

A Writer of Hope, Humour, and Resistance: An Interview with Saad Z. Hossain

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Saad Z. Hossain

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Abstract

In this interview, Bangladeshi Anglophone writer Saad Z. Hossain (1979–) addresses several important issues involving his works, worldview, and writing career. First, he explains when he began writing, what inspired him to write, why he chose to write in English, and whom he writes for. He also discusses his writing and reading habits, his favourite authors, how he negotiates between his seemingly opposite interests as a businessman and a writer, and his view of the present state of English writing in Bangladesh. Moreover, Hossain talks about his narrative techniques, how his fiction has evolved over the years, how he works out a plot from his multi-thread narrative, his predilection for characters over plot, and how he compares his experience of writing prose fiction in different forms: novels, novellas, and short stories. Finally, the author reflects on his themes, use of humour, view of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and what he is currently writing.

Keywords

Literary interview, Bangladeshi literature in English, science fiction and fantasy, US imperialism, Artificial intelligence, climate change

Introduction

Until the growth of English-language schools post-independence and US education, there was very little English writing from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The 1990s saw the emergence of a generation of new Bangladeshi writers, writing in English and in different genres from home and abroad. Saad Z. Hossain, born in Dhaka on 22 April 1979 and raised there, studied in an English medium school before attending the University of Virginia, USA to study Business and English Literature. He is arguably one of the most talented and productive of this new generation of writers. Hossain writes in a hybrid genre within speculative fiction, blending tropes and elements of both science fiction and fantasy, spicing it further with wry irony, black humour, and reimagined Islamic mythology – a fusion that he describes as “[softer] science fiction with magic realism” (Myman). He has authored four novels, one novella, and several short stories in about ten years and is presently working on his fifth novel, which he expects to bring out by the end of 2023. He also writes columns for local newspapers such as *The Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune*.

Hossain’s debut novel, *Baghdad Immortals*, published in Dhaka in 2013, was republished as *Escape from Baghdad!* by a Los Angeles-based publisher, Unnamed Press, in 2015. All his works have since attracted reputable overseas publishers in his niche area and appeared to rave reviews in journals worldwide. His other novels and the novella include *Djinn City* (2017), *Cyber Mage* (2021), *The*

Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday (2019), and its sequel, *Kundo Wakes Up* (2022). He is also the author of several short stories, including “Djinns Live by the Sea” in *The Apex Book of World SF: Volume 4* (2015), “Bring Your Own Spoon” in *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories* (2017), and “The Endless” in *Made to Order: Robots and Revolutions* (2020). His first two novels, *Escape from Baghdad!* and *Djinn City* were translated into French and became finalists for the Grand Prix de l’imaginaire in 2018 and 2021, respectively. The translator of *Djinn City*, Jean Francois Le Ruyet, won the award for the year for his translation of the book. In addition, *The Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday* was a finalist for the Locus Awards as well as the IGNYTE Awards 2020, and *Kundo Wakes Up* was on the Locus reading list of best novellas for 2022 and is on the longlist for the British Science Fiction Association awards.

Hossain is essentially a self-made writer, as his family has no writing history and his parents were, he explains in a previous interview, opposed to his writing activities in childhood: “[M]y parents basically spent all their lives just making fun of any writing pretensions I might have. It’s always been mockery and general discouragements, but in a nice way” (Myman). His father was a businessman, so he naturally wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. That was likely why he was sent to the University of Virginia to study Business. However, Hossain studied English Literature simultaneously to fulfil his inner calling, as writing is something native to his imagination. “In my head, I always consider myself a novelist,” he comments in an interview and goes on to explain how he began writing fantasy fiction from an early age:

When we were kids, I started writing a fantasy story with a bunch of friends, where each person took one character. They eventually dropped out, but I kept going. I eventually finished that and another massive fantasy tome, raw, uneven stuff, but I enjoyed doing it and I figure those efforts taught me how to write. (Tan)

Hossain stopped writing for eight to ten years when his father fell ill with Alzheimer’s, and he had to take charge of the family’s business. Once confident in this new role, he began writing again by joining a Dhaka-based literary group where every member was required to submit a story or chapter of a novel every two weeks for critique or be ousted. This challenging but motivational, purposeful and productive environment influenced Hossain to take up writing, in his own words, “seriously” and “religiously” (Myman) and gradually complete his first novel. Since then, he has never wavered in his writing commitment and has pursued his creative talent diligently and passionately.

