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The Storytellers of Empire

By Kamila Shamsie

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Captivated by an image of an atom bomb falling on Japan, Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie asks American writers why, “Your soldiers will come to our lands, but your novelists won’t.”

A disquieting thing happened to me in 2004. I had just finished my fourth novel and, unaccustomed as I was to any space of time in which I didn’t know what I would write next, I found myself searching for the single image which would lead me into a novel. Somewhat bewilderingly, instead of a single image I found myself thinking about the atom bomb falling on Nagasaki. There were a number of reasons for this—or at least, I have a number of theories about why this was so. But at the time the only thing which seemed relevant was the fact that I didn’t know anything about Nagasaki other than that a bomb fell there, yet somehow that falling bomb was getting in the way of my ability to alight on the image from which a novel would emerge.

“Of course you’ve read John Hersey’s Hiroshima,” a friend of mine said when I mentioned that atom bombs had taken up residence in my mind. I hadn’t. But I went and found it in a bookshop; it was appealingly slim enough to buy and bring home. As I read it in a single sitting I found, on page forty-six, this image of Hiroshima minutes after the bomb fell:

“On some undressed bodies, the burns had made patterns of undershirt straps and suspenders and, on the skin of some women (since white repelled the heat from the bomb and dark clothes absorbed it and conducted it to the skin), the shapes of flowers they had had on their kimonos.”

In my memory, the moment I read that line an image came of a woman facing away from me, three bird-shaped burns on her bare back from the pattern of the kimono she was wearing at the moment the bomb fell. That was it—the originating image. That I knew practically nothing about Nagasaki, had never been to Japan, was aware of the accumulation of stereotypes that surrounded my idea of that country and my almost total ignorance about its history, geography, weather patterns, language, foliage, cuisine, art forms was daunting to say the least. But Hersey had given me my originating image, and very quickly it started to exert a magnetic force, tugging at other images and ideas and elements of plot and character until a tiny universe was wheeling around it, impossible to ignore. Eventually it went on to become my fifth novel, *Burnt Shadows*, which started in Nagasaki in 1945 and ended with a man on his way to Guantánamo in 2002.

This is not in any way to suggest the significance of John Hersey’s work lies in its connection to my work—merely to acknowledge a debt of thanks.

With my left eye I saw the America of John Hersey; with my right eye I saw the America of the two atom bombs.

Of course, the significance of Hiroshima lies in its extraordinary achievement in “bearing witness”—Hersey’s deliberately flattened tone is almost transparent, allowing us to see the images of the bombing of Hiroshima with as little mediation as possible. The line cited above illustrates this perfectly. Note the almost clinical detachment of “white repelled the heat from the bomb and dark clothes absorbed it and conducted it to the skin.” There is no need for anything more to be said, or any more emotive tone to be employed. As the actor Tara Fitzgerald recently remarked, “Melodrama is busy, tragedy isn’t.” Hersey’s pared down writing always stays on the right side of the tragedy-melodrama line. He is so good at effecting this self-effacement, this transparency, that it almost becomes possible to forget the writer—it almost becomes possible to forget the nationality of the writer. Hiroshima is a book about what happened in Japan, to Japan, in August 1945. It is a book about five Japanese and one German hibakusha, or bomb survivors. It is not a book which concerns itself with what the bombing meant for America in military terms, but rather what it meant for the people of Hiroshima in the most human terms.

Inevitably, it also contains within it two Americas. One is the America which develops and uses—not once, but twice—a weapon of a destructive capability which far outstrips anything that has come before, the America which decides what price some other country’s civilian population must pay for its victory. There is nothing particular to America in this—all nations in war behave in much the same way. But in the years between the bombing of Hiroshima and now, no nation has intervened militarily with as many different countries as America, and always on the other country’s soil; which is to say, no nation has treated as many other civilian populations as collateral damage as America while its own civilians stay well out of the arena of war. So that’s one of the Americas in Hiroshima—the America of brutal military power.

