INTERVIEW WITH ABDULLAH HUSSEIN

BY DR KHALID SOHAIL

AND

PROFESSOR MOHAMMAD UMAR MEMON

"How tall are you?" his hostess asked.

"Six feet and four and a half inches" Abdullah Hussein replied.

"How come you are so tall??'

"I chose my parents well. They were both quite tall," he smiled.

I was quite amused by his response. It was my first meeting with Abdullah Hussein, the living legend of Urdu literature and the creator of masterpieces like "Udaas Naslein" and "Nadar Loag", the two popular and well-respected novels.

Since I had seen his picture only once a long time ago, I was expecting to meet a stocky and serious man with thick glasses and beard, so I was surprised to meet a tall and lanky man sitting awkwardly in a reclining chair wearing his sneakers in the living room, while other guests had taken off their shoes near the door, smoking a pipe while enjoying his drink. He got up to receive me and when I hugged his tall lean body, I became aware that he even physically had a towering personality. I had never shook such a long and awkward looking hand before in my life. He welcomed me gracefully and asked the guests, "Do you know what Khalid Sohail did?"

"No," Professor Memon said.

"Munir Pervaiz told me that he was going to be interviewed on "The Multicultural" television station this weekend but he asked the host to interview me instead. I have never seen an Urdu writer offering such a sacrifice for any other writer, not even his own father."

"It is not a sacrifice," I responded. "I live in this town, so I can be interviewed anytime. After all you are our pride and joy. We feel honored to welcome you in Toronto and proudly present you to the Canadian public."

"It is very nice of you." He was quite graceful.

After the brief introduction I invited Abdullah Hussein and Mohammad Umar Memon for a dinner. We wandered around in downtown Toronto and landed in an Italian restaurant. All three of us talked and ate and drank. It was quite an enjoyable evening. Abdullah Hussein shared with us that he was a shy man and did not enjoy attending sponsored

seminars and conferences and workshops because he felt forced to interact with people that he might not have liked otherwise. He felt such arrangements restricted his freedom. He said, “Urdu writers go on these trips because they want either fame and popularity or money. I don’t need any of them. After forty editions of my novel being published, I think I am reasonably well known and I have earned enough that I can travel with my own money. I value my freedom and I don’t want to sacrifice it for anything.”

I always believed that only a free man could create genuine literature.

We were surprised to find out that the man sitting at the next table who volunteered to take our picture was a Native Indian writer. He was pleased to know that I had read the writings of Black Elk and had translated the famous speech of Chief Seattle into Urdu, the speech delivered in the 1850s when Native Americans were asked to move to the reserves and the American government had offered to buy their land.

At the end of the evening I dropped Abdullah Hussein and Umar Memon at the Quality Inn in Missisauga where both of them were staying. Umar Memon gave me the book Stories of Exile and Alienation which was the collection of translations of Abdullah Hussein’s stories recently published by Oxford Press Pakistan, the first of the series of Pakistani Urdu writers, and I offered Abdullah Hussein a collection of my stories called Dharti Ma’n Udaas Haiy (Mother Earth Is Sad).

While I was driving back I remembered the evening Professor Umar Memon was visiting Toronto to present his short story, and in Munir Pervaiz’s house, while exchanging our views on Urdu Literature, we discussed our dream of having a two-day conference on Urdu fiction and inviting Abdullah Hussein for a few days to Toronto. Professor Memon shared that Abdullah Hussein was a hermit and rarely accepted any invitation, but he was confident that because of his special relationship with Abdullah Hussein h could convince him to come. He also agreed to present a paper on Abdullah Hessian’s fiction and introduce him to the writers and literary audience in Toronto.

In early June 1998 Munir Pervaiz, the general secretary of the Writers’ Forum, sent dozens of e-mails to all parties interested, sharing the news that Abdullah Hussein was attending the Urdu Fiction Conference in Toronto on the weekend of June 27-28,

1998. There was a wave of enthusiasm and euphoria in literary and intellectual circles. It was the first time in Canada that rather than having a mushaira and inviting a number of Urdu poets from all over the world, the focus was on fiction. The wave of euphoria was replaced by sadness and disappointment when we heard that Abdullah Hussein was too sick to travel and could not come to Canada. We were quite thrilled to find out two days before the conference that he had recovered enough to grace us with his presence for a few days.

