

“I don’t think I am addressing the empire”: An Interview with Mohammed Hanif

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Mohammed Hanif was born in 1964 in Okara, a small town in Punjab, Pakistan. As a young man he joined the Pakistan Air Force Academy and graduated as a Pilot Officer. A month after President General Zia ul Haq’s plane crash, he left the air force and started working as a journalist. He moved to London in the mid-1990s and worked for the BBC World Service and later became the head of the BBC Urdu Service. Hanif has written for various publications including *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *India Today*, and *Newsline*. He has written plays for radio and the stage and also a feature film, *The Long Night* (2002). In 2008, he moved back to Karachi, and his first novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, was published in the same year. The novel presents a fictional account of events leading up to the plane crash of President General Zia ul Haq. It was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, long-listed for the Booker Prize, and won the Shakti Bhatt and the Commonwealth Best First Book Prize. His second novel, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, was published in 2011. The novel is set in present-day Karachi and tells the tale of a young Catholic nurse, Alice Bhatti. It was shortlisted for the Wellcome Trust Book Prize and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.

Mohammed Hanif is one of the best-known contemporary Pakistani novelists writing in English. His fiction is considerably influenced by Punjabi popular culture and explores how a human self negotiates with institutions of the state and religion in contemporary Pakistan. Through his seemingly ordinary characters, Hanif provides immediately relevant social and political commentaries, interspersed with witty repartee, which not only keep the narrative fresh and the reader glued, but also provide valuable insights into the complex cultural milieu of present-day Pakistan. Hanif’s novels are extremely popular in the Indian subcontinent and have been translated into more than sixteen languages. His fiction has been compared to that of Salman Rushdie, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Joseph Heller.

The following conversation took place in Islamabad on 1 April 2013.

MRB: You work as a journalist, a job which involves a lot of writing, and you have written plays for both the stage and the screen. Why did you feel the need to shift to fiction?

MH: I was always interested in telling stories and so I tried various formats. All these things, including journalism, the stage, and the film, are collaborative in nature. You have to work with other people. You are relying on a director, actors, and so many other people. And that's great if it works well. There is no better feeling than having your own little theatre play being performed. But when it doesn't work it is quite heartbreaking and everybody starts to accuse each other. The director says the actors did not perform well; the actors say their lines were not well written. What drew me into fiction writing was that you were on your own completely and you would do it all by yourself. Whether it is good or bad, it is solely yours and it doesn't require any budget or investment either. All you need is some paper and a ball pen and you are good anywhere. I think this was the reason.

MRB: How do these two roles—as a journalist and a fiction writer—interact and intersect? Do they complement each other?

MH: I think yes. They complement each other. As a journalist you have to go out and meet people, so you start observing how people talk, how they tell a joke or a story, what they are passionate about and what their prejudices are. And also writing journalistic pieces is a good exercise because you know you have to stop after 900 or 1200 words. You cannot describe everything you've seen or heard, but you still have to tell a story. So you need to discard things. The same is true for fiction as well. You have to leave lots of stuff out.

The other thing is that journalism is a grim business. It is always bad news. As journalists, we are always writing about one atrocity or the other. There has always been some war going on since I got into journalism. When it becomes too grim you can turn and say, "I am going to sit on my desk and create my own little world." Then, this thing has problems of its own. You are stuck somewhere and the character is not working and you have no idea what will happen on the next page. That can also become too much. But, then again, you can take a break from that and go do some journalism. I am one of those people who, when writing fiction, is always thinking, "I wish I was reporting that story" and in the field, "I wish I was writing the next chapter." It is a perennial dissatisfaction, but they do complement each other.

MRB: What was the reason for choosing the genre of the novel? Is it something dictated by the publishing market?

MH: No. I read a lot of novels as a young man so the format got stuck in my head. I didn't read too many short stories. I have started reading them now. I always thought that I was going to write a novel. I never thought about writing short stories. I had done theatre plays and radio plays which were more like a short story. But I think you want to stick with something for a longer duration.

MRB: What are your influences, literary and extra-literary?

MH: They keep changing. I am quite impressionable so anything good I read I am easily impressed by. I am influenced by Urdu fiction, Russian classics, and spy thrillers. I used to love John Le Carré. Latin American literature was very popular when we were growing up, so I read a lot of that. Lately, I have been reading more contemporary stuff in Urdu as well as in English.

