WRITERS MOSAIC

Suhayl Saadi

In Conversation with Bashabi Fraser

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[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Bashabi Fraser talked to the poet, novelist, lyricist and physician Suhayl Saadi about the journey of his writing life, focusing on his polyphonic novel *Psychoraag*.

[Music]

Suhayl Saadi (SS): It developed really from a series of short stories that I was writing in the late 1990s, which appeared in the previous book, *The Burning Mirror*, short story anthology. And some of the characters were too strong just to be confined to short stories. And then I conceived of this radio station idea because a poet and I wanted to read some of our work over a South Asian radio station in Glasgow. In those days, there wasn't a fixed station. People would apply for licenses, and it would run for a few months, and then they would expire. And one of these stations gave us the midnight to 1 am slot, which was beyond their closing time. So I thought, *well, what would it be like if you were stuck in a studio, midnight to 6 am, what they call the graveyard shift, just broadcasting music?* And that's what gave me the idea of citing it in a radio station. And I've always been very much driven by music of many different types, and so that suited my over—my passion. And that pressure cooker effect of being in a radio station for six hours during the night, on the last night of the radio station, but able to roam the city cerebrally, psychologically, psychedelically at the same time in different states of reality and so on, with the music driving the narrative, and the songs being relevant to the moods of the character. And that somehow all came together.

And I wrote it really quickly in the summer of 1999. And then, after cogitating on it and showing it to various people, I wrote another part of it very quickly, actually in New York

City, [laughs] in about 10 days in 2023, in the spring, in Chelsea, Manhattan, which is a very creative area of New York. And I think it suited—New York suited the novel because it's a fast-paced urban novel. It's a caffeinated novel. And New York is a caffeinated place. Everything's very fast. And it's very multicultural, obviously, being a world city. So weirdly enough, some of it was written in Glasgow, maybe two thirds, and about one third was written in New York. I was there doing workshops and things in schools and colleges and various other events as part of an anthology of writing—based on writing from Scotland. But I had a lot of free time, and so I was able to write part of it there.

And obviously, you draw on everything, don't you? And you don't really know what you're going to draw on until you actually physically write. And then ideas come, things that you didn't think would—you hadn't planned for. As I say in one of the pieces I'm going to read, I'm not a crime writer. My plot is like a ghost, really. It comes into formation, and then it drifts away again, it's like that. So yeah, so that's how I came to write it. And of course, it's hard work, but I really enjoyed writing. I was on a high when I wrote it. And then on good days, writing does give you a high, that type. Yeah, that's—I drew on different kinds of music, really. Everything from Indian cinema music, playback singers who were great stars in their own right, right from the 1930s onwards, to

psychedelic raga rock from the 1960s and more recently as well, to Scottish folk songs, Gaelic songs.

I was able to roam free in my imagination because of the structure of the book allowed me to do that—and the theme of the book. And *Psychorag*, basically, of course, means—psycho is obviously from the Greek, the mind, or it could have connotations of madness from the film *Psycho* or 'somebody's psycho'. And raga, of course, is the South Asian classical form of North Indian music, which I suppose the equivalent might be a symphony. It's a type of music, a type of structure of music. So *Psychorag* could be a symphony of the mind or a symphony of madness or a raga of madness or whatever you want. Maybe it's all those things. And so there is that idea of liminality. At times, the main character, Zaf, is almost insane. Perhaps he is insane. And the geography of Glasgow is very important as well. I find that especially when you're writing very cerebrally and imaginatively and psychedelically, if you like, you have to have some opposite pole of reality to draw on and root people in five senses. And Glasgow's very good at that. You could never get away from the physicality of the city and of its history and its geology and archeology. As you burrow down into the earth, you go back in time, literally. And so that, at one point, the character, in one of the streams of consciousness, walks through the city as dawn is breaking and through history and

through some of the disused railway lines and all of that stuff. So I suppose that was the conceptual framework of *Psychorag*.

Bashabi Fraser (BF): As you've just said, Zaf loves music; you love music. You have written librettos, lyrics that have been very well received. But going back to Zaf, there is a lovely passage where you say about Zaf, 'He loved music. No, it was more than that,' and I'm quoting you, Suhayl. 'It was because music defined him. His identity lay not in a flag or in a particular concertisation of a transcendent supreme being but in a chord, a bar, a vocal reaching beyond itself.' It's very poetic, and it spells harmony rather than narrow nationalism.

