

Zubair Ahmed

In official documents my name is Muhmand Zubair. As I grew up, my mother said, "I prefer Ahmed as your name and I wanted to keep your name as Zubair Ahmed." I was born in Lahore, there is one place in Lahore called Krishan Nagar, quite old from 1930s. This is quite pleasant and clean area that was inhabited mostly by Hindus. My parents both of them are from East Punjab. My guardians are from Batala, this is in Gurdaspur district. Although my parents from Gurdaspur, I was born in Lahore and educated here. I was first educated in a school in Krishan Nagar, then I went to college, this was at Civil Lines, Islamia College where I was graduated. After that I went to Punjab University and took up philosophy. But this is 1978 and Pakistan was under Martial Law, conditions were pretty bad and I could not study further. When I was in the college there was a National Students' Organisation (NSF). This was a socialist organisation. We were all students in the 70s. As people say when one is young either he is in love or a poet. That was the kind of romantic era in my life. We were all socialist or we did not regard anything else as important. We were all swayed by socialism. Imagine, when I was in the first year, my age was 15 or 16 years, just after school, I was very much influenced by such thoughts. When I went to University, then there was a bit of alternatives in terms of an Islamic group, they would use some threatening gestures also. In any case, I left the department a bit disheartened. I went to Europe and stayed in Italy for some time, more than a year perhaps and then I returned. I did not like up there. On return, I did my M.A. in English. After that I also completed a Diploma and I got a job as a lecturer, now I am assistant professor, it is 25-26 years I been teaching.

I was always fond of reading and writing from my childhood, I don't know why? As I went to school I remember I always used to have books in my window and in school's cupboard. I remember saying to my teacher, "I like reading books." My teacher made me in-charge of that library. So I would clean these books in the cupboards. I was studying in 6th or 7th year then. While cleaning this cupboard, I was motivated to read these books. These were all in Urdu and I remember reading Monto, Krishan Chandar then *Aag ka dariya*, that was by Abdula Husain. I really became very fond of reading, but this was all in Urdu. As far as Punjabi, it was my mother who spoke Punjabi. She never went to school. So all our family used to speak Punjabi. My father used to tell me that your *mamas* (mother's bothers), they all used to read *Zusaf Zulaikhan*. *Zusaf Zulaikhan* is a book whose author is Maulwi Gulam Rasul, who belongs to Kapurthala in East Punjab and was a classic poet. Now they would read *Zusaf Zulaikhan* and reading it they would cry. So this is part of my family tradition. But my turning towards Punjabi took some time. As I went through college education, we were affected my socialist ideology. But basically, literature was my passion, politics was not. It so happened at that time in Lahore city, there was a small literary circle; this was called new Horizon, *Neh-Ufak*, new Horizon. At that time, I wrote some poetry in Punjabi. This is 1975-76, but my Punjabi was not that good. Then I went abroad. As I returned, I found one of my friends who is still there, his name was Lakhbhasha. He was my political guide as well as teacher; he would coach us in socialist ideology – a kind of training. Then he also talked to me saying, "You see, you can write in Urdu and of course, all are writing in Urdu, who will write in Punjabi?" And he raised the second matter saying, "You see, we want to bring a radical change, how can we bring it about if we don't speak people's language? How can common persons understand us?" And he also criticized a bit. There was a progressive movement and it had subcontinent background, in which there was Faiz Sahib and Monto and Suchid Zahid, Kofi Azmi and remember this was well known progressive movement among writers. He told me, look, in UP or CP this was right thing, this was in their mother tongue but what

happened in Punjab. Those who were progressive and leftist writers and they wanted to bring radical changes, why did not they adopt common people's language? This fellow impressed me with these kinds of arguments and I was really influenced by this and I never looked back. After this in 1988, we established an organisation; this was called Punjabi Parchar Committee. I was its president. We used to go different cities, preached about it, have gatherings there, sell books there; we would hold seminars in white people and asked them to be proud of being Punjabi.

