

## INTERSECTIONS RADIO

APRIL 13, 2016

### TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to KXRY Portland on 107.1 FM, 91.1 FM, and streaming online at XRAY.fm. I'm Sarika Mehta. Welcome to Intersections Radio, a new independent podcast which also airs on XRAY. Intersections Radio is the show where we geek out on all things intersectionality.

The next few episodes will be a series on South Asian comics and graphic artists, who use their art for the purpose of social justice. Today, I'm featuring an interview with Gauher Aftab, creator of the comic book series "Paasban - The Guardian." On December 16th, 2014, the Taliban killed more than 150 people at the Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan. Most of the victims were children. Gauher Aftab and his creative team were moved to develop this comic book series to combat terrorism and radicalization in Pakistan. They researched how radicalization forms in the minds of young people, and how it can be undone without violence, as part of creating this series. Gauher joined me on Skype from Lahore, Pakistan, to talk about this comic book series, how Islam is both regarded and taught in North American mosques, and more. This is Intersections Radio.

Gauher Aftab, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

GAUHER AFTAB: Thanks for having me. It's a joy to be here.

SARIKA MEHTA: First, tell us a bit about yourself and the Paasban series.

GAUHER AFTAB: I'm actually not a writer by profession, so I've taken up writing this comic book series specifically as a tool to counter violent extremism, especially in a religious context, in Pakistan, after the December 16th attacks in 2014, where 165 children were massacred as they were in school. That was something that really sort of pushed me and the rest of my team towards this particular project. We had been toying with the idea for a number of years before that, as an animated series, but then, you know, after December 16, we just thought that we had to get some kind of content out there. And what we could afford at the time were comics, and so that's what we went with.

And, so, this is the series that really has worked for us in the field, and has been delivering some good results. It's called "Paasban - The Guardian." There are six issues out right now. There are six issues out in print and online. Initially we had gone with three, but, you know, after our first initial trial session we realized that perhaps Pakistan isn't very developed as a market for reading material, and so it would be better if we broke it up into more manageable chunks for the kids. And so now, we're definitely going with six issues, and we're making six more. And hopefully, you know, it's our belief that this is the right way of tackling the problem of hearts and minds, and we've definitely started getting some good results.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, I want to back up for one second. You had mentioned that the inspiration for creating this was the attack on the school in Peshawar, which had killed over 150 people, mostly children. And you said that this was a more affordable medium, so to speak. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

GAUHER AFTAB: I mean, it was affordable for us, as a third party that's not affiliated with any government or political party, just people. We were running an advertising agency, a content development house and animation house before that, and this was an idea that we wanted to work on independently for a long time. But, we obviously did not have the funding or couldn't get the funds to work on an animated series, that we could then launch on a television channel or online. So, it seemed most appropriate that we stay within the visual storytelling medium, and therefore we chose comics. That, too, comics with a very heavy message lend themselves more towards the graphic novel format, and so that's where we decided to go with finally, when we did the intervention, out of pocket, essentially.

SARIKA MEHTA: Okeh, now I understand. And, I'm also under the impression that you and your team actually conducted some data driven research about the radicalization of young people as part of your impetus for this.

GAUHER AFTAB: Well, yeah, I mean, content development is something that you need to constantly have the target audience in mind, and this type of content is being created for a specific reason, which is, you know, to challenge preconceived notions about the plight of Muslims in the world, and what Islam really is all about. And so we definitely were very, very interested to know if this approach was even working on the ground. There have been so few real counter-narrative projects the world over, and so, you know, you're always trying to figure out if this is the right way to solve the problem.

So we surveyed around, well, we distributed 15,000 copies of our -- of the first three volumes, and we surveyed a specific group within rural areas as well as urban areas, low income, all of them, public schools. And we did, you know, a pre-analysis and a post-analysis. And what we found in the pre-analysis was pretty -- it was scary, but very important to know. And that was that, you know, the majority of the kids we surveyed between the ages of 10 to 18 already thought that, that it was okeh to use violence in matters of, you know, in religious matters. And that they also really had a very strong belief in the infallibility of religious leaders, you know, and so, that just opens itself to all kinds of possibilities, because, a religious leader who is essentially making a decision of who, this child or this community, can be violent against, and that varies a lot, you know. So this was scary stuff for us.

