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The interview took place via Zoom on 31 August 2020. Lahore was still in lockdown because of the Coronavirus pandemic. The transcript below has been edited for clarity.

Figure 1. Screen capture of the Zoom interview with Mohsin Hamid and Paul Veyret



Credit: the authors.

PV. Thank you very much Mohsin. So, we could launch this interview first by talking about 'Naya Pakistan', and Pakistan now, with Pakistani fiction of the last 10 to 15 years under scrutiny, and the renewed interest in it. And secondly, we could look at each of your novels and discuss them. So, what is changing in Pakistan now, how do you perceive change, locally and globally? Politically? We are going through an unprecedented global crisis, do you think any "naya", any "newness", will grow out of it, not just for Pakistan, but globally, as you situate your novels both in an imagined, re-imagined Pakistan, and in the world as well, globally?

MH. Well, I think the newness of Pakistan or the newness of any place is a bit hard to measure. My perspective on Pakistan is as somebody who's, you know, mostly stuck at home with the schools shut, offices shut. I think each of us feels in many ways disconnected from our neighbours everywhere in the world. But I feel particularly disconnected at the moment. So even more than usual, my impressions are the impressions I gather from the mass media, from online interactions and from these sorts of things. And I think that these perceptions can often be very wrong. I'm

bringing this up because I think there's a very powerful caveat, and I think it's probably worth almost beginning with that. We have, as a species, to a remarkable degree, lost our sense of perspective. Today, certainly not all, but many find themselves getting a worldview that is disproportionately informed by social media and mass media, which are really the attention economy, and the economy seeks to capture our attention with increasingly extreme demands, most of which are intended to frighten us. So, we are subject to a kind of sense that things are bad and getting worse quickly. I think that hovers over the entire world. It's not specific to Pakistan. And when I say that here, in Pakistan, it looks like things are getting bad quickly, which I think is perhaps the case.

Now, alongside that, I think that the pace of change does appear to be accelerating everywhere in the world, and it is accelerating largely because of technology. It seems already that my children's childhood is far more different from my childhood than mine was from my parents', and my parents' childhood, I suspect, was not that different from their parents' and thereafter... the generational shift throughout human history, but probably for the most part, modest.

I mean, you could have sudden events: invasion, war, or disease that we should make in any particular location. The experiences of two generations are very different, but the rate of change was probably not quite so fast. It's been accelerating since the precursor to the industrial revolution, and it has accelerated continuously since then. The way that acceleration works with a falling object, the gravity sort of pulls on. So, it is true to say that we are living in New Times everywhere and that the New Times are increasingly new.

And so, against that backdrop, if we look at what specifically is occurring in Pakistan, I think one can see certain trends playing themselves out. So, for me, in a way, the most important of these trends is the environment. Or climactic? The biggest scarcity that Pakistan faces, of course, is what? It is clear that water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource. Yet when I was a child, you could go out, and we did at my grandparents' house, we had to crank the lever on the hand pump and water would come shooting out.

And I think that we are coming up against such constraints, this idea of development, which has characterized discourse in Pakistan, in many of the countries since independence, you know... you are a developing country, you must develop their five-year development plans, etcetera.

You know, they sort of assume that development can just proceed unchecked. I think what's beginning to occur is that we are running up against very real limitations, planetary, ecological, limitations on certain modes of development. You simply can't just take more water. You may not even take as much water as you did in the past. And then you say, OK, well, as a society, as a country, we are coming up against these constraints. And the challenge will then become to what extent is a society able to organize itself, govern itself, manage itself to flourish in the face of constraints? And this is where I think now Pakistan is worrisome. It does not appear to me that we are developing enough capability to deal with these constraints. I think the water crisis is very real. I think we seem unable to prioritize among the threats that face us. I think relations with India are deteriorating in many ways.

India has become the nightmare that many Pakistani foreign policy makers have always said it was, but it seemed not as well when you thought that Muslims would be a minority, in that the Congress was in fact led by high caste Hindus who didn't care about minorities. When you see India with the BJP and how politically, deeply, they've changed society with this new law that's being introduced that really puts Muslims apart in terms of citizenship.

It's crazy to see that that's the BJP has been working like this for about 100 years, almost since the assassination of Gandhi. It turns out, it was not a sort of aberration, rather a harbinger of the direction in which the nation would travel.

And India has begun to look quite a bit like 1980s Pakistan under general Zia. You have this muscular, chauvinist, religiously horrific attitude towards minorities, towards the politicization of religion, towards the institutionalization of violence, towards opponents, to all of this sort of thing. And I think in Pakistan today what the real question to be asked is, are we developing the ability to deal with the neighbourhood in which we find ourselves? a neighbourhood of nations? India? The crisis, the ecological crisis, the very real demands of our population? And how would we measure this? It seems that that we would measure this by, first of all, being able to say, OK, what are the issues we face? That's the way. You need to have the capacity to identify these things, just prioritize them. And then you need to articulate, you know, what are we going to do about them?

And you need to actually do something. And over time, if you do that, you see the dramatic success story in this department, of course, has been the People's Republic of China in recent years. It seems they have identified certain things that they wanted to improve, then has been able to improve them in a system which of course strikes many of us as quite tyrannical. They nonetheless seem to have delivered the greatest improvement in living quality for any group of people on planet Earth in history because of very strong, centralized, unique party.

PV. Yes, and very strong centralized states as well. With a strong single party and limited modes of democratic expression.

MH. Yes. It is, well, different from, I don't know, Pakistan or India, which is much more discerning and federal. They have thousands of years.

PV. They have a bit of a historical tradition with centralization, don't they?

