

An Interview with Aamer Hussein

By Iqra Shagufta Cheema

Recently, I got a chance to interview Aamer Hussein, the eminent Pakistani English fiction writer. He holds a degree in Urdu, Persian, and South Asian studies and has held professorial posts at Southampton University and the University of London. He is the author of two novels, *Another Gulmohar Tree* (2009) and *The Cloud Messenger* (2011). His collections of short stories include *Mirror to the Sun* (1993), *This Other Salt* (1999), *Cactus Town and Other Stories* (2002), *Turquoise* (2002), *Insomnia* (2007), *Love and its Seasons* (2017), and his latest publication *Hermitage* (2018). The works by this prize winning author have been translated into multiple languages, including Italian, Arabic, and Japanese. He frequently visits Pakistan and delivers guest lectures there as well. In this pleasant interview, we discuss his writing, Pakistan, and Pakistani literature.

Q: Were there any big challenges that you faced when you started writing?

AH: I don't think I faced any challenges at all. I was doing a postgrad degree in philosophy and psychology. I had always loved literature and I decided that in order to experience something I was reading I should try to enter the emotional state of individual characters. So I started writing pieces that became short stories. Even a year after that, I didn't have the desire to publish, or even to be read by more than a small number of people. My friends encouraged me to send these stories to small magazines and get them published. In a few years, I had enough stories to publish a book. But publishing my first book wasn't the easiest thing in the world because I had no idea how one went about the process. The first publisher who saw it rejected it after sitting on it for months. But finally, a small publisher decided to take a chance on me and asked if she could publish it And I said "yes." It was not the best decision in the world but I had a first book out that gave me enough attention. I was well known as a reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement though, so I already had a public profile. And when you publish your first collection of short stories, the question always is "when is the novel coming?" But I was not interested in writing a novel at that time at all.

Q. What makes short story a preferred medium for you? Why are you attracted to the minimalism and economy of a short story rather than a novel?

AH: I think my first love was poetry and the short story comes closest to poetry in expressing emotion, the centrality of scene, and a couple of events rather than a whole span of time. My short stories sometimes cover many years, but I enjoy the short span of time, the concentration, the focus, the ability to dispense with excessive words in a short story. When you create a baggy novel, you have to be very aware of what you are doing. It has its own space, its own time.... Even though, as a form, I enjoy reading them, I think novels are such huge creatures. Thank god for those who write them. But I prefer the economy of the short story. And I love so many short story writers too. I love some writers of American South, I love some Chinese, Japanese, and Urdu writers – I think the Urdu short story has some really fine works.

Q. In some of your short stories, characters from diverse cultures with politically similar but tense histories come together. Sometimes these characters share antagonistic national pasts, experiences of colonization, but also the roles of imperialists – e.g. Murad and Shigeo in *The Crane Girl in Insomnia* highlight the ironical politics of Japan, US, Korea, Taiwan and Pakistan, UK, and Bangladesh. What are the possibilities of interactions and coalitions that go past these burdens of contentious histories?

AH: The world that I came to as a writer, as a thinker, was a different world—there was an interest in Third World Literature in England. People were congregating in huge conferences from Latin America, from the Arab world, from Asia and the Middle East, from Africa. Many of these countries were not perhaps colonized the way we think of colonization but they had gone through hegemonic experiences. We were trying to talk to each other – very often in European languages — trying to cut out the colonial master. There was a lot of bitterness and resentment. That was the atmosphere I grew in as a writer. I wouldn't say that I feel an absence of that atmosphere. But I would say that the commodification of literature is so much greater now. And I think that some African, Latin American, Pakistani writers still write directly to what people still think of as the global center. And I do not know how good that is. Not much has changed in terms of the arguments. People are still discussing the same old histories – and perhaps they should if that's what readers require. I do think that short story writers can directly deal with human relationship and tragedies. But some of what we still dwell on happened a long while ago. I do not know if there is a need for us to repeat ourselves on those issues because our burdens keep changing. Pakistan has

had different burdens in the last few decades. Turkey, which was itself a significant imperial power once, has had different burdens too.

Q. We saw some revolutionary secularization movements in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan in 20th century (not all unproblematic). But now we are witnessing a kind of regression and a call back, reversal to “Islam”. What are your thoughts on that?

