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Aamer Hussein's *The Cloud Messenger: A Migratory Bird's Co-Existence in a Multicultural World*



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Abstract: *This article explores the transcultural contact zone in Aamer Hussein's fiction through Pratt's concept of autoethnography in the cultural contact zone. Hussein presents residents of a multicultural world, coexisting with people of diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds. The social positioning of his characters as a minority cultural group has been theorized through Kymlika's description of social classes. Hussein portrays the identity issues of his characters in the multicultural, cosmopolitan world. His characters develop connections with their current habitus and their previous home to discover ways to translate their cultural identity to their mainstream society. Cultural traits, modes of life, and the nature of cross-cultural relationships of the characters have been explored through common grounds proposed by Pratt and Krupat in their theories of ethnography and ethnocentrism respectively.*

Key Words: Multiculturalism, Contact Zone, Ethnocriticism, Autoethnography, Pakistani Literature in English

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Introduction: Hussein is an Author of Cultural Contact Zone

Aamer Hussein is a multicultural, polyglot, Pakistani Anglophone fiction writer. He was born in Karachi but spent his early childhood both in Pakistan and India. His childhood provided him bilingual brought-up. He migrated to England in his teenage and settled in London. South Asian Diaspora Arts

Archive explains Hussein's multicultural position: "Being culturally inquisitive by nature, it was not hard for Hussein to find his feet in the multicultural metropolis. He embraced three vividly different cultural contexts, the upper-class Karachi of his parents, the feudal India of his maternal grandparents and his own adopted London. His teens were with Iranians, Greeks, Arabs, Vietnamese" (n.d., p.1). He studied Persian,

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Urdu, and History at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Later, he started teaching Urdu at SOAS Language Centre. His educational field kept him closely associated with the art and culture of Pakistan through Urdu and Persian literature. He is associated with English Department at Queen Mary College (London), the Institute of English Studies at the School of Advanced Study, Imperial College London, and the University of Southampton. His reviews have been published in the *Literary Review*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The New Statesman*, and he is a regular reviewer for *The Independent* now. He occasionally writes essays for *Tehelka*, an Indian Magazine. Alongside, he is a trustee of the magazine of international contemporary writings *Wasafiri*. His ties with multiple institutions and his writings for multiple magazines make his words accessible to diverse readers of multiethnic backgrounds. His investment of time and intellectual endeavours in pushing oriental literature to the limelight through his lectures and scholarly discussions in Western academia not only introduces him as a dweller of multiple lands but introduces his culture as well to those who are unaware of its intricacies. He, like his characters, is a traveller to multiple countries. Every year he pays a visit to Pakistan, and he explains his purpose: "On my frequent travels to Pakistan I'm usually invited to speak at universities. The discussion often takes on an academic tone, revolving around diasporic issues and the international reputations of Pakistani English writers" (Dawn, 2019). He spends every winter in Asia and the rest of his days in England (Insomnia, 2007, p.134).

Literature Review

Every biographical note on Hussein declares him a resident of both London and Karachi, without missing either of the two. He describes himself as a Karachi-born Londoner (Shamsie, 2019) acknowledging the

bilingual position of every Pakistani in one of his columns for Dawn newspaper (Dawn, 2019). His positionality at cultural crossroads substantiates his dwelling to be dual, and he constantly moves between them like a migratory bird. Transnationalism denotes the repeated movement of immigrants between their homeland and their host land, and the contexts and activities that they practice across their national borders. It replaces the older idea of permanent settlement in a new land with temporary settlement and circular movement to and from the origin and destination. Responding to a question about his caste, Hussein responds:

My ancestors migrated to Sindh via Delhi and the Deccan in the era of the East India Company settled in Shikarpur and married into Sindhi and Baloch families, but though assimilated, were generically termed Mughal. Several of my relatives speak Sindhi as a native language. I can't (Dawn, 2019).

He is fluent in Urdu, English, Persian, Spanish, French, Italian, and Hindi reflecting his vast understanding of multilingual people and their cultures and enabling him to fuse various cultural horizons. He holds a multicultural social and literary circle. Acknowledgement sections of his books are studded with Italian, English, French, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Pakistani names. He inherited literature and art forms from his maternal family. His mother, Sabeeha Ahmed Hussein was an amateur singer. Aamer also attended lessons on classical singing in early childhood. He has been fluent in English since childhood and feels indebted to his mother for teaching him the Urdu language, the source of his inspiration for pursuing translations of literary works into English (Hussein 2014, p.125). Hussein's polyglot personality makes his move to different societies with a good understanding of their lifestyle, ideology, and rationalism.