MH. And a competitive exam system through talent from across the board, which was subsumed into an imperial bureaucracy, which was dedicated to the theory to develop delivering good to the population. Now that has worked less, or sometimes better, and sometimes worse. But throughout human history, China has tended to be quite successful. It was until a couple of hundred years ago among the wealthiest country in the world, and it seems to be headed in that direction again. Now, I don't think that's really a model that anybody else can quite follow. I mean, the Japanese, maybe the other countries in the Northeast Asia that have similarly effective bureaucracies... France is known for having a very effective bureaucracy.

PV. (*laughs*) Yes, the French love red tape, but we're not quite near the Chinese model. What about Pakistan and the Pakistani Army, they're quite a bureaucracy aren't they?

MH. (*laughs*) Indeed. Certainly, Pakistan has no history of producing this kind of thing, although of course, you could imagine people in the armed forces arguing that that's precisely what the Pakistan Army does. It sort of takes these cadres of young

people and trains the best to rise through the ranks. That can be quite a robust argument in terms of how beneficial that has been for Pakistan. But you could imagine that there's at least one institution in Pakistan, something like the Chinese Communist Party.

But unfortunately, every military in the world probably thinks that it's like the Chinese Communist Party. Every autocratic military would like to think this. But for me, the real problem is I do not see these crises being effectively tackled. And so you start to wonder at one point: does a country run out of runway? In other words, you have to accelerate the decision speed so that when the time comes, you can lift off and fly over the place that is coming. What the ecological situation is telling us is that we do not have forever. It's not that we could potentially develop in 500 years if there's a 3°C increase in temperature and a decrease in rainfall or more, just extreme weather events that affect crop patterns. We may just have 100 years, or 50 years, to really transform the effectiveness of our state. Therefore, we encounter things like mass hunger, you know, problems that we haven't faced really since the Green Revolution.

Maybe we will invent our way out of this. Maybe people will come up with some solution. I'm not pessimistic necessarily, but my feeling is that we are beginning to see something like the glint of desperation in the eyes of many countries around the world. There's a sort of growing realization that it might not work out and that we might not be doing well enough and, in the end, that this will not necessarily be easily reversible, and it could result in an irrevocable catastrophe.

And I think that feeling is felt in France. I think it's felt in America. I think it's felt in Pakistan. I think it's felt many countries. But, but for me, to the extent that there's a Naya Pakistan, it's that the glint of catastrophe has begun to reappear in the eyes of the country after some decades.

PV. Yes, the glint of catastrophe, that's a good transition with *Moth Smoke* (2000), perhaps, which takes place in the shadow of catastrophe, doesn't it? It takes place during the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan in the summer of 1998 when Pakistan detonated its first nuclear weapon in the middle of an arms race with India. And that was your first novel, which was first a work assignment for a creative writing course given by Toni Morrison, am I correct? I think it became sort of a cult novel in Pakistan, with a TV adaptation. Can you tell us about the genesis of *Moth Smoke*?

MH. For me, *Moth Smoke* was in some sense somewhat a pessimistic novel written for a more optimistic time.

PV. I see. I was right after the Zia years, and during the period of brinkmanship with India.

MH. Yes, it was written in the period after Zia, so we had experienced this horrible dictatorship in the 1980s. The mass arrival of heroin and Kalashnikovs in Pakistan meant real violence done to minorities and it was an atrocious decade. And then Zia-ul-Haq was gone. And the 90s were, you know, a chance of opening up. But the hope was that, over time, democracy would roll back these injustices and unlock the potential of the country. And so, *Moth Smoke* was written really at the tail end of the 1990s democratic experiment.

I began it in 1993 in a creative writing class in my final year in Princeton. Toni Morrison taught a long fiction workshop where you could work on one piece of fiction for the entire semester, and that semester you were supposed to write 30 or 40

pages, and I sort of produced 200 pages, the first part of this novel. I was dying to write it. So then I took a year off, and I continued working on it for that year. And, then I went to law school. I kept working on it. I was able to adapt it into a trial [the novel is in the form of a trial, the main protagonist is wrongfully tried for having killed a young boy during a hit-and-run] and submitted as my law school thesis, arguing that it explores the contest of different narratives in the same way that adversarial judicial proceeding would do.

PV. I see. Quite clever. Did it do the trick?

MH. I mean, that was all happening. At the same time, I didn't necessarily do it so I could submit it as a thesis. But it became possible for me to argue. Instead of writing a traditional law school thesis, I discovered about three months into law school, my three-year course, that I didn't really want to be in law school. So thereafter it was doing whatever I had to do to satisfy the requirements of law school while doing what I wanted to do. So, my outlook became my novel. That was also my law school thesis.

And then I worked in management consulting in New York City, and kept working on the novel, and taking time off and writing on weekends, and eventually it was published in 2000. Now, the year 2000, of course, was after the nuclear tests and after the Kargil India-Pakistan confrontation and after Musharraf had done his coup, and Pakistan had ended the 1990s democratic experiment. But it was still written because it was written from the 1993 point of view, really until about 1999.

It was very much a novel written in what I think was an optimistic moment in Pakistani history, because it was optimistic, it felt optimistic to me. The potential for Pakistan felt optimistic. I thought it's entirely appropriate after this dictatorship that focused on the purity of Pakistan to really go for the impurity of life. Unpack a novel about Pakistan. And so that novel looked at drug use, adultery, corruption, urban life.

And at that point in time, there hadn't been very many novels that explored these themes in South Asia. I would say that I sort of invented this, or I was the only one, but it was contrary to the thrust of South Asian fiction before that. And I think in Urdu and in other languages, you saw much more writers like Manto, half a century earlier, exploring these sorts of things. But in English, we had a very different kind of literature, and everything that is easy, contemporary.

PV. Are you thinking of *White Tiger* [Aravind Adiga's 2008 novel], that was published, I think, a year after *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?

