

On Both Sides Of The Gate

While some South Asians serve as the new literary gatekeepers, others offer radical voices from the margins

Some of the earliest migrants from South Asia to the Americas were workers imported in the 19th century from British India into the Caribbean basin. At the turn of the century Sikh laborers were brought to California and Washington to work on farms, railroads and lumber mills. They were often attacked by mobs. Those histories, including the 1914 *Komagatu Maru* incident where hundreds of Sikh migrants were denied entry into Canada, and later left to die at the hands of British authorities, have been largely forgotten. The Hart-Celler Act of 1965 drastically increased the number of South Asians allowed into the United States; many who came were from the educated classes and privileged castes of India and Pakistan, developing countries who could not accommodate all their own graduates. The United States, meanwhile, in a precarious, intellectual chess match with the Soviet Union, needed all the mind power it could get.

Many children of those more educated South Asian immigrants went on to attend elite Western schools and some, in part, because of an English-language tradition (a legacy of British colonialism) have ended up (along with South Asians who came before, and others from Canada, Britain and India itself) in a powerful literary coterie: editors of journals, publishing executives, influential journalists and high-powered academics. The political tastes of this community, while seemingly progressive, are often cautious and insipid; these gate-keepers support literary works which either match or lag slightly behind the temperature of the social moment, or self-congratulate as they highlight what they view as just ahead of their time. Ideas or writers not in vogue are diminished or ignored. Iconic African American artists who are already celebrated (Toni Morrison, James Baldwin) or used to index or mark political or cultural milestones get special attention; lesser-known or independently published African American writers who are seen as out-of-step or cultural dissenters get brickbats or the cold shoulder. Political developments in Africa and South Asia, and the writers from there who speak directly to them, get little screen time.

Parul Seghal, the top reviewer for *The New York Times* (and Columbia University graduate), has, in recent years, described a collection of Audre Lorde's writing edited by Roxanne Gay as "timely", "vital" and a "cause for celebration", and a biography of Lorraine Hansberry as "loving, lavishly detailed." A new collection of poems by Danez Smith "produces shocking new vibrations," and Seghal finds the 2019 novel by million-selling, Man Booker-prize winning Colson Whitehead, "ascendent" and "rigorous controlled." However a memoir by the less-well known and formerly incarcerated Mitchell Jackson exhibits "exuberant maximalism," and is called an "exercise in misdirection", filled with "stale writing."

A smaller example: Harvard University graduate Nawal Arjini reviews books at *The Nation*, where new works by popular, contemporary African American writers like Daphne Brooks, Saeed Jones, Colson Whitehead, and Claudia Rankine are all discussed warmly and breezily. A

poetry collection by Hanif Abdurraquib is “a consideration of what it means to be a music fan”, while a sociological text by Eve Ewing is “illuminating”. Both are relatively young media stars (Ewing is a “Twitter star”). However Ishmael Reed’s play *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda* is back-handedly described as “extremely earnest”; while the 1992 novel, *Negrophobia*, by sexagarian performance artist Darius James is “provocative and slapstick.”

The family of Vijay Sheshdari, the Columbia-educated, Pulitzer-winning poet and Sarah Lawrence professor, came to the U.S. in the 1950s, before the Hart-Cellar Act. He is the first poetry editor at *The Paris Review* of South Asian origin. “There weren’t Indian communities then that I could use as a means by which to assimilate into the larger culture,” he said in a 2020 interview. Although he says he “got into poetry because of anti-Vietnam War politics,” when asked about his commitment to politically-themed poems he equivocates; he hasn’t “found examples of it that really satisfy.” One of two he does cite is a poem by Nicole Sealey about the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown. “Sealey wasn’t talking about George Floyd,” he says. Perhaps Sheshdari’s obliqueness can be explained by a line from Parul Seghal’s critical 2017 *Atlantic* review of the Arundhati Roy novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: “To so confidently believe oneself to be on the right side of history is risky--especially for a writer.”

Numerous other South Asians--most liberal, some conservative--crowd the rungs of the literary world. Yet even some forward-looking, serious critics of Empire can find themselves weaponized by New York literary circles in battles far outside their expertise. In 2015, Pankraj Mishra, an Indian writer whose specialty includes an intellectual history of decolonization in the Third World, accepted a *New York Times* assignment where he rehashed an argument James Baldwin had with Richard Wright. *The Times*, with its establishment ties and its history of complicity with power, is not an appropriate place to hold a discussion about the disagreements between two radical African American writers of the 20th century. Mishra should have declined the offer.

Widening the lens, however, allows us to consider an alternate tradition of writing by South Asians in the Americas. A few examples: the Indian-born journalist H.G. Mudgal was an editor for Marcus Garvey’s Harlem-based paper *The Negro World*. Frantz Fanon, whose experiences in colonial Martinique later influenced Che Guevara and Stephen Biko, was descended not only from Africans but also from indentured Tamil workers. And, in the 1990s, the Bengali-Canadian writer and intellectual Himani Banerji published several important books, including the ground-breaking *Returning The Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism, and Politics*, with Sister Vision Press, the first black and women-run publishing house in Toronto.

These days, *The Margins*, a publication of the Asian American Writers Workshop (aaww.org), regularly features the voices of left-of-center South Asian American writers not beholden to the literary world. *Pree* (preelit.com), a new magazine out of Kingston, Jamaica, publishes writers and poets--including many Indo-Caribbeans--from across the West Indies. The New York-based online magazine, *Africa Is A Country*, also offers a platform which includes Indian writers from

the African continent, including Indo-South Africans. And, of course, there is *Konch*, which regularly features writers of all backgrounds who are shut out from the mainstream outlets.

Let's listen to the voices outside the gates.

A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SOME CONTEMPORARY WRITERS OF SOUTH ASIAN DESCENT

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Fiction

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Shaljia Patel is from Kenya; Rajiv Mohabir is from Guyana; M.G. Vassanji is Tanzanian-Canadian; Deepak Unnikrishan, Sri Lankan. What all of the writers listed above share is an ability to bring together common human experiences and little-known histories in an arresting and clarifying manner. Their work survives without the attention of the mainstream United States literary establishment.