The next day I picked Abdullah Hussein and Farooq Hassan, a professor of literature, poet, and translator visiting from Montreal from the home of Zahoor Ikhlaq, a famous artist of Pakistan, to take them to North York Library where the conference was going to

be held. Abdullah Hussein asked me about my clinic and my practice and when I told him that I was a marital therapist, he laughed and said jokingly to Farooq Hassan, "Farooql I think you and I should go to see Sohail as his patients and discuss our marital problems." Then he laughed aloud once again and said, "No, I don't think we should go."

Why not?" I was enjoying the conversation by now.

"Because being a therapist you would like to bring the spouses together and iron out our differences but that will not be good for us as creative writers. When a writer does not get along with his wife, it is good for his writings. They don't spend all the time together and then he has ample time to be involved in his creative endeavors. Marriage and family life is not a good omen for any creative person."

Then suddenly Abdullah Hussein became serious and said, "Sohail you should read a book called Enemies of Promise. In that book the author discusses the life stories of many artists and writes and musicians and other creative people who had promise as young people but it never blossomed or flourished. The author highlights the factors that killed that promise and one of them was "A pram in the hall"

"You are absolutely right," Farooq Hassan said from the back seat of the car. "Once you have a child, twenty years of your creative life are wasted."

During the conference it was my responsibility to facilitate the discussion. On the stage was a panel of writers including Abdullah Hussein, Mohaninad Umar Memon, Farooq Hassan, Shan-ul-Haq Haqqi, Pervaiz Pervazy and Shakila Rafiq and there was an audience of nearly fifty people. I requested the audience to let me ask questions in the first half of the program and listen to the speakers patiently and during the coffee break give me their questions in writing and then I would ask those questions on their behalf. Abid Jafri, the president of the Writer's Forum, was there on the stage to help me coordinate the event. The discussion was quite informative, fruitful and intellectually stimulating. Abdullah Hussein shared his views about on story and novel writing. He thought novel writing was far more demanding than short story writing. He said, "A novelist has to live two lives. On one hand he creates dozens and dozens of characters in his novels and lives with them day and night and on the other hand he lives a life with his spouse and children and neighbors and colleagues and friends. It is almost a schizophrenic existence.

He agreed with me that one of the reasons we find far more novelists in the West than the East is that in the West those writers who become popular and whose books become bestsellers can afford to be full-time writers and spend four to eight hours every day to write, while in the East, even the popular writers have to earn a living in some way other than writing. Because the literacy rate is so low, even if the novel is popular, only a few thousand copies are published and the author can not earn enough money to give up his other job and completely dedicate hi life to writing. Most poets and writers in Pakistan and India publish only a few hundred copies and most of them are given fre to friends

and writers as gifts. Most Urdu readers have never developed the tradition of buying books.

Abdullah Hussein shared with the audience that it took him nearly six years to write one novel and nearly five to complete another.

It was interesting to see how Abdullah Hussein avoided the philosophical questions. Responding to the question of whether Pakistani writers living in the pre-industrial environment are trying to create post-colonial literature he said, “It is quite an academic question. Maybe Professor Memon should answer that.” It was quite obvious that Abdullah Hussein did not pose as a critic or an academician. He wanted to be a writer and just a writer. He resented intellectualizing and philosophizing.

I think most of the people that evening were surprised when they listened to Abdullah Hussein. It was the same thing the next day. He was very straightforward and down to earth. There was no air of arrogance about him. He read a couple of chapters from his new novel and told the audience that in his sixty-seven years of life it was the first time he had read something in public. He said he only knew how to write. He did not know how to read. Abdullah Hussein won people’s hearts with his simplicity and innocence. It was obvious that he was a genuine artist and an honest man and had little tolerance for hypocrisy and playing games. He said he wrote stories in the classic style focusing on the concrete details of day-to-day life rather than using abstractions or philosophizing about life.

