Genres, Languages, Voices:
Rukhsana Ahmad in Conversation with Maryam Mirza

Maryam Mirza
University of Bonn

Born and raised in Karachi, the highly acclaimed fiction writer, playwright and translator Rukhsana Ahmad moved to London in the early 1970s. She co-founded Kali Theatre Company and was also a founding chair and trustee of the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive (SADAA). In addition to a collection of short stories *The Gatekeeper’s Wife and Other Stories* (2014), and the novel *The Hope Chest* (1996), Rukhsana Ahmad has written numerous plays, including the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize nominee *Song for a Sanctuary* (1990), the Susan Smith Blackburn International Prize finalist *River on Fire* (2000-2001) and *Mistaken: Annie Besant in India* (2007-2008), which toured the UK and India. She has also adapted several novels and short stories into plays, such as Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* and Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s “Kali Shalwar”. Her original screenplays include *Cassandra and the Viaduct* (1996) and *The Errant Gene* (2002). *We Sinful Women*, Rukhsana Ahmad’s groundbreaking translation of Urdu poetry by Pakistani women, was published in 1991; she has also translated *Dastak Naa Do*, an Urdu novel by Fatima Altaf, published under the title *The One Who Did Not Ask* (1993). Here she is discussing her prolific and multifaceted creative life with Maryam Mirza.

Maryam Mirza: Ms. Ahmad, who/what would you say are your main literary influences?

Rukhsana Ahmad: I’m afraid it’s difficult to be precise about what these might be. I started reading fiction at a very young age in both English and Urdu without much supervision and have loved innumerable books at different stages of my development. Some were great, some mediocre and some forgettable. I read more fiction than non-fiction until I became a
full time student of English literature at Karachi University. At that point, my reading in Urdu began to slip but I had, by then, learnt to love Manto, Krishen Chander and Ismat Chughtai’s work; I discovered Intizar Hussain, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Altaf Fatima and Ghulam Abbas; I was charmed by Flaubert and Maupassant and totally in awe of Dostoyevsky. Favourites amongst English authors were George Elliot, Jane Austen, Henry James, Jean Rhys and Virginia Woolf. I still love George Elliot and Henry James though, in recent years, contemporaries have held me in thrall. One fears imitation, but I’d like to think I’ve learnt a little from all the disparate but accomplished writers whose work I’ve admired and loved over the years: Toni Morrison, Marilyn Robinson, Michael Ondaatje, Coetzee and the inimitable Marquez.

Maryam Mirza: Your extensive body of work is a testament to the ease with which you move from one genre to another: you have written numerous short stories, a novel as well as plays (both original and adaptations) for the stage and radio. How would you describe your experience of working in multiple genres? Do you have a preference?

Rukhsana Ahmad: It’s been a privilege to be able to move between various genres and I’ve loved the shape-shifting that it enables. Each has its own particular challenges and rewards. I love the immediacy of theatre and its collaborative nature, the total freedom of working on a piece of fiction and the generous canvas a film script or a radio production offers. The constraints of each discipline require a different kind of creative energy and I do enjoy the tension induced by the effort to observe its formal strictures and maximise its strengths. I suspect I am happiest working on fiction but most confident with theatre writing. I also find film scripts an exciting area of work at the moment as they demand a stronger visual awareness and a careful commitment to movement/action alongside the reliance on sound and the use of words. As a writer you are always learning and growing with your work, which keeps it all fresh and exciting.

Maryam Mirza: I was wondering about your relationship with Urdu literature as a diasporic writer and translator based in the UK.

