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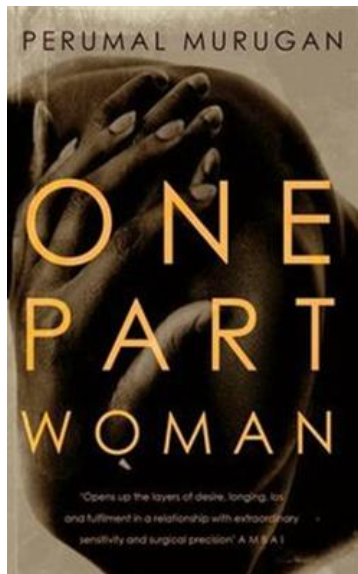
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Gender, caste and class take centre stage At Adelaide Writers Festival Perumal Murugan in conversation with Roanna Gonsalves A special report by Sharon Rundle

"In India, caste plays a more powerful role than class. People will come together based on caste and will differentiate based on caste, so they both may be having the same struggle, but they do discriminate because caste plays a bigger role than the economic struggle in some states" – Prof. Perumal Murugan



Warm, witty, erudite and entertaining – Professor Perumal Murugan is all of these as he proved when interviewed at UNSW by award-winning academic and author Dr Roanna Gonsalves. He was in Australia to speak at the Adelaide Writers Festival.

He has twice been long listed for the National Book Award for translated Literature, for "One Part Woman", and "The Story of a Goat". His novel "Pyre" was long listed for the International Booker Prize 2023.

He is a Professor of Tamil literature and Vice President of PEN International. He spoke about his books, and writing which he describes as "enjoyable and tormenting". He revealed his clash with censorship when his book "One Part Woman" offended some critics who called for his book to be withdrawn. The title is a reference to the half man, half woman form of Shiva, the Supreme god of Hindus. A childless woman attends the fourteenth night of the Chariot Festival, due to a belief that a

woman can conceive a 'God given child'.

When the book was denounced, I joined the protest to object to this censorship at Sydney Town Hall Steps, on Sunday 18 January 2015. As we said at the time, "In a noisy public space, a few words of a burned Indian book were brought to life and released into Australia." In solidarity with Perumal Murugan, excerpts of "One Part Woman" were read by

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Editorially Speaking	Contents
Dear Readers, Welcome to the latest issue of Confluence South Asian Perspectives – the second of 2024. We depend on modern technology for our communication and other essential activities. Even though these technologies make our lives more comfortable in many ways, they bring some problems, too. Being a small publication, Confluence is more vulnerable to these problems. The recent attack on our website has forced us to take it down. As they say, ‘every crisis yields an opportunity,’ so we have relaunched our website, www.confluence.org.uk, with enhanced security. We have taken this opportunity to make sure our site is now more interactive by introducing new features. Our readers can soon search for past issues or the author’s name, etc. More importantly, we are introducing a dedicated section for our regular writers so that they can showcase their work to a broader audience and share their work with their readers and associates more easily. This new feature will soon become more popular with our readers and writers in many ways. We will discuss this with our writers in more detail in the coming days. The current issue features exciting contributions from well-known writers and special interviews with some authors, making it colourful. I am very grateful to the writers who have helped us bring out this issue through their valuable contributions. Once again, I want to remind all our contributors to send their submissions one month before the publication due date. Please email your work/s to confluenceuk@yahoo.com only. I look forward to meeting you all in the next issue. Vijay Anand  CONFLUENCE SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ISSN: 2633-4704 23 Cray Avenue, Orpington BR5 4AA United Kingdom Telephone: 01689 836 394 / 07801 569 640 Email: confluenceuk@yahoo.com CHIEF EDITOR Dr. Vijay Anand SENIOR EDITOR Malathy Sitaram FOUNDER EDITOR Late Joe Nathan EDITORIAL ADVISORS Dr. Meenakshi Mohan (USA) Dr. Subhash Chandra (India) Magazine Design: Confluence Publishing Ltd The views expressed by interviewees or contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect Confluence editorial policy. No part of this publication or part of the contents thereof may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form without the express permission of the publisher in writing. © Copyright, Confluence Publishing 2024	1. Perumal Murugan interview – Sharon Rundle 2. Editorially Speaking – Vijay Anand 3. Two poems – Laksmisree Banerjee 4. Short story: Mother and son - Debjani Chatterjee 5. Review: Radha Chakravarty’s Subliminal: Poems – Sudha Rai 7. Interview: Aliya Ali-Afzal’s The Big Day - Yasmeen Doogue-Khan 9. Review: Bashabi Fraser’s Habitat - Stefan Brandt 9. Review: Laksmisree Banerjee’s Dust-decked Rainbow Quilts by Usha Akella 11. Short story: Dog Lover -Subhash Chandra 12. A Masterclass in Poetry – Yogesh Patel 13. Review: Mapping the Mind Minding the Map - Shyamasri Maji 15. Story: Marathon Man - Cyril Dabydeen 16. Review: Nishi Pulugurtha’s Looking: Poems-Malashri Lal 17. Interview: Saborna Roychowdhury-Lopamudra Banerjee 19. Review: Write to Me: Essays on Indian Poetry- Jaydeep Sarangi 21. Review: Chaitali Sengupta’s The Crossings- Anjana Basu

Dr Charmaine O'Brien, Dr Sharon Rundle (myself) Dr Roanna Gonsalves, Dr. Ben Etherington, and Dr. Sukhmani Khorana, under the aegis of The South Asian Australian Writing Network.

In her interview, Dr Gonsalves said that "The book was burned in 2015, and petitions raised against you and your work – which led you to say, 'the author is dead'."

Professor Murugan, responding through his interpreter, said that the objections were: disrespect to religion, disrespect for caste, disrespect to women. Yet, none of the women who had read the book said anything against them. Some even asked him, 'How did you know my story?' More men than women raised issues.

Dr Gonsalves asked how many books he has published since then? "Three," Professor Murugan responded. "They're increasing now since then. Short stories and poems."

His book "Pyre" is about displacement. "Migrating from one country to another is not the only displacement, people moving from a village to another village, or relocating because of economic or other situations is also displacement".

Professor Murugan explained that usually people migrate from village to city or town. But in this story, the migration happens from the city to the village. Kumaresan, the protagonist, believes that he and his wife will be accepted in his small Tamil village. His mother Marayi lives in the village. His wife Saroja, the heroine, is

the men, they also fear that women from the city have more opportunity to break those rules. They are convinced that women should not go to work as they may lose their beliefs. Saroja appears to be more trusting because she's from the city.

Dr Gonsalves commented that most of the novel is from Saroja's perspective but "I love the mother-in-law character, Marayi. She herself has faced many hardships, and yet she's so awful. She speaks to imaginary people, and animals such as her goats. She speaks to her dead husband and chastises and berates him. Her son, Kumaresan, is used to this. He says 'why are you talking to my father? He's dead'. And do you know what Marayi says? She says 'So what? Being dead doesn't mean you have settled your account'. You've



He added that it was caste and religion combined that caused the issues in Karnataka state and the adjoining state of Tamil Nadu. Two writers were murdered for their writing at about that time.

So, in that context, the District Administrator had a meeting with him and the denouncers. They forced him to sign an agreement stating that he would not sell that book anymore. He felt so shameful about this withdrawal of his book that he said, "I'm not going to write anymore."

The Progressive Writers Association went to court, asking for the agreement that Professor Murugan had signed to be withdrawn. Two judges presided and the last sentence of the verdict in the judgement said that Mr Murugan should write. Fortunately, he took this as an order that he should write.

fair skinned – and generally fair skinned people are associated with a higher caste. Kumaresan is much mistaken and that is not what happens.

In India, caste plays a more powerful role than class. Even workers do not unite for a common cause. People will come together based on caste and will differentiate based on caste, so they both may be having the same struggle, but they do discriminate because caste plays a bigger role than the economic struggle that people face in some states, Professor Murugan explained.

He said that the time frame of the story is fifty years ago. The villagers believe that people from the city are suspect – that they may engage in unacceptable behaviour, so they are not to be trusted. While they think women will uphold the caste structure more than

created her in a very tender way. We hate her, but we also love her".

Professor Murugan said that it appears that way. She's a young widow who has brought up her son by herself. The husband committed suicide at a young age, and there were no details of his death. She has not travelled for more than thirty kilometres. When her son brings the woman from outside their caste and from the city it breaks her and because she's broken, she behaves in such a way. Her possessiveness comes through because her son is all she has – no husband, no other relatives close by, and she can't stand it when he is showering love on his wife. All this is connected to the caste system and caste discrimination, because in a village setting you cannot write about this without mentioning caste, because if you do then you are hiding something, you're not completely

telling the story. If a person from another caste comes to the area, nobody will stop them, but people want to know why or what that person is doing there. There's no common space where people from different cultures may go. So mixing castes becomes a big issue.

I used a psychological approach because loneliness plays a big role in such relations and when you are lonely, you tend to talk to goats because you can't talk to a neighbour. If Mariayi wants to curse her husband, she says you didn't do this or do that to the goat, instead.

I hope you all know about honour killing. People have killed their own children because they married someone out of their caste. For a person like Marayi, the world revolves around her and her son, and when her son has done such a thing, people in the village would go to the extent of performing an act like that. Saroja lives in fear realising that she "would have to live through this unending torment". "How much worse would things get?" Kumaresan thinks. Then things do indeed get far worse in this riveting novel.

**Photographs by Maria Boyadgis,
courtesy of UNSW**

Adelaide Writers Festival URL Links
<https://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/events/2024-writers-week/gender-caste-and-class/>
 Sydney protest readings
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcEJn7uMFgA>



Dr Sharon Rundle is a University of Technology Sydney Friend of Distinction, who encourages international people-to-people links. She edits fiction and nonfiction books, literary magazines, and journals. She co-edited five Indo-Australian anthologies of short fiction. Her stories, essays and articles appear in books, anthologies, journals, magazines, and have been broadcast on radio. She has taught at universities and presented conference papers in Australia, the UK and India. She has served on the Board of Directors and Management Committee of the NSW Writers' Centre. She was an Australia India Business and Community Awards finalist 2022.
<https://sharonrundle.com.au>

TWO POEMS BY LAKSMISREE BANERJEE

PEBBLES

from the first to the last light
 I walked along the shore-line
 through flush and wane
 in glorious haze and fine,
 in sunlit and tear-lit trance
 collecting and counting my precious pebbles
 those I would never part with,
 treasures I possessed proudly
 and closeted in my heart
 like gems scooped out of the earthly womb
 pebbles of all shades and sizes
 of alluring hues daubed with
 silver and gold dust ---

unmindful of the fast changing
 colours of the sky till sundown
 in darkness the blizzard and billows
 swept me into the rumbling deep ---

as the fierce waves threw me back
 my rich pebbles were lost in the sea
 the lone boatman called me out
 it was already time for me to go
 beyond the void ---

after generations have gone by
 the sea rolls back
 as I see my seal on the sandy shores
 children playing with my glittering pebbles
 glazed and multihued
 in their balmy cupped palms
 offerings for eternity---

SHE

Married off on her eighth birthday
 She hardly knew what
 That dark red orb
 Staining her forehead like blood
 Meant.

She heard the bells ringing
 Within a few years,
 Jingling with her jewels
 And knew that it was springtime,
 That it was the happiest
 Season of blossoming
 In her life.

