Living By The Pen:

In Conversation with Sunjeev Sahota

Sunjeev Sahota is one of the leading lights of contemporary British literature. Raised in Derbyshire, Sahota graduated with a degree in mathematics from Imperial College, London before moving to Sheffield, a city he has since made his home. While working in the insurance industry, Sahota began to write during his evenings and weekends and went on to pen his first novel, *Ours Are The Streets*, in 2011. The novel tells the story behind the alienation and radicalisation of a Muslim boy growing up in the North of England, and pre-empted many subsequent debates about terror, migration and morality in Britain. Upon release, his debut novel was widely critically acclaimed, judged by the *Observer* as "nothing short of extraordinary" and "a moral work of real intelligence and power" by *The Times*. Less than two years later Sahota was featured on *Granta* Magazine's once-in-a-decade 'Best of Young British Novelists' list, and became a full-time writer.

Sahota read his first novel at the age of eighteen. This text – *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie – marked the beginning of a journey into the world of literature that culminated in Rushdie endorsing Sahota's second novel, *The Year of the Runaways* ("All you can do is surrender, happily, to its power") twenty years later in 2015. This latest novel follows the lives of a group of young immigrants who share a house in Sheffield and the challenges of finding a home and sense of belonging as they struggle to forge a new life. The novel achieved a place on the Man Booker shortlist, a nomination for the Dylan Thomas Prize and won the Encore and Southbank Sky Arts Awards.

Although Sahota writes in a familiar form, the content of his work is anything but ordinary. From social dislocation in contemporary India, to the hidden labour behind Sheffield takeaways, to the radicalised generation responding to twenty-first century British society, his novels tackle some of the most pressing social and political concerns of our times. Although they are set in Northern England, the themes of his two best-selling novels and the lifestyle of their author are profoundly global. Sahota splits his time between a home in Sheffield, family in India, and an international diary of literary work. In the last twelve months alone, Sahota joined Leeds Beckett University as the first University Writer in Residence, took part in a British Council trip to promote contemporary British literature in Russia, and scooped the EU Prize for Literature in the immediate aftermath of Brexit.

Before this whirlwind of success, and a variety of concurrent social and political changes in the UK and overseas, Sunjeev Sahota agreed to an interview for *English*. The interview that follows reflects on many of the events that occurred in the twelve months leading up to the day we conducted our interview, in person, at Mrs Atha's coffee shop Leeds, UK on the eve of the 2017 UK General Election. I transcribed our conversation and e-mailed a corrected text to Sahota, who reviewed my editorial changes, making only two superficial alterations to his answers. Some final changes were made by the editors at English to reflect house style. Thanks to Sunjeev for being so generous and giving of his time, and to Katherine Baxter for her interest in this project from its inception.

How did you arrive at a career in writing?

My relationship with English is a relationship with words, a fascination with the feel of words, with the rhythm of words, with the colour of language. As a young child, I was forever reading the back of shampoo bottles, the ingredients on bars of soap, just being interested in these letters, the marks

that make up words, and their meanings. Through school there were various times when I could indulge my love of language, but that passion didn't find its vehicle in the novel until I was about eighteen. When I started getting into novels their language was a way of making sense of myself, and my role: who I was as a child of immigrants, who I was as a Briton, as an Englishman, and as a global citizen. The novel was part of that wider conversation I was having about myself. But from the shampoo bottle to the global, it was always situated in a Yorkshire/North Derbyshire context.

What is it about the novel as a form that gives you the capacity to consider the local and the global in one text?

The novel is a capacious form, you can throw almost anything at it and it remains robust. It's the access to interiority that means the novel can take you inside someone's head in a way no other art can. That is its USP I guess. The world it creates, and the world-building that the novel enables you to do as a writer, absorbs and immerses you. When you're reading a novel, it's like you're at the bottom of a pool. When you get to the end of that novel, it's like emerging from the water and feeling slightly dazzled. You see the world as fundamentally different to the way it was when you started reading. It's the art form that speaks to me most.

