

# Excursions

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**Saba Karim Khan**  
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## Interview with Mohsin Hamid

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*Please note that you can access the unabridged interview in podcast format on the Excursions Journal website.*

**Q.** Mohsin Hamid is joining us from Lahore to talk about all things home. ... Mohsin is the author of several astonishingly powerful and award-winning novels including his most recent work, *Exit West*, that was nominated for the Man Booker Prize. On a more personal note, Mohsin is a role model who I have looked up to and admired for many years. His literary pilgrimages and journey symbolise for me all things aspirational. Mohsin, a very warm welcome to the *Excursions* UK podcast!

As you know, the conversation today looks at unpacking the idea of home in all the messiness and chaos that this rather large and fuzzy notion encapsulates. ... This idea of straddling different worlds, of movement, of shifting homes, and your own personal journey and the parallels within your writing all offer a fantastic impetus to start thinking about this concept. I want to start right here with the word home which for some people is scarily crystalised. I don't think of it in terms of very clear binaries, but people will often ask "but where are you *really* from?". I want to start with the following questions: which sort of emotional vocabulary does the question of home evoke in you? What is your literary and symbolic relationship with home? What parts have you perhaps preserved or let go of wilfully, or otherwise?

**A.** I feel quite perplexed by the idea of home. I say this as somebody speaking to you from the house where I grew up as a child, and where my children are now the fourth generation of the family to live. So, in a sense, it is very much home. I have been back in Lahore since 2009; it has been 12 years. But a number of things are happening. Pakistan is changing, Lahore is changing, the world is changing. I feel that in that context, my sense of what home is begins to become less stable. And then, of course, in my travels I too have changed. You can never go back home and find it quite as you imagined, because home has changed and you, the person who makes the home, has also changed. ...

**Q.** In your novels, it seems like the movements across geographies correspond to places where you have had intimate associations with, or that you have spent time in (Greece, San Francisco, etc). *Exit West* (2017) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) are prominent examples. Place becomes a powerful protagonist in your work. What went into your decision to return to Pakistan after having spent so much time abroad, and at a time when it might have been the less popular decision to make? And does where you are physically anchored influence your writing?

**A.** I think that wherever you are impacts how you write. The experiences that you have often find their way into fiction, not necessarily as autobiography, but as experiences (such as the fear that your city may suddenly be consumed by a war or living with parents who are now getting quite old). These sorts of things are shaped by where one is. In my case, they find expressions in fiction, even if the characters are not having experiences that correspond directly to my own. The part of the planet Earth that you tend to be placed on also affects your viewpoint in a certain way. I suspect that were I living full-time in London, I would have a different perspective on things.

The plan was to spend considerably more time in New York. Then Covid intervened, and it became difficult to go there. In the last two years, I have been to New York three times, for three or four weeks each time. It has been interesting, to have New York begin to re-emerge as a place one goes back to as their main 'other place' than Pakistan, after a very long time. Certainly, if I was in New York, my vantage point would be quite different. Experiencing the approach of the pandemic was very different in Milan than it was in London than it was in New York and Lahore.

Where one is invariably has an impact, in the same way as for an athlete, what one eats has an impact. If you play a sport and eat *daal chawal* before the game, it might have a different impact than if you eat sushi or a bag of chips or KFC. The body reacts differently to those things. I think the imagination and one's emotional state is very much shaped by where one is.

When we moved back to Pakistan in 2009, our daughter was about three months old, and we were facing a crossroads. We thought that by staying in London, we might never return to Pakistan. Why not go back, since we had always thought we would one day, and just see how it went? A dozen years have passed, and we have been mostly in Pakistan ... I spent the first three years of my life in Lahore, then six to seven years in California, then about a decade in Lahore, then the better part of more than a decade in the US, and almost a decade in London. But I think that twelve years in one place is probably the longest I've stayed put. I don't want to make any predictions about the future, but we came back almost as though we didn't want to miss a chance to come back. We have been here since, almost without planning to be.