SS: I mean, music can be a very unifying factor. It came from the Stone Age, with people banging on skulls and stones and things. I mean, it can also be a divisive factor. I mean, there are also martial songs, and the military band was invented really by the Ottoman Empire, bashing away on drums and trumpets and stirring soldiers up. And the poets used to lead the legions into war, and we all know about the Celtic poets that did that. So it's not necessarily a unifying force. It can be like anything, any kind of art or human activity, it can go any way you want, any way you use it. It's a tool. But in my conceptual framework, I strive for unity, really, I suppose unity of my own being, whatever that means, and in Zaf's case, unity of his being. The novel is not directly

autobiographical, but of course, you do draw on autobiographical streams when you write this kind of novel, set in your home city, about a South Asian, relatively young person, as I used to be, [laughs] and as Zaf still is forever, he will be.

BF: You are forever young as well.

SS: Oh, thank you, thank you. [Laughs] So he's really drawing together the music on this last night of the radio station. It's about to close forever, and its license has expired. And so he's now playing that night, those six hours, he's playing the music that he loves rather than the music that he thinks people want to hear. And he's stretching his own imagination and perhaps stretching the public's, the listening public's, imagination, whoever might be listening. The backstories about his parents journey in an old car all the way from Pakistan to Scotland, way back, and their elopement as well, love story, going back to Lahore, which is a very historical, romantic city, of course, itself. So yeah, music forms the unifying thread through the novel, which I think is quite obvious. And obviously, the title incorporates it as well, as I said, rag, with its moods, its emotional moods fluctuating, fast, slow, happy, sad, angry, everything, all the human emotions and the five senses are there. It's also a very highly sexualized novel, I think, as well, which—I developed a style of writing which somehow easily dips into that, [laughs] so that it doesn't pull any punches in any way, I think. It says it like it is, and it

doesn't deploy the tropes of political correctness. It's actually, in places, potentially quite offensive.

BF: Your work embodies the journeys that are part of your own experience. In *Psychorag*, Zaf reflects, and I'm quoting you again, 'He was a sample of Pakistan thrown at random into Scotland, into its myths. And in Lahore, he felt like a sample of Glasgow in the ancient city of the conquerors. Yay! The journey from the Clyde to the Ravi was a journey through time, space and spirit. It required a leap of faith, a sword dance, but not with scimitars, but instead of claymores.' So would you, Suhayl, like to share with us the journeys between the Clyde and the Ravi, both metaphoric and physical, which is something you explore as you look at the sense of belonging and of the outsider?

SS: It's a city novel, isn't it? And cities are usually built on rivers for obvious reasons of trade and everything else. And obviously, the Clyde and the Ravi, in relatively recent history, 19th century, 20th century history, were two rivers of Empire, of the British Empire. I know this is a disputed thing, but Glasgow is sometimes known as the second city of Empire, although some will claim it was Calcutta. And the Ravi, obviously, is the river that flows through Lahore and—the historical Lahore. And Lahore being a city originally in northwest India, now in Pakistan, very historical as well, going back many hundreds of years. So yeah, Zaf, the character, obviously, is Scottish, and he's not ever

lived in Pakistan, so his memories are almost metaphorical always and dislocated, his memories of the old country, if you like. Yeah, obviously, the scimitars and the claymores and all of that falls into that. And so he's striving for some kind of unity across 5,000 miles of space and also across time with his parents journey and history, because there's a lot of history in that novel as well, the history of Empire, and before the British Empire as well. It goes back to the times of Alexander the Great, who invaded northern India and conquered it. There was an Indo-Greek empire there for several hundred years. What became Lahore was part of that, so—and as we know, Scotland really goes back a long time before the Scots, [laughs] in fact, Roman times and previously as well. So all of that's in the novel. So yeah, I tried through that poetic prose to encapsulate that flow of history across multiple domains.

