

“My concerns aren’t only to do with the fact that we were once a colonized people”: A Conversation with Aamer Hussein

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Aamer Hussein (b. 1955) is a critically acclaimed British author of Pakistani origin. In 1970, after spending a year and a half in India, he moved to London, where he studied Urdu, Persian, and History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Following a brief stint as a researcher for films and television, he started writing short fiction and reviews during the mid-1980s. He has published five collections of short stories: *Mirror to the Sun* (1993), *This Other Salt* (1999), *Turquoise* (2002), *Cactus Town and Other Stories* (2002), and *Insomnia* (2007); a novella, *Another Gulmohar Tree* (2009); and a novel, *The Cloud Messenger* (2011). He has also edited and co-translated a collection of short stories by Pakistani women writers entitled *Hoops of Fire* (1999), which was revised and re-titled as *Kahani: Short Stories by Pakistani Women* (2005). Since the early 1990s, Hussein has divided his time between writing and teaching. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, and is the Professorial Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Southampton. His fiction has been translated into several languages, including Arabic, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and Urdu. He has also served on the juries of the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2002), the Commonwealth Writers Prize (2007), and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (2008). Since 2004, he has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He is currently working on new volumes of fiction in Urdu and English, and has taken up a visiting post as Professorial Research Associate at the Institute for the study of Pakistan (SOAS).

Hussein’s fiction, which is considerably influenced by Urdu and Persian poetry, deals with themes such as exile, trauma, melancholia, love, divided and multiple identities, the volatility of human emotions, and the process of writing. Hussein is a polyglot (speaking and reading English, French, Hindi, Italian, Persian, Spanish, and Urdu) and is widely read in literatures from various parts of the world. Writers who have inspired and influenced him include Lu Xun, Han Suyin, Naguib Mahfouz, Assia Djebar, Milan Kundera, Qurratulain Hyder, Ghulam Abbas, Ismat Chughtai, Cesare Pavese, Mirza Hadi Ruswa, Tennessee Williams, and A.R. Khatoun, among others. Hussein’s fiction does not conform to the

trends and dictates of the publishing market, as a result of which it is able to retain its individuality and distinctiveness.

The following conversation took place in Islamabad when Hussein was in the city on a private visit.

MRB: In one of your emails to me you have written that you are a Third World intellectual. Why do you call yourself a Third World intellectual ?

AH: That was where I began. When I started looking at Asian writers writing in English during the middle of the century I always thought the South Asian writers were not giving me what I wanted. I was interested in what people were doing after colonialism, whether it was in English or in other languages, what effects colonialism had on us and how it damaged or influenced or reinscribed our traditions. Then I read the work of Han Suyin and found it very interesting. She was Chinese but wrote in English which was quite unusual when she started in the 1950s. She was one of the few writers who had written fiction, non-fiction and memoirs and she was very interested in the idea of a non-aligned world. In those days they did not use the term 'postcolonial,' but it was a postcolonial Asia.

I don't think fiction writers really put into practice what they read theoretically. But there is always a way of looking at your work and your impulses through a theoretical perspective. We still look at ourselves through the lens of Western literature and through the way we imagine the Other reads us. Nayantara Sahgal said it was our responsibility to present ourselves to the West in a way that we really were. And I thought: are we always going to have to do this? Are we always going to have to write for the Other? I wanted to write for the non-West or for people who had gone beyond this paradigm of what the West wanted from us. It had something to do with questions I was asking myself, questions which came from a sense of being from a country that had been colonized and decolonized. People have been educated only partially about their own histories, so there is always this obligation to look back and discover what those histories are. Is there a Third World anymore by the way?

MRB: Would you elaborate on the obligations you feel as a Third-World writer?

AH: I feel the obligation to be true to myself and to my own views of what literature can do or what life is about. Those views change, obviously. I have been writing for close to thirty years now and there have been things which changed my perspective and perception of the world a lot. In the 1980s when I began to write there were stories from Pakistan about Zia's oppressive military rule, but he was not unpopular in the West. He was seen as almost heroic during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The unpopularity of Pakistan came much later in the West. So in those days you'd have been writing about what was wrong in Pakistan's body politic,

not trying to rewrite it—perhaps in oblique ways, which I did. Generals kept cropping up in my stories.

