

American Poetry Today: The contribution of poets from the Indian sub-continent

Introduction

No survey of contemporary American poetry is complete without an assessment of the contribution made by poets from the Indian sub-continent. Indian poets have been enriching the poetry scene in America for decades. A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), an award-winning poet and translator, was the William E. Colvin Professor of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, Linguistics, and a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Vikram Seth's superbly crafted, delightful *The Golden Gate: A Novel in Verse*, described by Gore Vidal as 'The Great Californian Novel,' could not have been written without some of his creative years being spent in California.

As there are many such poets, this introduction limits itself to the more established poets with full-length collections published since 2000. They include Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, Vijay Seshadri, Ravi Shankar, Jeet Thayil and Reetika Vazirani. The voice of these poets is increasingly being recognised. Vijay Seshadri's *The Long Meadow* won the 2003 James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. Reetika Vazirani was the recipient of a 2003 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for her book, *World Hotel*. Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* was the winner of the 2002 PEN Open Book Award.

Meena Alexander currently lives in New York City, where she is a Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Her two most recent books are published by Northwestern University Press, in collaboration with Triquarterly Books. Agha Shahid Ali had the backing of one of the leading publishers in the US, W. W. Norton. He held various academic posts including one at University of Massachusetts – Amherst. America's leading poetry journals regularly publish the work of these poets, and the various foundations for the arts have been immensely supportive. Thanks to a more inclusive culture, poets from immigrant backgrounds are no longer dissolving at the margins of the contemporary poetry scene in America, but seen more as a part of the mainstream.

American universities have been forward looking in introducing courses on South Asian/ Indian literatures and languages as well as supporting journals dedicated to these genres. According to *The New York Times*, by 1999, there were over 43 Asian American studies programs at universities across the US, twice as many as just a decade earlier. *The Journal of South Asian Literature* (Michigan State University), established in 1963 actively promoted creative and critical work until it ceased publication. The *South Asian Review*, founded in 1977, continues to promote creative and critical writing from South Asia. *Catamaran*, a journal dedicated to South Asian American Writing, was launched in 2003.

According to Jeet Thayil, editor of a forthcoming anthology of Indian poetry for the Boston-based publication, *Fulcrum*: "There are excellent Indian poets at

work today, and though the Indian poetry diaspora is vast, it is also vastly underrated, particularly when compared to fiction.” In the words of Ravi Shankar, an editor of a ground-breaking anthology of contemporary Middle Eastern, East Asian, and South Asian poetry, which is the first of its kind and a crucial contribution to the world of global literature and culture to be published in the US: “These poets rewrite tradition and broaden American literary awareness.” For Pireeni Sundaralingam, editor of *Writing the Lines of Our Hands*, an anthology of South Asian American poetry awaiting publication: “There are some 40 or so ‘emerging’ South Asian poets writing in America today with a few recognisable names, including Vijay Seshadri, Meena Alexander, Reetika Vazirani, Agha Shahid Ali and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.”

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has published four books of poetry; the latest being *Leaving Yuba City* (1997) which won a Pushcart Prize, an Allen Ginsberg Prize and a Gerbode Foundation award. She is considered among the major contemporary South Asian American poets but has lately moved away from writing poetry to more rewarding genres such as fiction. At the other end of the spectrum, a fine poet like Jaysingh Birje-Patil, featured in *Contemporary Indian Poetry*, edited by Kaiser Haq (Ohio University Press, USA; 1990) never published a collection of poems though his novel, *Chinnery's Hotel*, was published both in the UK and in India in 2004. Many younger writers are turning to fiction today perhaps with the hope of securing lucrative financial contracts from their publishers. Those of us who remain devoted to the writing and reading of poetry do so for the sheer love of it; there is simply no choice in the matter.

Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander is the author of several books of poetry; her two novels are *Manhattan Music* and *Nampally Road*. Her memoir, *Fault Lines*, was one of *Publisher's Weekly's* best books of 1993. She currently lives in New York City with her husband and two children. She was born in Allahabad, spent her childhood in India and Sudan. Meena Alexander's two collections under review, both published by Triquarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, are *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004).

In *Illiterate Heart*, dedicated to the memory of her father, she pays tribute to him acknowledging that he “taught me to hope that lines scribbled in a secret notebook might one day enter the world.” In “Port Sudan,” she notes how “he knew she needed knowledge/ of the imprints of earth.” In “Elegy For My Father,” she sings with the three priests who beckon her as the oldest child to cover his eyes: “If this is the end of life,/ .../ what use are *gnanam*,/ *dhanam*, *kavya*?” “Why am I here? I cannot tell” the protagonist questions in “Valley.” She utters “the immigrant's fury” – “who understands my speech,/ further what is my speech? – ” and questions: “Whose tongue is this/ melting to the quick of migrancy?” (Gold Horizon)

The answers appear tentatively in the same book, invoking poets and writers as diverse as Rumi, Ginsberg, Conrad while she explores her journey. In “An Honest Sentence,” she notes: “In seeking answers/ the hardest script will do.// A child's upright hand –/ stony syntax, slow work// in part-time English,/ trying to forge an honest sentence...” In “Muse,” she acknowledges: “Write in the light/ of all the

languages/ you know the earth contains,/ you murmur in my ear./ This is pure transport.” The search for self, “the self turned outside in/ approaching where there is no turning back” (Mirror of Earth), and not knowing “how I learnt to spell/ out my days, or where I must go” (Glyphs) is pursued deftly in *Raw Silk*, where the purpose of *kavya* (poetry) is reckoned with in no uncertain terms. *Illiterate Heart* is a finely honed, moving account taking the reader on a deeply personal journey. “How did I come to this script?” she questions in the title poem, “Illiterate Heart”: “In dreams I was a child babbling /at the gate splitting into two,/ three to make herself safe.”