MH. Yes, that's right. But I was very interested in it, just really revealing to myself this reality. What life in urban Lahore felt like to people like me and people I knew. And interestingly, it did sort of find this cult audience not just in Pakistan, but in India as well. I remember being at the Jaipur Literary Festival, maybe a decade after *Moth Smoke* came out, and there was this sort of musical concert, and then somebody tapped me on the shoulder and I turned around and he said, "Are you Mohsin Hamid?" I said, "Yeah". And the guy said, "Well, I really want to share this joint with you". And that's when I knew I was talking to residents on both sides of the border. But, you know, because this sort of urban angsty, hash-smoking South Asian life, was very widespread among a certain segment of upper-middle class South Asia, you could say, or middle-class, up and down urban South Asia.

And so, the novel, of course, is very much about judging, and having emerged from this incredibly judgmental 1980s perspective, the idea that you, the reader would be asked to judge the main character, and to perhaps find your judgment wanting. It was important that he, our main character, Darashikoh, was like all of us, guilty, and also, like most of us, not guilty for what we imagined him to be guilty of. And so, this to me, seemed an appropriate response really to the enforced "Pakification" of Pakistan, that was really the period of *Moth Smoke*, my first novel.

PV. Judging is also much in question in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and there you go one step further, when the reader or the narrator – we don't know – is put into that position of having to judge what the narrator says. But you did it in a much more experimental way. Can you tell us about this choice of voice, this very strange confession and about the circumstances of writing the novel?

MH. Each of my books has had a kind of challenge, it has a formal structure that allows it to function in each case. That formal structure has retained very strong connections to what we call reality, but it also skews that perspective. So, it's sort of a fractured reality and recognizably real, but also impossible to characterize entirely, which for me actually is what human life feels like. I think reality isn't actually real, but we can talk more about that later. In the case of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the question was how does this story get told by the fundamentalist in hindsight? It really is a novel of the filter bubble. How do we navigate this world where we are receiving such one-sided information? The 'algorithmization' of the world is far advanced, and we are either zeros or ones. And as in this binary system, we get even more ones if we are one, and more zero, zero, zero. And so the way of telling this story, and it seemed to me that what was required, was a mood which reflected this. This condition, which sort of held up a mirror to this condition. And so, the idea of the dramatic monologue, the conversation in which only one side gets heard seemed an appropriate way to get at this. And a very powerful literary antecedent for me was, of course, Camus's *La Chute*, to which the novel sort of tips its hat in its opening sentence, and then a couple of other gestures along the way. There's certainly a debt, although Camus didn't invent the dramatic monologue. But his use of it really got me thinking. And in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I think that there's a difference from the way in which the dramatic monologue is used, and the purpose for which it is employed by Camus. I think that his enterprise was a sort of modernist enterprise, which was to allow to sort of show the absurdity of this situation.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez is holding up a mirror to us, but that mirror is a black hole. I wanted to use the dramatic monologue for a slightly different purpose, that it would again hold up a mirror, but that mirror would hopefully allow us to see the process by which we arrive at our viewpoints and judgments and focus on that, on the process by which we judge. Not as a kind of absurd or nihilistic or void based on the view of the world, but as an essential task that we must undertake if we wish to cohabit in this world with people who are unlike ourselves. In other words, I thought *Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a kind of meditation in a meditation. You sit there, among different kinds of meditation. But if, let's say you were to sit there and focus on your breathing at a certain point, you realize that it's almost impossible to focus on your breathing. You are a random-thought generator, and they start popping up. And each time you are carried over the waterfall of these thoughts, you swim back to your breath. You do it again, you do it again. Now what is the purpose of this exercise? I don't want to sort of distil an ancient and widespread practice, and just

sort of some little nugget of wisdom. But among the important purposes of this exercise is to help us understand that we are not our thoughts, actually.

And the thought which we cling to at this particular moment, so desperately, is also a thought which potentially we can relinquish. There is a degree of being imprisoned when we imagine that we are the horse and not the rider of that thought. Similarly, I think with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the idea was to allow the reader to enter into this. A world full of judgment, and build up a kind of Western, you know, an American Western gunfight with no guns, no fighting, and using only the pre-existing fear of the other that exists inside each of us and to sort of leave it a bit unconcluded.

So, you're left, in a sense, with your fear, not with a familiar void or lost in absurdity, but with a recognition of the fear-based judging system which we each deploy as part of our operating system, and which very frequently leads us to disastrous outcomes. And so, in a sense, it was to a mirror that would allow us in the binary filter bubble universe to comprehend our own contribution to the creation of the bubble in which we find ourselves, and to make us somewhat more uncomfortable with it.

And then I began the novel, hopefully. But it really felt to me at the time, it was you're either with us or against us, you're either Muslim or American, you're the West or the East. I mean, my loose idea of identity being this, this multifaceted diamond with 100 faces, not as a coin with only one side or two sides. I was very much, I think, aligned with that. That hopefully shattering this binary way of looking at the world or at least making us more aware of our own tendency to plunge wholeheartedly into the embrace of a binary system.

PV. And that's also what you wanted to do with *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). The self-help myth, the South Asian self-made man myth man is also at the heart of that novel, plus the idea you mentioned, meditation. It does read like a meditation. It reads literally like somebody's reading out or talking to you, to the reader as all the names are erased. Place names, identity, and it's all created in the story, in the reader's mind. So how did you step away from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to this new venture, to this new experiment?

MH. Well, I think that in a way there is a kind of non-denominational "spiritual impulse" to what I'm trying to do in my writing. Stories are an essential way in which we, as individuals, make sense of existence, and also as we have, as shared inhabitants of this planet, navigated our shared existence. And I think that one of the functions of literature, one of the functions of art, is to put forward stories that do that.

That can function too. Address some of these issues that were confined inside of individual, religious or philosophical traditions, and instead open them up to everyone and to say: regardless of your religious tradition, or absence of religious tradition, we can use narrative as a way to explore these sorts of themes, which are human universals, and come at ways of understanding these things. *Moth Smoke*, of course, has a Sufi title, the idea is that the moth is like the Sufi mystic in the Muslim tradition who has a sort of love-based relationship with the divine, and seeks proximity to the divine through recognizing in the universe reflections of themselves, and in themselves reflections of the universe, and such an expansive sense of love that allows that to happen.