After the conference I took Abdullah Hussein and Umar Memon to the television station where they were interviewed live by a young promising journalist, Arshad Khan, who asked Abdullah Hussein to autograph his novel, While waiting for the interview Arshad Khan told us about his meeting with Sartre in a cafe in Paris.

While I was driving them back, Umar Memon asked me if I would interview Abdullah Hussein in English. He wanted that interview to be published in his magazine. When I asked Abdullah Hussein, he kindly agreed. So the next day I met Umar Memon and Abdullah Hussein in a local park and recorded the interview.

After spending a few days with Abdullah Hussein and inter viewing him for an hour, I had a lot to think about.

The first thing that surprised me about Abdullah Hussein was his shy and introverted personality. Throughout the interview there was hardly any spontaneous expression of emotions. I felt as if there were a glass wall around him. I could see him but I could not touch him emotionally. Even when he was talking about his wife and children, the loved ones in his life, it felt as if he were talking about some strangers. After my repeated questions he became aware of his lack of feelings and acknowledged that he had never felt normal in his life. He knew that he did not experience the same range of emotions in his personal life and relationships as other people did. He could let his characters express those feelings but he could not experience them himself. I wondered whether, like many

other artists, his creative life was a compensation for his inability to have a full life himself.

When I thought about Abdullah Hussein's introverted and schizoid personality, I wondered about the effects of not having a mother in his childhood. It was a painful and traumatic experience for him. He was deprived of that nurturing that most people take for granted.

It is also significant that Abdullah Hussein's father was fifty-two years old when Abdullah Hussein was born. He was more of a grandfather than a father to him. Although he took him for long walks and hunting in the fields, he was still quite overprotective of him. He did not send Abdullah Hussein to a regular school for four years and arranged a special tutor to teach him at home. That tutor looked after the academic needs but Abdullah Hussein was deprived of socializing with other kids in school. Even when he started school in grade four his father sent a special servant with him back and forth to school. His father wanted him to be protected from the harsh realities of life without realizing that he would have to pay a price in some other way later on.

Abdullah Hussein never became part of the mainstream writers' group of Pakistan. He never attended literary meetings to read his stories and receive all the praise and criticism. He always wrote in isolation. He shared that while working in some far-off cement factory he felt so bored that he started reading and writing to kill his boredom. Books and papers and pens became his friends. And he kept on writing for years till he finished his first novel. It is interesting that writers and critics and publishers had never heard of this novelist who was going to be a living legend of Urdu literature in the next fifty years.

It is fascinating to listen to Abdullah Hussein relate how the publisher asked him to write a few stories so that he could be introduced to Urdu readers before his novel was published. The strategy worked and his stories became so popular that people were anxiously waiting for the novel to be published. The popularity started in the early sixties and kept on increasing over the decades. It is interesting that the popularity did not affect Abdullah Hussein very much. He never became a social butterfly and kept on working hard on his novels.

I was quite impressed that even at the age of sixty-seven, rather than talking about his past successes, he was discussing his future creative endeavors. He wanted to write two more novels, one the extension of Naadar Loag and the other about American CIA involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He wanted to go to Washington to do research and read files on American support of Afghani Mujahidin to fight coimiunism. Abdullah Hussein believed that American involvement had done some irreversible damage to Afghani and Pakistani societies. It was inspiring to see a genuine and dedicated writer talking about his future creative dreams.

The only time when I found him reluctant to talk about his true feelings was when he talked about religion and faith. It seemed ironic that living in a strictly religious and

conservative society he had lost his faith in his young adulthood. He had become an outsider in that society. He could not express his views openly because he knew it was a dangerous proposition. He was not living in a secular society like Canada where belief and faith were considered a private affair. He lived in a country where state religion was enforced upon people's lives and anyone who declared himself a non-believer could be persecuted and loses his life.

