

REVIEW

# The good, the bad and the ugly

■ Mohsin Hamid oscillates between the dangerous and pluralistic aspects of Pakistan in his new book

BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI

The central characters in Mohsin Hamid's novels are all outsiders, caught on the ever-shifting margins of class, values and national identity — caught between their ambitions and memories, aspirations and resentments, and finding the lines between the personal and the political, the private and the public continually blurred.

*Moth Smoke* used the tale of a romantic triangle to explore the divisions racking Pakistan. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* took the form of a monologue delivered by a young Princeton-educated Pakistani, whose life and sense of self are rocked by the September 11 terrorist attacks. And *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* recounted the journey of an unnamed hero, who leaves an impoverished village in an unnamed country, moves to a big city and makes and loses a fortune.

In his erratic but often compelling new collection of essays, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, Hamid addresses many of these themes, as well as themes of migration, exile and the relationship between the East and West that Salman Rushdie addressed in *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*.

When he was younger, Hamid recalls, he thought of himself as being a migrant and being foreign; "things that made me different, an outsider". In today's globalised world, subject to accelerating change and flux, he says, he now thinks of his experiences as "increasingly universal".

Hamid writes about his peregrinations, Pakistan's fraught relationship with the West in the post-September 11 era, and the frightening, sometimes absurd challenges of daily life there. He writes about rocking

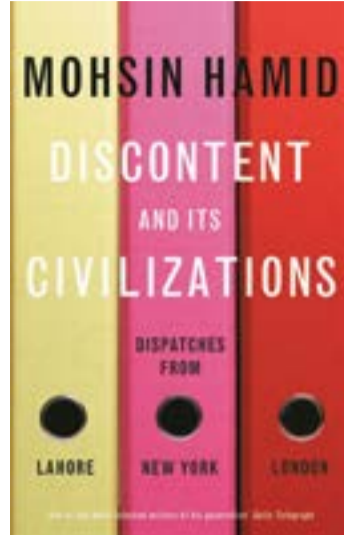
to move back to Pakistan with his wife and daughter, after two decades of living in London and New York, and being reintroduced "to a multigenerational daily existence", occupying an apartment above his parents' house in Lahore; "three generations at one address, as was the case when I was a child". He also writes about the frustrations and anxieties of living there, from unreliable internet service to worrying about getting a haircut because his barber is in Main Market — four kilometres from Moon Market, where two bombs killed 42 people and injured 135 in 2009.

## Some good, some not

The new volume, which includes some pieces that originally appeared in *The New York Times*, lacks the layered complexities of Hamid's novels, which employ narrative frames and subtle inflections of voice to create added tension and ambiguity. Its strongest entries, however, reflect the same subtleties of thought, laid down in his lapidary, crystalline prose.

The sections on art and writing are mostly predictable musings about whether characters ought to be likeable or not, and the pleasures of rereading favourite short books. It's the chapters about Hamid's life and his meditations on Pakistan's tumultuous recent history that command attention, and call out for a volume of their own.

Like so many characters in his fiction, Hamid seems to be of two minds about many things, especially the country of his birth. One moment he laments the hazards of life in Pakistan, where death can come in the form of militant attacks and US drone strikes, and where one can be killed for "being liberal, for being mystical, for being in politics, the army or the police, or for sim-



ply being in the wrong place at the wrong time".

At the same time, Hamid says he's made "an attempt at optimism", so fervent is his belief that "Pakistan is a test bed for pluralism on a globalising planet that desperately needs more pluralism". Although he writes that Pakistanis have been their "own worst enemies", he's never believed the role the country "plays as a villain on news shows".

"The Pakistan I knew was the out-of-character Pakistan, Pakistan without its make-up and plastic fangs, a working actor with worn-out shoes, a close family and a hearty laugh."

Despite its inclusion on lists of failing states, Pakistan is "not a basket case", he says, arguing



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Mohsin Hamid

that "it has well-established political parties, noisy private media, and an independent-minded supreme court".

## Pakistan-US ties

When it comes to Pakistan's relationship with the US, Hamid is blunt. He writes that the alliance between the US and the Pakistan military (comprising mutual need, suspicion and financial dependence) remains "a relationship between parties viewing one another through gun sights; each side blames the other for putting its citizens in grave danger, and each is correct to do so".

In what is perhaps the volume's most impassioned piece, he contends that US drone strikes in Pakistan have had a deeply pernicious effect, facilitating "the refusal of the Pakistani state and Pakistani society to do more to confront the problem of extremists who threaten Pakistanis and non-Pakistanis alike".