But then when we gave the kids the comic book series, and came back after a couple of weeks and then surveyed them again, it was really heartening to know that almost half of the kids who had these, you know, these, let's just say radical inclinations, had changed their viewpoint and, you know, what we are really happy about was that, not only did they change their viewpoint from before, but they didn't go to a negative stance about the role of religion, or they didn't adopt an antagonistic sort of viewpoint about religion. They actually said that, you know what, we're going to use our brain. We're going to use our critical thinking process, and figure out, you know, what's pushing us toward something negative and what's pushing us toward something positive. For me, as both a storyteller and, you know, a communication content designer, I really think of that as a proper victory.

SARIKA MEHTA: That is incredible, both of what you said, that they were so -- these are very impressionable young people who are already experiencing radicalization at a very young age, and with exposure to your graphic novel, to your comics, that they didn't go on another extreme of just denying all religion, but rather just, what you were talking about, this critical thinking component, and how that plays into how they're perceiving what's around them.

GAUHER AFTAB: You know, two things could have happened when they read that comic. Number one, they could have been radicalized so much, subliminally, already that they would have immediately

rejected anyone else talking to them about religion. So that's one thing that didn't happen, that's great. The second thing that could have happened was that they went totally extreme the other way, and I don't think any change agent or any kind of quantum that's meant to change hearts and minds is meant to take up an antagonistic view with the other. Right? Because obviously you want to make sure that there's space in society to have these discussions in a tolerant and respectable manner, and remove violence from the equation. So that's really something that I thought is unique, because there's not a lot of content out there that can do this, and obviously, you know, Paasban is something that we're going to keep improving, and there's a lot of work that needs to be done. But just to be going in the right direction, I mean, it's just a huge news for us. Right?

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely, and a very powerful educational tool. Before I forget, I had heard somewhere along the way. Did you experience some kind of, not radicalization per se, but some attempt at this?

GAUHER AFTAB: Yeah, I mean, I think that I probably went through a very similar subliminal radicalization process, that most of these kids are going through right now. And that is, you know, elements of society, people from your family, just the overall lack of information about what real Islam is, you know, and the existence of so many people out there who are pushing this violent form of religion. So eventually, you know, especially younger kids who are growing up and don't really know what the real picture is all about, haven't had the opportunity to explore that knowledge. Right? So, they do get confused, and they often get misdirected.

And I was at that stage already when I met someone who was a radicalizer. And he was my, one of my teachers in school, in high school. So, I met him in the ninth grade, but this was a very long time ago, this was in 1997. And I was about 12 years old, so this was pre-cell phone, pre-internet, I didn't really have a lot of ways of communicating with him, so we just talked in school. And he was someone who had served as a, I mean, he had served in the Afghan war as a Mujahid, you know, he had fought in that war against the Soviet Union. That was largely financed by western countries and Muslim countries together. And so he was the first generation of Jihadi, so to speak. And he was very inspiring as a story. You know, he actually took me to that point where I felt that I needed to go join up, because there were so many injustices happening against Muslims all around the world, and it was all part of this huge plan to destroy Muslim civilization, and it was the duty of every Muslim to really go and fight this, physically.

And so, you know, over a period of time, I began to gravitate towards that. I was searching for my own identity. I was trying to figure out what I'm really, you know, what I've been sent to do here on this earth, you know, just figure out your direction in life. And I thought, here's a good direction, you know. I get -- do a couple of sacrifices, get in, get out, and, you know, at the cost of my life, I can pretty much gain eternal salvation. It was a very seductive sales pitch, so to speak, for radicalism. And really, you know, now that I look back at it, I often, you know, think to myself that Islam and, you know, religion had very little part to play in it. It was mainly a political narrative. It was mainly about other countries, or other civilizations, occupying Muslim lands, and basically committing atrocities against Muslims. And that was really what the whole narrative was built around.