Raw Silk, her latest collection, is an autobiographical cycle of poems which in the words of Marilyn Hacker, “demonstrates the rare blend of an acute, utterly contemporary intelligence with a sensuality that is, in itself, a radical way of processing information. In its profound and polyglot sense of world citizenship gained through the indelible experience of exile, Meena Alexander has written what is – not at all paradoxically – a book that’s quintessentially a New Yorker’s.”

Meena translates her experience of exile into poems that explore identity and self by establishing a global persona reflecting all that it takes to ‘be’ in a changing world. Her poems are shot through with the pain and hope of reconciliation as she becomes “Sita and Iphigenia, Demeter and Draupadi” (Dialogue by a City Wall) or when she joins the ghost of Lorca in the subway, asking/ listening: “what is the color of home?” (Color of Home). In “Hungriest Heart,” she is the girl “fleeing what was meant to be real/ a house without wheels// the bone’s high arc/ without let of forgiveness// Why call it home –/ O cuckoo’s cradle!” In “Firefly,” she asks: “I have crawled in and out of the sky./ Who am I?” In “Central Park,” she declares: “From mouth to shining mouth news darts... There is no homeland anymore,/ all nations are abolished.”

The themes of poems in *Raw Silk* are wide ranging – from the aftermath of America’s 9/11 to the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat or apartheid in South Africa. They invoke Ghalib, Kabir, Sankara, Lorca, Verlaine, Akhmatova, Amrita Sher-Gil among others. There are poems for her family (a beautiful poem, “Green Parasol,” for her daughter urging her to be “a girl like any other”) and friends. As we read the poems, we are offered insights into her own life (her “mother’s mother was a satyagrahi,” for example) or how poetry came to her rescue when she was a child: “poems I committed to memory/ flute music guiding me through the vertigo of history.”

Just as she had “heard Verlaine singing” in the sandstorm of her childhood, after the pain and shock of September 11, 2001, she notes: “it was a pleasure to read Lorca’s *Poet in New York* and reattach myself to place through some, and I stress *some*, of his words. At times his lines startled me – ‘If it isn’t the birds/ covered with ash...” She felt Lorca was speaking to her: “then it happened,” she wrote – “I started to hear Lorca’s voice as I walked about the city.” In “Aftermath,” she writes: “There is an uncommon light in the sky/ Pale petals are scored into stone./ I want to write of the linden tree/ That stoops at the edge of the river// But its leaves are filled with insects/ With wings the color of dry blood./ At the far side of the river Hudson/ By the southern tip of our island// A mountain soars, a torrent of sentences/ Syllables of flame stitch the rubble// An eye, a lip, a cut hand blooms/ Sweet and bitter smoke stains the sky.”

The title poem describes how “Raw silk/ brought all the way from Varanasi” was “the wedding sari with its brocade/ saved from the bonfire Gandhi had ordained// was wrapped in muslin/ set in a wardrobe, the door locked tight.” The poem ends with: “Amma there are silkworms/ dancing in the firmament// above your head and mine,/ and the mother of worms// doffs her veil/ and darkens her lips// and sets a crown/ of mulberry leaves on my head.// When I open the drawer/ to search for silk// I touch smoke,/ raw silk turned to smoke in the night’s throat.” This shock of recognition, the loss of home and a violated world where “ground rules are abolished” lead her to “take comfort in sentences.”

In “Blue Lotus,” she reaches out to her poetic ancestors for comfort: “I search out a bald rock between two trees,/ ash trees on the riverbank/ on an island city where towers blazed.// This is my short/ incantation,/ my long way home.// William, Rabindranath, Czeslaw,/ Mirabai, Anna, Adrienne/ reach out your hands to me.// Now stones have tongues./ Sibilant scattering,/ stormy grace!” And in “Searching for a Tomb over Which They Paved a Road,” she refers to the carnage in Gujarat, where the tomb of the 17th century Muslim poet, Wali Gujarati, was torn down by Hindu extremists in words that hark back to her predicament in New York: “*Where is my skin/ my bones?! I am the poet of a city/ in ruins/ burnt by the sun/ bound to the moon./ The reeds/ by the river/ are lashed to swords./ My dust is in the mouth/ of the bloodied rose.*”

“Field in Summer” captures this loss of innocence strikingly: “I had a simple childhood,/ a mother and father to take care of me,/ no war at my doorstep.// Stones sang/ canticles in my mouth/ as darkness rose.// Love, love where are they gone?/ Father, mother, ink dark stars,/ singing stones.” Out of a deep sense of loss, “you hear her words unfurl on the screen,/ bare sound, filled with longing,/ syllables of raw silk, this poem” (Triptych in a Time of War). Out of the powerlessness of poets and artists come “these poems, cloud-tossed particulars,/ sharp with need, sprung in the ash” of her new country. Meena Alexander writes with moving intensity about the poignancy of living in fragile places, in the world that is a forest on fire. In “Fragile Places,” she sums it up thus: “Who dares to burn/ with the stamp of love?// Words glimmer/ then the slow// march to sentences./ Sankara speak to me.” Sankara, the philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, believed that the phenomenal world was *maya*, unreal. And so she speaks to us: “Nothing is changed/ by the strength of reflection// and everything.” With Rabindranath Tagore’s words she reminds us that she too has picked at words, “*tried to redeem them./ They cry as sinners might.*”

Agha Shahid Ali

Born in New Delhi in 1949, Agha Shahid Ali grew up in Kashmir. He was educated in Kashmir, India and America, where he taught at a number of prestigious institutions including the University of Massachusetts – Amherst. He is the author, translator and editor of several publications. The two poetry collections included in this review are *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; both published by W.W. Norton & Co.

His previous collection, *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), was widely praised as a poignant and nostalgic evocation of not only his lost homeland, but as

W.S. Merwin wrote: “Agha Shahid Ali’s Kashmir, in his poems, is our own lost but inalienable homeland.” With the prevalence of war and homelessness in the post cold war era, and the increasing displacement of people in our time, Agha Shahid Ali’s voice represents that of all exiles. A haunting volume, it established his reputation as a poet. In the words of John Ashbery, Agha Shahid Ali’s poems are “translucent elegies ‘for the city that is leaving forever’ (Srinagar) from one of its sons, who also happens to be one of America’s finest younger poets.” In focussing on the tragedy of his homeland, he was able to create a persona that has great resonance in our time. “Few poets in this country have such a voice or such a topic,” notes Hayden Carruth.

