

## Interview: Suhayl Saadi by Zafar Anjum (Scotland)



Suhayl Saadi was born in Yorkshire in 1961 of Afghan-Pakistani parents, and grew up in Glasgow, becoming a medical doctor. He is a widely published novelist, dramatist and poet, and the author of a short story collection, *The Burning Mirror* (2001), shortlisted for the Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award. His radio and stage plays include *The Dark Island*, broadcast on Radio 4 in 2004, *Saame Sita* (2003), *The White Cliffs* (2004), and *The Garden of the Fourteenth Moon* (2006).

He has written articles and essays for several national newspapers, and song lyrics for classical and folk-rock combos. He has co-edited three anthologies, and is co-director of an arts production company, Heer Productions Ltd., which established the Pakistani Film, Media and Arts Festival in the UK.

His novel, *Psychoraag* (2004), was shortlisted for the 2004 James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction), and the 2005 National Literary Award (Pakistan), longlisted for the 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and winner of a PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literature Award. It was published in French in 2007.

His latest book is *Joseph's Box* (2009). [Read exclusive excerpts from this novel here.](#)

Here is an exclusive interview with Suhayl Saadi.

In Philip Roth's *The Anatomy Lesson*, the protagonist Nathan Zuckerman is a 40 years old novelist who thinks he has wasted his life writing. He wants to be a doctor. You trained as a physician. You are a doctor. How did the transition happen to writing? What does writing do to you?

It goes right back. I have always loved reading and have always loved stories. As a child, I had exposure to a broad range of books - English classics and many others way beyond the books usually directed at my age-group - and also had constant access to lived experiences concerning history and memory from both Britain and South Asia. I was excellent at English and History and could have done either at university, but for various rather boring reasons largely to do with the internalisation of racism, I did medicine instead.

Yet very soon, I was attracted back to the world of the arts, and specifically, music and literature. The rest of my life has been an attempt to explore the nature of meaning and being through words.

I think I would have been a writer, regardless. I am not a 'doctor-writer', in the sense that people normally understand the term. I am a writer who also happens to be a doctor and a lover of certain types of music, and much else besides. It's not as though I've invented penicillin! If I had been a real scientist, I'd have wanted to push the envelope. But I feel that I definitely have written unique works, which, I hope, may advance the discourse that is literature. My real place - and any talent I have - lies in books.

I often wonder, and obsess about, how much more I might have been able to achieve, had I simply been a writer. But for that, you

need serious money and backing, and a weight of critical approval which, frankly, can come only from cultural maturation (and specifically, an expansion of cultural literacy) that has yet to occur among the elites of the West, who, in recent times, in terms of literature, have become increasingly orthodox. It also requires a diminution of the associated corporatist, marketing/ PR ideology that increasingly inhibits literary entrepreneurship and innovation in the book world.

Nonetheless, I think I can bring a considerable wealth of personal experience with humanity to my writing, though not always in a straightforward, naturalistic manner. Part of writing entails connecting with the world, part entails escape from it and that about defines my interaction with reality; the creativity that emerges from the need to seek meaning, issues from the fissures between the two. I get a sort of 'Eureka' high when I write - on good days, at any rate!

**Do you feel any tug of war between being a doctor and being a writer? How do you strike a balance between the two worlds, two professions? Does your life and the choice to be a writer remind you of Chekhov, who was also a physician and a writer at the same time?**

Yes, definitely. In many ways, they require opposite mind-sets. For example, in medicine, the aim is to reduce risk. In art, it is necessary to pursue risk. Also, while particularly in the state and academic sectors, people have been very supportive of my work, there may be some in the corporate power-houses of the literary world who resent the intrusion of someone 'from outside' (an 'Asian' doctor, for heavens sake!) who didn't go through the normal arts university curriculum and yet who dares to attempt to be highbrow, rather than 'authentic' and 'exotic', in the world of the white arts.

On the other hand, there are similarities, particularly in relation to the construction of coherent narrative, the creation of empathy for characters, the necessity for both doctor and author to 'see' deep inside an individual yet also remain detached and finally, the seeking of some kind of resolution, even if that resolution is in death. Furthermore, one could argue that both modern medicine and the novel-as-we-know-it arose from the same great vat of the Mercantile, and later, the Industrial, Revolution; both exemplify that sense of restless change, the unending need to redefine myth and history and the contingency of juxtaposition which is emblematic of Modernity.

