

## PANEL OUTLINE

### **Title: Mangoes or Pizza: Battling Self-Censorship to Write/Right the Self**

**Description:** The focus of this panel is the challenge writers of color face in rendering the authentic self in their writing when the landscape they identify with and write about is the subject of western stereotypes and misrepresentation. We'll attempt to discuss how we maintain a genuine voice when writing about ourselves as the other in our work. .

**Category:** Multiple Literary Genres Craft and Criticism

**Organizer and Moderator:** Farah Habib

### **Panel Participants & Short Bios**

**Mushtaq Bilal** is a Fulbright doctoral fellow in the Department of Comparative Literature at Binghamton University where he teaches Pakistani literature. He is the author of the book *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction*.

**Soniah Kamal** is an award-winning novelist and author of, *Unmarriageable*, a 2019 Financial Times Readers' Best Book Pick. Her debut novel *An Isolated Incident* was shortlisted for the Townsend Prize. Her essays have been published in the *New York Times*, *Guardian*, *BuzzFeed*, *Catapult*, *Georgia Review*, *VIDA* and more.

**Sehba Sarwar** is an award-winning writer and artist. Her novel *Black Wings*' second edition was released in 2019. Her essays and poems have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Callaloo*, *Vallum* and elsewhere, and her papers are collected by the University of Houston.

**Farah Habib** teaches writing and Multicultural Literature at Bristol Community College in Massachusetts. She is currently on sabbatical to work on her book *Divided Lives: An Anthology and Resource on Pakistani Literature in English*.

### **Opening Remarks**

Welcome (FARAH)

The impetus for the presentation

- My personal experiences with self-censorship
- A short-story I wrote about arranged-marriage took inspiration from events from my childhood; it was heavily criticized by readers in my family for “making our culture look bad”
- How does a writer respond to such negative feedback? How does it shape his/her writing?
- Mushtaq's column: This past summer Mushtaq published an article based on his experiences of teaching a course on Pakistani literature to old, white Americans in Binghamton, which is a small, rural, predominantly conservative town in upstate New York. The article was titled “Teaching Pakistani Literature to Old, White America.” In that article, Mushtaq talked about his reasons for proposing to teach this course. The first reason was that Mushtaq has observed that Pakistani academics thought that Pakistani anglophone novelist pandered to a Western reading public and portrayed a stereotypical version of Pakistan for their consumption. So, Mushtaq set out to see if American readers felt pandered to in

the works of Pakistani novelists like Mohsin Hamid and Mohammed Hanif. In that article, Mushtaq also talked about how works by Pakistani writers are subjected to censorship by the state and society in Pakistan.

- Soniah's Essay in Literary Hub (2016): Soniah Kamal tackles the subject of self-censorship in her article "When My Authentic is Your Exotic." In it, she writes about her dilemma while writing the novel *An Isolated Incident*. A scene in the novel during the summer in Pakistan required a character to be eating fruit and her instinct was to go with mangoes. However, Soniah feared with the 'mango' she might be feeding into stereotypes or expectations of western readers about the east as well as risk readers from Pakistan accusing her of pandering to the West. After struggling with this for several months, Soniah decided to go mangoes. Her struggle illustrates the choices the non-western writer has: to appease the west but risk feeding into stereotypes; to purposely go out of the way to challenge assumptions and risk skewing the lived reality of her characters.
- Sehba's TEDx Houston talk "What is Home?" in which she challenges a growing global culture of nationhood and patriotism, and instead resists borders - and the US Pledge of Allegiance - by claiming citizenship to the world. While grounded in Pakistan or with experiences from a transnational perspective, Sehba's essays, poems, stories, and visual art challenge stereotypes and offer new lens through which to process the complexity of displacement

Reiterate/Summarize the main question and topic: ***How does a writer write freely without having to worry about always looking at oneself through the eyes of the other?***

Note that the question is complex and nuanced because the "other" for ethnic writers from the diaspora can be the western "other" but also the "other" in their homeland.

End with how I self-identify: Pakistani-American; Born in Pakistan, but grew up in the west.

### **Participant Initial Remarks**

Panelists will define how they identify themselves. These initial remarks will set the stage for the discussion by inviting panelists to explain their subject position and serve to clarify for the audience how each person defines and redefines what the other means to them.

