

The New Age Indian Novelist: A Conversation with Anees Salim

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Anees Salim (b. 1970), who is based in Kochi, a South Indian town located in Kerala, is an award-winning novelist. He never fails to amaze his readers with his style, which combines chatty, colloquial prose with sharp and poignant observations. Salim is a great chronicler of a specific life over a span of time. Despite enduring two decades of rejection from numerous publishers, Salim has managed to publish seven novels in just a little over 10 years. Four of his novels—*Vanity Bagh*, *The Blind Lady's Descendants*, *Tales From a Vending Machine*, and *The Vicks Mango Tree*—saw the light of day as they were brought out by various prestigious publishing houses from 2011 to 2015.

Throughout his career, Salim's literary works have been translated into many languages, substantiating the popularity of his books. Another noteworthy aspect of his writing is that many of his novels have either been shortlisted for various awards or have won prestigious prizes, earning him recognition and fame as an author. He received several accolades, including The Hindu Literary Prize for Best Fiction in 2013, which recognized *Vanity Bagh*. *The Blind Lady's Descendants* earned him the 2014 Raymond Crossword Book Award for Best Fiction. In 2017, *The Small-Town Sea* was honored with the Atta Galatta-Bangalore Literature Festival Book Prize for Best Fiction. Salim was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2018 for *The Blind Lady's Descendants*. He is a pioneer in fictional prose, marking the fourth occasion that a writer from Kerala has been honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award. Before him, Kamala Das (1985) and Jeet Thayil (2012) received the award for their poetry collections, and Arundhati Roy (2005) was recognized for a collection of essays.¹

Salim's debut novel, *The Vicks Mango Tree* (2011), unfolds within the confines of the Mangobaag neighborhood, focusing on its inhabitants. The central character, the young journalist Raj Iyer, bravely opposes the Emergency regime through his writing. As the government clamps down on the media, Raj goes into hiding but eventually faces a harrowing interrogation upon capture. The book leaves readers in suspense about Raj's fate, with a bronze statue and a planned biography immortalizing his post-Emergency legacy. Additionally, the narrative touches on the neighboring Teacher Bhatt, who secretly aspires to publish his autobiography. The plot is

characterized by thorough character development, making it an intriguing read for patient readers. Adam B. Learner is of the view that the novel had a light-hearted and playful tone, but underneath, Salim explored some of the broader themes present throughout his work: the importance of literary expression, the complex relationship between Islam and modern India, and the subtle humor found in everyday life (Learner 2014).

Tales from a Vending Machine (2013a) is a novel that follows the everyday challenges faced by Hasina Mansoor, a young Muslim hijabi girl employed as a vending machine assistant at an airport. Narrated in the first person, the story portrays a typical day in her life, marked by her delightful sense of humor, unwavering resilience, and whimsical daydreams of discovering the extraordinary within the mundane fabric of her existence. *Vanity Bagh* (2014) unfolds an alluring story set in a small Indian mohalla. Within the novel, the Muslim characters find themselves imprisoned, reflecting on their personal histories while their lives unravel. The prison environment becomes a backdrop for introspection, allowing the narrative to revolve around their past and their imperfections. Against the backdrop of a series of terrorist attacks, explosions, and pervasive Islamophobia, the novel paints a vivid picture of the characters' experiences. Anees states: "The book is not about hope. It is about hopelessness. More than anything else, it is about distress and religious intolerance that can divide humanity and win elections" (qtd. in Venugopla 2014).

