

Women Poets Sharing Their Success Stories and Immigrant Experiences Through Poetry

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LIFE AND LEGENDS

In Association with



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& Writing Programs

Women Poets Sharing Their Success Stories and Immigrant Experiences Through Poetry

PANELISTS

Pramila Venkateshwaran

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

Deema Shehabi

Shadab Zeest Hashmi



Moderator

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

Editor-in-Chief

Life and Legends

Welcoming Speech

Greetings, everyone!

I am Kalpna Singh-Chitnis, the Founder and Director of the **Silent River Film and Literary Society (SRFLS)** and Editor in Chief of *Life and Legends*, the presenter of “**Women Poets Sharing Their Success Stories & Immigrant Experiences Through Poetry**” at **2021 AWP**.

I feel elated in welcoming our distinguished panelists on behalf of **SRFLS**, the parent organization of *Life and Legends* to an exceptional event that was supposed to take place at **AWP** in San Antonio, Texas last year. However, we are brining this panel a year later due to the pandemic, not over yet. Nonetheless, we are thankful for our survival and grateful to **AWP** for taking upon this Himalayan task to fulfill a promise made to our creative community and being there with its unflinching support throughout the year.

Before we begin, a few words about the discussion we will have on the panel today - Much has been said about how immigration affects a writer’s creative pursuit and the challenges of immigrant writers. But here we explore the other side of this phenomenon, which enables the writers beyond borders to draw their roadmap to success. This event will share the creative journey and poetry of four female poets who have paved their way to success, despite challenges and setbacks in their adopted country. Their journey is inspiring, and their stories must be told to inspire others.

From where we had left off...

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

Editor-in-Chief: Life and Legends

Director: Silent River Film and Literary Society

STATEMENT

Women Poets Sharing Their Success Stories and Immigrant Experiences Through Poetry

By Pramila Venkateshwaran

My life as a poet in the U.S. was fraught with difficulties. I felt alienated and had lost my voice in the shock of migration. I did not write for years and then slowly started writing about my experience of migrating and reflected on the life I had left behind. One can argue that Rushdie's statement, "At home everywhere and at home nowhere," is not merely the experience of the migrant but of poets in general. But even in marginalization, one can find a connection.

I read my poems in public for the first time in a bookstore on Long Island, for Performance Poets, a poetry community that continues to thrive. It was in that community as well as in the close friendships I developed with a few poets, that I began to feel the sense of a community that supported by writing life. In the course of the past three decades, communities, such as The Frost Place, Matwaala, South Asian Feminist Caucus of NWSA, Women Included, a transnational feminist organization of which I am a co-founder, and NOW have been the bulwarks of my writing. Being active in feminist organizations percolated into my writing. My essays and poems reflect my ideas of justice, the use of imagination and creativity in our lives and in our art.

In leading workshops and writing about other poets, or promoting South Asian poets, as Usha Akella and I are doing currently in Matwaala South Asian Diaspora poets Collective, I feel I have arrived. I am offering the kind of community that I had received in my early years as a poet. Poetry is not a solitary act. It happens and thrives in the community.

The poems I have selected to read are examples of poems that were generated as a result of my engagement with other poets and activists. "Thirtha" came about as a result of my conversations with the editor of my first book about religion and philosophy and pondering about the borders between faiths. "Art by the Way" resulted from my wonder about the persistence of women's art despite patriarchal demands. "The Flood" arose from my 2017 participation in the Women's March in Washington, D.C, which reinforces the merging of art and activism. To express my solidarity with Black Lives Matter, I wrote "Impact," a deeply political and emotional poem, which reflects both inhumanity and the possibility of our humanity.



FOUR POEMS BY PRAMILA VENKATESHWARAN

Thirtha 11

The bus conductor thunders, "Haaji Ali,"
above the muezzin's pitch, above cymbals clashing
around the corner by the jasmine vendors.