MUSHTAQ: A simple way to answer this question could be that I identify as a "Pakistani" but then the question is what is a "Pakistani identity?" Like gender identities, national identities are also inherently performative, provisional, and unstable. And our lived experiences are always in excess of whatever identity label we choose. I can say that I am a "Pakistani" but then there will always be certain experiences that this identity label will not admit into itself. Identities are themselves fictions and constructs. There is no "Pakistani" or "American" identity "out there." These identities are always constructed discursively. The danger in using these identity labels is that the moment we identify ourselves as X, Y, or Z, from there it's a very slippery slope towards stereotypes.

SONIAH: a global citizen with roots in several different places but also no roots, feminist, born in Pakistan but growing up in England and Saudi Arabia in International Schools

SEHBA: feminist, writer, artist, mother, South Asian, community organizer / activist.  
Transnational- I hold Pakistani and US passports (dual citizen)

## **PANEL DISCUSSION AND READING**

### **QUESTION #1: *Have you ever felt the pressure to self-censor?***

Sharing their personal experiences will enable the panelists to use concrete examples to address the issue of self-censorship. Their answers will invite the audience to envision ways in which they can relate to the experience of the panelists.

SONIAH: Twenty odd years ago, I wrote a story called Papa's Girl which was published in an online journal. It had 'vagina' in the first line and was about child prostitution and pornography told through the point of view of a little boy who sees his father in a compromising situation during a trip to Bangkok. I received a lot of backlash for having written such a story as a 'Muslim girl', and in my essay 'Girls From Good Families Do Not Write Such Stories', I wrote about how I came to terms with the severe backlash and how it shaped me as a writer. And no I do not self-censor at all. In fact, this early incident allowed me to fearlessly begin to address sexuality and 'taboo' subjects in both my fiction and non-fiction.

SEHBA: I write for myself and for readers around the globe - I can't make everyone happy. So I don't try. However, I do weave context into the text that I produce - whether I'm writing about the US or Pakistan - to shatter stereotypes and share complexities of landscapes, characters, and issues. I share my truth about growing up in a secular Karachi, and I make sure that my writing represents my history. At the same time, I make sure that my work represents the contemporary landscape that's changed over time.

MUSHTAQ: I always self-censor when I am writing. When you are writing about Pakistan it is impossible for someone like me to not censor. In one of the earlier drafts of my article that you mentioned in your introduction, there was a line about how copies of the Urdu translation of Mohammed Hanif's novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* were seized by the military intelligence. I asked my editor if I could mention this and he said he wouldn't be able to publish it. A few years ago, I interviewed a number of Pakistani novelists and asked them if they self-censored while writing. Some writers said they write whatever they want to and that they had never self-censored. But Bapsi Sidhwa who is one of the pioneers of Pakistani English fiction said that with every new novel, the extent of self-censorship increased in her work. Another writer, Kamila Shamsie, said that the really effective regimes of censorship are the ones that get ingrained in our unconscious minds and sometimes we don't even recognize that we are self-censoring. Mohsin Hamid's response was also quite interesting and productive. He says that he always self-censors but then he also tries to be as attentive as possible to his own processes of self-censorship. He said that if speaking honestly is not possible then as writers our job is to find ways to speak as honestly as possible and to include in that speech the announcement that we are not allowed to speak freely.

FARAH: I also feel I have to self-censor as I fear offending the sensibilities of western and eastern readers. In an essay I wrote about Islamic burial rites, I found myself questioning tradition. The essay was actually about coming to terms with my young mother's unexpected death. I was stuck at a place in the essay where I had to describe the details of the day of her

funeral. For some reason I found myself being afraid and angry at the same time. I realized after journaling about it that the source of this fear was my inner critic preventing me from expressing anger toward the dictates of my religion that didn't allow me enough time to bid my mother farewell.

**QUESTION #2: *Do you feel the pressure to “Set the record straight” or serve as “ambassadors to white society”?*** This question directly addresses the panel description by focusing on the concept of “always looking at oneself through the eyes of the other” which is especially relevant to writers of color.

FARAH will set the context for this question before asking it: For ethnic writers from Pak, the issue is further complicated in the aftermath of 9/11 with Pakistan and Pakistanis being synonymous with issues of terrorism and oppression of women. She will read the following quotes from *Beginning Ethnic American Literatures* edited by Helena Grice, Candida Hepworth, Maria Lauret, and Martin Padget:

- “Whether this burden [of responsibility] is placed upon them by readers and critics or whether they willingly take it on, ethnic writers are often engaged in contestations of a dominant historical record which has demeaned or vilified their culture and their people.”
- “African American, Native American, Chicano/a and Asian American literature usually begins with writing against history, and against racism and ethnocentrism which characterizes it.”

