



'Our inner struggles like broken relationships or sexual identity are more complex'

A lot of South Asian writing in the US is clichéd, Jabeen Akhtar tells **Rukmani Sah Mehta**

In her debut novel *Welcome to Americastan*, Pakistani-American author Jabeen Akhtar subverts many stereotypes associated with South Asian writing in English. Like her protagonist Sameera, she is brazen and unapologetic about distancing herself from the clichéd issues of identity crisis that form the crux of many Diaspora novels. Akhtar tells *India Abroad* why that is.

How does it feel now that your first book has been published?

It's exciting, I am nervous, too. When your first book comes out you are nervous that everyone is going to read something that you have been writing on your computer for so long. I have read it aloud at book events and it's overwhelming. Everyone is saying it was really funny. I don't need to hear that the book changed people's lives; all I want is for my readers to enjoy it and have a good time.

Like your protagonist Samira, you moved to North Carolina from Washington, DC and gave up a government job. Is the novel autobiographical?

A lot of the experiences in the book are autobiographical, but it is not fully inspired by my life. If I wanted to write an autobiography, it would have been in memoir form. I took a lot of things that happened to me and added fictional details. I wrote the book after a difficult breakup, so it was also cathartic in a way. I wanted to write about it; there was this need that had to be satisfied. I wanted to put it down.

How is your book different from other South Asian-American writing?

This book hasn't been published in the United States yet, so I don't have US reactions except for friends and family who have read it. A lot of South Asian genre in the US is clichéd. All the authors are writing about the same thing; they have similar characters and the same struggles, over and over again. I don't want to disparage anyone, but these are great writers who can come up with new material. There is so much

to mine out of Indians and Pakistanis, so many levels and complexities. My book straddles several genres. It's a contemporary American novel.

How has your identity as a Pakistani American shaped your writing?

You don't have a lot of female Pakistani writers. I have written about sex and drugs openly and unapologetically. Topics that are considered blasphemous have not been treated as taboo in the novel, that's intentional. I wanted to show how life is.

All these things are made such a big deal in a lot of Diaspora fiction — if a girl is partying and smoking pot she's rebelling against her parents and rejecting her Muslim or Pakistani identity. There is this whole idea, especially if you are a female from a Muslim background, that you have to be quiet and I'm not quiet. I am not a typical well-behaved Pakistani girl. My book deals with issues differently.

Why did you choose this title for the book?

At a convenience store a woman once said to me 'Welcome to America.' I didn't understand it at first since it was not a racist comment like 'Go Home' or 'You are a terrorist.' It was an odd comment that got stuck in my memory and the title came somewhere from there.

Have you faced racism?

I was at a store with my sister and a woman said something to her. The other shoppers also heard the comment and started apologizing to us on her behalf. It made us more uncomfortable and awkward. We wanted to just get out of there.

What do you think is the reason behind the sudden boom in Pakistani writing in English?

The writing was always there, publishing has opened up to us since now Pakistan is everywhere in the news; it's the center of attention on the world stage. People know enough about what is happening policy wise, but they don't know anything about the people... People are looking for sources of information. Maybe they feel a writer's voice is more authentic, or they feel a writer can capture real life and give a more honest account of life than they find elsewhere.

It's a trend; once a publisher starts publishing one Pakistani writer, then they all jump on the bandwagon.

Have you been to Pakistan?

I have been to Pakistan only once, for two weeks. We have lots of family there. It was nice to meet them. But what I liked most was seeing the places my parents talked about and the colleges they went

Jabeen Akhtar



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to. I actually saw a streetlight under which my dad studied and did his homework. It gave me goose bumps to actually see things that we had heard of all our lives.

Did things change for you post 9/11?

Things have changed. Prior to 9/11, Muslims, including Pakistanis, were looked at as respectable people and were a part of the educated immigrant population. They didn't contribute to crime, they were considered invisible. In other words, they didn't get any special attention. But things have changed now. A few right-wing politicians have been picking up everything that has to do with Muslims, like legislating to ban Sharia law. Muslims are not trying to get Sharia. It's ridiculous.

At an individual level, my life has not been affected. I'm not a regular Muslim girl who would wear the hijab or the burqa, so I can't speak of what they feel.

There is a rebellious streak in the protagonist of your novel. Does it mirror the attitude of most second-generation immigrants?

The immigrant kids now do all this (*smoke pot, drink, attend wild parties and have one night stands*), but not as an act of rebellion. It is not an issue, when all your peers are doing it. There is no motive attached to it. Some parents are appalled at that behavior. However, many know what their kids do. They turn a blind eye, or just tell their kids don't let anyone in the community see you doing that. Everyone knows what's happening; it is just pretence sometimes.

Have you ever faced any kind of identity crisis?

Our parents' struggle is about identity crisis and adjusting to a new culture. The second generation immigrants, however, struggle externally since those are issues the world is forcing on them. People from outside come and tell you, 'Hey you are Pakistani, or you are different.' Our inner struggles like broken relationships or sexual identity are more complex than issues of identity.

What about your next book?

It is coming along slowly. I am writing a couple of short stories now. In short story writing I write differently... These may not be for publication, but just for myself. My next book will have the same lighthearted tone, but I want to expand my genre.

Aren't you afraid that your book might fall into the chick lit category?