AH: It is very hard. I was just talking to an Iranian friend and he was telling me how hugely the country has regressed under the Ayatollahs. The situation in Turkey is fairly recent so analysis is still very nascent and very preliminary. We know the story for Pakistan very well. We had regression and we also have strong forces that counter that regression. I think this quarrel between the regressive forces and progressive forces has continued for a really long time in Pakistan. It might create a very dynamic system in our society. It might create stasis in some areas too; but overall, I think, if we take two steps back, we can at least take one and half step forward as well –the intelligentsia, thinkers, and those who are literate. I have also met a lot of who might be considered “illiterate,” but who are still aware of the fact that progressive education is necessary for their children’s lives. If we move beyond these issues, the country does not assail you with its regression, especially in big cities. When you go there, you are aware of the injustices, retrogressive ideas, and things like that but most of it does not oppress your mind when you move around in the country. *Wahan ja ker ghuttan nahi hoti* (One does not feel suffocated there).

Q. Don’t you think you have a different experience of mobility as a man in public spaces in Pakistan and a woman might have a completely different experience?

AH: Yes, indeed. But you see what women have achieved in Pakistan. You walk into a literature class and the majority of the students are women. I have twice lectured to all female literature classes in Islamabad – women, who are students, have Ph. D.s, have Masters, are professors. In an entirely different social milieu, on my way to Faisalabad I was served by women at a McDonalds at a petrol pump, which would have been unheard of just a few years ago. Women, given the fact that their spaces might be limited, are still achieving and doing a lot.

Q. Does the fact that majority of Pakistanis are cultural Muslims and not ideological Muslims affect this?

AH: Yes, I was just driven to Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai’s shrine from Hyderabad a month ago. It was 10:00 pm when we left Hyderabad. The woman driving the car

was an academic, there was one other woman in the car. We got to the shrine past midnight. One of our companions was wearing a head covering, the other was not. Though it was past midnight, there was nobody staring, saying anything, or doing anything. Maybe it was a particular shrine and a particular experience. But that experience was valuable to me. As a short story writer, I value these particular experiences.

Q. Sufi shrines, historically, have always held a significant place for us. What place do the shrines have culturally in Pakistan now?

AH: Shrines have always been interesting to me as memorials of people who wrote poetry and who wrote philosophy. They were intellectuals in their own way; they were organic intellectuals. So when I go to these shrines, it might be for the music, for the overall environment, for the ritual to an extent. I am not saying that I am not religious, but I have a secular attitude towards shrines. For me religion is an extremely private, very personal matter.

Q. In one of your autobiographical pieces, you wrote that the larger themes in your writing are not identity and representation, rather they are space and place.

AH: I don't know... what can we do without identity, what is identity? This is the platform from which we face the world. Even when I write a story, the focus would always be on a character's personal history which is their identity. But if we mean their social identity or political identity, then perhaps not. As someone who studied psychology and philosophy rather than literature, I will tell you that places play a big role in the construction of subjectivity. Subjectivity is crucial. How can culture not be a part of subjectivity? I went to boarding school in India for 18 months before moving to London. I do not see that as the main thing in my fiction. But I have written about that experience in my stories; I think we all use our experiences to write fiction. Someone moves from one place to another, and from there to another one and goes through the process of adjustment. My place or connection to multiple places serves as a rich background to my fiction, and sometimes as a foreground. For example, I have written of people like a Cypriot citizen who has lived in Istanbul and then moved to Paris. I think that in Europe we live in a place of, and I won't even call it multiple identity, rather multiple experiences — especially after Brexit.

Q. Do you think that the younger generation's perceptions of space and place have changed because of increasing digitization, emergence of a global culture, and compression of time and space?

AH: There are people who you find so local and regional but the terms of their lives are completely postmodern. Everything is happening on your mobile in your hand; you are always on social media; you might listen to very local music but it is played with Western instruments; when we talk about food, very often we are talking about fast food which is Western. But I think we are still very limited in our access to the riches of global culture. It is very much in the dissemination of global culture in our society, most of which is televisual, and not of a very high order. I think the literature which people are fed from the West is often very banal. That is my perception.