Hossain was inspired to write Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) primarily by Western writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, David Eddings, and William Gibson, whose books were readily available at his home and school libraries – a rarity given the general indifference of Bengali Muslims towards

English and English literature at the time. *Au contraire*, he shows little familiarity with Bengali speculative fiction writers, namely Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937), Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), and Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934-2012) because, as mentioned earlier, his education and upbringing were entirely in English and he had little exposure to Bengali or Bengali literature in childhood and adolescence: “At home also it was mostly English for various reasons. I am sorry to say that my Bangla is not that great, and I would not be able to write anything in Bangla. It is one of my goals to improve,” he explains candidly in the interview.

This self-made Anglophone writer with a fecund imagination now straddles the opposite worlds of commerce and art; a businessman by day, he pursues his passion for writing mainly at night. However, he sees no conflict between the two and considers them rather mutually enriching, as his day job, instead of fettering his imagination, he affirms, helps to replenish and revitalise it: “Writing about the human condition requires meaningful interaction with humans, and I feel the rich variety of my experience gives me more fodder.”

Hossain’s novels are funny, as he incorporates a healthy dose of humour and satire in them, which is his key strength. “As the world hurtles towards a climate apocalypse, we probably need more humour rather than less,” he quips caustically in the interview. However, despite the preponderance of comic elements, his novels should not be seen as works for mere entertainment. Nor should they be viewed as fun-read for children and adolescents just because they present a supernatural world with incantations, fantastical beasts, and mythical creatures or because they have the trappings of a futuristic society with flying machines, nanotech implants in human bodies, and all-powerful AI robots.

Essentially, Hossain’s novels show a masterful convergence of the magical and the factual, the extreme and the ordinary, the sacred and the profane, and the comedic and the earnest – in all of which the author’s primary objective is to interpret everyday reality through the film of sci-fi and fantasy and exercise his readers’ minds. He describes his writing as a “bazooka,” a light shoulder-carried anti-tank weapon that, if used efficiently and effectively, could help improve the world by fighting corruption, violence and oppression and restoring the rights and opportunities of the have-nots. “In writing stories, it is possible to humanise the people who have been deliberately erased”; “I want to fight against privilege, even though, realistically, we have to acknowledge that it is often people in places of privilege who shape the world,” he explains articulating his vision as a writer.

In *Escape from Baghdad!*, for example, Hossain provides a blistering indictment of Western military aggression toward Asians and their shenanigans about just war, nation-building, and cultivation of democracy. It is a charged postcolonial novel that deconstructs America’s imperial designs by investigating the Iraq war saga from the victim’s rather than the interventionist’s standpoint.

It ventilates the author's outrage at the utter madness of war and senseless destruction of the rich culture and heritage of one of the world's oldest civilisations by a reckless, sabre-rattling superior power and its sheer indifference to ravaging, in the author's words, "brown lives, brown houses and brown trees." His novels also thematise the issues of racism, cultural and genetic purity, majoritarian politics, religious fundamentalism, misogyny, endemic political corruption in both developed and developing countries, catastrophic effects of climate change, and the pros and cons of Artificial Intelligence.

The following interview was conducted via email in March-April 2023.

Tell us a bit about your childhood and adolescence. What inspired you to become a writer? Why English?

I went to an American school in Dhaka where all the lessons were taught in English, and that became my primary language. At home also it was mostly English for various reasons. I am sorry to say that my Bangla is not that great, and I would not be able to write anything in Bangla. It is one of my goals to improve. We had a big library of a 1000 plus books at home, a collection of books from my grandfather, my uncle, and my parents. This was not an organised collection by any means; it was haphazard shelves of books on law, philosophy, plant chemistry, communism, thrillers, travelogues, and romances. This was a treasure trove for me and I grew up reading whatever I wanted. No one actually stopped me or checked if I was reading things beyond my age. In retrospect, I feel this was a great blessing.

Whom do you write for? Do you have a particular audience in mind, or is writing an irresistible compulsion for you?

I write entirely for myself. I started writing as a child to amuse myself. I am easily bored, and creating worlds and characters entertains me in a deeper way than consuming media. The compulsion to write returns every few months if I leave it.

So, you write mainly to please yourself? You don't have someone in the back of your mind the image of someone reading your fiction at home or in another country?

I definitely do not have any readers in mind. It would make me worry about all kinds of things then and remove the freedom I enjoy. For me, it's important that

I am surprised and happy with the work. If I were to cater to a target market, I would be disappointed in the end product.

Some writers follow a particular habit or routine of writing. Do you have any?