Salim's fourth publication, *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2015), unfolds in his hometown, Varkala, Kerala, and continues to showcase his distinctive fusion of subtlety and satire, which previously earned him the Hindu Literary Prize for *Vanity Bagh*. While *Vanity Bagh* explores societal issues concerning misguided youth and religious tolerance in the external world, *The Blind Lady's Descendants* takes a different path, delving into themes of existential angst, questions of identity, strained relationships, inner conflicts, and the fundamental human condition. As Leeya Mehta points out,

[h]ere is a universal portrait of a boy as he enters adulthood and grows into a man. The introspective voice, the truth-telling, the playful eroticism, the disavowing of religion, all emerge into a parable for masculinity anywhere.... [W]e meet male characters trying to survive in a changing time, despite a lack of control in their lives. (Mehta 2019)

Radhika Oberoi, in her review, writes, "It is tempting (and convenient) to label Anees Salim's *The Small-Town Sea* as Narayanesque in theme—a thirteen-year-old boy is compelled to leave the big city for an unnamed coastal town, with his family" (Oberoi 2017). Here, he forges an improbable bond with Bilal, a fellow orphan from the local mosque's orphanage, leading to a string of clandestine escapades. Meanwhile, the boy's ailing father, yearning for the sea one last time, unexpectedly rediscovers his past. After the father's passing, the boy encounters unanticipated challenges, catalyzing a transformative journey. Salim's narrative is a captivating blend of lyrical beauty and poignant humor, offering a profound exploration of love, friendship,

and family. In *The Odd Book of Baby Names* (2021), the narrative delves into the intricate familial connections within an eccentric Indian king's lineage. As one of the last monarchs in India, this king confronts his impending death while eight of the rumored 100 offsprings wrestle with the daunting task of uncovering their father's harsh truths and carrying the burden of their heritage. In her review of this novel, Saloni Sharma writes:

It is, instead, a chronicle of those on the peripheries of a royal family—the oddballs, the misfits—a motley crowd of children sired by His Highness, acknowledged by name in the pages of his book of baby names and subsequently forgotten (Sharma 2021).

In his most recent book, *The Bellboy* (2022), Salim invites us into a world that is both simple and imperfect, with melancholy lingering like a dark omen. The narrative unfolds through the eyes of 17-year-old Latif, capturing his dreams and desires. It explores his vulnerabilities and ambitions as the slow-witted teenager sets out on the first adventure of his life. Kinshuk Gupta says:

What works for me is Latif's transformation from an insignificant chap to the breadwinner of the family. Something in him hardens once he realises that he earns for the family, as is the case with most men in typical middle-class households. Not raising his voice as a child, he even beats his younger sister with a stick after a particularly bad day at work. However, even after earning money, doesn't disability continue to weigh in, the novel seems to be asking. (Gupta 2022)

In this interview, Anees Salim has graciously responded to questions, emphasizing that his goal as a novelist is to depict unique reactions to situations while also acknowledging that the perspective from which he views them is shaped by his own experiences and insights. As Manasi Subramaniam, executive editor at Penguin Random House India, rightly points out, "Anees Salim is among the finest living writers we have in the English language. His wry sense of humour and his razor-sharp wit belie his uncanny understanding of human frailty. He is the master of tragicomedy" (2021).

Md Jakir Hossain (MJH): If there is a much-talked-about incident associated with your life, it is that you had dropped out of school at the age of 16. How has that incident shaped you as an author?

Anees Salim (AS): Looking back, I see that as the wisest decision I have ever taken. I was bad at studies, and I saw no point in writing exams I was sure of failing. I grew up in a small town where there was hardly anything to keep me entertained. Fortunately, we had a fairly big library at home, crammed with classics and modern literature. So, I decided to read up, and the more I read, the more I wanted to write. There was tremendous pressure from my family to return to school and reappear for exams. But I persisted, else I would have become a disgruntled clerk or an irate shopkeeper by now.

MJH: How do you balance your job at an advertising firm and your literary career?

AS: I see advertising and literature as two streams of life. Balancing a job in advertising with a literary career is challenging but not impossible. It requires dedication, discipline, and a willingness to make sacrifices. However, the rewards of pursuing both a professional career and a personal passion are immensely fulfilling for me. I keep them away from each other and manage my time decently well.

MJH: In your career, you have seen ups and downs in your field, from rejection to publishing to winning awards. How did you cope with rejections? What motivated you to keep going?

