

An Interview with Zulfikar Ghose

By Mansoor Abbasi

The famous expatriate Pakistani writer and scholar, Zulfikar Ghose, visited Pakistan on one of his infrequent visits, in August 2006. I was lucky enough to have this opportunity to interview him, in which we were able to discuss many issues concerning Ghose and his art, Pakistani literature, culture and society, and various contemporary issues in international writing that are of considerable direct interest to students and scholars in postcolonial contexts and to which we have, in Pakistan, comparatively less exposure. An abbreviated version of this detailed interview was published in daily *Dawn*, Lahore edition, August 20th 2006 and the full text is reproduced here, in this article.

Zulfikar Ghose was born on 13 March 1935, in Sialkot, in what is now part of Punjab in Pakistan. His family moved to Bombay in 1942 and ten years later emigrated to England. Graduating from the University of Keele, UK, in 1959, he worked as a freelance journalist in London, reporting cricket and hockey for *The Observer* and book reviewing for *The TLS*, *The Spectator* and *New Statesman*. In 1969, he moved permanently to the United States where he is still based, and is Professor Emeritus at the University of Texas, Austin.

His first novel, *The Contradictions* (1966) explored what has remained a central part of his early literary-creative experience, “[the] differences between Western and Eastern attitudes and ways of life” (*Cambridge Encyclopedia*, 469). His best known and rather controversial work, *The Murder of Aziz Khan* followed, in 1967, with its very realistic criticism of the vagaries of Pakistani society and politics and the depiction of the clash between the traditional ways and a new, rampant materialism. Later, he wrote *The Incredible Brazilian* trilogy, comprising the novels *The Native* (1972), *The Beautiful Empire* (1975) and *A Different World* (1978). His other novels include *Crump’s Terms* (1975), *Hulme’s Investigations into the Bogart Script* (1981), *Don Bueno* (1983), *Figures of Enchantment* (1986) and *The Triple Mirror of the Self* (1992). There are a few unpublished novels which are in his archive at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin. Ghose has also published six volumes of poetry, six books of literary criticism and an early autobiography, *Confessions of a Native – Alien* (1965).

INTERVIEW

Zulfikar Ghose was staying at his sister's house, in Gulberg, Lahore, when I went to interview him there. Somewhat grayed over time, his natural good humour, courtesy and quiet, reflective personality were a welcome respite.

MA: We generally know you through your early work, *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, which is still considered of a controversial nature here, in many quarters. Do you still receive any comments/criticism?

ZG: Well. I have written much more since then, in various genres. *Aziz Khan* was a 'foundation novel', a preliminary work with some strong sociological content, reflecting a number of problems facing Pakistani society. Normally, I am not interested in content unless it can be presented in a form that charges that content with an unprecedented imaginative power and therefore engages the reader with new, and perhaps challenging, ideas associated with that content. But *Aziz Khan* was my second novel. I was writing it 40 years ago when the British Empire was still being dissolved. Remember that we—the writers from the Commonwealth—were the first generation of the so-called post-colonial writers and therefore subjected to a special scrutiny: before we could experiment with form, we had to prove that we could write in the traditional mould. *Aziz Khan* was my proof.¹

And yes, it received some adverse criticism back then --- and yes, I believe there was some criticism again a few years ago when the book was being taught in a university course. I heard that some students objected to a reference to homosexuality and apparently the matter was referred to some government official. I was not told anything, but a little later the publisher declared the book out of print.

Whatever the facts, any society that calls for a restriction and eventual censoring of another human being's ideas is a very immature society. I believe that we in Pakistan are the inheritors of some of the most advanced civilizations the planet has known and that one consequence of that extraordinary inheritance is an intellectual evolution that makes us gifted creators in the arts and the sciences; but our tragedy as a nation is that we have let our native genius be stifled and nearly choked to death by religious exclusivity and the appalling intolerance associated with it.

We should never be intimidated by any subject matter but should direct our criticism at the way it is presented, we should estimate not what is said but

how it is said.

MA: What is your subject matter?

ZG: There is very little ‘new’ subject matter; human experience is repetitive and universal. It’s all been said and thought before. Therefore, in my view, one’s emphasis should be on the quality of the writing. That is what I do. I believe in emphasizing this aspect in my work. In the creative writing courses that I teach [at the University of Texas], I advise the students to try to find the best way to present their subject matter: pay attention to the language, the construction of the sentences, see if you can’t arrive at a style that captures your unique voice.

MA: What about International writings, especially South-Asian writing in English? What is new about these? How would you rate these as literature?

ZG: I don’t believe in categories, be they regional or national or parochial.² It has been said before—by Henry James and Chekhov, among others—that there are only two kinds of literature: that which has life and that which does not, and it makes no difference from which part of the world the work originates. I admire Cervantes (Spanish), Pushkin (Russian), Proust (French) and Machado de Assis (Brazilian) not because there is anything to learn from them about Spain or Russia or France or Brazil but because I see in each a unique imagination that renders reality with such forceful originality that it takes on a new dimension. When we applaud a Dante or a Shakespeare, we honour the individual and not the nation he was born in.