Rukhsana Ahmad: I always loved Urdu literature and read a number of books at a precocious age since I hung out with older cousins and siblings. Bait-baazi was a favourite pastime (this parlour game requires you to quote a couplet starting with the last letter of the last line recited by your preceding competitor. It drew us into poetry reading and a devotion to rhyme and rhythm long before we understood much of the verse itself. It was all traditional poetry. Without TVs, mobiles and social media to distract us, we read extensively... literally, whatever we could find.) However, I never understood the importance of one’s first language and of translations until I came to live in England and realised that our
second and future generations would have very little access to our literature without them. There was hardly any provision for mother tongue teaching and no space for our literature within what was then (and probably remains?) a deeply Eurocentric curriculum. I felt it was important to do what I could, to rectify that; so I organised Urdu classes for Pakistani children (including my own) at our local state school, got my children to watch Hindi films and set about working on translations. I love translating and regret the fact that I now have too little time to expend on them, or even on attending Urdu mushairas [social gatherings where Urdu poetry is read] and literary events, which I seldom missed when I first came.

Maryam Mirza: In the introduction to We Sinful Women, your collection of translated Urdu poems by Pakistani women (published in 1991), you argued that ‘the most innovative, the most radical and the most interesting Urdu poetry of our time is being produced by women and not by male poets’. To what extent do you still believe this to be true?

Rukhsana Ahmad: When you’re younger you do make bold generalisations more blithely than you would in your ‘wiser’ middle years. I suspect this claim was gravely unpopular with the literary establishment of the day, but when I reconsider it, even today, I feel there is some justification for it. The poets I chose, barring one or two, were almost all political at a visceral level. A bold strand of radicalism informs the DNA of the poems that were written to protest against General Zia’s Islamization programme; a couple of them were written at the behest of the Women’s Action Forum. The poets I chose addressed the burning issues of the day, speaking out bravely when several of their male counterparts had maintained a stony silence. Choosing to resist meant they had to be innovative both in terms of content and form. The work speaks for itself and the impact of the collection was remarkable.

Maryam Mirza: You have adapted several novels into radio plays, including Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss, Nadeem Aslam’s Maps for Lost Lovers and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children. What did you find to be the main challenge when adapting a novel such as Midnight’s Children into a play?

Rukhsana Ahmad: Adapting any novel into a dramatic form is a challenge. Novels have a sprawling overpopulated world that throbs with energy, emotions and ideas, often expressed with considerable nuance and subtlety. Swathes of it are lost when you’re confined to a fraction of the original number of words and are expected to reshape the most coherent dramatic aspects of the story in a manner likely to draw the listener into that world instantly. Ideally, what you hope is to distil the essence of the novel’s meaning through its most powerful moments/scenes and to preserve the tone of the original. My producer and I felt we realised both of those goals but we had to make some tough choices and brutal cuts along the way. The first half of the novel is more vivid and has the immediacy of a family
saga, whilst the second morphs into a war fantasy and political melodrama that chugs along a different plane as Saleem is hurled overseas and loses his natal moorings. To connect those two halves of the novel in a meaningful way was perhaps the hardest trick.

Maryam Mirza: In several of your works of fiction, including *The Hope Chest*, and short stories such as “The Gatekeeper’s Wife” and “Through the Rose-Tinted Window”, you present the reader with fascinating and unexpected examples of cross-cultural, interracial encounters between women. Could you talk about your interest in meetings and interactions between women belonging to different cultures.

Rukhsana Ahmad: I find those encounters absolutely fascinating. Subconsciously perhaps, they are at the core of my experience as a woman who came to live in London as an adult and understood, for the first time, in a very direct and personal sense the meaning of the term ‘the Other’. That sense of exposure as the Other has not changed. Though I am reasonably integrated into mainstream culture here, I am sensitive to the grating reality of a growing deep-seated hostility to Muslims or people of Muslim heritage settled here, which has supplanted the racism of the Enoch Powell days. (In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are so divided by class, nation, faith and race that it is hard for them to find common cause with each other.) Her insight, perhaps inaccurately recalled here, seeped into my awareness early on and has lingered, I must admit. Sadly, it holds true even today. It probably explains this recurring trope. The encounters work as a vehicle for exploring the contrasts in women’s lives but also delineate their inability to identify the commonalties in their experience and their often ineffectual support for each other. Occasionally, as in real life, a bridge is built and crossed and women succeed in creating bonds that transcend family, class and faith. Those rare moments bring hope and light into the stories.