Now, I write stories and poetry too. I am author of two books of story and two poetry books. I write in newspapers, both in English and Punjabi. Other aspect of mine, I am an activist of Punjabi movement and for a long time, I have been a part of this campaign of Punjabi language through Punjabi Parchar committee. In 1977 we opened a bookshop also, and this was called 'Writers Co-operative bookshop (*Likharian di te kitaban di sanjh*)'. You know there was no proper bookshops in Punjabi language. After that there were 2-3 more shops opened. This 'Suchet' people came around, then 'Sanjh' publication was established. I was only a volunteer, you see, I was teaching then at the same time. To carry on this was very hectic. I was pleased to see that full time people have come for this purpose. So I stopped worrying this side. In 1980s whatever was happening in support of Punjabi language, and there was demonstrations, there were newspapers, there were shops, I was part of that as a witness, as a participant and as an activist.

Pakistani Punjabi Adbi Board is an organisation. At present this is a very respectable organisation. This came into being in 1975. I want to talk about Punjabi movement which will make clear how Punjabi movement going in this province. You see, when partition of Punjab took place (1947), all creative writers who lived in Lahore have migrated, you will know Mohan Singh used to publish a magazine here, Kartar Singh Dugal was a resident of Lahore, Balwant Gargi was educated in this college. Ajit Kaur used to live at Nisbit Road. And all those who were leftist and were communist, they were mostly Hindus and Sikhs. So during partition they were migrated to Punjab. In the new state of Punjab, Urdu became the dominate language and Punjabi was side-lined. And most of people started saying our real language is Urdu only and the rest of languages such as Punjabi, Hindi, Sindhi, Balochi and Pashto, they were all *kafairs'* (non-believers') languages. So people who were attached to the power, they were all united in this. So Punjabi was for Punjabis and we were Punjabi so what we did, Baba Faqir Mohamad started a magazine in 1951 or 52, this was called 'Punjabi'. This would appear off and on. But this was the first activity started in Punjabi, then in late 1950s, one *Punjabi Majlis* came around, it would have weekly meetings. Some people would come together, talk and I think they published one collection of poetry in 1958. When the first Martial Law was imposed, this organisation was banned labelling it as communist. You see rulers were feeling bit threatening from Punjabi language. Still in 1960s, 1961-62, 63, a Punjabi Academy was established. This was sponsored by a bureaucrat from Islamabad. Some money was made available for this. With this money old classical literature started to be published. Among these publications, the best book was Waris Shah's *Heer*. This was edited by Abdul Aziz Barat Law. Of all the editions of *Heer*, this edited book, remains the best among all the texts of that classic Punjabi literature. In all other editions, there all sort of additions, errors and unauthorized mixtures. There all sort of *Heer* editions available under so many names. And then Bulle Shah's book was published. Through these publications, in a way, Punjabi was reborn in this province. And in 1964, there used to be writers' Guild, this was established by Ajub Khan. And then there was Shaukat Aziz Mirza, who was in-charge of its Punjabi chapter, who decided in 1964 that we should celebrate Shah Husain's anniversary. As a result there was gathering in Lahore Museum. There was a prostitute in Hira Mandi, who was invited