And the image of the moth and the candle flame is used as an example of that because the Sufi can be so lost in the love of the divine that he is consumed by that love, and the moth literally circles and immediately burns up, and is willing to burn up in the divine, and that's sort of my, I guess you could say 'postmodern riff' on that, given that was the 1990s was, 'but what happens afterwards?' In the case of Pakistan, it was this supposed dream for the Muslims of South Asia. The dream has now been brought into existence and we must begin to scrutinize what that is, what comes after, the realization of the dream. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, like *Moth Smoke*, is also about a doomed love story, a love triangle, except one of the people in the love triangle isn't alive during the course of the book.

PV. The love story between Changez and Erica, and also Erica and her dead lover Chris, but also Changez and America, is very much idealized.

MH. Yeah, it's a love triangle between three parties. And one of those two parties is a kind of idea. And it felt to me very much that that was the sort of love story that we are experiencing in this world of nationalism, that each of us is now in a kind of love triangle. There are the people in our actual lives. One point of that triangle there is ourselves. And then there's this imagined, idealized, folk, or nation, that we have this religious identity, that we have as a sort of third spoke of this triangle. But in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, what I wanted to do was... If *Moth Smoke* was a way to present the idea that there's this problem, and *Reluctant Fundamentalist* was also to again identify the problem in the hope that, being aware of it, would make us more oriented towards resisting it. In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, I was quite interested in the idea of what form might this resistance take. So, the religion of Pakistan, to the extent one can see such a thing, appears to be, and much of the world, I would say, this is in what neo-liberalism really is, money. We might claim that our religion is something else. But if we take religion as the fundamental principle around which society is organized and values given a hierarchy, etc., the crushing difference of poverty and wealth in Pakistan, and the mad scramble to achieve these things and the total abandonment of traditional values and religious morals in this race, suggests to me that that really is the effect of religion of much of the world, certainly of this 'rising Asia' that we were thinking of.

Many of us in the world, we're imagining the 21st century as this Asian century. And so, I wanted to write this novel that explored this, and also began to posit how it might be resisted. And so, in narrative terms, the two or three things that I thought I might use: one was a folk story, or a parable. These tales, which are much more general, than the tales which we normally tend to occupy ourselves with. They are the denuded of a degree of specificity such that we can imagine ourselves, we can insert our own existence into them very easily. The boy who cried wolf. Where is this boy? What century are we talking about? What sort of wolf is it? Who cares? These things are not relevant, it is that there's a kind of Ur-storytelling capacity which such tales evoke. And so I decided to strip the novel of many of these specificities, but not in particular specificities of place, but the specificity of brand, of proper nouns, names with capital letters. It seems to me Pakistan has become a brand, Islam has become a brand, Lahore has become a brand. And the names of people from these places are like brands. And what brands do is they bring with them their own interpretation and meaning systems that overwhelm our ability to think for ourselves. We would talk about a rectangle of glass and metal that is addictive, that

we keep in our pocket and stare at. We talk about our iPhone. And by doing so, we've already abandoned our ability, in a way, to identify and name and reckon with this object for ourselves. And so, so having moved back to Pakistan, it's like, how do I look at this place for myself? I must not use these words. I must, in a way, de-exoticize my surroundings *to myself*, and see them with my own eyes. In the same way that you might sketch something upside down, or engage in a kind of exercise to avoid lazy assumptions of familiarity with things with which one is not actually familiar.

So, once you take the names away, you have to describe the stuff. What is this street? What is this person? What is this school like? How does this person pray or die? And you are left with the task of describing yourself, for yourself. It was sort of "the parable of folktale" benefits of namelessness, coupled with the "seeing things for yourself" benefits.

PV. Yes, it's very like the *Nouveau Roman*, or Italo Calvino's novels, the way they wrote about reality as well. An unreal reality, de-realized, seen from a different angle.

MH. I've always admired this modernist European moment in fiction. And, you know, Mr. Palomar and Calvino's actually referred to in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. But I don't view myself really as part of that tradition, in the sense that I'm not sure necessarily that I can speak to what they are trying to do with their fiction now. I find it quite beautiful and quite effective, but it's something that I wanted to learn and borrow from, among many other sources for my project.

And so, yes, this sort of modernist hyper specificity, and these specificities, simultaneously, coupled with a very money-based, sort of money and power analytical-based lens of a market strategist or of a development economist. My father is a development economist by training. He's a university professor of economics, and I myself worked in business as a management consultant. And those two ways of looking at money, one to promote the greater good, and one to sort of promote the individual good, were overlaid on this world. But against it all was set up this Sufi form in which we have a "you" who is being spoken to, and that was the beloved, either the literal beloved, or the metaphorical beloved of the Divine. And in this case, the "you", of course, is the literal reader "You", actually holding the book, and the metaphorical notion of the reader actually existing. The novel tried to create a relationship with this "you", during the course of the novel, such that by the end of the novel, a sincere mode of address could be offered between writer, between the "I" of the writer, who's actually me, and "you", the reader, who actually is you, the reader of this book. To get to that point, a significant relationship needed to be navigated. And like many relationships, it begins in a much more cynical way: if somebody comes up to you in a bar or cafe and says, "I would like to speak to you heart to heart about the reality of existence," you're going to quickly pay your check and walk away, but somebody comes up and starts making a joke about the political situation, you start engaging, and you chat along for a while, and over the course of a few hours, the relationship evolves, it's such that of the conversation that can go to more sincere matters.