MUSHTAQ: I don't think of myself as an ambassador or representative of Pakistan or Pakistani culture. It would be unforgivably presumptuous on my part to assume that I, Mushtaq Bilal, can represent the experiences of 220 million Pakistanis of diverse ethnicities and cultures and languages. I mean, what do I know about the culture of the Kalash people in Pakistan and the Chuhras and the Baloch people. If the white, hegemonic society wants someone like me to provide representations of a quintessential Pakistani experience and I end up taking up the role of that representative then I have already subscribed to the hegemonic logic. What is important for me is to interrogate this hegemonic logic as much as possible.

SONIAH: I am not an ambassador or a textbook and as such I write what I want without any audience in mind.

SONIAH will read a selection from her novel *Unmarriageable*

SEHBA: I'm troubled by the one-way flow of information -- from western powers to the developing world. So I don't serve as ambassador. Instead, I create text and art that shows images of the worlds that I know through an alternative lens, and I share my truth with the expectation that readers will recognize that one writer can't represent a nation. Though I am based in the US, I do have deep connections in Pakistan and I spend time there each year (though

the pandemic is making the travel more difficult). Social justice issues are woven into my work — not because I have a message to deliver but because the issues interest me. I'll read a poem about teaching in Houston after the Bush government invaded Iraq - the poem is an example of my work where I serve as witness to life in the US

SEHBA will read her Poem “Why I can't/don't write about the ‘war’” (*ASIA: Magazine of Asian Literature* 3.4 (2008))

FARAH: As someone who writes Creative Non-Fiction, my motivation to write is to discover what I know about a particular moment in my life. Worrying about “Setting the record straight” would take away from delving into memory and arriving at the “truth” of my own story.

**Question #3: *What narrative writing strategies have worked for you to help you be your authentic self in your writing?*** After discussing the issue of self-censorship, audience members will be curious about how writers address this in writing. This question will address craft and offer practical and concrete take-aways to consider.

SEHBA - I use storytelling as a strategy. In my novel *Black Wings*, the protagonist is Yasmeen, who is cut off from her past in Pakistan because she blames her mother for the death of her twin brother Yasir. After she reconnects with her mother in Houston, she finds herself sharing stories with her young children – stories about her home in Karachi where they have never visited.

In this story, she talks about the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, which Pakistan lost and after which Bangladesh gained independence. In this excerpt, Yasmeen and her twin have found shelter from bombs in the home of the milkman.

SEHBA will read an excerpt from her novel *Black Wings*

SONIAH: I write my truth as I have lived it and as in my novel *Unmarriageable* seek to understand history in relation to identity. *Unmarriageable* is a post-colonial retelling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and I'll read a passage from *Unmarriageable* as an example of grappling with history, identity and authenticity.

MUSHTAQ: “Relocalizable delocalization” technique used by writers like Mohsin Hamid, Anna Burns, and Dave Eggers. I will read from a work-in-progress called “I couldn't come up with a title for this story.” The unnamed narrator of the story is a cross between Holden Caulfield (J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*) and Alexander Portnoy (Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*) who tries to tell his story but keeps failing will read from a work of fiction that he is working on called “I couldn't come up with a title for this story.” The unnamed narrator of the story is a cross between Holden Caulfield (J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*) and Alexander Portnoy (Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*) who tries to tell his story but keeps failing.

FARAH: Journaling to get to know a character, what motivates the person, why he/she behaves the way they do helps to stay in the scene and with the character instead of writing from the perspective of the critic.

Farah will Read “Patches”, a micro-essay

**Question #4: How has your response to self-censorship shifted over the course of your career?** Addressing this question will allow panelists to trace their evolution and growth as a writer in response to criticism of their work

SONIAH: As I mentioned above, the backlash to my short story Papa’s Girl was the litmus test for me. As a result, I began to fearlessly write about sexuality and traditionally ‘taboo’ subjects such as homosexuality.

SEHBA: I haven’t shifted much. Back in 2002, several mainstream publishers were interested in *Black Wings*, but they wanted me to add more 9/11 and Islam into the text. I couldn’t do that then, just as I couldn’t do that now. I don’t write in response to the market. I have to be honest with myself to have integrity as a writer.

MUSHTAQ: I think I am becoming more and more aware of the ways censorship works, and in my work, I try to understand the reasons that lead to self-censorship and, of course, then one tries to develop strategies to negotiate censorship.