But there's another America in the book, that of John Hersey. The America of looking at the destruction your nation has inflicted and telling it like it is. The America of stepping back and allowing someone else to tell their story through you because they have borne the tragedy and you have the power to bear witness to it. It is the America of The New Yorker of William Shawn, which, for the only time in its history, gave over an entire edition to a single article and kept its pages clear of its famed cartoons. It is the America which honored Hersey for his truth telling.

I grew up in Pakistan with two Americas. One was the America of To Kill a Mockingbird and Ferris Bueller's Day Off, of the young Michael Jackson and Laura Ingalls Wilder, of Charlie's Angels and John McEnroe and Rob Lowe's blue eyes. Of Martin Luther King and Snoopy. That America was exuberance and possibility.

But there was another that I lived with. The America which cozied up to Pakistan's military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, because it served its own interests in Afghanistan to do so. This America threw vast amounts of money at Zia, propping up his rule, strengthening his military, turning a blind eye to its nuclear program, working with him to promote the war in Afghanistan as a jihad for all Muslims rather than a territorial matter between Afghans and Soviets; this America spoke eloquently of the Afghan people's right to freedom and self-determination but decided it was an internal matter when Zia's government cracked down on pro-democracy protestors in Pakistan, or when he instituted public floggings and hangings, or when he passed a law which made it possible for a woman who had been raped to be stoned to death for adultery.

How to reconcile these two Americas? I didn't even try. It was a country I always looked at with one eye shut. With my left eye I saw the America of John Hersey; with my right eye I saw the America of the two atom bombs. This one-eyed seeing was easy enough from a distance. But then I came to America as an undergraduate and realized that with a few honorable exceptions, all of America looked at America with one eye shut.

I don't mean Americans looked at America uncritically. I mean they looked at it merely in domestic terms.

Then, of course, there's [Hersey's] vision of the American army as a sort of United Colors of Benetton in the fall collection's Combat Pants.

I hadn't expected anyone in America to know anything about Pakistan's cultural life in the way that I knew about America's cultural life. In the 1980s at traffic lights in Karachi, barefoot children, many of them refugees from Afghanistan, sold paper masks of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo. As the unfortunate among you may know, Rambo III showed that great American icon fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan and was dedicated to "the brave Mujahideen fighters of Afghanistan," though Wikipedia informs me that after 9/11 this dedication was changed to "the people of Afghanistan." I haven't sat through the movie to determine the veracity of this claim. But anyway, yes, you could buy paper masks of Rambo at traffic lights. And young men in the heat of the Karachi sun wore leather jackets and pushed up their sleeves in imitation of Michael Jackson. I was never foolish enough to imagine that at traffic lights in America anyone was selling paper masks of Maula Jut, Pakistan's mustachioed cinema icon of the same period, or

dancing while moving only their upper bodies in the manner of the sultry pop singer Nazia Hasan—whose below-the-waist gyrations didn't make it past Zia-ul-Haq's television censors. But I was startled to discover that when I said I was from Pakistan I was met with blankness—as if, in 1991, no one knew that through the 1980s Pakistan had been America's closest ally in its proxy war against the Soviets. I don't recall being too bothered by this. After all, it gave me a way of seeing which for a while was entirely satisfactory.

I had grown up in a country with military rule; I had grown up, that is to say, with the understanding that the government of a nation is a vastly different thing than its people. The government of America was a ruthless and morally bankrupt entity; but the people of America, well, they were different, they were better. They didn't think it was okay for America to talk democracy from one side of its mouth while heaping praise on totalitarian nightmares from the other side. They just didn't know it was happening, not really, not in any way that made it real to them. For a while this sufficed. I grumbled a little about American insularity. But it was an affectionate grumble. All nations have their failings. As a Pakistani, who was I to cast stones from my brittle, blood-tipped glass house?

Then came September 11, and for a few seconds, it brought this question: why do they hate us?

It's hard to remember this now, but it was a question asked loudly and genuinely, maybe not everywhere, certainly not by everyone, but by enough people. It was asked not only about the men on the planes but also about those people in the world who didn't fall over with weeping but instead were seen to remark that now America, too, knew what it felt like to be attacked. It was asked, and very quickly it was answered: they hate our freedoms. And just like that a door was closed and a large sign pasted onto it saying, "You're Either With Us or Against Us." Anyone who hammered on the door with mention of the words "foreign policy" was accused of justifying the murder of more than three thousand people.