I think, you know, we imagine oftentimes that sincerity is sort of a dirty word, right? That to say sincere is, by its very nature, to be insincere. But that needn't be the case. I think that there is a kind of hard-won sincerity which is possible, which acknowledges all of the cynicism and deceit and marketing that happens between individuals, but yet it does, in the end, try to establish this again. Italo Calvino talks

about how we're all in the Inferno, and our task is to recognize being *within* the Inferno, that who else within the Inferno is managing to stay apart from inside the Inferno, and to encourage them and embrace them and recognize them. And I think in that sense, this is the writer-reader relationship that it is possible in the Inferno of reality to have actually a meaningful contact across the written page. And for that, to stand for something.

And so, this novel in a way tried to deploy this Sufi notion of arriving in a kind of enlightenment, of love-based possibility of salvation for the "you" of the main characters, because in the end, he is able to become close to his beloved, and the beloved is able to come close to him. But that required, in fact, navigating a life dedicated to something completely different. So, in a sense, I viewed, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* both as a kind of effective manual. This is if you wish to become rich in a place like Pakistan, these would be the steps I would suggest that you follow for that objective. It's not bad advice. In fact, it's been assigned, you know, in business schools and finance courses, in various places. I think, not because people think that it's necessarily good advice, but because it actually tries to engage very sincerely with what is the required business standpoint to do these things. But so, while it is in a sense playfully subverting, it is also sincere to the task of being a manual of "how to get rich". But with the objective of getting us somewhere else, which is that what it takes to get rich is not perhaps what we actually want, and it is possible for us to sort of transcend that desire.

And we would be well-served looking to older wisdoms in this neoliberal catastrophe. And whether those wisdoms come from a Sufi love-based tradition, or whether they come from an eastern meditative tradition, or whether they come from a secular enlightenment tradition, it doesn't matter. We don't necessarily need to be bound by any of those things. But we should just recognize that people have been grappling with this stuff. It's worth figuring it out.

So that really, for me, was *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. It was an analysis of what's actually happening, but also the suggestion of the precursor to a vaccine.

PV. OK. To move on, as a connection, there's the obvious idea of un-labelling and un-naming in your latest novel, *Exit West*, which has had a tremendous success. I'll try and come back to that later. That's one of the most remarkable things about *Exit West*, a novel about migrancy, about movement, motion perhaps, and general movements of the spheres, of the stars, etc. But at the same time un-labelling. I noticed that the places of departure in the novel are anonymously labelled. But at the same time, the places where all the different characters arrive are specifically named, the neighbourhoods, places in Japan, places in Australia, and London, they are all given very precise locations. Why this paradox? You've already given me a part of the answer: defamiliarizing the familiar. But does it also suggest that it's partly allegorical? It's also not just about the migrant crisis, but about us, as universal migrants?

MH. Yes, so formally speaking, what I wanted to do in each of the books we talked about earlier, was have a reality that is skewed in a certain way, in *Moth Smoke* we have this trial where all the different characters are telling us stories. And you, the reader, are cast as the judge, which of course, is not realism. These characters wouldn't actually present you the Miranda on the rule of air conditioning in everybody's lives.

But yet, the stories they tell individually are what you might consider to be realism. Similarly, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the story of Changez is what we might consider to be an exercise in realism. But the manner in which he has this conversation with the presumably American interlocutor that we never hear speak is, again, unlikely to be the mode in which two such people would interact. And it is, in a sense, a theatrical setting. Just as this the trial in *Moth Smoke* is theatrical, and it fractures reality in that sense. And then in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the self-help book frame, again, is a kind of unreal frame. But the main character "you", the main character's story, is what we might call realism. Of course, no historical time passes in that book: he's selling DVDs as a child, and when he's an old man, technology is still at the same level. So, whether this is the tale of 12 different "yous" existing in the same moment in one city, or whether it is a world where no time has passed... it's slightly skewed from what we might imagine reality.

And so, in *Exit West*, instead of a formal skew, a trial, a dramatic monologue, a self-help book where no time passes, the skewers of physics of the world, that in the world of *Exit West*, it is possible to step into a black space that was formerly a door in your bedroom, say, and emerge in another city, or village, or town halfway around the world. And this does not correspond to how we imagine physics to operate, for the most part. So, people began to say, "Well, this is a different kind of novel from the previous ones". To me, it didn't feel particularly different. I think that was the slight fracturing of reality that sort of unlocked the potential of this book, because in every case, what we call reality is the kind of consensus illusion that we tend to cling to. And so, if we're really to get at the nature of human existence, challenging this notion of reality is important. But for me, not to full-heartedly throw out reality and just invent it willy nilly, but just tiny fracture that reminds us that we are in a world in fiction, but then is real enough to make us begin to wonder whether our life outside of the book is also a world of fiction.

And in this case, *Exit West*, these black doors are really no different from the screens in which you and I are speaking right now. I mean, if I turn my computer off and you turn yours off, you have a black screen in front of us, a rectangle. And ultimately, you've chosen to teleport through this rectangle so that, for all intents and purposes, you're sitting with me in my study and I'm sitting with you in yours, and we're in two different continents having this conversation. And this is not some unusual activity. A large part of our day is spent precisely in this relationship. We are watching screens that are disconnecting us from the geographical reality that we, our bodies occupy, whether it be the news, or film, or a video conference, or a phone call. One of the effects of technology in the last century has been this, the vanquishing of physical distance, and now with the containerized shipping and air transport, a human person could be moved at almost no cost anywhere in the world.

If we have a month, we can take a container from Lahore to France for a thousand dollars or two. And certainly, there's enough seating in that for people to make it, if you decide to move people, not packed in containers, but with the efficiency of containerized shipping, it might be a \$50 or \$100 passage to someone from here to France in the course of a month. We could, if we wanted to, live in a world where it was basically free, you know, a thousand dollars if you need to get there today and 50 dollars if you need to get in a month anywhere in the world. We have chosen for that not to be our world, at least the shipping version of it. But we could easily live in that

world, and some people are choosing to try to live in that world, even if the laws of the countries to which they are moving suggests that they would prefer that world not to exist. In a sense, the fracturing of reality in *Exit West*, these black doors, to me, is closer to the reality of human life today, than a world that pretends that these things don't exist.

