



“Wonder why we can’t have normal food”: New Poetry from South Asian Diasporic Women poets

Arpita Ghosh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ramananda Centenary College, India

Received: 11 Dec 2020; Received in revised form: 10 Feb 2021; Accepted: 01 Mar 2021; Available online: 20 Mar 2021
©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *New literatures have emerged from processes of colonization that had once affected and altered the fabric of large territories of the world since the fifteenth century well into the latter half of the twentieth century. The newness of these literatures consists in their articulation often but not limited to the effects of colonization, the march of capitalism across the globe, the emergence of new diasporas and their struggle to find their voice in the new world, and so on. This paper hopes to locate some of these new voices in the context of South Asian poetry. The works of three diasporic women poets based in the West, but who trace their ancestry to countries such as India and Bangladesh will be studied in order to realize the imaginative connection that these poets forge with South Asia in the process of creating their work.*

Keywords— *diaspora, new literatures, postcolonial poetry, South Asia, women’s writing.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the twentieth century, ‘new’ literatures have emerged as a result of the processes of colonization that had once altered the fabric of large territories of the world since the fifteenth century well into the latter half of the twentieth century. Some of them trace their beginnings to the nineteenth or even late eighteenth century, “when English, Irish or Scottish settlers in the Caribbean, Canada or South Africa first began to create an overseas literature and enslaved or colonized people first began to reflect on their current situation and future perspectives utilizing the medium of what was then ‘the colonizer’s tongue’” (Middeke et al). This newness has taken upon varied forms across nation states and their Diasporas long after the end of colonial and imperial regimes.

In order to understand this paradigmatic shift in the rise of ‘new’ literatures, let us consider the Aime Césaire’s 1969 play *Une Tempête*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* from a postcolonial perspective. In the play Césaire foregrounds issues of race, power, decolonization, and anti-imperialism. The play is set on an island in the Caribbean, and Césaire uses all of the characters from Shakespeare’s version, with some additions and new renderings of the original cast. Significantly, in his

version, Césaire asserts Prospero as a white master, Ariel as a mulatto and Caliban as a black slave.

As an African black man educated in French, Césaire found that what colonization has taken away from him was not only land, but also his language, culture and identity. This gave birth to the idea of *Négritude*, which Césaire explored in his first published poem “Return to My Native Land”. The concept of *Négritude* or black consciousness is used as a rallying point for freedom and liberation, for acceptance and pride of francophone black racial identity. *Négritude*, thus represents a crucial advance in the conception of African diasporic identity and culture in the twentieth century. It also marks the distinctness of this kind of writing from English literary writing, signposting itself as ‘new’.

Elsewhere, these new literatures have coalesced in countries all over the globe – African literature in English with Chinua Achebe, native Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand writing, writing from Black British and American authors, and finally Asian diasporic writing. As Middeke et al put it: “All of these new literatures in English have—in remarkably diverse ways—been shaped by experiences of colonization and their legacies, and all of them have—to varying degrees—moved beyond the

original colonial matrix to remake the forms and functions of English as a global language and to engage with a wide variety of political, cultural and literary contexts in various parts of the world” (163). Although the origins of Indian poetry written in English goes back only to the late nineteenth century, commentators and critics have asserted that like the various labels ‘Indo-English poetry’, ‘Indo-Anglian’, ‘Indian English’, “much of the poetry it describes...is truly dead” (Arvind Krishna Mehrotra). Subsequently, poetry that coincided with the period of Indian independence and end of the Second World War has come to be taken as a signpost for announcing the arrival of new Indian poetry.

Seventy odd years later, it would perhaps not be entirely wrong to think that this ‘new’ poetry has been institutionalized through university curriculums, anthologies, commentaries and criticism. This ossification has in turn lent a certain canonicity to post-independence Indian poetry in English. To seek ‘newness’ here, therefore, one would have to look for socio-cultural markers similar to those that had once distinguished Nissim Ezekiel from Sarojini Naidu.