In this moment of darkness, I found myself looking to my tribe, my people. I found myself looking to writers. Where were the novels that could be proffered to people who asked, "Why do they hate us?", which is actually the question "Who are these people and what do they have to do with us?" No such novel, as far as I knew, had come from the post-Cold War generation of writers who started writing after the 1980s when Islam replaced Communism as the terrifying Other. But that would change, I told myself. The nation that had intervened militarily with more nations than any other in the latter half of the twentieth century but had itself come under attack infrequently would now see its stories bound up with the stories of other places. The writers would write. The novels would come.

They didn't. They haven't.

Last year, John Freeman, the editor of Granta Magazine, was interviewed about the journal's "Ten Years Later" issue. Here's what Freeman had to say about books written on some of the great historical events of the last decade:

"Between 2004 and 2006 an avalanche of 9/11 books hit stores. Histories of Pakistan and the Islamic jihad; tales of the hunt for bin Laden; political memoirs; essay collections. I read dozens of them and, in an awful way, it felt good. I took comfort in having so many places to turn to for answers to my questions. Who exactly were our allies? What did they do in our name? Why were young men in Egypt and Pakistan willing to die simply to take an American life? All of my questions were American questions, though, by which I mean they were questions conditioned by my citizenship. My dollars, my country, our soldiers, our allies. Even when I was trying to read my way out of the parochialisms of being American, I often read right back into them. The book that broke this habit for me was Anthony Shadid's *Night Draws Near*, a chronicle of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, as seen through the eyes of everyday Baghdadis. Mothers and children, people whose refrigerators were blown open during shock and awe. For the first time since 9/11 here was a book without a filter, a book that didn't assume war was a good solution. Ever since I finished *Night Draws Near* I've often bristled at the way our cultural pages assume we're Americans first, humans second. We read less about the world and more about ourselves—instead of reading about the places we are invading, we read about our invaders... It's a natural instinct, I suppose, but in terms of empathy it feels like a closed loop."

Where are they, the American fiction writers whose works are interested in the question "What do these people have to do with us?" and "What are we doing out there in the world?"

John Hersey never closed the loop. To take this a step further, Hersey wanted to be part of a project which helped Americans imagine and aspire for an America which never closed the loop. Let's consider, for a moment, his first book—a novel, as were so many of his books. *A Bell for Adano* is an astonishing work, not only for what is written in it but also for when it was written. It is about the American occupation of Sicily following on from the Allied victory over the fascists there. Hersey accompanied the American troops as a war reporter during that invasion which took place between July 9 and August 17, 1943; by February the following year *A Bell for Adano* was published. In fact, he wrote it in a month. This fact alone will make many people sneer at it—how good can it be if it was written so quickly? Well, Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks, so let's dismiss that argument. *A Bell for Adano* isn't *As I Lay Dying*. But then, almost nothing is. So let's dismiss that as well. It is, however, a novel with an extraordinary sense of the moment—reading it I was reminded of the Pakistani-British novelist Nadeem Aslam remarking that the conflagration within Pakistan makes him feel as though he's "writing very fast with a quill whose other end is on fire" and he must get the words on the page before the pen burns down to the nib. While *A Bell for Adano* has passages of lightness and humor and charm, it was written with a pen on fire. Or, in Hersey's own words, "in a sort of white heat."

Hersey chooses to make this explicit in his foreword to the novel:

"America is an international country. Major Joppolo [the central character in the novel] is an Italian American going to work in Italy. Our army has Yugoslavs and Frenchmen and Austrians and Czechs and Norwegians in it, and everywhere our Army goes in Europe, a man can turn to

the private beside him and say: ‘Hey, Mac, what’s this furriner saying? How much does he want for that bunch of grapes?’ And Mac will be able to translate.