There have been so many writers who were also doctors. I suspect some were driven to be doctors for similar reasons to me - economic and socio-political - while for others it was a vocation and was deeply intertwined with their books. Chekhov caught TB and proceeded to work himself to death. I do not intend to follow his example! Having said all that, the protagonist in 'Joseph's Box' is a doctor.

**What is your attraction to music? In your latest novel and the one before it, Psychoraag, music was present--the protagonist Zafar was a radio jockey. You yourself have said that in your ideal life, you would have been either a musician or an experimental biochemist. What does music mean to you and how does it creep into your writing?**

Music destabilised and invigorated my life, specifically, psychedelic rock music from the 1960s: The Beatles, The Byrds, The Jefferson Airplane, The Velvet Underground and all the rest. I'm sure that as a child I heard this kind of music over the mono record-players and transistor radios played by my older siblings at the time, but I really got into it myself in the pre-CD early 1980s, through visiting touring record fairs to pick up old LPs and also through newer compilation labels. Psychedelic music can expand the mind. Furthermore, we know now that music in general acts synergistically in relation to other brain functions.

I was exposed to South Asian - Pakistani and Indian - 'film' songs from early childhood; we had a reel-to-reel, valve tape recorder and for decades, every Sunday morning, before the French-language and religious programmes, the BBC used to broadcast a show, in black-and-white, for the South Asian communities: 'New Way, New Life' ('Niya Zindagi, Neeya Jeevan') which, among other things, would showcase musical acts. Occasionally, we would visit 'The Cosmo', a cinema in Glasgow now called 'The Glasgow Film Theatre' (in my role as aide to the Artistic Director of the Pakistani Film, Media and Arts Festival, in recent years I've chaired Q and A sessions there!), but which, in those monochrome days, used to screen South Asian films on Sunday afternoons (what is it about Sundays?!). Many of these films, as I recall, seemed to relate in some way to the existential fracture that was Partition (the 1947 Partition of South Asia) and of course this was the 'golden age' of North Indian, and Pakistani, cinema. Lyricists were poets

and the singers and actors were superlatively poignant on-screen presences. Again, the full extent of the films' narratives were beyond me. But this gives one a desire to stretch one's mind, it renders to the soul a desire for acquiring understanding in a world of baffling imagery and sonic architecture.

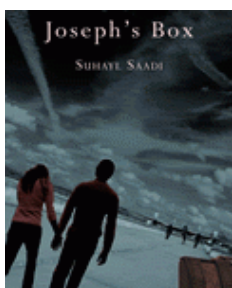
I lived part of my childhood in a very rural area, in a village in the north of England, and most of it in a town in industrial (and later, post-industrial) Scotland. So, Anglican church-bells, Presbyterian hymns and local folk-musics constantly swirled around me. The actual landscape of Britain was changing (again), as the industrial infrastructure of empire was broken-down, gradually and sometimes turbulently, into that of a service economy. I've moved through times of hope and optimism (the 1960s) to those of anger and despair (the 1980s) and finally, to the current era with its societal pathology of apathetic cynicism. Throw books into the equation, as I've stated earlier, and to a receptive and questioning mind it's a recipe for creativity.

On some level, whenever I'm writing fiction or drama, I search for what I call, 'the music'. This comprises not merely the poetic textures of the piece, nor even the types of music emanating from the places and times in which the narrative is set, but something deeper, something to do with the larger chiasmic and other structures underpinning the piece. It's like a gravitational centre around which constantly the narrative moves - a tonal centre, perhaps. A thus, everything I write seeks to reveal and join with, this 'music'. Another spiritual concept, as you suggest. By the way, this is why, in my view, music and Islam are not only compatible, but actually are coterminous, congruent, synonymous, even. Ibn Farabi and Al Kindi knew this very well, as did Ziryab, Rumi, Tansen, Mohammad Rafi and as does Richard Thompson, Danny Thompson, (thankfully, again) Yusuf Islam, Wajahat Khan, Hossein Alizadeh and millions of others.

