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The End of Canon

IT IS DIFFICULT AT ALL to think of “South Asian American” because the directionality of language is one way, yet in most Asian American writing one has yet to contend with the issue of transnationality or issues of polylingualism, even when the writer is anglophone. For most writers, the connection to the old country is still strong, its cultural traditions, its languages, its literary forms, and so “influence” is multidirectional. Whether or not those poems of South Asian forebears were written in English or not, they bear the traces of a practice of translation.

To me there was a one-two punch that interrupted the possibility of a twenty-first-century South Asian–American poetic canon that younger poets of the contemporary moment could draw from, and that was the death at the end of 2001 of Agha Shahid Ali from cancer and the death of Reetika Vazirani by suicide in the summer of 2003. Both poets were comparatively young—Ali was fifty-one, Vazirani was forty-two—but were establishing themselves as important poets. Ali had published one of the most important collections of the decade, *The Country Without a Post Office*, in 1996, and Vazirani had won the Bernard New Women’s Poetry Prize the following year, and her follow-up collection, *World Hotel*, had just been published by Copper Canyon the year before her death. Of course there were many other Indian Americans writing and publishing, but besides Meena Alexander, none had as high a profile in poetry circles or the critical acclaim of Ali and Vazirani. (Vijay Seshadri had not yet published his second volume nor won his Pulitzer Prize.)

I am tempted to rest it there and say that all the dynamic and exciting Indian American writers writing today spring from multiple lineages and did not or could not draw from the lineage interrupted by the premature deaths of Ali and Vazirani—Seshadri, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Bhanu Kapil, Tarfia Faizullah, Vandanna Khanna, Zubair Ahmed, Rajiv Mohabir, Soham Patel, and Amit Majmudar, to name only the very few that pop into my mind at the moment—and in fact, thankfully, there are too many to name and so I’d best stop naming.

But the truth of the matter is that two important posthumous collections were released by Ali, and Vazirani's dynamic last work was also collected in a book called *Radha Says*. For her part, Meena Alexander has continued to break new ground in poetry, publishing four new volumes in the last fifteen years as well as publishing an important collection of essays, *Poetics of Dislocation*.

Both Ali and Vazirani had a vexed relationship with the English language, with American idiom, and with canonicity, including how it manifested in received poetic forms. Ali's answer was to traffic deeply in form, turn it on its head (he had an obsession with Sapphic stanzas in English), invent it ("real" *ghazals* in English), and fine-tune to the point of virtuosity (he always claimed—as far as I know, he is correct—that no one else had written two canzones, and so on his deathbed he wrote a *third*, all the better to clinch his legacy, he only partly playfully claimed). Vazirani for her part was in the process of splintering poetic form, fracturing the line, abandoning syntax. After a fairly traditional first volume, her second began rupturing the rhythms of free verse to something new. Her third continued this work in shorter and even more visceral spiky-lined lyrics. Vazirani, as some may know, suffered from mental illness and died by suicide after killing her young son. The very dramatic circumstances of her death have blocked much consideration of her work.

Ali pushed the very limits of constraint in his posthumous collections *Rooms Are Never Finished* and *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. In the first he created long poetic sequences comprised of various poetic forms, explored (in an exquisite homage to the poetic inspiration of his friend and mentor James Merrill, as well as Merrill's poem "From the Cupola") the Ouija board as a compositional tool, and made his reverse journey from the rapturous West (captured in *The Nostalgist's Map of America*) back to Kashmir. His final volume was comprised completely of *ghazals*; the *ghazal* has a rich and ancient tradition as both an oral and a written form, and it traffics in the coupling of the extremity of its constraints and its deeply ingrained architecture of nonlinearity and abstraction. Unlike, for example, the sonnet, its architecture is geometric and grammatical rather than rhetorical. In what appears to be an extreme formalism on Ali's part and a fracturing of the same in Vazirani's last work we find two calculations of a relationship to form that only appear to diverge; more often than not they are heading toward each other and meet in the same and new place.

Meena Alexander's earliest critical work was on Dorothy Wordsworth and the Romanticism she embodied, but in her own poetry and fiction (her novels include *Nampally Road* and *Manhattan Music*) she writes of people unable to attain the Wordsworthian ideal. More often than not Alexander is interested in the places the lyric digresses, breaks from its intended course, and veers into unknown spaces. At least once—in the 1993 and 2003 editions of her memoir, *Fault Lines*—Alexander returns to and rewrites a book with an utterly new perspective, a move similar to the pattern of Marguerite Duras in her novels *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* (among others). Alexander certainly draws from the Western tradition of Dorothy Wordsworth, but she has equally drawn from very Indian traditions as widely varying as the historical canon of women Bhakhti poets and the very modern exemplars of Eunice De Souza and Adil Jussawalla. In her own critical writing collected in *Poetics of Dislocation*, Alexander invokes a varied and far-flung lineage that includes writers from a range of aesthetic commitments, including Yusef Komunyakaa, A. K. Ramunajan, and Myung Mi Kim. In spite of being perhaps the most visible and widely known South Asian American poet now, Alexander has not taken for herself a “tastemaking” or “canon-constructing” role of editing or curating or writing extensive critical books (there is only the one collection and another of more personal essays), though she does travel extensively to read and lecture.

There was another death, earlier, of a poet whom I believe would have been a major influence. Shreela Ray came to the United States from India to do graduate work at the University of Iowa and the University of Buffalo. Though an influential teacher (of Cornelius Eady, among others) and a promising young writer, she died in 1994, having published her one and only book, *Night Conversations with None Other*, in 1977. In her short and plainspoken lyrics, she evokes the poetry of De Souza, but with a deeper sense of earnestness and political awareness than is evinced by De Souza's often arch and ironic tone.

In a poem called “Jericho,” Ray writes:

How could the world be so goaded to unreason
so as to look upon its history as a tall Romance?

Jericho, Jericho how many of your
citizens lived to tell what happened
on that seventh day?

Who was the last among you
to see the face of Joshua shining
in the light of his God?

Although for asking this I'm buried,
there are other forms of death
that scare me more.

So it seems to me that contemporary Indian-American poets can rely on no "canon" at all, at least not in the way that that term is commonly understood. We exist within a plural present that does not seem bound to what might ordinarily have been thought of as the major writers of the last part of the twentieth century, the ones who would have created our "canon" as they continued their bodies of work well into the twenty-first century—Ali, Vazirani, and Ray. While Alexander declines in her work to create a definite or defined aesthetic perspective, Ray and Vazirani did not have the time. Ali certainly was tending in this direction in his editorial work and teaching when he died. Rather the very restlessness of this group, their quality of motion, has come to define what is available to younger Indian-American writers in terms of "lineage."

One has only to look at some of the writings available from a few of the writers I mentioned at the beginning of the essay to see the fruits of this varied and ranging sense of canon. The much-vaunted South Asian postindependence notion of "multiplicity" and the old and ingrained liberal concept of "cosmopolitanism," stemming from the nineteenth century artistic and literary cultures of Lahore and Delhi, are struggling for continued relevance in a culture riven by social and political differences, but these ideas—nearly old-fashioned on the subcontinent—are nonetheless the prevailing concepts among younger American writers who draw from these lineages. The new canons of South Asian American poetry—and they are being developed and written right now as we speak—are multidirectional—"hybrid," not in the sense of the joining of separate impulses but in the agricultural sense, a species heretofore unknown, something completely brand new.

Perhaps rather than "canons" we have "caroms"—they slide across an aesthetic map, hit another piece, and veer wildly off again in exquisite directions.