

TRIVIALIZING ENGLISH: PAKISTANI LITERATURE TODAY

SRI CRAVEN



A Conversation with
FARAH ALI



Farah Ali is from Karachi, Pakistan, and currently lives in Dubai, UAE. She holds a master's degree in Business Administration from the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi. Ali worked at Colgate-Palmolive while beginning to write fiction. She now teaches creative writing courses as a freelancer and conducts workshops at the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance. Her short stories have been anthologized in the Best Small Fictions and Pushcart series. People Want to Live (McSweeney's, 2021) is her first collection of short fiction. Ali's writing is informed by her observation of everyday life as it unfolds amidst the changes of urban Pakistan and the immigrant lives of Pakistanis. Her novel, The River, The Town, is forthcoming in Fall 2023 from Dzanc Books.

This interview engages Ali's short stories in People Want to Live. The conversation delves into Ali's motivations for exploring contemporary everyday Pakistani life in terms of psychological processes, on the one hand, and through/in English on the other. The city is never far from these conversations, and Ali speaks about the changing urban landscape as an inevitable part of the psycho-social exploration of life in contemporary Pakistan.

You've published quite a few stand-alone short stories and one collection. Where did you start as a writer; how did you come to writing fiction? What personal philosophy motivates your writing – a place, an instinct, or a social identity?

I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. I have always been writing, in my head or on paper. When I was a kid I filled pages with stories, and if I was doing something else, playing with my friends or doing schoolwork, I was making up stories in my head. And I was reading a lot, whatever I could find—Urdu magazines for children, abridged novels, unabridged novels. Probably very early on I found fiction, reading it and writing it, the ultimate place from which to understand the world and its people, as well as a place of incomparable rest. So, it is an instinct, a compulsion.

*Let's talk about your first collection of short stories, *People Want to Live*. The title could suggest a poignant/wary kind of emphasis that human life occurs in the context of or despite the state of the world and of humanity. Many of the stories strongly suggest an interest in mental health struggles that inevitably accompany everyday life, but are just as inevitably overridden in the context of philosophical understandings of life in Pakistani culture. This focus on mental health allows you to draw a portrait of Pakistan – especially cities like Karachi, but also far flung areas mostly unknown to the west – as a place and space where the human condition of struggle and enlightenment, pain and grace, are so clearly exemplified. Do you see your representations of individuals' inner lives as situating Pakistan differently from its overwhelming representation in western geopolitical terms in the global arena? And, what might be the result for western and Pakistani audiences who might read *People Want to Live*? For Pakistani English literary culture?*

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When I was writing these stories—which in no way were written with a design to turn them into a collection—the only thing I was thinking about was, “What does this person, in this story, really want?” That’s what I always want to know, and looking into the causes of that want and the resulting actions of seeking fulfillment of it are what create—or show—the story to me. This is an exploration of the effects happening inside a person from causes both external (weather, riots, potholes, money) and internal (hunger, love, etc.). So maybe this has made the people in these stories multidimensional as opposed to the overly simplistic cause-and-effect way people from Pakistan are generally shown. And viewers and readers who look at Pakistan only through those simplifying, generalizing lenses are being willfully ignorant. If they want, they can find out more about these people,

their histories, the contexts of their actions. But I don't write to intentionally provide that context and deepen understanding. I write because I am curious about how people get by.

There are a lot of writers from Pakistan whose work is not centered around a particular lens, or around wondering whether they please or displease readers, or widen a western reader's understanding.

Can you offer some examples of such writers? Do you see them as part of a community that might challenge western and non-Pakistani perspectives about Pakistani culture and society?

Mahreen Sohail writes amazing fiction, as well as Hananah Zaheer and Dur-e-Aziz Amna. Iqra Khan and Hera Naguib are incredible poets. There are so many more. If they are challenging perceptions of Pakistan, it's not always intentionally done. But I want to add here that the west does not get to say that a culture is good or bad, backward or with the times. Whose times? From whose position of standing is it seemingly "backward"? The west can go on having perspectives about Pakistan and its culture and society, but we shouldn't have to worry about what they think of us. That's not a good place for writing to come from.

The first-person singular narrator who represents the voice of individual women or men whose educational and class statuses vary is key to many stories in People Want to Live. You evoke these individual characters and the circumstances they represent with a very sharp eye, tracking how individual agency and choices are constrained by social circumstances. (As a non-Pakistani South Asian who came of age in India and lives in the United States, I found myself reading these stories and immediately recognizing and identifying with many of their experiences.) What does the choice of narrator mean for you in telling stories about contemporary Pakistan? In your imagining/craft,

does the first-person narrator voice a culture, a place? Or, does it offer an intimacy that readers can enter and identify with? Can the first-person narrator alienate a reader, whether from the same or a different culture?

I was surprised by the number of my stories that were in the first person. It all comes down to the right narrative distance, how much space is needed between the story being told and the protagonist. Sometimes, to me, it was a fine line between a close third person and first person. And where I really wanted to be in the very mind of the protagonist, where I wanted to see from their eyes, I chose the latter. Also, maybe where I wanted no distance between the things that were happening to the character and their immediate thoughts and reactions. So, it's more about choosing an extreme closeness with the narrator, and I think when we are readers of a first-person story we get pulled into that closeness as well. As for alienation, I think it might do the opposite. It does rely on a reader's willingness to let go of older notions and set ideas and inhabit that character for a few pages and go through a situation or a culture they're not familiar with. They could do the same in a close third-person story as well.

