On Stories and Settings

I write different types of fiction—and some non-fiction—but what most people associate me with is historical detective fiction. The detective I invented is Muzaffar Jang. He's a 17th century nobleman, a man living in the Delhi of the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan's time. That's 1656, for the first Muzaffar Jang novel, which was *The Englishman's Cameo*.

Ever since *The Englishman's Cameo* was published, I've been interviewed dozens of times, and one question which I am always asked is why I chose to write detective fiction, and why specifically did I decide on a Mughal detective. My answer is that the combination of mystery and history is something I really like, because history fascinates me. Not merely Delhi's history, but history as such. Not political history, but the history of how people lived: what they ate, how they dressed, how they sent letters or what technology they used, things like that.

And I chose to set my historical detective series in Mughal Delhi because Delhi is the city I am most familiar with. And because setting is so very, *very* important when you're writing a story.

The 'setting' for a story is of two main types. One is the **chronological setting**, and the other is the **geographical setting**.

The chronological setting is, of course, the time in which the story is set. The chronological setting of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, for example, is the late 19th century and the early 20th century. The chronological setting of George Orwell's 1984 is a specific year—1984. The Muzaffar Jang series have a chronological setting of the 17th century.

When you set a story can mean a lot. The **chronological setting, after all, can be either of three types:**

1. The past
2. The present
3. The future

For the writer who wants to focus completely on his or her characters and plot, the easiest chronological setting is probably the **present**: all you have to do is give the reader a sense of here and now, and that's it. Especially if your target audience are **people already familiar with the setting—so, for example, if I'm writing a story set in today's world, I don't have to describe how a telephone works, or what the Internet is. I can assume that my readers know it already.**

With the **future**, you have the **freedom to use your imagination quite a bit**, especially with the further in the future you place your story. A story set a hundred years from now can have a very different setting from the present. Look at *Star Trek*, for example, and all that "Beam me up, Scottie," stuff which they thought up back in the 1960s, when the TV series began. And, more than fifty years later, it's still science fiction: we still can't instantly transport people across a room, let

alone across galaxies. The crux of the matter is: we don't know what lies in the future. When I was a kid, in school, we'd just about started using computers, and we had to learn DOS commands to make them work. If back then I'd read a story in which a character was typing something into a computer and someone else across the world was reading it almost simultaneously—or if two people, one in India and the other in Europe, were having a conference, seeing each and talking… well, I would have thought it was really smart.

The third type of chronological setting is the past. The **past is history**, and setting a story in a historical period means that, **if you want to be accurate and authentic, you need to do your homework. You need to do lots of research.** And the research isn't just the sort of things most people remember about history: not just how the Bastille was stormed or who were the first six Emperors of the Mughal dynasty or who was the first man to find a sea route to India. You might, of course, write a story about an important historical event, but stories need believable settings and believable characters—and unless you can describe, accurately, or mostly accurately, the details of everyday life in another period, a historical story can fall flat. Or, worse, a knowledgeable reader can tell that you haven't done research. For **example, the other day I was reading a novel set in ancient India, and there were mentions in it of tea, and of somebody making a meat curry with potatoes**. And, because I am interested in history, and I've done a lot of historical research, I thought, "Oh, this writer's got it all wrong." That's because potatoes originated in South and Central America, and didn't arrive in the Old World until Christopher Columbus had made his epic voyage. And tea was introduced in India—and became so very popular—by the British, who brought it from China.

So. We've discussed the three types of chronological settings. As I said, there's another type of setting, and that's the **geographical setting**.

As it's apparent by the name itself, the **geographical setting refers to the place where the story is set.**

Now, when we talk about place, it **can mean several different things**. First of all, the **place can be either real, or imaginary.** For example, **JRR Tolkein's Middle Earth** in the Lord of the Rings trilogy is an imaginary land. It's a land where trees can walk and rings can turn you invisible and there are a range of very varied creatures, all the way from orcs to elves to dwarves. Or there's **Stephen King's Dark Tower series**, also set in an imaginary land, where there's a pink train racing along, which will stop only if you're correctly able to answer the complex riddles it asks you.

