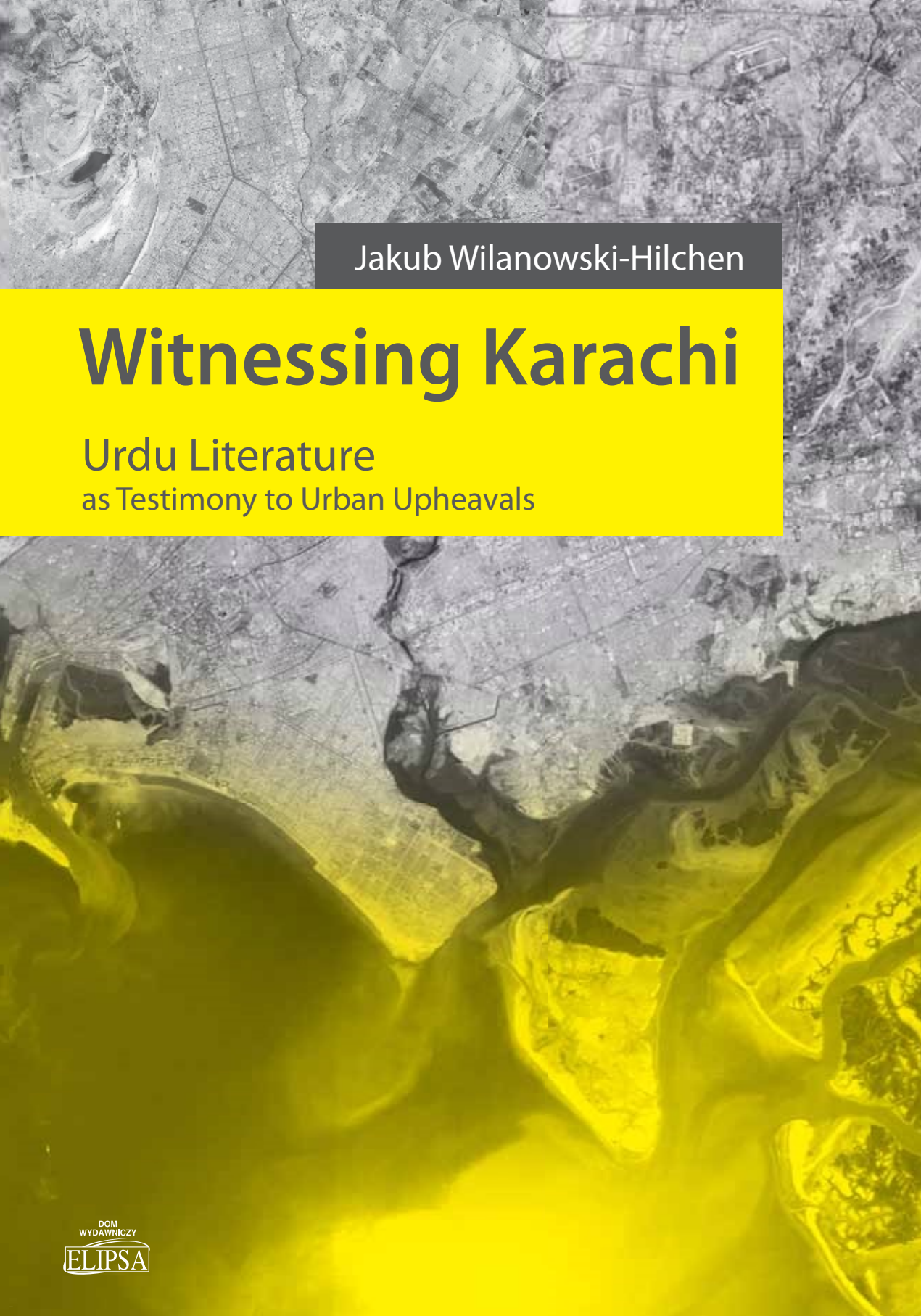

Jakub Wilanowski-Hilchen

Witnessing Karachi

Urdu Literature
as Testimony to Urban Upheavals

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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.

Transliteration

The transliteration of Urdu followed in this book, devised by J.T. Platts,[1] although not the most widespread, is the basis of most of the various transliteration systems used for Urdu today, and offers a coherent compromise between Urdu spelling and pronunciation. The two modifications introduced in this study are: the representation of nasal vowels with a tilde (˜) above the nasalised vowel (thus, *kitābẽ* instead of *kitābeṅ*), and the representation of the allophonic sound pairs of *u*/*ŏ* and *i*/*ĕ* according to common pronunciation (thus, *ṣĕḥat* instead of *ṣiḥat*, and *mŏhājir* instead of *muhājir*).

Proper names and other Urdu words with an established English spelling (like most geographical and place names, but also words like Eid, Mohajir, Urdu, Bhutto, katchi abadi) are transcribed in brackets on their first appearance, and afterwards rendered in their usual English spelling. The names of authors are also rendered in their usual English spelling, with the exception of when they appear in reference to sources in the Urdu language.

The occasionally occurring Punjabi and Sindhi words or phrases are transliterated according to the aforementioned Urdu transliteration rules.

[1] Platts 1997: vii.

1 The Historical, Social and Political Context

1.1. Introduction

Situated on the hot and arid coast of the Arabian Sea, Karachi (*Karāćī*) is the largest city and the economic capital of Pakistan. From a fishing village at the beginning of the eighteenth century, within less than two centuries, Karachi turned into one of the main commercial hubs of British India and later independent Pakistan, and currently one of the biggest cities on Earth. Its development has been due mainly to the commercial importance of its port within the proto-global economy, serving as a trading link between South Asia, Europe and Arabia.

Until 1947, Karachi's largest ethno-religious community were the Sindhi Hindus and Sindhi was the most widely spoken language.[1] This situation changed dramatically after the partition of British India and the creation of the independent state of Pakistan.[2] The city became the capital of the new country and reeled under a massive, and largely unexpected, influx of Muslim refugees and migrants from India. This wave of immigration was soon followed by the near-complete exodus of the Hindu population. The predominantly Urdu-speaking migrants from India who settled in Karachi and other urban centres of Sindh came to be called Mohajirs (*mŏhājir*).[3] After their often

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[1] For more information on Karachi's pre-Partition history, see Lari and Lari 1996, Hasan 2010, Hot Ćand 2007, Baillie 1997 and Cheema 2007.

[2] For the history of Karachi and Sindh during and after the Partition, see Ansari 2005 and Zamindar 2008. For an account of the socio-economic development of the city since its establishment until the end of the twentieth century, see Hasan 2002(a).

[3] Until the emergence of 'Mohajirs as the Urdu-speaking ethnic group' in the mid-1980s, the Urdu word *mŏhājir* designated simply 'a migrant (from India)' rather than a particular ethnic identity.