I was also impressed by his attitude towards the issue of the independence of Pakistan. He was comfortable expressing his mixed emotions. On one hand he felt that the separation of Hindus and Muslims seemed inevitable because he had experienced segregation. He remembered those times of his childhood when he could not enter the kitchens of his Hindu friends and there were heated debates about the sacredness of the cow; but on the other hand he felt that members of both communities could have been encouraged to embrace each other rather than building walls of prejudice and resentment. He thought fifty years was too short a time in the history of a nation to say with any surety and confidence whether the birth of Pakistan was a better alternative for Muslims than living together with Hindus, Christians and Sikhs in the same country.

The only subject I found him angry and disappointed about was the topic of critics. He felt that in spite of praising his novel for forty years, not a single critic had done it justice and written a detailed critical appreciation of the novel. He complained that Urdu critics did not read enough and did not support him when his novel was ignored and suppressed because he had challenged the Pakistani government's position on Kashmir and the initiation of the 1965 war with India, in his novel Bagh.

It was refreshing to have a rational discussion about religion and politics with someone from Pakistan, a rare treat for me.

I was fortunate that not only did I feel connected with him, he also felt connected with me. In spite of our age difference he treated me with respect and affection. I felt very fortunate to have the opportunity to spend some time with him. I am looking forward to reading his stories once again. I am sure after meeting him, I will enjoy them more.

After meeting Abdullah Hussein, I will read and write fiction with a new awareness.

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Sohail: *Abdullah Hussein Sahib! I am curious about your background. What kind of social and family environment did you grow up in?*

Hussein: I grew up in a middle class family. My father was a government servant. He was an excise inspector. I was born when he was 52 years old. I was four when he retired and died at the age of 72. I was the youngest of four siblings. I have three older sisters. We had a house and some land in Gujrat. It was a comfortable living. Our family was a

professional family most of them were government servants. There were no business people. Most of them had 25-50 acres of land on an average.

Sohail: *What kind of childhood memories do you have growing up there?*

Hussein: I don't know. Normal, I suppose.

Sohail: *Tell me a little bit about your mom.*

Hussein: I don't remember her. She died when I was six months old. She had a gall bladder operation, which became septic and then she died. My oldest sister who was at that time 17 years old brought me up.

Sohail: *What kind of relationship did you have with your father?*

Hussein: Good, a normal relationship. We used to go out together for long walks. He used to take me for hunting trips. He was retired when I was growing up. He spent his days looking after the land, which was tilled by two families of muzaras (farmers). He used to take me to the village to visit our land.

Sohail: *What was it like for you to be the youngest in the family?*

Hussein: I don't know what you mean. The older siblings didn't abuse me. I wasn't pushed around. If anything I was the favorite of the family because I was the only son. My older three siblings were sisters.

Sohail: *Sometimes the youngest is the spoiled one. He is given far more attention and affection than the older ones.*

Hussein: Although I was given far more attention and affection, I wasn't spoiled. I didn't throw any temper tantrums or make too many demands on other people. I was quite a normal child, I suppose.

Sohail: *How old were you when you started your formal school education?*

Hussein: I was eight years old because I had a private tutor who used to come and teach me at home from class one to class four. His name was Maulvi Naseer-ud-din and he was a retired teacher. When I was eight years old, he took me to the primary school. I appeared in the exam, passed it and was accepted in fourth class.

Sohail: Do you remember the first few days being with other students in a regular class?

Hussein: No, I don't have any memory of those days. It was a Hindu school, Santna Dharam Primary school. It was the nearest to our house, about ten minutes walk and it was an English medium school. My father was very protective. He had appointed a servant to take to school and bring me home.

Sohail: Did the Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs study together in that school?

Hussein: Mostly Hindus and Sikhs. Not many Muslims. Muslims mostly went to another school, which was called Islamia School.

Sohail: Did you enjoy school?

Hussein: I have no idea now. I have no memory of whether I enjoyed it or not.

Sohail: Was your father a religious person?

