



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## A Bosnian refugee who became a great story-teller: Adnan Mahmutovic on what drives him as a person and author

Sunil Sharma

*Adnan Mahmutovic is fast becoming a literary phenomenon across the Anglophonic world, courtesy a strong narrative voice that is unique and spotlights human endurance in most extreme conditions, including war, ethnic cleansing and survival in new places as a refugee. His recent novel *Thinner than a Hair* is in news; so is the collection of short fiction *How to fare well and stay fair*. Adnan has a PhD in English literature and an MFA in creative writing, and is currently a lecturer and writer-in-residence at the Department of English, Stockholm University.*

*Fellow writer Sunil Sharma interviewed Adnan by email.*

SS: Adnan Mahmutovic is emerging as a significant voice in Europe and rest of the English-speaking world for bringing focus on Bosnia and recent European history through his writings. A big achievement for one who fled his home country and arrived in Sweden as a refugee. How do you view this journey of an eventful decade as a political survivor in a changing Europe?

AM: I've been lucky to have become a refugee. Sounds weird? It is, but it's true that as bad as my history has been, I now think that Europe itself has benefitted from being invaded by its own refugees. There's a lot of paradoxes in this state of being and this history, but overall it has been a new, albeit familiar experience (thinking about the Jews), to have refugees that are European. It's like experiencing the other who is also the same, or the same as the other. Very hard to categorise. Especially since most countries we ended up in had people from the Balkan who came there as imported working force and our status as refugees was weird to say the least. Even for ourselves. And especially for the people who remain in the Balkans we are what they used to call *Gastarbeiter*, guest workers. That's how they see us in many places. Like we just left to find work and not to save our lives. If you for instance look at Sweden these last few years, one Bosnian man has been in the previous government and now, in the new government, our youngest ever Minister is a Bosnian woman, only twenty-seven years old. That's huge for a small ethnic group. I consider myself a part of our Bosnian journey, however anti-nationalist I may be. I think our initial trauma, our miserable fate, turned into something good for us and for the countries we now inhabit. There's the old saying that war is everything's father. I don't want to say that good comes out of war as much as evil, but rather that the great thing about our world today is that we can refuse to be defined by war and go in the opposite direction. So, to revise Heraclitus, war is not

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**everything's father in the sense that it causes good as well as bad things. Good things happen in spite of it. Takes a lot of work. A lot of love. A lot of care.**

SS: How does Adnan the person look at Adnan the writer? In third person singular, his literary achievements, please.

**AM: Mahmutovic published his first story, 'Integration under the Midnight Sun' in an American journal. If it were not for the encouragement of the editor and writer Kathryn Magendie, he would not have come out strong after all the rejections for his first novel, *Thinner than a Hair*, which eventually won a prize for the first novel, and came out five years after that first story. Two years later, he collected his short stories in *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair*, after which he has ventured into creative autobiography, for instance 'The Origins of Smudges' in *World Literature Today*. He is particularly proud of the short film 'Gusul', based on his story with the same title, and which starred his paternal grandmother as one of the characters.**

SS: Your reception in UK and USA?

**AM: I've mainly published in the UK, my books I mean, and short stories in various American journals. So, I cannot say much about America, but the little I know of my readership there, and the few reviews, it's been really quite amazing. I've only been in the US once and during that week I found a lot of interest. Otherwise my readers are mostly in the UK where I've done a few tours.**

SS: Which book of yours has given maximum satisfaction to you?

**AM: Has to be the first novel, *Thinner than a Hair*. Because everything seemed to conspire against it coming to life and then it did come to life. It's like the first child. It only happens once. But there is always disappointment to match it. You expect too much, are still too naïve and irrational about the way the world works.**

SS: Any interesting projects going on right now or in future?

**AM: There's a top-secret one, but if I told you ... you know how it goes.**

SS: Your work with people with brain damage must have been very challenging. What lessons you learnt out of it as a displaced person and a sensitive writer?

**AM: I think it was the perfect place. People with some kind of disability are, though extremely well taken care of in Sweden (compared to many countries in the world), the ones on the margins of history. Even today, if I have a character with some form of physical or mental damage in a story I get questions about that, as if I have to justify an inclusion of such a character, like Aziz in my first novel. For me it's just normal. I've spent a lot of time with such 'abnormal' people. As a refugee, I felt at home among them. They needed me and I felt**

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good about being needed. I didn't feel I was a problem, like I was abnormal myself. And I'm saying this as a person who has experienced the least amount of xenophobia, due to, as a good friend once told me, being white. People with brain damage I worked with had bigger issues. Just managing the simplest, everyday things we take for granted is huge for them. No big ideological problem, but more things like how to open the damn honey jar in less than hour without help. You got to be humble to work in such environments. I know how helpless it feels, which is why try and help as much as I can.

SS: Why English as a medium of expression for writing your version of contemporary history in fiction? Why not your first language Bosnian? What are the main reasons for choosing English in multi-lingual Europe where English is largely used as a lingua franca and does not enjoy a pre-eminent position or prestige among its member-states?