Subsequently, this paper turns its attention to newer tracts in South Asian poetry in English, especially poetry written by Diasporic writers from the South Asian region. The particular focus is on women diasporic poets as my intention is to foreground issues of gender, race, narration of the nation, and history writing. In order to understand the artistic literary space that these women poets write in, we must first trace the history of the South Asian region briefly. The term ‘South Asia’ is a geo-political referent. The region includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. India occupies the largest land share in this region. Though the region has a rich diverse background of regional languages, culture, and history, there also exists a substantial body of writings in English which emerged with the British colonization of Asia after the fifteenth century. For the purposes of this paper, we shall be concerning ourselves with only South Asian literature in English. Many South Asian writers have made their mark on the global literary scene in the post-independence period, and their work offers a glimpse into the region’s complex geo-political and cultural histories. Subsequently, a good number of these writers who write either from South Asia or abroad, have come to represent their country or region in the cultural and literary circles of the West, and have earned recognition through many international awards and prizes.

II. SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA WRITING

Writers from South Asia whose writings have earned considerable global recognition include Bapsi Sidhwa, Amitav Ghosh, Meera Syal, Mohsin Hamid, Arundhati Roy, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, among others. Dealing with momentous events in the history of the region such as the birth of nation states, the partition of India, political and armed struggles in postcolonial nations, these authors continue to act as representatives of the continually shifting dynamics of the nations in South Asia to a global audience since the 1970s. To illustrate this point, let us take for instance the celebrated novel *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie. The novel explores significant events in the history of the Indian sub-continent, including the war between India and Pakistan, the independence of Bangladesh and the Emergency under Indira Gandhi. Rushdie’s deft positioning of Saleem as the unreliable narrator, his use of the tropes of the supernatural, or the fantastical, combined with more realist or naturalistic storytelling make *Midnight’s Children* arguably one of the best novels to come out of South Asia.

Consequently, the novel has emerged as the representative literary form in the narration of the nation and in this case, South Asia. Although studies on poetry collections do occur, they are not given the same valence as criticism and commentary on novels. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra goes so far as to say that “the criticism of Indian poetry in English that has come out of our universities’ English Departments is both voluminous and of inferior quality, and is best left

alone.” At the same time, critics such as Letitia Zecchini also praise South Asian poets who “refuse to be pigeonholed in neat national, linguistic, and cultural categories.”

In such a scenario then, there exists a considerable gap in this literary and critical academic discourse which this paper hopes to address. The choice of women poets in this regard is conscious and deliberate as will become evident. For the purposes of this study, we shall look at the works of Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Faizullah Tarfia, and Vivek Shraya.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil was born in 1974 in Chicago to a Filipina mother and South Indian (Malayali) father. She received her BA and MFA from the Ohio State University and was a Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is the author of *Miracle Fruit* (2003), winner of the ForeWord Magazine Poetry Book of the Year and the Global Filipino Literary Award; *At the Drive-In Volcano* (2007), winner of the Balcones Prize; *Lucky Fish* (2011), and *Oceanic* (2018).

Her book of illustrated nature essays, *World of Wonder*, has been published from Milkweed in 2020.

Nezhukumatathil's work is situated at the intersection of three cultures: Filipino, Indian, and American. Her writings deal with race, death, and nature often. Describing her artistic process, Nezhukumatathil says, "When I think of a metaphor, vocabulary from the natural world happens organically. I always start with an image or scene first and the delight is seeing where that takes me" (Sevigny). Her mixed parentage and the experiences it entails is captured in the poem titled "Kottayam Morning, Kerala, India" included in the collection *Lucky Fish* (2011). There she writes of the unfamiliarity of the country where her father grew up:

Chickens disturb the pebbles just outside my bedroom window

as they skulk and search

for bark crickets. The neighbors

still mourn their youngest son, caught under an oily car.

Four mornings here and each one rings out funeral song and honk ::

The disquiet that the child feels in a foreign land finds expression in these lines. The child speaker tries to comfort herself by imagining the vibrant sounds, sights and sensations of this strange land:

..green parrot and slender goat :: a clay dish full of ghee.
Saris tongue the wind,

trying to taste my grandmother's cinnamon plants and leafhopper wing.

Or the karimeen fish waiting to be wrapped and steamed in a single banana leaf for tonight's meal. A hundred bats fly inside my chest.

In an interview Nezhukumatathil speaks of the difficulties of living in America coming from a different race and ethnicity. She has spoken about how in the 1970s, the pediatricians in Chicago (where she was born) routinely told immigrant families to teach children only English so that they would not be ridiculed in school. She regrets that this resulted in her never learning two languages, Tagalog and Malayalam. In the same interview, Nezhukumatathil goes on to talk about her and her family's differences from the typical American suburban neighbourhood where her family was the only family of colour. This often led to her having to explain her unusual choice of food to her classmates, for instance. In a poem about eating fried fish for breakfast as a child, Aimee Nezhukumatathil says she used to -

"wonder why we can't

have normal food for breakfast like at Sara's house – Cheerios, or sometimes if her mother is home:

buttered toast and soft-boiled eggs

in her grandmother's dainty blue egg cups and matching blue spoon. Safe. Pretty.