But suddenly the cruel
 High tide ebbed,
 The efflorescence waned off
 Into extinction,
 Into the agony of white.

As she was told that
 She was a widow
 For life.

Laksmisree Banerjee is a Multi-Award Winning Poet, Litterateur, International Sr. Fulbright and Commonwealth Scholar. As a Fmr. Vice Chancellor and University Professor of English and Cultural Studies, she has taught in premier universities of the world. Widely anthologised she has Twelve Books of Poetry and several Academic Publications.



Short story

MOTHER AND SON

By Debjani Chatterjee

Flying to England, an excited Alpana imagined what awaited her: a new home and a loving husband who had settled in Sheffield some years ago. She daydreamed that she was dancing with her husband, while a flute was playing a romantic Rabindra Sangeet tune in the background.

An artist, dancer, and musician, she would make their small, terraced house homely and perfect. Every room would be beautifully decorated with Jamini Roy prints and her own delicate watercolours on the walls, mirrorwork cushions, Rajasthani rugs, colourful curtains, and silken drapes. The flowers in the garden would be a magnet for butterflies and bees. She wondered what kind of birds she might observe in her British garden. She would paint a lovely alpana pattern at the entrance to their house, invite their neighbours to their home and make new friends.

The couple's joy knew no bounds when Alpana became pregnant. Their child would be born in the spring. They decided on the name Anand, meaning 'happiness'. Alpana read voraciously about good parenting and healthy nutrition for her unborn child.

Alas, Fate intervened. In the depths of her first winter in Sheffield, Alpana's husband suffered a massive heart attack and passed away. She became a young widow, alone in a foreign land. She drifted through the dark days and nights that followed like an interminable nightmare.

The long hard winter finally gave way to spring and Alpana determined to put all sorrow behind her. She welcomed Anand's birth, three weeks prematurely.

Cradling her fatherless baby, dandling him, playing with him, Alpana poured all her love on the child. She gazed in awe at every tiny feature. She considered him a miraculous gift. In her eyes, Anand was perfect. She would sing the lullabies of her motherland, and soon she began teaching him the nursery rhymes of

her adopted country. Alpana hoped he would grow up to be bilingual.

From time to time, friendly Sheffield neighbours would drop in and admire the healthy child. She received plenty of advice as well! Anyone could see that there was the strongest of bonds between mother and son. Alpana would often hold him in her arms and dance around the house. She felt proud of her little boy and dreamt of the wonderful man he would eventually become.

As he grew older, Anand went to kindergarten, and then to primary and secondary school. He was a bright lad and had plenty of support at home. Alpana would attend every Parents' Day and her heart thrilled to hear his teachers' praise a 'star' pupil.

She made sure that Anand also had enough time and opportunity for sports. Very much an all-rounder, he was on the school swimming team, and, in the fifth form, he helped his school to win a cup for debating. Delighted to note an early aptitude for music, Alpana taught him to play her own favourite instrument – the flute.

Anand grew moody in his teens. 'It's just adolescence,' Alpana thought, hoping he would soon grow out of it. At least, the flute's lilting music could generally calm him down. Despite the moodiness, Anand continued to sail through every exam – academic and musical – until he easily gained admission to university.

He was still a teenager at this time and Alpana worried to see him chafing at living at home. He fell into some wrong company and began experimenting with drink and drugs. Inevitably his studies suffered.

Each day Anand would return home later and later – and often he was the worse for wear. There was nothing his mother could say to make him see reason.

Mother and son had an almighty row when Alpana discovered that he had stopped attending classes for quite

some time. 'I can't stand by and see you throw away your life!' she pleaded. 'What would your dear father have said!'

But, as so often these days, Anand was not in his senses. In a slurred voice, he declared that University was dead boring, and home was a claustrophobic prison he must escape. He even insulted his mother. 'You are nothing but a jailor!' he raged. 'You're always nosing about: what was I doing, where've I been, who with? I'm sick of living here! I'm sick of you!' Hurling his dinner plate at the wall, Anand staggered out of the house. Alpana tried to follow, but he shouted some more abuse and warned her not to come after him.

Tearful, Alpana knew she could not stop him. After all, Anand was an adult now, even if his behaviour was far from mature.

Over the next few weeks, his condition deteriorated. He was now sleeping on the streets, sometimes under an archway and occasionally at the entrance to a shop at Arundel Gate. His watch and mobile phone were snatched one night. His nice warm coat vanished too, and his shirt was torn in a scuffle.

What little money he had was soon gone. With no money for drink and drugs, hungry, cold, and wet, he was forced to sober up and take stock of his desperate situation.

Anand was too proud to go home. He realised that he still had one precious possession in his rucksack, an old bamboo flute that was precious for sentimental reasons – his mother had given it to him a long time ago. He now sat by the fountain outside Sheffield station and began to play. With every note, he remembered his loving mother and many happy moments that they had shared. Stray commuters

would occasionally stop to listen to his melodious music and would sometimes drop a few coins in appreciation.

One evening he counted his coins – there wasn't enough even for a chip butty. Sighing, he picked up his flute again. How he longed for home! But no doubt his mother was glad he was gone, he thought – he had given her nothing but heartache.

At least the music could temporarily make him forget his misery. After a while, when he stopped playing, he saw that a man was clapping. 'Bravo! That was superb!' admired the stranger. 'You have certainly earned your dinner. Come, let me buy you a meal.'

Anand was not only treated to a much-needed dinner at a station cafe – his benefactor also offered him a bed for the night. 'I own a 'bed and breakfast at Bridge Street,' he said. 'We can walk there in ten minutes or so. You look as

though you could do with a good night's rest.'

Anand stammered his gratitude. 'I'm indeed tired,' he admitted, 'but this is too much. You have already been most generous. I am embarrassed to tell you that I cannot repay you.'

His host smiled. 'This is not charity, Anand. Your room has already been paid for by your mother!'

Anand learnt that his mother had been searching for him every day. When at last she had spotted him busking near the station, she had located the nearest 'bed and breakfast', booked a room, and enlisted the owner's help in reaching out to her son.

'I am indeed lucky to have such a caring mother!' exclaimed Anand. 'I will go home at once and thank her.'

Mother and son hugged each other. Great was their happiness that evening!

Note: A dance-drama version of it was performed on 11.05.2024 at the

Shared World Festival at the Quaker Meeting House in Sheffield. It was written to celebrate Mother's Day on 12th May 2024.



**Debjani Chatterjee
MBE FRSL**

has been called a 'national treasure' (Barry Tebb). She grew up in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Egypt

and Morocco, before settling in England. She has worked in industry, teaching, community relations and arts psychotherapy. An acclaimed poet, children's writer, translator, Olympic torchbearer and storyteller; her awards include an MBE, Sheffield Hallam University's honorary doctorate, and Word Masala's Lifetime Achievement in Poetry Award.

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Book review

"A Different Truth in a Different Tongue": Journeys of Consciousness

In Radha Chakravarty's *Subliminal: Poems*

by Sudha Rai

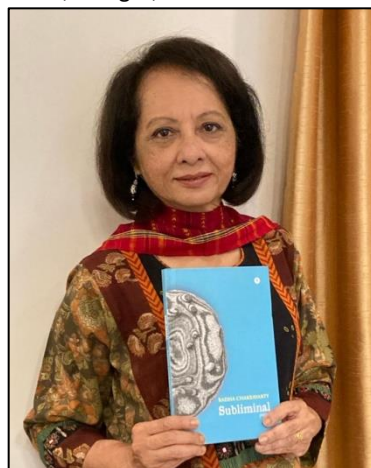
Hawakal Publishers, 2023. ISBN978-81-19858-52-1

Dr. Radha Chakravarty is an academic, poet, critic, and translator based in Delhi. Her poems have appeared in reputed journals and anthologies worldwide. She has published more than twenty books, including *The Essential Tagore* (Harvard & Visva-Bharati), nominated Book of the Year 2011 by Martha Nussbaum. She has book-length publications and translations on Mahasweta Devi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Kazi Nazrul Islam. *Subliminal: Poems* is her first collected volume of poetry.

In "Work in Progress," from *Subliminal*, Chakravarty suggests the complexity of the journey of self-knowledge, using the device of the self-portrait as a device of self-exploration. Her poem "Inside Story," takes us to the epicenter of how the creative process works, in birthing the story:

"That explosive pause/ That nanosecond/ Just before/ The story

breaks." Chakravarty's eighty poems in the collection are remarkable in their scale and scope of explorations, discriminations, depth, and design. The poems move, delight, and awaken with a



mastery over poetic form that result in wondrous, mindful creations, that weave cadences and silences, insights and wisdom for our changing world.

The import of the title poem "Subliminal" that satirizes advertisement-propelled consumerism, parodying its formulas for attaining nirvana, and its dominating permeation into the human sub-conscious, is captured by Chakravarty through the Pied Piper story. The poet's reflections here on the theme of unsatiated desire, lead appropriately as one begins to understand, to her complex, layered eco-poems in the volume, that voice human failure to act as sentient beings, causing the loss of ecological balance.

The anthology's opening poem "Memories of Loss" in its apparent simplicity of nine two-lined stanzas, is an astute exercise by the poet in working out an escalating emotional scale of 'loss,' in the human to non-human relationship. The poet's deep insights and perceptions emerge from various observation posts she occupies, enunciating the

themes of predators and poaching, drought and deforestation, and species and environmental loss, clear signposts to a point of planetary no-return. Contrapuncted in the collection too, are the poems "Snowflake," and "The Sapling," that beckon to the poet as survival miracles of possibility.

The metaphors, images and symbolism Chakravarty marshals, create a dynamic synergy where memories and everyday experiences coalesce seamlessly with poetic forms, visible in her sonnets, Fobbinachi poems, and Skinny poems. The ripples of memory renegotiate through anger, hurt, and grief, the theme of loss-personal, territorial and environmental. The poetic I, journeys from the external world into the inner psyche, donning personas, liberating voices, through embedded questions and sharp modernistic perspectivism. Her poetic voice positions itself subtly, ironically, and in places with a restrained didacticism, bringing out the disruption of life-preserving ties, to which the poetic persona stands as witness and ethical commentator. Within the Nature theme, Chakravarty's 'Seduction' poems on the Apple, the Mango, the Tangerine, the Guava, the Pineapple and the Coconut, explore fruits as sensate subjects. Here she resonates the archetypal temptation story, with tantalizing ambivalent close-ups of our human cannibalistic delight, in butchering and consuming the 'body' of the fruit, disregarding the voice of its 'being.'

Chakravarty responds to the Covid-19, defining the pandemic as "...a kind of capital punishment" in "Pan(dem)ic in Delhi". In "Another Exodus, 2020," the images in close-up, trace the emotional and physical pain for migrants during the pandemic, as they flee the city on foot:

Sadness seeps

Like blood from soles of broken feet,

Leaving tell-tale narratives on the soil.