I think writers have a very different role from journalists or analysts, which is to record subjective experience. I can't say this about all writers but a lot of writers do feel this way, particularly poets and short story writers. I think it is through subjective experience that you arrive both at the particular and the universal. By humanizing people and their experiences you can reach the widest possible audience. It becomes all the more important when you are writing in a language that is not entirely your own or in a language that is not innocent—let us take English, because of its colonial past. I don't agree with people who say that English has been indigenized in Asia and it has become our own. I would love someone of your generation to explain to me how you think of English as your own language. To me it remains a language which was borrowed and no matter how much we indigenize it, [it] will never remain innocent because it was implicated in the colonial discourse. This lack of innocence of English has always stayed with me. I write in English and I know that willy-nilly I am being read over my shoulder. I know that I am writing for people who don't immediately and intimately know what I write about but I try not to explain, gloss or editorialize. Somewhere, the reader will always start putting in nuances which will make the fiction exotic or Other. And then they might say this fiction feels like something they are so familiar with, as if it is a trial for them to identify me with something which comes from elsewhere. And the minute they do they say the experience is universal. That level of universality is often defined by a Eurocentric view of the world and that's why I am very wary of words like "universal."

MRB: Do you feel you have the responsibility of representation?

AH: No. I think this is something imposed on me. As public intellectuals people would say they are cosmopolitan. Well, I don't belong to the whole world. I come from a particular place and I have the experience of that particular place. I have the sound of many languages of that particular place. I also have a strong connection to India because of my mother's family. I am not an international person. I am a Pakistani who spent a little time elsewhere and moved to England and adjusted quite easily. But that doesn't mean that everything important to me should have its roots in the place I come from.

MRB: What do you think of writers, especially from the Subcontinent, who intentionally or unintentionally assume the responsibility of representation and try to present a holistic picture of countries like India or Pakistan for Western audiences?

AH: Being holistic is something you try to do even when you are trying to represent what or who you are and where you come from. Dealing with

representations which you think are going to answer the questions that people want to ask lacks innocence. The minute you become conscious of trying to answer questions you are producing a text that is not just imaginative or fiction. Trying to present your world in a holistic fashion, the way Nayantara Sahgal says, is possibly laudable. [R. K.] Narayan's work can be considered as an example of this. I think he is underrated in many ways. He is one of the geniuses of his time because he presents you [with] that picture on such a small scale and when you read it you think that he is so much less conscious of doing it in a way that answers questions. I am worried about answering questions. I would like to pose questions and push people into a place where they have to identify or recognize things in spite of themselves. Not just: Aah! This is what I wanted to know; O! Human beings are all the same. What is this sameness? Why do we assume that the experiences of a particular upper class which can speak English and possibly other languages are representative? Is it manipulative to write about another class in a particular way when we have no access to their language? If something appears to you in a particular way and you can write it very well and you feel it is valid, it will have a strength of its own and I think we should read a text that way.

MRB: How would you feel if you were labeled a postcolonial writer?

AH: Initially we were labeled Commonwealth writers and it was great because writers from Canada, Australia, South Africa, the Caribbean, and Pakistan could meet under one roof. But then you thought what on earth do I have in common with these people. Canadians and Australians are settler colonials which is a very different thing. They bring with them the burden of their Irishness or Scottishness or their whiteness. Then there was this black British thing but after a while you were no longer black because you were brown and some Black Britons didn't like your being on the bandwagon. We [South Asian writers] couldn't really easily identify with any of those labels. I come right back to the Third World thing. With the Third World label you are immediately free of Australia and Canada but what you have is a dialogue with Arabs or Latin Americans who are writing in Arabic or Spanish and want to identify with indigenous traditions. But we were the Other and we were choosing to be the Other. The Third World means that you define yourself as belonging outside the Eurocentric zone even if you live in Europe and you identify with a multiplicity of languages and if this easily segues to the postcolonial label I think it is alright.