AS: Rejections did destroy my confidence, but they also strengthened the writer in me. Every time I got a rejection mail, I locked myself in a room and wept and cursed myself for nurturing the foolish desire to be a writer. But in my heart of hearts, I knew I would get published one day, maybe just one book or a single short story or even a movie script. I knew I was not going to be buried without leaving a piece of fiction behind. Had I died unpublished, I would have set up a small printing unit inside my grave and published a weekly journal for the dead; I would have named it *Ghost Gazette*.

MJH: What inspired or motivated you to write about your hometown and ancestral home? In your novels, you either avoid using the real names of the places or your stories are set in unnamed places. But when one reads them, the reader does get a sense of their geographical locations. What are you hoping to accomplish by not setting your novels in real locations?

AS: As I have a problem with real names, by weaving the essence of real places into fictional or unnamed settings, I can pay homage to the roots while crafting stories with a broad appeal and deep emotional impact. If the setting has a real name, you have to do justice to its topography. That seems to restrict the movements of my characters. So even when I set my books in my hometown or any other place, I reconstruct the setting the way I please and rechristen them. This technique allows for a rich exploration of identity, memory, and belonging, transcending the limitations of specific locales to touch on something more universally human.

MJH: Dark themes such as death, suicide, and loneliness pervade your novels. Are there any specific reasons for your interest in, and subsequent engagement with, such topics?

AS: While the exploration of death, suicide, and loneliness can be challenging, it can also be deeply meaningful. Literature and art have

the power to illuminate the darkest corners of the human experience, offering insight, solace, and understanding. It's important, however, for creators to approach these topics sensitively and thoughtfully, considering the impact on their audience. I do not consider any of these topics as particularly dark. They provide me with good material for fiction.

MJH: You seem to have been influenced by Marquez when it comes to the matter of storytelling. As we all know, it is the power of storytelling that makes an author famous or important. In your case, who were the authors who influenced you greatly as a storyteller or shaped you as an author?

AS: Though I admire Marquez's writing a lot, I do not think he has influenced my writing in any way whatsoever. I am actually against the idea of one particular writer influencing another. I believe that when you read a good book, it makes you a much better reader and a marginally better writer. That way there are many authors who deepened my thirst for literature. V.S. Naipaul, Graham Greene, George Orwell, Christopher Isherwood, and Saul Bellow, to name a few.

MJH: You surround your protagonists with parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and friends, and each of them holds up a mirror to them at a slightly different slant. So, the family becomes one of the recurring themes in many of your novels. How does your family influence the stories you write?

AS: In crafting stories, as an author, I might not directly replicate my own family dynamics but instead use them as a springboard for exploring broader human conditions. The family—with its inherent complexity—provides a universally relatable context for characters to confront their deepest selves, make meaningful choices, and, ultimately, embark on journeys of transformation. Through the lens of family stories, I can delve into the heart of what it means to be human, connecting with readers on a deeply personal level. When you sit down to write, the people you have irked in the past crowd around your writing table and beg to be chronicled.

MJH: Your novel *The Vicks Mango Tree* (2012) recounts the days of The Emergency², which was, for many, the worst period in India's post-independence history. How do you see this entire episode? How has history been used in your novel?

AS: I was in school when the Emergency was declared, and I have only vague memories of that period. *The Vicks Mango Tree* is about the personal history of small people who were affected by the Emergency, and it has very little reference to the history of a nation.

MJH: You have spent most of your time living and working in Kerala. Having gone through *Vanity Bagh* (2013b), I was intrigued by your accurate portrayal of the Hindu-Muslim strife and the North Indian locations in it. What inspired you to write *Vanity Bagh*? Would you mind elaborating on this?

AS: I was born in Kerala, but I spent a lot of time traveling across the country, doing all kinds of jobs, and unknowingly gathering materials for my novels. I witnessed riots and their aftermaths in many parts of India. But what actually triggered *Vanity Bagh* happened in Kerala when a so-called patriot said I belonged to Pakistan. That infuriated me, but that also gave me an insight and a thread to work on.