I wait among garish women on a ribbon of road at the head of the bay,
where double-decker buses hurtle into town, the dome
rising behind me, white and gleaming at low tide.
Crows and gulls wing about, searching.
On the floor of the bay, a path moves steadily to Allah's heart.

I think of Muhammad describing to Meccans
the light he had seen above the seventh tier of the mountain—
it was bright, you know, like...
but couldn't find metaphors to paint the image that stunned him.

The singing on the cliff mingles with the muezzin's prayer.
Both loud, their long syllables wind down the water's edge,
rise among the birds, dip low, lift, and circle mosque and temple.

Nudged from one random thought to another, I wait for the right bus. "Do you know if 47 comes here?
It's new," asks a woman in green.
I shrug, "I'm new."
One stops; a call pierces the heat, "Mahalakshmi":
Different names for the same stop, different names for God.

(from Thirtha (Yuganta Press, 2002))

Art By the Way

Imagine if the dye had to be made,
leaves and flowers plucked, mixed
with water and stirred over a hot stove

cooled under the moon, the right branch
found and sharpened to dip into the potion,
a piece of parchment, dry enough

but not too dry, has to be smoothed
before the pen can be lifted
from the decoction, wet enough

but not drippy, so the words form in neat,
thick chunks as the hours pass slowly,
so at day's end if four lines are written

it's a feat, especially if dishes have to be washed,
laundry hung out to dry, kids fed, and
a hundred pieces of family life picked up:

it must have been the woman with magic
who put a god on watch to brush a few strokes
on leaves, the pen's spout, her life, so imagine

the women who couldn't manage it all,
let the dye coagulate, the pen stick to the bowl,
the parchment vanishes into yellow dust.

(Published in The Singer of Alleppey, (Plain View Press, 2018)

The Flood

Dawn sees a string of women
in the city waiting to board
the bus. Voices ripple in the
dark, a roll call of names,
and soon the bus rides the descending
fog, following a necklace of red
lights weaving into the Capital.
Women hold up banners,
call out, call out, call
out the king and his henchmen.
Spilling into avenues, they walk colorful
in coats, hats and scarves, chanting,
bursting into song. Yes, we shall overcome.
Sister, shine this little light of mine,
yours and mine, let it shine.
Spirits take wing as words burst from lips
of women and men who work
brutal hours to lift the weak
and now lift sagging spirits.
Courage, sisters, and the women
cry back *courage and power,*
heat gathering in layers, the air warm with
joined wills, a giant tide gradually
curling into the perimeters.

(Published in Manhattan Review, 2018)

Impact

When the bullet meets flesh
the moment the moment is gone
then the searing pain then gone gone
confetti of flesh then the after the hereafter
no looking back or forward

not like the impact of a kiss
when lips meet and draw each other's breath
as if the essence of the other is needed to make you live
so you draw the other deep into you

and in the next moment of that joining
you savor the taste of the lover
remember the utter leaving of your body.

Bio Note

Pramila Venkateswaran is an American poet of Indian origin. Pramila Venkateswaran, poet laureate of (Safek) Suffolk County, Long Island (from 2013 to 2015) and co-director of Matwaala: South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival, is the author of *Thirtha* (Yuganta Press, 2002) *Behind Dark Waters* (Plain View Press, 2008), *Draw Me Inmost* (Stockport Flats, 2009), *Trace* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), *Thirteen Days to Let Go* (Aldrich Press, 2015), *Slow Ripening* (Local Gems, 2016), and *The Singer of Alleppey* (Shanti Arts, 2018) published between 2002 to 2018. An award-winning poet, She has performed poetry internationally and teaches English and Women's Studies at Nassa Nassau (Nassa) Community College, New York. She is also the 2011 Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, Long Island Poet of the Year. She has performed the poetry internationally, including at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival and the Festival Internacional De Poesia De Granada.