Hussein: Not overly religious. He did offer namaz (prayers) once or twice or three times a day. He did not pray when he was in service. When he retired he had little to do, so he read newspapers and offered prayers and did his tasbeeh (prayer beads).

Sohail: But overall, was your family traditional and conservative or liberal?

Hussein: My family was a typical conservative family of a small t own.

Sohail: How long did you stay in that school?

Hussein: The primary school was till 5th class. I did class 6,7 and 8 in Santna Dharam high school, which was some distance away, and then I moved to Islamia high school where I studied class 9 and 10.

Sohail: Did you have any Hindu friends?

Hussein Yes, Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs. I had a good Hindu friend called Baldev Krishan who had a sister Pushpa. She had become my sister too because she used to tie rakhi around my wrist. I used to spend long days in their house and they used to spend long days in our house but I could never step into their kitchen.

Sohail: Growing up were you a shy or an outgoing boy?

Hussein: Shy, very shy. I suppose I did miss my mother. I did miss not having my mother around; therefore I think I became rather introverted.

Sohail: Were you also very tall from the very beginning?

Hussein: No, no, no. I was perfectly normal child until the age of 17 and then from 17 to 19 I just shot up. People said they could see me grow and by 19 I attained my present height.

Sohail: When you were in school did you have any special hobbies or interests or anything you felt passionate about?

Hussein: No

Sohail: How did you like the schoolwork?

Hussein: I was a bad pupil. I never did my homework. In school and four years of college I just scraped through. I was just barely promoted.

Sohail: In your family were there any writers or artists?

Hussein: On my mother's side there was a chap called Rafi Peerza da. He was a very well known playwright and filmmaker. He wrote and produced and acted in an old film called "Neecha Nagar". It is still one of the classic films in India's film archives. For many years he lived in England and Germany and worked with a German director. He married a German woman and had a daughter. Just before the war he went back to Bombay and after partition he came to Pakistan and settled down in Lahore. He produced 30 to 40 Urdu and Punjabi plays for radio. His Punjabi play Akhian became very famous. His daughter Samina Peerzada is quite well known in Pakistan now. Rafi Peerzada was my first cousin. His mother and my mother were half sisters. They had the same father but different mothers.

Sohail: What happened after you finished high school?

Hussein: I joined the local Zimindar College Gujrat and did my F.Sc. and then B.Sc. and then joined a cement factory as a chemist. I worked in one factory for three years and then in another factory for nearly nine years. After that I got a Columbo Plan fellowship which was given for commonwealth countries. People who got that either went to England, Australia or Canada. So I came to Canada. They used to give us enormous amounts of money. In 1959-1960 we got $365.00 a month. It was so much we could not spend the whole bloody thing. So I earned a diploma of chemical engineering specializing in cement technology. I was in the department of chemical engineering for 11½ months and then the Canada Cement Company sent me to four plants for one month each, to Belleville, Montreal, and Woodstock and in New Brunswick. When I went back I told them that I wanted to travel by ship. So they converted my air ticket to a ship ticket. So I took the ship from Quebec to Liverpool. It was for ten days and then from Liverpool to Karachi, which was twenty days. So I was in ships for the whole month.

Sohail: Obviously you did not get sick.

Hussein: The trip from Liverpool to Karachi was very calm but crossing the Atlantic was very rough. There was a big storm. The ship I traveled in was called Caledonia. It was 23000 tons with 500 passengers out of which 450 got seasick. The huge ship felt like a paper boat in 30 feet waves. When I got to England I called my friend in London. I hadn't informed him before but I knew where he was, so I rang him up. He asked me to stay where I was and he came to pick me up. When I told him that I came from Canada by ship he asked me, "Were you caught up in that storm?"

He said they had been hearing on the radio the news of a huge storm for the whole week. One ship even sank. When I said "Yes" he thanked God that I was alive.

Sohail: Were you in high school when the independence movement started in India?

