



Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London

By Mohsin Hamid

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From “one of his generation’s most inventive and gifted writers” (*The New York Times*), intimate and sharply observed commentary on life, art, politics, and “the war on terror.”

Mohsin Hamid’s brilliant, moving, and extraordinarily clever novels have not only made him an international bestseller, they have earned him a reputation as a “master critic of the modern global condition” (*Foreign Policy*). His stories are at once timeless and of-the-moment, and his themes are universal: love, language, ambition, power, corruption, religion, family, identity. Here he explores this terrain from a different angle in essays that deftly counterpoise the personal and the political, and are shot through with the same passion, imagination, and breathtaking shifts of perspective that gives his fiction its unmistakable electric charge.

A “water lily” who has called three countries on three continents his home—Pakistan, the birthplace to which he returned as a young father; the United States, where he spent his childhood and young adulthood; and Britain, where he married and became a citizen—Hamid writes about overlapping worlds with fluidity and penetrating insight. Whether he is discussing courtship rituals or pop culture, drones or the rhythms of daily life in an extended family compound, he transports us beyond the scarifying headlines of an anxious West and a volatile East, beyond stereotype and assumption, and helps to bring a dazzling diverse global culture within emotional and intellectual reach.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Hamid is an amazingly gifted writer, and *Discontent and Its Civilizations* is a near-perfect essay collection, filled with insight, compassion, and intellect. It's a powerful look at the way people juggle their individuality with the tensions that inevitably result from being part of a community." —NPR

"Often compelling ... Its strongest entries reflect the same subtleties of thought [as his novels], laid down in his lapidary, crystalline prose. ... The chapters about Mr. Hamid's own life and his meditations on Pakistan's tumultuous recent history ... command attention — and call out for a volume of their own."—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"Powered by innate wisdom and informed opinion ... solid, questioning, explorative writing that not only picks fault and apportions blame but also offers tentative solutions. ... The Hamid that emerges is a probing, critical political animal, one that is resistant to foreign intervention in Pakistan, anxious for more pluralism and tolerance within its borders, prepared to find good in the 'brutal phenomenon' that is globalization, and mystified—rightly—by 'illusory' civilizations." —*Daily Beast*

"Hamid is a deft and fluid novelist, unafraid to take on big topics...[In] *Discontent and Its Civilizations* ...[he] make[s] a case for the way big issues unfold across individual lives. And yet his intent is not to trace the evolution of the war on terror but how it alters us on the most intimate terms." —*LA Times*

"Elegant, piercing [and] often funny." —*The Chicago Tribune*

"The author of three groundbreaking novels...[Hamid] compels readers to see the global need for empathy as well as the need to acknowledge that we are all hybrid beings. And it is this blended approach—personal essays bolstered by research...that makes Hamid's argument so successful...[T]his book is essential...important and urgent." —*The Brooklyn Rail*

"Whether the essays are brief, evocative op-eds or longer essays on literature and Pakistan's history, they are always concerned, at their core, with the rippling impact of globalization ...offering perspectives...that are little heard in the West... No matter where we live, Hamid's insights are a testament to our shared responsibility and humanity." —*Biographile*

"The author of the buzzed-about novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* applies his global perspective to illuminating essays." —*O Magazine*

"Whether writing about global politics or theories of narrative, Mohsin Hamid is that rare writer who's comfortable in both worlds. This collection of over a decade's worth of his nonfiction is essential, expansive reading." —*Vol 1. Brooklyn*

"[A] must read." —*Conde Nast Traveler*

"One of the most successful and inventive young novelists...[In *Discontent*] his self-deprecating and witty tone is utterly engaging." —*The New York Review of Books*

“Poignant and funny.” —Kojo Nnamdi, WAMU

“A mesmerizing read.. Hamid seamlessly fuses the personal and the political...[his] perspective is essential to better understand our world.” —*The Progressive*

“Vital...The essays' trenchant cultural commentaries and beguiling memory pieces illuminate Pakistan's present and past from both personal and political angles....On almost every page, Hamid's mind is as fresh in its perspective and limber in its logic as in his fiction...[and] delivers a portrait of a country that's impossible to reduce to a tidy set of traits.” —*Oregon Live*