“Because both countries (India and Pakistan) are nuclear powers now, international anxiety has increased: Kashmir, it is feared, may be the flashpoint of a nuclear war. The ongoing catastrophe – the focus of *The Country Without a Post Office*, my previous volume of poems – provides the backdrop to this volume,” writes Agha Shahid Ali in the introduction to his collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*. Though India and Pakistan fought several wars over Kashmir, Agha Shahid Ali’s upbringing in India and Kashmir influenced his thinking. As with his previous book, *Rooms Are Never Finished* excavates the devastation wrought upon his childhood home. In also depicting a deeper, personal tragedy, his mother’s death and the journey with her body back to Kashmir via Delhi, he appropriates the ancient style of the ghazal that can be traced back to seventh-century Arabia and brings to his voice a tragedy and yearning of loss that transcends all divisions. “It was the only thing to do, for she had longed for home throughout her illness,” he provides us with an explanation for taking her body back to Kashmir. His mother had come to the USA for treatment of brain cancer in January 1996; she succumbed to her illness and died in April 1997.

He was imaginatively and emotionally preoccupied with Kashmir, which he visited regularly. He was utterly devoted to his mother and to his country. In writing about the scale of such loss, he fell back on traditional poetic forms to take on the “big subject matter” enabling him to acquire “a certain fullness of voice” as he put it. His death in December 2001, also of brain cancer, silenced this extraordinary voice, which was so suffused with the passion of grief and loss. As Carol Muske-Dukes of the Los Angeles Times wrote: “What is timeless in these poems is the power of grief – sheer cliffs and drops of despair that he masters and spins into verse with astonishing technical virtuosity.” In one of his poems, “Summer of Translation,” Agha Shahid Ali writes: “I who of passion/ always make a holocaust...”

In “Lenox Hill,” he writes about his mother in these words:

“As you sit here by me, you’re just like my mother,”
she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
she’s watching, at the Regal, her first film, with Father.
If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
I’d save you – now my daughter – from God. The universe
opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God’s mother!

The poem ends with the lines:

For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe

when I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother?”

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, “the lyric amplitude throughout interweaves mythic context and personal narrative—his closeness to his mother, her death, the fraught return of her body to Kashmir—yoking the individual and the global. We read, in part, to understand ‘the other.’ He wrote, in part, to help us understand,” comments Ellen Bryant Voigt. Agha Shahid Ali was able to achieve that understanding through an angle of vision that unified apparent disunities.

While his “paradise on earth” had turned to hell, in the poem, “Summers of Translation,” he strikingly weaves words and images that draw upon Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *bhajans* (Hindu devotional singing) harking back to Krishna and Radha, Begum Akhtar, Muharram, Zainab, Karbala, black and white Hindi films and their haunting songs, and of course his Mother! Through his poetry he achieves a felicitous co-existence of disparate traditions that has torn people, cities, countries apart. To that extent his poems are political, taking a stand on how things could be – if human beings were not blinded by their own limited beliefs. And, that was no dream; a whole generation of post-independent Indians were brought up in such a visionary milieu. Thus, he was not being overtly political when the cultural backdrop of his upbringing is taken into account. According to his elder sister, Hena Zafar Ahmad, an Associate Professor of English at Truman State University:

From a mother who quoted Ghalib (the Shakespeare of Urdu verse) and Faiz (the most famous Urdu poet of the twentieth century from South Asia) to a father who quoted Plato and Aristotle, from a grandmother who quoted Hafiz (a great Persian poet) and Mir (a great Urdu poet) to a grandfather who quoted Keats and Shakespeare, from Hindu mythology to Indian cinema, from stories of Laila-Majnoon to Heer-Ranjha (doomed lovers in Arab and North Indian legends, respectively), all these helped lay a foundation that finds expression in some of his poems.

But, his death also symbolises the passing of such a world. What Shahid loved most, after his mother, was Kashmir. In “Above the Cities,” as they fly from Boston to Delhi via Frankfurt with the coffin of his mother, he becomes all sons bidding farewell to their mothers: “It’s easy to write your story./ For whatever city I fly to, even/ that of my birth, you// aren’t there to welcome me. And any city/ I am leaving – even if one you’ve never/ seen – my parting words are for you alone. For/ where there is farewell,// you are there. And where there’s a son, in any/ language saying *Adieu* to his mother, she is/ you and that son (*There by the gate*) is me, that/ son is me. Always.” The title poem, “Rooms Are Never Finished,” has an epitaph by Mario Buatta – “*Many of my favourite things are broken.*” Living as he did in a fragmented world where his favourite things were not only broken first before being taken away from him, he writes: “I’ve bought the world indoors. One wants certainty./ Not in art – well, ... – but, why,/ in life. ”

Agha Shahid Ali’s verse is deeply imbued with the romance and cadences of Urdu poetry; he brings to his work an inventive formalness acquired from his extensive knowledge of western literatures. “Shahid worked assiduously to establish a place in American literature for the formal discipline of the ghazal,” note Agha Iqbal Ali and Hena Ahmad in their “Foreword” to the book, *Call me Ishmael Tonight*. In this

posthumous volume, we are offered gems from Agha Shahid's ghazals. In "Arabic" he writes: "They ask me to tell them what Shahid means –/ Listen: it means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic." Agha Shahid Ali, "the beloved witness," witnesses the world in this collection from an angle that is deeply personal and truly tragic. During the time of his writing of the poems in this collection, he was also confronted with his own mortality while undergoing treatment for brain cancer, having already lost his mother to the same illness.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the story of Ishmael in the Koran made an indelible impression on him. In the "Foreword," there is an explanation of the story of Ishmael, which runs briefly as follows: "Directed by God, Abraham says to his son, Ishmael, 'I see in a vision that I offer thee in sacrifice.' Differing from the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, the sacrifice is demanded not only of Abraham, but also of Ishmael. Ishmael's willingness to be sacrificed (as cited in the epigraph to the Foreword '...do as thou art bidden;/ thou shalt find me, God willing;/ one of the steadfast': *The Koran*, Surah 37: 102) heightens the beauty of God's redemption where He says: 'This is indeed a manifest trial.' " Agha Shahid Ali's personal life amounted to such a trial.