That is where we are lucky. No other country has such a fund of men who speak the languages of the lands we must invade, who understand the ways and have listened to their parents sing the folk songs and have tasted the wine of the land on the palate of their memories. This is a lucky thing for America. We are very lucky to have our Joppolos. It is another reason why I think you should know the story of this particular Joppolo.

America is on its way into Europe. You can be as isolationist as you want to be, but there is a fact. Our armies are on their way in. Just as truly as Europe once invaded us, with wave after wave of immigrants, now we are invading Europe, with wave after wave of sons of immigrants.

... I beg you to get to know this man Joppolo well. We have need of him. He is our future in the world. Neither our eloquence of Churchill nor the humaneness of Roosevelt, no Charter, no four freedoms or fourteen points, no dreamer’s diagram so symmetrical and so faultless on paper, no plan, no hope, no treaty—none of these things can guarantee anything. Only men can guarantee, only the behavior of men under pressure, only our Joppolos.”

Now, there is a whole list of objections I have to this foreword. It starts, as a technical point, with the idea of a foreword itself. Let the novel do its work and trust its readers, I want tell Hersey. Don’t tell us why we need to read the book and what we must glean from it. Then, of course, there’s his vision of the American army as a sort of United Colors of Benetton in the fall collection’s Combat Pants. The analogy between migrants and invaders raises an eyebrow which is joined in its lofted position by the other eyebrow when we come to the idea that the character of individuals guarantees a nation’s future rather than the politics and power structures underlying the roles into which those men are dropped.

And yet when I read that foreword I was strangely moved. Some of this we can put down to Hersey’s rhetorical style, so unrestrained compared to his voice in Hiroshima—“only men can guarantee, only the behavior of men under pressure, only our Joppolos.” It’s soaringly Churchillian. But that’s only a small part of it. Hersey was writing during the war, at a time when the world was neck-deep in destruction. Consider this and you start to read the foreword differently. The clue is in the verb “beg.” I beg you to get to know this man Joppolo well. That’s a sentence written with a pen on fire.

As the war in Europe was drawing to a close and the war in the Pacific raged on, Hersey gave us, in Joppolo, an America which felt emotionally connected to people from every part of the world by virtue of its migrants, an America which looked at the Italian woman killed by its own bombs and said, “My mother’s mother must have been like her.” This America, in the form of Joppolo, entered an Italian town and didn’t expect to be thanked for liberating it from the fascists but understood that acceptance, let alone gratitude, had to be earned. This America understood people’s need for cultural symbols and the importance of their pride and the necessity of honoring their way of life.

The optimism that is written into the creation of a character like Joppolo is not escapism; it's blueprint. Be this, America, he seems to be saying. Be Joppolo. Don't be the other guy. Because—spoiler alert—there is another guy. General Marvin, described by Hersey as “something worse than what our troops were trying to throw out.” He appears at the beginning of the novel, shoots a mule, makes himself thoroughly disagreeable then disappears, and the novel moves forward without him. And then—boom—in the final pages of the book, just when it all seems to be going right, Joppolo is dismissed from his post and made to leave Adano, all because he chose not to follow a destructive order issued by General Marvin. Hersey was begging his American readers to know Joppolo well because of the necessity of having Joppolo rather than Marvin conducting America's relations with the countries whose histories were becoming and would become entwined with its own.

I also can't help wondering what happened to Hersey's ideas of Joppolo when he picked his way through the rubble of Hiroshima, or heard of the allied firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo. Perhaps the answer to that comes in his interview with *The Paris Review* in 1984 when he said, “A Bell for Adano, as I see it now, had a value when it came out, flawed as it is, because it presented to the American public, at a time when the war was far from won, the spectacle of an American general who seemed to represent the very things we were fighting against—General Marvin, loosely based on Patton, who was I think rather seriously deranged during the Sicilian campaign.” So in later years he saw Marvin rather than Joppolo as the figure America needed to look at very closely.