And yeah, you're right, I wouldn't say it's an anti-nationalist novel, but it's—a nationalist with a small N—it may be an anti-Nationalist with a big N. It's anti-tribal. I hate tribalism. We all came from tribes, and we all have that in us, and obviously there's a visceral tendency to that, and it can be very easily triggered by unscrupulous politicians and so on, as it is all the time, as we see today everywhere. And this novel, in a way, politically, is probably a blast against that because it shows that actually, the streams flow through everyone all the time. Somebody once said about my writing that you write and write and write and follow something to its logical conclusion, until you hit a

paradox. And that was quite a perceptive thing to say, which I hadn't realised myself. Writers often don't realise these things about themselves or their own writing. It's other people that point it out to them. Or if we realise it, we realise it and then we forget it because there's a necessary forgetting in order to be able to do the art.

BF: I'm now going to ask you, Suhayl, about your first novel, *The Snake*, an experimental erotic fiction. But what is interesting is you use a pseudonym, Melanie Desmoulins.

SS: Desmoulins.

BF: Desmoulins, which signifies a French female identity. Would you like to share the reasons for this choice?

SS: Yeah, well, it's quite interesting because in the mid-1990s, I was trying to get published, and I was trying to write. And obviously, when you start, nobody is very good. You have to go through a lot of writing to become useful [laughs] or competent. But you have to also, at some level, think it's good because if you don't actually strive for it, you won't get anywhere. So I was sending off lots of manuscripts for novels and things and getting rejection letters. In those days, there was no internet, it wasn't widely available, I wasn't on it. So it was all snail mail. And all the agents and publishers

were in London. So I was getting these rejection letters, some of them polite, some of them standard [laughs]. So I did what's probably not a very healthy thing, I blue-tacked them to my walls where I used to write, all these rejection letters, as a challenge. Probably not a very good karmic thing to do [laughs]. But anyway, and then one mid-winter's day, very cold winter's day around the mid-90s, I got hacked off, and I tore all these letters off the wall, took them into the back garden, and burned them on a pyre.

BF: Good for you.

SS: Which was obviously—somebody said, 'You did a spell. You were doing a spell.' I wasn't consciously doing a spell, I was just angry, and I was burning them all. But weirdly enough, a week later, I got my first acceptance letter. Isn't that strange?

BF: Wonderful.

SS: And that was the acceptance letter for *The Snake*, the novel. Now, how I came to write it was I was going to the Paisley Writers Group every week, which was a very, very creative group at that time. People like Jim Kelman and Agnes Owens.

BF: A lot of people have said you write in the same genre as Kelman. Yes.

SS: Yeah. I mean, I think all of that, I might call it Western Scotland urban realism, that came from working class experience, I think you would say, did definitely shape my writing. I mean, Agnes Owens used to run the group when I was there, and she was a very powerful writer, one of the members of that group, and of course Kelman and others. So anyway, I was going to that. And then I decided, *okay, I just want to prove that I can get published. I don't care if it's any good, I just want to prove that I can actually get a book published*, you see? So I went away, and I decided to write a Mills & Boon. So I got 12 Mills & Boons out of the library. Now, this was in the days when the librarian would stamp your book as you took the book out. Most of the librarians were female. So I had loads of these Mills & Boons. I was a guy. It was a bit embarrassing. [Laughs] And the woman was looking at me stamping these Mills & Boon. So I got some very august philosophical and scientific textbooks out as well. I don't think that fooled her.

Anyway, I got these Mills & Boons out and started reading them and tried to write a Mills & Boon. Now, of course at the time, I didn't realise that there is a formula and that people obviously have to follow the formula. It's very—I always admire writers that write those Mills & Boons type books because it's very disciplined, and I just wasn't disciplined enough, and the characters rebelled. So it starts off very gently in a Mills &

Boons-type romantic way, and then it gets darker and darker and darker and more sicker and sicker, if you like, as the characters rebelled. And then of course, I had to go back and revise the beginning. And it becomes—it goes through, various erotic styles of writing, you know, Anaïs Nin and the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille *The Story of the Eye*, classics of erotic literature, which I read, of course, as research.

And I also went into a corner shop in Paisley, and of course, all the corner shops in those days, and maybe still, were run by South Asians. And of course, I'm in a corner shop in the town where my parents lived at the time, where I'd been brought up, and I'm thinking, *gosh, I hope this guy doesn't know my dad*, you know what I mean? [Laughs] I'm picking all these pornographic magazines off the top shelf, as research, of course. So because people write accounts and things, and the writing isn't very good, but it's research, it's grist to the mill. So anyway, then suddenly—there was nobody in the shop, and then suddenly there was a queue, so I was standing with these pornographic magazines in a queue in an Asian corner shop. And one of the guys in front of me looked around and said—I realised that I got to the front of the queue and realised I didn't have enough money. We all had cash. We didn't have credit cards in those days. I didn't have any way—phones didn't exist, mobile phones, really. So I didn't have enough money, so I had to put some of them back, which is even more embarrassing,

with all these people in the queue behind me. And the guy in front says, 'Don't put that one back, it's a really good one.' Anyway, that's the story.