MJH: Like your other novels, in *Tales from a Vending Machine* (2013a), there is an undercurrent of sadness blended with humour. What function does humour play in one's life and literature, in your opinion? How do you blend the tragic and comic elements?

AS: I write books the way I enjoy and humour creeps into the craft organically. So does sadness. You can't force either humour or sadness. And humour is essential in life and literature for its ability to heal, connect, critique, and illuminate the complexities of the human condition. Blending tragic and comic elements in literature mirrors the duality of life itself, offering readers a richer, more authentic narrative experience.

MJH: Your novel *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014) has autobiographical elements in it, and in your early novels, too. How have autobiographical elements helped you shape or develop your narrative? Did it make your job easy?

AS: I see a bit of myself in every book I write. There are autobiographical elements in all my books. It could be a character, a sense of loss or belonging, an episode, authenticity, emotional depth, a unique perspective, or an encounter. It could be anything. I think writing oneself into a piece of fiction is something every writer does with ease. In some ways, drawing from personal experiences makes the writing process easier. It provides a ready source of material, reducing the need for external materials. Familiarity with the subject matter also makes the writing flow more naturally.

MJH: In your novel *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014), you have employed Marquez-esque symbols and themes. How far do you agree with this statement?

AS: I do not think I can agree with you on this. In *The Blind Lady's Descendants*, I have not explicitly employed magical realism as Márquez does. The novel shares thematic and symbolic affinities with Márquez's works. This includes a focus on complex family dynamics,

the use of symbolism to explore deeper societal and personal issues, and an exploration of themes such as identity, belonging, and the absurdity of the human condition. These parallels might lead readers to draw comparisons between my narrative style and thematic exploration with those of Gabriel García Márquez.

MJH: There are commonalities between *The Small-Town Sea* (2017) and *The Blind Lady's Descendants* (2014) presented in terms of a first-person narrative in an epistolary form. How have these techniques helped you shape your narrative?

AS: I think when a tale comes to you, it comes with its own structure and technique. Even though *The Small-Town Sea* and *The Blind Lady's Descendants* are in an epistolary format, they have different voices and different personalities. The format of a letter is very evident in *The Small-Town Sea*, while in *The Blind Lady's Descendants*, you don't actually notice the format until you reach the last passage.

MJH: In the present political climate, where minority communities, particularly Muslims, experience a sense of vulnerability, how do you perceive your role? Are there moments when you sense the weight of being a spokesperson or representative?

AS: I write about a specific community, but my intention is not solely to write exclusively for them. I choose Muslim settings and narratives because it is more natural for me to explore the lives and locales I know well. I believe that some of the most outspoken critics of right-wing politics are found among writers and scholars who identify as atheists. As writers, we often reside beyond the confines constructed by religions.

MJH: Your latest book, *The Odd Book of Baby Names* (2021), is primarily a work of historical fiction. Tell us about the idea or inspiration behind this novel with such a fascinating title.

AS: Well, the book is loosely based on one of India's last kings and his children. While the official records credit him with two sons, the unofficial ones tell a different and more fascinating story. I spoke to a dozen people who claim to be his direct descendants, and I was struck by the sense of loss they carried. They were completely distraught that they had to live in slums instead of palaces and that they could never meet their father. I was moved by the immensity of their sadness.

MJH: As far as this novel is concerned, it employs multiple characters narrating the story in the first person. How difficult was it for you to maintain a balance so that the different characters don't appear similar?

AS: It was not an easy task, and I had to work on several drafts before I could get each voice right and distinct. Employing multiple first-

person narrators allows me to add depth and breadth to a narrative, and for that, it requires careful planning, deep character development, and meticulous attention to detail to maintain the balance and ensure that different characters don't appear similar. I find this approach both challenging and rewarding, as it allows for a richer exploration of the story's themes and characters.