Many women poets worldwide construct in their poems, their familial matrilineage of great-grandmothers, grandmothers, and mothers, and Radha Chakravarty is no exception. *Subliminal* is dedicated to her great-grandmother, whom she describes as both self-taught and a poet. Familial, and cultural histories come alive in telling women's cultural stories of Bengal in her "Designs in Kantha." *Alpana* designs and Durga Puja come together to narrate the story of "The Homecoming." Mythical women characters are reminders of the gendered impositions and violence women have faced for centuries, and Chakravarty's interest is in making visible their suppressed psychological and emotional trauma. In her poem "Walking through the Flames," Chakravarty shifts the focus away from the external images of the "accusing tongues of flames" that Sita is being subjected to as a test of virtue, to her internal scorching, through "burning shame." In "Ahalya's Awakening," the poet describing Ahalya's immobility laments passionately Ahalya's "tormented heart trapped in stone." "The Violence of a Volcano" draws on nature imagery in a collective portrayal of women's anger, and their rise:

*Women's silent agony is not unlike
A dormant volcano, smouldering
With aeons of suppressed rage
Until it boils over, erupting in fury,
Exploding in smoke, ash and flames.
A volcanic violence,
Both force of nature and course of
history ...*

In her lengthy narrative poem "The Severed Tongue," Chakravarty narrates the trauma of Khona or Lilavati, a legendary Bengali woman astrologer and poet (9th-12th century), whose intuitive powers and unique kind of commonplace speech, brought as punishment from the male establishment, the brutal severance of her tongue.

Chakravarty envisions however the resurgence of speech and poetry for women, in time thereafter. The poet goes to the heart of the practice of writing, for women in many languages, suggesting their prime mission of exploring, finding, and formulating their discovery of truth. These are Khona's words as the poet hears them:

But I defy their decree, and as a woman, speak

A different truth in a different tongue...

In Chakravarty's "Uncrossed Sea" from *Subliminal* - we hear the voice of the explorer, the feminist, the environmentalist and more, (who carries always, one feels, Tagore's sentient philosophy of a green Shantiniketan), ready to embark on further expansive journeys of consciousness:

The sea I never crossed surges in my heart

On this shore I stand on the shifting sands of

what I took for certitudes

as the tide pulls me towards other shores

other lives

never lived,

and the wind sings of other worlds

I never explored.

Sudha Rai is former Professor and Head, Department of English, and Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur. She



has been awarded several prestigious national and international research fellowships such as the Senior Fellowship of the Australia-India Council; Visiting Research Professor at Paul Valéry University, Montpellier III, France; and Senior Research Fellowship of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi. She is the author of the works V.S. Naipaul: A Study in Expatriate Sensibility; Homeless by Choice: Naipaul, Jhabvala, Rushdie and India; and co-editor of Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema.

Aliya Ali-Afzal's *The Big Day*

Published by Head of Zeus

The author speaks to Yasmeen Doogue-Khan*

Aliya Ali-Afzal - a proud Londoner and now a full-time writer and a creative writing teacher and mentor. Her new book, *The Big Day*, was published on the 6th June by Head of Zeus. This is a funny, heart-warming and page-turning novel about a British-Asian mother and daughter, who clash over the plans for the bride's Big Day.

1. You published your first book at 50. Can you tell us a bit about your journey to becoming an author?

My earliest memories are of writing stories and dreaming about becoming a writer. But there were no writers in my family, and I didn't know any writers, so by the time I left university, I dismissed this as an unrealistic fantasy and got a 'sensible' corporate job instead. 25 years later, I met an old university friend who had written a novel. In a split second, all my childhood desires and ambitions came rushing back. This time, I was older, and more ready to take a risk. I

21 and ready to at least try to go for my dream.

2. Your new book *The Big Day* will be published on 6th June 2024. What's the book about?

The Big Day is about a loving yet complex mother daughter relationship between Noor, a millennial Londoner and her Mum, Leena. As the only child of a single mother, Noor always felt responsible for her mum's happiness when she was growing up. But when Leena hijacks plans for Noor's wedding- and her life- Noor must decide whether it

happened to her late father. Noor is in love with Dan and excited about her wedding, but can't help thinking about her parents, who were also in love, but ended up divorced.

The book has been described by readers as 'a joyful, page-turning read tackling some big life questions', which sums up what I wanted to explore in this story.

3. What made you want to write this particular book?

When I got married, I was more interested in being with my fiancé



did a writing course, then an MA in Creative Writing and wrote my debut *Would I Lie To You*. I quickly got an offer from my dream literary agent and my novel was sold at a multiple publisher auction all over the world. It wasn't as easy as it sounds. It took years, a lot of rejection along the way and a crisis of confidence. It was hard to keep writing when I knew that my dream had a slim chance of coming true, and I was also juggling work and family. But I was braver than I was at

is finally time to think about what she wants for herself too, even though it means disappointing her mum.

Noor and Leena clash over the wedding plans. Noor wants an intimate, low-cost and sustainable wedding, whereas Leena wants a week of celebrations, with hundreds of guests and ice sculptures of Noor and her fiancé Dan. But these arguments are a catalyst for exposing long-hidden family secrets about why Noor's parents split up and what

than the wedding event. Recently too, I was fascinated by the way wedding planning consumed the lives of family, friends, and work colleagues for months on end, as they grappled with logistics, the dream 'big day', the cost, trying to please everyone involved, arguing over guest lists and escalating family politics. The potential for drama, relationship clashes and exposing long suppressed cracks within family dynamics was high.

(Continues on page 8)

I was particularly drawn to the idea of how planning a wedding might tear a mother-daughter bond apart, especially with a mumzilla, even if they were seemingly close

Although these themes are universal to all cultures, everything is somehow more intense within British-Asian weddings, where there is the added conflict of parents holding onto all the South Asian traditions and millennials and Gen Z, wanting something a little different that reflect their own experience

I am passionate about representation, and it was important for me to write about modern day British-Asian weddings and families, and how they are evolving, instead of just showing the stereotypical aspects sometimes seen in fiction, that are no longer accurate.

4. Are there any personal experiences or real-life events that influenced the story?

At the heart of the book is the relationship between Noor and her mum Leena and the intergenerational dynamics between Noor, Leena and Noor's grandmother, Nani. I am close to my mother and my daughter and am aware of how cultural, historical and generational influences have impacted how we are as mothers and daughters. Even though my mum is in her 90s, she has made an effort to stay in touch and interested with the lives of her millennial and Gen Z children. Despite that, her opinions and values are still very 'old school' and traditions that my mum still cherishes from her own mother's time are important to her, even though they may not make sense to me or my daughter.

As a Gen X mother, and a second-generation British South Asian mother to my children, my own childhood, growing up in London in the 80s, makes my perspective very different to both my mother's and my

daughter's. My daughter will have her own take on things.

My experience of navigating these disparate and sometimes conflicting viewpoints, so that we can express our opinions while keeping our minds open about the different way each of us wants to approach life, influenced my novel. There is so much potential in hiding truths, arguing or even stopping communication in these situations, and I looked at the way we can listen to each generation and value and respect those perspectives.

5. What does your writing process look like - how did you go about developing the characters and plot on this occasion?

Writing a novel is the most exciting feeling. I usually start with a question that has been on my mind. In *Would I Lie To You*, it was, what would happen to a loving marriage if there was conflict over how each person approached finances. For *The Big Day*, it was how the relationship between a mother and daughter is one of the closest ones possible. When it works, it can be the most nurturing and supportive one, but if something goes wrong though, it can be devastating.

Next, I 'meet' the lead character, who appears by magic in my head. I start a relationship with them where just the two of us exist in my imagination and slowly, I start to discover the world they live in and build it.

Plot is very important in my books and I am thrilled that both my books have been described as 'page-turners' and 'impossible to put down'. To construct a plot that builds up mystery and tension, I plan each major event in the story before I begin writing.

I find it impossible to write at home so I will write in coffee shops with iced americanos by my side for inspiration and for *The Big Day*, I locked myself away in a hotel room for 2 weeks to finish and edit my novel.

6. What do you hope readers will take away from *The Big Day*?

I hope readers enjoy a page-turning, emotional story, which also makes them laugh. At the same time, I hope it gives food for thought about the topics I explore; love and marriage, complicated family and intergenerational dynamics, living life on your own terms, moving on from past traumas.

It's also important to me that this is a story about a mother-daughter relationship and a young woman making decisions about how she wants to live her life, and the fact that she is British-South Asian is part of her story, but it is not the story itself. Although Noor's culture is very much present, the themes are universal ones- mothers and daughters, family, work, love, marriage, and I am glad to see that readers from every background are relating to it. I hope it shows the experiences we all have in common, which is something we sometimes forget in an atmosphere of 'othering' not just in society but in literature too.

This reader comment sums up the way I hoped readers would respond to *The Big Day*, and I hope others do too!

'The Big Day has all the dramatic intensity and hidden secrets that I'd hoped for but with such a dose of heart and warmth' and 'The Big Day is a profoundly moving novel of familial bonds and romance'.

***Yasmeen Doogue-Khan is a publicity Executive at Head of Zeus publishing**

Aliya Ali-Afzal is a full-time writer and a creative writing teacher and mentor. Her debut novel *Would I Lie To You* was selected for World Book Night 2022, was a Summer Reads Pick by Penguin Books UK, picked for Summer Must Reads by Adele Parks, a Clare Mackintosh Book Club pick and featured in The New York Post as a 'fab British export'.

Book review

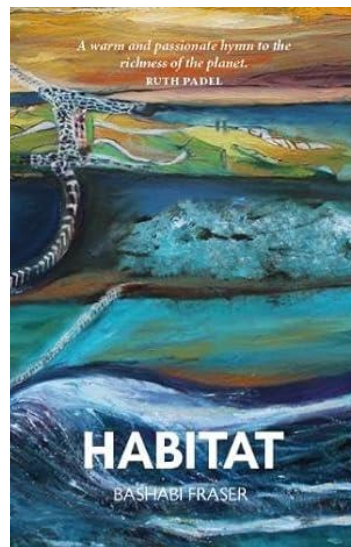
Bashabi Fraser's *Habitat* "Crossing Borders – Connecting Spaces" Reviewed by Stefan Brandt

A habitat is the natural environment where a species lives and thrives, providing essentials like food, water, and shelter. It is a sacred space where life unfolds and nature breathes. In her captivating poetry collection *Habitat*, award-winning poet and academic Bashabi Fraser invites us into the vibrant, enchanting worlds of our planet. Through her eloquent verses, she balances admiration for nature's beauty with a keen awareness of its vulnerabilities. *Habitat* explores the planet's splendor through human journeys, often crossing both physical and metaphorical borders. As the back cover reveals, "At its core, this collection is about our journeys—where we have been, where we are going, and what we are moving through. It is all about habitat and our connection to it." Fraser's poems take us on mesmerizing, sometimes unsettling journeys: "As lost travelers, we stumble through / Undergrowth, wishing for the moon / To Emerge."

Habitat is more than a poetry collection; it is a sanctuary for those seeking refuge from modern life's chaos. It serves as a beacon of hope, offering solace and a renewed perspective amidst today's madness. The lines, "A madness we can now with reason / Rise above, to cherish this prodigy," invite us to reflect on our planet's beauty and resilience, presenting it as a wonder worthy of protection. Within *Habitat*, readers experience vivid scenes of Earth's wonders—its landscapes, ecosystems, and creatures. These poems celebrate nature's richness and diversity, urging us to appreciate its myriad delights and idiosyncrasies. Yet, woven into this celebration is a poignant reminder of our planet's fragility. *Habitat* is a gentle but insistent call to action, highlighting threats from human-induced disasters. The collection also advocates for attentiveness and curiosity, encouraging us to rediscover the often-overlooked pleasures of our environment. It underscores the importance of safeguarding these treasures, fostering a sense of responsibility towards our shared

habitat. Throughout the poems, nature emerges as a powerful narrator, its voice depicting the consequences of human actions with haunting clarity. This is evident in lines like, "This is a war you now wage / With cutting-edge technology / [...] Till in a hundred years from now / Will exist no more / Replaced by a silence / More terrifying than war."