So I did all this research: high quality erotic literature, low quality pornographic magazines. And *The Snake* reflects that. And it broke a lot of barriers for me in terms of writing. I was brought up very middle-class, bourgeois, son of a doctor, you know. So you can imagine that the type of writing that *The Snake* embodies is the diametric opposite of that. It's very, very sexual and physical, and it ranges from high-level erotic literature to base pornography, to be frank, and it maybe falls between those.

So I bashed that out in the summer of 1995, which was one of the hot summers we got in Scotland. We get one a decade, [laughs] and that was the decade. So I was sitting in the garden writing this, the same garden I burned the pile of rejection letters, but in the summer now, writing this erotic pornographic novel very quickly. I wrote it in the space of eight weeks, and while I was also working as well. So—first draft anyway, and then I went back and revised it. I called it *The Snake,* obviously, for obvious reasons: Satan the snake, the serpent in the garden, and obviously the phallic imagery of the snake I suppose as well, you might say. The reason I chose that pseudonym of course was I was a full-time GP at the time, so you can imagine if the red top tabloids had got hold of the news that a full-time GP in Govan, Glasgow had written a pornographic

novel. I didn't really want to be—that was not the way I wanted to enter the world of literature.

BF: I'm going to now talk about a very different novel, *Joseph's Box*, which follows *Psychorag* in a way where a South Asian character encounters mainstream character. And here we have the main character, who is Zulie MacBeth, who's a doctor like yourself, but a woman, and Alex, a lute-playing clerk. And I wondered if you could tell us about the significance of *Joseph's Box*, the eponymous protagonist, almost, as it were, the journeys they undergo – they go through Glasgow, Argyle, Lincolnshire, Sicily, Lahore, that wonderful city which I hope I can one day get to – and Zuli's own troubled history as she deals with it, of her Afghan-Indian identity.

SS: That novel, I think, was inspired by the Persian story of *Yusuf and Zuleikha*.

BF: That's right.

SS: Yusuf is Joseph, the prophet, the Hebrew prophet, Joseph. And in different traditions, there are different side stories and narratives you see. So in the Islamic tradition, Joseph is a, well, he is a prophet, obviously, but he's a magical figure, who has another—a complete other set of stories other than what we read in the Bible, for

example, which is about Pharaoh and all that stuff is in there, but there's other things. So Potiphar's wife in the Islamic tradition is Zuleikha, who becomes besotted with Joseph, and she becomes an acolyte, a disciple of Joseph, who is almost like a cult leader, if you like. And I suppose it's almost a troubadour-like story of unrequited love. And she gives up everything and follows him, and she's quite pathetic really in that way, in her devotion to him. But it's a mirror of the soul's search for God, for enlightenment. That Zuleikha is you and me and everybody, and Yusuf is the beautiful face. He was known for his beauty, of course, spiritual beauty as well as physical beauty, for which we are striving all the time, and it's unrequitable because we never get there. And so that was the basis of it, this story, *Yusuf and Zuleikha*, a famous Persian romance, classical romance.

The idea of the lute, I took, of course, from the instrument, which—the lute came from the oud, which is an Arabic word meaning the 'wood'. And of course, it goes back even further to Central Asia and people bashing on bits of wood and so on and so forth, to one stringed instruments known as ektara, one string, as opposed to sitar, many strings. But so I'm going back to the beginning of music really and that string on top of a mountain, somebody plucking it and singing. And then of course, the oud, through medieval Spain and possibly Sicily, came to Europe, and through the Arab conquests and cultures there, which were themselves syncretic, and evolved into the lute. And

then the lute became a very elaborate instrument, with multiple strings and multiple fretboards, during the period just before the Enlightenment, I suppose just before the Baroque period, after which it declined in popularity. And troubadours in the high medieval times would use the lute. Eleanor of Aquitaine and people like this would hold love courts in the south of France, and the female troubadours, trobairitz as well, whose history was suppressed, of course. And so it became a central instrument in this idea of unrequited love, romantic, physical, human love, but also spiritual love. And the two were enmeshed. And that's a very Sufi idea as well that I think came from Spain to Europe in the form of the troubadours and trobairitz. So that was the base of the novel. The musical base, that was the key, if you like.