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By Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

Growing up in India in a prominent Hindi belt, in the state of Bihar, where English was a second language spoken mostly by the elites; where its usages outside schools, colleges, and universities weren't popular, I never had imagined that someday a poet of Hindi tongue will fulfill the destiny of becoming a poet of English, and earn herself an opportunity to be the creator and editor of an English journal in a foreign land.

Knowing a language is one thing, and making it our own is another. My mother gave me my first lesson in English. She taught me the English alphabet, words, sentences, and my father helped me learn spoken English. My grandfather taught me how to make English my guide and travel the world without flying or sailing on a ship. But it was my uncle who gave me a taste of English literature. He was an expert on Shakespearean literature and English poetry. However, when I began writing at the age of fourteen, I chose to write in my native language Hindi, widely spoken in India and the fourth largest speaking language globally. I realized people wouldn't have cared much if I had written in English, which was also a reminder of India's colonial past.

Before migrating to the USA in 1994, I taught Political Science to postgraduate students at Gaya College, affiliated with Magadh University. I had published three poetry books in my language and had won prestigious awards for my works in India. However, in my adopted country, no one knew who I was, what I wrote in my language, and what they meant to me. I tried to translate some of my poems into English, but I was not happy with my translations. I rejected everything I wrote and translated in my early days. I began to take creative writing courses at the College of Dupage in Illions and joined some local literary groups in Chicago. But no one paid attention to me as an established poet of diaspora in the USA. My poems were rejected repeatedly by American journals, and I was deeply discouraged. I began to sense that my creativity would die soon. I was also getting desensitized to Hindi in my new country and wasn't ready to adopt English for literary expressions. The changes in the geography and social environment changed the sensibility of the poet I was, and I went silent for almost a decade. I was incapable of writing in any language. During this time, my sole focus remained on my family and children.

But, I didn't allow rejections to turn into self-doubts for me. Instead, I looked at them as an opportunity to discover what they meant for me. I had a sort of epiphany that I was being prepared for a new role and a new identity as a poet and artist. For that, I had to sacrifice much of who I was before as a creative person. In 2000 I moved to California. In 2003 I enrolled myself at NYFA to study film

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directing. I began to write English scripts, directing English movies, writing love letters in English, and finally, dreaming in English. NYFA broke the language barrier for me, and I reincarnated as the poet and writer of the English tongue. Yet, the rejections continued, and I wondered, was it because my bio was still identifying me as a bilingual poet, my books still had Hindi titles, and my name was still bearing my cultural identity? The rejection letters didn't give any of these reasons, yet I felt marginalized. I had my first book in English ready, but I wasn't finding a publisher. I began to share my work on my blog and in social media groups. This is when some North American and Australian writers and editors noticed me and showed interest in reading and publishing my work. Jennifer Reeser, an established American poet, liked my poetry, and wrote the foreword for my book. This gave me a huge morale boost, and I was inspired to create a magazine for writers like me and envisioned **Life and Legends** with a mission to build bridges between languages and cultures.

Life and Legends changed many things for me in a short time. It helped me build a community for writers from diverse backgrounds and create many opportunities for them. It also allowed me to study and understand diverseness in international literature, which helped me grow as a writer and poet myself. I was further inspired to turn my personal endeavor into a non-profit organization and founded the **Silent River Film and Literary Society** in **2013**, which has served over a thousand writers, poets, artists, and filmmakers from across the world.

I have been like a volcano ever since, gushing out blocks of rocks, lava, and ashes, only to create fertile islands like one we are standing on, growing poetry of different shades, transcending the barriers of languages, cultures, and geography.



FOUR POEMS BY KALPNA SINGH-CHITNIS

The Language We Speak

How possibly you could have heard me.
I barely knew your language before.
But let my heart wear out with one last remorse -

should you ever want to know
why I had traveled so far from the land
I belonged to and did not belong.

I couldn't speak sooner, I know, I know.
My words were inadequate,
lumped in my throat,

And one day, I emptied
all the *letters* of my tongue in a chest
locked them, and went silent.