Fraser's collection refuses to remain silent in the face of global and local catastrophes, reminding us that our



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actions, mindset, and compassion can make a difference. In the largest section, "Birdspeak," we are invited to see the world through the eyes of various birds such as sparrows, seagulls, crows, and others. Poems like "What the Birds Say" encourage us to notice voices we often ignore: "This city listens pensively / To your call, startlingly raucous / Forestalling debate, gratingly coarse," the hymn to "Seagulls" demands. An imaginary crow tells us, "I am your black-coated advocate / The activist you can't placate / Your tireless campaigner for an / Environment at risk." These captivating poems help us recognize the "mature beauty and reflective gaze" of birds, whether they are praying for the night, guarding doorways, or impressing us with their "magnetic presence." As readers, we

feel their experiences and understand how their lives are interconnected with ours: "Flying to breed, to feed, to sing / A symphony of life, of freedom on wings / A heavenly concourse of hope and splendour / A miracle of joy and wonder."

Habitat invites us "To a destination / Where love can / Return," envisioning a place "Where you and I can wander free / Create and live with dignity." This return to love, hope, and dignity is crucial in a world driven by greed, profit, and vitriol. In "Pages from the Memoirs of a Battery Hen," a poem with the feel of a magic realist short story, we enter the world of powerless creatures who need our empathy the most. The poignant lines, "I lost mum one day when I was busy sampling grain. Then it was my turn one rosy morning, when I was full-sized / Lass to be spotted and dragged off, my screams / Making no impression on my hard-handed captor," starkly illustrate their plight, urging us to extend our compassion beyond our human-centric view.

The collection's final section, "The Distant and the Near," emphasizes that a shared future for all Earth's creatures is not only necessary but possible if we are bold enough to envision, feel, and enact it. The hopeful words, "This is where I find my friends / Who, unlike my siblings, / Do not think I'm a big joke / Or a pitiful underling / I have found my new spring home / Where I will breed and feed / And seed this land for summer, / Giving up till autumn, my urge to roam / Anew," evoke a sense of belonging and renewal. This hope, this "new-lit dawn," is what *Habitat* encourages us to explore and realize, inspiring us to create a world where all beings can thrive together.

Habitat challenges us to confront the harsh realities of our world while nurturing the dream of a compassionate future. It prompts us to reconsider our relationship with the natural world, advocating for a shift from exploitation to stewardship.

Through vivid storytelling and evocative poetry, the collection highlights the suffering of the marginalized and celebrates the resilience and interconnectedness of all life forms. It calls us to action, to rebuild a world where dignity and empathy prevail, and where every creature has the opportunity to live freely and purposefully. This transformative vision is a clarion call to humanity, urging us to embrace a path of kindness and sustainability.

Stefan Brandt is a Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz with a distinguished academic career. He has held positions at several universities, and (co) edited fifteen anthologies. Brandt is a founding member of the journal *American Literature*, authored four monographs, numerous scholarly articles—



(www.amlit.eu) and the Digital Studies research network of the European Association of American Studies (EAAS). Currently, he is writing a book on the transatlantic origins of U.S. Bildungsliteratur. <https://homepage.uni-graz.at/en/stefan.brandt/>

Book review

Laksmisree Banerjee's Dust-decked Rainbow Quilts (Penprints, 2023, Kolkata) by Usha Akella

The title offers pause, indicating a doorway into a poet's world—magic tinted with reality—dualities, pairing, reconciled contradictions—and the possibility of harmony. Rainbows are rainbows—they shimmer, transcend and loop above earth. 'Dust tinted rainbows' arrests as a phrase, hinting at a blend of elements, of sky and earth. And with sky and earth we enter the whole realm of women and men symbology and mythology. I was curious. I entered. A cornucopia awaited.

Banerjee unrolls a shimmering carpet with her very first poem, and signature voice, 'Dust-decked rainbow quilts' to invite the reader in with a majestic metaphor of opening a box, embroidered with lush images, rolling diction, and tongue offering poetry as almost incantation, and a conjuring. She revels in sounds throughout the collection, and the clang of syllables against each other—she deliciously celebrates the aural, the essence of poetry. What a delight to see this primal characteristic celebrated in what makes poetry.

Banerjee is a traveller in starry skies, and on a ploughed earth. She heartily poetizes and claims a self, refracted and reflected in the larger compass of existence. Her self blooms with the lilies. She goes full throttle into poetry, harnessing all that it can offer to offer in turn her own rewriting of self. Her self/poetry won't settle for little, they thirst for the fountain of life. Her poetry is a glorious canvas melding devotion, love, light, darkness, the erotic, philosophy, being and language. Her's may just be a lamp in the reeling galaxy, still, it is a sacred part of it, and



shines. It announces, 'I am here'. This tendency to pair opposites or contradictions or the dual or the incongruous or unrelated permeates, and is fueled by a furious hunger to reconcile, echoing the promise in the title:

Dignity of darkness/cherry pain/wincing butterfly wing/fire feathers/fireball of water/purity of darkness gleams crystal clear/santhal melodies/viking loneliness of my Indian warmth/Home pulsating still in foreign lands/gloss and gloom/refractions of shame and glory/dark aged modernity

In fact, the hunger for life permeating the poetry, is the revealing secret at the poet's heart—the wish to see the whole in the grain—the torrential rush to fuse and fire, the poems bursting the poet's heart—the wish to see the whole in the grain—the torrential rush to fuse and fire, the poems bursting into the blinking patterns of a kaleidoscope of

things and process interchangeably, and in the self and universe interchangeably. This poetry reaches for the breathless mad dance of atoms in the firing of a galaxy. It won't compromise on its vision or reach. And yet, there is a soft wistfulness in the voice, a cry for sunflowers in our fragmented civilization. A poet who can say I turn narcissistic often/in the courtyard of my dreams isn't really a narcissist. She is channeling the voice of the witness in the rampages of living.

Poets can't help but slip in poems about poetry, poems, and writing of poems consumed as they are by the art of it. Here the poems that engage with this are 'Mirror', and the poignant 'My tree of poetry'. I was totally disarmed by 'On a greyhound from London to Northampton'. One has to surrender to a poem when it offers the perfect word choice line after line.

This is a poet who dares to open boxes, unravel narratives, soothe layers and layers of dust, and darn stories, rewriting histories in her own flamboyant tenacious way—a way of shimmer, hope and celebration. I was charmed.



Usha Akella has authored five books of poetry, three chapbooks, and scripted/produced two musical dramas. She earned an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge, UK (2018). She is the host of a curated interviews website- www.the-pov.com. She is the founder and director of *Matwaala* (www.matwaala.com) a festival and collective initiated to increase the visibility of South Asian poets in the USA.

Short story

Dog Lover By Subhash Chandra

Bhola Ram owned a small fruit shop in a khokha – (a rigged-up wooden kiosk) which did good business.

He had a regular clientele comprising both the rich and the poor. Shiny SUVs stopped before his shop and drove away with bulging bags. Thanks to the differential pricing, poor maids living in the nearby basti could also buy some fruit for their families. He sorted out good quality fruit from the wooden crates he brought from the Mandi, charged extra for them from the wealthy, and sold the remaining at a lower price.

#

One day when Bhola got out of his one-room house in Razapur – a lower middle-class colony in Rohini – a skinny stray dog looked at him with liquid, expectant eyes, wagging his tail vigorously. Bhola patted him on the head and the dog followed him to his shop and curled up nearby. As always, Bhola got his lunch from the neighbouring Dhaba. When he started eating, the dog looked at him expectantly and Bhola gave him some food. In the days following, the same routine continued. He named the dog Bhure because he was brown.

Over time, many shopkeepers, and some residents also started feeding Bhure. Before long he looked more like a pig. He grew slothful and slept through the day, lackadaisically opening his eyes now and then to take in the surroundings. Even at night, unlike the other stray dogs who pranced around, keeping vigil, and barking at suspicious-looking characters, Bhure would walk around for a few minutes, wiggling his heavy posterior and resume his day routine.

#

After many years, Bhola visited his village, Silao near Rajgir (a hill station in Bihar).

"Tiru (Tirath) has scraped through class eleven but his heart is not in books; I suggest you take him along to Delhi," Bhola's elder brother, a school teacher suggested. After Bhola's wife passed away, Bhauji (brother's wife) brought up Tiru.

Bhola looked thoughtful.

"If you don't, he might join the louts in the village and go astray. Bisheshar's son has become a drug addict, Kallu's son has formed a gang who roam around and rob

the tourists visiting Rajgir," he said in a worried voice.

#

Though he had not done well in studies Tiru was a smart boy. He cheerfully joined his father's business, completed a part-time computer course, and became adept at working the Internet and mobile phone.

Thanks to Tiru, the shop had a signboard, B.R. (Bhola Ram) Fruit Centre. He got visiting cards printed and would slip one into bags of fruit he handed over to customers. He acquired a Paytm QR Code for Online payments. Orders started pouring in on the phone. Tiru also created a WhatsApp Group, comprising regular rich clients. Whenever they brought a new fruit of the season, the information would be posted on the WhatsApp Group.

Tiru wanted to prove himself to his Babu, as he had not done well in his studies. The business prospered, profits soared, and they saved enough to buy a small house. Lunch, as usual, came from the dhaba and Bhure would join them, of course.

#

One day, the dhaba was closed. It was 3 p.m. when Tiru brought food from another dhaba. Meanwhile, Bhure was livid with hunger. As Tiru was parking his bicycle, Bhure attacked him and tore a chunk off his calf. Bhola rushed him to the doctor a short distance away who cleaned up and bandaged the wound and prescribed an anti-rabies injection.

The two chemists in the market did not have the injection. He rushed to the hospital chemist shop but had no luck there either. The chemist directed him to two big chemists and said, "They may charge extra."

"Theek hai."

Bhola would have sold his shop to procure the injection.

Tiru said, "Babu, don't worry. He is not a mad dog. Nothing will happen to me, even if I don't take the injection."

But on the fifth day of the bite, Tiru developed a fever, headache, and muscle aches. Simultaneously, the virus affected his brain and he couldn't think coherently. Bhola rushed him to a hospital, but they could not save him! The sky came crashing down on his head.

He got into a rage, picked up an iron rod from the nearby hardware shop, and smashed Bhure's head.

Officials from the Cruelty Against Animals Organisation appeared with two policemen to arrest him. But the shopkeepers explained to them the whole situation and they took no action. However, Bhola's wrath expanded to include the whole of canine species. Whenever he saw a dog passing by his shop – now in a state of neglect with rotten fruit – he would chase him with the rod.

He galvanized into life only when he noticed a dog. At other times, he sat on a stool, head slumped, and moping. Several dogs who had tasted the power of Bhola's rod avoided his shop.