MRB: So is it alright if your work is labeled postcolonial?

AH: Why would I want my work to be labeled only in connection with the British having been in my country for a hundred or two hundred years? There is something that goes before and beyond that and my concerns

aren't only to do with the fact that we were once a colonized people. That would surely come into my work at some level but there are other stories in which people go on with their lives, even in the past, and they are not particularly concerned with the fact that they were colonized.

MRB: Do you think your work has the potential to be studied under a postcolonial rubric?

AH: I think it is up to you to say that. How could I tell you what label my work should be studied under? I was born in Pakistan, I have Indian ancestry from my mother, my father studied in England, and I write in English. If I have a history that looks like a classic postcolonial history then certainly my work can be examined as such. I can't look at it and say this is a postcolonial element in my work. I don't think I write about one thing all the time. My story "The Lark" is set in the last month before the Second World War in 1939 and illustrates the point of view of a young Pakistani. Another story is about the last years of feudalism and aristocracy [in India] when the princely states closed down just before 1947. If you want to call these stories postcolonial, sure. Then I have got stories about subalterns who migrate to the West. Which type of stories would you be looking at when you say that I can be studied as a postcolonial writer? One critic might find postcolonial interest in certain stories while another might find it in some other.

MRB: Labels like "the postcolonial" or "the Commonwealth" are mediated by the Western center and most postcolonial discourse takes place under the auspices of the Western academy which places the Western self in a superior position. How do you negotiate with this assumed superiority?

AH: I have never felt the Western self to be superior. The answers to this question can be very complicated. If your language is replaced, as is the case with me, it feels as if you are being handed something and monitored from outside but then you have ways to inflect it. Postcolonialism says that you have the right to take languages and make them your own. The difference between Latin America and the Caribbean, where Spanish and English took absolute hold, and [South Asia] is that we had our languages with strong literary traditions. I think postcolonialism has not looked into this. Those writers who are deeply rooted in their own languages but shift to a European language for an international readership because they think that the world needs to know about their troubles are in a very different place than those who don't know their language very well and had it stolen from them. However, some writers belonging to the latter category, like French-speaking Algerians or English-speaking Indians, write in a language that insists on its foreignness. Here we have to acknowledge Salman Rushdie, no matter what we feel about his novels. He tried to

write in an English that refused to be a colonial language. I think Narayan did that even more beautifully.

MRB: After Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize last year, a debate started in the pages of *The Guardian* between Pankaj Mishra and Salman Rushdie. Rushdie criticized Mo Yan for supporting the Chinese regime while Mishra argued that unlike fiction writers in non-Western countries (China, Pakistan, Iran), British and American writers were never judged on their politics alone.

AH: There are many Chinese intellectuals who have supported the Chinese government throughout history but it does not mean that they are not very critical of its policies. I have been reading Mo Yan for about twenty-five years now. When he first became popular with his novel *Red Sorghum* he was considered a dissident writer. That's what was said about him. Whether he was or not was another matter. I think Pankaj Mishra is probably right that the Third World intellectual has very different ways of offering allegiance to his [or her] people. Censorship is another important question. I don't know what China censors, but censorship in some form exists everywhere. I don't want to mention certain Western writers, you just have to say one bad thing about them and there is an upsurge of protest for criticizing them. These writers and their pals argue with people who criticize their work and say that they don't have the right to say anything about it. Is this a democratic form of censorship? Maybe this is how it operates in a democracy.

MRB: What do you think of the academic enterprise of postcolonial studies?

AH: I'm not sure why you need to ask me this. If it is a way to bring different sorts of texts to the academy then it is a good thing. In a university course it allows you to study Margaret Atwood along with Chinua Achebe along with Salman Rushdie, but I don't necessarily feel that colonialism itself is enough to unite all these different people who might be using one language but have nothing in common in terms of their experiences of colonization. When we talk about postcolonialism in English we tend to think only about the British Empire. Are we really talking about French or Dutch postcolonialism? We should be but we aren't.

