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Introduction

The 1990s were a particularly violent decade in the history of Karachi. Political, ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as a number of security operations, ravaged the city, which in the middle of the decade turned into an urban quasi-war zone. This study is an attempt to provide a glimpse into the life of this conflict-torn city from an inside perspective, through an analysis of the literary representations of the city's upheaval in contemporary Urdu literature.

The conflicts and violence of the said period provoked a fairly limited immediate literary response, which made it possible to include all of it – as far as the author is aware – in this study. The works analysed here include a novel, two collections of short stories and a collection of poems, written and published in 1995 and 1996, i.e. during the violence's peak period. The implicit aim of these works was to provide a literary testimony to what was happening in the city, and for that reason they are analysed within the theoretical framework of witness literature, a mixed-origin genre that emerged around the 1940s and 1950s, aiming to give testimony to the various collective traumas of the twentieth century through the means of literary fiction. To the author's best knowledge, no other study of the source texts has been undertaken so far.

The study is divided into four chapters. As the analysed texts often seek to explain the violence in the city's complex history, the first chapter is an attempt to provide a background for the events of the 1990s. It traces the historical, political and social development of Karachi, particularly in the post-Partition times and during the period of the emergence of the Mohajirs as an Urdu-speaking ethnic group in the 1980s and 1990s.

The second chapter tries to place the source texts within the framework of literary theory and within the history of Urdu literature. It introduces the conceptual framework of witness literature and its understanding of the relationship between trauma and narrative, as well as selected aspects of the

postcolonial theory relevant to the analysed texts. Finally, it introduces the source texts and their authors, providing an overview of the texts' structure and contents.

The third chapter provides a detailed analysis of the representations of the conflicts and violence in the source texts. It is structured around the issues most prominent in the analysed works, starting with an analysis of the texts' reconstruction of the past that led to the contemporary conflicts, in an attempt to understand the violence by putting it into a historical context. It then proceeds to an analysis of the epistemological problems posed by the violence, namely the issues of possibility/impossibility and dangers inherent in the knowledge of what is happening. Subsequently, the chapter moves to the study of every-day life in Karachi in the mid-1990s, taking a closer look at the impact of the violence on the individual, particularly in psychological terms, and on the city's social fabric. It concludes with an analysis of the interlinked questions of agency, ethnicity and gender in relation to the situation in the city as presented in the source texts. Conclusions are presented in the fourth chapter.