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# 'We are creating conditions for young people that are un-survivable': An Interview with Sanah Ahsan

Sanah Ahsan and Emma Williams

*Sanah Ahsan is an award-winning spoken word artist and a qualified clinical psychologist. Ahsan has a growing profile in the public conversation about mental health. Her work has been featured by the BBC, Channel 4, Shakespeare's Globe, and Southbank's WoW festival. In 2019, she presented the Channel 4 Dispatches documentary 'Young, British and Depressed'. Recently, she has fronted campaigns for the charity Childline on 'coming out to religious parents' and the therapeutic practice of poetry. Emma Williams spoke to Sanah Ahsan about matters of race, education, the arts, and how she draws on the interconnection between these areas in her own practice and research on mental health.*

**Keywords:** Whiteness, mental health, race, poetry, education

**EW:** You're a clinical psychologist and in your work you draw on poetry as a form of therapy. Before coming to discuss this, could you tell us a bit about the more typical practices and forms of therapy that are used in clinical psychology?

**SA:** Clinical psychology at the moment has a very Western and Eurocentric underpinning to it. 88% of those who work in the profession are White. It is underpinned by a theory of dualism: the splitting of mind and body. A lot of the therapies are focused on the mind, for example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT approaches take a very individualistic approach to understanding distress. In this form of therapy the focus is on the individual person: their unhelpful cognitions, the way that they are coping, and their thinking styles. What a lot of therapies in the profession therefore tend to do is *obscure* the political and social context and what is creating the distress. All of these therapies—CBT, psychotherapy, acceptance and commitment therapy—are very much focused on the individual person. This even seems to be the case for systemic therapies, which are therapies that are supposed to work around the person, by drawing on families and the school and so on. Still, a lot of this is about working with the individual in front of you. The *problem* can inevitably become seen as being with the *person*.

As a professional, I am more interested in looking at: what are the systems that are creating distress? I am interested in looking at the systems of oppression, and the relationships that sit within these wider systems. How can we see distress as an understandable response to a traumatising world and can we meet it with compassion? How can therapy be a place in which we can allow for distress, be with it in a compassionate way, and thus find ways to survive?

**EW:** Why do you think the approaches to clinical psychology you've just identified as problematic—those which centralise the *individual* rather than the wider system in which the individual finds themselves— have emerged? Where have these approaches to treating mental health problems stemmed from?

**SA:** Clinical psychology sits very closely with psychiatry. We are working very close with psychiatry, which is a very bio-medical understanding of distress, and uses a framework of illness. Psychiatry basically says if you are suffering you are sick, you are ill, and the way to treat that is with pills. As much as psychology has been on its journey to move away from this medical framework, I think it is still very much tied to it. After all, have a system of therapies that works on referrals that are based on the diagnoses of disorders. We have CBT for 'anxiety', for 'depression', for 'OCD' (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). Although psychology does try to take a framework of formulation—looking at distress in terms of the story, what's happened to you that has brought you to where you are—it is still quite tied up within this bio-medical model.

If you actually think about the root of the word psychology, the Greek term for 'psy' is the *soul*. It is actually the study of the soul and the liberation of the soul.

**EW:** Could you say more about the way the soul is important to you and your work?

**SA:** It goes back to the narrowness of Western and Eurocentric traditions that place value on the mind and offer an intellectualised understanding of everything. The body and the soul are seen as redundant from this perspective. But in other parts of the world, the body is everything. The body is our way of knowing and understanding ourselves, and it is our way of connecting with others. We are not well practiced at speaking in terms of the soul and spirituality. I notice with myself even now a reluctance to speak about soul and spirituality because of how it has been met in the professional world.

**EW:** From the perspective of evidence-based approaches to medicine, and outcomes measures, talk of the soul seems problematic. If you start from the position that you want to heal the soul, how could you measure whether you have been successful?

**SA:** We can put this back to the conversation around systemic Whiteness and hierarchies. And we can use the language of power: whose knowledge is legitimate? Outcomes measures are reinforcing the idea—or the myth—that the only way of knowing is through scientific research, which repeatedly reinforces the way this is the only way we can do therapy.

Outcomes studies appear to show CBT is effective. Is it really? I think it actually risks a lot of harm, because we repeatedly obscure for people systems of oppression around them. And they obscure and delegitimise knowledge of the soul and knowledge of the body.

**EW:** Can we go back to the idea of the systems you are interested in as causing and sustaining suffering and distress? Could you say more about what these systems are and involve?

**SA:** I think we have a system and a culture, even more so in Western cultures, where we are obsessed with wellness. Any expression of grief, trauma, pain are intolerable. We are not practiced at being with suffering. This goes beyond mental health systems but it is very much reinforced in mental health systems. If someone is suffering we need to send them away. We have a sense that we need to fix them. We need to make them better. What actually is better? I think our framework of understanding what 'better' and 'well' mean are tied up with capitalism. Can you get back to producing? Can you get back to working? CBT works very well with this: we address your thinking styles, keeping your 'cogs' working for capitalism. As I said earlier, I am more interested in therapy as a space for compassion. We are suffering—of course we are, how can we not be within the systems we are in? But through understanding our suffering we can come to be with it, and connect with each other in more authentic ways.