I write in spurts. If the flow is good, I have the luxury to drop everything and focus on this for a day or a week or a month, however long it lasts. Also, I pick up the pace in the latter half of a book when things are kind of coming back full circle because then it's on my mind constantly, so the urge to write is higher. I am not a full-time author, so I do not in fact have a routine otherwise. I don't worry too much if I'm not writing because I trust that my subconscious mind is working on the story anyway.

Do you read a lot? If so, who are your favourite writers?

I used to read a lot more before smartphones and video game consoles became readily available. Now it's definitely less, but I still read for fun and buying books is still my primary shopping agenda. In Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF), I have William Gibson (1948–), Neal Stephenson (1959–), and Steven Erickson (1959–). Some authors I tend to reread are Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice* [1813], *Mansfield Park* [1814], *Emma* [1815], and *Persuasion* [1817]), Alexandre Dumas (just *The Count of Monte Cristo* [1845]), and Haruki Murakami (all of it because I always forget them after I've read them). I enjoy Austen because she's hilarious and so skilful at carrying that mocking tone throughout a novel, while at the same time still running a perfectly good romantic plot. It works on multiple levels and I think she might be the most skilful writer in doing that consistently. I love Stephenson because he's so erudite and tackles the world's entire history in every sentence. Gibson is to me the best futurist because he doesn't focus on technology and hard cause and effect but actually captures the sort of vague social effects of scientific progress. Murakami is sort of the same but even more dreamlike than Gibson. *The Count of Monte Cristo*, finally, is the definitive work on revenge; there can be no doubt about it, but I actually like the in-between parts, when the count is just doing count-like things.

I believe you are a businessman by day and a writer by night. How do you mediate these two disparate lives? Do they strain or influence one another?

It's actually nice to have other employment. Writing about the human condition requires meaningful interaction with humans, and I feel the rich variety of my experience gives me more fodder. The problem with writing is that it hollows you out. You use up all your outrage, your emotions, your angst in the project,

and then also your memories, your hard-grafted wisdom. This is why often, after the first book, the quality dips because you've already mined your own life, and there isn't any more material. I think having an entirely different career recharges me and also shifts my focus from obsessing over writing.

You mentioned a writers' group in Dhaka in a previous interview. Tell us a bit about the group. Are others in the group as active and productive as you are? You are a part-time writer but have thus far produced four novels, a novella, and several short stories. That's a remarkable achievement! What motivates and keeps you so focused?

The group is still active in the sense that we are all in communication and participating in various literary endeavours and supporting each other whenever we can. I think I am probably ahead output-wise, but that is probably not the correct metric to keep score. One of the members – Sadaf Saaz – went on to direct the Dhaka Lit Fest, which is now the largest literary festival in Bangladesh, and probably one of the largest in the world.

In any writing group, people go in with different aims; it's important to get what you need from it, and I think, for the most part, everyone did.

Would you like to share your view about the state of Anglophone writing in Bangladesh? Does it have a future, considering the country's history of language politics?

I think in the end, it will all be in English. I like to think of global literature as a slow, long-drawn-out conversation, and for whatever reason, English is the language most accessible to the largest number of people. If you don't write in English, you are giving up your seat at the table; you are at the mercy of translators and losing your chance to represent. That being said, participating in it is not necessary; you can easily write for your own language group exclusively, but I feel the urge to show off my culture and country to a global audience.

How has your writing evolved over the years?

I feel my technique has improved in terms of dialogue and action. My interest has also changed from depicting big stories to smaller, tighter ones. The urge to put cosmic importance to your characters' actions has to be balanced with creating something accessible and believable, even in SFF. For example, in my first novel, *Escape from Baghdad!*, I tried to build a mythology that encompassed all of Islamic history, focusing particularly on Ibn Sina, one of its main characters. The scope of this story was big; I tried to swallow the Iraq war whole, along with five thousand years of history and spit out a fantasy tale. This is fun to write and fun to read as well, perhaps, but it also, by necessity, requires a certain suspension

of logic and a permissiveness on the part of the reader to forego different aspects of plot resolution. You are given what you are given because the ink and paper run out before the story is complete. This is why epic fantasy tales are often unfinished. In contrast, my last novella, *Kundo Wakes Up*, is really about one particular failed artist, a man acting to improve his own life, with no larger ramifications whatsoever. This is a move away from heroic fantasy because there is also no moral imperative at work here, no fight between good and evil. I would say I have evolved because I would not have seen the value in writing this kind of story earlier, nor would I have enjoyed reading it.

Your novels are a conflation of multiple genres: fantasy, comedy, sci-fi, speculative fiction, and horror. How do you work out a plot from this multi-thread narrative?