His experiments with the ghazal form in depicting the very human trial he underwent will remain his lasting contribution to the world of English poetry. In his introduction to *The Ghazal in Call me Ishmael Tonight*, he wrote: "The opening couplet sets up the scheme by having it in both lines, and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet – i.e. the first line (same length) of every succeeding couplet sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the rhyme and refrain – the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding." In ghazal after ghazal, Agha Shahid's virtuosity can be witnessed over and over again. As with Urdu ghazals, his poems come alive when recited, preferably before a group of connoisseurs.

Agha Shahid Ali was not short of friends and admirers. Most of his poems are also dedicated to his friends and family, some of whom – like Edward Said – also died of cancer. Shahid tends to incorporate words and phrases written or spoken by others into his ghazals as a tribute to these men and women – they include, for example, references as diverse as "The god of small things" (Arundhati Roy/ "In Real Time"), "WHAT THE THUNDER SAID Shantih Shantih Shantih" (T. S. Eliot/ "Shines"), The Satanic Verses (Salman Rushdie/ "Angels"), "Long years ago we made a tryst" (Jawaharlal Nehru/ "Land") among others. There are several such pregnant references; however a review such as this does not permit a fuller analysis. Agha Shahid Ali's voice remains among the most poignant in this group of poets.

Vijay Seshadri

Vijay Seshadri was born in Bangalore, India, in 1954, and arrived in America at the age of five with his parents. He grew up in Columbus, Ohio, where his father taught Chemistry at Ohio State University. Vijay subsequently lived in many parts of the US, including the Pacific Northwest, where he spent five years working in the fishing and logging industries, and New York's Upper West Side, where he was a graduate student in Columbia's Ph.D. program in Middle Eastern Languages and Literature.

His poems, essays and reviews appear regularly in major publications. He has received several prestigious grants and awards for his work: John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant in 2004; MacDowell Colony's Fellowship for Distinguished Poetic Achievement as well as the Academy of American Poets' James Laughlin Award in 2003, which is given to commend and support a poet's second book. His two collections are *Wild Kingdom* (1996) and *The Long Meadow* (2004), both from Graywolf Press. He currently teaches poetry, and is the director of the graduate non-fiction writing programme at Sarah Lawrence College. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and son.

Vijay's first collection, *Wild Kingdom*, was celebrated as one of the most exciting debut in years. *The New Yorker* hailed him as "a son of Frost by way of Ashbery: both the high-frequency channels of consciousness and the jazz of spoken language are audible in the poems." "Seshadri offers us works that belong among the broadest, most intelligent new poetry of this decade," noted the *Publishers Weekly*. His second, *The Long Meadow*, has been lavished with praise. According to a statement from Campbell McGrath, head juror for the James Laughlin Award, 2003: "Grave and witty, classical and contemporary, *The Long Meadow* is a casually brilliant collection of poems. Vijay Seshadri is a writer of subtle, elastic and unblinking intelligence.... Thematically, Seshadri asks big questions and addresses big issues – time and consciousness, suffering and devotion – but for all their deep seriousness of purpose, his poems refuse to take themselves too seriously.... Profound and delightful, *The Long Meadow* well deserves the high distinction bestowed upon it by the James Laughlin Award."

The Long Meadow is spiritually centred in New York City; in the title poem, we find ourselves in a park – in the Long Meadow in Prospect Park – where the poet takes his dog for a walk. Nothing is more commonplace or domestic than that. Yet the poem deals with issues that are far from common. This delicacy of touch, this juxtaposition of the cosmic and domestic, real and illusory, casual and sublime, urban and rural, ironic and serious that makes our journey with the poet rewarding. The book begins with "Immediate City" and ends with "The Long Meadow," poems that deal casually yet brilliantly with issues such as justice, loneliness, devotion, awareness among others. In "Immediate City," he offers hints and guesses about the nature of the City: "Tall and plural and parallel,/ their buff, excited skins/ of glass pressed to glass and steel/ bronzed by the falling sun,/ the city's figmentary buildings dream/ that they are one with the One". In a few powerful lines he portrays the soul of New York City; the first line poised, confident, breathing the same air as Whitman.

"North of Manhattan," conceived in his head *en route* to work one morning, has a title that recalls Robert Frost, but "is a poem written in the shadow of Whitman," explains Vijay Seshadri. "It is concerned with Whitman's spiritual location, the city of New York. It responds to the city, and looks at the same thing Whitman looked at: the fecundity of life in the city, its overwhelming plenitude, which in Whitman is usually, but not always, glorious, at least in Whitman's work prior to his experience of the Civil War. In "North of Manhattan," that plenitude is seen as energetic and vital, but also as destructive. There is a way in which I am looking through that poem to Whitman, and arguing with him."

The poem portrays “not extensively but briefly and emphatically, the vocal variety of New York. And New York is, of course, a cosmos rather than a mere city.” The poem is a series of snapshots, images and voices interweaving in a language that breathes the life of this City where “The mind, meanwhile,/.../ panting down the tracks, straining/ from the past to the vanishing present./ It will never catch up/ and touch the moment. It will always be/ in this tunnel of its forever,/ .../ that looks all around without seeing...” It is not the same voice one encounters in “North” for example: “As if in a well a thousand dead cities deep,/ all over the hemisphere/ the people sleep –/ their mysteries still unsolved,// their doors shut tight./ Inside, a voice croons/ *Be mine tonight*/ to their deaf selves,// deafer than the stars.”

