

## **Jack Straw Writer's Program - 2005**

### **Excerpts of Q & A with Maliha Masood**

*So tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you start, what's your background?*

**MM**

Well, I was born in Pakistan, and then my family immigrated to the States and we came to Seattle in 1982. So, I pretty much grew up here. I started out in the seventh grade, and spent my whole adolescence, college years in Seattle. But, I always felt like I was straddling East and West from a very early age. I never had as much conflict with it as a lot of my peers, it was just something that was natural to me, to be in this kind of limbo, and negotiate it as it came.

*Well, it's really interesting, since you lived in Karachi and Paris, Rome, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Istanbul. How does the Pacific Northwest compare?*

**MM**

I've always had an awareness of geography, just because we are sort of perched on the edge, so, it's kind of been like a frontier, or a threshold. And I've often had the need to stretch that and that's where my travels come in. Like this whole trip to the Middle East, I had no idea where I was going to go. I literally just bought a one-way ticket from Seattle to Paris, and quit my job and cleaned out all my savings, and told my parents, "Hey, I have to go, I have to take off." Seattle is something that encouraged me always to explore those frontiers.

*Can you say more about the woman's perspective, what it meant to have, sort of, come of age in the United States, and then what it meant to be traveling in other cultures as a woman on her own?*

**MM**

Definitely my American upbringing gave me this tremendous sense of independence and freedom. I had this urge to go travel, and I didn't see what was wrong with going by myself. I didn't feel like I needed a chaperone or needed permission. I think maybe having grown up here gave me that sense of independence, and I took that with me to the Middle East, where a lot of people wouldn't just go for soul-searching. You could go to a nice Buddhist shrine in Thailand, or, you could go to Hawaii, there's a lot of better places to go. But to me it was natural: "Oh, you have to go to the Middle East, that's where you're going to find this sense of peace and whatever you're looking for." At the same time, I knew it was going to be hard, because women don't travel there by themselves, especially when they have no official mandate to go. A lot of times, women who do go, they're journalists or they're political analysts, but they definitely have some sort of official reason to go. But someone who just wants to backpack out of sheer curiosity and enthusiasm is more unusual. When I got there I found that it was a mixed bag, that I wasn't perceived completely as an American, because I'm a Muslim, yet being alone you're already breaking a lot of stereotypes that people have of Muslim women, especially in the Arab world. So you were constantly in this "no woman's land" where you couldn't belong in either one. But it was very, very interesting, and it changed my perceptions of what a woman means to Middle East culture. It's certainly not the stereotypes that I see in the media here, there's a lot more layers to it.

***So in order to find some sense of inner peace, you travel to the Middle East. Which historically has been one of the more conflicted areas in the world. Say more about that.***

**MM**

There were two things, I think, driving this. It was my love of adventure and travel. Ever since I was little I used to play this game with my father where, I would memorize these world capitols and he would pretend to be Alex Trebek, and he would ask me, "What's the capitol of Tanzania?" or Ethiopia, or Kenya. And I would just rattle them off, because I used to memorize world capitols as a kid. I also used to draw maps of different countries. I was drawn to the world and felt like I had to go explore it in order to understand it. That traveler in me was something I think that was handed down from my father. Growing up in Karachi, my dad used to work at Swiss Air, and I used to literally just hang out at the airport and watch planes taking off and landing. So travel was almost something that was in my blood. And I don't know why, but for some reason I gravitate to Islamic countries. They're not easy places to travel to, certainly the concept of a backpacker hasn't caught on. I always used to go around telling people, "I'm kind of like a Muslim woman Jack Kerouac backpacker." But to me, it was the challenge and the quest that made it most intriguing. And I got it into my head that I wanted to see for myself if these stereotypes are real or not, and then try to break as many as I can. For myself and for them. And it was just the thrill of doing that, that made it fun.

***You talk about a burning desire that motivated your travels. How does that burning desire fit in with your creative process as a writer?***

**MM**

Well, I see myself as a bridge, somebody who literally straddles East and West, and I feel like it's my duty to communicate to both sides, perceptions that we have of one another. And I feel that as a Muslim American who grew up in Pakistan, yet also grew up in Seattle, I really see both sides, and I can communicate in different languages to different audiences. And my whole burning desire, basically, after September 11th, was to humanize the Muslim, the Arab world, a region that is so demonized in the media. I'm not saying those are not true, they are true to some extent. But they're negative images and they lead people to believe that that's all there is when it comes to perceiving Muslims, that they're all terrorists, or all women are oppressed. It tends to lead into certain stereotypes, and the media adds to it, or they don't balance it with more positive images. So my whole thing, and this is where I see myself coming in, is to level the playing field a little bit, and say, "Hey, this so-called 'other' is not as different as you think. They're very similar people to your next-door neighbors, they're worrying about job security, and their children's education, or their health, just like Americans do here." So, the fact that I've traveled to these places and I've seen for myself what the regions and the people are like, I think, makes it more of a from-the-ground perspective. And it's not even a political exercise. I just want to share a piece of the world that I was very, very close to at one point.

***Are there other subjects that engage you, that are maybe saying "write about me next"?***

**MM**

I do want to continue this quest of building bridges between cultures, especially Islam and America. I wouldn't say "the West," but I think living in this country I almost feel a sense of obligation to keep communicating and to keep enlarging perspectives.

***I see here that you've earned a master's degree in international affairs from Tufts University. And you've also done some graduate studies at Harvard University's JFK School of Government, focusing on public policy. I assume that this has to do with your human rights activist work in Pakistan?***

**MM**

In the summer of 2003, when I was between my first and second year of graduate school, I went back to Pakistan. I hadn't been back in 21 years. And I went there to see what this "home" was like, or see if I would relate to it anymore, how it would respond to me. I also wanted to work in the field in international development, so I did an internship with an NGO called International Crisis Group, conducting research and analysis on different issues of local government. Then I worked briefly at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, where I did some independent research for my thesis. But I did end up having adventures, even in Pakistan I ended up traveling a lot. I went into the tribal areas, and people used to kid me that I might've walked past Osama bin Laden. I was literally the only woman, the only foreigner in those areas at that time. And it was an amazing experience, but very different from the Arab world. In a sense I felt more of a stranger in my own country than I did over there.

***Is there anything else you would like to say about you or your writing?***

**MM**

Well, I'm a big believer in travel as a means of self-exploration. And I feel that now, as the world seems to have shrunk, it's also created more boundaries. People are more afraid to travel, especially to the Middle East, especially to Muslim countries. There are two opposing trends: people are a lot more open now, more curious to learn about Islam and Muslim countries; but at the same time, there's a lot of prejudice and biases that are fed by the media and through different experiences that people have had. And if you really are curious and you want to stretch your horizons, just let go of those fears and explore and travel. To me, two years of graduate studies in Boston were not as fulfilling as that one year in the Middle East. You cannot just learn from books, you ultimately have to go and experience the world up close, and make it very personal. And I would say you can travel in your own backyard, too. Now that I've come back to Seattle after almost four years, I'm almost rediscovering it, and I'm always trying to have that sense of curiosity and adventure that I had in all those other countries, and still try to find something new and different in Seattle. I think travel is both external and internal, it's like a process we go through, we shed different lives, and we have different chapters that we live out. And I would tell people to not be afraid of taking those detours, and not have a need to always know what's going to happen, and somehow just surrender to the unknowns that we encounter. You have to let go of that sense of control. That's ultimately what I did, and I don't think I'll ever have that kind of power again, that sense that everything you're doing is absolutely right. I think when you trust your instincts you can never go wrong.