MRB: English literary fiction which is produced in countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh is broadly termed “postcolonial writing” in Western academia. How do you see this label?

MH: I don’t get it and I don’t mind labels. People have to make a living teaching this stuff so they have to come up with titles to bracket you. Good luck to them. They can keep calling us whatever they want to. Writing is a very private and personal act, and I am free to write whatever I want to. Nobody tells me you should tell this or that story. Similarly, reading is also a private act. So, people are free to make whatever they want to make of your book.

MRB: But unlike writing, publishing is not a private affair. These labels are also used for promoting and publishing writers such as yourself.

MH: I think these labels are used to teach students about the theory and history of literature. I have never heard anybody in publishing use the term “postcolonial” [chuckles]. I know five, six good editors around the world and I have never heard them call what they are publishing “postcolonial.” They talk in terms of plot and characters and worry about whether anybody will read it or not. This is the language of academia and not of the publishing world.

MRB: *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* was awarded the Commonwealth Best First Book prize. Do you think labels like “Commonwealth” and awards like this are parts of a colonial legacy which keeps reminding postcolonial nations that they were once a colonized people?

MH: Yes, they want to feel good about themselves by doing it. But as a writer if somebody gives you money you take it. The Commonwealth is one of those organizations that nobody knows what it does. I think it is meant to plan holidays for the Queen. I have never heard it do anything else, and, yes, there is an element of patronizing. What is common about the Commonwealth countries except for the fact that they were once colonized? Many countries have got over it a long time ago.

MRB: Postcolonial theorists, such as Ashcroft et al, argue that postcolonial writing is always addressed to the Empire. Do you think your writing is addressed to the Empire?

MH: [laughs] I don't think I am addressing the empire or I am writing back to it. When I am writing or when I am thinking about writing, I don't approach it like that. You cannot second-guess who will read or like your book. You obviously want to be read and liked, but there is no way that you can sit at your desk and say that I am going to write a story which will please the Empire or criticize it. Basically, your loyalty is to what's on the page more than anything else.

MRB: Writers like Nayantara Sahgal say that it is our responsibility to present ourselves to the West in a way that we really are. Do you share the burden of such a responsibility?

MH: I don't. I think we have a foreign office for that. We have media, journalists, and diplomats for that. I think it is their responsibility and not a fiction writer's. A fiction writer's first and foremost responsibility is the story that he or she is trying to tell. I don't think it is the responsibility of a writer to portray a society in realistic or honest terms. I don't think writing from Pakistan is somehow meant to represent Pakistan. I never take this kind of responsibility and have never thought about that.

MRB: What kind of responsibility do you feel as a fiction writer?

MH: My first responsibility is the story. The other responsibility is that I should try and not bore my reader. Also I shouldn't give up because writing a novel can be a tortuous, frustrating experience. Twenty pages into it and you want to give up and do something else. That is my responsibility: to get over that hurdle and carry on telling the story.

MRB: In recent times, the interest of Western popular media in Pakistani English fiction has increased significantly, which has placed Pakistani English writers in a privileged position. What effect has this phenomenon had on contemporary Pakistani English literary production?

MH: There might be some writers who feel a responsibility. Since they are in the spotlight, they might feel they have to produce something true and representative of the country. I don't feel that responsibility. The only thing that people never mention is that maybe they are getting attention because some of them are writing good stories regardless of the fact that they are from Pakistan. That possibility should also be considered [chuckles].

I used to work in the BBC, and every day my wish used to be that Pakistan should not be in the top three stories and it happened very rarely. It is obvious that if you are reading about a place and watching about it on TV day after day, you get curious about the place. You do get that advantage as a writer that people are curious [about Pakistan]. Now, I don't know if anybody can sit on their desk and decide that since there is a possibility of getting all this attention, I should write accordingly. Basically, you write because you want to write. In

publishing these trends keep coming and going. Some decades ago, South American literature was very popular, then African literature and, after that, Indian literature. I was telling my friends to wait another couple of years and Central Asia would be the new ["in thing"] in the literary world. But one hopes that when this attention goes away people will still be writing stories and reading them.