There's also the element of dislocation - culturally, geographically and ethnically we were very isolated, so I had to invent myself and my realities, I had to breath my own music. And invention can become a way of life! I was also brought up in the grounds of a mental hospital on the edge of the country - my father was a psychiatrist and we lived in the staff quarters - so I was surrounded by mad people, schizophrenics, or those with (to use an archaic yet evocative term) melancholia, some of whom became our friends. We used to play tennis with some of these individuals, who were experiencing systemic internal dislocation. In those days, people would sometimes end up living forever in institutions, would become gardeners there, or whatever. They were friendly, not scary at all. It was a sort of community. It wasn't 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', though one guy did have a talking mynah bird to whom he taught the most shocking expletives! In the R. D. Laingian sense, this was probably good for me. The title of my previous novel, ['Psychoraag'](#) could mean 'the music of madness', while one slightly puzzled reviewer thought that in 'Joseph's Box', all the characters were "psychotic". I, of course, am completely sane. I think, therefore I may be. Maybe.

'Joseph's Box' draws on European, Arabic, Persian and Indian musical forms, and centres around the lute, which derived from the Arabic 'ud ('al ud' means, simply, 'the wood'). The lute is (to quote NYC-based, Ukrainian-American lutenist and composer extraordinaire, Roman Turovsky) "an instrument of melancholy rather than mania". And so, apart from the historical and potentially mutatory aspects, this provides an effective counterpoint to the periodic ferocity and overall lyrical density of much of the narrative. However, 'Joseph's Box' is a slow - in places, a very slow - narrative, employing what another reviewer referred to as "a Lawrencian tedium" (presumably referring to D. H., rather than T. E., Lawrence). I hope I'm not putting you off reading it! I wanted to shape the text from old English semiotic forms, to acquire that sense of long-history which one can feel very powerfully in certain places in Albion. I also wanted, to some extent, to undermine and eschew the tropes of modernity and postmodernity, alike. Though this was not my primary motivation in writing 'Joseph's Box', I am rather pleased that it does cock a snook at contemporary corporate creative writing dogma. A slogan for the wall: !!Orthodoxy is death!!

**Your latest work, Joseph's Box, seems to have a religious, mystical element in its narrative. What is this novel about? Does it in any way respond to the increasing Islamophobia in Europe?**



Good question, some might intone: what exactly is this novel about? Yes, it draws on multiple religious, historical and folk-tale narratives. The central motif refers to the Islamic (or should one say, the 'Judeo-Islamic'?) story of 'Yusuf and Zuleikha', which, in the end, is a quest narrative, a search for unity through the attainment of spiritual beauty. The protagonist is called, Zuleikha MacBeth (now if that's not a loaded name, I don't know what is!). At its most basic level, Zuleikha is bereaved; she has lost her child and her mother; and 'Joseph's Box' is the story of her search for, her journey towards, some kind of redemption. So it's a fairly simple premise.

But we, as individuals, are more than a set of linear narratives, our lives consist of more than simple character-arcs, we are more than ourselves, and so all of history and legend flow through this woman and through the other characters. Like the old epics, 'Joseph's Box' is porous, so that I deliberately have not tied-up all possible ends. The website (<http://www.josephsbox.co.uk/>) contains a number of other tales which are tangential to the story in the book. You can dip in and out of these folk-tales. There are end-notes and web-links to other things I've written and things which I've yet to write. Folk tales (and folk music) are great metaphors for the manner in which stories, ideas, rhythms and peoples always have travelled and taken their multiple selves along with them.

It's potentially an entrancing, but not an easy, read. You have to approach it in a quite different way from the way in which you would approach most other (even literary) novels. You really have to immerse yourself in its world. For some, it will seem obtuse, primitive, incoherent, incontinent, incompetent, even. Apart from drawing on epic (originally oral) forms (think of the Mahabharata, the Odyssey, the Shahnamah, the Norse epics, etc.), I'm also attempting to employ, in literature, some of the modalities used by the writers of texts which draw on, and exemplify, sufism as well as on the techniques used by sufis, lamas, saadhus, tzaddiks, gnostics and others. It's not a 'New Age' book, though, don't look for tinkling chimes, it's far too visceral and connected to sources of rage and despair for that.