In an interview with *The New Yorker Online*, Vijay points out: “I think of myself, to a certain extent, as a poet who does voices, which I think is a pretty orthodox way of going about writing, and has been since the modernists. Eliot comes to mind—wasn’t the title of *The Waste Land* at one point ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’? I feel comfortable writing like that.” Channelling voices, as he has a very clear idea of the characters behind them, comes alive in another poem, “Lecture” where he knows “exactly who this art historian was who was giving the lecture and referring to the slides of the artist’s work.”

Getting the conversational tone in anything, “whether it’s the conversation of an imagined character or your own conversation, or the representation of your own conversation” helps him more than starting out with an idea. He does not shy away from big issues; just prefers to approach them indirectly: “It is in my nature that if I make a large statement...I’m going to find a way to undercut it rather than go any farther into it and try to do what, say, Rilke did. Rilke would start there, and he would move directly to the sublime. But I could never, ever, in a million years, not feel tremendous irony, and a certain shyness, and a feeling of being abashed, if I continued in that way.” Like Elizabeth Bishop or Emily Dickinson, Vijay Seshadri transforms his shyness, naturalness and modesty into “this tremendous metaphysical force.” He has indeed carved a niche for himself in the tradition of the greatest of American poets while enriching it with his own voice.

In “The Long Meadow,” the poem originates from an incident in the *Mahabharata*, the Sanskrit epic poem, which he appropriates and distorts radically. When the protagonist, the “son of righteousness” “finally arrives at the celestial realm./.../ The god invites him to enter.” He does not see “his beloved, his brothers, his companions in war and exile,/ all long since dead and gone –” but sees “sitting pretty and enjoying the gorgeous sunset,/ his cousin and bitter enemy, the cause of that war, that exile,/ whose arrogance and vicious indolence/ plunged the world into grief.” “The god informs him that, yes, those he loved have been carried down/ the river of fire. Their thirst for justice/ offended the cosmic powers, who are jealous of justice.”

In a post-9/11 world, Vijay is making what he refers to as “a large statement”: “This is the final illusion,/ the one to which all the others lead.” The illusion is one of expectation – of justice, of a system of belief where a God or cosmic power or perhaps the most powerful government in the world is supposed to deliver justice but does not. However, that is not all either. In his own words: “The poem is not about the cosmic drama that it relates in the first part, nor is it about the domestic drama of the anticlimax. It’s about the relationship between the two. And managing that relation,

making the relation the poem, was something I had never been able to do before, and I was very happy. It's not often that you get an opportunity to manage an idea in that way." The poem swivels from the cosmic theme to the quotidian, and the solace that our ordinary, daily lives offer in the company of those who do not let you down.

Building an idea into a climax while holding on to what he refers to as the "quotidian" is a technique that he uses from time to time. In "The Disappearances" and "Baby, Baby," for example, he develops the scene from "broken perceptions and hesitations and incomplete actions" and then delivers a sort of coda: "*Hush, children! Don't you understand history is being made?*" (The Disappearances) or "the story of the universe is the story of a boy and his dad." (Baby, Baby). He does something not too dissimilar at the end of "North of Manhattan":

And then, for just a while, the mind will disembark from the body,
relaxed on its contoured plastic seat,
and go out to make fresh tracks in the snow
and stand and breathe under the imaginary trees –
the horsehair pine, the ambergris tree,
the tree that the bulbul loves,
the nebula tree...

Were it not for the "bulbul" there is no guessing Vijay's Indian background from his writing. Similarly in "The Long Meadow," apart from the reference to the "kingdom being carried/ as on the back of the tortoise the earth is carried" there is no indication that the poem sprung from the famous Indian epic poem. One of the things he says about his 'Indianness' is that, "whatever else it was, it wasn't, when I was growing up, social. What I mean by that is that it wasn't collective. It was unique to us as a family, and unique to me as a child in my family. We were effectively the only Indians in Columbus, Ohio... almost everybody else in the world I lived in was white Anglo-Saxon Protestant." Vijay Seshadri's worldview, shaped as much by mid-century American ideals as Indian thought and culture, comes across in his poetry refreshingly as his own.

Ravi Shankar

Ravi Shankar was born in Washington DC, grew up in Virginia and studied at the universities of Virginia and Columbia. He is currently poet-in-residence at Central Connecticut State University. The founding editor of an online journal of the arts, *Drunken Boat*, he is also an editor of an anthology of South Asian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern poetry, due to appear in 2005. *Instrumentality*, his first collection of poetry, is a series of meditation on life with an ironic and lyrical look at human experience. According to Vijay Seshadri: "Ravi Shankar's poems are immortal in the flesh, finding in the life of the mind – its interpretations, its 'instrumentality' – the surpassing, transient lyrical moment; and in the life of the world's body the permanent, unflinching presence of thought, unconfined by time or space. They are the verbal artifacts of a singular, many-sided, and distinguished consciousness."

As Charles Bernstein points out, *Instrumentality* plays expectations and delivers uncanny reformulations that seem 'predestined, in retrospect.' " In "Fabricating Astrology," for example, the poem begins innocently with: "I lie on my back in the

damp grass,/ Staring at the stars' mineral precision." Before the reader gets lost among the stars, we are led to "Masses of gas, bearers of dead light," and then an encounter with "Death, Provider of cardinal boundary," drawing us out to concur with him: "This much is certain:/ Today, I'm a day closer to extinction." It is every poet's dream to replace extinction "with these words." However, every serious poet also plays out the dialectic of the self/soul and the limitation of words/language in understanding the world/reality in all its fullness, physical and metaphysical.

In "Blotched in Transmission," Ravi begins masterfully: "Bark of the birch, aria of the oriole, grit of the sand-grain," and then he slips in "In the first stanza I shall attempt to confiscate your essence/ And each time, you will slip through the noose of language,/ Having no owner." Words/language have power to deliver either/both – freedom/liberation, slavery/termination. "In the second stanza, I shall feel like an outsider in my body," because "Even the breaths heaving in my chest do not belong to me." Then he moves on in the last stanza to conclude: "Emptied of the need to own, I become the pit of a plum./ We color our language, Wallace Stevens wrote to Elsie Moll,/ And Truth, being white, becomes blotched in transmission." Like him, we will probably understand what he meant for a moment, "before the old words come flooding back."