It is interesting how now 'third way' therapies from the Eastern world such as mindfulness are leaking through into the Western world. and there are values in this. But it risks becoming another capitalist commodity when it is put together with Western ideas of individualism. Then it becomes focused on my soul, my peace, my happiness. I would favour a more collectivist approach where my well-being is bound up with the well-being of everyone; practices of collective liberation.

**EW:** I'd like to ask you about your interest in poetry as a therapeutic practice. What is poetry? I am interested in poetry a way of thinking, and I would say poetic thinking in the Western world presents a resistance the rationalised ways of thinking we have been discussing. I suppose that's more view from me than a question for you! Could you say more about your interest in poetry?

**SA:** I think the arts are often hugely undervalued as truth and ways of knowing. I am interested in how we can legitimise the knowledge of the arts. The arts are forms of storytelling. For me, as a marginalised person—as a brown, gender non-conforming person—poetry is a means to author my own story. But it is also a means to understand the stories of people before me. My greatest education—and the knowledge I hold with me the most—comes from black and brown poets and writers such as Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and bell hooks. They are writers I repeatedly go back to, for understanding the world and navigating it, and understanding myself. I think it is Alexis Pauline Gumbs who talks about 'mothering' in relation to texts, and the capacities for rearing and guidance on the page.

**EW:** Is there something distinctive about these forms of art—poems, texts, and stories—that allows them to have this educative and therapeutic value?

**SA:** We can think of language as the medium. Language constructs our realities. And language repeatedly exposes us to narratives. If I think of myself, I have been repeatedly exposed to certain narratives that make me feel I am less worthy: being queer is a problem, being Muslim is a threat. These narratives and these stories around us can become internalised. A lot of my development into adulthood has been recognising that these aren't my own stories. For me what is therapeutic about

poetry is that it allows authorship and reconnection with your own narrative. Poetry has become a practice of knowing myself. What I think is very exciting about poetry at the moment is that we see more and more voices that have been marginalised coming through and being seen and heard.

**EW:** There are two things I wonder about in relation to what you said, and it is related to my own philosophical interests in language. One would be whether we need to be a bit careful with notions such as being the author of one's own story. This can make it sound like we are in full control when it comes to using language. But language is not our own, it is something shared, and the meaning of my words can get away from me. The other is whether poetry is all about the self and understanding the self. Isn't there also a sense in which poetry and language also moves one beyond oneself—it takes us somewhere new?

**SA:** Yes. This reminds me of the book *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson. She is a fantastic writer. Early on in the book is a line that says 'you can't fault a net for having holes', and she is talking about language. The idea is that things are always going to fall through. There is always going to be gaps. Even in this conversation with you, I am trying to communicate something and we are dancing around what we are saying and trying to come closer to it. That reciprocity of language is a beautiful thing. But it is hard to have that reciprocity.

**EW:** You've referred to certain poets and writers as your teachers. Was this relation to poetry and writers something that started for you in school? What was your experience of poetry at school?

**SA:** I find it very difficult to remember my experience of poetry at school. I remember studying a poem by John Agard called 'Half Caste'. That stood out to me because I found a lot in school that was inaccessible to me. For example, Shakespeare. Although I can see the beauty in it now, I still find it hard to see myself in Shakespeare. It was not necessarily that I saw myself in the Agard poem, but something struck me in the way he was using his own accent and dialogue. There was a lot I was suppressing at of my being Pakistani. At the time I didn't see it like this, but I think looking back I found a portal of entry to something about myself through that poem.

I found school a difficult place to be. I struggled with Whiteness and feeling that I couldn't fit in as I was. I went through a lot of self-betrayal in trying to fit in. When we think about the education system, it is less publically understood today as an oppressive place. The myth is it is nurturing: through teaching we can allow people to be more and more themselves and ready for the adult world. I think what we actually end up doing is suffocating children to be an idea of what we expect them to be, to fit into the cogs of the Western world. When I look back I wish there was more experience of the arts and poetry, in the way I have been able to discover in adulthood. I don't know whether things are shifting now. Perhaps in the context of George Floyd's murder there has been a lot of pushing for changes in the curriculum. I think it is really important to have Black and Brown voices in the

curriculum, especially for adolescents. Adolescence is a really difficult time, and there is a lot of room for bringing in important voices for guidance and nurturance.

**EW:** At a minimal level there is the need to broaden some of the content. But if that content is going to still be delivered in the same way—orientated towards passing an exam—it is perhaps not going to make much of a change. To go back to what you said earlier, perhaps we need more of a structural change rather than just adding in a text by a Black author or a Brown author.