**Q.** When I read writers who speak about their homes (homes they have been attached to in the past, where they are currently or even in a more imagined, more reflexive sort of future), I find that it triggers a reflexive slate of emotions that can make for very compelling and affect-laden essays, from a

sense of wounded nostalgia and loss to a reclamation project, leaning into a sense of attachment and love. Writing about a home is almost a form of travel writing. It is informed by a confluence of intimacy, imagination, and memory. In your own work, you put it so poignantly when you say: “we're all migrants through time”. This evokes for me a real sense of not having to have physically moved away from Pakistan to actually be a migrant, or for my relationship with home to have changed. Yet, we are at a time when there is a lot of chatter about who can speak for whom and who can write about what. If I am for instance an expat, am I entitled to write about Pakistan as my home? I was privy to conversations online about Pakistani authors getting a lot of pushbacks along the lines of “Oh, they will always talk about the *masjid*, they'll always go back to this symbolism around mangoes, there will always be the damp smell of earth”. On the one hand, writing about home can be so powerful, personal and intimate and I don't think it should matter whether I'm relying on imagination, memory or nostalgia, or even if I'm physically located there. But on the other hand, I cannot help but wonder who gets to decide whether I have passed this test of authenticity. Who gets to decide when something is being exoticized or sensationalised, or, to use this new word that I got introduced to recently – whether I'm 'expatsplaining' just because I'm not physically in Pakistan? What do you make of this conversation, Mohsin?

**A.** There are so many different aspects to this. There is an internal aspect to the writing; what am I doing with this? What is the purpose of this book? Am I designing it in a way to pretend to be one thing, while actually being something else? And if I am doing that, do I really want to be doing that? There are all these sorts of questions that one has to ask. There is also the question of who gets to decide these things. Who gets to say whether writers can't do this or that? There is the terrible burden of whether to imagine that the particular writer(s) are representing their nation – particularly a country

as diverse and vast as Pakistan, a country with 220 million people, speaking different languages, believing in different religions and belonging to different ethnic groups and cultures.

When I wrote *Moth Smoke* (2000), it wasn't too much about mangoes, exoticism, and that kind of stuff. At the time, I thought it was a sort of departure from a lot of depictions I was seeing coming out of South Asia. The book focused very much on new urban people smoking joints, having affairs, and dealing with corruption; what one saw around oneself in Lahore in the 1990s. It wasn't certainly intended to be representative of life in Pakistan. I remember that when it came out people thought: "This isn't really happening in Pakistan, people aren't drunk and on ecstasy at parties, they aren't smoking weed, having joints and hooking up", and of course they were. In fact, they are doing it much more now than they were twenty-two years ago when the book came out. There was this idea that I had "imagined" Pakistan. That said, the book endeared itself to certain groups of young people. I was once talking to Russell Banks at an Italian literary festival, who said that it takes ten years after a book comes out to find out what it does in the world. As far as *Moth Smoke* is concerned, it seems to have found its way with young people in places like Lahore and Karachi but also Delhi, Bombay, Lagos, etc. It speaks to a particular kind of urban Global South experience. I didn't view it as exoticizing, but I thought in many ways it was coming from what one saw. It tried to break a lot of the tropes that characterised South Asian writing in English at that time. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was something quite different. I heard from people saying that I was playing the trope of Pakistan being terrorist. The novel was, in fact, trying to disassemble that trope. It intends itself as a kind of mirror that asks the reader to engage in their own forming of judgements.

When I moved back to Pakistan and started working on *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), I made the very conscious decision to not use the words "Pakistan", "Islam" or "Lahore", or any proper nouns

whatsoever. I decided to write a book that is rooted in Lahore but would take the city as a template for the universal city, much as somebody might have taken Paris as a template in the 19th century or New York in the 20th. Lahore is more like most cities in the world today than London or Paris certainly are. So why not have this universal city with no names, and characters with no names, as a very strict exercise in resisting any internal impulses towards either exoticisation or towards lazy suppositions? You have to describe things: if somebody is praying, you have to say what that means, for instance. ... That was a radical exercise for me. ... I felt that I had departed from this zone of conflict over who was representing Pakistan, because there was no Pakistan. In *Exit West* once again the city was not Lahore. It could be, but it could be many other places as well, like Damascus. People from these places asked me if I had them in mind when I wrote the book. The idea of people moving through doors and this idea of migration was something I had been grappling with for a very long time. I made a very self-conscious decision to not write about Pakistan in the novel, to create a geographical space of the imagination, to avoid self-exoticisation and this tired critique of writers.

