



'I try to write things on a very personal place so they resonate into a larger cultural context'



Aasif Mandvi at the launch of his memoir in New York, November 3.

Actress Madhur Jaffrey with Mandvi.

In the hilarious and the poignant stories in Aasif Mandvi's memoir *No Land's Man*, **Arthur J Pais** finds a reflection on identity, race, and dislocation. Photographs by **Paresh Gandhi**

Over two decades ago, Aasif Mandvi, who was waiting tables in New York, broke the rules and whispered *'Dr Zhivago*. It changed my life.' The object of his adoration, actor Omar Sharif, did not seem to hear Mandvi, who would go on to win the treasured Obie award for his one-man play *Sakina's Restaurant*, shine in a number of films and become a correspondent on the award-winning *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and get the chance to whisper again, *'Dr Zhivago*. It changed my life.'

'As I stood there, not knowing what to say, enveloped by the din of the Manhattan's rooftop cocktail lounge,' Mandvi writes in his memoir, *No Land's Man*, which released November 3, 'Omar Sharif smiled back at me. Nodding in recognition, almost familiarly he said leaning into me, "Really? Mine too".'

How did Omar Sharif change your life?

Omar Sharif represents something to me, as a young kid, who dreamed of being an actor. Growing up in England, I did not grow up on Bollywood movies, but Western, Hollywood movies. All my actor-icons were Caucasian; they were 'White.' All the heroes that I looked (up) to were always white.

Omar Sharif, though he was not South Asian but Egyptian, was the first time that I saw a brown man in a role that was dignified and was the lead. I saw him in *Dr Zhivago*. He was a handsome brown leading man. It was a revelation for me to see that as a child in a Hollywood film.

It gave me the aspiration that maybe there is a possibility that if Omar Sharif can exist, Aasif Mandvi can exist as well. Maybe there's a space in that culture for that character. For me he was a real iconic symbol, the first one. He had sown the seeds for myself and other brown actors hoping to work in Hollywood...

I was obsessed, while growing up, with this icon of American masculinity. It was this motorcycle riding, 60s iconic, James Dean-esque sort of American symbol of masculinity that was nothing like me. I thought, oh maybe I can be that.

As a young kid who is an immigrant, brown, not part of the majority culture, doesn't look like the white kids that I went to school with, on one side of me the image of masculinity



Mandvi with Top Chef host Padma Lakshmi.



was this Western idea of masculinity, which I would realize later also has racist and oppressive elements to it.

On the other side, there was this immigrant's idea of masculinity that my father (*Hakim Mandviwala*) represented. He was a shopkeeper in Bradford (*England*) after having migrated from Bombay with my mother and my sister Shabanam.

I didn't want to be either of those things. I wasn't allowed to be one and I didn't want to be the other. So, Omar Sharif represented a third way, another way to be a brown man and be masculine in a predominantly white culture.

You did television commercials for some time and went around *patank-ing*. What does that word mean?

Patanki-ing is a word that actress Sakina Jaffrey first introduced to me and soon the desi actors were using it in the early '90s, in New York.

Patanki-ing was basically the sound of mimicking an Indian accent to a non-Indian ear. It was like... you bobble your head and you go *patank... patank... patank... patank... patank*. We would always come back from auditions and ask one other, 'Did they ask you to *patank*'?

What it meant was a disembodied accent of an Indian caricature that was devoid of any humanity or any context. The ad makers would just ask you to come in, put a turban on, and 'do' an accent. They would ask me if I knew to charm snakes.

These were what a lot of my experiences as a young actor in New York were when I first got here. There was a lot of going into auditions and being asked to *patank* for them. Then, of course, there are nuances to that. You try to *patank* in a not-so-stereotypical way, but at the end of the day, that's what it was.

I write in the book how I was dissociated from my own Indian heritage and my own Indian culture, that when I first came to New York and I first started doing auditions, I didn't even know how to do an Indian accent.