Migration is a source of self-quest for Hussein. His mother, Sabeeha A. Hussein,

was from India and she used to spend summers in India with her parents. She had a "brief longing for rain in arid Karachi" (Shamsie, 2007), therefore, whenever she missed the rainy season, she used to visit her Indian home to enjoy rain after her marriage with a Karachi-based man. Thus, Hussein's childhood period was spent in both Karachi and India. Hussein pens down his mother's longing in Mehran's story in *The Cloud Messenger* (2011). Mehran's mother is also Indian by birth with whom he goes to meet his maternal family every summer in India. Mehran's mother and he himself missed the rain in dry Karachi. Hussein and his characters keep exploring life and its opportunities wherever available. Hussein is a constant traveller. His movement and migrancy are close to Brah's interpretation of global migrancy. The concept of diaspora offers a different way of conceptualizing the global mobilities today that involve crossing economic, political, cultural and psychical borders, redefining the questions of homing and belonging (Brah 1996. p. 45).

Migration, for Hussein, is the same transition which changed his social, cultural, economic, and physical outlook. It has brought him a never-ending loss of connection with his past. Loss of home in the process of dislocation is one of the most common problems faced by diaspora people. Hussein's sensibility of migration, however, dates to the partition of the sub-continent. His mother being an Indian, could not freely meet her Indian family after Partition, especially after the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. Hussein, being very close to his mother and paternal family, felt the pain of loss of connection with the Indian home. English language and culture remained familiar to him since his early childhood through books and so he spoke English as his first language. His family "left behind the place [Pakistan] and happily settled in another one, only to rediscover that the old, left behind, the place had become so remote

that there was no access to it" (Shamsie, 2007). So, for Hussein, England is the place of discovering his identity afresh and he rediscovers himself through the literature of his forefathers. His ambivalence towards his native land and the host country remained hazy until he came across an incident, he narrates in one of his interviews:

As an urban Karachiite who has spent [the] adult years in England, I'd never acquired a strong sense of belonging to a region, but the evening brought back my father's tales and memories of his ancestral region and his love for its poetry. I sat in the garden later, talking to a group that had stayed on to continue the conversation, with two ajraks draped around my shoulders in the evening breeze, when a man from Shikarpur came up and told me he knew my extended family there. I knew that this was a land that would always lay claim to me, its prodigal son, too. (Dawn, 2019)

For Hussein, culture, people, and literature are the basis of connection with his native land. He confesses the duplicity of Western society toward immigrants and refugees from third-world countries, for whom European capital cities are "both harbours and refuges for migrants and refugees and also hostile places" (Shamsie, 2007). The same applies in London as well. Hussein, belonging to a privileged social class, does not have to face the antagonistic side of the metropolis. But his sensitivity as an author perceives the hard realities stretched around. He is "a product of modern Asia, with its partition and post-national squabbles, and not a child of Empire or English literature" (Hussein 2002, p. viii). He acknowledges being "a Pakistani writer" (Hussein 2002, p. ix) in terms of his association with issues of history, migration, and literature. He views literature as his home that is his source of recognition in both Pakistan and England.

Theoretical Framework

Kymlicka argues that the term 'multiculturalism' demands acceptance of cultural diversity. It does not require to outcaste minorities from a state rather the term signifies 'inclusion' and 'pluralism'. He chalks out two patterns of cultural diversity and pluralism in a multiethnic society:

- a) Multination states arise through the absorption of previously autonomous, locality-based cultures into a larger state that makes these people "national minorities" (Kymlicka 1996, p.10)
- b) Polyethnic states arise through individual or familial immigration under a policy of 'Anglo-conformity' (Hussein 1996, p.14)

To understand how minorities play their part in shaping the culture of mainstream society, it is essential to know the nature and specific demands of "multination states and polyethnic states" (Hussein 1996, p.11). For Kymlicka, 'nation' is "a historical community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language or culture" (Kymlicka 1996, p.11). This definition is like that of 'culture' or 'people'. Therefore a country having more than one nation is a multination state, not a nation-state (1996, p.11) and so the minorities are to be called "national minorities" (Hussein 1996, p.11). The incorporation of these minorities, however, can be voluntary or involuntary to formulate a multination state. For example, in America, Chicanos, Native Americans, Hawaiians and various other Pacific Islanders make it a multination state. These minority groups do not try to leave the country though Native American tribes are acknowledged as "domestic dependent nations" (Hussein 1996, p. 12), with their own government, treaty rights and courts. Canada's historical development shows the incorporation of English, French and Aborigines to make it a state. Finland, Belgium, and Switzerland are

also some of the European multination states. A common feature of all allegiance groups within multination states historically proves that they always try to get more political and cultural autonomy keeping themselves intact with the federal governing body of their country.