It is understandable, of course, that Pakistanis want to read books set in Pakistan and the English books set in England, and so with other societies. But this is a rather elementary level of reading; worse still, such a lowly approach pays no attention to quality, for it is easily impressed by the nationalist association. It is like saying that you like Monet’s paintings of water-lilies because you are a keen gardener, but if you happen to be a businessman with no time for gardens then those paintings mean nothing to you.

Or it is like an Englishman lamenting the fact that *Hamlet* was set in Denmark and that it would somehow be a better play had it been set in Windsor Castle.

As for South Asian writers, there are several that I admire, but not because they are South Asian but because they are good writers.³ It is always the individual, not the group, that matters. However, I will add that some of the finest English writing in recent decades has come from the former British colonies—not

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only South Asia, but also from North America, Africa and Australia. Of course, it is gratifying that among the best writers a few have come from our part of the world, but, really, artists are a global and not a flag-waving nationalist community.

MA: Do you think that the trauma of Partition in 1947 is a subject that offers a lot of scope for subcontinental writers? Especially in Pakistan?

ZG: Again, ‘subject matter’ should not be confused with ‘great literature’. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is a great work of art because of its canvas, its beauty, not merely because of its subject matter. Partition was a trauma. It affected millions of people in the subcontinent. But I am personally not really engaged with the political aspects, or dimensions, of this historical event. Some writers have found that they can write about this aspect, this dimension in the context of the subcontinent. As a human being, one is touched: I share the same feelings—about Partition, about Pakistan—as most Pakistanis do. Just as I grieve for the people suffering in Lebanon right now. I take a broader view of history. I believe in liberating the mind through study, through knowledge.

Look at the state of Pakistan now [2006]. The political situation is disappointing. When Benazir [Bhutto] originally came to power, I thought things might get better, that the government would promote education. But it didn’t. The failure of democracy to serve the people in Pakistan is quite disappointing. Perhaps the power of the military on the one hand and the excessive influence of the priests on the other, each group jealously guarding its power and the wealth that comes with it, have created a vested interest in sabotaging democracy that connives to keep it so weak that any liberal progress is stifled.

MA: Do you find Pakistan has changed for the worse? In what ways?

ZG: I recollect a visit I made to Taxila sixteen years ago. I found a richness of experience there [at the Museum/ruins]; I felt that I was part of this place, this ethos. It gave me a consciousness of being rooted deeply in that past, so much so that I still feel it within me as a sense of cultural continuity. I think this is our common inheritance, but I don’t see it translated into that dimension of political action which would advance the common good. What I mean is, we have the intellectual grounding to take us to great heights, but I see no evidence of our using it. We have the potential to be a prosperous liberal state, the very picture of advanced civilization. Instead, the image of Pakistan in the world is that of a country that has been handed over to the barbarians.

However, that is not to say that the situation is hopeless. There still are some very cultured people living in Pakistan, although they now constitute a thinning minority. But I believe that it is this small minority, which is alive, which is producing fine creative work, which could bring about positive change in Pakistan—if it is given the chance to exercise its intellect freely, a freedom that only a secular state can guarantee, without any constraint from the inflexible dogma of a theocracy.

MA: You say that you have moved beyond a conscious involvement with any one culture or literature. Do you still find the subcontinent, or Pakistan, reflected in your writings, at any level?

ZG: Well, not directly, not consciously. I am no longer ‘involved’ in that way. But, perhaps, at a deeper level, the concerns of this region do creep into my writings. In *The Incredible Brazilian* trilogy, I feel that Brazil has become my surrogate subcontinent, the subtext is Pakistan, to quite an extent.⁴ Although I don’t like labels and tags, I do have an awareness, a sense of this duality, consciously or unconsciously, as a ‘once-Pakistani’.

At various levels, I have a special, non-political, non-politicized associative relationship with Pakistan, with Pakistani culture. I have some nostalgic feelings, too, but more than that, rather than dwelling on what Pakistan ‘means’ to me, I tend to see [for example] what the Pakistani cricket team is doing in the field. I share the feelings of Pakistanis over the loss of the Test series against England. I also have an abiding love for Pakistani music. I’m sorry to say that I have largely lost the vocabulary of Urdu and Punjabi, therefore I cannot speak these languages with any fluency or confidence any more. But I listen to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Ghulam Ali and Abida Perveen, on my way to campus daily [in Austin]. Nusrat Fateh Ali is truly wonderful....

MA: Someone remarked that you do not receive much critical attention in the West, any longer, as you do not write the type of books that people ‘want’ there. Do you agree?