I did not starve, but I felt deprived.
I wasn't abandoned, but I felt alone.
I wasn't lost, but I couldn't find what I was looking for,

And one day I died.
I was buried in your bosom
like a Pharaoh,

with all my grains and gold,
with all my silk and songs,
with all my love and loss,

And now, I am one with you.
I am your mountains and prairies.
I am your oceans and deserts.

I am your air and sunshine.
O America!

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I am your glory and prayers.

I am your shame and guilt.

I am your pride and prejudice.

I am the language we speak.

Trespassing My Ancestral Lands

In my dreams,
I often trespass my ancestral lands.

looking for the centuries hidden in the hills,
finding the history lost in the sands,
searching for an oracle safe in ruins,
not to be found and read.

I often venture without any food and water, in
the land of five rivers,
emerging through the passages of
a glorious civilization

I have no shoes, only my garb, and a scarf, that
I'm afraid of losing to the desert winds. An
amulet strung around my neck reads - an Aayat
of the Quran.

May almighty bless the daughter of the idol worshipers out
to defy the borders and demarcations, there were only
destinations,
before the birth of nations.

In my dreams, I often wonder,
who carved my face and disappeared in the winds? I
wonder,
where did my ancestors come from?

Were they Aryan, Mughal, or Turk,
Greek, Mongol, or Tughluq?
What mountains did they cross?
What oceans did they brave?

And the roads they traveled,
were they made of silk, rocks, or gravel?

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What battles did they fight,
before surrendering to the light?

Where did they sleep, away from their homes? In
Ordo, Palaces, or Viharas?
What food did they eat?
What songs did they write and sing?

Did they speak Sanskrit, Prakrit, Farsi or Pashto? I'm
bewildered in the desert, like a dervish. Like a Sufi,
leaving behind a trail of songs, for a caravan lost in the
desert storms.

In my dreams, I search for the Buddha in the forest,
Muhammad in a cave, and Jesus on the mount. I look for
Krishna in the battlefield,
and Chanakya in Takshashila.

In the alleys of towns and villages,
I look for Ghalib, Rumi, and Khayyám,
In the temples, I look for Meera,
Kabir, and Tulsi; and Rama in a *Gurukul*.

In my dreams,
I remain uncaptured.
In my dreams,
my dreams are valid!

In my dreams,
I sleep in the seven continents,
and wake up with the sun
on the roof of the universe.

An eagle hovers over me in the skies,
flapping wings, shedding colors, protecting my dreams, that
can never be a part of the history,
you will ever like to write.

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America

This time when I boarded the plane
to return to America, I felt a peace within.
A peace that had finally returned to me after twenty years.

This time, I did not fly on the wings of imagination or dreams.
I flew on the wings of aluminum and steel,
that will finally take me home, away from my home.

Would that make me a lesser daughter, sister,
friend or a patriot, if I'm not able to see the land below,
rising from the ground, up in the air

with my eyes filled with tears, saltier than my Indian sea?
Would that be unfair to say that
I'm destined to a safe Island, still quivering in hope?

Among hundreds of faces sitting in the plane,
I could easily identify the face of America
and its smile served to me like a warm blanket in my seat,

for me to peacefully fall asleep and migrate into my soul silently, no
longer in search of a land of opportunities but love, that knows no
boundaries of nations, my ultimate destination.

Coping with the Answers

Once exited from the mother's womb
is it possible to return to it?

Once departed from the homeland
is it possible to go back again?

Everyone remained silent
coping with the answers

America held my hand.