One evening the dusk had yielded to the dark. Suddenly, Bhola stood up, firmly gripping his rod. His sense of smell had become as sharp as the canines'. He was right. A dog, a stranger to the neighbourhood, could be seen at the far end of the lane. As he came near, Bhola attacked him ferociously. The dog was alert and agile; he narrowly escaped and galloped away, with Bhola in hot pursuit. The Coconut vendor who parked his thela near Bhola's shop followed them but soon lost track, as the dog entered a by-lane. Bhola had grown weak and started gasping; his birdlike small chest began to heave like bellows, but he did not give up the chase. The street light in that by-lane was not functioning. In the semi-dark, a pack of dogs was resting.

The chased dog stopped near the pack and snarled at Bhola. Some dogs recognised Bhola as their tormentor and mounted a joint attack on him. He defended himself with whatever strength he could muster. But soon he fell and several of them dug their teeth into him. The next day, after an extensive search, two shopkeepers found the mangled body of Bhola.



Dr. Subhash Chandra is a former Associate Professor of English at the University of Delhi. He has published three collections of short stories, viz., Not Just Another Story, Beyond the Canopy of Icicles, and A Game of Dice, and more than eighty short stories in Indian and foreign journals, and Guest Edited College Fiction Section of MUSE India.

A Masterclass in Poetry



Yogesh Patel

The Art of Volta

When one talks of volta in poetry, one mostly thinks about the sonnets. However, in the broader context, the Italian word for “turn,” a volta is a rhetorical shift that marks the change of a thought or argument in a poem. It is extremely disheartening to read many poems where the poet fails to go beyond what is obvious—just a description or telling the reader what you think is not poetic art. There is a lovely story about Keats, mentioned by Steven Fry. Keats was completely possessed by the phrase ‘...the sea-shouldering whale.’ The weird idea of the unthinkable, the whale shouldering the sea, unfolded poetry to him and its fascination never left him. The concept may sound trivial, but that is how poetry opens the imposing closed gates to any poet's imagination. Humans are masters of the obvious and telling others their minds as if they are revealing the truth no one has come up with before! Lesser poets thus submit to this disposition easily. But before we indulge further, let us talk more about volta.

Other common names for volta are turn, fulcrum, swerve, or twist. In sonnets, volta is observed by the move from the prime narrative or concept in a poem, directing readers to a different meaning and outcome of a poem. Where it follows the use of “but,” “yet,” or “however”. to distinguish a reversal or shift in thought. Volta appears in the Petrarchan sonnet, between the eighth and ninth lines. And in the Shakespearean sonnet before the final couplet. However, for poetic art, volta is induced by poets in every aspect of a poem: image shifts, metamorphosis, propositions, concepts, themes, etc. In Ghazal, you will find it in every second line.

The volta is not just the 'turning point' of a poem but also of everything that happens in a line, thought, idea, image, or argument. A transformation is the key factor here. A poem is not a description cast in metaphors or

clever imagination; if it is not magic, it is trivial. These magical shifts not only jolt and charm the readers but also give a glimpse into the poet's creative thought process.

‘Please God’ is a simple but mesmerising poem by poet Ian Dunlop.

Watch how he transforms the poem from this:

*Please God, stop the leaves from falling
tell the trees to keep their great achievement,
ask the winds to hold their breath
and command the rain clouds: ‘stay away’.*

to this

*.../ Let's keep Mary as she is—
smiling, wordless, but content—
lost to the daily world but still dreaming
of time past and better days ahead.*

then this

*‘I can't stop time,’ I hear you say.
But is it heresy to ask:*

*‘With my camera in Hyde Park this morning,
the sun was out and the leaves flickered in the breeze.*

The shutters clicked—time froze for one glorious moment.

So if I can stop time why can't you?

(From *The Urban Fox*, Paekakariki Press)

The volta here is in leaves as the tree's achievement, winds acting with anthropomorphism, the juxtaposition of Mary's stoical state, and a play with the word 'time'. Which again turns into an idea of a camera and the obvious point it makes. When you revise a poem, think of the tangents and how they can enhance your poem. Always inform yourself that your first, second, or third draft is not a poem. Good poets constantly work at the poem, treating it as not the final version! The first draft is always

an outburst! Mould it with the volta and tangents, entangling the poem with metamorphosis.

A haiku from the recent collection by Imtiaz Dharker should be a reminder of how poetry can be approachable without getting trapped into words not used every day.

Take one step forward
and the light will find your face.

You are the story.

(From *Shadow Readers*, Bloodaxe Books)

Notice how the poet shifts the paradigm from the expected to the unexpected. The stages here are ‘steps’, ‘light’, ‘face’, and ‘story’. Dig out your old drafts of the poem, list the tangents, and see if you can move it in stages as Dharker has.

In "How We Value Contemporary Poetry: An Empirical Inquiry", Bob Broad and Michael Theune note that the poems are valued as "a sort of development or shape that moves with control to negotiate the poem's risk, while incorporating surprise and build and turns to arrive at an ending".

Critics and poets who lack imagination often sneer at the twists forgetting that the prose is always available if you want to state the obvious. ‘Juxtaposing perspective’ is where poetry excels.

A fulcrum can also be stamped by a change in view or even a transferral from one speaker to the next. It can furnish a conclusion, an answer, or an explanation of the first part of the poem. But usually, such poems fail to impress. Epiphany is effective in a poem, only if it is also launched from the ‘swerve’.

In *The Poet's Art*, M.L. Rosenthal discusses two coinages for different classes of turns: "gentle modulations,

or at the furthest extreme, wrenching turns of emphasis or focus or emotional pitch (torques)". An author and historian Paul Fussell in his book talks of 'volta' as "indispensable" stating that "the turn is the dramatic and climactic center of the poem, the place where the intellectual or emotional method of release first becomes clear and possible." Volta is not always a singular event in a poem unless you are attempting something like a sonnet. The art of volta comes into its own when it unfurls in multifaceted tangents, as in the above two examples.

In this class, you may have assumed I am talking toss, but take the word of poet-critic T.S. Eliot who calls 'volta' the 'turn', "one of the most important means of poetic effect since Homer." To improve your poem, you need to spring from a synapse of one idea or image to another, one thought to the tangential thought, one level of comprehension or probing to the presence of ambiguity. Randall Jarrell says that "a successful poem starts in one position and ends at a very

different one, often a contradictory or opposite one; yet there has been no break in the unity of the poem". Such is a required poetic transition induced by the turn. If you have an interest in the critical analysis of volta types, I suggest delving deeper into these categories: Irony, emblem, concessional, retrospective-prospective, elegy, dialectical argument, descriptive meditating, mid-course, and dolphin turn. But for our purpose of this masterclass, that is best left to the critics.

Exercises:

Work out how Louis MacNeice, instead of describing the fire of the historic London blitz, turns the elements, its horror into irony through the idioms "dog's day" and "Give the dog a bone". Pick one of your drafts and see if you can create such diction with twists.

*When our brother Fire was having his
dog's day
Jumping the London streets with
millions of tin cans*

*Clanking at his tail, we heard some
shadow say
'Give the dog a bone'—and so we
gave him ours;/...*

Also, notice how MacNeice has used the word 'brother' to create social commentary!

Yogesh Patel received an MBE for literature in 2020. His latest collection of poems, [The Rapids](#), is published by The London Magazine. Patel's poem appears on the Poetry Wall of the Royal Society of Literature. His poem is to be launched aboard a NASA rocket to the moon to be archived there. His poem has been featured on the wall of Cambridge University's Language Library. He runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote SA diaspora literature. Extensively published, an award-winning poet, he has also received the Freedom of the City of London.

Book review

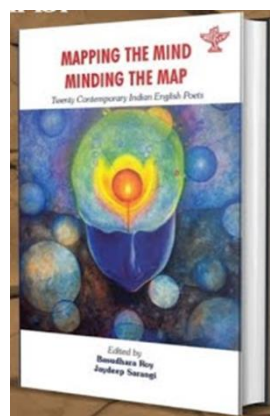
Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map

Twenty Contemporary Indian English Poets

Editors: Basudhara Roy and Jaydeep Sarangi

Reviewed by Shyamasri Maji

In the Introduction to A History of Indian Poetry in English, Rosinka Chaudhuri remarks, "Indian poetry in English is an indissoluble component of India's existence in modernity, yet this is a tradition without a proper history, an unclaimed tradition for much of its beleaguered and secret existence"(2). Chaudhuri's observation may be seconded by many if the journey of Indian poetry in English is viewed alongside the jet ride of Indian English fiction in the last four decades. Though both the genres in Indian English literature moved through similar trajectories, of nationalist, transnational and cosmopolitan discourses, Indian poetry in English till date remains in the fringes as far as its commercial circulation in the global arena is concerned.



Sahitya Akademi, 2022 ISBN: 978-93-5548-513-7

Several efforts have been made since 1960s to address this gap through publication of anthologies by Indian poets and publishers. P. Lal's Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology

& a Credo (1969, Writers Workshop), Vinayak Krishna Gokak's The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry (1970, Sahitya Akademi), Pritish Nandy's Indian Poetry in English Today (1974, Sterling), Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets (1992, OUP), Eunice D' Souza's Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology (1997, OUP), Jeet Thayil's 60 Indian Poets (2008, Penguin) and Sudeep Sen's The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry (2012, Harper Collins) are well-known in literary and academic circles. These anthologies not only represented Indian poems in English but also brought together the well-known and the lesser-known poets who chose to represent Indian poetry in English language.

The anthology, edited by Roy and Sarangi, keeps up this tradition. It

consists of two hundred poems by twenty contemporary Indian poets. The selection consists of acclaimed poets, including doyens such as Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023), Keki N. Daruwalla (1937-) and K. Satchidanandan (1946-). Others, living in India as well as in its diaspora, such as Cuttack-born bilingual poet Bibhu Padhi, Mumbai-based academic Ashwani Kumar, internationally commended Delhi-poet Sudeep Sen, Chennai-based poet and translator K. Srilata, Denmark-based author Tabish Khair, Scotland-based academic Basabi Fraser and the US-based Usha Akella are widely published. Each poet contributed ten poems of his/her choice to the volume. A short bio-note of the poet precedes his/her poems. The contents are arranged as per alphabetical order of poets' first names, starting with Adil Jussawalla and ending with Yogesh Patel.

The varied locations mentioned above imply the editors' zeal for eclectic representation of Indian poetry in terms of region, culture and gender. Coincidentally, these poets belong to diverse professions as well: while Daruwalla was a police officer, Mahapatra was a Physics teacher and Patel is an optometrist in England. In the Foreword to the book, Shyamala A. Narayan rightly observes that the poets come from different professional backgrounds and they have a variety of concerns—social, mythological, historical and political—which is manifested in their choice of subjects.

Nostalgia, love and loneliness are some of the common themes in this volume. These however, are predominant in the poems of Keki N. Daruwalla, K. Srilata, Sudeep Sen and Adil Jussawalla. While history acts as a method to explore the political unconscious of a non-conformist in the poems of K. Satchidanandan and Ashwani Kumar, memory serves as an effective means to express alienation and angst in the poems of Tabish Khair and Yogesh Patel. In Adil Jussawalla's poems, history and memory intersect to form a

chiaroscuro of ineffable emotions of the Parsis, a minority community in India.