for same. Her name was Anait Bai Berowali. She came and as she recites Shah Husain's *Kafi*, people were astonished. After the event people were talking where from this woman was studied. So they concluded, there was an old tradition which still continues. In 1963, this was for the first time, a demand was put saying, Punjabi is our mother tongue and this should be taught in Primary schools to our young children. Practically what happened, Mirza Sahib was expelled from this organisation. Because this organisation was established by Ajub Khan and whose head was some Urdu speaker and he ordered the expulsion of Shaukat Mirza. When Shaukat was expelled, it led to a major controversy. At that time there was someone called Sabdalbir. He was a big name in leftist circles and used to work in Pakistan Times. He was quite a fire brand who started writing articles and this resulted in lot of talks around the issue and this led to the Punjabi movement. So the result of expulsion of Shaukat Mirza meant two things. First was the establishment of Punjabi Adbi Sangat which later produced many writers. Punjabi Adbi Sangat used to meet at YMC on the Mall Road, where they used to be weekly meeting. That place is still there, where writers used to go and they would read two or three things there. Among those who used to go there was Sukhan Sahib, then Nazam Husain Sayad read his poems there, Usak Muhammad also read his poetry, then there was Siflat Ulat Zaigam, he read his poems there and they are all dead now. Second thing happened there was celebration of Shah Husain. Shah Husain was a poet of Lahore, a big name here. There used to be fair around him. This was a big event before partition. People from Amritsar and Lahore would go together. It was well known that Maharaja Ranjit Singh would make pilgrimage there and go by bare feet. All the way, he would throw gifts around. The poet's full name is Madho Lal Husain. He was a major dissident and there was a *Majlis* around Shah Husain. Shah Husain published many books and this was the first organisation. This *Majlis* also established a college in Shah Husain's name. Several well-known professors were appointed there. There was Prof. Alexpreen. And then there was Amin Mughal who lives in London now a days. Then there was Prof. Manjoor Sahib. As the college was established, there was campaign that only Punjabi should be taught there. There used to be drama play there, so this Punjabi Adbi Sangat and Shah Husain Majlis exists in 1967-68 and this is the period when the world was celebrating Chinese and Russian revolution. Mao-es-Tang was in his prime, Latin America was in rebellion. In America Martin Luther King was proclaiming, "I have a dream." In Africa, there were people who were preaching, "Black is also beautiful." This was the period I am talking and this Punjabi Movement came then. Several people joined them, they were from middle class, upper middle class, educated at government college and then Husain Sayad was among them who started writing in Punjabi. Now we enter in 1970s, many people thought that this movement is now so strong that Punjabi will triumph. But when in East Pakistan, Rehman became victorious and political developments in Pakistan broke down into Pakistan and Bangladesh. Then Bhutto arrived, but things never returned to what was in 1960s. Shaukat Mirza passed away, he used to say that Rehman will become Prime minister because he was a Bengali and we thought that Bengalis love their language and we will develop our own Punjabi. But Bhutto wanted Punjabi, but upper class Punjabis here or you can call Punjabi politicians or elite class never agreed him. So we lost our last chance in a way, that was a golden chance. Bhutto really wanted some change but that never happened. After that Punjabi Movement carried on. We wrote and read Punjabi, but nothing big happened, only Punjab University established its Punjabi department whose head is now Najab Husain Sayad. Second thing was sixth class to B.A. degree, Punjabi was offered as an optional subject.

I learned Gurmukhi in 1985-86, then there were not many books for Gurmukhi learned, after this some books became available. I was, as a story writer, I was interested to read story writers from the other side. It was quite an accident when I picked up all stories of Kulwant Singh Virk which was published from Navyug by Bhapa Pritam Singh. I got that book in photocopy form. I read it from cover to cover. After that, other story writers including Gurdial Singh, Ajit Kaur, then Balwant Gargi, Waryam Singh Sandhu, Jindal, Prem Parkash as many as I could have access to. Then in 2006, I went to East Punjab and I brought lot of books from there, read them to keep in touch with East Punjab writers. What the problem is, the stories or the novels which are written in Eastern Punjab we can quote them as an international context. For me, the biggest university is the company I have of Najam Sahib. As I never studied Punjabi at school or university, but the company of my elders that is where I picked up Punjabi. Whatever I am, I owe all it to that of them. Najam Sahib had tried to evolve new criticism and created a new language of it. You read his books, whatever is happening in West such as structuralism, post-structuralism, reconstruction etc. he has tried to put it in Punjabi, taking care not to use of too much of Persian or Arabic words nor of Sanskrit. So he has created a terminology which is very near to Punjabi. Here we have kept near to Punjabi which is rooted to its culture. Here we made one word, which included Najam Sahib and his friends, then there was Asib Khan- he was a scholar and linguist and we created a specific word from *Rehat* and *Wehat*, the word was *Rehtak*. This was the word we coined, I read this word in some books of East Punjab also. Then there was the word *Adab*, we coined a word *Sulekh*. Then we have word called *Shayar*. In East Punjab they say *kavi* and they call *Kavita*, we call it *nazam* and the poet is *shayar*. Then there is another word *jod-lafat*, *jodanhar* and Waris Shah has coined this beautifully saying '*fikra todh ke khub drusat kita, koyi ful gulab da toraya ei*', there is line like this which we have used.

What I emphasise we can try to coin our own terminology, this is the least we can do and we have a good example set by Najam Husain Sayad. He has created a Punjabi terminology which is right for criticism, but what is happening in 'East Punjab' that they are not working hard enough, they are borrowing easily. And this borrowing is not doing any good for Punjabi. You go to five or ten miles away from Lahore, Punjabi is spoken in our villages, although it is accepting some English words, but still we have 70% or 80% proper Punjabi language.