MRB: In recent times, we are talking about them.

AH: Very little. I think postcolonial literary studies seem very much to be an Anglophone thing. Only a slightly more radical way of describing Commonwealth studies.

MRB: Only a little radical?

AH: Yes, slightly more radical. Commonwealth studies assumed that these people were once part of the British Empire and so they had been indoctrinated with the canons of English literature. Postcolonial studies make us look at them in a more historical light. My problem with postcolonialism is that it assumes a blank slate before colonialism. In the case of the West Indies it is fair enough because literature in written forms begins after colonialism. What is before colonialism is usually oral. But in cultures with strong textual traditions like India, we can't say [that] what is written after colonialism is the only record of a literary tradition.

MRB: Bill Ashcroft et al imply that literatures of postcolonial countries are always addressed to the Empire. Do you agree?

AH: Is every Pakistani writer who writes in Urdu or Punjabi addressing the Empire? I have seen books in Urdu that do but I am sure that people have continued to write without addressing the Empire. Postcolonialism is a way of bringing together different writers from different countries and I think it only looks at the writing which is addressed to the Empire. Postcolonialism continues the old tradition of assuming that if someone writes in English or a colonial language, they are writing for the metropolitan marketplace and for publication in the center.

MRB: Some of the postcolonial elements I found in your stories are a longing for home and an obsession with the past.

AH: You can't say that without being specific. Find a passage in a story and say, this passage is obsessed with the past. You can't pick up a book of mine and say that the book is obsessed with the past. Maybe it is there in some of the stories, but you cannot say it generally.

Regarding the longing for home, I played a joke in *The Cloud Messenger* and if anybody falls into that trap they have to read that again because the narrator says he wants a hot place, he wants sunshine, and he wants to move away from the cold and dullness of England. He is not talking about the past. He is talking about the present and the future. There is a desire to get away. What you might call the notion of home is actually a tomorrow, a thing of the future. It is not the past. And that is probably quite autobiographical too. When I think of Karachi in winter I am not thinking of going to the place of my childhood. I am thinking of going to a hot place where I can speak another language and be with different people and visit the seaside. It's a very simple urge. It's not nostalgia. It is a longing for the future and not for the past. If I want to come to Islamabad it is not in my past in any way. I have been here just once before so I can't be nostalgic about it. But Islamabad does happen to be the capital of the country I was born in, it does happen to be a place where my language is spoken and I have got a lot of friends here. But the minute I say I am longing to go to Islamabad, a postcolonial theorist will say: O, there is the nostalgia for home again. But it is neither nostalgia nor home. I can read

you a passage in *The Cloud Messenger* in which Mehran says he wants to go to another country. He wants hot skies and his skin to be brown. He is longing for something to take him away from his past, which is cold and grounded in rather dire realities. There is a deep bitterness in [that] novel. If you are saying that people have a sense of another country they belong to and they always feel that they are in two places at the same time or they want to be in one place rather than the other, I think that is a fairly common human urge. If you want to call that postcolonial, sure. I can't imagine people living happily in one place all the time.

MRB: Postcolonial critics like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin suggested that it was the colonizer who made literature central to the cultural enterprise. Would you agree with such a statement?

AH: No, I wouldn't because in the Subcontinent literature was very important to the cultural enterprise even before colonization. It might be the case in countries that lost their languages entirely or didn't have a literary tradition. What colonialism managed to do was to wipe out indigenous languages and vibrant local traditions and certainly convinced some native intellectuals that their traditions were inferior. We were told that Urdu poetry was decadent and we had to write modern novels. What actually happened was, the poetry produced in the Subcontinent wasn't at all what the English colonizers had expected and it might have in many ways become a tool for resistance against colonization.

MRB: Was only poetry central to the cultural enterprise of the Subcontinent before colonization?