BIO NOTE

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis is an Indian American poet, writer, and editor-in-Chief of *Life and Legends*. She has authored four poetry collections, and her work has been translated into many languages. Her full-length poetry collection *Bare Soul* was awarded the 2017 Naji Naaman Literary Prize for Creativity. Her works have appeared in notable journals like *World Literature Today*, *California Quarterly*, *Indian Literature*, etc. Her awards and honors include the "Rajiv Gandhi Global Excellence Award," "Bihar Shri," and "Bihar Rajbhasha Award" given by the Government of Bihar, India. Kalpna Singh-Chitnis participated in the "*Silk Routes*" project of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa from 2014-2016. She has read her work at Sahitya Akademi, India's highest academy of letters, Poets & Writers, AWP, and others. A former lecturer of Political Science, she also holds a degree in Film Directing from NYFA and works as an independent filmmaker in Hollywood.



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STATEMENT

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By Deema Shehabi

As a young teen, the quiet hush of a long siesta in afternoon hours and the hum of the air conditioning outside my bedroom window mingled with my indeterminate writerly dreams. Charlotte Bronte's protagonist Jane Eyre and her sermon on love and its discontents had a marked (indeed burning) effect on my soul as did Lebanese singer Fairuz's voice with its velvety, gauzy texture and disquieting beauty. The call to prayer at dawn and its repetition throughout the day grounded me in reflection and gave me much respite from school work, from incessant teen gossip, and from social visits. In the evenings, as the searing heat yielded to a certain softness in the air, I would fling open my bedroom window and listen to sea sounds: always in the eucalyptus trees across the street and along the stucco wall below my window. Sometimes, depending on the wind's direction, the smell of iodine filled my nostrils and provoked both a simultaneous feeling of placement and displacement engendered by an intuitive understanding of the sea's rhythmic restlessness.

At the time, I did not write poetry though I was surrounded with it; the love for poetry ran in my family, and when I returned to Gaza during summer, my uncles, cousins, and aunts would recite it in everyday conversations; it was a living, breathing tradition, a rich continuum passed along from generation to generation.

Today, I can pinpoint my early teen feelings as epiphanies or perhaps as forms of circumstantial evidence that point to unease, to discomfort, or perhaps to an implicit understanding of the nature of belonging. When I arrived in the US in 1988, as a young Palestinian from Kuwait, I felt a strong sense of alienation. It was only when I turned to poetry that I found comfort because it anchored me in my exile and provided me with a respite from a gnawing feeling of loss. It was in writing that I felt more displaced from norms of experience, so it was more honest than artificial normalization (ie assimilation or acculturation). Many of the earlier struggles had to do with finding a voice that bridged two sensibilities, namely, where I came from, and where I am now. I argue that my success as poet (if it can be perceived as such) stems from rooting strongly in the joys and discomforts of belonging to two worlds.

Certainly, the first impetus for writing poetry began with experiencing the foundational loss of Palestine, the way of life there told by the stories of my mother and grandmother (who were both gifted storytellers), and the loss (by geography and migration) of an extended beautiful family of aunts, uncles, and cousins, many of them courageous, vibrant, and utterly human. That sorrow—and an accumulating desire to immortalize that loss—spurred my poetry. I began searching for a language to give to that sentiment.

The voice that rises in poems from my first book, *Thirteen Departures from the Moon* took a couple of decades to develop fully. In looking back at the trajectory of my writing, I discovered that I often oscillated between strangeness and familiarity and between acceptance/rejection.

When I think of paving the way to success, I think of the importance of constantly

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renewing/reimagining language. In my second book of poems, I turned toward listening (I mean really listening) to people's vernacular in speaking. This gave rise to *Diaspo/Renga*, my second book of poems, which is a collaboration with the poet Marilyn Hacker. In the end, we had a renga collection that began in January of 2009 during Israel's invasion of Gaza and lasted over four years. We each take a word from each other's renga and braided it into our own renga, resulting in a kind of call and response effect. The personae and geography may change, but the renga are anchored by a kind of fragmentary narrative.

Another source that I've turned to in recent years is the love for the beauty of the land where I live now. Mt. Diablo and the surrounding valleys, creeks, and rolling hills are a perennial renewal.