My next novel is coming out this August, and called *The Last White Man*. It doesn't really have any non-white characters. The main characters are called Anders and Oona. Their story unfolds in a nameless place. I feel that whether it is informed by this critique (what one has permission to write), or whether it is just to carve out space to allow me to do what I want to do in my own fiction, I have made a whole series of formal choices to make it more difficult for me to fall into this position of representing the entire experience of Pakistan. It is a ridiculous thing, in a sense, to be accused of, but it is an accusation which stings. You don't want to be somehow exploiting this place. I don't know what it means to exploit a place through fiction. ... As a writer, I have had certain formal concerns (how novels get built, what the architecture is, how the language works) that I have been working with.

I have evolved towards exploring both the formal and the thematic concerns on a fictional landscape that can less clearly be defined as Pakistan, aimed at something more specific (ie. coming from me) and something much more general (ie. a sense of universality). It seems odd to say, but there is this idea that if you are a white writer in New York or London, you can speak about the human condition, but if you are a brown writer in Pakistan, all you are doing is representing Pakistan. Not that representing Pakistan is a lesser task, but it is a reductionist reading of what any artist is doing. ... It is a very complex terrain which is full of all sorts of uncertainties and discomforts. In my case, it is something which has led me to be very conscious of how and where I wander fictionally, and to create spaces of freedom and openness for myself, despite living in a world where this conversation of representation and who has permission is such a dominant conversation.

**Q.** So much of what you say resonates. This burden of representation is real, and it is reassuring that it is something you have thought about and looked at interventions to address it. Can you tell us more about your new book?

**A.** For me, writing a novel about whiteness internally, from people who imagine themselves as white is, in a sense, an act of cultural appropriation. Or, at least, it is a resolute rejection of the idea that I can only write cis 50-year-old heterosexual Muslim-origin Pakistani men. I really believe in the transgressive nature of imagination. Fiction, for me, does not merely exist so that I can tell people what happened or what it is like to be me. It also exists so that I can imagine being other things. When my son was playing next door being a dinosaur, for example, he wasn't trying to represent himself. ... His main concern was that he wanted to be a dinosaur, and so much of fiction is about that, writers living out different lives, inhabiting other characters, going on different adventures. It is useful to reflect on what brings diasporic writers to write about their "original homeland". The least charitable



reading ... is that people are trying to exploit the fictional economic value of their supposed homeland and monetizing it for their own gain while harming the homeland. We all know that, for the most part, there isn't that much money in this fiction game. Writing about Pakistan fictionally in ways that exploit the cultural patrimony seems an odd choice of corruption to pursue. ...

A much more generous reading would be to say that maybe many diasporic writers wish to return to that place, if only in their imaginations. I wrote *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* largely after I left the US, and it is set significantly in New York. I wrote *Moth Smoke* largely in New York, and it is set significantly in Lahore. My latest novel, *The Last White Man*, is set in an unnamed place that feels like small-town America or somewhere in the West, and I wrote it while living in Lahore. In each case, these books are meant to imaginatively teleport myself into a different place, to travel. If no place has that possibility of home, and you have moved around so much that even the place you live in cannot feel satisfactorily like home, then using your imagination to be in more than one place at one time is quite possibly an important move that many of us choose to make. In fiction, it means people writing about a place where they don't happen to be at that time, and not for an exploitative purpose, any more than my son being a dinosaur is exploiting palaeontology or the Jurassic era, but really because they need to be there. Imaginatively that is where they want to go.

This topic of race and whiteness has been very interesting for me. It has felt like a kind of transgression to write characters who are not 'like me' very much from the inside. This felt like a necessary thing to do as, for me, this is what writing is all about. It will be interesting to see if next time out the critique is "Once again he is showing Pakistan in a bad light" or "Look, here you see yet another example of diasporic writing – here is somebody who lived in America, now lives in Pakistan and is writing about America from the outside!". The reason these questions are so visceral is because they

get to the heart of what sort of a person you are, what the validity of your writing is. Of course, each writer must judge for themselves, but it is a conversation and an argument that I personally don't feel the need to shy away from. ...