AH: Yes. Certainly prose fiction did appear during colonization, but I think it would have come to South Asia in any case, the way it came to Japan or Thailand or Iran. It may have come earlier because of colonization but it would have ended up here anyway. Pakistani Urdu writers were deeply influenced by Chekhov and Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Zola, and not by Hardy and Dickens and Austen. They read these writers in English, but what if those people had not been colonized, what would have they read then?

MRB: Do you think English literature helped in legitimizing the colonial project?

AH: Definitely. I think that continues to this day. I still get asked: are you influenced by D. H. Lawrence? Isn't T. S. Eliot the greatest poet? I think the teaching machine legitimizes certain texts and presents them as absolutes and universals for people to follow and emulate. This has more to do with ways of teaching literature. I think people who discover literature on their own do not see it like this. But it is taught this way to students of English literature even to this day.

MRB: Do you think this construct of the universality of English literature has affected literary production in native languages such as Urdu or Hindi as a result of colonization?

AH: I don't really see any fiction that is located in the place where it is produced as being a replica of English literature. My mother says that a lot of Urdu novels written by Indian women during the early part of the twentieth century read like old English novels written by hack writers like Mrs. Henry Wood. I think these women writers described their own society and so they couldn't really rely on English novels because in those novels there would be characters like governesses and single women who didn't really have any place in a purdah society which was the kind of society most of these Indian women were writing in. Chekhov was a big influence on Ghulam Abbas and Manto, but their works are very much located in their own realities. So I don't think Urdu literature has peddled in any way any kind of universality. I think it is the critics who always read these stories in a Eurocentric way.

MRB: So you are saying that Urdu literary critics uphold Eurocentric worldviews?

AH: I don't know about these days but certainly some of the formative Urdu critics did. They used inherited tools of criticism, but I don't know how much that influenced fiction writers. Muhammad Hasan Askari, credited with modernizing Urdu critical discourse, eventually proposed a new kind of Pakistani literature that reflected Pakistani Muslim realities. He was asking for some kind of imaginary nativist view or some kind of magic realism, but very few people tried to follow that. The fiction of Progressive writers dealt with sexual agony, but their stories didn't really read like Western stories.

MRB: According to Progressive writers, literature should be used for a cause and resistance which also seems to be a European construct.

AH: I wouldn't say it is a European construct. It is a construct that happened to emerge in Europe at the time when it was needed. By the way, while words like "responsibility" sound an ominous knell, I love "resistance."

MRB: You told me about Homi Bhabha saying that your story "Karima" illustrates his concept of hybridity. But you didn't seem to agree.

AH: How is Karima hybrid? She is a Bihari woman from Bangladesh. She comes to live in England where she is always going to be foreign and is probably never going to speak proper English. If you are saying that migrants pick up ways of adjusting to the culture they live in, of course

they do. What is this hybridity supposed to represent? People often think Mehran, in *The Cloud Messenger*, is hybrid. He is an upper-middle class, educated Pakistani, who comes to England, always feels quite foreign, and is never at ease with his surroundings. But he also told you that he was never quite at ease with his surroundings even when he was in Karachi as a child. I think it is postcolonial theory which emphasizes his sense of loss and longing for Karachi as a home. But he said that Karachi was never really his place. He always thought he belonged to a rainy place and when he came to live in a rainy place he realized he didn't belong there either. He is somebody who is un-belonging. I don't think he is particularly hybrid.

Maybe pluralism can be a better way to talk about it. I can't really conceive of people who aren't in some way plural because most people that I know speak at least two languages and live in two places either physically or mentally. What about English-speaking Pakistanis who eat what they call English food and live in Pakistan? Are they any more or less hybrid than Mehran? Probably more. Maybe the hybrid species is something that lives more at home and tries to replicate what they think of a foreign lifestyle. But then there is the stereotype of a typical migrant who is supposed to eat curry and rice with his fingers and speaks English and if he goes to the library he would probably borrow books in Bengali or Tamil or watch cable TV in Hindi. If that is the only kind of migrant that is not hybrid, then I guess many of my characters are hybrid.