In trying to attain/maintain success or continue finding inspiration for writing, I have kept the words of progressive Muslim scholar Ebrahim Moosa close to my heart. He coined the term "poesis imperative" which calls on Muslim intellectuals to engage creatively and imaginatively in tradition/heritage or turath in Arabic." More specifically, he describes poesis imperative as "standing on a threshold position that enables one to engage in creative and critical thinking" and ultimately this lends itself to flowering and production. In thinking more fully about this threshold, I wonder how immigrant writers might continue to stand at that invigorating threshold, especially within America, which seeks to assimilate and acculturate those within it.



TWO POEMS BY DEEMA SHEHABI

Pantoum

(for Fuad)

Twilight at the winter solstice blanks out
before the story of loss begins
with a daughter whose face suddenly pales
dreaming of her father's last gasp.

Before the story of loss begins
is the sound of a daughter asleep in the house,
dreaming of her father's last gasp,
listening for his footsteps at the door.

Is the sound of a daughter asleep in the house
the same sound a mother makes, hiding from her son,
listening for his footsteps at the door
as he peeks through the keyhole then runs away.

The same sound a mother makes, hiding from her son,
is the echo of a nagging question about love,
as he peeks through the keyhole then runs away:
Hold it, buddy, I've already seen you.

Is the echo of a nagging question about love
like the stain of darkening sky in her eyes?
Hold it, buddy, I've already seen you.
He runs from her, thinking the sun belongs only to him.

Ghazal: A Lover's Quarrel with the World

History gallops over your page's margins, what's a story, but its plural all over the world? Arabic lulls ageless in your ears, but to you what matters most is temporal in this world.

The Sheikh with a gold pen in his pocket, the girl lathering her father's head with musk, and you—pearling over Whitman's poems—all have a lover's quarrel with the world.

A riddle of childhood loss soaks the rearview mirror in an Arizona desert, and you drive past the unsaid but ignite nothing immoral in this world.

When you put your head down to grass and gazed at a fallen sparrow, your eyes met rest in its body and what's silent became oral in the world.

The child, splintered with too many voices, hears only yours, and her paths, dismantled of sound, light up murals of this world.

A sweet theft, a heavy hour of grief, and a ghazal posturing for friendships that never fade, vine-leafed gardens where we hide against the perils of this world.

Her face is a balm against fracture; the light on her moon is a cheek you return to, and time has no stride against her flushed lips, flickering corals of this world.

How else to bundle this dark where pillow meets dream, and the one acquainted with the night rises like an immortal of this world?

(published in Rusted Radishes)

BIO NOTE

Deema Shehabi, an American poet of Palestinian origin. Deema K Shehabi is a poet, writer, and editor. She is the author of *Thirteen Departures From the Moon* and co-editor with Beau Beausoleil of *Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here* (PM Press), for which she received- NCBR Recognition Award given by Northern California Book Awards . She is also co-author of *Diaspo/Renga* with Marilyn Hacker and the winner of the Nazim Hikmet poetry competition in 2018. Deema's work has appeared in literary magazines and anthologies, including *Literary Imagination*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Literary Hub*, *Poetry London*, ... and *Crab Orchard*, to name a few. Her work has been translated into French, Farsi, and Arabic, and she has been nominated for the Pushcart prize several times.



STATEMENT

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By Shadab Zeest Hashmi

As a poet who resides in America and writes exclusively in English but is deeply influenced by the polygenetic beauty of the Urdu language (a diversity coaxed, framed and magnified by the unique design of the ghazal), I have come to appreciate the ghazal's cosmopolitanism even more in the US — its home now for more than half a century. The ghazal fuses the old with the new, the friend with the stranger— reflecting, refracting, and constantly reminding us that America too is a convergence of sorts, a cultivation of diversity— at least the promise of it.