Nothing with eyes."

The South Asian community forms a large part of the multicultural groups that have migrated to the United States. According to SAALT, nearly 5.4 million South Asians live in the United States. The South Asian community in the United States comprises of individuals with ancestry from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The community also includes members of the South Asian diaspora – past generations of South Asians who originally settled in many areas around the world, including the Caribbean (Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad & Tobago), Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda), Canada, Europe, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands (Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore).

The community is diverse and heterogeneous, possessing a variety of ethnic, religious, and

linguistic characteristics. Reports have also shown "a direct connection between xenophobic political rhetoric and policies and the rising tide of hate violence" against south Asians in the United States. Literature and art in the US has addressed these issues. Subsequently, racism and xenophobia emerge as important themes in Nezhukumatathil's poetry too.

III. 'MOSAIC' AND 'MELTING POT' CULTURES

Like the United States, Canada too has a large multicultural ethnic population. However unlike the United States, Canada believes that it offers a 'mosaic' where ethnic groups have maintained their

distinctiveness while functioning as part of the whole, whereas America offers a 'melting pot', where peoples of diverse origins must fuse in order to make a new people. Canadian poet and performance artist Vivek Shraya, however, critiques this claim in her poetry. Aimee Nezhukumatathil criticises and brings to the fore the casual racism directed at her in America in her poem "Dear Betty Brown":

If I didn't change my name for my husband, I'm certainly not going to change it for you. You can take the time & learn it like everyone else. I know five-year-olds who can say it without a stutter or hiccup.

Vivek Shraya's work too carries echoes of similar resistance. Shraya who is a transgender artist, filmmaker, and poet has written about transphobia, racism, and erasure of indigenous Canadian peoples in her work. Her book titled *Even This Page is White* speaks of inherent racism even within the queer community in Canada.

without seeing a white cock i knew my teenage penis was too dark

no patch of my brown body is safe

from white sovereignty not even between my legs without means to under my over colour

i warned potential lovers:

i nicknamed it "oprah"

shifting shame into a joke about a black woman.

Shraya often speaks about her own internalized shame and racism. Her poems then become sites of palimpsest of racist stereotypes, jokes which she rewrites through her self-realization. In her poem titled, "amiskwaciwâskahikan" she admits to her participation in the erasure of the indigenous people in Canada. Despite Canada's proclaimed commitment to multiculturalism, it is critiqued for its policies for the Aboriginal population which aids in the displacement and disempowerment of First Nations individuals. Shraya writes in "amiskwaciwâskahikan":

so preoccupied with my own displacement didn't notice

i was displacing

you

gave myself a white name

adam in place of divek civic ribbit

didn't bother to learn

yours

Just as Shraya's work draws attention to the minority voices in her nation's history, it would be prudent to point out the gap in representation when it comes to publishing of South Asian writing. South Asia is dominated by India not only geographically but also in the representation of its literary output. This has been detrimental to the production and circulation of the literatures of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan which are often treated "as mere footnotes to the larger history of Indian literature" (Zecchini 46). There have been instances where anthologies of South Asian poetry, for instance, have become instead a stand in for the reproduction of Indian poetry. This leaves a serious lacuna in the representation of this oeuvre of rich voices from the South Asian region. Many Bangladeshi, Ceylonese, and Pakistani poets seem lost in this pantheon of Indian poetry

in English.

Poet Tarfia Faizullah was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Bangladeshi immigrants and raised in Texas. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Registers of Illuminated Villages* (2018) and *Seam* (2014). Her writing has appeared widely in the India and United States in the Daily Star, Hindu Business Line, Huffington Post, Ms. Magazine, Oxford American, Poetry magazine, and the Academy of American Poets website, as well as in the anthology *Halal If You Hear Me* (2019).

Faizullah's work has been presented at institutions and organizations worldwide, and has been featured at the Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, and elsewhere. Her writing has been translated into Bengali, Persian, Chinese, and Tamil, and was included in the theater production *Birangona: Women of War*.