In the impressively crafted title poem, "Instrumentality," Shankar speaks of "action's unstuttering arc, which is eloquence and muteness/ At once," turning "the bars of time into a provisional, shoreless field." "Was it corporeal act/ Before idea, disembodied before uttered as sound?" The answer lies in the last two lines of the poem: "before the invention/ Of the pump, there was one less way to understand the human heart." "There is considerable distance to travel from page to page," wrote E. Ethelbert Miller of Ravi Shankar's book. "Even in a poem like 'Home Together' Shankar detects a vacuum in love. From a men's room to a San Francisco sunrise, Shankar emerges with a pocketful of koans reflecting the wisdom hidden in the stars." The fifty-two poems in this collection indeed carry the reader over long distances in content and style. "Moving from place to place – Illinois, Florida, Monteverde, and Hell's Kitchen – a Spiderman of the imagination," in the words of Gray Jacobik, Shankar's poems dissolve into ideas, are inventive with language, "guided by a strong intelligence towards resolutions that are both surprising and apt."

In the poem "Exile," he writes about the need to belong while acknowledging the impossibility of ever achieving that: "There's nowhere else I'd rather not be than here,/ But here I am nonetheless, dispossessed,/ Though not quite, because I never owned/ What's been taken from me, never have belonged/ In and to a place, a people, a common history./ Even as a child when I was slurred in school –/ *Towel head, dot boy, camel jockey* –/ None of the abuse was precise: only Sikhs/ Wear turbans, widows and young girls bindis,/ Not one species of camel is indigenous to India..."

For someone who was born in Washington DC, and who conjures "sustenance from thin air" and admits to "the smell/ Of both camphor and meatloaf equally" repelling him, he also admits to feeling "extraneous." While acknowledging that "to be rooted/ Is the most important and least recognized need/ Of the human soul," his admission that "This alien feeling, honed in aloneness to an edge,/ Uses me to carve an appropriate mask each morning./ I'm still unsure what effect it has on my soul" is instantly recognised by exiles all over the world.

Jeet Thayil

Jeet Thayil was born in Kerala, India, and educated in Bombay, Hong Kong and New York, where he received an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College. His two previous collections of poetry include *Gemini* (two-poet volume, 1992) and *Apocalypso* (1997). Jeet now lives with his wife in New York City, where he works as an editor and writer. *English*, his second full-length collection, was published by Penguin Books India in 2003, and is also published by Rattapallax Press in New York. *English*, “is more than a language – it is a metaphor for divinity, and it holds a hard-won tenderness for all things living.” As Philip Nikolayev says: “Thayil’s *English* first spices a transcendent command of diverse registers of literary and colloquial speech with certain sprung local talk, but then melts all that into an infinitely focused and inventive, personal and emotional dialect, delivered in one of the most unforgettable voices of our time. He is the master of the knockout lyric punchline.”

In the faux prologue poem, “About the Author,” he introduces himself as having spent his youth under “the twin shadows of madness and avalanche.” He uses various registers of English as he writes in different voices: “Title for an imaginary sequel:/ Ishmael, Fishmeal, call me what you want,/ just call me, okay?” Readers of Agha Shahid Ali’s *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* cannot help making the connection though Jeet’s inspiration was Melville. In a ghazal called “Beyond English,” Agha Shahid writes: “No language is old – or young – beyond English./ So what of a common tongue beyond English?// I know some words for war, all of them, sharp,/ but the sharpest one is *jung* – beyond English!// ...// Baghdad is sacked and its citizens must watch/ prisoners (now in miniatures) hung beyond English.” While Agha Shahid is clearly referring to the 1991 Iraq war, Jeet is witnessing “The Mother of All Battles” in the heart of New York City: “I’m standing on Sixth, watching ruin, with/ a handful of rain and a prophecy,/ no idea in my head what next to do,/ say, be, or think, or anything, except// a taste of ash in the pulverized air,/ .../ ...just before the savage winter of/ 2001, everything settled/ at last, the star anise folded between/ my eyes saying, I am not of your race.” His poems convey multiple outsider perspectives with an insider’s poise.

“Moveable,” takes a look at events of 9/11 in a different perspective. “Alright I admit it, I am struggling, I am./ Naming the sacred is not a job you take/ lightly, not that is, if you want to live/ to any half-ripe sort of age.” He begins and then goes on to write: “Who would have guessed the disaster/ in store, or how rarely you would appear/ in the decade of denial? I am in my thirties,/ shirtless, a baby elephant’s head grows/ out of my shoulders, I carry a beer-/ belly and shades. My mother is bathing./ I am on guard duty, which I enjoy./ As my Asiatic time came to a close,/ you and I grew reckless...” Even Ganesha, the Hindu deity, remover of obstacles, is helpless at the precise hour of need. “On the airplane, we sat/ by the aisle – sharing drinks, magazines,/ maps to the world – measuring our journey/ in statute miles. At JFK, you scurried/ off for coffee. ‘Back in a mo’ you said,/ ‘and remember, yaar, the nail in your head/ is moveable. So move it, why don’t you?/ In the fall of 2001, I do” The poem ends with the line: “You, I am beginning to suspect, are not here.” One could have arrived at the same conclusion in “Meanwhile, Over in Orissa,” where “the Australian missionary/ and his two small sons/ who pray in a burning jeep./ Saffron men dance around them, their ash-lined foreheads/ tremble like crosses in the heat.”

In responding to a real event that took place in Orissa, where an Australian missionary and his two young sons were burnt to death, Jeet evokes strong images – the men in saffron and the crosses trembling in the heat – commenting on the schisms that dent India’s secular traditions.