I understand that both narrative voices could offer similar degrees of intimacy and/or alienation depending on the reader's willingness to enter into communion with (characters in) a story. But, I do think that your use of the first-person voice elicits such a rich range of characters, fully exemplifying what a writer observing everyday life can point to — the sheer variety of human experience against forces over which, as you note earlier, humans have no control. When you say you were surprised, is it that you started out intending to write in a different voice, but as the plot developed, the voice automatically changed in your writing, or that you decided to change upon re-reading the story written in a different voice? What would you

tell emerging writers about how to approach the issue of narrative voice?

It happens both ways. Sometimes in the course of writing a story I feel that the third-person point of view is too far from the narrator and there needs to be no distance at all. I would tell emerging writers to be very patient with their stories and not to say, “Okay, this is close enough because we’re tired now.” Writing is hard, and finding the correct narrative distance between the protagonist and the one narrating the story takes time. So, if necessary, rewrite the entire thing in third person if it was in the first, or the other way around. And making those point of view changes requires other finer changes in how the story is told. It’s not only about switching pronouns and names.

People Want to Live is equitably divided among women and men protagonists and their experiences. It draws on urban dwellers quite considerably, reminiscent of other South Asian fictional works that deal with the different challenges for middle and poor classes in the current century. Urbanity – especially the city of Karachi – is central in many of the stories. Why is the city so central to your stories? Do you see Karachi or other Pakistani cities as different from their counterparts in the rest of South Asia, and, if so, how? Do you see these cities as different

from western cities, apart from the obvious differences of global south / north difference?

Karachi is a city that’s in a constant state of movement in so many forms—noise, crowds, growth from migration, expressways, buildings. Living there, one has to adapt, for survival, to all that movement; go with it or around it; live with an infrastructure strained with under-budgeting. I grew up in Karachi, got my first job in Karachi, all the while noting the way people navigated their lives there. So, in many ways Karachi and its South Asian counterparts create a different sort of person because of a different set of necessities. You’re not the same person there that you’d be elsewhere because you’d have certain basic concerns managed for you. And then even among similar-natured cities, there would be differences in behaviors that would show up in people because of the unique histories and present conditions of a particular city. For me, the force that Karachi exerts upon people is what kept showing up in the stories in this book.

Who do you consider your primary audience (the one in your head)? Do you see yourself in conversation with other South Asian writers in the diaspora, other Pakistani writers living in Pakistan? Collectively, do you see a shift in the kinds of issues that this new group of writers (age or immigration

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cohort) is interested in? Are the interests more a kind of individual in a changed society where colonial violence is no longer the interest/concern/influence? There is so little conversation about the political situation in Pakistan and much more about society and family and the insides of individuals' heads.

I think I see myself in conversation with the people in my book and with writers of fiction who might be dead or alive. And that conversation ranges from the how of writing a sentence to the how of unearthing a story, wherever in the world that story takes place. As for the general direction that work by Pakistani writers is taking now, there is a shift in the themes wrestled with and in the approach to addressing the effects of colonial violence—more and more, among short story writers, I see the latter is alluded to, or briefly mentioned, keeping the main focus of the narrative on the now of a protagonist.

Many stories in People Want to Live focus on interiority or class relations, not specifically on politics (with the possible exception of "Heroes"). Although, like most stories from South Asian countries, politics is never far from everyday life, I was struck by how very much you turn to the non-political space as the generative space for a wonderful view of contemporary Pakistan that flies in the face of what the west expects to read about the country and its people.

To this, I'll just add that I tend to write this way because I am fascinated by how people act and react to society, to expectations, to themselves. And embedded in those external and internal causes are the political and cultural histories of that place.

Finally, the Pakistani postcolonial literary canon (of course, a western creation) includes those who are mostly diasporic. These historical greats like Zulfikar Ghosh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, Hanif Kureishi, Kamila Shamsie, and more recently Mohsin Hamid.

Do you see your own move out of Pakistan (to Dubai), your writing in English as a different engagement with the type of postcolonialism that these other writers exemplify? So many writers remain unknown in the west or to the canon. What is your sense of the reason for this absence?

If I'd never moved out of Pakistan, I would have still written in English. I leaned toward writing in that language from a very early age. People whose lands and ancestors were once colonized can only move forward as an altered form, and produce art in that form and play out their politics and write their books and generally live their lives in that form. The legacy of unfair policies and practices by colonizers will keep showing up for some time in the words of Pakistani writers, whether they address it head on or choose to make it inconsequential; and even that choosing to make the colonizer trivial is a reaction. And these are things that writers get obsessed with solving and understanding, and that changes as new writers come on the horizon.

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What we're all doing is using the language and making it our own, altering the shape of it sometimes, or using it to tell stories a different way. What the west chooses to pick from our writing to hold up as examples is fine, but it doesn't reduce the value of other writers who have been writing for a long time. We should work on our own methods of getting to know them better ourselves.

I love your response! How does living in Dubai – a very multicultural place – shape further your decision to write (only) in Eng-

lish? How, in this case, does English help you to tell the story of Pakistan in a different way? How does the use of English “trivialize” (what a potent idea!) the power of the colonizer in your collection?

I write in English because it's a language that I enjoy writing in, irrespective of where I live. When I say using English to trivialize a colonizer's power, I mean that we own the language and we write our stories, poems and essays in it, to talk about our people and our cities.

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