I can walk onto the streets of Lahore, and see somebody who has come here from China, or Africa, and you, in your town in France could do precisely the same thing, and it happens to all of us all the time. For us to imagine that this doesn't exist, seems wilfully blind. In that sense, *Exit West* fractures reality but to come closer to what we have to do.

It builds in a way on *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is deploying namelessness. But, whereas in that novel, the only proper names were continents, Asia, Europe... In *Exit West*, some places and two characters would have names, the two characters are Saeed and Nadia. And in a way, the fact that these two are named, allows us to witness the two strands of their lives as the fundamental threads that we are following throughout this book. It sort of orients us. They are the wolf and the boy who cried wolf, in a way, it has the parable-like effect of allowing us to focus. And the places that are not named allow us to do what we can do in folk stories and parables as well, which is to imagine them for ourselves, and to imagine us being in those places. So, when a character called Mother dies, it is very different to a character who is a mother but has a name dies, because to the reader, the word 'mother' means something to us and that is significantly influenced by our own mothers and experience what a mother is. So, in a sense, there was a use of some of the things that were used in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. And there's again a kind of love story that occurs in *Exit West*.

If *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are sort of two variations on the love triangle, and if *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* was the Sufi dream of actually arriving at the beloved one day, but utterly transformed by the journey to get there, *Exit West* is a love story about how to relinquish this. How do we let go of things well? And it seemed to me that this is one of the fundamental challenges of this moment of human existence; that we have been denuded of our historical, cultural, equipment that allowed us to relinquish things.

First of all, we may not have really believed in possessions in our tribes, things may have been held in common. This was *a* spear, wasn't *my* spear, this child was perhaps the *tribe's* child, not *my* child. But anyway, we do evolve property and we all do these things over the subsequent millennia. But we also evolve rituals that allow us to let go of these things. How do we die? What does a good death consist of? How do we prepare ourselves for that? How do we prepare our children for our passing? These fundamental aspects of what every culture throughout human history has engaged in very rigorously appeared to be substantially abandoned by much of contemporary humanity. It's hard for us to imagine what a good death is. If we can conceive of a child blowing themselves up in a shopping mall as a good death, or somebody dying wealthy in a care home far from anybody they know as a good death, we have really gone very far from any engagement with millennia of human thought on this topic.

I think that in our orientation towards possession, possession of money, and physical possessions, possession of our countries, possession of this planet, we are engaging in

impossibility. It is impossible for the human being to truly possess, at best we can temporarily hold on to. And that too, if we make that our only objective in life, you know, there's a there's a Zen kōan story from the Zen tradition, a parable I should say, where this monk is being chased by some wild animal, say a tiger, and comes to a cliff and starts to climb down and the tiger's roaring above, and then looks down and sees another tiger at the bottom of the cliff, waiting. The monk is trapped and his strength is weakening, and the monk sees next to him growing from the face of the cliff a strawberry, and he plucks the strawberry and eats the strawberry. And he thinks how sweet it is. This really is the kind of story that we have been telling ourselves forever, right? Which is that that there is a tiger above, there's a tiger below, we cannot cling to the cliff forever. It would be madness for us to spend our existence simply engaged in the exercise of clinging to the cliff. What a meaningless existence that would be. Let us embrace the ephemeral beauty of this strawberry. And of course, every tradition has variations on this. But I thought a love story about people who part *well* seemed what I needed to tell in this environment. And partly because we have become crippled by a sense of nostalgia. We can imagine that France can remain the way we imagined it to be 50 years ago, that Pakistan can return to what we imagined Islam to be a thousand years ago. That America can be what it was like when Donald Trump was born. Now, first of all, these things that we imagine didn't exist, because our imagining of them is completely inaccurate. If we magically transported to these places, we'd probably be completely miserable. But aside from that, it is the monk saying, "I must get to the top of that cliff and get back to that cliff and not have crawled down here onto the cliff in the first place"... That somehow, we can reverse time. And that's a pathology. And this pathology, as it expresses itself, becomes increasingly destructive. You wind up with attempts to reverse time, monstrous attempts to purify, and not just the Hitlerian, Nazi, pure Germany strand or moment of human history. But the entire strand upon which that moment rests, the Catholic Protestant wars that split Europe for centuries, the Islam and Christian wars, slavery... We look back at these purity moments, these attempts to re-establish in cosmopolitan environments a pre-existing pure time. And invariably they are horrific. You know what happened when Greece and Turkey split? When Israel and Palestine split? when Pakistan and India split? What happened was horrific massacres and terrors and genocides. And so I think this idea of saying: look, if fear of what is coming and fear of loss is the animating force that gives such power to nostalgia and nostalgic visions, the only way, or at least one important way in which we can confront that fear, is to explore relinquishment, letting go, to understand that that is what human existence actually consists of. I cannot remain in the previous second, more than one second. It's gone. Each moment disappears for me as I live it, and I'm constantly being thrown into a future where I'm a little bit older, perhaps a little bit more frail, where a few more people that I know are getting sick, and when new children are born who look different from me, and aren't related to me. To stand up in opposition to this situation is to fundamentally misunderstand what it is to be human, and to engage in a kind of impossibility.

And so, what we have today is a world where people like billionaires are engaged in the quest for living forever, where old people dominate the politics in their countries, where nostalgic visions are being sold all over the world, because we just cannot bring ourselves to accept that things end.