Massive immigration to a country also causes cultural pluralism. Currently, the United States, Canada and Australia are the three major countries where more than half of the world's legal immigration goes (Hussein 1996, p.14). These immigrants largely migrate for the economic uplift of their lives, the phenomenon generally referred to as the "New World phenomenon" (Hussein 1996, p.17). There is a minor level of migration as well that generates polyethnicity. Movement of refugees to a new place (e.g., Afghan refugees in Pakistan) and settlement of 'guest-workers' (e.g., Turkish guest-workers in Germany) bring vital cultural changes to the host society through their active participation in a new land. Prior to the 1960s, the model of 'Anglo-conformity' was in practice in these countries that required total assimilation to the host culture by the immigrants. However, in the 1970s, metaphors like 'melting pot' in America and 'ethnic mosaic' in Canada became so popular that "under pressure from immigrant groups, all three countries rejected the assimilationist model, and adopted a more tolerant model that allows and encourages immigrants to maintain various aspects of their ethnic heritage" (Hussein 1996, p.14). Even then there are certain protocols of the 'Naturalization Process' that an immigrant individual or family must follow:

- i. Learning and use of the language of the dominant culture
- ii. Sound knowledge of the history, culture, norms, and traditions of the host-land
- iii. Complete submission to the law of the country

- iv. Contribution to the economic and political life of the country through personal skills, time, money, and any other means
- v. Voluntary association with the host land through a legal oath-taking process
- vi. A pledge of staying loyal to the country through thick and thin

Fulfilment of all protocols with a little variation in every polyethnic state is essential for every immigrant. Kymlicka states that their distinctness shows basically in their family life and in voluntary relationships though they still interact with the public institutions of the dominant culture/s and speak the dominant language/s (Kymlicka 1996, p.14). In case of rejection of assimilation to the mainstream culture, national minorities continue their claims of equality of social and political status. On the other hand, ethnic/immigrant minorities cannot demand equality in case of this rejection. This shows that there is a huge gap between a national minority and an ethnic minority in the real sense in those countries where people from the third world move for economic prosperity and better living conditions. However, in countries where the British established its colonies, the colonizers did not see themselves as ethnic minority rather "aimed to reproduce their original society in a new land ... to create an institutionally complete society" (Hussein 1996, p.15). Kymlicka suggests that the same model of the British colonies can be adopted in polyethnic countries as well to facilitate the minorities "in terms of settlement, language rights, and the creation of new political units" (Kymlicka 1996, p.15). To deal with such a situation, countries like Canada have developed laws for 'multicultural society' but the term 'multicultural' is problematic. It equates national minorities with immigrant ethnic minorities. National minorities consider themselves the claimants of their land and do not like their equation

with any immigrant minority, whom, they fear, the policy may declare a 'national minority'. Both minorities, in actuality, behave entirely differently towards the dominant culture. Anglo-conformity under legal pressure makes them distinct from each other. So, Kymlicka suggests that the two terms, 'multination' and 'polyethnic' are less confusing and describe two different modes of socio-political life of minorities vividly.

The concept of 'multiculturalism' requires an understanding of the term 'culture' first. For Parhi, culture is a complex entirety which includes epistemology, belief system, art and morals, law and customs and other habits and capabilities, that humans acquire as members of a society (Hussein 1996, p.39). Williams considers culture an indicator of "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general" (Williams 1996, p.52). Alexander, Thompson, and Edlles view culture as socially transmitted symbolic and learned patterns of human society, (Alexander, 2016, p.5). These are all broad and over-generalized definitions of a highly complex term as far as its use in various fields of life is concerned. Kymlicka's definition of 'culture' is distinctive from a conventional view of the term. For him, culture is one and the same as 'a nation' or 'a people' belonging to an "international community, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and history" (Kymlicka 1996, p.18). His definition is different from its conventional perception. Similarly, to be a multicultural state, "its members either belong to different nations (a multination state) or have emigrated from different nations (a polyethnic state)" (Hussein 1996, p.18). Thus, multiculturalism arises from national and ethnic differences in a country. Kymlicka clarifies that he does not reject the existence and working of all other types of cultural groups, such as gays, lesbians, communists, atheists, women, or any other cultural group. He names these groups as

"new social movements – associations of gays, women, the poor, the disabled – who have been marginalized within their own national society or ethnic group" (Kymlicka 1996, p.19). He observes that "accommodating ethnic and national differences is only part of a larger struggle to make a more tolerant and inclusive democracy" (Hussein 1996, p.19).