Adano was the first of his twenty-four books. Even a quick trawl through the descriptions of the other books allows you to see that he remained a deeply political writer. In 1950 he wrote the novel *The Wall*, set in the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1966 another novel, *The War Lover*, about a pilot who glorifies war—by this point, as a committed anti-war activist he was no longer writing about the good soldiers like Joppolo, and I'd be surprised if he believed they could stand in any way against the terrifying war machine which he so passionately opposed. In 1968 there was the true crime book *The Algiers Motel Incident* based on racially motivated killings in Detroit the previous year. In 1974, he edited a collection of critical essays about his friend Ralph Ellison. There were also books about violins, and fish, among other subjects. He was clearly a man who believed the only precondition to writing about something was the desire or need to do so. He was also a man who told *The Paris Review*, “My prevailing interest has been in the world as a whole, and in the place of a person in a larger setting than one defined by national boundaries.”

It caused me a certain delight, I'll confess, that when I emailed my mother a few days ago and mentioned this essay she wrote back: “I have a wonderful book by John Hersey, at the top of the book shelf—it is called *A Single Pebble*, set in China. I picked it up randomly at some bookshop in Karachi shortly before or after you were born! Had never heard of him at that time I bought the book. I was just amazed by it and realized that he was obviously not some ordinary writer.”

So there you have it. All my life John Hersey has been in my mother's bookshelf. If I could believe in talismans or totems which exert a power simply by virtue of their proximity that would be a totem I'd choose to have grown up with.

But the truth is, while Hersey's novels may remain in bookshelves across the world, in America John Hersey the fiction writer has disappeared. I'm not talking about whether or not his novels are in print, but about the matter of his successors. In which American writers of the last decade can we see John Hersey's DNA?

The moment you say, a male American writer can't write about a female Pakistani, you are saying, Don't tell those stories.

In nonfiction the first name that comes to mind is Jon Lee Anderson, one of the few American reporters in Baghdad who chose not to be embedded with American troops and instead wrote a book—*The Fall of Baghdad*—telling the stories of the Iraqis who lived between Saddam's brutality and the American invasion. I recently asked a friend with a quite extraordinary voraciousness for nonfiction related to the 9/11 Wars—the term is Jason Burke's—for the names of writers other than Anderson who managed to successfully engage with perspectives that weren't American. He listed more than fifty books around the 9/11 wars before pausing to draw breath and said, "The thing is, female western writers have dealt well with the Other. Sarah Chayes's *The Punishment of Virtue* and Ann Jones's *Kabul in Winter* are both excellent to name only two of the best. But the men haven't really dealt with the Other." This could of course be the basis of an entire paper in itself, and I hope readers might be moved to write it, or to tell me that they've already written it, or read it. But for the moment, let's lower—or no, let's shift—the bar a little. Hersey's nonfiction writing didn't exclude the American perspective—quite the contrary; his first non-fiction book (which he later disavowed, and had taken out of print) was an admiring portrayal of General Macarthur and the follow-up was *Into the Valley: Marines at Guadalcanal*. So if we take Hersey's DNA to live on in writers whose works illuminate the historical and political moment we find ourselves in, telling us the stories behind the stories, expanding our understanding of the world we inhabit, answering such American questions as "How did we get here?" and "What are we doing, out there in the world?" and "What do these people have to do with us?", there's a long and glittering list of American nonfiction writers including David Finkel, Steve Coll, Judith Butler, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Jane Mayer, and Dexter Filkins.

But what about fiction? Hersey himself was in no doubt about the importance of the project of fiction. Again, in *The Paris Review* interview he says, "I've thought quite a lot about the issue of fiction and journalism as two possible ways of presenting realities of life, particularly such harsh ones as we've encountered in my lifetime. Fiction is the more attractive to me, because if a novelist succeeds, he can enable the reader to identify with the characters of the story, to become the characters of the story, almost, in reading." So where are they, the American fiction writers—and I mean literary fiction—whose works are interested in the question "What do these people have to do with us?" and "What are we doing out there in the world?"

During the Cold War there was a smattering of writers interested in these questions, particularly during the Vietnam war—Robert Stone and Ward Just, to name just two; both of them, like Hersey, had also been war correspondents. But largely the American novel continued to look inward even as the American government looked increasingly outward. September 11 did nothing to change that.