Q. How does that affect writing – especially writing categorized as postcolonial that relies heavily on spaces and places?

AH: I think it is already changing that writing. Pakistani writers, before 2001, were already looking at things very differently, without huge emphasis on past histories. Even the younger writers were either dealing with sociohistorical problems and injustices, like Mohsin Hamid wrote *Moth Smoke* and Kamila Shamsie wrote quite a bit about the legacy of partition and Bangladesh. I think they try to root themselves in contemporary reality as much as they look backward.

But after 2001, another kind of global space was created where there was a dialogue going on between Pakistan and the West, Pakistan and America. For example when you read Kamila Shamsie's prize winning book *Home Fire*, you hear this dialogue between Muslims with the non-Muslims or the religious and non-religious people. I think it has already changed. But I don't know what is going to happen on the ground in Pakistan. More and more people are writing about Pakistan from Pakistan who have not stayed abroad for a long period of time. I think there is an Indian market which perhaps influences the perception of what writers should write or what they are going to do to an extent. I am sure, though, that there is a variety of stuff being written.

What I have noticed now is a desire in people to write fantasy and comedy. I keep hearing young people asking, 'how do I go about writing about djinns, *churails* and *bhoots* etc'. Or how do I do social satire without risking offending people. We have examples of all of these kinds of writing coming out from Pakistan. Shazaf Haidar, a young writer, has a lovely new fantasy novel. There is Maha Khan Philipp who lives in UK but writes about Pakistani society. I have met a few young people who are writing about history and supernatural stuff. There is a huge hunger in Pakistan among people to acquire the skills for creative writing, to be in workshops, to learn what to write and how to write. And there are frequent workshops, reading groups, discussion groups in Karachi. Creative Writing is

being taught at universities though I am not sure if that is the best way to do it. Everybody has their own style of writing fiction.

Q. We have some great modernist writers like Ismat Chughtai, Quratulain Hyder, Abdullah Hussein, but we do not really have any postmodern fiction writers.

AH: Actually, I was teaching Ismat Chughtai to my English students here. Though they found her rather difficult, they were all very impressed with how she did not comply with any of the traditional roles. She transcended, surpassed all the expectations of an Indic or Asian woman writer. When I challenged them about it, they said they just thought she was such a surprising writer and that they would be surprised by a writer like that in any culture. Despite the hazards of translations, she was such an impressive writer to them. Postmodern is perhaps another label. How do we define it?

Q. There is an international rise in acclaim for experimental, post-apocalyptic, and speculative fiction. Some Pakistani writers are writing in that vein too, for example Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, and Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*. Would you consider writing something like that?

AH: No, no. I did write some political fiction in the 80's that was set in an imaginary land called "*Hilalistan*." I realized that I kept writing about Zia's Pakistan because that was the Pakistan that I was hearing about though I was absent throughout his regime. But eventually that novella was stripped down to a short story. That is as far as I have gone. I do write a little bit about supernatural things but I cannot write another novel. I can't write anything that is hundreds of pages long. I have written some stories that are somewhat longer, about 30 pages, but most of my new ones are only 2 or 3 pages long. I am interested in the past as well: for example the span of time that links 1857 to now, the undertones, the absent, the unspoken, the hollows of history. When people ask why I am stuck in the past, I say I am not, I am just going there, revisiting, trying to find answers for today. Quratulain Hyder did that all the time. When you read her works, they are full of relevant answers. Not that I think a writer is obliged to be relevant. I think one writes something with integrity and it does not matter where it is set or whether or not it is relevant. It does not have to be relevant to its history. For me, going back to the past is a way of understanding what our yesterdays were, what today is and what tomorrow will be. The past is a foreign country so in a way you are speculating whenever you are in the past.