In a networked age of constant communication and the dominance of social media, is there something about the novel that predates contemporary developments in its capacity to connect people and illuminate other people's lives, opinions and ways of living?

The novel no longer has the agency in society that it once did to change people's minds and to shock. It's had to shape shift to situate itself in the twenty-first century. In the past, the ability of the novel to create bridges between people was profound. I see the novel as a bridge between reader and writer, but also (to mix my metaphors somewhat!) as a kind of table around which readers and writers sit down and have a conversation. I think that is a very important function of the novel today. When you think about what novels used to do - and in some cases still do - in terms of holding a mirror up to society, novels like *Madame Bovary* showed facets of life that society might otherwise not see. That was, and is, a very important function of the novel. The novel effectively replaced religion as religion died down. Post-enlightenment, the novel was in its ascendancy as society began to view religion as another fictional enterprise, another narrative that encouraged the suspension of disbelief.

In terms of lifting the lid on people, places and practices that might otherwise remain unseen by readers, your own novels can to an extent be seen as continuing that long traditional of fictional endeavour?

I suppose I write about the world I know. In my first novel I wrote about a young suicide bomber. Now, I might not know what it's like to be a suicide bomber, but I do know what it's like to be a child of immigrants, growing up in the North of England. And feeling quite alien, as if you are living in two worlds behind and beyond your front door. In my second novel I explore the world of illegal immigrants that I've been exposed to through my time in India. But I don't write my novels with the explicit intention of showing these hidden lives that people aren't aware of. I just the write the world that feels most alive to me, a world that feels like it will benefit from a novelistic treatment. But I do get the impression from readers that my novels do encourage them to think differently about things that they hadn't perhaps previously thought about, or to consider areas they haven't perhaps looked into in the past. And I think that's definitely a good thing. Whether novels should breed that kind of sympathy, or whether the empathetic influence of the novel is always a good thing, I'm less certain.

Did you feel a responsibility as a writer in representing these issues? You wrote both novels during a period in which debates about immigration, refugees and asylum seekers were a major presence in the news and the focus of international news media. Did those contextual debates and controversies influence your writings?

The debate around terrorism, or illegal immigrants, or migration, is just so base and crude, and gives no concession to nuances. The media wants a simple narrative that comes with easy hooks, and gets easy catchwords and slogans out there which will make people think that they're on top of the situation. The truth is that is a complex and difficult subject. I don't remember sitting down and thinking "I need to address this". I didn't feel a conscious responsibility. But I know immigrants, I know people who have been living her illegally. By virtue of having been exposed to that, there's an instinctive sense that the narrative in the press is wrong. Not only can I address that but if I write what I know, I will automatically be writing against that, without me consciously thinking that these books needs to have a moral, or a rationale or the sense that I'm fighting against this wall of awful media.

Fiction cannot accommodate didacticism, it just collapses. But if you write books honestly and with a gaze as truthful as you can, doing what writers and novelists do in looking through and beyond and lifting out the inner heart of stuff, the world will be as honest as it needs to be. The characters in my novels are not simple – it's not a case that all immigrants are good, or all bad - hopefully it just shows them as being human, more than anything. But I think the novel needs to move on, and in terms of my last novel I just can't imagine me ever writing another novel like that again. The novel and my novels need to change to address the newer concerns of the world we live in, and I'm trying to figure out how to do that. How to capture the new world, and how language in novels has to change to better reflect the world out there.

Given the rapidly changing times we live in, what is the role or function of the writer in the twenty-first century?

I don't think it's really changed, the role and responsibility of the writer has been constant throughout time. The form of the novel will adapt and change to reflect the pace of our lives today, but the role of the writer has always been to say "this is my view of the world. I walk through the world and this is my vision, this is my brain you are holding in your hands, on these page these words are my nerve tissue, and this is how I see the world". I think that response hasn't changed, but how that response is represented on the page has changed. You can't keep on writing novels that are essentially nineteenth-century in their form. But that should change – if the wiring of your brain is changing because the world is changing, then the novel needs to change too.