MRB: You've mentioned that these trends have come and gone over the last three to four decades but that the Anglophone publishing market has been a constant throughout. How does this Anglophone publishing market and its politics influence your writing?

MH: As a writer, you come from a certain place with a certain background. You are born into a certain class, you go to a certain kind of school, and you have a certain kind of family. And writers write about where they come from. You just cannot say that this is what one should be writing. I have heard from writer-friends that they are sometimes told that a Western reader won't get their story, and so they are asked if they can provide more context. I've been quite lucky, and I haven't had such an experience. I have a very good editor and [in my manuscripts] they only move some commas around. We never discuss what I am writing about and they only see it when I have a finished manuscript.

MRB: So the publishing market has not influenced your writing?

MH: [laughs] Not so far.

MRB: Can you write whatever you want to irrespective of the demands of the publishing market?

MH: If publishers and their editors really knew what the market wants, why would they publish hundreds of those books which nobody reads? For every book that gets read there are ten others being published which don't get read. Publishers themselves don't know. The editor sees a manuscript and thinks that if he or she likes it maybe there are readers out there for it, too.

MRB: *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* deals with an historical event: Zia's plane crash. To what extent does the narrative draw on historical facts, and how much of it is invented?

MH: The central incident that the plane crashed is the only truth in it. Everything else is made up. How would you research something when five inquiry commissions haven't been able to find anything? But we've lived through that period, so we know what it feels like. That's what might be over-the-top realistic. It is set in a certain period, in a certain institution. Tiny irrelevant details might be true but as far as the plot and characters are concerned, it is all made up.

MRB: Both of your novels tell the stories of marginalized and oppressed people: Ali Shigri and Alice Bhatti, Alice Bhatti more so because she is a poor, Catholic girl compared to Ali Shigri—a junior officer in the Pakistan Air Force—whose father is killed by the Zia regime. Is it a deliberate attempt at rewriting contemporary Pakistani social history from the point of view of the marginalized?

MH: If I wanted to write social history I would do that in journalism and I do that. I write rants regularly in both Urdu and English. I am not really concerned about social history. When you have a certain character, you have to know them. They would come from a certain place, they would have a certain kind of political view of the world which is rooted in some kind of political history. All that becomes part of a character. The idea is not to rewrite social history. The idea is to write a story that will make people get to know about this world that you have inhabited for years and years and that you want other people to share with you. But as I said, writing is a very intimate affair, and so is reading. So the same book is read differently by different people.

MRB: At the end of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, people see an apparition of Alice Bhatti in the sky which completely changes the tone of the narrative. Is it an attempt at experimenting with magic realism?

MH: No, it is an experiment to end a novel [laughs]. It's as banal as that. But we have this thing in our society. We turn victims into martyrs although they might not have wanted to become martyrs. They are victims of our everyday casual brutality, but sometimes we say that somebody has sacrificed their life for a great cause and they are heroes and martyrs. I think it must have been this idea in my head somewhere when I was trying to find an ending for the novel.

MRB: Your fiction is concerned with how a Pakistani self interacts with different social structures, religious institutions, and cultural constructs. *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* is concerned with the institution of the state while *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* deals with the institution of religion. How deliberate were these creative decisions?

MH: Everything is deliberate. You give a character a certain name, choose how they dress. These are the decisions you have to make. Sometimes you know why you made those decisions; at other times you don't. Sometimes those decisions have to be made because you have made a commitment to a character. There is an organic way of looking at it. If a person is in the army, for example, this is how they will talk and this is the kind of background they might come from. And this is how they will fall in love. You make certain decisions in the beginning, and what comes after that is sometimes the consequence of the decisions that you made earlier.

MRB: Were the decisions to explore the institutions of the state and the religion made knowingly?

MH: No, as I said, you follow the character. Basically, what you are doing is channelling your own obsessions, madness, and phobias into these novels. In a way you are all of those horrible characters that you've created.

MRB: Towards the end of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, there is a twist in the plot when Alice comes to know that her supervisor, Sister Hina Alvi, is a closet Christian. Why would she remain a closet Christian when she is aware that it would hardly be of any help? What kind of security does she feel with a Muslim name?