Maryam Mirza: In your writings you often also explore the tenuousness and fragility of women’s relationships with each other. I’m thinking of your play *Song for a Sanctuary*, which is set in a shelter for battered women, but also of your portrayal of Reshma and Shehzadi’s cross-class friendship in the novel *The Hope Chest*. How do you conceive of female solidarity?

Rukhsana Ahmad: Female solidarity is possible but it does require a degree of self-awareness and political understanding of what divides us as women. It comes, often too late. Cultural conflict is at the heart of the breach that erupts in violence in *Song for a Sanctuary*, where the residents in the refuge clash with the refuge workers, who are more powerful than them; one of them is definitely hostile to any perceived weakness in the victims. In *River on Fire*, both sisters, raised in different faith cultures by their liberal atheist mother, fight over the death ritual appropriate for her. Here again, the relatively powerful
position of the older sister becomes an underlying trap that prevents the possibility of a dialogue, until it’s too late.

Maryam Mirza: In the Author’s note accompanying your play Mistaken: Anne Besant in India, you mention that you are not ‘a documentarist by nature’ and ‘have, at times, grated against the constraints that a “true” historical play requires’. Would you like to expand upon this.

Rukhsana Ahmad: This is a tricky question to answer. It’s easier to explain if I begin with the fact that I did try my hand at journalism when I started writing but found reporting quite hard. It requires meticulous research and a dogged adherence to facts that often lead to a tedious and ultimately inconclusive story. With fiction and drama you tell stories that excite you, that create an illusion of pattern or a meaning that makes sense of our time on earth. You can invent a character; even one based on a historical personage gives you the space to explore all its potentialities through invented moments of doubt and irresolution, of regrets and joy, passion and hesitation that constitute the fundamentals of his or her journey/lived experience. When I am researching a story or a play, I need simple nuggets of information; the bare facts that will help me build a credible framework for the situation I am recreating and will spark off the trajectory of that character in my imagination. Just to be able to exercise that freedom, I would rather work on a play or a novel that is ‘based on a historical’ incident: a mixture of facts and fiction, rather than one that claims all the weightiness of a ‘purely’ historical document.

Maryam Mirza: The narrator of your short story “Confessions and Lullabies” is an inanimate object, a lace doily. Why did you decide to use this technique.

Rukhsana Ahmad: It was an experiment in the creation of a narrative voice that appears to have the objectivity of an omniscient narrator without all the knowledge you would associate with a true omniscient narrator. It only knows the world it inhabits. Both my characters in the story were too unselfconscious to function well as first person narrators. The lace doily served them both well, I think… as the link between the hard pressed creator and the fragile consumer. Adi’s character and her story were inspired by a book entitled The Lace Makers of Narsapur by Maria Mies, which I was invited to review a few months earlier. The statistics on labour and wages had left me utterly enraged.

Maryam Mirza: You have spoken about how, when writing radio plays, it is important for you to read the dialogue aloud to yourself. Is there any difference in your approach to writing dialogue when working on a novel or a short story?
Rukhsana Ahmad: In fact, I do read my work aloud to myself quite often, whatever the genre. It helps me focus on the material itself, to hear the voices of my characters more clearly and to catch any superfluous words and repetition. One of the dangers of hovering over a text is that you can write the same thought in more ways than one. (A habit that Urdu literature often indulges.) Hearing the dialogue is, of course, doubly important as you do not want all your characters to have the same vocabulary, inflections and patterns of speech. It does need to express who they are.

Maryam Mirza: Please tell us about your current project(s).

Rukhsana Ahmad: At the moment, I am working on a play commissioned by Kali Theatre Company, entitled From Kabul to Kunduz and am developing a screenplay treatment of the same story for myself, with the help of a lovely mentor. Fiction is very much on the back burner at present as I am also reading scores of novels for the HWA Endeavour Ink Gold Crown 2018 this summer.

Maryam Mirza: Ms. Ahmad, thank you very much.

The interview was conducted by email during January-March 2018.