While Jussawalla reveals a longing for belonging to the idealised long-lost home/land, Mamang Dai, Robin Ngangom and Nabina Das foreground the unhomely conditions in the Northeast. Dai's "Small Towns and the River" and Das' "A Song for the Bihu-Waisted Sister" illustrate India's topographical and cultural diversity. At the same time, their poetry manifests their bold and uncompromising responses to internal conflicts in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Ngangom's "The Homeland I Left" and "To a Valley Known as Imphal" narrate the terror and trauma of armed violence that has been chasing the inhabitants of Manipur for generations. By clubbing his own experiences of witnessing atrocities of Indian army in Imphal during his teenage years with those of his grandmother who witnessed the oppression of local people in the hands of Japanese soldiers during the second World War, he points out to the long-standing disorder in Manipur.

Inclusion of ten women poets in this anthology is indeed a distinguishing feature that indicates editors' keenness for maintaining gender equality in the representation of poets. Women's poetry in this volume is sharp, incisive and eloquent of injustices to women in the society.

Arundhati Subramanian probes into her childhood memories to challenge traditional notions of femininity. In "When Landscape Becomes Woman" she recounts how she learned that "mothers are women" by observing through a keyhole her mother's lively whereabouts in a party. The poetry of Anita Nahal ("What's Wrong with Us Kali Women") and Usha Akella ("The repetition of it in Sri Lanka and elsewhere...") is marked by feminist resistance to patriarchal tyrannies of the state and the society. Sanjukta Dasgupta's sensitive response to Nirbhaya's gang rape in 2012 is well-conveyed in "The Hunted." Lakshmi

Kannan refers to anecdotes from Buddhist lore to present her thoughts on discriminatory gender norms in "Mahaprajapati" and Smita Agarwal reviews the Sharia Law of 'Triple Talaq' in her poem of the same title.

Interestingly, K. Sachidanandan's "The Girl of Thirteen" and Tabish Khair's "The Hijra Speaks" underline fiery debates on gender issues and present them as concerns of an egalitarian society. While "The Girl of Thirteen" is vocal about sexual abuse of adolescent girls, "The Hijra Speaks" draws readers' attention to recent activism for the rights of transgenders in India. As discussed earlier, several other poems in this anthology present topical issues that made news headlines in India and abroad. These features make this book remarkably different from the anthologies published previously. Richness and variety of themes bestow on it a tint of uniqueness.

Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map: Twenty Contemporary Indian English Poets is a significant addition to the existing opus of Indian poetry published so far. It judiciously maps the changing trends that stirred and engaged the minds of the contemporary Indian English poets. The role of the publishing house—Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters—is also commendable in this context.



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Threshold fiction

MARATHON MAN

by Cyril Dabydeen

He's covering a long distance--yards, metres. How much farther to go, or to come from? Jimmy's eating up dirt, and moving faster; and the youths here with us now with their own speciality, I know. Mental disability, d'you say? Bob, their group-leader, frowns; he's large-built, compact. Who's really mentally challenged?

Jimmy hardly bats an eye, but keeps running in one spot in the change-room. Sure, running-on-the spot, it's called. The others like Benji, Kumar and Cecil make their own headway with squeals, shouts. Everything instinctual, yes: here in the shower area, with sounds more deliberate; and indeed, everyone must shower before they enter the pool. Bob has asked them to observe the rules, you see.

But Jimmy keeps covering a longer distance, alone, in one spot. Let the others make faces at him...or at me... grotesquerie of a kind. Bob--a professional, he calls himself--encourages them to be whoever they think they are. Do...they really? I simply watch Jimmy with miles to go before...says who? Oh, I am on my own quest, imagining more. Now whose intelligence are we talking about? Jimmy purses his lips, looking at me with more determination.

Does the journey of a thousand miles begin with one step? Words of Kenyan marathon legend Kipchoge, you see. And that first marathon runner, the ancient Greek named Pheidippides, let it be known--all in my own memory-consciousness, or awareness. --Let the real Olympics begin. Bob casts another glance around, constantly aware of everyone.

Of me, too.

The others keep horsing around, cavorting...splashing water under the showers, like their accustomed place. But Jimmy keeps running, skinny runt and all...lifting his legs higher. *Up-down, up-down.* Being a Forrest Gump manqué, ah.

Bob forces a grin. But, he's watching me--how I am taking it all in my own style. A far distance...but coming closer with distances crossed. "Hurry up

Jimmy," he calls out. The others let out more playful squeals, mimicking pain, naked bodies and all. Yeah, showering.

"Do you have a penis?" one boy calls out, heckling.

"Who...asking?"

"Don't you really know?"

"Know what?" blurts out another.

"Why not?"

Louder sounds, catcalls; their calling out to Jimmy in the change-room as he's covering a longer distance, it seems.

Giddy-sounding they are now, or simply being *idiots*. Says who? Water cascades down like a mighty waterfall. Victoria Falls in Africa. Who's more native...the blackest of them all? *Who a tribesman of a lost time?* Jimmy's running across the Kalahari, being a Bushman of yore. Bob forces a grin as if he senses my awareness of place and time.

Ah, Jimmy-- not just a Whiteman, calling himself a marathon-man?

Let him be famed Ethiopia runner Haile Gebrselassie--like the first man to cover such a long distance, the entire earth as Jimmy has seen on TV. Africa, America, Asia--here I come! *But in Canada we actually are, see.*

*

Do you live in a prairie-desert or wasteland? Who's asking, nothing denying because of possibilities with us? The others take measurements of their naked body parts in style. . Thighs, hips...as water pours down in a torrent. "Hey, Jimmy, where are you going next?" calls out Benji. "How far away?" Kumar yells.

Bob, indeed their supervisor, keeps up a poker face. What he wants me to know...from me? The ground spins under my feet.

"How much farther do we go?"

--*Tell me, Jimmy.* He's yet in one spot, but going past great Olympian Gebrselassie--thin-legged and all as he is. Skinny runt! *Sure*, Bob says--he, once a star football player, but really watching me now.

Like we have miles to go...before we sleep. And still in my own style I am. Saskatchewan, Winnipeg, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa--here I come! Terry

Fox I am with, too. Nothing more bewildering, ah.

*

Jimmy looks back at me with a faint recognition. Pride, hope, in his eyes. *Fooled you, eh?* "I am not who you think I am," he says, sotto voce. "But I am real!" --*Are you, Jimmy?*

Bob's aware of their "challenges," he calls it. He waves to the others. And sure--Jimmy becoming a true long-distance runner, not unlike famed European Emile Zatopek, I imagine. Everything more compelling, in a fashion. See, more I will imagine...with poetic ambience. ah.

The others continue playing their games in the showers.

Victoria Falls next?

I keep crossing the Kalahari desert, then the Gobi desert, with Jimmy. His pale white skin I focus upon. But my being alone... in Canada's Banff, Alberta, where buffaloes once roamed. Benji and Kumar look at me, well, in disbelief. Never mind who has a mental challenge. Bob simply nods an acknowledgment.

Jimmy finally takes his place under the showers. A really hot shower--winter's cold as it is. Now who wants to go to the North Pole?

Never call it a *disability*, see. Jimmy simply wonders about it...in the freezing cold looking at me. "Tell me," he says. "Tell you what?"

Bob nods. "Let him tell *you*, Jimmy-boy." The others clamour looking around, but asking--Where will you go next? Jimmy laughs. The others, well, simply gawk.

We've finally arrived, you see--in one place and time. A dead-spot. And really it's places to go before...we sleep, I will know.

Cyril Dabydeen's latest books include *My Undiscovered Country/Stories*, *God's Spider*, *My Multi-Ethnic Friends/ Stories*, *Imaginary Origins: Selected Poems*, and the novel, *Drums of My Flesh*. Cyril was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, won the Okanagan Fiction Prize and the Canute A. Brodhurst Prize for fiction via the Caribbean Writer. [Contact- cdabydeen@ncf.ca](mailto:cdabydeen@ncf.ca)

Book Review

Nishi Pulugurtha's *Looking: Poems*

(Red River, New Delhi, 2023)

by Malashri Lal

Nishi Pulugurtha's collection of poems is called *Looking* but leaves a teasing puzzle about what one is looking for. That, to me, marks the sophistication of her subject choices and her use of images and experience that scan over a versatile range on the subject of pursuing an unidentifiable goal. The act of looking generates its own action, thoughts, philosophy—and that is more significant than identifying or grabbing the object of the search. It is that elusive search that fascinates me about this book.

First, dedicated to Amma and Appagaru, several of the poems are about a lost childhood, and a return to that state in ageing when the same energy without intention takes various forms. For instance, how does one look for a security of home—what are its markers?

paths that are known,
unknown. To reach
a destination.
Home, maybe.

Nishi articulates sensitively several poetic details about amnesia and forgetfulness which may have been painful as memory but have been transformed into aesthetic and memorable lines:

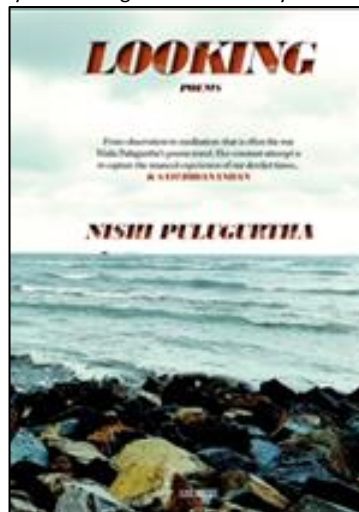
I am alone in the house
I walk about here and there
I am looking for someone
I think I am looking for my mother
He tells me she is dead and gone

He says it has been years now
I look at him
It is not true

But let me move, secondly, from the private domain to a more public one of Goddess worship—the link here being the search for another kind of Mother. Several of

Nishi's poems are about Durga, my favorite being the one that traces the various steps in the ritual observance of Devi worship. The lines emphasized are from the *Durga Stuti*, a prayer to Goddess Durga— *shakti rupena samstitha*: one in whom power resides; *buddhi rupena samstitha*: one in whom all intelligence resides; *ya devi*

sarvabhuteshu: O omnipresent goddess. In such a context, why is there so much violence in the country against women, asks the poet. Instance after instance tumble into the pages directing us to specific as well as generic instances of street harassment, domestic abuse, brutality, rape and ravage. If I may broaden the discussion, this collection by Nishi Pulugurtha was mainly



conceptualized during the pandemic, and she is deeply troubled by the dependent condition of the migrant woman, as I have been in my poetry too. Here are Nishi's lines:

She didn't answer, she couldn't answer —

she was just a woman,
a migrant returning home,
to uncertainty and poverty —

The stance of the poet's 'looking' is engaged and empathetic but can it be an intervention in the arena of social change? Public action belongs to a genre outside of this volume of poetry, but here one finds an oblique answer in the many poems that relate to nature, my third area of focus. Imagine this:

The winter afternoon sun is just crisp as it glistens on the waters of the green lake —
a pink bloom visible amidst all that green.

Nevertheless, nature is not always bountiful, and sometimes one is troubled

by the interface of human confinement and nature's apparent abandon. See, for instance, the lines:

As I look out through the iron grills that hold so much in, I see the green mossy concrete that gets slippery that the sun clears up in a day or two.

Let me emphasize here that nature in such poetry is deeply engaged with the sentient imagination. It's neither Wordsworth's command "Let Nature be your Teacher", nor Keats' declaration "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder". Nishi's is a conscious adoption of nature as an ally in the wellbeing of individuals and society. The poet is indeed a very keen observer of every blade of grass and each unfolding petal, but she is equally aware that they presage time and record human history. Hence comes a poem on Jallianwalla Bagh and another on Putul Bari—one place is haunted by the remains of a brutalized community in Amritsar, another is an abandoned old home with folklore about ghosts gathering around it.