Q. Do you imagine any particular kind of audience/readers when you write?

AH: I think it is really hard to write something for a specific readership, does not matter how much you love your readers. I write for people who like my work and might entice new readers. I am aware of my Pakistani readers and I do think about how they might receive a story that I write but it doesn't in any way determine my choice of subject or theme. But I am always very impressed when there is someone who tells me that they completely identified with a story, even when it might not be about them at all. I do get Pakistani readers who might say about my work or any other text, what does this have to do with us, why should we care about this, but yet they can relate to the human element in fiction. They really love my retellings of Sufi stories. I have also had my English students respond enthusiastically to Pakistani writers' works that are specifically set in Pakistani culture, with a specific historical context, written in Urdu. I would not go as far as to say that everything is universal but there is always something that reaches out to someone. But I never write with an English audience in mind. I did try that once when I was more aware of my English readers but that work turned out to be one of my most popular works in Pakistan. That was *Another Gulmohar Tree* and they loved it. But there was one reader from Faisalabad who wrote, "this is like a series of buffaloes moving slowly in a landscape, it is dull and heavy." I died laughing at that comment. Otherwise I never worry about whether the story is going to appeal to my local audience, to my English audience, or my international audience. I only write for a good, sensitive reader who takes pleasure in storytelling. But if you ask me if I'd be happy if a book of mine is hated in Pakistan, that probably would affect me, especially since my last two books have been popular in Pakistan.

Q. What is your next book?

AH: *Hermitage*. Muneeza Shamsie wrote a review for that in Dawn today. I wrote it mostly between my trips to Pakistan. It is written for Pakistan, composed in Pakistan, I sat with the publisher and decided upon the pictures.

Q. So you are influenced by Japanese writers, Chinese writers, South American writers. How do these multiple traditions come together in your works? Are there any similarities, dissimilarities between them?

AH: I would say there are parallels in these traditions. The first thing that I would talk about is Chinese writers before the Maoist revolution; we see a very similar treatment of themes by our Progressive writers in Urdu, we would have a Chinese equivalent of Prem Chand, of Rasheed Jahan, of Ismat Chughtai. I think the Chinese tradition changed slightly because after the Maoist revolution, writers

had to write about socialist issues. Then there are Japanese writers like Akutagawa, Enchi and Maruya – who are extremely aware of the whole Japanese literary tradition. They write modern stories, they go back to the Japanese past and create beautiful stories about their past with a postmodern take. Meanwhile, Intezar Hussein in Urdu was a somewhat similar writer who looked at Buddhist folklore, Hindu legends, Muslim legends and created really great modernist stories based upon that. We have Khalida Hussain, who could be easily compared with Angela Carter, rewriting fairy tales. But oddly I do not find huge parallels between Urdu writing and Arabic writing. There is a book by Latifa Zayyat called *The Open Door* and it is about a woman growing up in colonial times in Egypt but women writers in Urdu were doing much more impressive work twenty years before that.

Q. You said you are interested in poetry. How does the rich poetic tradition and its diction translate into prose? How do you render that aestheticism into your short stories?

AH: It happens naturally, unless I deliberately do not want it in a story. I did that with a few stories in *Insomnia*. Some of my characters quote Ghalib and Faiz. So this poetic element is sometimes there in a conscious way or sometimes in an unconscious way. Poetry is what I have read most and enjoyed for most of my life. I grew up listening to Meerabai and Kabir's verses before I ever heard of Keats or Shelley. I enjoy Faiz, Ghalib, some of Iqbal, some contemporary poets. I also enjoy Bulleh Shah, Khawaja Ghulam Farid, and recently Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai in translation. I enjoy these a lot more than the classical English tradition.

Q: What is the future of literary criticism in Pakistan?

AH: I think we have to create organic theories, theory has to be parallel to literature. I really like Hamid Dabashi, Edward Said, and Samir Ameen in my times. I think those people cast a light on our world. But imposing their theories on works of fiction to read them is not the best way to go about it. I think organic criticism should deal with what is going on there on the ground in a more open minded or even journalistic way.

Q: What are your favorite books?

AH: I really like *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, *This Earth of Mankind* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Wedding Song* by Naguib Mahfouz, *Patjhar ki Awaz* by Quratulain Hyder, *Terhi Lakeer* by Ismat Chughtai, Ghulam Abbas's short stories, *Seven Japanese Tales* by Junichiro Tanizaki.

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Q. Any work that you would recommend to all writers as a must-read?

AH: *Aag Ka Darya* by Quratulain Hyder, despite all its imperfections.

Note: This conversation has been transcribed from a video recording.