MRB: Recently, you have started writing short stories in Urdu. Do you find the medium of English language inadequate to express certain things?

AH: Yes. But I don't always find English inadequate because much of the time I write about people who live in England and who think in English. But when I am not writing about these people, I realize that by writing in Urdu I am really hitting on expressions that are quite dynamic. I can think of my story "Zohra" in which she uses words like *nihatta* (informal for unarmed) and *nikamma* (useless, unemployed). You just can't do this in English. There are too many syllables in English when you try to say this and I couldn't find another way of saying it. I hadn't sat down and thought this is the way I want to put down these things. But as I wrote and thought of Zohra the character and what she would say, those words came to me. Then there is this phrase *khudai faujdar* which is quite an ordinary phrase in Urdu, but in English you just cannot get the right equivalent. We can say moral custodian or something like God's little soldier but it doesn't have the kind of appeal it does in Urdu.

MRB: Can we say your characters choose the language you want to write in?

AH: I think not. I think the language influences the kind of character I want to produce. While writing in English the characters wanted to speak

a language that I couldn't give them so perhaps they remained silent and when I gave them Urdu they were able to say things which they couldn't say in English. But writing in English has given me fairly creative ways of imagining, particularly, dialogue. Fahmida Riaz once translated a story of mine into Urdu and when I read the translation I could hear all the Urdu expressions of the story. She got them right in Urdu and they were better than they were in English.

MRB: There is a reworking of Urdu metaphors in your English stories both at the sentence and the narrative level. You do not use exact Urdu words or metaphors, unlike many writers from the subcontinent who write in English. Is it deliberate? Can we think of it in terms of an attempt at literary and cultural contamination?

AH: I would say that I try to extend the boundaries of [the] English language to express the emotions and pictures which I have in my mind. I don't know about contamination and how deliberate it is. I am always experimenting with English in different ways and whether those [ways of experimenting] come from another language or just from my own internal structure of language, I don't know.

MRB: In *The Cloud Messenger*, Mehran talks about confronting his professor regarding the latter's Orientalist view of Urdu literature even though Mehran has not read any of Edward Said's theories.

AH: I forget what [the professor] is called in the novel but in real life it was Ralph Russell, my own professor. You have to look at the way other literatures are taught. There used to be this comparative literature paradigm in which if you were taught Urdu literature, you were told that Urdu novels were inferior to English novels because they were written in a different historical period and Urdu poetry must always be considered medieval because our society was four hundred years behind Western society. We were told that English literature was ahead and Urdu literature was retarded and it was only compared to something like English literature to make it [English literature] look better. It was always Umrao Jan Ada is like Moll Flanders. Daniel Defoe was supposed to be the father of Urdu literature. Every early Urdu novel was considered to be inspired by Defoe. But Umrao Jan Ada is a completely original novel which has nothing to do with Moll Flanders whatsoever. I don't think Ruswa had ever heard of Moll Flanders. It was said that the story of Umrao Jan Ada was actually told by a courtesan to Ruswa and he only slightly fictionalized it. Mehran is protesting against the kind of comparative-literature teaching that we received.

MRB: *The Cloud Messenger*, like most of your other stories, deals with human emotion, especially grief and love. Do you try to examine some of

the social constructs, political assumptions, and religious stereotypes which influence these emotions?

AH: I think that is a clumsy question. But they are there. If you read the novel, you know exactly who Mehran is. You know which year he is born in, the place where he grows up, and that he leaves that place at a certain time. Then he comes to university and tells you that he is drawn to other exiles because he himself has no idea where he comes from. He has learnt to lie about his origins because he doesn't know how to explain certain things. Later, when he grows older, he realizes how displaced he is. He recognizes that there is no place that he can go back to and live happily forever. There is going to be a degree of discontent everywhere. The second woman he falls in love with is a Sindhi and four, five years younger than him. She has studied economics and looked at the position of women. She is also an expat but wants to be buried at home. How are these people without context? What sort of context does a reader want from them which is not there?