Not that I was not familiar with the Indian accent. I was very familiar with it. I had grown up with it; my father had an Indian accent; my mother had an Indian accent, but somehow in myself I had repressed it and pushed it down so far that I didn't know how to access it any more.

When I started going to these auditions and I was being asked to do the Indian accent, I was doing it really badly. I had to re-connect with my own Indian-ness and accept the Indian accent again. I had to sound like my father!

From there you make your own destiny to writing and acting in *Sakina's Restaurant*...

In reaction to the fact that there really weren't many roles for South Asians in theater and films!

I was doing stand-ups, auditioning for these kind of really stereotypical parts in commercials or TV shows or whatever. There weren't any real roles with any substance or nuance or culture or context or complexity.

In school, I had played all these character roles. Mostly, they were 'white' characters, but I had at least gotten to play those that had some kind of complexity and humanity. When I got into the professional business, I realized that I was being just asked to do very stereotypical, one-dimensional things and in a reductive kind of way.

I started to write *Sakina's Restaurant* almost as reaction to that as a way to create characters that came from a place of truth for me, that came from a place of writing, that came from a place of reality, that came from a place of my own family. I wanted to create a kind of South Asian char-

acter that no one was writing because they did not have a point of view about those people in the way that I did.

So I started writing characters based on myself, my parents, my family and people I grew up with and stuff like that. I started writing these characters that actually represented South Asians in a real way, at least attempting to.

What happened from that was that a lot of South Asians came to see *Sakina's Restaurant*. It was a revelation, I think, for a lot of South Asian audiences because they had never seen that play that was done by a South Asian about a South Asian family, that was done on the mainstream American stage!

Those of us who were not artists, those of us who were not actors, felt empowered by what you had done. It showed us we could aspire to be what we wanted to and did not have to kill our identity.

Yes! We got bus loads of South Asians coming from New Jersey, Connecticut and Long Island. They would come to see the play because they heard about it and you had also mentioned it in *India Abroad*.

They would read about it and they would come and they would see this play and it probably gave them the same feeling that I got when I saw Omar Sharif for the first time — oh, there is a point; there is a representation.

It was only a small thing that I was doing: It was in a small theater with only 100 seats and we ran for six months... But, for me, personally, it was a departure point. Because, up until that point, I really didn't have an association with my own culture or really have a lot of Indian friends.

It was only after *Sakina's Restaurant* that I had a re-immersion with my own culture.



Mandvi had the audience at the Aicon art gallery in Manhattan, including his father Hakim Mandviwala, laughing out loud.

And then there is *The Daily Show*. Tell us about that.

Here I was with a very clear agenda of what I wanted to be as an actor. I was doing Ibsen, and Chekhov in off-Broadway shows and doing roles in movies. I had also got to act and sing in a big Broadway production, *Oklahoma!* I was still considering myself a serious actor, even though I had done a lot of comedy.

The Daily Show always felt to me that it's for stand-up comedy people. It's a little bit left of center; it's creative not political in terms of my own life itself, something that was *not* on the path. But these things happen in life and you need to be open to things. The things that are meant to come into your life, come into your life. *The Daily Show* was one of those examples.

I was just sitting in my apartment and the phone rang... I didn't know what it was, initially. Initially, I thought well all this is going to be some stupid kind of thing where I put a turban on and pretend to fly on the carpet and wear a beard and yell 'Death to America' or some shit like that. Initially, I said no, I don't want to go. Then they called back and said no, no, no, it's for a correspondent.

I went to *The Daily Show* that afternoon and I auditioned for Jon Stewart. It was initially for a Middle East correspondent. It was just a one off thing... They had me come in; they auditioned me at 3 o'clock; Jon Stewart hired me immediately and said you are going to be on this show tonight. I didn't even have time to tell people what was happening.

Jon has been real "mensch" to me. He has been great. He kept having me back on the show, back on the show, back on the show and then eventually offering me a contract.