And so, now that I can, you know, think in an empathetic way about kids and sort of understand how they're led through this process, it really makes it a lot easier for me to go point by point and refute many of the kind of, you know, the propagandist elements in radical narratives. It definitely helps me out when I recall the kind of emotional imagery and religious imagery. They're just words, really, that are used. Because then I want to co-opt and recapture those terms, so Muslims can use them without

fear, and so that the radical can't use them. So one of the things that I do a lot these days is that I want to try and recapture the word Jihad. Because, you know, Jihad is something that's A, being misused exceptionally, people fear that word all over the place, Muslims fear that word, non-Muslims fear that word. It's essentially only -- the only meaning it has in modern society is global death cult.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. It's a hot button word, yes.

GAUHER AFTAB: Yeah, and it actually means so many different things, and it's a very essential concept to anyone who really wants to call themselves a Muslim. And it's essentially not violent. It really has nothing to do with violence, you know, and this whole concept of, you know, using a particular narrative to kill other people is something that, you know, not something that religion has much to do with. This is something that, you know, class can be used to dehumanize people, gender is used to dehumanize people, race is used to dehumanize people, and religion is just one way of doing that. For me, just knowing the approach really helps in structuring a good narrative to counter it.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, maybe explain that a little bit further. You said you want to recapture and reappropriate the word Jihad. What the unfortunate global understanding of the word is, is a very negative -- I mean, it's an excuse for violence, effectively. What is the original intent you want to give back to it?

GAUHER AFTAB: Well, you know, Jihad literally just means to struggle and to strive. And, you know, most of the philosophical connotations are, two words, improving yourself. Improving yourself in religion, improving your relations with your family, your society, your community, going all the way up to the top, two words, your relations with other civilizations. So it's what gives impetus to the average Muslim, you know, man, woman, child, to wake up every day in the morning and just do their best, at whatever it is that they're doing, and, you know, Islam is a religion that really preaches a lot of humility and modesty, and charity, and, you know, just a kind of negation of your own ego. And I think that Jihad is one of those social concepts within Islam that helps you to keep on functioning as a society. And once you take that concept out, or, you know, misinterpret it to mean only, not only just killing, but, you know, kind of a suicidal level of killing. Once you only have that meaning attached to that word, you know, Muslim civilizations across the world have really nothing to push them towards any action. You know?

Socially speaking, psychologically speaking, there is no concept left in their religion that pushes them towards that level of action, that can challenge, you know, the drive of Jihad. And this is really unfortunate, that drive is being channeled only towards violent outcomes, which it has nothing to do with.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely. I want to talk a little bit more about the graphic series itself, Paasban - The Guardian. Tell us about the specific characters and the scenario, so our listeners can have a visual before they go out and buy it.

GAUHER AFTAB: Well, definitely. I mean, if -- there's some good news for listeners if they happen to understand Urdu, they can read it for free because it's up on our app, and it's meant to be out there for free for anyone who can read it in Urdu, so that we can have the maximum outreach possible. But, going back to the series itself, it's basically a journey of a group of college students. They would enter into any interaction with a radical organization or a radicalist ideology, they're just mapping that out. What is the way that these kids could possibly come into contact with these kind of ideas? What happens when they do come into contact with those ideas? And what choices do kids or young people

across the world who, you know, are in that situation, what choices should they make, or what choices do they have and what are their -- what is ideal for them? To pull their friends or their loved ones outside of, really, this chokehold that is radicalism.

So, you know, there's one character that is Saad, who's one of the main protagonists. And we modeled him a little bit in terms of his facial features on one of the founding fathers of Pakistan, or at least what he used to look like when he was young, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. So he looks a little bit like a young Jinnah, and he's a very strong, law-abiding citizen, very good idea of morals and principles, and what is right and wrong. And so basically someone who can lead, and who can shape opinions, both within his little circle of friends and hopefully with the reader as well.