I don't worry about plot. I don't plot ahead, I don't make outlines, I don't want to know the ending before I get to the last few chapters. I get terribly unmotivated if I know what is going to happen far in advance. I want to start somewhere and end up somewhere else entirely, so far off the reservation that the reader is surprised and delighted. Hehe, that is the aim at least. The plan is to stay true to the characters, follow their internal logic, and let the story breathe. In order to keep the threads together, I use a policy of re-using places and people in the second half of the work so that it appears well put together. For example, in *Escape from Baghdad!*, the character of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) was supposed to be a kindly guide who would help the good guys find the treasure. In fact, it turned out there was no treasure because I found that I could not leave Baghdad with these characters at all, and so I repurposed Avicenna into the main villain, as I had already introduced him early on in the book. Similarly, in *Kundo Wakes Up*, Fara and the toddler were initially just cardboard characters to help with information dumps, but in the end, the toddler became one of their main reasons for leaving the eternal city, as she wouldn't be able to age or grow there. This is the idea of using what you have rather than introducing something new.

Apart from the novels, you have written several short stories. Is it relatively more challenging to write a short story as it requires "unity of effect?"

Short stories are hard because every word counts. Novels are hard because it's a big beast and can be easily derailed, with a lot of wasted effort if you don't like it halfway through. The hardest thing to write is a novella because it has to be as tight as a short story and half the length of a novel. It is to give you the satisfaction of a novel with half the words; thus, the words have to be perfectly chosen.

A novella is then more demanding because it requires more precision and focus? Is it also more time-consuming? Please explain by referring to your work.

When I was writing *Gurkha and the Lord of Tuesday*, I started off with a premise, the idea of this djinn being stuck in ice and then climate change freeing him up thousands of years later. When I finally got him to Kathmandu, I had already introduced a second main character, and it was difficult to think of a way to wrap up this big, open-ended tale. I really had to keep thinking about it because I was afraid to put words on paper, lest it run away in a direction I couldn't finish.

*Your first novel, *Escape from Baghdad*, is set in the hellhole of post-war Iraq. But why Iraq and not Afghanistan, the "graveyard of empires?" Besides, how did you construct a story around a terrain you are unfamiliar with? Did it require additional research to understand the place's geography, culture, and postbellum politics?*

I feel the Iraq war was the war of our time, for our generation. I chose it because I felt an outrage at the destruction of a country, an ancient country and culture, and also the madness of the situation sort of summed up war in general. I did do research from different Iraqi blogs as well as military blogs. It was the first war that was truly publicised from the perspective of soldiers and reporters embedded in the units. There was ample material available. It was also a story of mythology and the mental scape of people caught in impossible situations, and that is something that stretches beyond nationalities.

You talk about an "outrage" while writing the first novel. Please enlighten us on this. Was it a personal outrage or something related to the futility of modern life, with its overriding sense of nothingness?

This is sort of the outrage of the victim, the outrage of being invaded by superior powers, of everything being destroyed for no good reason, the unfairness of it, the inhumanity in the global response, the indifference to brown lives, brown houses, and brown trees. In writing stories, it is possible to humanise the people who have been deliberately erased. So yes, this is perhaps the outrage one feels being Muslim, being brown, being from the global south, watching our wealth be stripped away.

Now I want to turn to a different topic. Do you believe that Artificial Intelligence can work better than human judgement – that only value-free machines with no political axe to grind can solve the world's problems and bring about a technological nirvana? Wouldn't that catalyse our emotional and spiritual death?

I think AI can improve our governance in many ways. For example, in my own country, automation in any department has resulted in lower corruption simply by removing some of the human element. In the West, people take many processes for granted, which cost us effort and time, for example, paying bills, dealing with land papers, banking, and even paying taxes. A lot of that is due to automation. Look at America now; how often people have to protest to protect abortion rights, fight the gun lobby and police brutality, and fight for clean water or banking regulation. It seems like every time you gain one thing, two other things are taken away. It is exhausting. At what point would we be thankful if a machine just quietly did the job, balanced the budget, and let us focus on our own lives?

I agree with you. AI obviously increases efficiency and minimises corruption, but it also increases scamming and unemployment. I guess I am trying to make the point that every tool is as good as its user – the individual behind the machine matters. Would you agree? Or do you think these machines will one day develop their consciousness or sensitivity, as some of its proponents tend to suggest?