Your literary work to date represents the North of England as a marginalised place, home to marginalised cultures, peoples and languages. **Is there something about the North of England that you keep returning to in your work? Why is it such a central location for your writings?**

Other than it being the place I know best, the North has undergone so much upheaval in my lifetime. When I think of the places I grew up, which were vibrant working class communities, and then the decimation of the manufacturing industry and the mining industry that Thatcher caused in the 1980s, a sense of betrayal from that time still hangs in the air today in many communities in the North of England. What that does to a community, how the blame for that is fixed on a government, and the sense of displacement caused by new communities coming in, is fascinating. The children of those new groups create a new dynamic and a unique nexus of conditions that is quite specific to the North. The landscape of the North seems to lend itself to that sense of isolation, of subversion,

of going against the grain. Everything about the North represents a kind of uniqueness which makes it a great location for a novel.

Although they're set in the North of England, your novels are explicitly addressed to global readers. How have readers responded to your regional landscapes?

The main sense I get when I go to places like India to do readings is their reaction to the representations of the places that immigrants have to live in when they come over here to work in broadly poorly paid jobs, how hard it is. But also they're surprised that Britain isn't just London; that the North of England has supported and continues to support broad groups of people who have chosen to make the area their home.

How do you think that global view of Britain and British writers will change in our post-Brexit era?

Brexit is a stain on our national identity, our sense of ourselves and our place in the world. I think writers will continue to write globally and won't be hemmed in by these boundaries that politicians try to impose on our minds. Your imagination will take you where it takes you. Writers will continue to push against those discourses and show Britain as the international facing place it is, and needs to be. People's responses to Brexit are just one a shock, in my experience. I don't know if they're looking to writers to be the unofficial legislators of it. I think writers will write truth to power, which is what they should do.

You mentioned that one of your motivations in writing was to understand your own identity and where you come from. In this new context, do you think it's an important motivation for British writers today to use their work to consider what it means to 'British'?

The beauty of the contemporary is that your identity doesn't need to be tethered to any one place, you can 'belong' to several different spaces at the same time. It doesn't even have to be a physical space – for a lot of people the virtual world is where they draw their identity. The older I get, the more I consider myself to have several senses of 'home' – Sheffield, India, with my family, plugged into virtual worlds – and different identities for different places. Different groups illuminate different facets of your personality, and it's the same in different places you consider yourself belonging to. People are different on social media than they are in real life, and how those competing identities complement or conflict is interesting. How writers respond to that new reality is even more interesting. I don't think writers have got their heads around communication technology yet. Perhaps that is something to do with the form of the novel, or the nature of language online compared to language used in day to day life, but we've not had the great internet novel yet. It's ripe for being given novelistic treatment.

It's interesting, because when the 2003 invasion of Iraq happened, and all these terror attacks over the past ten years, novelists have been falling over themselves to write the terrorist novel, or the '9/11 novel'. But these very wide, profound changes we have experienced in the way we exist and the fact you carry a camera around with you everywhere now, has not been addressed by the novel with the same degree of enthusiasm or level of profundity. I can see why people are attracted to writing novels about wars and terrorism – its in-built drama – but there is something about the way we live now that the novel is yet to represent. That's what I'm interested in looking at – how can the novel say something meaningful about what is happening to us as a consequence of the way we live now?

Lots of contemporary authors have used social media to deliver their new writing – like David Mitchell with *The Right Sort* – or like Hari Kunzru, Teju Cole and Irvine Welsh who use it as a

platform to comment on social and political issues, as well as the writing process. You also meet your readers and critics regularly at events all over the world. Do you think this enhanced and enabled dialogue between writers and readers is a good thing, and does it feed back into your creative process?