Analysis: Cultural Contact Zone in Hussein's *The Cloud Messenger* (2011)

The cultural contact zone in Hussein's stories presents a world of individuals who celebrate their multicultural identities in the diaspora. His texts, autoethnographic in temper, display selective collaboration with the host society, and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis to suit his themes, characters, and language to create self-representations. His audience is both metropolitan and his own Pakistani community. His bilingual and sometimes multilingual texts pave the way for marginalized characters of immigrant families to enter mainstream society through their literature. His texts are a blend of English and Urdu literary traditions with certain experiments to create novelty in style. His stories present the life of immigrants coexisting with mainstream society, busy in their familial, social, and professional lives. Hussein writes,

I'd always felt good narrative should have the intensity of fiction, and the best stories carried the electric charge of lived experience ... though every word I write here is true as memory can make it, I'm merely chasing the flickering light. My friend Huma, who's spent time in Beijing tells me the Chinese have an evocative name of images captured on film: Electric Shadows (*Hussein* 2002, p. iv).

The Cloud Messenger (2011) is the story of a culturally inquisitive person Mehran, a dweller of multiple places simultaneously. He left his birthplace, Karachi, early in his teenage and lives most of his life in London, though he travels across Asia and Europe

frequently. His father a "permanent expatriate, born in Karachi and grown up in many other places" (p.22) connects his children with the world through art and literature by introducing different art forms to Mehran such as ballet and pantomime and tells stories of London to his daughter. His mother is an amateur singer and sings Faiz, Ghalib, or Rani Roopmati's poems other than songs on rain. She tells her children a story of a displaced man "who asked a cloud to carry messages to his beloved in the city he had left behind, describing the route and the cities over which the cloud would travel" (p.25). Rain, in this novel, has been used as a metaphor for homing. Sabah, Mehran's eldest sister is fond of reading popular British children's fiction by Enid Blyton. Mehran, after listening to his father's reveries of his days in London and reading Blyton's adventurous stories, starts fantasizing about life in London. He, in his teenage, goes to England for education. Later starts exporting rice to Middle Eastern countries for which he travels extensively to multiple countries. His travelling makes him, what Kymlicka calls a 'multicultural citizen' of the world for whom it was hard to imagine him without his own city (Karachi), yet when in Karachi, "he was always dreaming of other places" (p. 23). A multicultural state or a society implies the existence of various distinct cultural and ethnic groups considered politically relevant, and society promoting it as a policy matter. Mehran's memoirs as a young student in London are based on his multicultural life with multiethnic friendships and his connection with Pakistan through Urdu literature. Mehran's parents are the first diaspora generation from Pakistan who intermittently visit home to settle property issues or to meet friends and family. His sisters are knotted with Indian and English boys. In recollecting his memories of 1979 Mehran notes down major political and social changes in the world such as the "rise of Khomeini, and the hanging of Bhutto,

Thatcher's success in the election, and Zia's military coup" (pp.59-60). Mehran analyzes major Urdu and Persian literary works in his Urdu and Persian literature classes. His understanding of "Wali and Quli and Sauda and Ghalib" (p.61) Sa'adi, Rumi, Hafez and Qabus, the disciplines of Persian syntactic order, nuances of translation, and aspects of Persian literary canon expand his understanding of various literary traditions in a comparative mode.