MRB: The emotions of these characters are formed in a certain way. What I want to ask is: do you make it a priority to foreground the conditions which influence these emotions?

AH: That's an obscure question. Why would a novelist do that? It is for the reader to find out. What I am saying is that there is enough evidence in the narrative.

MRB: Do you think there is only one particular interpretation of your stories?

AH: No. Maybe in a particular story if there is a particular impulse. But I am always very happy for people to respond in ways that teach me something new. There are times when my works are interpreted incorrectly. For example, *Another Gulmohar Tree* is often considered to be about cultural hybridity. A gulmohar tree, whether in Madagascar or Pakistan, would look exactly the same. It learns to put its roots down in another soil like Lydia does in the novel. She still remains an Englishwoman but picks up Pakistani mannerisms along the way. She realizes she is never going to be one hundred percent Pakistani but she is happy in Pakistan. She is not the gulmohar tree. She is only another gulmohar tree. She is not entirely transplanted. It is neither about cultural hybridity nor about cultural clash. A young man who taught literature at a university in Faisalabad once said to me that *Another Gulmohar Tree* was about cultural hybridity. I asked him what made him think so. He said the novel had folk tales in it that were from Punjabi and Urdu but told in English. But then all fairy tales are translated and cross-bordered. If I read a Punjabi fairy tale in English and I retell it in English, am I retelling a Punjabi story or an English story? And if I retell a story in Urdu which

was originally from Sanskrit but I read it in English, am I retelling an English story or a Sanskrit story?

MRB: You call *Another Gulmohar Tree* a postcolonial and a “post-national” novel. Would you elaborate?

AH: It is a double narrative which keeps changing directions and begins with this man who comes to London soon after the partition and who is seen through the eyes of an Englishwoman. He has come to what people might expect to be a center but it is not his center because he has no relationship with England. What England does do is to make him more aware of his own sense of belonging and his desire to go back to Pakistan. It is a bit of a postcolonial trope, if you will. But the fact is that this man never seems to want to have any relationship with England. Not with the language, not with the culture. With nothing at all. He has just come to do a job. He thinks that his relationship with the Englishwoman is over, but she pursues him to Pakistan. That’s where the other story begins when she follows him to Pakistan. I was familiar with narratives, particularly by writers like Ruth Praver Jhabvala, in which a young woman would go in pursuit of her dreams to a country like India with perhaps a romantic attachment to a local man and how her life would come undone. I always knew that Lydia’s life was not going to be undone. I knew she might want to return to England briefly but life would bring her back to Pakistan. Her life in Pakistan involves painting, teaching, a little bit of writing and journalism, and her children. She has been living in Pakistan for ten years and at one point she asks herself what her life would have been in England had she stayed there. And the answer she comes up with is that perhaps she wouldn’t have been able to do all these things which she was able to do in Pakistan. She lives in Pakistan a life that is very, very full.

In a sense [this novel] undid and remade the postcolonial narrative. Here is a woman who travels from the Empire to the periphery and finds fulfillment there, but not by ethnicizing herself or by becoming a counter-version of a Pakistani woman. She is an English expatriate wife who is interested in the local culture and the local people and wants to be part of their development. On the other hand, you have the story of Usman who I think has nothing postcolonial about him at all. He is very much post-national. He is someone who has a dream of Pakistan. He is a Punjabi who moves to Karachi because it is the capital city at the time and it is a booming town. He wants to be part of a cultural resurgence but he finds that his talent is not recognized. There are two parallel tracks: Usman’s and Lydia’s. Lydia’s track is more or less an English novel about an Englishwoman who comes to Pakistan, although the conclusion of the story is quite different from what you might find in a hackneyed English narrative. But Usman’s story has got very little to do with England. It has to do with the local language, his surroundings, his past and present.

MRB: There have been women like Lydia in real life who came from Britain and settled happily in Pakistan. Names like Alys Faiz and Christian Abbas come to mind.