ZG: Yes I agree that apolitical writing has affected my public image, as a writer, in the West. Especially when some writers have made reputations and won accolades for a certain type of politicization of our ethos --- in the subcontinent, in the Middle East, in terms of a certain type of writing, which is ‘expected’. If you are an Indian and write a novel set in India, your book will immediately receive

the attention of professors teaching post-colonial literature; but if you are a Pakistani writing a novel that is set in Brazil, the same professors are not going to look at it. A friend of mine, an American writer, said to me sometime ago, “Had you kept on writing on the pattern of *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, you would have won the Nobel Prize”. I don’t take this as a compliment. I strongly disapprove of any sort of ‘formula writing’. There are different kinds of obsessions that we all suffer from, and mine is entirely concerned with aesthetics.

MA: Why don’t you come back to Pakistan? Or, at least, visit more regularly?

ZG: I would like to! I loved being here in the 1960s. I thought of staying here [for good] and went around the editors of different newspapers for a job. I was already an established journalist in London, but no Pakistani editor had a job for me.

I would be glad to visit, now, to come every year if I could—Pakistan should give me a passport! Having to get a visa and to endure all that bureaucratic hassle to visit one’s native country is enough to put one off.

[Interview Concluded]

Comments

As a conclusion, it might be appropriate to add this. Like many other former colonies, we in Pakistan, too, have a strongly Anglophile tradition, and a vibrant ‘diaspora’ in more developed countries such as the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. Many expatriate writers of Pakistani origins, such as Zulfikar Ghose—and Bapsi Sidhwa, Attiya Hossein, Hanif Kureishi etc., have added considerably, one way or the other, to creating ‘representations’ of Pakistan abroad (Tarin, 70-72). Yet, almost all of these representations and images, direct or indirect, seem to be more focused on the diasporic or nostalgic experiences and impressions of a ‘lost’ homeland, with rare exceptions. Firstly, these diasporic writings have a tendency to cater to the popular Western perceptions or trends, that seek to present a distinct image of Pakistan/Pakistanis, and Muslim societies in general: As writers like Naipaul have gained a lot from catering to such requirements. This raises the important concern, or question, of why we are not capable of creating our own, comparative critical-literary set-up to offer our own perspectives. For this, the sites, centers and sources of production of international literature, especially in English, need to be ‘relocated’ so that a truly effective response can be generated. Furthermore, those writers who are writing in Pakistan, can also be enabled to present their work in a more balanced, realistic atmosphere of “critical globality” (Weinbaum and Edwards, 255). Secondly, with special reference to issues of identity and the continued ‘intervention’ of colonial/imperial discourses in post-colonial societies, in

countries like Pakistan, for example, diasporic writings of writers such as Ghose (and others, as mentioned) need to be seriously re-evaluated, in the proper critical perspectives. Alastair Pennycook gives a fitting agenda for such considerations, when he points out, "... the potential meanings that can be articulated... [in] discourses of development, democracy, capitalism, modernization, and so on" (53). No doubt, English is the 'world language', in which the cultural identities of nations are now being articulated, in an increasingly globalized environment. Yet, quite frequently, diasporas and diasporic writings are not necessarily the best interpreters of identity as far as developing ex-colonial/post-colonial nations are concerned. Pakistani universities and academic bodies, intelligentsia etc., need to be able to develop larger critical faculties, and facilities, to respond to these challenges (Tarin, 72). This is very significant. Since this is basically an Interview-based article, I shall not dwell more on matters that require deeper debate and discussion. It is hoped that Ghose's preceding interview, along with the brief critical comments herein contained, might prove to be useful for other scholars, so as to generate a larger debate in these pages.

¹ In an earlier interview abroad Ghose said that apart from his novel *The Murder of Aziz Khan* and some of his early poems, he never intentionally wrote about any 'one culture', or a 'particular culture'. In other words, he was not politically motivated in writing on certain themes and did not subscribe to the usual 'pigeon-holing' of texts in such simplistic categories. See R.W. Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla, "A conversation with Zulfikar Ghose", July 1985. http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview_ghose.html

² Ibid.

³ At the same time, Ghose believes that he himself is much closer in many ways to English/British writers of Anglo-Saxon provenance. He stated as much, in an earlier interview: "I am more Anglo-Saxon than the Anglo-Saxons." This is a satirical comment as the interviewers were trying to push him into a multicultural category. Therefore, he further says, "... I don't mean to align myself with Kingsley Amis or Philip Larkin...all I mean is that my education has been British and that it was such a

powerful conditioning force that I cannot see myself apart from it.” (In Dasenbrock and Jussawalla)

⁴ Interestingly, in the above quoted interview of 1985, Ghose talks of ‘transposing’ *The Incredible Brazilian* to an Indian environment. He says that the, “Brazil in my [trilogy] novel is simply a substitute for India”. So, in the present interview, when he says that the “sub text is Pakistan, to quite an extent”, he is essentially referring to his own shared memories of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, of South Asia in broadest terms, rather than any specifics. Thus India for him is a place not a state. (In Dasenbrock and Jussawalla)

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