One of my favorite authors Nick Hornby's book *High Fidelity* is all about a man going through a breakup and getting over heartbreak. That doesn't get the label of guy lit. It was hailed as a great book. I am worried about that label for my book because I am a female, writing about a female and the book is a first person account dealing with relationships. I don't want it to be labeled as chick lit. It wouldn't be appropriate because it addresses a lot of topics. I feel sorry for female writers who have to deal with this label. ■

'The US government thinks I'm a terrorist'

Welcome to Americastan takes an irreverent look at the Pakistani-American community

I had only been home eighteen minutes when the cursing started.

You *churail!* *Haram zadi!* *Awarra!* *Bey waqoof!*

She was cursing at me in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. Urdu was not to be confused with Punjabi, my parents explained, that other language of Pakistan, the language of grungy and unfiltered-cigarette-smoking rickshaw drivers. Urdu was spoken by the elite and the educated — the people who lived in the pink barricaded palaces on Mall Road in Lahore. The ones with cooks and drivers and invitations to have afternoon *chai* near the crystal staircase of the downtown Avari Hotel. Urdu had history. Urdu was an epic classical language of the Persian and Mughal dynasties in which the most eloquent philosophical principles were inspired and the most stirring poetry was scribed.

Urdu was also a language my parents never bothered teaching me, so I had no idea what profanities my mother was hurling my way. But I could guess — you devil child, you vagabond, you spoiled, ugly-looking witch.

I glanced over at the living room windows.

'I'm talking to you!' she said, this time in English.

I couldn't figure out where she was. Maybe outside by the water fountain with the green fiberglass cherubs? The fountain was on and the sound of splashing, gurgling water was nice. Like there was a creek nearby. I looked at the wrought-iron bench behind the fountain, but she wasn't there either.

'Samira! Do you hear me?'

A bead of sweat rolled down the back of my neck. I was roasting in the little oven that was my Honda Civic. All the windows were open, but there was no cross-breeze. Two wasps flew in and out of my car, in and out, in and out, whirling around my head several times before settling on the windshield for a hump session. I watched the mounting, the penetration at lightening speed — allowing myself some of this

interspecies voyeurism — and then not a few seconds later the lovers up and flew onto my older brother's car to hump on his roof. Khalid still hadn't fixed that boulder-sized dent on the passenger-side door. I wondered why. My father could get it fixed for free. But I guess it didn't matter now that Khalid was leaving the country. Khalid wouldn't need a car where he was going.

I rested my elbows on the steering wheel and put my fingers to my head, massaging the temples.

'Samira!' she screamed. 'Do you hear me? I need your damn help!'

My mother didn't seem to care that I had just driven five long hours from Washington, DC to our house in Cary, North Carolina, with my car stuffed with 11 trash bags of clothes, three suitcases and three boxes.

Of course, she didn't know my car was stuffed with boxes and suitcases and bags and that the rest of my apartment, my entire life, actually, had been hastily thrown into a DC storage unit two days ago.

'Looks like you're gettin' the hell out of dodge,' the manager at Founding Father Storage up on 16th Street, S E told me, inspecting the jumble of furniture and household goods that piled to the ceiling of my 5' x 15' unit. 'Cops bust you for drugs or somethin?'

Not exactly.

I looked up from my seat, still wearing my seat belt, and saw my younger sister's heavily lined cat eyes peering down at me from an upstairs window. She was chatting on her cell phone, the little diamond in her nose twinkling. Meena was twenty-five and home from grad school for the weekend and everything about her was twinkly, even the cell phone she was talking into. Twinkly, sparkly pink. Her advancing age be damned. She waved to me and I waved back.

'For the last time, Samira. Are you going to help me or not?'

I curled my fingers around the back of my neck and squeezed to relieve the tension. This was the first time I was back home since spring when we celebrated my

twenty-seventh birthday. Ethan, my parent's favorite green-eyed Appalachian with size twelve feet and, until recently, my boyfriend, had scooted a tiny velvet box across the dinner table. Everyone held their breath as I opened it, but inside was a tiny emerald, my birthstone, pressed in the middle of a heart on a platinum chain. Ethan and I had already discussed marriage and when it would happen for us — the following spring we would get engaged, after work cooled down for me and he paid off some of his law school debt and we would have time and a little more money to plan the wedding. Having an engagement ring? A technicality. A minor detail for two people who had spent eight years together and knew marriage was certain. My parents didn't say anything, but they were visibly disappointed when I opened the box. I wasn't. I thought the necklace was beautiful.

I lifted the chain from my neck now, letting the thin metal slip between my fingers. If history was any indication, my mother would not stop yelling and cursing until she had me in her grip. I didn't know what she needed help with or why there was any urgency to it, but whatever it was, I dreaded it. Whatever those five feet of anger had in store made me want to slink under the mat and pretend I wasn't really there, sitting in my parent's driveway.

A few days back, I had told my parents that things were slow at work and I had more vacation days than expected, so I was using it to come home for a week.

'Such a good girl,' my father had said, pleased his busy daughter could have traveled anywhere with her time, but used all of it to come home.

I was going to have to coast on this goodwill until I figured out how and in what order to tell him and my mother the following: I moved out of DC; I tried to kill Ethan; the US government thinks I'm a terrorist; and I need my old room back.

'Fine. Stay there,' my mother cried out. 'Don't help me then. Just stay there and keep sitting in that driveway like a bump!'

The belt swooshed past my chest. I pressed the unlock button. Taking one gulp of moist air for fortitude, I finally stepped out.

'You mean bump-on-a-log,' I said to no one in particular, as I followed the flag stones to the front door. 'It's bump-on-a-log.' ■

Excerpted with author Jabeen Akhtar's permission from Welcome to Americastan, published by Penguin India.