Hussein: I was in first year of college. Gujrat was a center of Muslim League. Because of the opposition of Unionist party of Khizr Hayat even Quaid-e-Azam came to Gujrat and I saw him from a close distance.

Sohail: What was your impression of him?

Hussein: I don't remember. I suppose like everybody else I was also shouting "Pakistan Zindabad".

Sohail: What happened to your Hindu and Sikh friends and their families at the time of independence?

Hussein: They just fled. All my friends left. Some of them even wrote me letters but then we lost touch. The houses that were left behind were taken care of by council members. Some of them were elected while others were chosen. They were called Sarkari (government) members. The Deputy commissioner chose my father. My father was only matriculate but he spoke perfect English. He was a close friend of Deputy commissioner. They used to go shooting ducks together. The council members used to examine the evacuated houses and then report to the Rehabili tation office.

Memon: Were there any killings in your city?

Hussein: Oh, yes. Not among the city population. There was a terrible incident at our railway station. A train full of Hindu and Sikh refugees came from Bannu to take them to Kashmir. Gujrat had a camp for refugees because it was close to Kashmir. So when people got wind of this train that it was passing through Gujrat, they stopped the train. They not only looted he train, they took out the nice looking young women and killed everybody else. We were halfway to college that day when people told us what was happening at the railway station, so we went there and saw every thing that happened.

Sohail: What was your reaction at that time?

Hussein: A normal young boy's reaction. I can say I was disgusted and I was outraged but at that age you are not aware of those things. Probably I was shocked. At that age I could not sit down and say I am outraged, it is bad. One can generalize about it afterwards

Sohail: You had mentioned earlier that your dad passed away when you were nearly 20. How did that affect you?

Hussein: It did affect me quite a lot. My father had a stroke and he was bedridden for the last few years of his life. I was away working in a cement factory and my sisters took turns to come and look after him and there were times when nobody was there and the servants looked after him. So when he died, the house had to be closed up and shut down. And when I migrated to England, even the land had to be sold because there was no one to look after it. So his death resulted in big changes. My father never remarried after I was born. My mother was his fifth wife. He married five times but never more than one wife at any one time. He was very unfortunate in his marriages.

Sohail: How old were you when you got married?

Hussein: I was 31.

Sohail: How did you decide to get married?

Hussein: My oldest sister's husband had a brother whose daughter became my wife. So we knew the family already. We weren't related in any way other than my oldest sister. My oldest sister is nearly 17 years older than me. Her husband had four or five children and this girl was the youngest. When my sister got married I was nearly nine years old and she was three years younger. We more or less grew up together. We knew each other from childhood.

Sohail: Was your wedding formal and traditional?

Hussein: Yes, it was a formal wedding. We did not elope or anything like that.

Sohail: How many children did you have?

Hussein: Two and they are girl and a boy.

Sohail: How old are they now?

Hussein: They are quite old. My daughter is 32 and my son is 30.

Sohail: How did you experience family life?

Hussein: Normal, I suppose.

Sohail: Was becoming a father something special for you or was it just a part of life?

Hussein: Just part of life. Nothing special. Even marriage was nothing special. Something that one is supposed to do. I may be giving you a wrong impression. There was nothing normal about me as I was growing up. There was something wrong with me, which I can't express properly. I wasn't crazy but I was far from normal. I can't describe the way I was. So all these experiences of getting married and becoming a father were not earth shaking experiences as they are for other people. For me they were just regular experiences. I just did not pay much attention to them I suppose.

Sohail: Did you have that awareness of not being normal as a teenager?

Hussein: No, there was no such awareness. I can only say it now. Your asking me questions about my getting married and becoming a father triggers it. Everybody says the first time you become a father it is a great experience but I never felt that way. So that is why I am saying that. I never felt the way other people felt. It wasn't normal but I don't know why.

Sohail: How old were you when you developed an interest in art and literature and started writing?