As a child goes to school, you say to him, "the word you have learnt at school, speak them." There are 4000 or 5000 words which only create an inferiority complex in him. The child thinks language spoken by his parents is different from school language, so that must be inferior. And what I have learnt is also inferior, so education means we are alienating them from our culture. So what we need to do, teach the child in proper mother tongue and it should be the language which they already speak, which would help them to read. So we would not forcing them a new language to learn, then we ask a child to learn in a new language as medium of instruction which is usually Urdu or English. This is sheer high-headedness, a kind of imposition and threatens existential right. It is important a child should learn in his mother tongue, we should grant him this right. This would mean a better education also. There is story of Najumidin Ahulia who approached by a person who asked him, 'I want to become Muslim.' Ahulia said, "I am not converting anyone to Islam, I am giving a message of love. If I will try to convert you, my object will surely be perished." Then Baba Farid also said, "I have in my hand a needle and a thread, I don't have a scissors. I am trying to join things not cut them out." All these people have the commonality where they have said nothing against religion, it is a secular literature. It deals with issues of life. We call in Punjabi- *Khehna* as '*uh Kheh reha aapne vajat ch, reha uh sada literature jihda uhdi kahani karda*.'

In old Punjab, we had the main occupation of agriculture, it was all related to land and if you see images in our poetry, they all are derived from land. It is there in Farid, in Nanak, in Damodar, does not matter if it is of different religion, we read them together. We don't read them that this is Muslim and that is non-Muslim. If we read Bulle Shah, that there could not be a bomb out Masjid. There would not have any difference between *Siya* and *Suni*. We have addressed all religions- Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christians, Buddhism as our society is diverse and believe in all of them. They live with them, sing them, read them, publish, that is our real culture. This was not born in separatism; this was old ways of Hindustan. It was a cultural mix. One thing impressed the other and two together made this culture and we lived among that. It means everyone is equal and the God or *khuda* is inside a human being, while human being is a God, this was our basic understanding.

We read Baba Nanak the same way as the other babas, Baba Farid, Bulle Shah and this is our folklore tradition. And we have Ranjit Singh. He was a king. He never himself named as a king. He had his *darbar*. After that period it is the English rule began when the difference over religion started- a sense of exclusion came. These are Muslims, these are Hindus and others are Sikhs. This process of identification was laid down by English rule. As English started granting rights, they granted on the strength of groups. So there was a Mohamdans' society in 1906, out of which later the Muslim League was formed. Then as the partition took place and Pakistan was created, on the other side Hindustan became an independent, then it is my idea that Sikhs felt that their dream has broken. They felt we wanted to build a Punjab state. What Punjab state was created by them (by Indian politicians), there was sense of discrimination. I understand what is Punjabi literary tradition, this includes everyone. If you exclude Bulle Shah, exclude Waris Shah and you only stick to certain other writers, I feel that is not justified, it is not fair. We have some poets who can never be reduced to their religion identity. For example Bulle Shah. Now Bulle Shah does not recognise Masjid, he does not go to be studied under a Maulvi, in fact he fears maulvi. Waris Shah is not read in Masjid. It is not sung there and there are so many other poetic stanzas and writings which blast against the Maulvi. So this tradition which is derived from Waris Shah that cannot be called a Muslim tradition. I can only call it as Punjabi literary tradition.

In Punjabi Literary tradition, in some ways what is happening in East Punjabi, they have much written ahead of us. There are several names who have written very well- Amrita Pritam, Ajit Kaur and Dalip Kaur Tiwana. On our side there are not that many women as they should be. We can only hope they start. In poetry they are there, but in term of story writers, there are few women. We are not satisfied about that. In Urdu, this has already happened, there are many women who are defining themselves as feminist and they are writing very well. In Punjabi, there is a gap yet. The reason is our Punjabi language has not become a language yet. For Punjabi there is issue of commitment. People who are writing, they are writing only because of personal commitment. Some women have come, such like Parvin Malik, Afsar Tasrib and there are few other names, then there is Tasrib Ajab Bhatti who is a revolutionary poet. There is Shakaro Sakutafa, she has done Punjabi proud. Few other women have written books. On the whole, it is not that much.