One argument for AI usage is that it is just a tool, like any other tech, and we should adopt it or be left behind. At some point, though, we have to consider that if a mind mimics consciousness to the nth degree and acts accordingly without any breaks, does it matter if it's really conscious or not? At the same time, it is clear that everyone has to adopt this tool like we did the pencil or the smartphone. We have to think that this will augment us, having a pocket AI for each human, as opposed to replacing us further. I mean further in the sense that capitalist overlords decide what humans should live, what their labour is worth, and how much air, water, and space they can consume. The enemy, as always, is not the tools but the system which hunts for profit relentlessly.

What are some of the dominant themes in your work?

Revenge, friendship, found family, injustice, and djinns of course. I like to inhabit a place that is partly in the mind and partly rooted in mythology, so you are not sure what is real and what is made up. In *Djinn City*, I developed a complex culture and history for the djinns because to me it seemed ludicrous that they would be static entities. It was necessary to create motivations, social ties, and rivalries for them to become real characters and behave in ways that would not be jarring to the reader.

Apparently, you are big-time into gaming. How do you translate that experience into fictional material? How do your real-life experiences fit into all these?

Gaming, for me, is also storytelling. The best games tell stories, and great stories are made when playing cooperative games. I play online now with friends, and it is something we all look forward to. It is a social event rather than a solitary pursuit. Similarly, I play games with my kids, like we share a Fifa 23 ultimate team, for example, or a Minecraft world, where we all build on it together, and this gives us hours of entertainment as a family. (Except for my wife, she hates it.) I think all creative work is storytelling. A painting tells a story. A game tells a story. A song tells a story.

When you write a novel or short story, who is in charge – you or the characters?

I am most definitely not in charge. I want the characters to live. I do not know if they will make it. In *Djinn City*, for example, I did not expect Aunt Juny to die. I sincerely liked her, and I expected a long future with her. But at that moment, it felt like Indelbed would need to pay yet a final heart-breaking price, and that was the most painful.

Tell us about the humour in your fiction. How do you mix humour with the horror, the comic, the tragic, the natural and the supernatural in your stories?

I personally enjoy reading books with some degree of humour. I feel there has to be some balance so the work doesn't become onerous for the reader. There have been times when I'm reluctant to pick up some critically acclaimed work because I know it's going to be unrelenting doom and gloom. As the world hurtles towards a climate apocalypse, we probably need more humour rather than less. Blending humour into the writing itself has to come from the tone rather than anything else. For me, it's about maintaining a slightly sarcastic narrative tone throughout, which allows me to take advantage of any absurdities in the story.

Would it be fair to say that your fiction has a streak of abiding optimism underneath the cynicism and dystopia?

I am definitely optimistic. I try to give my characters some wins along the way, however small. I want the ordinary characters to win, not the kings and queens. I want to fight against privilege, even though, realistically, we have to acknowledge that it is often people in places of privilege who shape the world.

*Your critics have only exuberant praises for you. One critic has remarked that your novel *Cyber Mage* is "worthy of a Hollywood summer blockbuster." How do you feel about such compliments on your work?*

I am grateful I don't write for anyone in particular, so when someone praises it, I feel that I have found a kindred soul who likes reading the same kind of thing I do. Writing is a lonely pursuit and any positive feedback is like hearing a voice from across the void. There is no formula to writing for me; it's a journey every time, so I am never sure if it is any good.

So, it's not like looking at a blank wall, as some writers suggest. There are rewards, though not necessarily financial.

There are rewards. The work itself is a reward, like any creative work. You are euphoric and drained simultaneously; the sense of achievement is immense; existing for even a short time entirely in the world of ideas is semi-divine. These rewards are intangible and, therefore, immeasurably valuable, *because they cannot be purchased*. No drug in the world could replicate this feeling for me. But there are also tangible rewards. There is recognition from people in all walks of life. I recently did a round of talks at schools, as the teachers discovered that students really liked reading about settings and people similar to themselves, and now, sometimes, random kids will approach me to say hello and ask questions. The idea that this is possible, that fantasy stories about brown kids can be set in Dhaka, has dawned on them, and that is a very good reward for me. It is also rewarding to slowly gain a sense of expertise. It was always my hope to be one day considered world-class, not just good for a writer from Bangladesh, and I think I'm approaching that goal.

What are you working on now? What is it about?

I am about 10,000 words into the next novel, which I hope to finish this year. It's set in the same universe, in the New Dhaka which is guided by the Cyber Mage and his sidekick AI. The main character is a Rohingya refugee half-caste who is kicked out of his settlement and must struggle his way through a Dhaka, which appears to hate him.

Thank you, Saad Hossain! I look forward to reading your new novel when it hits the market.

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