In 2010, the poet travelled to Dhaka, Bangladesh, to interview women survivors of the 1971 war. The 1971 Liberation War between Bangladesh and Pakistan, in which Bangladesh won independence from Pakistan, saw the adoption of rape as a military approach by the Pakistani army. Feminist and human rights advocates have elsewhere analysed the deep rooted cultural notions regarding female honour and shame and how this is used to dampen and rein in military opposition throughout the ancient and modern civilizations. Sean Carman notes how over the course of the year long conflict, "the Pakistani military raped or made sex slaves of between 200,000 and 400,000 Bangladeshi women." To honour these survivors, the Bangladeshi government has given the name *birangona*, a Bengali word that means "brave woman" but may also be translated as "war heroine."

In *Seam*, the result of Faizullah's interviews with the *birangona*, she attempts to come to terms with her own heritage, identity, and experience as the child of immigrant parents and as a Muslim woman living in the west. The first verse in the collection is titled '1971' to mark the memory of that eventful year. The epilogue states that on March 26, 1971, West Pakistan launched a military operation in East Pakistan against Bengali civilians, students, intelligentsia, and armed personnel who were demanding separation of the East from the West. The war resulted in the secession of East Pakistan, which became the independent nation of Bangladesh.

Reviewer Trista Edwards notes that in the course of the armed conflict over two hundred thousand women were raped, and over 3 million people were killed. Faizullah writes on the stark dissonance of that moment experienced in simultaneously in America and Bangladesh:

In west Texas, oil froths luxurious from hard ground
 while across Bangladesh, bayoneted women stain pond
 water blossom. Your mother, age eight, follows
 your grandmother down worn stone steps to the old pond,
 waits breathless for her
 to finish untwining from herself the simple cotton sari to
 wade alone into green water—the same color,
 your mother thinks, as
 a dress she'd like to twirl the world in. She knows the
 strange men joining them daily for meals mean
 her no harm—they look like her brothers do nights they
 jump back over the iron gate,
 drenched in the scents of elsewhere— only thinner. So
 thin—
 in the distance, thunder, though the sky reflected in the
 water her mother floats in burns bright blue.

IV. CONCLUSION

The works surveyed here demonstrate how poets such as Faizullah, Shraya, and Nezhumuthathil draw inspiration and engage in a dialogic dialogue with the South Asian writing emerging from their native countries even as they negotiate their identities as second generation citizens in the West. Each of the poets whose works are reviewed and analysed here writes from their shared vantage points of being second generation naturalized citizens born of immigrant parents. They also reflect on their gendered experiences in their choice to revisit their ancestral countries. Whether it is the ten year old persona of Nezhukumathathil in her native village in Kerala trying to make sense of the sounds and sights of her father's birthplace, or Shraya meditating on the malleability and fluidity in the genders of Hindu gods and goddesses in order to find a safe place for her transgender self, or Tarfia Faizullah's return to Dhaka Bangladesh to reclaim a piece of her history by revisiting the site of gruesome violence – these women writing poetry from the margins of the category of South Asian writing compel critics, editors, publishers, and readers to re-imagine the reified contours of the body of writing that is referred to as 'South Asian literature'. By being placed in two worlds and by going beyond the geographical and socio-cultural positions of their 'outsiderness', these women poets share between them a rich tapestry of words, images, phrases which though contingent remain urgent.

REFERENCES

- [1] Carman, Sean. Everything Is Near and Unforgotten: An Interview with Tarfia Faizullah. *The Paris Review*, 2014.

- [2] Edwards, Trista. Review of Tarfia Faizullah's *Seam*. *American Literary Review*, 2014.
- [3] Faizullah, T. (2014). *Seam*. SIU Press.
- [4] Laetitia Zechhini. "Postcolonial South Asian Poetry" in Ramazani, J. (Ed.). (2017). *The Cambridge companion to postcolonial poetry*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Mehrotra, A. K. (2012). *Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History*. Permanent Black..
- [6] Middeke, M. (2016). *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Springer.
- [7] Nezhukumathathil, Aimee. (2011). *Lucky Fish*. Tupelo Press.
- [8] Shraya, Vivek. (2016). *Even this page is white*. arsenal pulp press.
- [9] Together, South Asian Americans Leading. (2018). "Communities on fire: confronting hate violence and xenophobic political rhetoric."