I spent my childhood in Krishan Nagar, we lived in a house which was sold later. Later I came to know that it was a jointly owned building, not exclusively our house. I lived in that house for 20-22 years and house was sold in the 1980s. I felt very bad about that, angry so much that I never went into that street for several years. I was living in Lahore but never visited that place. I felt sad that I had lived in that place and this relationship was broken as it was sold. I did not go there for 10 years.

In that period I wrote several stories about that house. I wrote a story called '*Minh Buhe te Barian*, then there is another story '*Buha band eh*,' wrote several stories, which my friends think are out of nostalgia, but I don't wrote story out of nostalgia, but I like to write stories about contemporary times and try to catch how things have changed. I feel as things change, a person's thinking does not change as much. A person fixes those things in his vision, and with his difference, there is sadness, a pain. You move from one place to another, you notice changes there, but you have a vision of things before that. This creates a painful feeling. You have to compromise with that pain. It takes time to come to terms with that, I write a story of that pain. Secondly, Krishan Nagar for me is a metaphor. It is part of Lahore city, it is one street of Lahore which has changes and that change has taken place all over Lahore. So I tried to catch time. I tried to analysis character of that past time and how human beings are attached to places- a sense of home. So you may understand my Krishna Nagar as a reservoir, as a water well in which there is some water, and I used this to write stories. And this story captures changes as well as stability that was part of it. To my mind stories we are writing now, there are imitations, I did not want to write that kind of stories because I have read English literature. I knew Western tradition, you cannot write realistic story any more, you need to change it in some way. In a story there is beginning, and middle and the End. This is Greek formula for a traditional story and this is same for drama and at that time I felt, I should break this structure, I tried to break this through my story '*Minh, Buhe te Barian*', that is written in present time. Through a narrator who sitting in front of Window, and the narrator is talking about an old situation and there is one sentence where he says, 'So where have they gone all?' then after some time he says, 'where are they now?' So he is trying to be conscious of time interval- a sort of stream of consciousness, you can say. Then my second book came of short stories, in this I went back even further. I went back to Gurdaspur where my parents lived. I dedicated this book even to Gurdaspur. I feel to talk about one's roots or discover one's root is not reactionary or backward thing. We have a very ancient culture, Lahore had very rooted culture, one household used to cook *saag* and *alan*- and they used to share with others. There was much exchange in neighbours. People used to ask others' pains and pleasures. And if I feel that this sense of commonality has gone with modern culture, we don't know who is my neighbour anymore and we are very alienated. If like Sweden now, where people pass away, and you discover so many days after. That is not a culture of Punjab I had seen. There is much integrated relationships. So I am writing about changed Lahore, I am talking about modern Lahore as well as Lahore when we can close our eyes and cross the road. Now I have to stop five minutes to cross the road. A person coming from village may not realise this who had no knowledge of old places as they have changed. I had seen inside of Mall road. Its trees had thousands of sparrows who used to make chirping noise. Now where those birds have gone and where those trees have gone and who have cut those trees, which were part of our landscape. So the stories I write is story of Lahore. Indeed of 'Lahores' that have changed over time. I tried to sketch that. Secondly story has its own structure. I feel fascinated by that. And I am always trying to narrate a story through new moves. For an example, it is an old tradition of folklore stories say about Gautam Budh, you might have heard folklore story of a person meeting Gautam Budh. He says, "this is my pain and this is an event happened to me." Budh replies, "this matter has happened already." Then Gautam tells him full story this is about an animal or a bird. So this is one way of saying a story. I read lot of folk tales from where I got an inspiration, my endeavour is to break the old structure to tell in a new way. You can decide whether I have succeeded or not or people can tell whether I have been successful or not. This is my wish though I am not sure whether I can fulfil it that I should write a novel of Punjab for the last 5000 years which should start from Harappa. It should have some sort of structure like

Kura Turan Hadar's *aag ka daraya* in Urdu. He had written this novel in 1950, may be someone has written in East Punjab something like that, but I have not seen any. Still I want someone should write like that. It should embrace whole of our history from Harappa then Buddhist, then Vedic period, then Muslim, Sikh Period, the British and so on. This narrative should be in a novel. I know in other languages such literature exists. In Hungary, there is such novels like that which covers seven generations. But we have not attempted anything like that, we should.