I thought it was important to try to tell a story that shows how things can end well. And I thought that, in a sense, what would such a folk story, a parable, be rooted in: it should be rooted in first love, because first love is maybe not universal, but pretty near a universal thing. Most of us will experience a first love, even if it's an unrequited first love. At some point, most of us will fall in love with someone. And we will call it a first love because it didn't last. If it did last, it would just be a love. When we use the term first love, we tend to mean something that ended. I thought I would write a novel about this situation, the first love which talks about how it could end well, and to use this as a jumping off point to talk about our other first loves: our love of our country, our love of our city, our love of our place, a love of our generation, our moment in time. And how those first loves too we must be prepared to relinquish, because by trying to keep them, as if you try to keep someone you love who doesn't want to be with you anymore as you both change, the result is horror.

The result is the same thing if you try to keep Pakistan or France the way they were, whether you imagine them to be, the result will be a kind of horror, which isn't to say that we embrace any future and change for the sake of change, but rather that we try to orient ourselves towards what is the mode of relinquishment that we think we have value. And if we can think about that, then we can begin to think about the future. For example, it's one thing to say that North America and Europe will no longer be the only wealthy parts of planet earth. One way of experiencing that is a catastrophic loss and say that now we must destroy whatever else challenges our supremacy. Another way to do it would be to say, 'OK, given that we will no longer be and should no longer be the most wealthy place in the world — and in fact it'd be great for the world if there are many other wealthy places — what can we do as the places that got wealthy first, to influence those who come after us, who will become wealthy afterwards? So that this future wealthy world in which we are no longer unique is a world that we would want our grandchildren to live in? One is a worldview of the quest for supremacy, the other one, you have a generational transfer of knowledge, wisdom, and values to broader and broader groups of people, and also to accept from them those values. We don't simply teach our children things, they teach us things, and we certainly don't teach the children of others things. They will teach us things, in the same way that countries are like this — and this is not to say that a country's a child and the other is an adult, and this sort of weird, preposterous way of thinking about it. But I do think that the generational view of human beings is useful when you imagine this in that it may not simply be a contest among competing nations, it may rather be the growing up of a human family.

Why not have our family be a better kind of family, which requires me to relinquish my position as the young man, or the middle-aged man, or even the old man? And eventually life itself. Unable to do that, the family cannot really progress. So, on that basis, the novel takes on this first love, and loss of love, and happiness, and juxtaposed it against the universality of migration, thinking of migration as something that occurs not just through geography, but through time, and tries to suggest that the apocalypse we many of us imagine is coming because of migration, needn't be viewed as an apocalypse at all. The reason why there are people in Europe and North America is because they migrated, nobody evolved in Europe and North America. That really was the thinking behind the creation of that novel.

PV. One last thing, we've already spent an hour and a half, that's been great conversation. How did you feel about the rights of the novel having been bought by the Obamas? Is that correct? By Michelle Obama. And that it's going to be adapted, or it's being adapted into a Netflix series by the Russo Brothers?

MH. I don't know what I'm supposed to be talking about or not talking about this. But maybe I can add to the question a bit more generally. When you think about the adaptation of a novel to film or television, which for me, has happened — there's already been one film that was adapted from one of my books [Mira Nair's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2012, starring Riz Ahmed, Kate Hudson and Liv Schreiber] and another has been on TV [*Moth Smoke* as *Daira*, 2002], and there have been other attempts at adapting. For me, the most important thing is to recognize that it is impossible to adapt a film or TV show from a novel. What happens is a new work of art is created. And the inspiration of that new creation is a novel. In the same way that I make a song about a sculpture or a sculpture about a song, they are not the same thing. But it is possible to make a sculpture about a song, or a song about a sculpture. So, I think what we're talking about is a relationship. And for me, what is interesting about the relationship is, as a novelist, I work so much alone. My creative existence is sitting all by myself in a room, typing away, reading by myself. And I've gravitated to that form. Clearly, it's something that suits me. It's also something that makes me intensely miserable at times. It does question, to a certain point, why have I chosen this existence? It's a horrible existence in many ways, and it's a beautiful existence in many ways because you get to make up whatever you want. And it's really the only narrative form, or mass distributed narrative form, where that is possible. In other mass distributed narrative forms, lots of people, lots of money are involved in making the thing. In a novel, certainly, there's money involved in editing and producing and marketing it, but not much. Really, it's the time of the writer that translates into the creation of a novel. It's one human being pending time. I guess it's an incredibly wonderful and beautiful form, but it's also a miserable form in that we have a limited time appearance on this earth, and to spend it cut off from most people is a huge catastrophe. I wonder how many novelists at the end of their lives look back and say, "What did I do? I could have been at the beach, or I could have been with my kid, and I could have been doing something else!"

So, for me, the attraction of collaborating or engaging with people in other forms, is so beautiful. To be part of a project with other people. Not in my role as anything so large, it varies from project to project; I'm not the director, I'm not the actor, I'm not even really the primary writer of any of these projects. I have some degree of input. But it's just wonderful to have these couple of hundred people working on a shared project, and you also have some small role. And then you have this thing come into existence. It's really a little bit like sending your child to school. You think, "Well, if I can find a place where the ethics feel right, the culture is appropriate", then you send your child over there, and hope for the best. Mira Nair, I've met her, I thought she was a wonderful person, I'd loved *Salaam Bombay*, and *Monsoon Wedding*, she's a fantastic filmmaker, and with a great personal connection, I felt trusting, handling this child. And the analogy breaks down because, of course, what she made was not that child grown up. It was something else, it's different. My parental attachment to my creative progeny is then to somebody else. That's really what I bring into each of these things. Who are these people? What do I imagine? How do our conversations go? Is there potential here for some kind of cross-fertilization to create something

beautiful? And that's really been my approach. Then what comes out of it is very much outside my control.