**SA:** Definitely. It brings us back to what we mean by education. Is education just about gaining external knowledge or is it to guide our youngsters to know themselves more? I think there is a big problem with grading and assessment, because this is relying on an external figure to assess fundamentally our worth. What it ends up doing is repeatedly perpetuating shame. It tells me: I am not good enough unless you over there validate me. And the only way I can get the validation is by seeking your knowledge, and showing I can practice it in the way you know it.

If someone had said to me during my education ‘write what you want to write, draw on what you love, come as you are and come with what you feel like you want to show’, I could have really created things. I have been able to only come to this in my adult life. I think something really important is the way the school system works as a tool to feed shame, and we do not talk about it enough. We use language of diagnoses and disorder, but we do not talk enough about shame. The constant nagging sense of ‘I am not good enough.’ How our systems and especially our education systems feed that.

**EW:** Are there any other influences on your own poetry and work, other than the references you’ve cited so far?

**SA:** Music and hip-hop have been very influential to me. It is interesting how ‘rap’ stands for ‘rhythm and poetry’ but this as a form of poetry is completely missed from the curriculum. When I think back to my own youth how many albums I knew completely off by heart. For example the album ‘The Mis-Education of Lauren Hill.’ I went over it so much at that age and knew it off by heart, and it is still embedded in my mind. I think this as a medium of education was missed hugely from the curriculum. Music and poetry has different forms. And it can mean so much to people and be a portal of entry for people and their discovery of the world. I feel that is really missed from the curriculum and the syllabus.

**EW:** I think you are right and there is a lot of potential in so-called ‘pop-culture’ for education. Do you think psychology has something to learn from pop-culture?

**SA:** A good contemporary example would be the show ‘Wanda Vision.’ It is such a creative exploration of grief and the depths of what grief can do you in terms of denial of reality and how much disconnection can come from it. Shows like this make you think about how much the arts can offer education, and how much they can enrich our psychological understanding of ourselves and each other.

**EW:** You presented the Dispatches documentary *Young British and Depressed*. Could you say more about what that documentary was trying to achieve?

**SA:** The idea of that documentary was partly to speak to the way there a lot of (albeit well-intended) moves and campaigns in wider society now to create scaffolding where conversations can be had more about 'mental health.' These are often based around removing the stigma of talking about it. But the way they do this—for example in comparing depression to a broken leg—very much reinforces a language of disorder and illness. This language for 'mental health' has been adopted by the wider world, by the media, and by schools.

Even most recently with the pandemic, there were headlines everywhere talking about mental health problems on the rise and mental illness on the rise. This way of talking is reinforcing this language of disorder.

**EW:** You visited some schools as part of the documentary. What do you think about the way schools are getting involved in this conversation?

**SA:** The way schools in general are responding at the moment seems to be by saying we need more practitioners in school settings. And the education around understanding pain and suffering is still very much tied up around this framework of illness. Why I believe this is fundamentally a very flawed understanding is that it is problematising suffering. It is reinforcing the idea that if you have pain or distress, that is wrong, it cannot be tolerated, and it needs to be fixed. This reinforces a culture that cannot tolerate expressions of pain.

The other main problem, as we started off saying in this interview, is that the language of illness individualises the suffering. It locates its cause as *within* young people. It makes them believe there is something wrong with *them* and it obscures young people from the conditions they are having to endure including those competitive academic conditions that reinforce a sense of lack. It suggests to young people that we need to fix them rather than the conditions they are in.

If we want to think about reform in society and in education, I would say it is more to do with modelling a completely different use of language around our suffering. So we would shift the question from being, not what is *wrong* with you, but what is *happening* to you.

I think we are terrified of expressions of pain. It is embedded in our culture and linked to our being terrified of risk. Even in our practices of trying to keep people safe and alive we are terrified of risk. So in therapeutic practice now there is an obsession with asking young people if they have made a suicide plan. But shouldn't we rather be trying to help them, and making them feel they want to be alive? We don't recognise the way we are creating conditions for young people that are un-survivable. We don't recognise that the conditions asking them to live in are making them not want to live in them: they are making them want to die. How can we change the conditions and use language better to talk about our suffering?

**EW:** It struck me that many of the young people shown on the documentary said that they wanted to talk to someone. That seems a very normal thing to want to do, not something that requires a specialised technique or professional. Perhaps by

'talking' they mean try to make sense of their suffering, try to understand it, rather than label it and cure it?

**SA:** The absolute lie we are told is that getting a diagnosis or having a label is the only way to seek help. That if I speak about my suffering in the language of illness, I will be less blamed and shamed, and I will get help for it. But when we think about some of the main experiences young people are having—for example feeling of shame we talked about earlier—at the bottom these are to do with loss of connection. Shame grows in isolation. We can support it through connections, through schools; sometimes through therapy but it does not have to be through therapy. What I would like to see is a society where we can support each other more and are less afraid of pain. Where we could turn to each other and support each other more, without having to pathologise or medicalise our feelings.