The good thing about an imaginary setting is that you can **let your imagination run wild. Fantasy can be really fantastic**. You don't have to really stick to facts or even any rules. You could create a world where water is responsible for photosynthesis, or plants are the chief predators, or mud is a more precious commodity than diamonds. You aren't bound.

On the other hand, **when you're writing about real life, you *are* bound**. You have to—at least to some extent—follow some rules. You can't set a story exclusively in say, Melbourne, and then talk about characters walking down the Champs Elysees to have ice cream. **You can still, of course, take some liberties. For instance, you can (and almost certainly will) invent a shop, houses, even neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities in some instances—but there should be a semblance of**

reality about them. For example, the English writer Elizabeth Gaskell invented the industrial town of Milton when she wrote her novel *North and South* in 1855. But, while Milton was fictitious, it was based largely on the town of Manchester, where Elizabeth Gaskell spent many years of her life. Unlike Tolkein's Middle Earth—which was supposed to be fantasy—Gaskell's Milton was *supposed* to be real.

Therefore, when I write about Delhi in the time of Shahjahan, I'm writing about a real place. When I'm writing a contemporary short story set in Delhi, I'm still talking about a real place.

Let me give you an example. I'll read out an excerpt from a short story I wrote some years back. It's called *One Night's Work*, and it's about a girl who's an orphan and has been pushed into some very unsavoury business by two men who control her life. Here's a little bit describing a part of Old Delhi, near Chandni Chowk:

Outside, the road from Jama Masjid to Matiya Mahal was beginning to stir, preparing for another evening during Ramzan. Opposite the kebab seller's, a halwai was boiling syrup for jalebis while his assistant swatted flies with a grubby napkin. Further on, a grizzled shopkeeper was setting up a stall. His son was emptying cartons of Tupperware, hair clips and skullcaps for the father to arrange in regimented rows. A skinny boy with a prominent Adam's apple had spread a scrap of bright blue tarpaulin beside the road. On it was a jumble of odds and ends – pressure cooker gaskets, men's handkerchiefs, cell phone covers, screwdrivers. Near the seller's haunches was a lacy white dupatta, embroidered in gold thread.

And now, I'll read out a description of the same area, around Jama Masjid and Chandni Chowk, from a Muzaffar Jang story. This is Delhi in the 17th century.

For want of anything better to do, Muzaffar walked away towards the wide steps of the Jama Masjid, and seated himself there. He was aware of the surprised looks he drew from the motley crowd that milled about the entrance to the imperial mosque. A nobleman, sitting on the steps, was a novelty. There were jugglers here, and petty magicians who performed simple tricks for the amazement of the easily pleased. There were beggars and sellers of kababs. There were travellers, staring up in awe at the most magnificent mosque in the city. But the noblemen who came here arrived on horseback or in palanquins, made their stately way up to the mosque itself, and thought it beneath their dignity to sit among the riffraff.

The time period has changed—the chronological setting has changed—but the geographical setting is the same, even though (because of the centuries in between) a lot of other things have changed. But the setting is real. Incidentally, that description of Jama Masjid in the 17th century is based on travellers' accounts from that period. Several European travelers, like Francois Bernier, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Niccolao Manucci visited India during the 17th century, and left very detailed accounts of Delhi and its people.

But, back to settings. And, especially, back to the concept of geographical settings. I've talked about real and imaginary settings, but there's also another related concept. **It's what I call concentric settings. It's like concentric circles, you see: a series of circles, with different diameters, nested**

one inside the other. Settings are often like that too, especially in longer stories and novels. You could set a novel in a particular city, and you'd then describe the city, give the reader a feel of what the city is like. Then, scenes of the novel would be played out in certain neighbourhoods, and you'd describe those neighbourhoods. Then, there will be particular houses or buildings, or even outdoor spaces like parks and gardens in which the action takes place. And within those, especially related to buildings, there'd be specific rooms where you'd set scenes.

Each of these is a setting. The room is a setting. The house of which the room is a part is a setting. The neighbourhood in which the house stands is a setting. The city of which the neighbourhood is a part is a setting.