In “September 10, 2001,” the poem’s protagonist says: “...each of us walks with the same/ impossible burden...” In this moving attempt to humanize someone involved in America’s 9/11, the protagonist is depicted as a Christ-like figure. While I cannot claim a superior understanding of people capable of such inflicting such tragedy on their fellow human beings, nor do I deny them their humanity, what bothers me is the basic premise of the poet. In my view, most human beings with intelligence and compassion (for we are being invited to imagine such a person in this poem) would not be able to commit an act that would result in the death of thousands of their fellow beings. Someone capable of such compassion, as depicted by the poem’s protagonist, cannot also inflict such immense devastation on others. It is only when we feel threatened, unjustly treated and without recourse to due process or totally alienated from others may we be able to commit such outrage, though that is not always the case. *Jihad* refers to the inner struggle to become a better Muslim, and taking the life of even one fellow human being including that of your own is not truly Islamic.

However, the general pace and flexibility, the seriousness, the humour of the narrator’s voice conveys a dramatic effect all its own. In Part II, Shapeshifter, in his “How To Be...” poems, for example, he plays with words and ideas about being a girl, a toad, a leaf, a horse, a crow, a bandicoot and a krait. In the title poem, “English,” he says: “I would be ruined still by syntax, the risk/ and worry of word committed to stone./ English fills my right hand, silence my left.” He talks too of “players on a grimmer no-man’s land/ between experience lived and written:/ you are etched in water, sculpted in wind,/ unless remade by the transfiguring hand.// All else is vanity and play, death-before-/and death-after-life. So pick your worm/ carefully, look for flavour and vitality.” As Bruce King writes about Jeet Thayil in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*: “The temptations of decadence along with the Bible are basic influences on his poetry, appearing side by side, hand in hand, rather than always as conflicting opposites.”

In “The Boredom Artist,” life says Jeet quoting Hobbes “is nasty, brutish and short./ “He left out boring, as grim a condition as any.” “Then there’s Chekhov, who, a moment ago, wrote,// *The earth is beautiful, as are all God’s creatures,/ only one thing is not beautiful, and that is us.*” He goes on to add how “all things break down to flesh, food and fear,” and ends with “Listen: nothing, not even love, is true.” One is inclined to agree with Vijay Seshadri when he says: “I revel in Jeet Thayil’s poetry. He seems to be one of the most contemporary writers I know, and contemporary precisely because he has such command of the poetic and historical past, and because his invented language has such depth, archaeological richness, and reality. The staying power here and the imaginative strength, which allows the soul to be forever balanced on the cusp of the inner and outer worlds, are nothing short of remarkable.”

Reetika Vazirani

Reetika Vazirani was born in India in 1962, and came to the USA when she was 6 years old with her family (“You fly across the world like mail in 1968,” Dedicated to

You) settling in Silver Spring, Maryland, where her father, an oral surgeon, was a faculty member and dean of students at the Howard University School of Dentistry. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1984 and received an M.F.A. from the University of Virginia where she was a Henry Hoyns Teaching Fellow. Recipient of a 2003 Anisfield–Wolf Book Award for her second collection, *World Hotel* (Copper Canyon, 2002), and a Barnard New Women Poets’ Prize for *White Elephants* (1996), she also received a “Discovery”/The Nation Award and a Pushcart Prize. Reetika was a writer-in-residence at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, and was part of the core faculty of the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshops. Later in 2003, she and her partner the Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet, Yusef Komunyakaa, were to join the faculty at Emory University in Atlanta. For such a promising life, the circumstances of her death and that of her son, Jehan Vazirani Komunyakaa, are tragic. Mother and son died on July 16, 2003. In the context of her father’s suicide in 1974, her own is all the more disturbing.

Though Reetika came to poetry when she was in her mid-20s, her devastating family background meant she had “no sense that there was a place for me in the world except in books.” As an immigrant, she thought she had very little else to distract her when her family first came to the US in 1968. She is reported to have said: “I needed to learn English, and I could spend my time on that as I did not ski, ice skate, roller skate, swim, or do much of anything else for that matter.” But she knew “that reading was the most magical way to spend my time. I would copy verbatim anything I wish I had written. And so in fact I would write it, copy it, and that is how I became a writer. I was a scribe first.” Later on, she attended Derek Walcott’s poetry seminars in Boston University, and also met Joseph Brodsky who was then at Mount Holyoke, and Seamus Heaney at Harvard. “I have no end of gratitude,” she said, “for my lucky circumstances, having studied with poets so squarely rooted in the English tradition, and who brought to it influences which are changing the language from their own old and varied traditions.”

In the epigraph to *World Hotel*, Reetika quotes Louis Bogan: “Women have no wilderness in them,/ They are provident instead,/ Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts/ To eat dusty bread.” The discontent in her heart she herself could not contain. In “It’s Me, I’m Not Home,” she writes: “and if your face nears me like a familiar map/ of homelessness: old world, new hemisphere/ (it’s me leave a message after the beep).” In many of her poems, she explores the question of belonging, of home and identity. For someone who moved twenty-two times in eighteen years after graduation, it is not surprising that places trigger her poetic imagination. Many immigrant writers come to exile and homelessness early in their careers. *World Hotel* appears to be a fitting title for someone whose work often revolves around a sense of being “unhomed,” as she refers to it. In “Aerogram Punjab,” she writes: “You’re good with maps; to find me/ first find in your atlas, your page,// not a tropic, a dashed line – / ... Find/ the page black. *Chota bhai*, tell me// where the world goes.” In “It’s a Young Country,” she warns “pack lightly we move fast.”

Reetika explores conflict – between mother and daughter, eastern and western cultures, colonizers and the colonized. “She’s truly an international, lyrical poet,” comments Sam Hamill, whose Copper Canyon Press published *World Hotel*. “She wrote about being in both cultures and between both cultures.” In “Letter to Jaipur,” she writes: “Rekha, teach them the distance/ between us is tiny – you see it/ when the

light pours into a room// dusted before the day rose./ Geography is airmail paper, that's all,/ lint slanting in the sun's column." She was a representative of the new world voice, dealing with issues of finding one's place or home, after immigration. "Inventing Maya," the opening section of *World Hotel*, is a sequence of poems loosely based on the life of her mother. By the time Reetika wrote these poems, her life was more secure than it had been in a long time; she was a mother by then and more successful as a poet.