My interest in cosmopolitanism on the one hand and in history and tradition on the other, propels me to seek common roots and a common purpose. I have enjoyed every bit of research that my poetry projects have led me into, and the challenges of speaking to and for two cultures have opened up opportunities for growth. I ask myself the question: does my work contribute towards illuminating the big picture our species contends with? I often write about bridges, whether they're historical moments such as *al Andalus* in Spain whose civilization brought together three Abrahamic faiths and three continents in a millennium-long conversation, or the Urdu language, a hybrid that combines disparate civilizations of South Asia with the Islamic linguistic/poetic tradition of Arabo-Persian cultures, or my life in America, most of it spent in San Diego, our border with Mexico, which seems like an extension of my early years growing up near another border— that between Pakistan and Afghanistan— I have always identified with whatever may “link“ or “bridge” the gap. As a woman, I speak as a daughter and a mother and consider myself a link between generations, as an immigrant poet I feel I'm at a good vantage point, able to view both sides of the divide, as an insider and outsider.

The psyche of migration is not new to me. Born in Pakistan, a country that emerged on the world map after the collapse of the British Raj and the largest mass migration in human history, permanence, to me, is forever in the shadow of exile, and exile is not necessarily a disadvantage. The true home of a poet is language. English as well as Urdu are tied to the paradox of empire and are therefore rich with tensions, textures and sonic and semantic possibilities. The purpose of literature is to reinvigorate language by introducing nuance, and nowhere is it more important to do so than the language of empire. In my book *Ghazal Cosmopolitan* I explore the tradition of the ghazal, begun by Arab poets of antiquity, taking root in cultures around the world and reaching the American literary scene more than half a century ago via Urdu. At the heart of this exploration, as well as my first book *Baker of Tarifa*, is a search for intersections, mutual appreciation of diverse cultures arrived at by coining a common language that allows for individual expression while honoring a sense of community even in divergence.

Without a doubt I have suffered distress as a Muslim— especially as a mother of young children— not only from the global climate of war but also the devastating tensions arising from legitimized hate speech. I write about Islamophobia, mostly in my book *Kohl & Chalk*, contextualizing the historic shifts in global power I have witnessed. In my latest book *Comb*, a hybrid memoir, I revisit my childhood in Peshawar during the time of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, touching upon the geopolitical importance of the region since ancient times and the many cultures of encounter it fostered. I believe there is much to understand and celebrate in my cultural heritage, as a Pakistani-American, and that the poetic enterprise must include taking delight and deriving hope from the enlarging, empowering spirit of poetry.

FOUR POEMS BY SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI

Ghazal: House

After the storm, the sinking of keys, salted passport and bridal dress— the light house
Docked in the hemisphere of exiles, we married the spinning beam of the light house

No respite from paperwork— we file and file ourselves away, ghosting into forms
Imagination, you say, is the true domicile, but who can tell what it might house?

Outside the haunted nursery: rusted seesaw, oxeye daisy's mad glare, doll jaw
Nightguard's jigsaw, betrayal of bread crumbs blowing away from the right house

The famed rugs are Persian, the tick-tocking clock numerals Arabic, porcelain Chinese
We the people — brown, black, yellow— are peppersprayed in front of the White House

The unexplained scent of guavas in California autumn, lock of hair in the dictionary
Monsooon-green shimmer on the door— Zeest, have you found yourself a sprite house?

Qasida of 700,000 Years of Love

So Death's muscle was pulp, a breeze past a
dandelion. Its hold frost, a weak clam
gripping me when the Honda fell
into a crater off the interstate.
True, the last breath was thin as a veil caught
in thorns but it was swift and I entered
Iblis's study. No river of pus,
lava or honey, no plank to walk but
the punishment of another journey:
seven hundred thousand years of service.