AH: People have recognized Lydia as various women who weren't an influence on her character. People ask me if her character is inspired by Alys Faiz because she rides a bicycle! No she isn't. I read Alys Faiz's memoirs and letters after I wrote this book. Her character is based on Christian Abbas to the extent of her being an illustrator. While I was doing some research, I came across this book by Ghulam Abbas called *Chand Tara* which had illustrations by Zainab Abbas. I tried to find out who she was and realized that she was this Greek-English woman called Christian Vlasto and I thought that was very interesting.

There were some women painters too, like Anna Molka and Esther Rahim. Both Molka and Rahim are considered Pakistani painters. I wonder what their careers would have been like had they not come to Pakistan. What would someone like Lydia have done with her talent had she not come to Pakistan? One kind of narrative would tell you that had they not come to Pakistan, perhaps their careers would have bloomed. My feeling is that possibly Pakistan gave them a home and a space to nurture their talents.

MRB: What if the roles of these characters are reversed? If, instead, a woman goes to England and marries an Englishman who decides to come back with her to Pakistan.

AH: I also considered what that might be like. But it has already been done. I think in Qurratulain Hyder's novel *Fireflies in the Mist*, which she self-translated from Urdu into English. There is a character called Yasmin Belmont who is a dancer and thinks Europe is going to give her creative freedom, but it doesn't and she ends up on a dust heap. I think that is a very sad story. But I really can't think of a [South Asian] woman artist who migrated to the West, married an Englishman, and lived happily there. The only name that does come to my mind is that of Attia Hosain who certainly wasn't married to an Englishman but during the forty, fifty years she lived in England she only managed to produce two books. I often wonder whether, if she had lived in India or moved to Pakistan, she would have been more productive. I mean it is a hypothetical question. But certainly moving to England didn't give her that great, wonderful acceptance that she thought she might have. England does not say that she is one of its lost postcolonial writers.

Having said that, there are lots of people from South Asia living happily in Britain and America. I think circumstances have changed in recent times because people can travel back and forth much more easily. At the time when Lydia came to Pakistan during the 1950s-60s, she would have had to come by ship or if she had taken a plane it would have been a twenty-hour journey. It was a completely different matter back then and

also globalization hadn't taken place, so there was this "either/or" about countries.

MRB: Over time "either/or" seems to have been replaced with "both." Is that what you call post-national?

AH: Yes, absolutely. I think this "either/or" will become less and less relevant as we go along. I have started coming to Pakistan very often and my books are being published here. I am writing in Urdu and publishing in Pakistan even though I don't live here. I am writing in Urdu about England which perhaps is a colonial/postcolonial reversal because I am bringing an English experience to Urdu.

MRB: This is interesting. Your English prose is influenced by Urdu and Persian poetry while your Urdu prose is influenced by your English experience.

AH: Certainly influenced by my English milieu. Look at the two Urdu stories that I wrote recently: "Maya aur Hans" and "Hauslamund." "Maya aur Hans" is a story which is set in a milieu which doesn't demand anything Pakistani at all. Maya is actually Yugoslavian. It is not made very clear in the story, but it says that she comes from a Balkan country and the boy is Pakistani, but his Pakistaniness is only performed towards the end when he has a conversation with his sister and the politics of marriage come up. You can tell that he comes from a fairly conservative South-Asian background, but until then he is just anyone floating around London. On the other hand, "Hauslamund" is totally rooted in a milieu that is entirely London-Pakistani. The characters like the woman who gives Safia a job or Safia herself and the economics of her life in London present such a Pakistani situation that [it] possibly couldn't be written in English without becoming a parody or a comedy.

MRB: Do you think characters like Safia consider people like her employers as brown sahibs?

AH: No, they consider them as desi begum sahibs. I think the attitude is much the same as it would be here [in Pakistan]. They treat them like benefactors but also people to be exploited.

MRB: Do you see yourself as a bilingual writer?

AH: Yes. I find switching back from Urdu to English fiction quite difficult. I don't find it difficult to write critical prose in English, but at the moment when I think of fiction, my head is full of Urdu lines and phrases.

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