I end by referring to the book cover's blurb: "Nishi Pulugurtha's third collection is one of longing, and of acute observations, of being at home alone and being in the world with its people and places". Yes, these paradoxes are explored with acuteness, but I would still like to claim that the act of Nishi Pulugurtha's "looking" is a poet's insight entering the subtext of the objects and prying out the secrets they hold. The present continuous tense of the title *Looking* invites readers to join the search for whatever one is seeking.



Malashri Lal, Former Professor in the English Department, University of Delhi, has published twenty one books of which Mandalas of Time:

Poems, and Treasures of Lakshmi: The Goddess Who Gives are the most recent. Lal has received several research and writing fellowships. She is currently Convener, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi.

Interview with Saborna Roychowdhury: Novelist, Author of 'The Distance' and 'Everything Here Belongs to You'

by Lopamudra Banerjee

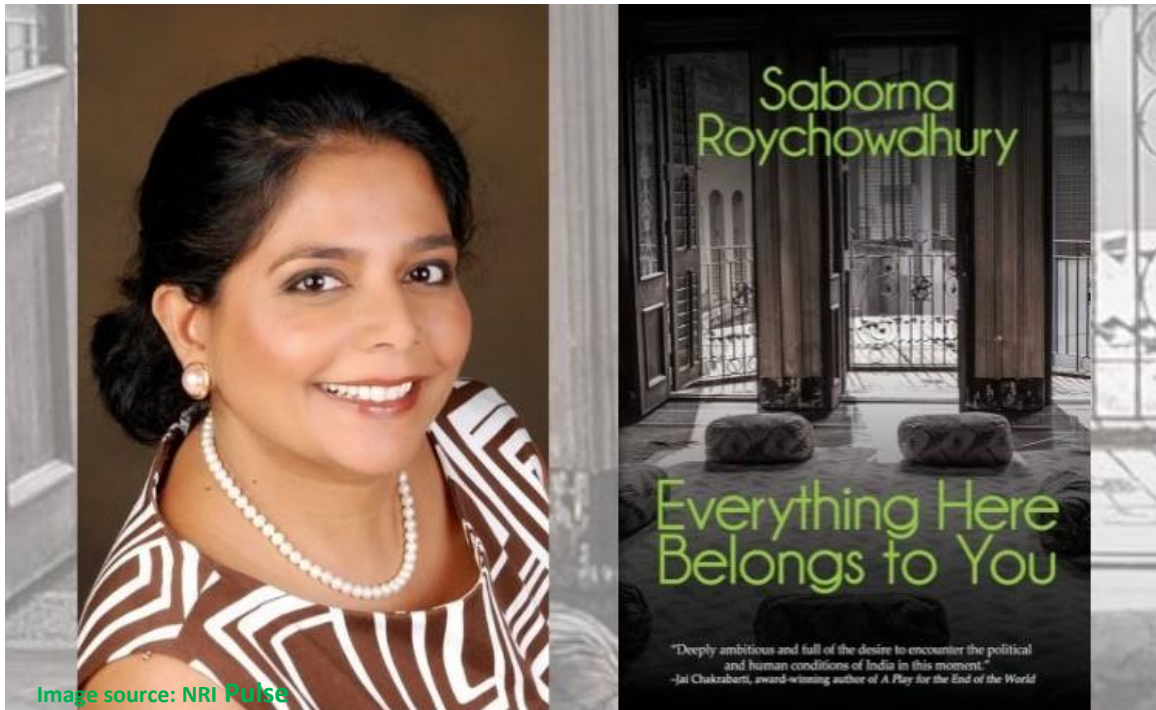


Image source: NRI Pulse

Indian diaspora author Saborna Roychowdhury's second novel "Everything Here Belongs to You" (Black Rose Writing, 2022) received raving reviews from Kirkus Reviews, which called her book, "A heart-wrenching family drama, as powerful as it is delicate." On September 1st, 2022, her book won 3rd Place/Bronze Medal in the prestigious Reader's Favorite International Book Awards contest in the Fiction-Drama category. In a candid conversation with Lopamudra Banerjee, she discloses her journey behind the novel and her tryst with the publishing industry.

Lopamudra: Welcome Saborna! It is my great pleasure to have a literary conversation with you after quite a long gap, since your first novel 'The Distance' (Istoria Books, 2014). Your first short story 'Bengal Monsoon' appeared in New York Stories in 2004 and it depicted a young, vulnerable maid's plight leading her to committed suicide. 'Everything Here Belongs to You' is again centered on the same plight of the maid Parul and how she finds her moorings. How did you flesh up the narrative from the short story?

Saborna: Yes, my second novel is an extension of the short story, 'Bengal Monsoon', which was based on a real-life character working as a maid in my aunt's house in Kolkata. She was abnormally thin and weak, her expressive eyes filled with sadness. Every month her father came to collect her wages, his demands on her never seemed to end. In addition to taking most of her salary, he asked for money to treat his asthma, or repair his house, or buy blankets for her sisters. The girl often complained to my aunt about her father's conduct: "Will I keep supplying paper notes to my father till the day I die?" My aunt felt helpless before her grief. One day, we found her hanging from the ceiling fan in her little terrace room. She used her sari as a noose.

I narrated their story in "Bengal Monsoon", intending for it to be a standalone piece, but for many years after it was published, the images of this girl and her father did not leave me. I started having second thoughts about the closure of this story. So in 2013, I decided to expand the short story into a novel, "Everything Here Belongs to You."

Lopamudra: In your debut novel 'The Distance,' you had skillfully dealt with the theme of the protagonist Minnie's travails in the foreign land as she grapples with her complex past with her communist lover and also with the strong individualistic spirit of her husband Neel. In 'Everything Here Belongs to You,' you deal with the theme of class struggle within an aristocratic household, and how conflict arises in Mohini and Parul's lives when their paths become divergent. What is the primary ethos behind these narratives?

Saborna: I am very interested in understanding why men and women get involved in a certain ideology and choose to go down a difficult political path. Often, they end up sacrificing their lives, family, career for a cause. Sometimes their extremist ideology results in violence. In "The Distance", Mini rejects capitalism and embraces her communist "Naxalite" lover. Naxalite groups represent socially marginalized members of Indian society. This movement seeks to liberate the peasantry from the dominance of oppressive landlords and redistribute the land amongst the farmers.

My protagonist Mini had the option of living a lavish, problem-free life in a developed country. But she rejected all material comfort and went back to India to accept a life of struggle. She re-united with her idealistic rebel lover and embraced the Naxalite philosophy. To the educated youth like Mini and Amitav, who dream of equality, this repression of the poor and marginalized seem unbearable. Some of them ultimately adopt a path of resistance.

In my second book, "Everything Here Belongs to You" Rahim and Parul get involved in religious extremism, ensuing violence. Violent ideology can seem seductive to disaffected youth, alienated from family, isolated and discriminated against. Growing up, both Parul and Rahim experience poverty, prejudice and discrimination. The injustice done to them ultimately pushes them to adopt an extremist philosophy, culminating in utter destruction and devastation.

Lopamudra: An old mansion in Kolkata form the settings of your second novel. Is the ambience based more on your own experiences of the old, aristocratic households of Kolkata? What are some complex emotions that such a world represented to you?

Saborna: I did grow up in a similar house in Kolkata, India, with two wings, three floors, a back alley, a terrace, and a courtyard. We even had a printing press on the first floor but the gym on the first floor stemmed from my imagination. Going back to that physical space (in my mind) brought back many memories from a time I could never go back to, a time that sat heavy in my chest. Immersed in that world, I sometimes smelled the curries in the kitchen, the incense in the *puja* room. I heard footsteps on the stairs, anklets ringing on the cold floors.

Somedays with closed eyes, I could see the freshly starched saris undulating gently in the afternoon breeze. Dust danced in the sunlight and stale air sat heavily behind the closed doors. I walked from room to room, chasing my own childhood with great impatience. The ceiling fans hummed and the printing press on the first-floor roared loudly.

Sometimes I saw reflections on the mirrors and broken window panes—so real I could touch them. But when I reached out, the reflections shattered into a thousand pieces. I knew then that the house I left behind was long gone. It

would only remain preserved in my books.

Lopamudra: How did you deal with sensitive themes like casteism, racism, the radical feelings embodied by the character Rahim, Parul's love interest in the book? What ideological conflict does his character add to the narrative of Parul and Mohini?

Saborna: Parul and Mohini have a close sisterly relationship. But the class difference between them constantly interferes with their relationship, pulling them apart. In her childhood, Mohini treated Parul badly---excluding her from playing and reminding her of her role as a servant. As young adults, Mohini is oblivious to Parul's suffering in that house. Even when Ma forces Parul to give up her Muslim identity, Mohini supports her mother.

Parul, who considers Mohini's family as her own, feels more and more alienated. She was born into unfair and difficult circumstances. So when Mohini alienates Parul over time with her increasing classist views, Parul reasserts herself by getting involved with Rahim, thereby reclaiming her Muslim roots.

Rahim points out to Parul the double standards of the Sen family who claim Parul is a member of their household but unscrupulously make her abandon her Muslim identity. From her childhood, Parul is forced to take a Hindu name, follow Hindu customs and rituals. Rahim urges Parul to see their hypocrisy. It becomes clear to Parul that the Sens do nothing to fight the prejudice their relatives harbor for Muslims. They never want to step out of their comfort zone and bring about social change, being oblivious of Parul's suffering. It is then that Parul starts to embrace Rahim's ideas.

Lopamudra: In the latter half of the novel, there is also the 9/11 question, which becomes pertinent with the characterization of Micheal who comes to Kolkata and the radicalism in Rahim makes him a victim of racial hatred. We have seen that amid the most turbulent times in history, the purpose of literature has been to empathize, empower and humanize society. What has been your vision when you bring up this essential discourse in the novel?

Saborna: Thank you for asking this! The death of Michael's father serves as a kind of parallel for Rahim's backstory. Rahim's brother and Michael's father die on two

sides of an ideological "war." Both Michael and Rahim are filled with bitterness and thoughts of revenge. The death of Michael's father sits like a boiling cauldron ready to overflow in Michael's heart. Rahim too can't forget the way the police treated his brother. His wound is so deep rooted that he can't turn back. He ultimately adopts an extremist ideology. By conveying both their stories I tried to show how "war" affects real human beings. Violence has consequences that reverberate on both sides. This is an important theme of the novel that I want the readers to understand.

Lopamudra: As a South Asian author, do you think the mainstream America is slowly but steadily acknowledging the immense cultural significance of the South-Asian literature and arts in the global literary scene?

Saborna: Honestly, prejudice and disadvantage persists in the publishing industry. No one is eager to give us South Asian authors publishing opportunity. According to an analysis, 95 percent of American fiction books published between 1950 and 2018 were written by white people. Till this day, the publishing industry remains disproportionately white. Literary agents representing South Asian authors are feeling the burnout. The diaspora is still struggling to be seen and heard.

Lopamudra: Do let our readers know about your forthcoming projects. I am also curious to know how you are contributing to the Houston literary circle with your book readings, your insights into publishing.