We brought Zara, a strong female character, who in many ways is much braver than Saad, because she actually is a bit of a firebrand, and likes to take action rather than sitting around and thinking about things, thinking through. But, you know, she also aspires to be a journalist, and so she's always searching for the truth. And she doesn't have a very huge role in the first, in the first story arc, but as things go forward, she's definitely going to be someone who we look to to lead in terms of thoughts. But also someone with a very strong moral outlook.

And then we've got Asim, and another character who is actually his mirror, Munir. And these were actually meant to be one character, but ultimately we decided to make them two different people, so people can see exactly the duplicitous relationship that kids start to develop with concepts of their -- their desire to be loved by their family and to love other people, and to be good in society, and then also that emotional feel, to just, you know go and get back and get some revenge, and take some violent action, you know?

So, both of these kids, as normal college students, trying to figure out, you know, different things that they can do in their spare time, decide to go and help out at a local charity. Pack rations and other supplies for flood relief, and you know, some other various issues that, they keep happening. And, this turns out to be a religious charity that has links, or affiliations, with radical groups, and eventually these children do interact, in their time, at that charity, with individuals who have terrible backstories, and who are directly involved in radical terrorist activities. And as it so happens, they've ended up in the office of a group that is going to launch their first major terrorist attack.

And these kids become part of the plan, and they become willing participants in the plan, after they get brainwashed. And so the rest of the series is really following the reaction of their friends and their families towards their decision, trying to show kids what happens when you follow a radical path, how you get there first and then, you know, how not romantic that journey is, because it leads to a very dark place. It also exposes many of the actors, who oftentimes, you know, we only see in the public eye, and who may look like or seem like people with a lot of religious credibility, but who are actually behind the scenes behaving as mercenaries, and don't have any religious goals in mind at all.

Anyway, hopefully, when other people and your readers read the series, they can kind of walk away with a much better understanding of the process and the pressures of living in the world, where, you know, radicalism is so prevalent in society, and how difficult it is really to stop kids from getting into it first, and then bring them out of it. It's really a huge help.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, it's quite an endeavor to really give a visual and like a step by step process as to how this occurs with young people, and impressionable people, college aged people, or younger, as the case were. I was curious there, any particular character that you enjoyed creating the most, or was

there any particular scene you enjoyed creating the most, and was there -- and on the flipside, was there any that was the most challenging for you?

GAUHER AFTAB: Well, I felt like Asim and Munir both were me. You know, my own experience was reflected so well in both of those characters, you know, because one takes a journey of introspection, uses their brain, sort of talks themselves out of it by trying to understand the rationale and logic behind a loving religion that preaches peace and a doctrine that only wants to kill other people, even Muslims. Right? So that was definitely me. But then I was also the kid, like Munir, who was just incensed at the idea that there was, quote unquote a western, evil empire out there, that was just occupying Muslim lands, and, you know, razing homes to the ground and causing mayhem wherever, you know, it wanted. And no one would do anything about it. And so, I tried to show both of those sides. That was really important for me.

One character, though, who I really, you know, that character is really important to me, because I feel like that character is not featured in any of the counter-narrative work that comes out these days, and that person did not exist when I was radicalized. That's one of our villains, I guess, Khurram. And Khurram is someone who's had a terrible life, you know, he grew up in a region where, which was, you know, wartorn, some of the northern parts of Pakistan, the tribal areas that border Afghanistan. And so he's seen a lot of war refugees, he's seen a lot of difficulties, and eventually, because of the US drone program, his family was killed in a drone attack, without ever having any links to any kind of group of that nature. And so that what really pushes him over the edge, you know, and then he goes nuts, he joins up, just to get his revenge.

And that's a story that you don't hear very often, because people are - have discounted the fact that the war on terror has really created a huge, new generation of fighters who you can't really reason with, and who aren't in it because they have some misguided view of religion. They're just in it for revenge, and something happened to all of them, and there are thousands of them. And so for us to really show, in six volumes, or six issues, the process of reclaiming that character towards a moral, humanistic standpoint, that was huge for us. And obviously your readers can read it for themselves and let us know if they think we succeeded. But, you know, there are very few templates out there for how to reclaim people who have truly been, who society has truly failed, and hurt really, really badly. And I think that maybe this could be one of them.