“These essays are vivid, full of sumptuous aphorisms on the role art can play in life.... The author's best essays—like his fiction—shine by demolishing the boundaries.” —A.V. Club

“Perceptive and inspiring.” —*Harvard Crimson*

“Superb.” —*Bookforum*

“[Hamid] is one of the most celebrated, inventive writers of the times.” —Ozy.com

“Tearing down stereotypes and assumptions, Hamid gives an insider's look that is truly unique.” —*Brit & Co.*

“The short, crisp essays in *Discontent* are empathic yet critical reflections on family, nationalism, sex, economics, Islamophobia, literature, violence and other expressions of humanity...Affable and concise, Hamid also proves he is a journalist capable of distilling politically charged conflict into a compelling, measured form...par[ing] his viewpoints to give readers not oversimplifications but, rather, perspective.” —*Shelf Awareness*

“Sharp...pithy [and] erudite.” —*Christian Science Monitor*

“Remarkable...thought-provoking, even entertaining...a collection to be savored and to be reread.” —About.com

“Smart doesn't begin to describe Hamid; he is the sort of thinker that could change hearts and minds.” —*Booklist*

“Mohsin Hamid is an important writer, not just in his conversational style that combines his personal convictions and depth of knowledge, but also in vantage point.” —*Ask Men*

“Extremely insightful and illuminating.” —*Book Riot*

“Eloquently written and richly informed...For longtime Hamid readers, this is a great compilation for getting reacquainted...For new readers, it is an excellent introduction...[to] an intelligent and impassioned writer whose work deserves a wide readership.” —*Library Journal*

“Honest and candid...Passion and hope infuse Hamid's most incisive dispatches.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“[*Discontent*] give[s] a vivid sense of life lived close to the headlines...the recurring theme — that individuals matter more than the groups we try to assign them to — is as relevant as ever. And...the

writing... is as simple, immediate and moving as any of Hamid's fiction." —*Financial Times*

"A heartfelt celebration of diversity and the power of the imagination." —*The Guardian*

"In contrast with the debased language of extremism, militarism and nationalism, [Hamid's] is a humane and rational voice demanding a better future." —*Sunday Telegraph* (UK)

"Vivid touches...elevate Hamid's intelligent... commentaries above the commonplace...*Discontent* suggests Mohsin Hamid is reasonable, intelligent...and humble. In short, just the sort of commentator the world could do with right now." —*The Independent* (UK)

"Lucid, informative and drily funny, these essays show that Hamid is one of the most perceptive commentators on contemporary global politics" —*The Sunday Times* (UK)

"Elegantly crafted essays confront everything from the future of Pakistan and the death of Osama bin Laden to fatherhood and falling in love. The insights into Hamid's literary style and influence will delight devotees of his work and intrigue newcomers...Hamid makes a compelling case for pushing back against the mono-identities of religion, nationality and race and for embracing the things that all human beings share" —*The Prospect* (UK)

"Accessible, wise and beautifully clear." —*Metro* (UK)

Praise for *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

"A showcase for its author's audacious talents...both an affecting and highly specific tale of love and ambition, and a larger metaphorical look at the startling social and economic changes that are...changing the lives of millions."

—Michiko Kakutani, "10 Favorite Books of 2013," *The New York Times*

"Extraordinarily clever." —*The Washington Post*

"Marvelous and moving." —*Time*

About the Author

Mohsin Hamid is the internationally bestselling author of *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. His award-winning novels have been adapted for the cinema, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and translated into more than thirty languages. His essays and short stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New Yorker*, among many other publications. Hamid now resides in Lahore, his birthplace, after living for a number of years in New York and London.

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Art and the Other Pakistans

(The Ones That Don't Make the Headlines)

Looking back, it's obvious to me now that the Pakistan of my teens was bursting with art. I had a burly cousin who used to play (incongruously) with inks and watercolors in the afternoons when he got home from school. I had an aunt who was in the habit of telling over and over again the story of her random encounter with the famous artist Sadequain, an encounter that resulted in him executing what was surely his version of

an autograph: a quick drawing depicting my aunt as a Nefertiti-necked goddess holding a flower above a line of calligraphy. I had seen the legendary painter Chughtai's long-eyed ladies smiling out from drawing room walls, offering half-lidded innuendoes to easily flustered young men like me. And I had in the backdrop of my youth the Lahore Museum, the marvelous old city, the trucks and cinema billboards covered in bold, pelvis-thrusting iconography.