MH: Obviously, if you have a Muslim name, you are secure in Pakistan. If you have a Sunni-Muslim name, you are even securer. If you are a Baloch young man your average age is reduced by half automatically. Many Christians over the past forty, fifty years have named their children Muslim names so that they won't have to give their identity so easily. But there are others who haven't. They insist on having proper Anglophile or Biblical or Christian names. I like the idea of exploring why people believe in God, why they worship, and what it gives them. Those who call themselves liberal and secular are bemused with the fact that some people have turned fundamentalist, they have started to pray, and they are doing hijab. I don't think I have any answers, but I am interested in exploring that side of human beings.

MRB: Both *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* deal extensively with disciplinary institutions such as the military academy, jail, and a psychiatric ward. Would you like to say something about your interest in these institutions?

MH: I must have a uniform fetish. It only occurred to me when I was half way through *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* and I realised that she wore a uniform. Yes, I am interested in institutions, in power structures, and how they work and what they do to people who have to work within them. I am interested in people who control them, people who try to subvert them and people who try to change them.

MRB: So you didn't plan your writing this way?

MH: As I said, sometimes one is channelling one's own obsessions and madness while writing, and, when one is doing it, one doesn't know. But after it's done, a friend reads it and they point out that you have done that again. So, in a way, we can say that we've got a completely different setting, completely different characters, and a completely different plot, but, maybe at some level, we are writing the same story over and over again.

MRB: One of the characteristic features of your fiction is your tongue-in-cheek style typical of what is locally called *Jugat Bazi* (witty

repartee). Is it an attempt at literary, linguistic, and cultural contamination?

MH: *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* can easily be a Punjabi novel. I am influenced by Punjabi stand-up comedians. Not just professional ones. They are on every street corner and in every *mohalla* in Punjab and they will explain the meaning of the whole universe in a joke and all the political commentary happens through it too. They are bright, sharp people and they can do it on their feet. Some people can do that and some people are sit-down comics. They can sit alone in their room and do it. I might not be able to tell you a joke and make you laugh but maybe I can sit in a room and construct a joke on paper.

MRB: Compared to *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* you use a lot of *Desi* words which are culturally-specific, like *Yassoo*, *Charya*, and *Choohra*. Don't you think it will make things difficult for those who are not familiar with South Asian culture? Or is it a way of imposing on non-South Asian readers a demand to know more about your culture?

MH: I can't impose anything on anyone. There is a book out there and you can choose to read it or ignore it. It's a reader's choice. I didn't realize this, but now that you say this, it's true. But that again comes from what kind of book you are writing. The language that is used by the officer class is English. All their manuals, commands, procedures, everything is in English. That's why there are very few [non-English] words in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. There are very few civilian characters in the novel. But *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* takes place in a civilian environment, and I like the sound of *Yassoo*. People can look up in a dictionary. If we are really curious about an expression we go to an online dictionary. Sometimes the context in which you use the word makes it perfectly clear what you are talking about. I don't think anybody is going to mistake *Yassoo* for Muhammad. If I like the sound of a word, I am going to use it and as a writer I think I have this right.

MRB: Ali Shigri's and Alice Bhatti's outlooks on life are very pragmatic. They do not seem to harbour any romantic notions about the human self and struggle. Instead of openly confronting social structures, cultural institutions, and religious obligations, they cunningly negotiate their way through them, thereby undermining these structures and institutions. Do you think this is how Pakistanis negotiate their day-to-day lives?

MH: Yes, especially people who are powerless and people who've got in situations where they've become powerless. I think that is what they do. They subvert and sabotage [these institutions]. They, very honourably, lie and cheat because they are made to do that. The institutions are designed in a way to keep these people powerless. So for them it is a daily process of negotiation. I think lots of Pakistanis who are not born privileged do that.

MRB: Is this is a characteristic of Pakistani lower-class people then?

MH: Pakistanis that I know [laughs]. I don't claim to know all Pakistanis.

MRB: Alice Bhatti's character is an embodiment of female agency and challenges the stereotypical view of women. Women like Alice Bhatti are able to exercise their agency but at a very high cost. Do you think Pakistani society has the potential to become a more democratic and tolerant place for women and minorities?