Hussein: I went to work in this cement factory in the middle of nowhere. There was nobody there. There was no entertainment. There was nothing to do. So I started reading books and after a few years started writing. It just came to me and I started writing and kept on writing for five years. Nobody knew about my writing. I had absolutely no idea

what to do with it. Sometimes I thought I would just put it away. I had no conscious feeling that I would publish it and it would amount to something. Absolutely nothing. So when I finished it, I took it to a publisher and he asked me to come back after a month. So after a month when I went back he said it was good and he would publish it but the problem was nobody knew me. So he asked me to write a few stories, which he published in his magazine Savera in the next few months, and then he published my novel. And then my novel Udaas Naslein got the Adamjee award, which had a lot of prestige those days. When I came back after receiving the award given by the President Ayub Khan himself, my family members were at the railway station with hars (garlands) to receive me. I had pictures in the newspapers. Those days having a picture in the newspaper were a big thing. It meant you were a very special person.

Sohail: Did you have a regular contact with other writers?

Hussein: I kept working in the cement factories one after the other. They were all out in the middle of nowhere. Occasionally I used to go to Lahore or Karachi for a few days but I was never part of the literary sect.

Sohail: Did getting all that acknowledgement and award change you as a writer or affect your future writings?

Hussein: I don't know. As a writer I decided to write more, so I wrote more. If that didn't happen I would have probably not written another word. But I knew I had the talent. After I had written the first page of Udaas Naslein, I knew I could write. That consciousness, that awareness I had.

Sohail: Has your writing style changed over the years?

Hussein: My writing has become more realistic. There is less adornment quality in it. I don't know the clinches. I have repulsion for cloches and too much adjectivization. I write simple and straightforward sentences. If anything they have become simpler and more straightforward and realistic.

Sohail: Were you ever seduced by the modernist writings of Camus and Sartre and their style?

Hussein: I was never a navel-gazer. I have to experience, go out and see and describe things. That is the way I write, in very concrete terms. I am very particular about details. I visualize the whole thing in my mind, I picture it, and then I describe the picture and that is how small details come into it.

Sohail: You mentioned once that the novelist has to live in two worlds, a real world of wife and children and friends, and the other world of his characters, the creative and imaginary world. As the novels grow and the characters increase, the whole Situation becomes more and more complex.

Hussein: You are right. It took me seven years to write Nadaar Loag. One character came on page 5 and when he reappears on page 200, two years had passed. I was writing on an average 100 pages a year. I had even forgotten the name of the character. So I used a dash. I was too lazy to find out in old notebooks the name of the character. It was a practical problem quite different than the one you are talking about.

Sohail: After writing hundreds of pages, how do you decide to enc the novel?

Hussein: I thought the story could end there in Nadaar Loag. Later on, I thought that all the characters were still alive and young. So I decided that the story should go on. So I put “To Be Continued”.

Memon: I don’t think it is that simple. The way I interpreted it, which of course is completely without any knowledge of how you conceived the whole thing, was that the novel had ended when you wanted it to end, but you deliberately wanted us to feel that yes the novel has ended, but what it is all about continues. So there is a semantic extension. That is how I saw Stephen Hawking’s quotation

Hussein: That quotation is an after-thought. Your interpretation could be true, but at the same time it is also true that I would like to write another volume of the same story. There will be more characters which are not in this volume, they are already forming in my head. I also want to write a novel in English about Afghanistan. I don’t know what I will do next.

Sohail: Are any of your stories biographical, an example of bio fiction?

Hussein: I don't know. I don't dwell on my personal circum stances. I have always invented stories, other people's stories My way of creating fiction is to invent a story about other people. Now if unconsciously some of the stories of my own life come into it, that is something that happens to all fiction writers, but that is totally unconscious and unintended. My idea of writing fiction is to invent completely independent stories.

Sohail: Are your stories based on real incidents?

Hussein: The is only one story, "Quaid" which was based on a real incident. I read in a newspaper that there was a woman who deposited her newborn baby on the steps of a mosque and the maulvi had the boy stoned and killed. That incident happened in Karachi. It appeared in one of the local papers and then it was completely supressed for fear of widespread riots and public disorder. The incident disappeared as if it had never happened. I was shocked by that incident. It took me five years to figure out how to approach the story. For five years so many forms came to my mind but none was satisfactory and then one day suddenly I knew how it ought to be done.