The novel provides an insight into characters who are residents of multiple lands and friends of multiethnic people. Marco, like Mehran, is a wandering soul and an unsatisfied, unsettled resident of the cosmopolitan world. He claims of receiving selfish love and short-term friendships and is still in search of true companionship and a permanent habitus. Mehran is like a migratory bird that does not belong to a single place. He wants to move in life without confinements and bonds as "too much affection [is burdensome] leading to dependency" (p.71). Mehran avoids both dependencies as well as holding any bonds. Marco forbids him to proceed with his relationship with Riccarda as he notices Mehran's inclination towards much older Riccarda, who is married too. Mehran expands his mental and social horizons through the cultures he comes into contact with. He develops new tastes in food and culture through Riccarda. Marco and Mehran are in contact through letters whenever they are away from each other. Mehran goes to Marco, in Italy, to celebrate his graduation where he got an invitation from Riccarda to visit her in Rome. He plans to go to India to pursue his research. He visits multiple places in India and this trip reconnects him with his past by discovering his ancestral writer, Rafi Rangeela – colourful Rafi (p. 91), who used to write his stories in a popular Indian journal *Sarosh*. Rafi's uncle is Mehran's literary connection with his past, his family land and his culture. He identifies himself as a legacy

of his ancestral literary figures. The characters go on visiting their roots while moving persistently on their well-thought-of routes in the multicultural world.

The characters in the novel exhibit a multi-hued perspective of belonging and home. The protagonist Mehran's character gets mature as he sets his sails to explore his hidden talent as an author. After getting back to England, the jobless Mehran spends most of his time reading modern English writers such as Ibsen or Chekhov, Eugene O' Neill or Tennessee Williams. His unstable economic conditions turn his moods into swings and his relationship with Marco also gets cold. Being a considerate friend, Marco forbids Mehran to waste his talent in non-creative activities and start his career as an independent writer. Five years later, Mehran comes across Marvi, a twenty-eight years old "mother of infant twins and married unhappily" (p. 121) besides being an independent writer. She has a lot of experience of dislocation and relocation since childhood. Mehran is envious of her sense of belonging: she clings to it going back annually to Karachi and sometimes more often, or the small feudal town in Sindh where she lived her childhood summers with loving maternal grandparents (p. 122). Both of these characters become nostalgic for Karachi, their childhood city but the concept of belonging for them is different. Marvi wants to remain connected with the land of her childhood. Her source of belonging is the territory, the land itself, whereas Mehran prefers to remain connected with the people through literature only. Belonging is an enigma to the characters of this novel. After his visits to India, Mehran realizes that "he doesn't belong anywhere; he's no longer in thrall to the places of his past" (p.123). Mehran starts working with Marvi on her manuscript, which was accepted by a university for publication. One day, when Marvi asks what they are to each other, he replies with silence. They are unable to tag a

name to their relationship. He tried to help her but their relationship begins to strangle him. Mehran returns to his parents' house in St. John Woods to take a break from all the fighting, the crying, and the heartbreak. Mehran feels unable to disconnect from Marvi, as he is unable to stay disconnected from Marco, Riccarda, his parents, or above all his native country Pakistan. "When he tries to escape [Marvi], he feels drained, empty; it takes him days to refill himself" (p.128). He can stay away from her or from any of his associations for a short period "[b]ut then his own ambivalent needs, his loneliness, draws him back" (p.129). This pulls and push in his decisions and actions is a particular feature of diaspora life. His life in that rainless place of his birth was filled with a longing for rainy places. But now that he lives in a city where it rains all year, he dreams of the desert and the sea, and the smell of warm raindrops on wet earth (p 137). The novel ends with Mehran's confessions of being trapped like "the peacock who had only wanted to escape captivity when he heard the rainfall, smelled the earth's longing, listened to his playmates' cries" (p.137). He is remorseful about his loss of land and loss of identity. He has nowhere to send his messages to because his home is no more his own home. He is an alien resident of a rainless place. He has built up a net of words and images in lieu of a home (p. 137). Displacement is a bleak tragic situation for Mehran and all other characters who feel out

of place and do not associate themselves with some new and definite place in the distant lands resulting in an identity crisis.

Conclusion

The concept of cultural co-existence is the dominant shade of Hussein's text that weaves the elements of memory, nostalgia, history, ethnography, roots, reclamation of history, political insight of 'home' and a journey of self-quest of his anxiogenic characters. But they are not trapped in the past at all. They live happily in their present cultural habitus, i.e. England. Their colonial backgrounds, family structures, set of values and traditions do not hamper their way to becoming responsible citizens of a multicultural society. Hussein's characters are educated and empowered individuals who negotiate with mainstream society to seek a secure social and professional life. His stories, autoethnographic in nature, have strong autobiographical currents, openness to multicultural relationships and ambivalence towards identity markers of the past home and the present host society. They keep their roots dear to them, owning them completely, but do not hesitate to find a route for themselves in the First World as active agents of change, translating their cultural history to their new socio-cultural circles at their present habitus.

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