**[Publishing Pakistani fiction](https://www.dawn.com/news/1706529/publishing-pakistani-fiction)**

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IF you happen to be a Pakistani writer, particularly a writer of fiction, you are out of luck. As a recent discussion I had on the topic with several other Pakistani authors (young and old) revealed, the trade embargo between India and Pakistan has been cruellest to Pakistani writers of fiction. I talk of fiction writers because unlike journalists and authors of non-fiction, who can find outlets in magazines and newspapers, a fiction writer by and large relies on a publisher to take their work and bring it to the world. Save for some small presses, there aren’t really any publishers of Pakistani fiction, and so Pakistani fiction in English has few means of finding an audience, at least not in Pakistan.

Following the attack on Salman Rushdie, I listened in on a conversation among the leaders of five of the largest publishing houses in the world. The group, heads nodding in solemnity, expressed their concern that events like the attack stymie the development of literature in English in countries like Pakistan. I listened and could not help but think that it is even easier to kill Pakistani fiction in English if you simply have no one to publish it. At least, that is the experience of many would-be authors in the country.

There is a way around this stifling of stories. The pity is that, like so many other things in Pakistan, it is largely available to those who belong to the Pakistani elites. A number of them might consist of the sons and daughters of various rich families who can afford to send them abroad to get a foreign degree stamped on their résumés. Since many of them have been doing this for generations, the forefathers’ time at a prestigious university provides a ‘legacy’ seat to the grandson, in a departure from the meritocracy that Western institutions are rumoured to be.

These sons or daughters might discover their love of fiction after attending the workshops of famous authors like Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe and the list goes on. It is also at these workshops that they might connect with literary agents. Many, I have learned from interviews, have sold their first books to publishers before they have even graduated.

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For many of these writers, the action in their stories takes place in air-conditioned drawing rooms, and if it steps outside, into the 45 degrees Celsius heat, it immediately reveals itself as inauthentic. The plebian protagonists they create have allegorical names like ‘Chandi’ for a sweeper woman or Turbo for a driver. That, it seems, is the purpose of poor people in their creations, mere conveyances for abstract ideas rather than actual characters. I suppose it is accurate because Pakistani elites who do not write fiction in English are all right with it too, even those Pakistani writers of fiction who must aim at a white audience if they are going to get published.

It seems Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, who lives in Lahore and whose novel Exit West grossed millions in worldwide sales, has to do that. Exit West tells the story of a couple who are not explicitly identified as Pakistani and whose refugee experience involves a magical portal that transports them to various places. The realm of fiction permits Hamid to take such liberties, but it also makes the experience of being a refugee palatable to rich, white and Western audiences, particularly those who are turned off by the dread and horror of news stories around statelessness and refugeehood.

Hamid’s latest novel The Last White Man attempts to do the same with the issue of race, featuring as protagonist a white man who has suddenly become brown overnight. If Exit West masterfully persuades white readers to consider the experience of being a refugee, Last White Man prioritises the interiority of the white man who has undergone this baffling change. The characters all around the ex-white man are also white; how brown or black people see the transformation is at best a tangential issue.

Fiction, it appears, must (prudentially) be geared towards those who are willing to and have the money to pay for novels. If noted writers must do this, imagine the plight of everyone else.

If the trade embargo on books cannot be lifted, there are other things that this new government can do. First among them would be to provide incentives for publishing houses interested in publishing Pakistani fiction writing in English. Second, incentives should be provided for holding frequent and diverse literary events at which the work of Pakistani authors in English is presented. Third, efforts should be made to send Pakistani writers abroad for literary conferences and programmes so that they may be visible to the world. When the CIA wanted to spread the American version of the truth around the world, it did not convene a task force; instead, it set up a magazine known as The Paris Review. The CIA is not an organisation that should ever be copied, but the example does reveal the power of culture export when it is free of censorship and less than obvious.

The emphasis on writing in English is not because Urdu or the regional languages are not important. The Urdu press has never relied on having its books imported from India, where the world’s large publishing companies have offices. It is the Urdu press that is already an integral part of Pakistan’s cultural narratives, its stories made into movies and television dramas. It would be wonderful if Pakistani writing in English could enjoy even a fraction of the success and ubiquity enjoyed by writing in Urdu.

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*Published in Dawn, August 24th, 2022*