notions of history, progress, and modernity. As a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at the University of Texas at Austin, I will soon begin writing my dissertation on the art and reception of Jaun Elia; a poet whose poetic performance corresponds to the literary space shared by titans Mir and Ghalib. Yet, unlike other great twentieth-century poets such as Miraji and N.M. Rashed, Jaun was also sensitive to the politics of circulation. The formative experiences that shape Jaun's legacy are those springing from the city of Karachi. Jaun's reception and circulation in Karachi set the broader stage for him and therefore more specifically my project will interrogate the significant cultural and intellectual transformations in the world of Urdu poetics and in the poetic culture of the city that have come about through Jaun's expression. In the hopes of filling what has heretofore been an absence in the study and criticism of Pakistani, Urdu, and World literatures, I make the case that Jaun wrote deliberately to contest the accepted boundaries of decorum and nation within these traditions. I advocate for Jaun as a pivotal figure of South Asian literatures especially, whose consequential standing must be taken into account. Unfortunately, Urdu literary criticism has absolutely not figured out a method to blend the poetic performance with the literary text. I want to address this gap and interrogate the way in which performers are dismissed as non-poets. The AIPS Short-term Research Grant will enable me to initiate my dissertation project: I propose to conduct ten weeks of research consisting of archival research in libraries that house the Urdu literary-academic magazines *Insha*, *Aalmi Digest*, and *Suspense Digest* to which Jaun contributed substantially: the Ismaili Tariqah Board library, the Mushfiq Khwaja collection, the Urdu Bagh, the Bedil library, and the Ghalib library in Karachi. These libraries also possess invaluable archives of Jaun's critical works on religion and philosophy, together with his Arabic-language translations which include *Akbbar-al-Hallaj*, *Risala-e-Hikmat*, *Ismailiyyat Jazeerab-e-Arab Mein* and *Isaghoji*, and which also require serious critical (re)examination. In addition to the archival research, I will undertake ethnographic research consisting of interviews with Jaun Elia's family, friends, and members of the networks he operated in. These archival and ethnographic research trajectories are integral components of my larger project on Jaun Elia. The ultimate goal of my dissertation study is to create a holistic interpretive analysis of Pakistan's most controversial, popular, and enchanting contemporary poet in the context of literary politics in Karachi and Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Archival and Ethnographic research: One of my research trajectories will trace Jaun's literary expression through his writings from his early time of more idealistic and progressive inclinations towards his later more melancholic and histrionic disposition. The questions I want to ask are: What happens to Urdu poetry during Jaun's time and how does he further shape modernism that he inherits within Urdu literature? What is the status of Urdu literature and poetic gatherings (*mushairas*) when Jaun is writing and how does it transform especially in the city of Karachi? What can Jaun Elia and Urdu contribute, theoretically and aesthetically, to the domain of World Literature? Jaun Elia was well-versed in European philosophy as well as religious thought within and outside of Islam and since Urdu poetry has a rich tradition of idols and masters that poets look up to, how and to what extent was he able to reconcile these two seemingly incongruous intellectual and aesthetic worlds in his thought and expression? How does his poetry go on to become seemingly individualistic and personal later in his life when at the beginning he had a very collective and socially conscious outlook of things? Linked to this is the other and equally important trajectory of my research which constitutes conducting interviews with the immediate family members (his wife and his niece both of whom are writers themselves), his friends (the famous poet Pirzada Qasim), and disciples (specifically Khalid Ansari who is also the editor and publisher of his works) for whom Jaun Elia, despite the flaws in his personality, continues to become significant as an outstanding Urdu poet day by day. Needless to say, this important research pertaining to Jaun's writings from the collections in the aforementioned Karachi libraries as well as these substantial interviews could only happen in that city. The pursuit of this biographical and personal knowledge, however, is certainly not in order to reduce the profundity in the poet's poetry merely to his life and experiences. But this knowledge is important to keep in purview as just one of the modes of interpretation since Jaun came from a family of very distinguished writers and intellectuals who had a profound impact on his thought. In the prologue of his first poetry collection that was published, from the outset he interjects that the following poetry is that of a "failed man" and soon after also mentions that the reason for his destructive life was that since his childhood his ideological father did not teach him 'practical ways' of living instead taught him knowledge and books were the only worthy possessions: there would be very few poets in any language who would begin their first poetry collection in such a manner. For this research which I aim to conduct in the summer of 2019, Habib University in Karachi would serve as a propitious venue both intellectually and spatially. Its community of distinguished scholars (particularly Asif Farrukhi) and its central location within the city – which is also close to the venues where I foresee my research being conducted – makes it most appropriate for the purpose of institutional affiliation.

Conclusion (Relevance to South Asian and Pakistan Studies/Comparative and World Literature): Traditionally, literature from Pakistan is studied mostly through the exhausted lenses of either Postcolonial studies or ideological bents. Either those or the mainstream critical interest in Pakistani literatures is limited to the genre of the novel – in English – that cater to the curricula of Western Universities or the lists of "Pakistani writers" that appear in publications such as the *New York Times*. The intellectual merit of my work lies in its challenge to the arbitrary and oft-used approaches from Western critical-interpretative discourses; what is more, my theoretical analysis of Pakistani linguistic and cultural creations will also speak to popular readers of Urdu poetry. This research will present a unique – and long overdue – perspective on the ways in which Urdu poetry from Pakistan is central to shaping the country's dynamic cultural milieu in light of the resurgence of native cultural forms and objects. More specifically, engaging with Jaun Elia's works will allow my colleagues in the field of World Literature to explore and comprehend the literary Urdu scene of Karachi and of Pakistan on its own terms. My knowledge in literary theory that stems from my strength in tenets of Comparative Literature will enable me to place Jaun on a broader spectrum that he deserves. I see my project as a valuable contribution to the lineage of Urdu poetics that will serve as a window into a complex poetic subjectivity that is marginalized, artistic, modern, communal, sentimental, melancholic, and wholly Pakistani.