Saborna: It took me five years to write the book and another three years to edit it. In 2015, I met my literary agent, but she could not sell my book to a big publisher. So we went with a small publisher from Texas. My publishing journey is absolutely soul-crushing and I don't know if I can put myself through this again. So right now I am not working on anything else.

But I enjoy promoting my book at various Houston Festivals, book fairs and book clubs. There is this sacred bond between readers and writers; a synergy created when the readers live in the fictional space I create for them. It is their love that acts as a balm and helps heal my writerly soul.

***Lopamudra Banerjee is an acclaimed author, poet, translator living in Texas, USA and has written and edited books and anthologies in multiple genres.**

BOOK REVIEW

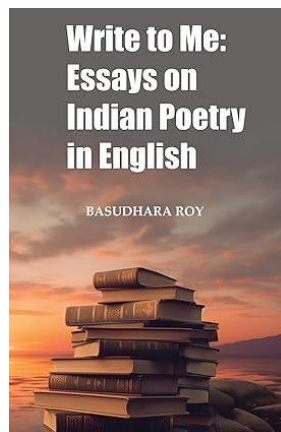
**Write to Me: Essays on Indian Poetry in English , Basudhara Roy, Black Eagle Books,
Dublin/Bhubaneswar, 2024,
ISBN- 978-1-64560-543-0, Pp 228/-
-Reviewed by Jaydeep Sarangi**

Renowned postcolonial critic John Thieme in his endorsement to *Write to Me: Essays on Indian Poetry in English* observes, "The voices discussed represent a significant progression from those of the independence generation of Indian poets and it is very rewarding to see them analysed together in this way by a first-rate critic." Basudhara Roy, a 'first-rate critic' and a confident Indian English poet brings a wide breadth of reading. *Write to Me* is powerful responses to particular volumes of verse, but taken together the reviews serve as a brilliant introduction to the rich diversity of today's Indian Poetry in English. Noted Australian critic Paul Sharad exclaims, "I would want Roy as my reviewer." A curator of *Hearth Within*, an important online poetry platform, the reviewer is a committed artist who thinks poetry constitutes a record, a document, a witness, a thread of happenings and a timeless corpus. Her introduction to the book is a rare gift for the readers where she earnestly says, "Poetry in India and Indian Poetry in English is, currently, going through one of its healthiest and happiest phases." Indian poetry in English is globally visible and intrepid for all spheres of social/ literary appropriation. Indigenous resources of multicultural India are the vital energy for the uniqueness of IPE. IPE has that strength that can never bore readers from different backgrounds. The reviewer explores all possible doors of Indian knowledge banks taking texts from different perspectives and analyzing them with care and grace. Her honesty as a critic is commendable and sincere. We observe her for recommending Indian English criticism in Indian classrooms more and more, "It needs to be taught more committedly in literature classrooms for its full potential to be examined and reaped." Yes! Indian English Criticism is a self-assured confident body of resources to analyse Indian texts relating them to Indian contexts which many foreign critics can never do.

Invested with extraordinary experience of being a practicing poet and critic and an interesting Introduction that throws light on the growth and prosperity of Indian poetry in English in contemporary times the book turns out to be a treasure-trove. The anthology begins with an in-depth analysis of Bhanu Kapil's wonderful collection *How to Wash a Heart*. Bhanu Kapil is a British American poet of Indian heritage. The review is an attempt to find out an interface among cultures and contexts. The speaker in this

collection, it is highlighted, is a champion artist, who brings out the fabrics of traditions and modernity at multiple levels. The reviewer examines the question of identity of an immigrant poet through a set of tropes. The immigrant experience is more layered in this collection as the interaction of three personal racial histories of the three women. Like all diaspora critics the reviewer tries to figure out "What is a home?." Her arguments are sharp and intense. Not all poetry collections have an axe to grind, to hypnotize the readers. But, Some are memorable; we return to them regularly.

The review of Nishi Pulugurtha's *The Real and the Unreal and Other Poems* is a journey to life's various facets and shades of thoughts ranging from physical nature to clinical Dementia, seeing and ignoring things and perceptions and memory and absences. The



review stresses on her take on the lockdown loneliness in these poems composed mainly during the first wave of the pandemic. Review of Nitoo Das's *Crowbite* is another jewel in the anthology where she unearths the poet's personal communication and engagement with the landscape of her hometown in the hills of Assam. Thirty well-crafted poems in this collection take the readers on a ride that begins in a real place and culminates in an existential space that mesmerizes the readers from different geographical/cultural positions. The review arrests our whole-hearted attention to maximum when it unfolds the essential spatial tension between the landscape and the mindscape with a powerful language rich with critical idioms,

"Not to be missed are the remarkable illustrations by the poet that by bringing in another dimension of visuality and

experience, lend a sinewy force to the overall interpretation of *Crowbite*." (p.42)

The reviewer is a cultural map maker; she includes poets from different social, political and geographical backgrounds to present India Poetry in English in true colours. Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's *The Untouchable & Other Poems* is a translation from his Bengali poems. Pramanik asserts, in his poetry, the Dalit voice characterized by subversions, protest, defiance, resilience and emancipation. The fifty poems that comprise *The Untouchable & Other Poems* are markers for social change. The reviewer probes deep into the poems and highlights the poet's strong self-awareness to his social and personal dignity and commitment towards a casteless society. The readers are startled in these poems by a language that resists both aesthetically and functionally. The maestro is at her critical best when she quotes and examines, "Awake, awake O world's primitive man." Only a sensitive reviewer can do it with ease.

Robin Ngangom's *My Invented Land* is a collection of poems which is a faithful surrender to desire and the heart's multi-layered longing for peace, hope, justice, cultural understanding and human credence. The review shows how the seasoned poet crafts an entourage of life's daily resilience to fight back from every upset. For him poetry is therapeutic. Self, land and poetry constitute a thematic confluence:

"It is never too late to come home.

But I must first find a homeland
where I can find myself.)" (p. 218)

In some poems the past leans out silently. At times, the poet's thoughts go beyond the world of facts where things are non-negotiable with human wit and routine grammar of living. The reviewer captures all these impressions tangibly and convincingly.

Some reviews justify immaculate collage of images, symbols and myths with inimitable lyrical fecundity by the contemporary poets. Many of these poets are critics of repute; some are established editors of journals and year books. They are multiple voices/ say-sos – sensuous, humorous, somber, nostalgic, dispirited and satiric. Among the wide and varied spectrum of other wonderful reviews we may mention, Anita Nahal's *What's Wrong With Us Kali Women?*, GJV Prasad's *This World of Mine: Selected Poems*, Kavita Ezekiel Mendonca's *Light of The Sabbath: Poems about Memories and the Sacredness of Light*,

Sanjukta Dasgupta's *Unbound: New and Selected Poems* (1996-2021), Smita Agarwal's *Speak, Woman!*, Usha Akella's *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, Kashiana Singh's *Woman by the Door*, Sukrita Paul Kumar's *Vanishing Words*, Vinita Agrawal's *The Natural Language of Grief*, Malashri Lal's *Mandalas of Time*. These poetry collections are remarkable for the explorations in linguistic, literary, cultural and emotional heritage of India. Each review is a call from

within. We are tempted to return to them frequently. To read these reviews in *Write to Me* is like we can wait for throughout the year--for sleep, further sleep and forgetting what is trash and prosaic.

Jaydeep Sarangi is an Indian poet, poetry activist and scholar on postcolonial studies and Indian Writings with forty one books anchored in Kolkata/Jhargram. Sarangi is currently the President of Guild of Indian



English Writers, Editors and Critics (GIEWEC) and Vice President, EC, Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library, Kolkata. He is principal of New Alipore College, Kolkata. Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map (2023, Sahitya Akademi) is his latest book. jaydeepsarangi1@gmail.com <https://jaydeepsarangi.in/>

Book review

DIVISIONS AND DISPLACEMENT

Chaitali Sengupta's *The Crossings*

(Hawakal Publishers, Won runners up award in the London Book Festival)

Reviewed by Anjana Basu

Chaitali Sengupta's *The Crossings* covers the related worlds of war. Migration and survival – the sections into which the poems are divided. These are world that she traverses through her imagination and experience some of them experienced through the memories of relatives during the Partition, others from the stories of war and the constant interaction in the papers that highlights the problems of those who wander from space to space with nowhere to turn.

War and migration have gradually become deepening concerns for the world - Russia's attack on Ukraine launched the first European war in decades, a conflict that still persists with the addition now of Gaza and Iran's entry. In a world strung taut, the poet expresses her concerns through vivid metaphors. Not that all the wars described are modern - with Partition as a backdrop it would not be. She writes about the Jagged Line that divided her family and the nation: "The strong white fingers pencilled a jagged line on our map. The Radcliffe line. In one fluid motion, Sengupta seamlessly transitions between allusions to ancient battles and contemporary events, from Kurukshetra to Ukraine, underscoring the timeless and universal impact of conflicts on individuals' lives. Through her poetry, she flies the flags of protest against war, highlighting the profound toll of violence and the pressing imperative for peace – this is a book of the time saying what needs to be said through the medium of verse, the laments of old given new form.

The poems travel beneath the skin of the invaded, the men with 'blue veins' and brown skins, forced to face the violent intrusion of hostile outsiders and the disruption of their once serene way of life. Sengupta's poetic sensibilities are ranged with the "rights of undocumented migrants" in the Netherlands. In the introduction, she

talks about her time volunteering as a translator for an organisation devoted to the cause migrant rights. Immersed in translating articles, she came to understand the profound devastation felt by migrants as they sought an identity "beyond the borders of their own country."



Once they had a home, they tell me in a far distant land, where May the Wind danced upon the green fields, ripening under the bounteous sun.

Through vivid imagery the poems evoke feelings of anger, despair, and sorrow, much of it is personal, memories of Noakhali and other places gleaned from family and pieced together. Sengupta herself mentions 'a home in Dusseldorf' and has worked in the Netherlands where examples of displacement and her own experiences come together to make the experiences in her poems more real. Her own feelings the reader guesses are highlighted in the story of the one who fled two continents away to escape the desolation of war and a vanishing way of life. Sengupta draws

attention to the wounds of war and the void of loss that linger in the lives of migrants, particularly the voices children torn from the womb of their homeland.

My unborn voice is a whisper, as I clasp to her insides, tensed, paralysed...

The challenge of acclimating to a foreign land, language, and culture is depicted as a daunting journey fraught with loneliness, apprehension, and psychological scars. Through the collection, the spotlight is cast on the prejudice encountered by migrants and their persistent sensation of alienation, even within their adopted communities. From the invaded the poems travel to those forced to find new homelands which are in many cases unwelcoming and resentful of a new kind of invasion. Displacement results in its own kind of scarring and the stories need to be heard so that their issues can be redressed.

Through her interactions with migrant, Sengupta reveals the profound void and desolation that many harbour within. The tales of the migrants, their devastated native lands, and the sacrifices they've endured find expression through her stirring poetry. The anthology stands as a tribute to their fortitude and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and comprehending their narratives.

'The Crossings' is an anthology that comes at a relevant time when stories of Partition and the narratives of migrants are being revisited. Sengupta weaves together various diverse elements to craft a rich canvas of emotions, illuminating the deep-seated repercussions of conflicts on personal journeys. Her poems advocate for empathy, comprehension and a collaborative endeavour towards building a world that is free from conflict and the devastation of war.