Sohail: On the first page of your novel Nadaar Loag, you have asked the critics not to re your book for six months. It seems you have strong feelings about critics.

Hussein: Yes, yes. I have a great grudge against critics. For forty years they have been saying that Udaas Naslein is a good novel but nobody ever wrote a detailed commentary on it. I don't demand a detailed review. My point is that either they stop saying it is a good novel and completely dismiss it, or discuss it thoroughly and in depth. I call them illiterate critics.

My other novel Bagh was suppressed because it expressed certain opinions, which went against the government's version of the 1965 war. I highlighted that the Pakistani government had sent military people to Kashmir to instigate a war. They did not ban the book but when the Academy of Letters was giving awards for the best poetry and fiction that year, my book was not considered for the award. It was suppressed. I found that out later on but no writer or critic had the courage to protest in favor of my book. I said in one of my interviews that our critics should read more.

Sohail: Recently you have been writing in English and also translating your own novel. Why are you translating your own novel?

Hussein: Because I think I can do it better. I can take the liberty of changing the phraseology. While translating Udaas Naslein, I have thrown out a couple of characters

that I thought were not important. Transla fiction is a difficult job, You need a lot of skill to do it, But I can take liberties with my own novel.

Sohail: Is the experience of writing in English more fulfilling or less fulfilling than writing in Urdu?

Hussein: More or less the same. You see, neither Urdu nor English is my mother tongue. My mother tongue is Punjabi. So I have equal difficulty or call it equal facility in writing in either language. Actually I think it is easier, not easier but more satisfying to write in English because our whole intellectual education has occurred in English.

Sohail: In your novels you showed great courage to challenge social and sexual taboos.

Hussein: I know I can get away with it. When you create natural, straightforward and appropriate settings, you can get away with.

Memon: I want to ask you about your views on the partition of India. For the last year or so after the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of Pakistan and the independence of India, there is so much talk about it and you are a major writer and people say that Udaas Naslein in some way is about partition.

Hussein: People are double-minded about partition, and so am I.

There was so much difference between Muslims and Hindus. If we touched their utensils they had to wash them. We ate cows and they worshipped them. It seemed natural, actually it seemed inevitable at that time that once the foreign Raj was over thrown, then we would live in separate countries. But that partition also created problems. All I can say now is that I am very hopeless about Pakistan. Pakistan will survive but like many African countries, in bad shape. I have little hope for Pakistan but equally I can't speculate whether Akhand Bharat (united India) was a better option for Muslims. We are seeing today that Indian policies are phasing out the Urdu language completely and Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims are studying Hindi as a language. Urdu will be phased out within the next generation. Now you can't say that it is happening only in reaction to Pakistan's existence. It could have very well happened in Akhand Bharat. So it is too early to say whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Sohail: You grew up in the Muslim culture. How do you see the institution of religion playing a role in that society?

Hussein: I mentioned earlier that I was not a regular normal person in my thinking and reactions. When I was 17 or 18 or maybe 20, I completely lost my faith. I could see as clearly as the day that the concept of God sitting on a throne in heaven, angels, and prophets were all stories. Anyway, I won't say any more on record. It is too dangerous. I can write about it sometime. Since then I have lived completely without any religion at all.

Sohail: I was not asking you from a personal point of view. I wanted to know your views about the role that the institution of religion plays in the community and in society from the social control aspect.

Hussein: It is very harmful. It is a myth that religion unites. In the beginning, it was a civilizing force, but in its essence, religion is a divisive force. Religion divides and sub-divides and sub-divides because religion has the phenomenon of righteous ness and righteousness turns into self-righteousness and gradually it becomes a divisive force. If you analyze the situation philosophically, that is the logical conclusion you come to.

Sohail: Is there anything else you want to share with us?

Hussein: No, and thank-you.

Sohail: Thank-you very much.