**Q.** There is a lot of comfort in hearing that we all seem to carry all the weight of 'real Pakistan' – whatever that refers to. ...

**A.** I do think that something does happen in the Pakistani context quite often. Maybe it happens in other contexts too, but I can't speak to those because I'm not as intimately familiar with them. In Pakistan, there is a fundamental crisis of legitimacy and authenticity about everything. Who is Muslim enough? Who decides? Who is Pakistani enough? Who decides? What is Pakistan? Can you be somebody who doesn't pray and still be Muslim? Can you be somebody who doesn't speak Urdu and is still Pakistani? Can you be someone who lives abroad and is still of this place? Who the hell knows?

I think there is a deep and abiding anxiety about belonging to the group which is perhaps a phenomenon much older than Partition. One can imagine that Partition plays a huge role, because everybody belonged to this larger South Asian entity which was then called India. But then it split into Pakistan and India. Within Pakistan, people had to exit that group which was now India and people had to exit the group which was now Pakistan, with Hindus moving to India and Muslims moving to Pakistan. And ever since then, there has been a series of similar things. There were the issues around the acceptance of Muhajirs in Karachi politics, the issues around the acceptance of Pashtuns in the middle of Karachi, and the issues around the arrival of Afghan refugees and their children grown up in Pakistan: who are they, are they Pakistani now or are they Afghan? There are the Shia-Sunni tensions, the secularists and the non-secularists, and this idea that free

expression is somehow harmful to national security and somebody who is engaged in this does not love the place they are from. There is a series of interlocking paranoias and fears that, in some hard-to-express level, have to do with the question “does one belong to the group or not?”. When you encounter somebody like a diasporic writer who is a kind of hybrid, who is ‘of the group’ and ‘not of the group’, it is fundamentally threatening, just as somebody who is Muslim and doesn't act in ways that other people think to be Muslim. ... The hybridised forms tend to evoke quite a visceral reaction in Pakistan, and maybe everywhere. A lot of what is happening here ties into that. ... Even if these are criticisms being articulated by liberal people, being progressive doesn't mean that one doesn't suffer from the same anxiety as everybody else. This question of legitimacy is something that is life or death in a place like Pakistan. It manifests itself everywhere and in everything, in our politicians, our artists, our writers, our diasporic writers. It is something we cannot really escape, and one needs to find a way to grapple with it. ...

**Q.** You may not realise it, but coming from you, this holds a lot of weight for other artists and people across the country. We sometimes think that the more accomplished folks have grasped this fully and it is now all behind us, invisible ... There is a lot of power in realising that these are real issues and that there are ways in which they have to be dealt with practically and technically... I have read some of your own journalistic writing that has touched upon this; you spoke about the idea of belonging, whether it is our faith, sex, gender, etc, and this kind of purity/totalitarian impulse. This is allied to this to notion of belonging, this sense of ‘us versus them’ but also purity and the unacceptance of what is seen as less pure. ...

**A.** I often find myself thinking about family in a Pakistani context, and the relationship of in-laws is the most fascinating example of this. When two people marry in traditional Pakistani society, there is this incredibly fraught

situation. Is the person who has married into the family really of the family? So much of our literature, TV, and gossip, has to do with that dynamic – the dynamic of the person who is ‘partly in’ and ‘partly out’. I find myself falling (out of necessity and temperament) very much on the side of people who are ‘partly in’ and ‘partly out’, who feel a connection, but are not always immediately accepted. The opposite is such a stifling existence where people have to pass the purity test in the family, in religion, in artistic or literary production. And then, of course, that purity test is always from outside, it is never the artist's sense of what is pure. If you want to believe in the arts in Pakistan (or really anywhere), it is essential to find faith within. In other words, the pursuit of the external idea that your work is of sufficient purity will never lead you anywhere. You have to find your own sense of what makes work ‘pure’, what purity you value and then embody that in what you make. The purity you value may be the purity of extreme impurity. If that is the case, that is what you have to express ...

Finding home is very difficult in a deeply interconnected and very polarised world, where everybody seems to have an opinion as to whether something is home or not. I have this quote from Calvino taped up on my study and I will read it:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.