AM: I tend to say I use English so my mother cannot read what I've written. It is partly true, but the origins of that choice are ... let's just say it wasn't an overnight decision. It happened slowly. I loved Bosnian so much and yet for me it was now the language of nationalism. It started changing under ideological influences, just as the other Balkan languages. I didn't like that and I didn't know how to write in it. Mohsin Hamid said something to me that made a lot of sense. Urdu was his first and third language. I think Bosnian became my second language, as did Swedish, as did English (which is my third or fourth language). So now I have three second languages. For years I felt I didn't have a language I could call my own, so I thought of trying the famous lingua franca. It worked so well because I could write honestly and make fun of my history without feeling this bondage to the nation implied in Swedish and Bosnian. I understand that for postcolonial peoples English is not a neutral language, but for me it is. For me it's liberating exactly because I have no historical connection to it.

SS: What has been your experience in Sweden, first as a war refugee and later on, as a university teacher?

AM: Generally I try and ignore bad stuff, so I'd say that Sweden has been great for refugees, especially the Balkan peoples, which obviously has to do with us being European. Not every refugee crowd fares that well. I've always had low self-esteem, which is a personal issue, and which probably got worse during refugee years. When I enrolled in the English department's literature program that was huge for me because I could actually work and study and I didn't have to bribe anyone to get a place at the university, which was amazing. And it was free. In most countries I'd end up with huge student loans, but not here. I decided to push my studies as far as I possibly could already after that first lecture on postcolonial lit, given by a Pakistani professor, a Shakespearean, this tiny-looking woman in a sari with a voice that'd put Macbeth himself in place. She was such a huge inspiration. She's remained my fiercest critic but also the greatest supporter.

SS: How do you feel as a faculty in Stockholm University? Is teaching a good option for a writer?

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**AM:** I won't speak for all writers but I didn't come to the academia as many writers to teach creative writing to be able to sustain myself. My academic development went hand in hand with my art. My novel was published the year I finished my PhD. I think teaching, like my previous work, keeps me grounded. So for me it's great. It's not just something I have to do.

**SS:** How do you feel as a Muslim intellectual in a setting largely anti-Islamic?

**AM:** If you refer to Sweden, I'd say that even though there is Islamophobia, as well as anti-Semitism, because these two go hand in hand, Sweden is probably one of the better countries. The problem I see is that it is hard to have an image that combines Islam and intellectualism, because the default notion in most Western countries is that the two are mutually exclusive. The former always causes the questioning of the latter. It is easier for me, I think, because people do not immediately read me as Muslim. The fact that you the first interviewer to ever ask me this question says a lot about how I am viewed. I'm white, and that comes with a privilege. This means that they can get to know me, and my work, before the label comes into the picture. And mostly I do not get labelled exactly because most people do not think of me as Muslim. They may know that I am but my behaviour does not correspond to the stereotype. I don't necessarily appear with full symbolic regalia. So let's say that a TV channel is looking for a Muslim to respond to some crime committed by some Muslim somewhere in the world, however weird that contemporary need may be, they won't call me.

I want to say something about the way this works in my classes, especially those that have larger numbers of international students. I know how these things work, so the initial encounter between students may be a bit awkward in the beginning, especially if some students display religious symbolism in their appearances. I tend not to attribute any immediate value to the way students may display their various ideologies. I will not, for instance, refrain from asking a woman in a hijab a question that other students might think is weird to ask from what seems to be a religious woman. This seems to immediately destroy that initial awkwardness, this culture of false respect/fear. I know that my treatment of students transforms them in each other's eyes and they feel more relaxed and then also more willing to show their intellect. This is how I wish it was in the public discourses, which, as you know, are pretty much defined along the lines of entertainment, and for this reason benefit from clashes of symbolic appearances. Let's say that although I admire Affleck for his answer to Maher's bigotry, I think it is essential not to think that being a good Muslim means to mind your own business and eat your sandwich. This defense on his part, however appreciated among Muslims, betrays the fact that being Muslim and politically engaged is incompatible, because one's politics must surely be devoid of intellect or religiously coloured. I'm not saying this is not true for many, but it is taken as a default position. Because of that, I'm not seen as Muslim-intellectual, but just intellectual.

**SS:** Your short fiction is very powerful and for me as a reader it evokes a strong sense of time and place. Sometimes, you remind me of Marquez in the description of felt realities of Bosnia

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and the Balkan region in a different way. Do you see any such underlying connections between Latin American and Bosnian/European political scenes?

**AM: I was in fact more influenced by writers such as Marquez, then Asian and African writers, than Bosnian. In order to write honestly and differently about the Balkans, I felt it was important to avoid and rework all those tropes that I feel plague much post-war writing. Sometimes, or let's say always and necessarily, a writer must take a detour through other cultures and literary traditions to be able to see through the traps of one's own mother tongue and myths of the nation.**

SS: Your favourite writers?