In nonfiction the 9/11 genre takes in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it discusses Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, it reaches back to the 1980s and the U.S. involvement in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, it looks at the Patriot Act and drone attacks. In fiction, with pitifully few exceptions, the 9/11 novel looks at 9/11 the day itself, in New York—think of the most acclaimed novels in that genre: Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

Let me make it clear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying September 11, the day itself in New York, is not itself a worthy subject for fiction. Only an idiot would say that. But just as the day itself is only one part of the genre of 9/11 nonfiction books, so it should be with fiction.

And here's another thing: does writing about the day itself preclude the possibility of entwining it with other stories? A friend of mine recently remarked in exasperation that the 9/11 novel in America is always ultimately a novel of trauma experienced by individuals. It could just as well be about an earthquake which occurred without warning, lead to thousands of deaths and required great bravery from the emergency services. Well, but it really happened and an earthquake didn't, you might feel compelled to respond, and that's true. So let's say instead that, in American fiction, 9/11 is a traumatic event as ahistorical as an earthquake.

Your soldiers will come to our lands, but your novelists won't. The unmanned drone hovering over Pakistan, controlled by someone in Langley, is an apt metaphor for America's imaginative engagement with my nation.

But I fear I'm falling into the American trap of focusing too much on 9/11 as though everything started there, and in the process I'm starting to sound as though I think the losses and traumas of that day should only be a side story in some other narrative. Neither of these positions are those I wish to claim. So let's approach it from another angle; let's return to that mask of Rambo.

I grew up in Pakistan in the 1980s, aware that thinking about my country's history and politics meant thinking about America's history and politics. This is not an unusual position. Many countries of the world from Asia to South America exist, or have existed, as American client states, have seen U.S.-backed coups, faced American missiles or sanctions, seen their government's policies on various matters dictated in Washington. America may not be an empire in the nineteenth century way which involved direct colonization. But the neo-imperialism of America was evident to me by the time I was an adolescent and able to understand these things.

So in an America where fiction writers are so caught up in the Idea of America in a way that perhaps has no parallel with any other national fiction, where the term Great American Novel weighs heavily on writers, why is it that the fiction writers of my generation are so little concerned with the history of their own nation once that history exits the fifty states. It's not because of a lack of dramatic potential in those stories of America in the World; that much is clear.

In part, I'm inclined to blame the trouble caused by that pernicious word "appropriation." I first encountered it within a writing context within weeks, perhaps days, of arriving at Hamilton College in 1991. Right away, I knew there was something deeply damaging in the idea that

writers couldn't take on stories about the Other. As a South Asian who has encountered more than her fair share of awful stereotypes about South Asians in the British empire novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I'm certainly not about to disagree with the charge that writers who are implicated in certain power structures have been guilty of writing fiction which supports, justifies and props up those power structures. I understand the concerns of people who feel that for too long stories have been told about them rather than by them. But it should be clear that the response to this is for writers to write differently, to write better, to critique the power structures rather than propping them up, to move beyond stereotype—which you need to do for purely technical reasons, because the novel doesn't much like stereotypes. They come across as bad writing.

The moment you say, a male American writer can't write about a female Pakistani, you are saying, Don't tell those stories. Worse, you're saying, as an American male you can't understand a Pakistani woman. She is enigmatic, inscrutable, unknowable. She's other. Leave her and her nation to its Otherness. Write them out of your history.

Perhaps it's telling that the first mainstream American writer to try and enter the perspective of the Other post 9/11 belonged to an older generation, less weighed down, I suspect, by ideas of appropriation: I mean John Updike, with his novel *Terrorist*. I confess I didn't get past the first few pages—the figure of the young Muslim seemed such an accumulation of stereotype that it struck me as rather poor writing. And, of course, it was a story about America with the Muslim posited as the Violent and Hate-Filled Other. Far more successful attempts to portray Muslims in America came later, again—there really is a paper to be written about this—from women writers: first, Lorraine Adams's *Harbor*, and then the wonderful *The Submission* by Amy Waldman, a breakthrough novel in the 9/11 genre, published in 2011, in which we have both the secular, ambitious, and very defensive Muslim American architect and a Bangladeshi 9/11 widow who is an illegal alien. So there have been writers who have moved the roadblock of appropriation and written about Muslims in America, and done it well. But there have been far too few of them.