Let me illustrate this with an example. The third Muzaffar Jang novel, *Engraved in Stone*, is set in the city of Agra, in the year 1657. The excerpt I'm reading describes a room in a nobleman's house:

Each successive room was equally magnificent, even oppressively so. The dalaan into which Muzaffar was finally shown was painted and inlaid in shades of muted red and blue, with a rich Persian carpet in the centre and urns of blue-painted Chinese porcelain on either side of the arched doorway. Haider fussed over Muzaffar, seating him on the thick mattress along the right wall and pulling the brocaded bolsters closer. He carefully moved a large vase of full-blown white chrysanthemums off to one side as a servant entered, bearing a salver with cups of Chinese porcelain, a small bowl of sugar, and an ornate silver pitcher.

So that, when I'm talking of 'concentric settings', is the innermost circle—the smallest setting, the room.

Then, here is a description of the haveli, the mansion in which the room is situated.

Mumtaz Hassan Khan's haveli stood along the riverside, ringed by a wall, an orchard abutting it on one side, a garden – now barren and dead in the winter – on the other... Muzaffar and his escort stepped through the gateway and out of the drum house. Muzaffar shivered. The short stretch of paved path till the main entrance of the haveli was flanked on either side by a grove of mango trees, now enshrouded in a clammy grey mist. Torches had been inserted into stone rings set on either side of the path.

And so on, all the way from rooms to cities. You'll see these 'concentric settings' in most stories.

Now that I've talked about the types of settings, let me move on to **why settings are important**.

It's quite obvious, of course, that **without a setting a story cannot really take place. Your characters must exist in *some* time, and *some* place, in order for a story to be written**. Whether that setting is as simple as a patch of sand on a deserted island, or as complex as a space station many thousands of miles above Earth—or a palace in ancient Rome, let's say—the setting is absolutely necessary for the story.

But that's not the only reason why settings are important. There are other reasons, too. **Settings, for example, can reflect your characters' personalities.** And in turn, they can affect your characters' personalities. As an example, there are **Arthur Conan Doyle's descriptions of the rooms that Sherlock Holmes occupied at the fictitious 221 B Baker Street.** There are frequent impressions of rooms with drawn curtains, stuffy and closed and dark, filled with fumes. **Messy, cluttered**. They are the rooms of a man who is so intensely wrapped up in whatever he's investigating that he cannot let the outside world intrude: the clutter, the closed curtains, the fumes are all reflections of Holmes's genius, even his arrogance, because he's not concerned with what the world thinks of how he lives.

And, as I mentioned, **settings can, in turn, affect your characters' personalities**. If you've read **Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*** or have even a vague idea of what the novel is about, you'll know that Oliver was a little boy who spent the first few years of his life in an orphanage. Dickens describes the **orphanage**, and it's a **rough, gloomy, oppressive place**. Not surprisingly, Oliver—who's a timid little child—is **easily oppressed**. He's very unhappy. Then, later in the novel, Oliver gets away from the orphanage and is befriended first by a rich and kindly old gentleman, and then later, after some more adventures, by a pair of well-off ladies. It's not just these people's personalities which allow Oliver to develop some self-confidence and feel loved; it's also their homes. Their homes are airy, clean, open—everything that the orphanage was not.

On a broader level, the **setting itself can be an important plot element in a story**. We've all read stories or watched movies about people who've been **shipwrecked**, or are going on long journeys through **deserts or jungles**—in all these cases, the setting becomes especially important. I remember, as a teenager, I used to read a lot of **Louis L'Amour's books**. They're all set in the American Wild West, and **almost every book had some character having to travel through the desert.** There would be problems of running out of water, there would be intense heat, people nearly dying because of thirst**. The desert was the enemy. It was not merely a setting; it actually became more like a character in the story.** It helped the story move forward: it made a protagonist look for ways to survive, it made him—or her—tougher, it created situations that were an important part of the plot.