I really enjoy talking to readers of my work. It's that bridge again, writing is half the act but readers are the other half. They complete the book by bringing themselves to it and their own lives to what's on the page. In terms of my own practice, sometimes an intelligently written review – even if it's critical – will make you think about the work differently. It's very rare that I read a negative review that is well written that makes points which is completely surprising. Sometimes they recognise that you might have taken a short cut - and you're annoyed that they pointed it out, or spotlighted it in the way they did, or they have to say it *so* rudely – but often it hits a nerve because you know on some level they're right, and you should have done more on the particular aspect. It's good to read those things on reflection and there have been critic comments that I will take with me into my next work. But I think writers should feel part of that wider world, should do events, they shouldn't just be sat in their room writing away. You can't escape – the world will come into your room! – and it does, and that's a good thing.

What has the experience of teaching creative writing taught you about your practice, and yourself as a writer?

Because I didn't do any kind of writing degree or course – which I regret, massively, I really wish I had done something along those lines – I just jumped straight into writing and it was all very organic and instinctive. The first thing I wrote was a novel. There wasn't really any stopping and thinking about form or structure, I was just trying to work things out for myself as I went along. Now, in my work with students in workshops, helping them edit and draft their work, it makes me so much more aware of the DNA of my own prose, the choices I make. When you're in conversation with students there is no sense that you're the oracle from on high – it's profoundly two way.

If I share a draft with them, they'll freely say "hmm, I don't like what you did there" or "you could look at that bit here" and it makes you look at the choices that you made in the same way as you approach their work. Sitting with students and considering the composition of a piece of work doesn't diminish the work but just enhances our awareness of what the writer has achieved. When a teaching session has gone well it just leaves you with this kind of lightness, it's very satisfying. It's very invigorating but also enlightening to be around people talking about books, and the imagination. It's one of the many great things about universities, they're the hot-houses of imagination. As such, they should be protected, just like libraries; it is civilisation, these are the spaces where conversations about the future take place.

Over the past few years you have won many, many awards, both in Britain and internationally. Have these awards effected the demographic of your readership, and how have awards shaped your experience as a writer?

There are more readers, certainly, which is the biggest function of prizes really – to get the pages in front of more readers' eyes. Prizes are enablers – they enable me to carry on writing the next book, they mean there are more companies interested in publishing the novel for foreign audiences, so more people are reading it in more languages, and they mean more time doing events and engaging with readers. But they don't change what I write, it doesn't change what I think about my writing, it doesn't change what I think is good or bad – and I mainly think my writing drafts are not as good as they should be. Any self-respecting writer should think their drafts have room for improvement, I

think. It is wonderful to receive these awards, and I am extremely grateful for them but mostly because they enable me to carry on living by my pen, which is all I've ever really wanted to do. It doesn't at all change my sense of myself as a writer.

No compromise then?!

No compromise. It doesn't make me think I should keep on writing books like *The Year of The Runaways* at all – that would be a kind of death to me, to any writer. You have to keep on changing and pushing and trying to write the perfect novel – which even though you know you'll never do, you have to convince yourself that yes, it will happen for me. You have to keep on thinking that the next book will be the masterpiece – and of course it isn't going to be – but it's like a confidence trick. You have to keep telling yourself each time you sit down at the keyboard this will be the session that ignites the page. So prizes are wonderful enablers, and necessary – but almost unfortunately necessary – because if we had a better and stronger literary culture and conversation about the arts in Britain then there wouldn't be so much focus on prizes and who's on shortlists and who's not. I think it's unfortunate that prizes and lists have become so central to the way we think about whether a book is 'successful', or not.

And finally, what's next?

I'm writing my third novel, and I'm about twenty thousand words in, its set over the course of a hundred years, and it's got all sorts of strange happenings going on. It's not set in the North of England – it is set in England – but it's a kind of unnamed location, a slightly fantastical place. I'm also working on an adaptation of my second novel. Enough to keep me busy, at least.