It is not necessary, in my view, for every reader overtly, consciously, immediately to understand everything in a novel. Meaning and understanding work in mysterious ways. We've been arguing over religious and literary texts for centuries. These disagreements, this lack of consensus, do not invalidate those texts - far from it. It's not that I'm being deliberately obscure to try to look clever or profound. On the other hand, I am saddened by the brutish celebration of anti-intellectualism which seems to dominate especially much Anglophone thought. It's rather that I'm using various techniques to trigger active, and deep, thought. What you may gain, by the end of the experience, might not be catharsis (at least not in the orgasmic way the term is understood in contemporary literary ideology), but rather (as another, very switched-on, reviewer commented), might be "a different view of the world. And that's what fiction is for". Well said.

Islamophobia? No, I don't think I was thinking specifically of that when I conceived and wrote 'Joseph's Box'. Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism, to my mind, both are simply manifestations of the continuation of that tribal European paranoia which is necessary to define and maintain the concept of 'Europe' (and its extension, North America) and its attendant war-economy. Islamism is a direct product of the Cold War, remember. In my fiction, I'm not too interested in latching onto contemporary mores, dilemmas and trends. They tend to be shallow-bottomed boats and they pass too quickly. In 'Joseph's Box' and some of my novellas, eg. 'The Saelig Tales' (<http://textualities.net/suhayl-saadi/saelig-tales-part-1/>), 'The Spanish House' (<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue3/TheSpanishHouse.pdf>), 'The Aerodrome' (<http://www.scotiareview.org/files/downloads/SSaadi.pdf>), 'The Black Mirror' ([http://sarmed.netfirms.com/suhayl/NEW/short\\_stories/black\\_mir/index.htm](http://sarmed.netfirms.com/suhayl/NEW/short_stories/black_mir/index.htm)), I aim at a much longer view of time, through which the reader voyages in a deeper-hulled, slower-moving vessel. I know this might sound pompous, but to paraphrase Stendhal, I write for the future.

### **With Joseph's Box, you have taken the e-publishing route. Is it an experiment?**

'Joseph's Box' is out in hard and virtual copy. My previous novel, 'Psychoraag' was also published in both forms, although not simultaneously as has been the case with 'Joseph's Box'. The publisher of the latter, 'Two Ravens Press', is very forward-thinking and innovative, and it was their excellent idea to do this. As I said earlier, there is a considerable amount of material which is only on the website and not in the book, so it makes thematic and structural sense to have the entire beast out there in cyberspace, since this medium, because it has no physical limitations, more closely resembles the human brain than do books. My editor has a

neuroscience background - see, we're all polymaths! - and has a broad view of the possible. So, you can access the various narratives any way you want. To paraphrase Alasdair Gray (I'm full of quotes today, aren't I?!) on his magnum opus, 'Lanark', you may read the book in one way and remember it in quite another. In this regard, I would refer readers back also to novels like 'Hopscotch' ('Rayuela') by Julio Cortázar as well as to some of the works of Italo Calvino, Juan Goytisolo, Gustav Meyrink and the early C20th Austrian Fantasy writers.

**What is your take on e-publishing and the future of books? Will e-publishing and Google's espresso instant books (machines can print and bind a paperback in 4 minutes flat) change the future of publishing, how writers distribute their books and reach out to the readers? Will the publishers cease to be the gatekeepers of content?**

I hope so. It needs a revolution. I would like to (here, I have delusions of Sidney Poitier) 'knock that big old white bastard off his hill'. Let's democratise but try not to continue to dumb-down. There are far too many stupid, and stupefying, books out already by chefs, gardeners, estate agents, DIY experts and vacuous 'celebrities' which are heavily promoted in the 'front fifty feet' of bookshops and this mirrors the inanity of much television. Give 'em what they want! is a big lie and is a recipe for the incipient snuff-movies and ritual humiliation which now pass for entertainment and which, ultimately, are tools of social control and mechanisms for the concentration of wealth. It's not really about gatekeeping - that's merely an instrumentalisation of these strategies - it's really about what kind of human society, what kind of world, we want. The bottom line is that writing, invented in Iraq 5,000 years ago, is important and at some level, is feared by those in power. Stalin, the one-time published and acclaimed poet, knew - and stated - this perfectly well when he attempted to justify banning Dostoevsky's works. Stalin was terrified of Dostoevsky and even eventually, of Gorki. The process of capitalist censorship is more systemic, less directed, more subtle, less obvious, but in the end it is even more effective in the engineering of pliant societies. Of course, Google is a big white corporation, too. We have to be attentive - to paraphrase from the Spanish writer, Ibn Tufayl, in order to stay alive, we have to remain awake!