And that isn't something which just happens in Louis L'Amour's books. It can happen anywhere, in any genre. The **setting** can be a friend or an enemy. It can allow a character to blossom. It can oppress a character. It can also do other things. **It can create atmosphere**. Again, as an example, the **books of Dickens, which create a very real, very stark image** of how dreary and polluted the poorer parts of London were in the late 1800s. You read his books, and even now, over a hundred years later, you can imagine what it must have been like to have lived in London back then.

Now that I've talked about all of this—what types of settings there are, why settings are important, and so on—let me say a few words about **how effective settings are written**. I remember, when I wrote the first Muzaffar Jang book, I'd written a paragraph describing Chandni Chowk, which was, as it is even today, a major market. I'd described the shops, with their canopies and all the exotic goods they sold. I'd talked about the water channel in the centre of the street, and the crowd moving about. When I gave my manuscript to my editor, one thing she said was, "If I close my eyes, I can see what you're describing. But I can't hear it. I can't smell it."

From that I learnt an important lesson: **that settings are described with all five senses**. In that particular case, I rewrote the paragraph and added details, like the call for prayer from a mosque, or the clip-clop of horses' hooves for sound. The pungent smell of fresh marigolds being sold outside a Hindu temple, or the bitter fragrance of coffee coming from a coffee house. Or the flavour of juicy kababs, the fat sizzling as it dropped onto hot coals from turning skewers. Settings are not just visual; they're also auditory, olfactory, related to taste and touch.

And, settings are best *not* described in one go. A few lines here, a few more there. This helps prevent overload: all of us have, sometime or the other, been bored because a writer has gone on and on about describing a setting.

Have I gone on and on? I've nearly finished what I had to say about settings, but there are a few things I'd like to share as I wind up. One question I've been asked several times is whether my fondness for travelling influences my writing. I do travel quite a bit, both within India, and whenever I can afford it, abroad. **Every time I travel, I maintain a daily journal**. I write down extensive notes about every place I visit, down to the sights I see to the people I meet, the conversations I have with them, the food I eat—everything. I also take a lot of photographs. And, because I love going to new places so much, I absorb everything, I keep my eyes and ears open. And yes, somewhere or the other, sometime or the other, perhaps those places will be settings in a story. It's because I feel a place, I can describe it better, more convincingly. If I'm setting a story in the Himalayas, I can actually draw from my experiences and write about things which I've seen and smelled and heard and tasted. I can write about the smell of pines when you roll down a car window, or the sight of yellow ears of corn drying on slate-roofed village houses. Or the sound of little children laughing as they play cricket in a fallow field.

And that brings me back to Delhi, really. **I chose to set the Muzaffar Jang series primarily in Delhi because I know Delhi so well.** Of course, Delhi has changed a lot in the 350 years since Muzaffar's time—in fact, if Muzaffar were to suddenly find himself in today's Delhi, he would be utterly lost—but there's still a thread of continuity running through the city, especially the older parts of it. There is a lot of history to it. Delhi has been around for more than 30 centuries. It has over 2,000 historical monuments. It has three World Heritage Sites. It was the home—during Shahjahan's time—of the richest royal court in the world, beside that of the Ming dynasty in China.

I like many things about Delhi: the fact that parts of it are very green, for example. Or, since I am very fond of birds, the fact that, after Lagos, it is the national capital with the largest population of bird species. I like Delhi's cultural traditions, its festivals, its food.

And there is a lot that I hate about Delhi. I hate the heat and dust, the way the city clogs up during the monsoon. I hate the dirt. I hate the lack of civic sense, the rudeness, and the insularity of so many Delhiites. I hate the corruption.

Why then, do I write about Delhi? Shouldn't one love a place to be able to use it effectively as a setting? No. Because I think it's impossible to find a place which is absolutely perfect in every way. Imperfections make for a more real setting.

In the Red Fort, there is a plaque which reads "***Gar firdaus bar rue zamin ast, hamin ast o hamin ast o hamin ast.*"** It's by the medieval poet Amir Khusro, and it means, "If there is a paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here**." I don't agree with that; I don't think Delhi is paradise. But a mixture of Paradise and Hell and something in between is what makes for a good setting.** And that is why so many of my stories are set in Delhi. That's why I write about Delhi, both past and present.