The stories of America in the World rather than the World in America stubbornly remain the domain of nonfiction. Your soldiers will come to our lands, but your novelists won't. The unmanned drone hovering over Pakistan, controlled by someone in Langley, is an apt metaphor for America's imaginative engagement with my nation.

But what about the Joppolos of fiction writing? Listen again to Hersey's remarks about Joppolo and imagine he's talking about fiction writers rather than soldiers: "No other country has such a fund of men who speak the languages of the lands we must invade, who understand the ways and have listened to their parents sing the folk songs and have tasted the wine of the land on the palate of their memories. This is a lucky thing for America. We are very lucky to have our Joppolos."

Where is Joppolo the novelist? Where is the American writer who looks on his or her country with two eyes, one shaped by the experience of living here, the other filled with the sad knowledge of what this country looks like when it's not at home. Where is the American writer

who can tell you about the places your nation invades or manipulates, brings you into those stories and lets you draw breath with its characters?

There are very fine and greatly acclaimed first- and second-generation migrant writers in America—writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Ha Jin, Chang Rae Lee—but it's the politics of being a migrant in America or the histories of places their families left that they're most likely to tell—not the story of America in the World (though I must flag Junot Díaz as an exception to this). It's interesting to consider the case of Khaled Hosseini, given that he is writing from the perspective of someone whose family background places him in a prime position to be a Joppolo in one of the countries most deeply caught up in the War on Terror. *The Kite Runner* shows America as the place of refuge from war in Afghanistan, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows it as the country which drove the Taliban from power. The entire messy business of American involvement with Afghanistan in the 1980s and then its withdrawal from that country as it descended from war to civil war is not his concern. Again, I'm not going to tell Khaled Hosseini the stories he tells aren't worth telling—there is no individual writer from America to whom I would dream of saying, You should be writing a different book. But someone should be writing a different book.

Someone, many someones, should be writing those many different books about America.

Many someones are. But not in America.

There has been much talk in the last few years about a “boom” in Pakistani English-language writing. The “boom” is somewhat exaggerated—even the most engaged readers in Pakistan would be hard-pressed to name more than a dozen writers from Pakistan writing English-language novels—most readers probably couldn't do better than naming six or eight. Compare that to the thousands of American writers who fill bookstores here.

But of those dozen or so writers, consider how many of them—of us—find ourselves writing about America. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H.M. Naqvi's *Homeboy* are both about Pakistani citizens living in New York on 9/11 and, in different ways, finding themselves on the wrong side of history. Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* is set primarily in Karachi but has scenes of a Pakistani character at university in America during the 1991 Gulf War, and the political tensions that arise from it. Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* set in Afghanistan from the time of the Soviet invasion to soon after the fall of the Taliban has American characters playing with and getting caught up in history. Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* set in Pakistan during the Zia years again has American characters connected to the U.S. government. And in my *Burnt Shadows* there's an American in Pakistan in 1983 and Afghanistan in 2002 as well as an American in New York in 2002 interacting with Afghans and Pakistanis.

In some cases, those of us writing about America have lived and studied here. But that's not true in all cases; it's not true of Mohammad Hanif and Nadeem Aslam.

So why is it, please explain, that you're in our stories but we're not in yours?

Fear of appropriation? I think that argument can only take you so far. Surely fiction writers today understand the value of stories about America In the World, and can see through the appropriation argument. It is, after all, a political argument that can easily be trumped by another political argument about the importance of engagement. So why, then—why, when there are astonishing stories out in the world about America, to do with America, going straight to the heart of the question: who are these people and what do they have to do with us?—why are the fiction writers staying away from the stories? The answer, I think, comes from John Hersey. He said of novelists, “A writer is bound to have varying degrees of success, and I think that that is partly an issue of how central the burden of the story is to the author’s psyche.”

And that’s the answer. Even now, you just don’t care very much about us. One eye remains closed. The pen, writing its deliberate sentences, is icy cold.