**AM: There's many and any list is way too limited. I'm more into favourite books than authors (Barthes' fault?), but to give you a few: Toni Morrison, Edwidge Danticat, Margaret Atwood, J.M. Coetzee, Ben Okri, W.G. Sebald, Alejandro Jodorowski, Joe Sacco, Art Spiegelman, Mesa Selimovic, Alan Moore, Michael Ondaatje, Bohumil Hrabal, Ernest Hemingway, Mohsin Hamid, Michael Muhammad-Knight.**

SS: What is the role of a writer in today's world where there is a de-radicalisation of the middle classes and commodification of consciousness are the sad facts of existence? Is literature with revolutionary élan possible?

**AM: I'd love not to be a pessimist, but it's hard. If it's true that the novel is the most democratic form, what's worst today is how the notion of democracy has been used to do exactly what you state. Everything is too easily commodified. I wonder if the true revolutionary élan must come in shapes not easily recognizable as traditional revolutionary tropes. I spoke about this with Bharati Mukherjee, who pretty much lamented the impossibility of such writing. Just like modern ideologies and forms of authority have changed shape, revolutionary writing has to be more creative.**

SS: How is Europe as a destination for the writerly books? A home for innovative ideas and new-age intellectuals? Why no Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet in the New Millennium? Why this palpable absence?

**AM: It's not entirely bad, I'd say, because the writerly books have been appropriated by the mainstream, but I see where you're going with this. It is weird, no doubt, and there may be people out there doing or trying to do that kind of stuff, but they tend not to fare that well or travel well. Honestly, I'm thinking that the political trends in Europe, with the rise of right-wing and neo-Nazi groups, may signal something. There is resistance to newness. After the exhaustion of postmodernism people are far less inclined to produce or read works that present radically new ways of thinking and writing. From my experience in just a few writers' conferences, I've seen both many writers and readers who are hungry for the new, and many who just plain lack curiosity and often a desire to read more of that which is closer to home.**

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**Idiosyncrasy is great if it's familiar idiosyncrasy. Just think how many African and Asian writers have to adapt. Adichie's latest book is a case in point. We say we love different, but not too different. It's still the digestible different that travels well.**

SS: What kind of history you inherited?

**AM: The history I inherited was full of heroes that fought the Nazi in World War II, the history of Communism, the history of anti-Stalinism, the history of a President-Father, and just a bit of the history of the Ottomans, which was always presented as the dark ages though it was centuries-long and shaped the place more than anything else. All these histories have been well used before and during the war to justify murder.**

SS: Political identity and a search for home are two recurring themes in your works. Are they crucial as emotive markers in the lives of migrants and the refugees?

**AM: In my life, yes. In the lives of refugees as such, not always. The notion of home, yes, but political identity, not always. It may be so in the beginning, but soon enough, in their host countries, they discover that identifying yourself as a political agent is not kosher, it's not halal, so to speak. So many lose that sense of being political agents. The problem here is exactly that the notion of home, no matter how we look at it, no matter how much we romanticise it, is a political notion. Home is ultimately political, but in the public discourse it's a place where you exercise your identity and hide it from the world and just sit there and eat your sandwich.**

SS: In your recent collection of shorts *How to Fare Well and Stay Fair*, the blurb points out that the stories revolve around people pushed to margins of history and the edge of life. This can be a line applicable to the discontented professionals and intellectuals as well who feel deprived of their chance under the sun. Are not all of us sliding towards margins? The 99% of the global population?

**AM: I think so, yes. But this doesn't mean these 99% are less a part of the shaping of the world. They are marginalised as political agents but that doesn't mean they are not political agents. But their roles are not a part of bigger narratives.**

SS: What is the historic role of a writer in today's globalised world?

**AM: I think most writers still live in their parochial worlds. This may sound weird, but not many writers feel like they can take the globe as their stage. I'd like to see globalisation of writing that butthheads what we call globalisation. When we speak about world literature we are still speaking about more or less unintentional movements of works. (Gayatri) Chakravorti wrote a piece on how humans are becoming geological force. I'd like to see authors who consciously attempt to be such force, minus the potential hubris that such a stance might cause.**

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SS: What is your personal philosophy of life?

**AM: I like to believe that trust and what Jean-Luc Nancy called 'inoperative' sort of community are good things, a community that doesn't have a big, ideal goal, that doesn't operate towards a logos but functions like a jazz band, with both structure and freedom.**

SS: Any message to other struggling writers?

**AM: Well, I'm a struggling writer, and in fact most published authors are struggling writers so except for growing thick skin, I'm not sure what more one should suggest.**

SS: Thanks.

**AM: Thank you.**

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*Mumbai-based **Sunil Sharma**, a college principal, is also widely-published Indian critic, poet, literary interviewer, editor, translator, essayist and fiction writer. He has already published three collections of poetry, one collection of short fiction, one novel and co-edited five books so far. His six short stories and the novel *Minotaur* were recently prescribed for the undergraduate classes under the Post-colonial Studies, Clayton University, Georgia, USA. He is a recipient of the UK-based *Destiny Poets' inaugural Poet of the Year* award, 2012.*

*He edits the online journal *Episteme*: <http://www.episteme.net.in/>*

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