



AIPS Grantee Final Report

In order to better report and highlight AIPS-sponsored programs with our funding agencies and AIPS members, please provide the information requested in this form. Information provided in this report may be posted on the AIPS website and/or submitted to our granting agency. All required materials should be sent via email to aips@pakistanstudies-aips.org. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact us!

Final Report Requirements

1. Complete the form below regarding details of your program. Please return this as a Microsoft Word document (doc or .docx).
2. Provide a one paragraph to one-page report highlighting the significance of this presentation on Pakistan Studies.

AIPS Grantee Information

Name:

Mushtaq Bilal

Affiliate Institution in U.S.:

Binghamton University, NY

Affiliate/Host Institution in Pakistan (If Applicable):

Nil

Research Field:

Comparative Literature

Conference:

Annual Conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP)

Paper Title(s):

Why I Self-Censor

Panel Title (if applicable):

Mangoes or Pizza: Battling Self-Censorship to Write/Right the Self

Date of Conference or Presentation:

March 3-7, 2021

Summary of Program and Significance on Pakistan Studies

The panel “Mangoes or Pizza: Battling Self-Censorship to Write/Right the Self” was organized by Farah Habib who is a professor of English at Bristol Community College, Massachusetts. It was part of the Annual Conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) that was held from March 3-7, 2021. It is important to mention that out of more 270 panels organized during the AWP 2021 this was the only one dedicated to Pakistani literature and writers.

I was joined by two other writers, Soniah Kamal and Sehba Sarwar. The panel sought to explore the challenges that Pakistani writers face while writing authentically about Pakistan. As part of my presentation, I was asked to respond to four questions. The questions along with the gist of my responses are given below:

Q: *How do you identify yourself?*

A: A simple way to answer this question could be that I identify as a “Pakistani” but then the question is what is a “Pakistani identity?” Like gender identities, national identities are also inherently performative, provisional, and unstable. And our lived experiences are always in excess of whatever

identity label we choose. I can say that I am a “Pakistani” but then there will always be certain experiences that this identity label will not admit into itself. Identities are themselves fictions and constructs. There is no “Pakistani” or “American” identity “out there.” These identities are always constructed discursively. The danger in using these identity labels is that the moment we identify ourselves as X, Y, or Z, from there it is a very slippery slope towards stereotypes.

Q: *Have you ever felt the pressure to self-censor?*

A: I always self-censor when I am writing. When I am writing about Pakistan it is impossible for me to not censor. In one of my articles there was a line about how copies of the Urdu translation of Mohammed Hanif’s novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* were seized by the military intelligence. I asked my editor if I could mention this, and he said he would not be able to publish it. A few years ago, I interviewed a number of Pakistani novelists and asked them if they self-censored while writing. Some writers said they write whatever they want to and that they had never self-censored. But Bapsi Sidhwa who is one of the pioneers of Pakistani English fiction said that with every new novel, the extent of self-censorship increased in her work. Another writer, Kamila Shamsie, said that the really effective regimes of censorship are the ones that get ingrained in our unconscious minds and sometimes we don’t even recognize that we are self-censoring. Mohsin Hamid’s response was also quite interesting and productive. He says that he always self-censors but then he also tries to be as attentive as possible to his own processes of self-censorship. He said that if speaking honestly is not possible then as writers our job is to find ways to speak as honestly as possible and to include in that speech the announcement that we are not allowed to speak freely.

Q: *Do you feel the pressure to serve as “ambassadors” to white society?*

A: I don’t think of myself as an ambassador or representative of Pakistan or Pakistani culture. It would be unforgivably presumptive on my part to assume that I, Mushtaq Bilal, can represent the experiences of 220 million Pakistanis of diverse ethnicities and cultures and languages. What do I know about the culture of the Kalash people in Pakistan and the Chuhras and the Baloch people? If the white, hegemonic society wants someone like me to provide representations of a quintessential Pakistani experience and I end up taking up the role of that representative then I have already subscribed to the hegemonic logic. What is important for me is to interrogate this hegemonic logic as much as possible.

Q: *How has your response to self-censorship shifted over time?*

A: I am becoming more and more aware of the ways censorship works and, in my work, I try to understand the reasons that lead to self-censorship and, of course, then one tries to develop strategies to negotiate censorship.

My presentation along with those of Soniah Kamal, Sehba Sarwar, and Farah Habib highlighted the challenges that Pakistani writers face with regard to self-censorship and by doing so contributed towards the promotion of Pakistan Studies. The panel was attended by more than 90 people from across the world and we received an overwhelmingly positive response. After the panel we were asked by the editor of *The Writer’s Chronicle*, the flagship journal of the AWP, to adapt our presentations into an article.