The attacks, he adds, also fuel the conspiracy theories that thrive in Pakistan — like "the claim that flying robots from an alien power regularly strike down from the skies and kill Pakistani citizens". In the US, such a claim would be "science fiction or paranoid survivor cultism of the furthest fringe-dwelling kind. In Pakistan, it is real. And constantly, wrenchingly, in the news".

— NYT



Rex Features

## From classic miniatures to massive installations

Shahzia Sikander leads the way in exploring art as a form of narrative

BY TANIA BHATTACHARYA  
Staff Writer

Shahzia Sikander is a stalwart. The Pakistani artist, a force of creativity and technical genius, is arguably the country's first to have garnered worldwide acclaim for her work, and paved the way for future artists to attract global attention. And yet, she seems to be routinely erased from narratives on contemporary art from the country.

Faisal Devji, Director of the Asian Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, wrote in *Newsweek Pakistan* last year of books by Iftikhar Dadi and Virginia Whiles that barely mention Sikander's contributions. Others critique her for not engaging with her community or pandering to Western tastes.

Understandably, she finds this approach to her work disturbing. "The freedom of the artist is what allows them to create their own worlds," Sikander tells *GN Focus*. "Contemporaneity is about remaining relevant by challenging the status quo, not about holding on to positions of power."

But perhaps this is changing. Sikander attended the Lahore Literary Festival last year — the first formal invitation she has



Courtesy of Studio Sikander

received for an event of this kind in Pakistan — and is hopeful that with new talent, the country's cultural scene will break away from its conservative moulds.

## A class apart

Born in Lahore, Sikander entered the National College of Arts (NCA) in 1987 and took to miniature painting when it wasn't that popular. "What others saw as an enslavement to craft and technique, I saw as a path for dialogue," she says.

While her interests vary, she aims to create new forms of discussion and dialogue. "In *The world is yours, the world is Mine*, I was interested in commenting on how history is constructed and [that the person who] gets to tell the story ends up defining history," says Sikander.



## Art in motion

■ *Parallax* by Shahzia Sikander is a critically acclaimed immersive multimedia artwork

"Such narratives rarely tell everyday stories. I juxtaposed hip hop and Indo-Persian miniature painting in this context because they are modes of storytelling and a means of engaging with personal histories."

Sikander, 45, is an ideal example of an artist who has set her art in motion over time. Beginning with miniatures, she made her way through large-scale artworks and murals to ultimately enter the realm of immersive multimedia installations that are intimidating in terms of size, intensity, depth, focus and imagination. Not only did she question the scope and ability of miniature painting and contemporised it in a way that gave the form a fresh lease of life, she tore down all cultural and political boundaries to establish its relevance

and how deeply rooted it is in culture and civilisation.

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* — in which he talks about various forms of cultural collision — had a deep impact on her work, especially as she shifted scales. Drawing from the films of Satyajit Ray, Michelangelo Antonioni and Godard, light also plays a very important role in her productions, and is often a narrative in itself.

## Journey to success

In 1991, Sikander wrote a thesis outlining the possibility of experimentation in miniature painting, for which she received the Haji Sharif award for excellence in miniature painting from NCA. After graduating, she flew to Washington D.C. to install some of her work in the Pakistani embassy, and

decided to stay in the US. In 1995, she enrolled in the Rhode Island School of Design for an MFA, and attended the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston two years later. During this time she cultivated a deep interest in wall and floor drawings, and paper was her medium of expression. She attended the prestigious Whitney Biennial in 1997, and there has been no looking back.

Sikander's experiments with various formats and media have earned her several awards, including the inaugural Medal for Art by the US State Department in 2012. Less than two weeks ago, she received the Asia Society Award for Contributions to Contemporary Art at Art Basel Hong Kong.

While *Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and*

## SMALL IS BIG Modern miniaturists

A look at other Pakistani miniature artists:

■ Imran Qureshi addresses issues of violence in his large-scale miniatures, and site-specific installations.

■ While Sara Khan sticks to the genre's features of precision and delicacy, she often experiments with the medium itself. In 2011, she presented her version of miniatures drawn on walnut shells and a necklace during an exhibition in Dubai.

■ Mohammad Zeeshan created a series in 2009 called *Dying Miniatures*, in which he replaced the traditional smooth *waasli* paper with coarse sandpaper.

■ Rashid Rana first used digital photomontage in miniatures in 2002. His art appears deliberately pixelated, to reflect the meticulously painted areas in detail.

— T.B.

*Islamic Art* — a modern look at the American heiress' enviable Islamic art collection — with works displayed by eight modern artists including Sikander is open until June 7 at the Honolulu Museum of Art, coming up is an exhibit at Guggenheim Bilbao that opens on July 17. Sikander will also participate in the Performa Biennial in New York in November. ■