And then of course, I set it in contemporary times. And Zuleikha is this woman of part Afghan origin, part Scottish origin. Zuleikha Macbeth, obviously connotations of Macbeth and all of that. And Zuleikha and Alex, who's the guy she meets, who plays the lute. And there's also an account of how the lute is made in a fictional part of the market in Glasgow known as the Barrows, which this fictional part, of course, doesn't exist in reality, although I wish it did. But it's a loot workshop, and the guy's actually carving the wood and putting the strings on. And so the different kinds of music that the lute and the oud and all of its forms played over the years, over the centuries, and over the continents is a mirror for the journey that these two characters embark on.

BF: So you have written extensively in different genres. *The Burning Mirror* collection of short stories, you've written plays for the stage, you have written plays for the radio, and even a libretto, *The Queens of Govan*, for the Scottish Opera in 2007, and you've written poetry. And may I thank you for contributing to *Thali Katori*, which Alan Riach and I co-edited, with extracts from your long poems.

SS: It's a pleasure and an honour again.

BF: Well, for us, it was really enriching. I just wondered if you would like to tell us about how you continue to weave these patterns from everywhere.

SS: I suppose I draw inspiration also from these epics like the *Mahabharata*, because they're disparate, they incorporate little things, they go off on tangents, don't they? They're not always linear. There's a beginning, a middle, and an end. Whereas the novel, the Western construction, it is supposed to be linear; you're supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Although, modernist fiction eschewed that a while ago. So I enjoy going off on tangents because I think that's what our consciousnesses are really like and our lived experiences are like that. We're all tangents coming together in some body, in one body, basically. And it also gives you freedom to roam

and explore other aspects of a character and of interactions between characters. And I suppose the other thing is that although I do do a lot of research, I don't put all that, obviously, into the text because it would be untenable, it wouldn't work. But it's also not to show off how much research I've done. It's when it's useful and when it will drive a narrative or an idea or whatever. But I enjoy pursuing it. I don't just do the research and then abandon it and write the novel, which some people do, and that's great, that's a great skill. But I like to incorporate some of that as well, overtly as well.

BF: How do you balance your work as a doctor with your writing, which is researched so meticulously?

SS: Well, I suppose in a way, I'm very privileged and fortunate to have worked in medicine because it gives you exposure to humanity in every incarnation, from birth to death, literally birth to death and everything in between, and all social classes and people in extremis. And that's a great honor and a privilege, really, to—it humbles one. It does. So there's that. It gives you exposure to narratives and voices. Not that I deliberately draw on patients and make them into characters. I wouldn't do that. It wouldn't work anyway. It wouldn't be ethical. But it affects you, and you wouldn't be human if it didn't, and you remember certain things, and you can draw on those

emotions and those feelings and narratives and situations. So that is one way where it's symbiotic.

But of course, it's very busy, and the time is the main problem. [Laughs] It's almost as though we all should be cats and have nine lives and live them all simultaneously or whatever—or serially. But we don't. We only have one life, and time is limited. And so I was very fortunate that sometimes I would write in the niches after work or at weekends. And in some ways, it's a very self-centred, like all arts, very self-centred, selfish activity. You're not giving that time to your family or—you're giving it to yourself. Sometimes I would be very fortunate in being given grants by artistic bodies, so that helped a bit. And I developed this technique of writing very fast through necessity partly, and partly because it's the way I write, it's the way I am, I do everything fast. Some people, they write very slowly and they cogitate, and I really admire that, but that's not my style. I write really fast, and then I revise it and revise it and revise it. So, I don't know, I'm not—delusions of grandeur, but I think that Mozart used to write slowly, [music] but when he wrote music, it would be perfect, but Beethoven just used to bash it out and then go over it and over and over and score through it and everything. So I'm more towards the Beethoven tendency, I think, although I haven't gone deaf yet, thankfully.

[Music]

Presenter: Bashabi Fraser was talking to Suhayl Saadi. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Suhayl Saadi was in conversation with Bashabi Fraser

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**