MJH: The recently published novel titled *The Bellboy* offers a unique perspective. It is characterized not only as a commentary on society's treatment of and discrimination against the intellectually vulnerable but also as an exploration of the simmering resentment faced by religious minorities in present-day India. How do you immerse yourself in the lives of individuals who often go unnoticed, those residing on the fringes of our society? Does this stem from your personal experiences and memories of growing up in a small town and travelling across the country in your youth?

AS: Indeed, I enjoy crafting characters inspired by individuals I have encountered at different phases of life and capturing their narratives. The main character in *The Bellboy* draws from a young boy who served as a domestic assistant in my hometown, although his destiny bears a closer resemblance to that of another boy I briefly encountered. In truth, I amalgamated the experiences of two of my childhood acquaintances to fashion Latif, the central character of this novel.

MJH: *The Bellboy* deals with profound themes of mortality, existence, and the immense sense of loss. These themes are mirrored in the novel's symbolism, particularly in the sinking of Manto Island. What motivated your decision to examine these specific themes within the narrative of this book?

AS: To me, the setting in *The Bellboy* serves a dual purpose. It acts as a representation of the world we currently inhabit while also providing the backdrop for a narrative centred around the potential displacement of a community of islanders. In either case, the book does not revolve around a picturesque sunrise; rather, it is a tale of a sombre sunset, and I couldn't avoid infusing it with a sense of gloom and profound loss.

MJH: Contemporary Indian literature in English has evolved significantly in recent years, with a diverse range of voices and themes. How do you look at this phenomenon?

AS: I will not delve into pulp fiction, as a significant portion of it seems to be more about self-publishing for vanity purposes. Personally, I would neither engage with it nor would I recommend it to others. In the realm of literary fiction, we are currently witnessing a surge in good writing, perhaps more than ever before. When I first embarked on my writing journey, I faced ridicule because I did not have the background of an Oxford or Cambridge education. I had left school at the age of 16, and instead, I created a personal library at

home—that served as my equivalent of Oxford and Cambridge. In my view, the essentials for becoming a writer are a vivid imagination, unwavering determination, and proficiency in writing. Dedication plays a vital role. I cannot envision myself pursuing a formal university education to learn how to write and create a book. If I had taken that path, I might have ended up working at a bank. I do respect individuals with academic qualifications, but I believe education can sometimes impose limits and hold one back. Gaining a scholarship, going to a different place, and writing may be another method of learning to write, but it's something I can't fathom for myself. Perhaps this is influenced by my own learning disability. In my current position at a multinational advertising company, we have training programmes and workshops, but I find myself losing focus within just five minutes. I struggle to grasp the content. An overwhelming abundance of information, data, or research findings tends to bewilder me. I attempted to educate myself through self-instruction. While it might not be the most conventional approach, I heavily rely on my books.

MJH: Thank you for your time. This interview will serve as a valuable resource for scholars and academics exploring the novels of Anees Salim.

AS: Thank you for reaching out.

Notes

1. Md Jakir Hossain is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Krishnath College, (Kalyani University) Berhampore, Murshidabad, W.B., India. He earned his Ph.D. in English from the Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India. Hossain co-edited with Md. Rakibul Islam *Rewriting Resistance: Caste and Gender in Indian Literature* (Vernon Press, USA). He has published in the *Journal of Borderland Studies*, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, *Journal of Department of English*, *Vidyasagar University (W.B)*, *Muse India*, and others.

2. Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, and Jeet Thayil have been honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award for their profound contributions to Indian literature through *Collected Poems* (1985), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2005), and *These Errors Are Correct* (2012), respectively.

3. Emergency: The Emergency in India was a 21-month-long period from 1975 to 1977, during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency, citing internal and external

threats to national stability. This period was marked by the suspension of constitutional rights, censorship of the press, and the implementation of controversial policies, significantly impacting Indian democracy.

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