How Iblis loved God before the cosmos,
before our polished clay, our high brow, our
delicious sin. It must have been *Isha*
time on Earth. His room in the swirling
infinity was a closed tulip, a
peeling thing with heavy petals, windows
open with desire for the One who
teaches love even to moss, scale, concrete.
I hung from the windows, dangling in
Eternity, a prowler, playing the

role of an extra where Iblis absorbed
all energies in prayer: a magnet
for the Nocturnal garden, swarmed
with delicate scents. I hung like a thief
for his purity, and crept like an ape,
a vine, onto his roof. My town must by
this time be encircled by the amber rim
of dawn, *Fajr*, plush, tranquil, unrolling the
day. Iblis, through the cracks, was a glowing

ton of fire, immeasurably at peace,
knotted in prayer as a fruit blossom,
a perfumed navel, a fetus, impenetrable.
I hovered like a bomber's shadow; sun,
a lemon in the sky and earth a wheat
grain. How could I not recall the fragrance
of bread, the gusts of wind that came with trains,
the arrivals; *Zuhr* my most hungry time.
His posture in prayer made me long
to wipe the tears of red-cheeked geishas,
orphans of war, those tied up, spat upon.

Women Poets Sharing Their Success Stories and Immigrant Experiences Through Poetry

Seven hundred thousand years of loving
God. I could not make it from *Zuhr* to *Asr*
without pangs. Every birdsong sewed me in
to the coarse cloth of the sufi's resolve.
With *Maghrib* came the sound of the key
turning in the lock, the lust of repose.
I clung to his study like a spider web
watching Iblis the steady servant with
his quietude, windows burnished with divine
light. Garlanded with lint, I looked below.

Notes: In the Islamic tradition, Iblis was a devout jinn, a creature made of smokeless fire, who worshipped God for 700,000 years before Adam was created. He disobeyed God by refusing to bow before Adam and from then onwards became "Shaitaan" or Satan, the evil one. Some Sufis view his refusal as an act of extreme devotion to the beloved rather than disobedience.

**The Stonemason's Son
Contemplates Death**

Because my heart
became a kiln
I wished to die

The inscription on the tiles
made a prayer in butterfly script
crowning your well

May the water refresh your soul

The clanging of keys became loud
A soldier stood behind me pissing in the well

Someone sang in the distance
Couldn't tell if she was a Jew
Christian or Muslim

It was a devotional song

Notes for my Husband

I showed Yousuf to the amethyst
Morning when he was born

Kettledrums play four at a time
Each tuned to play its own note
Each he would swallow whole
With my vertical voice in Urdu

And watch with his cardamom eyes
The slow flare of Van Gogh's Sun Flowers
The silk ascent to Victoria's Peak
The concave shine of mango *achar*

He is slender like pine nuts
And keen on butter

Yaseen prefers honey
And tells me the sun on the front door
Smells like library soap
I feel the light lathering the knob
As I open it

The house is filled
With jazz and bag-pipes
Iqbal's poems
On marble construction paper

We weep in both languages
And anything round is a planet

BIO NOTE

Shadab Zeest Hashmi, an American poet of Pakistani origin. Shadab Zeest Hashmi is the author of poetry collections *Kohl* and *Chalk and Baker of Tarifa*. Her latest work, *Ghazal Cosmopolitan*, is a book of essays and poems exploring the culture and craft of the Ghazal and Qasida forms. This book has been praised by Marilyn Hacker as "*a marvelous interweaving of poetry, scholarship, literary criticism, and memoir.*" Winner of the San Diego Book Award for poetry, the Nazim Hikmet Prize and multiple Pushcart nominations, Zeest Hashmi's poetry has been translated into Spanish, Turkish, and Urdu, and has appeared in anthologies and journals worldwide, most recently in *World Literature Today*, *Mudlark*, *POEM*, *Prairie Schooner*.... and *McSweeney's In the Shape of a Human Body I am Visiting the Earth*. Her new manuscript *Comb* has been named the winner of the 2019 Hybrid Book Prize by Sable Books. She has taught in the MFA program at San Diego State University as a writer-in-residence.



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