SARIKA MEHTA: You've mentioned several times so far about the influence of the western world, and how it plays a role in the radicalization. And you yourself have spent time in the US. I believe you went to Knox College. Talk about your thoughts on the US involvement, especially, as it were, with a lot of rhetoric in this election year.

GAUHER AFTAB: Absolutely. When I was growing up, I was able to de-radicalize myself because I got lucky. I couldn't speak or read Urdu very well. I had actually grown up and was born in Saudi Arabia, and so I only knew how to read or write or speak English when I came to Pakistan, when I met that Islamiyah teacher. So the only thing he could really give me were, was the Qur'an, and the Hadith, which are the compiled sayings of the holy prophet. So, you know, luckily I couldn't read any propaganda material, this stuff was all standard stuff, preaching, you know, good, humanistic values, and the way of Islam.

And so, you know, after a while I got out of it. When I came to the US, a very important part of my journey, because when one grows up in a particular society, you just take it for granted, you know. The liberties, or the lack thereof, the societal viewpoint on various issues, you just socialize yourself into it.

When I came to the US, it was definitely a different culture. And so it was a choice, you know. Do I want to act Muslim? Do I want to, you know, pray? Co I want to fast? Do I want to stay away from alcohol? Is this it, is that all my religion is really all about? About praying and staying away from things? Or is there more to it, can I explore it philosophically?

And so there were a lot of questions that I had, you know, as an undergraduate at Knox, and, you know, Knox being a liberal arts college is creative, asking these sort of questions. And looking at things holistically. And so my time in the US was spent visiting a lot of Islamic centers in Illinois and North America, and I found that while the way that Islam is taught in the US is very, very different from the way Islam is taught in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. You know, over here is a culture of fear, you know, here god is constantly looking at you and judging you and telling you that you've sinned, you know. Abroad, when Muslims preach Islam to each other and just talk in mosques, you know, god is very forgiving, very merciful, and definitely more prone to the kind of meditation and the kind of peaceful nature that one associates with Islam.

However, it is the same brand of Islam, which is absolutist, which says, you know, there is only one brand of Islam, and that's this. This is something that we call Wahhabism, or we call Salafism, you know. These are difficult terms to understand, but, you know, this is the kind of Islam that is -- has really been pushed across the world by countries in the middle east that have a specific agenda. They've obviously crowded out other competing voices, and over the last 36 years, this has become the main voice. So while it looks great, in the US, some of the fundamental things that are wrong with some of the centers that I visited was that, the way that Islam is taught does not allow for questioning, that it does not allow for understanding or trying to rationalize certain beliefs internally. You're supposed to just take it, just accept it, just submit to it. But then at the end, you only have a man telling you what to submit and accept. So that's a very crucial distinction that I feel globally, Islam, or the way that we now learn Islam, doesn't have anymore.

And so, you know, my time in the US really opened my eyes to the fact that, you know, I've already seen this. I've heard this. This is most of the stuff that I've already been through and rejected in Pakistan, so I'm not going to do this again. I need to look and search for answers on my own. And definitely I can't say that I found a lot of answers. There are a lot of questions that are answered, but then, you know, I always have more questions. And ultimately, I started calling this struggle to seek for more knowledge, to seek for truth, I understood that this is Jihad. This is what it means to strive, to better yourself and better your understanding in religion. And I thought, wow, you know, it took me so many years to figure this out, to figure out an alternative narrative to this word. And so, you know, since then, pretty much, it's been my attempt to figure out different ways of putting that idea out there. And luckily, I've got a team now that really believes in the project, and they're just awesome.

SARIKA MEHTA: I wanted to go back, you were talking about the way Islam is taught in the mosques in this country, in the US. It's taught in a way that people seem to accept it without the critical thinking component, without questioning why. And I guess I want to ask you, why do you suppose that's the case, because, from what I understood from what you were saying, in developing countries, that may be the case with, you know, poor nations where it's used as a political power. And in more developed nations, where people have more luxuries, they can -- they have the opportunity to question why. This is a country that has luxuries, you know, so one would assume that the communities would use critical thinking. Why do you suppose that that is not occurring in Islamic communities in the US?