**You are a Scot but you have Afghan-Pakistani ancestry. How do you see the recent rise of Pakistani writers like Mohsin Hamid, Mohammad Hanif and Daniyal Mueenuddin, among others? Is the interest (of the west) genuine or is it an accident of the moment as Pakistan is in the focus because of the war on terror?**

It's brilliant that these writers - and I would also mention the lucid books of Kamila Shamsie, the visceral works of Faryal Gohar and the powerful novels of Nadeem Aslam, who I think is a superb prose stylist - are gaining publication and broad exposure. They have written works of great literary and, in some cases, also political, validity. They also enable people - in the West, which in this sense seems still to be a dark, barbaric, place, which, when it comes to 'Other' cultures, constantly like a child in the Remedial Class, seems to be in need of enlightenment and very simple storytelling - to see Pakistanis as more than just a series of tired stereotypes. No, the interest of the power elites in the West who determine these things, who in acts of almost Nietzschean will, create and then dissolve zeitgeists, may sometimes be benign but is never genuine. I'm not talking about individual readers, I'm not criticising individuals here. We're talking about an empire. Empires are junkies. Power is its heroin. Pakistan currently is the site of the 'war of civilisations' (supposedly - it's bunkum, of course, but this is the de facto dominant narrative), and so, all of a sudden, like the effective colonials 'we' would like to be, 'we' need to understand Pakistan. Good! Such 'understanding' is long overdue. A pity they couldn't have tried to understand it in 1977 when the USA toppled democracy and installed a nutcase Islamist dictator. Or in 1947, when the UK, having fostered for 90 years the politics of 'divide-and-rule', then deliberately attempted to stymie Pakistan's viability. Or...

But what if one were not interested in writing overtly about the politics of the moment, the horrors of Afghanistan, the feudal system in rural Pakistan or the idiocy of the dictator? What if one were attempting not to pen the obvious and allowable narratives that are expected of subaltern novelists, but rather, to forge works of art, which (among other things) deconstruct the myths and histories of the artificial entity known as 'Europe', in relation to those of 'Other' places, to elicit the manner in which, as with the lute, much of 'Europe' was defined by those 'Other' places (and vice-versa)? Would one then face the open arms of the publishing-retailing complex? I doubt it. The closed fist, more like.

The interest of the West is not an accident, but it's not genuine. Yet still, things have unpredictable effects and so some good may come of it - and in terms of some of these books, some good already has! If the lid of the box, is opened, even a chink, along with all

the evils, Hope flies out!

**Issues of identity, multicutureism and terrorism are some of the major themes in contemporary literature. As a Muslim citizen in Europe, do you sometimes feel tempted to contribute to the discourse on the war on terror? Or are you more interested in mystical, individuals stories? How do you deal and engage with the present gobal issues in your writing?**

I think I've answered much of this already. In my fiction, I've probably done some of all of this, it's not mutually exclusive, obviously. However, I try to elicit deeper, longer views, to tap into both human and inanimate geopoetics, as Kenneth White calls it. But in my essays and articles, I do critique contemporary geopolitics. You'll see that in 'Joseph's Box', there are references to industrial disease, the death of manufacturing industry in the UK, the Mafia economy in Sicily/ Italy (part of the novel is set there), Islamism in Pakistan, the Indo-Pak confrontation over Kashmir, racism... all these things are there, but they are not foregrounded. They are part of a much broader rubric.

I'm not interested, either, in regurgitating in fiction the mores of identity politics. Others do that very effectively, but it's of no interest to me. I am not in the game of reinforcing Western liberal sanctimonious vanity. So, politically, my novels are probably 'suspect' and irritating in all directions!

**What are your current project? What is keeping you busy at the moment?**

Hey - that's a secret! To me. But I can tell you two things: it'll not be about teenage wizards, suburban property values or the Knights Templar!

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