MH: I think women are an engine of change in Pakistani society. You might have noticed that despite all the horrible prejudices, all the bad laws, all the messed-up traditions, you see many more women in public life than there ever were. I think this is one way of looking at this phenomenon. I hope it becomes a better world for them but I am certain that it will become a better world for them because of them, because of what they are capable of doing and achieving.

MRB: Men would not have any share in it?

MH: I don't think so. The increasing number of crimes against women in urban areas especially is a sign of a vicious backlash from patriarchy because women are getting more empowered.

MRB: *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a very irreverent and, at times, explicit satire on religion. How do you think you were able to get away with this given the ubiquitous religious fundamentalism in Pakistan?

MH: I think fundamentalists don't read novels.

MRB: Novels in general or novels written in English?

MH: Novels in Urdu as well. There are very few people who read novels. They are mostly liberal, literary types. Nobody has told me that they are offended. This book has been read by many women and young school-going girls and nobody has come up to me and said what the hell is this. Whatever our faults might be as Pakistanis, most of us have a sense of humour. I think when you talk in a certain tone, they don't take offence. They haven't so far, so let's not ask them to [chuckles].

MRB: According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, you are a better chronicler of Karachi than Rushdie is of Bombay, in that, unlike Rushdie, you do not exoticize Karachi. Lorraine Adams compares you with Manto. How do you feel about these comparisons?

MH: You will get me thrashed by Uncle Rushdie. It feels really nice. I know it's not true [laughs] but for a few moments you feel really good about yourself. But in your heart you know that you won't be as good

or as great as Manto is or Rushdie is. You know that but there is no harm if someone lies to you like this.

MRB: You have recently written a report for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan entitled “The Baloch Who Is Not Missing and Others Who Are.” What are your concerns about human rights and how these organizations deal with human rights? In *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, you hint at the vested interests of these organizations.

MH: Of course, these organizations have vested interests. There is nothing to hint about. Many of them get funding from other countries. They have a clear agenda. You may agree with it, you may not. But this one was particular because I had worked as a journalist for a very long time and I was surprised that nobody from our mainstream media was willing to cover the story of missing Baloch people. It is, by all journalistic standards, a huge story: full of drama and torture. It is a story that a journalist should be doing day after day, but they refused to do it. So this was an attempt to record some of these stories in the hope that some other writers and journalists would get interested and talk about it at different forums. I am not a professional human rights activist. I am more interested in the story. For me, your basic human right is that the state shouldn't kidnap and torture you. I think that we can all agree on this, and then we can have our arguments over other things.

MRB: The technique you have used to tell these stories is that of fiction writing.

MH: Not a single word of it is fiction but yes it is structured this way. The idea is that a reader should feel the impact of an incident that has happened with someone else. You have to be careful how you structure it so that the emotions are conveyed.

MRB: J.M. Coetzee says that “human rights” is a foundational fiction that may well be indispensable for a just society, but is a fiction nonetheless. Do you think “human rights” is a construct?

MH: Yes, it is a construct. But there is some basic work which needs to be done. An organization which keeps a record of a kidnapped person—his or her name, how long he/she has been missing, when he/she was killed—provides a very basic service which the state itself should be providing but is not willing to do because the state is the culprit. And when the media also seems to say that whatever the state is doing is justified then obviously somebody has to challenge it. I wish we lived in a society where we didn't need human rights organizations but sadly we don't live in that kind of society.

MRB: Countries like the United States attack other countries in the name of human rights. How is this construct adapted to justify large scale invasions?

MH: That's rubbish. There is a whole intellectual industry based on [human rights], and I am violently opposed to that. I think they are culpable as much as any war criminal is. Yes, human rights are used for [justifying] mass murder, but I think our context is slightly different. I am not a spokesperson for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and I don't even know what they do. But I think the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has been a valid, viable opposition when there is no political opposition in the country, when there is nobody who records the crimes of our own state.

MRB: One last question. You left London to come back and live in Karachi. Why did you feel the need to come back to Karachi?

MH: I was homesick. I lived in London and started to love it towards the end. There are lots of great things about that city, but I was one of those sad immigrants who was always homesick and always planning to move back. It was like a typical immigrant story. We still see people in their sixties and seventies making plans and I was running out of time. I didn't want to get to that stage and regret it.

MRB: And you don't plan to move back to London?

MH: No. I hope not.

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