In the final analysis, her sense of isolation perhaps never disappeared: "Where is that country nearest my blood?" ("No Complaints"). In "The Lover," she notes: "I disowned myself as some have by leaving." All the more reason to imagine that she finally found her own personal space to breathe in. In her essay, "The Art of Breathing," which also appeared in *The Way We Like Our Yoga* (Beacon Press, 2001), she wrote: "Poetry, like yoga, aims to heighten the awareness of breathing, so that there is space on the page, as between vertebrae, space for the heart and mind to explore and find poise in the unsaid." Such poise appears to have eluded her when she needed it most. In "Beads on a Mala," writing about her father's suicide, she records: "Out back I pulled weeds all day/ I lack the salt of the earth God/ what was the point of it." In "Seeta," she writes: "Thinking myself between cities,/ histories I could have lived,//...My life was not always a husband,/ the daughter in my head, or the lover/ I didn't keep...//...my life did not comprise me it was so brief."

The poem "Daughter-Mother-Maya-Seeta" offers hope: "To replay errors/ the revolving door of days/ Now it's over/ There's no one point thank god in the turning world/ I was always moving/ tired too but laughing/...Singly I flew/ and happiness was my giraffe/ in the face of Africa/ me among daughters/ and my son at work/ me pregnant with them/ taking in the glamour days/... We have made this world/ brown women/ laughing till we cleared the dining table." The poem ends with: "*Hello son this is your mother/ .../ I am proud to have borne you/ When you gather around me/ newness comes into the world.*" Tragically she denied herself such hope. In "Lullaby," she wrote: "I would not sing you to sleep/ I would press my lips to your ear/ and hope the terror in my heart stirs you." It is painful to read her lines in "Dedicated to You": "This poet loves her readers/ and you loved him who died before you were born."

Conclusion

The nature of exile, the role of language and poetry in defining a new personal identity are common among creative writers and thinkers, but more so among exiled poets. Both Meena Alexander and Reetika Vazirani grew up hoping that "lines scribbled in a secret notebook might one day enter the world." Both took "comfort in sentences" (Meena Alexander) and had "books to brace them in the havoc" (In "One Week In the Village," Reetika Vazirani refers to women who "had no books to brace them in the havoc"). Her experience of homelessness was transformed into poetry. And, as Vijay Seshadri puts it: "Art seems to be the only place we can liberate our many selves." Ravi Shankar delves into the effect that 'alienation' has on the human soul and Jeet Thayil uses the English language itself as a way of belonging. And, if as Meena Alexander says – "Home is where when I go, they let me in" – then these poets have indeed arrived. And poetry their "short incantation,/ my long way home" ("Blue Lotus," *Raw Silk*), though sometimes home may appear to be a strange, fragile, fractured, beautiful place.

Poetry is not only the way home; it is also a way of healing. "I'm always turning to poems," says Vijay Seshadri, "because they're the only way I can resolve all this stuff that's happening, which assaults one, which one cannot escape from. 'The Long Meadow' was, for me, a kind of release. I was feeling very desperate about the state of the world, and it really helped me, helped me get out of the state of despair I was in at that moment." Tragically, poetry could not sustain Reetika Vazirani, though her quest for love, identity, belonging through words and language is common among creative individuals. Reetika, at the age of 40, at the peak of her creative powers, took her own life along with that of her 2-year old son. There is no hint in her writing of such self-destruction. One can share Meena Alexander's confusion: "How can I know/ that in someone else's kitchen/ she will take a knife/ first to the child, then to herself?/ I cannot bear what she has done..." ("Opening the Shutters," *Raw Silk*). And, despite poetry's therapeutic powers, it is no panacea for a brain tumour; Agha Shahid Ali died of one in 2001.

While it has not been possible to examine the contribution of the emerging generation of poets such as Maya Khosla, Srikanth Reddy, Prageeta Sharma and Pireeni Sundaralingam among others, their collective voices is increasingly being recognised and continues to sustain the thriving contemporary American poetry scene. Maya Khosla, an environmental consultant and writer, received the 2003 Dorothy Brunsman Poetry award for her book, *Keel Bone*. Prageeta Sharma was the winner of the Fence Modern Poets Series, which led to the publication of her book, *The Opening Question* in 2004. Pireeni was named as "one of America's emerging writers" by the literary journal *Ploughshares* and her work is to feature in the International Museum of Women in 2005. Srikanth Reddy's book, *Facts for Visitors*, was published by the New California Poetry series (edited by Robert Haas, Calvin Bedient, and Brenda Hillman), whose official artistic positioning is to "present works that help define the emerging generation of poets -- books consistent with California's commitment to the Black Mountain tradition and reflective of California literary traditions -- cosmopolitan, experimental, open, and broad-ranging in their intellectual makeup." As the editors of *Catamaran* note: "*Catamaran* is an idea born of the tremendous creative energy among South Asians in North America. The list of 'newly discovered' writers grows." As they do, so will their impact on the American cultural milieu.

Books reviewed

Meena Alexander, *Raw Silk* (Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2004)

Meena Alexander, *Illiterate Heart* (Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2002)

Agha Shahid Ali, *Rooms are never finished* (W W Norton, 2003)

Agha Shahid Ali, *Call me Ishmael Tonight* (W W Norton, 2003)

Vijay Seshadri, *Long Meadow* ((Greywolf Press, 2004)

Ravi Shankar, *Instrumentality* (Cherry Grove Collections, 2004)

Jeet Thayil, *English* (Penguin, India & Rattapallax Press, 2004)

Reetika Vazirani, *World Hotel* – (Copper Canyon Press, 2002)

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