It's like you offer a mole a chance to go to Burning Man every few years [a weeklong event held every year in the desert in the United States where people create art in a self-reliant environment], and build some molehill as everybody else runs around it as fun stuff at Burning Man. You are part of this great cultural, and not the cultural circus of the marketing and sale of the film, but the cultural circus of the *making of it*. A carpenter actually making sets, a young person just transferring the audio from microphone to a hard drive, somebody holding the camera, while somebody else plans its movement. You see these people doing their thing and you realize it's not quite the same as a musician in a symphony, but it's probably not entirely different, either. So, for me, it's quite interesting. Then you just hope for the best, and hope that what comes out of it is something that you can love.

PV. And something you can be proud of. So, something is happening with *Exit West*, with some people, some producers. I understand you can't say anything more. It changes all the time...

MH. Yes, I mean, it changes all the time. For me, any partners I'm working with I'm excited about working with them, which is why they are sort of chosen to work with.

At a philosophical level, while I'm committed to the creation of this art form where I get to shape everything, I don't necessarily believe in the superiority of that art form to other art forms that rely on the serendipity of interaction between many different people. And it is useful to me as a writer to watch that, also, and to see this completely different mode of creation.

I guess one way of saying it is, in a sort of Sufi tradition, that there are two different paths to enlightenment: one is you look inside yourself and you see the universe reflected within you. And to me, that is something more like what writing fiction and reading fiction is like. This is a kind of universe that opens up within. But making a film or a television show is much more like a different form of enlightenment, which is looking out at the universe and seeing it, and recognizing in the universe echoes of you. When we look at the sea and we feel something, or the desert, or the stars, and we feel something, that's the feeling that we're talking about. In film and television, we're looking at something that looks like the world we live in, and the mode of creating it looks like the world we live in too, because it's people working together, having jobs, making a thing together. I think that there are two different routes. And for me, it's very interesting to get to have a small chance to explore the other route while I do my main focus on the first one.

PV. I think the connection to Sufi was a real insight for me. It might an interesting point in *Exit West*. I have Thierry Cohen's photographs of *Dark Cities (Villes éteintes)* and I think they're quite Sufi as well. Taking night pictures of cityscapes, then erasing all the artificial lights, then superimposing a view of a deserted place, but at a different latitude, thanks to the earth's rotation, so we can see the sky without light pollution? Isn't there something mystical there about reconnecting different places, and creating light with darkness?

MH. I think there's an interesting route there as well. I think for me, what's very important is that is that there's a rich human cultural tradition that we need to engage with, if we are going to make any sense about current predicament. The neo/new mania of the present moment, which is that only the new is what matters, I think, is a colossal mistake. And this sort of goes back to the beginning of our

conversation. What is Naya Pakistan? How new is Naya Pakistan? But the other question is: What is the value of new? How important is new? Is newness good in and of itself? And to a certain extent it feels like we've come to believe perhaps that it is, or partly is. And then we respond with a kind of nostalgic backlash. But I think that the rationalist Enlightenment values that went hand-in-hand with our understanding of science are increasingly being challenged by an ending of science. From Einstein onwards, we've come to recognize that the self that we imagined to exist perhaps doesn't exist. If you put somebody inside a functional MRI machine, and you ask them to do something of volition, and you discover that something happens inside them before the volition act. In other words, they think they dropped the penny into the glass when they dropped a penny into the glass. But a second or two before that, something else was fired that they're not aware of., raising the possibility that, in fact, our conception of free will is an overlay that our biological machine creates, in the same way that our phone creates an impression on its screen that isn't actually configured to conform to the reality of what's happening inside the phone.

I think that as we are confronted with things like this: what is it to be a human? Is any surface solid? What is time? It is useful for us to go back to all sorts of things, whether it be our burial traditions, whether it be the Sufi tradition, whether it be meditation. The idea that by expanding the moment, the tyranny of the fact that the literal end becomes less overwhelming for us, etc.

So I guess the last thing I would like to say is that this task of storytelling is to reconnect things that are separate without a story, that our language comes from somewhere, that our culture comes from somewhere. There's a narrative that connects us to each of those antecedents, and it's worthwhile trying to repurpose them and redeploy them to meet our current challenges because I think we are struggling to meet our current challenges.

PV. Absolutely. With these words of great wisdom, I thank you very much.

MH. My pleasure, Paul.

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ABSTRACTS

In August 2020, as the whole world was still reeling from the human and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, Paul Veyret interviewed Mohsin Hamid through Zoom at his home in Lahore. The conversation started off with considerations on the limits and politically fraudulent nature of Imran Khan's "Naya Pakistan", then embarked upon an exploration of Mohsin Hamid's four novels, *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*. Hamid develops his view on Pakistani fiction, the different crises the emerging nations are undergoing, and how Sufi philosophy and Italo Calvino underpin his writing.

En août 2020, alors que le monde entier était encore sous le choc des effets humains et économiques de la pandémie de Covid-19, Paul Veyret a interviewé le romancier pakistanais Mohsin Hamid via Zoom. La conversation a commencé par des considérations sur les limites et la nature politiquement frauduleuse du « Naya Pakistan » du Premier ministre Imran Khan, puis s'est engagée dans une exploration des quatre romans de Mohsin Hamid : *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*. Hamid développe son point de vue sur la fiction pakistanaise, les différentes crises que traversent les nations émergentes, et comment la philosophie soufie et Italo Calvino sous-tendent son écriture.

INDEX

Keywords: Hamid Mohsin, Pakistani fiction, Sufism, crisis, Pakistan, environment, literature, Calvino Italo

Mots-clés: Hamid Mohsin, fiction pakistanaise, soufisme, crise, Pakistan, environnement, littérature, Calvino Italo

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Mohsin Hamid is the author of four novels — *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, and *Exit West* — and a book of essays, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*. His writing has been translated into forty languages, featured on bestseller lists, and adapted for film and television. Born in Lahore, he has spent about half his life there and much of the rest in London, New York, and California. He now resides in Lahore.

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