For me that really encapsulates so much about life.

**Q.** Thank you for sharing that. I was recently listening to a heart-breaking testimony by cricketer Azeem Rafiq who was playing for the Yorkshire

County cricket club and discussing the normalisation of institutional racism in some of these clubs in the UK. We are in a world today where this idea of home can seem fluid and unanchored. On the one hand you feel like borders are collapsing and we are all moving closer, but on the other it's a world that really seems to be tearing at the seams, a world where our starting points still matter. This is a world where passport privilege is still something that is glaring and real, and people are looking to procure some kind of commercially viable passport like it is organic cheese off a farmer's market. How do you and your wife think about these issues and how do you plan to approach some of these conversations about home and passport privilege with your children? Are there apprehensions or things you would like them to be sensitised to? ...

**A.** Every parent is grappling with this sort of thing. We are too. At the basic level, there is the desire that the children learn to read and write Urdu and embed in the fabric around them. Their friends are all from here, they should speak the language, go out in the world early on (whether on a sports' team or volunteer pro bono sort of work). ... Let's say the covid lockdown was never lifted. What would your child need to survive here? It isn't just a matter of speaking a language, having friends or knowing what it is like to do a job. It also has to do with a kind of mental attitude ... These are not simple questions.

Home has to be made; whether it is by reading *Persepolis*, watching the Pakistani web series *Churails* or even working on an Urdu screenplay with our daughter, who recently read Malala's autobiography. There is a certain challenge at the same time to try to equip them with ability to make the world home: to speak other languages, travel, have friends in different places. ... The ability to travel is a bit like sight or the ability to walk, it can be taken at any moment. ... Sometimes travel becomes essential for survival. In that environment, how to manage? ... Certainly, you can make a home, but

to build a home where you can thrive is more challenging. ... We've reached a point where we cannot take things for granted ... so one does what is best so that the child can build a home and carry their home with them to a new place if they need to.

**Q.** All of your work, in some fashion or form, deals with this idea of home, this sense of being uprooted, in a schizophrenic state. Your use of nameless locations gets pointed out a lot, as well as the idea of disruption, of being torn away. ... and so, I want to hone in really quickly on *Moth Smoke*; the kernel of that novel is how conflicted Daru's relationship is with home in a subtle, deeply layered way, as he is in a Lahore that is burning up but which offers parallels to his personal life that is in shambles. You were in New York when you wrote this novel. What went into the making of Daru's relationship with Lahore? And what was the backstory to *Moth Smoke* and to the role that Lahore played in that book?

**A.** I wrote it as a young man. I began in 1993, in my last year of college before my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. I wrote a first draft in college, took a year off and came back to Lahore from 1993 to 1994, where I wrote a second draft. Then I went to Law school in Boston from 1994 to 1997, kept working on the book and actually submitted this book as my law school thesis at Harvard. I had figured out I didn't want to be a lawyer. I went to my supervisor and told him I was writing this novel which was sort of structured as a trial and wanted to submit it as my thesis. He told me, "You know what? I don't want to read another thesis about the law" and he agreed. I was in New York for 2 or 3 years working on it and eventually it was published in the year 2000. *Moth Smoke* went through many drafts. ... In many ways it was me grappling with Lahore. I think of *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as mirror images ... *Moth Smoke* was grappling with Lahore as an insider but also as somebody fundamentally shaped by their half American point of view. *The*

*Reluctant Fundamentalist* is someone grappling with New York, with America, as an insider but also as somebody shaped by their half Pakistani point of view. For me, *Moth Smoke* was trying to figure this place out. In many ways my references were much more *Pulp Fiction* than Bapsi Sidhwa. And of course, I love Bapsi and admire her very much, but I had a different lens that I wanted to bring. When I was doing it, I had no idea what anyone would make of this. ... *Moth Smoke* was, in a sense, my attempt to come to terms with Lahore in my imagination.

**Q.** Thank you so much for this conversation. In a world where we get so much flak (sometimes justifiably, sometimes not), for the green passport, you and your writing are definitely one of the reasons that allow us to hold our heads high when dealing with immigration at JFK or Heathrow or wherever else that might be. It puts us on the map for such beautiful compelling reasons and I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart for this conversation.

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