But at the time, art felt to me like something that belonged either to the past or to other places, because my teens were in the 1980s, and Pakistan in the 1980s had the misfortune of being governed by a mustachioed dictator with dark bags under his eyes and a fondness for dystopian social reengineering. General Zia-ul-Haq claimed to be acting in the name of Islam, and even though the history of Islam in our part of the world stretched back over a thousand years, we were told that our Islam wasn't Islamic enough, indeed that we Muslims weren't Muslim enough, and that he would make of our Pakistan the "land of the pure" that its name suggested—or ruin us all trying.

Under Zia, flogging, amputation, and stoning to death became statutory punishments. Acts disrespectful to symbols of Islam were criminalized. Public performances of dance by women were banned. News in Arabic, the language of the Koran but spoken by virtually no one in Pakistan, was given a prime-time slot on television. Thugs belonging to the student wings of religious parties seized control of many college campuses. Heroin and assault rifles flooded the streets, "blowback" from Pakistan's alliance with the United States against the Soviets in Afghanistan. My parents reminisced about how much more liberal Lahore had been in their youth.

When General Zia was blown to bits shortly after my seventeenth birthday in 1988, he wasn't mourned, at least not by anyone I knew. I left for college in the United States a year later. There I met people who were studying photography and sculpture, and I myself enrolled in classes on creative writing. Without thinking about it, I supposed an education in these "artistic" pursuits was something in which only affluent societies in the West could afford to invest, or, rather, that only the twin luxuries of material success and tolerance of free expression could provide the sort of soil in which an artistic education could thrive.

I was, of course, completely wrong. When I returned to Pakistan in 1993, I was working on what would become my first novel. I thought of writing as a transgressive act. I wrote at night, often from midnight to dawn, and in between writing sessions I would escape into the darkness with my friends. We drove around town in old Japanese cars, hung out on our rooftops, and searched for places beyond the reach of societal control or parental observation. Cheap local booze and even cheaper slabs of hash were the intoxicants of choice in that young urban scene, and avoiding the predations of the bribe-taking police was an alarming and amusing preoccupation.

Increasingly I found my wanderings taking me into the world of the National College of Arts. A couple of my friends were enrolled there, one studying architecture, another graphic design. Others were dating students: painters, printmakers. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. Students of all social classes, and from all parts of Pakistan, attended NCA. The place was a microcosm of Pakistan, but of a creative Pakistan, an alternative to the desiccated Pakistan General Zia had tried to ram down our throats. Here people who prayed five times a day and people who escaped from their hostels late at night to disappear on sexual adventures in the city could coexist. In the studios I saw calligraphy and nudes, work by students with purely formal concerns, and by others for whom art overlapped with politics. I was inspired. I wrote like crazy. I made friends I have kept for life.

Love comes to mind when I think of that time. There was a lot of it going on among the people I hung out with. But I was also falling in love with Pakistan. I have always had a stubborn affection for the land of my

birth. When I went abroad for college, I thought I knew it pretty well. But it was my encounters with the denizens of the NCA universe after my return that reminded me that Pakistan is too vast a country to be known, that it is full of surprises, of kinks and twists, of unexpected titillations and empathic connections, of a diversity that can only be described as human. It was exciting and vital and real.

Or rather, they were exciting and vital and real—for my Pakistan had become plural. The art, and artists, I found at NCA ushered me into many more Pakistans: the nascent underground music scenes, the emerging film and television scenes, the scenes of writers like myself, and of course the scenes of other art and other artists, not just in Lahore but in Karachi and Islamabad and elsewhere, and not just in 1993 but in the rest of the nineties, the noughties, and now.

Just a few months ago I was in Amsterdam with two old friends from the Lahore art world. On a warm summer night we checked out some galleries and walked along the canals, whirring bicycles and shrooming teenagers passing us in the darkness. Nothing could have been more different from where we had all been fifteen years earlier. And nothing could have been more similar, either.

(2009)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Eileen Lopez:

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Joan Burton:

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