GAUHER AFTAB: Well, you know, I'd say that, looking at many of the new research coming out of, you know, cognitive behavior, humans have a very limited amount of free will that they can really

bring to bear in an particular situation. Right? And oftentimes, we give up our choice to use our free will, depending on the situation. You know? So when we're at work, we just listen to what our boss says, we don't really ask him, you know, did you really get authorization for that, or do you think this is a good idea? We just do. And that's what we're supposed to do, that's what we're programmed to do. Our sense of free will is really not working at that particular point in time. We've chosen to suspend it, no doubt, but it's not there at that moment.

And so, you know, this applies obviously in lots of different situations. Kids often don't question their parents until a certain age, because they know no other way. Right? And so, oftentimes what I see is, and this is not just for Islam, this is for religious people in general. You can't have a discussion with them. And why is that? Because they're coming from a place where they just accept it. They are not engaging intellectually with that material, or with that philosophy. They're trying to swallow that philosophy whole, and call themselves a certain thing. It's part of their identity, but they -- it's not really channeled in the form of belief, you know, it's not something that they've understood, chosen, and now believe in. You know, it's just something that they grew up with, like pale skin or dark skin, or blond hair or dark hair.

And so, I feel that that relationship with religion is extremely dangerous, especially in countries where there's a concerted effort of keeping god out of government, because if god isn't part of government, or, you know, the state doesn't really have much of a role in regulating what is said in mosques, and what is said in churches, and what kind of activities constitute religion, then sooner or later someone else is going to use it for their own terms, and that's exactly what we've seen in many of the third world countries. As more and more people across the world fall into disenfranchisement, fall into hard times, fall out of the safe -- social safety net, this is going to become more and more appealing to them.

SARIKA MEHTA: Actually, that was another question I had, was, you expressed how the children in the schools responded to your comic series. How have other communities responded?

GAUHER AFTAB: You know, what I'm really glad about is that, basically, it's, 10 to 18 is not far gone enough, or perhaps they can never be far gone enough. They're too young, really, to believe in one thing with that much fervor. Right? So you -- it's all about timing, you need to get to them either before, or you need to get to them enough times so that they know that there are a lot of other options out there, this isn't the only truth that's there. Right? When you get to a slightly older, you know, age group, these conversations are much, much more difficult to have, and that's actually one of the reasons why I think it's been a blessing in disguise that we went with the comic book route, because perhaps the world is not ready, perhaps we're not ready to have this discussion in the way that we've framed it in Paasban on television as yet, but we can definitely have this kind of communication with a child directly through their cellphone, where no one else can observe that child.

And also allow that child to share that content with other kids, without having to physically take something that can be detected, or can be monitored or can be destroyed by other people who aren't so happy about it. And so, you know, that's why, perhaps, now our distro -- you know, our app, the CFX Comics app, is perhaps the better way of attacking certain hard hitting issues, and, you know, we need to be using mainstream media for issues that set the base groundwork, you know, the humanistic values, the respect for other views, the sacred concept of human life. You know, you push those forward in society, create a base and a foundation, and then you can have the hard conversations, maybe one day on TV as well.

So I think that's the way that we should be engaging with the problem, and the very different



communities and stakeholders that are part of it right now.

SARIKA MEHTA: Definitely. This is a very interesting discussion. Well, Gauher Aftab, thank you so much for taking the time to join me on Intersections Radio.

GAUHER AFTAB: It was a pleasure being here and, you know, god bless all of you.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was Gauher Aftab, creator of the comic book series Paasban - The Guardian, from CFX Comics. To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out [IntersectionsRadio.Wordpress.com](http://IntersectionsRadio.Wordpress.com). Visit the same website for previous episodes of this podcast. And, join the facebook community at [facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio](https://facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio). I'm Sarika Mehta, and this is Intersections Radio. Thanks for listening.