

Writing the City: In Conversation with Pooja Nansi

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A well-known persona on the Singaporean literary arts scene, Pooja Nansi's poetic work draws inspiration from a myriad of artistic forms, such as hip-hop, song lyrics and spoken word. Born to Gujarati parents in 1981, Pooja's role as a poet, musician and literary advocate encompass issues as wide-ranging as ethnic and cultural diversity, community development and the showcasing of marginalised or minority voices. A graduate of the National University of

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Singapore, Pooja Nansi was a teacher for many years at Temasek Junior College until becoming a full-time writer; in 2015 she was writer-in-residence at Nanyang Technical University, where she continues to teach creative writing on a part-time basis.

Writing predominantly in free verse, Pooja's poetry mixes lyrical form with hard-hitting social critique. Having experimented with spoken word through the slam poetry scene at popular Singaporean venues like Zouk, Pooja published her first collection *Stiletto Scars* (Word Forward, 2007) about identity, belonging and womanhood, fusing together her multidisciplinary interests in poetry, music and performance.

In 2009, she toured the UK with the British Council to discuss issues surrounding freedom of speech as part of the global Speechless project, whilst she also set up a performance duo called *Mango Dollies* with Anjana Srinivasan; her second collection, *Love is an Empty Barstool* (Math Paper Press, 2013), is largely a product of her musical compilations with Srinivasan. 2014 saw Pooja rapidly follow up her individual collection with further publication successes – a co-edited poetry volume entitled *SingPoWriMo: The Anthology* (2014), and a co-authored poetry teaching resource called *Local Anaesthetic: A Painless Approach to Singaporean Poetry* (Ethos Books, 2014). Pooja has also travelled extensively across the region: in 2015, she featured at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival and the Goa Literary and Arts Festival, and in 2016 she attended the Queensland Poetry Festival in Australia, where she performed her commissioned one-woman show *You Are Here* (Checkpoint Theatre). For these many and varied contributions to the Singapore poetic community, Pooja received the National Arts Council Young Artist Award 2016.

More recently, Pooja's roles as poet, performer, educator and advocate combine popular appeal with the ability to connect the disparate performance and page-based poetic communities in Singapore and abroad. From 2013 to 2018, she ran *Speakeasy*, a monthly spoken word and poetry event at Artistry Café, featuring the full panoply of Singapore's literary talents, as well as international writers from places as far afield as Botswana. She has become a strident literary advocate for young Singaporeans, via her role as the first Youth Poet Ambassador in 2017, while she continues to operate at the intersection between music and theatre with her first performance of *Thick Beats for Good Girls* with Jessica Bellamy for Checkpoint Theatre. In late 2018, along with Shridar Mani, Pooja helped to curate *Other Tongues*, Singapore's first minority voices festival which brought many emerging talents from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds into conversation with established authors like Alfian Sa'at and Haresh Sharma. More recently, as the Director for the 2019 Singapore Writer's Festival, Pooja is in the process of curating a ten-day programme of events in concert with sponsors, contributors and guest writers from the local and international community.

This interview was conducted by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho and Jason Eng Hun Lee as part of a university sponsored project on the development of Anglophone poetics and the evolving Asian city experience in Hong Kong and Singapore. The project explores how these cities share a similar yet also a quite distinct colonial history, and how their local poetic communities have sought to maintain their cultural identity in the face of the encroachment of neoliberal capitalism and the rapidly changing economic and demographic pressures that globalisation brings. Twenty poets across the Singapore and Hong Kong Anglophone community were interviewed for their opinions on the changing demographics of their cities, and its impact on their own creative writing processes.

In the following interview, we discuss Pooja's mixed cultural background and her creative inspirations, and her attempts to deal with the multiple and conflicting definitions of "Asianness" from both a Singaporean and Indian context. We also gather Pooja's thoughts on Singapore's changing cityscape and the encroachment of global capital, her own creative and community-based responses to these challenges, and her desire to question what economic progress means by continually interrogating and writing back to the official narrative of the city. We are delighted to share Pooja Nansi's observations in this interview with *Asiatic*.

Do you remember what inspired you to write your first poems? Can you list some important moments in your early experiences as a poet?

I was bored in a Math class and made up a poem about my teacher. It wasn't very kind, but it was true. Subsequently, I wrote a lot about boys I had crushes on. I would say a couple of important moments were going to my first poetry slam because that's when I first realised poetry could be shared and immediate. Also, having my first book published in 2007 opened up many doors for me.

What about your background and occupation? What influence, if any, do they have on your writing as an English language poet?

My highest qualification is a postgraduate diploma in Education, while my undergraduate degree is a Bachelor of Arts with a Major in English Literature and Philosophy. My degree in English Literature and having worked as an English Literature teacher for a decade meant that I was constantly looking at writing, unpacking it and that I think helped me navigate my own writing, both in ways of knowing what I didn't enjoy and what I wanted to aspire to.

While I don't write in any other language, I have Hindi, Gujarati and Malay deeply ingrained in my psyche and romanised phrases appear sometimes in my work, sometimes untranslated and unexplained because I don't think they can be

adequately translated. I listen to songs sometimes, particularly old Hindi songs, because they relocate me to Bombay, my other home, where my father grew up.

Who would you cite as your main literary influences?

Kim Addonizio, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Pablo Neruda, Anne Sexton, old Hindi Songs, Yehuda Amichai, Charles Bukowski, Cyril Wong, Alvin Pang and Tupac Shakur. These are the various musical and literary influences that I have grown up with and they appear in some shape of influence or subject matter often in my work.

How useful is poetry as a medium for expressing your personal experiences? How does it compare to the other genres you write in?

Poetry has served me beautifully as a medium in which to sort out my conflicts and tensions. I also write prose but realise my prose even at its most stripped down has elements of a poem.

Let's talk about your role as a Singaporean poet. How long have you lived in Singapore, and what motivates you to write about your home city?

I've spent all my life in Singapore, since I was one and a half years old, so that makes it thirty-three years. I think I write about Singapore tangentially, and when I do write about it, I write about how I am trying to figure out how I belong as a woman of ethnic minority. Don't get me wrong, I love this city, but our relationship is complicated. I think my one woman show *You Are Here* that is not published yet is probably the best example of me writing about my city, but early poems from *Stiletto Scars* like "A Rant" and "Listening to Mukesh" do that, as well as new unpublished pieces like "Too Many."

Do you find living in a city nurturing or stifling to your creativity? What aspects of the city are you most drawn to?

I find living in a city absolutely nurturing. Writing for me is not just the act of putting words to paper. It's also about the process around it, the things you read, see, hear, encounter that finally end up in a thought that becomes the writing. So I need my environment to be in constant movement. I love narrations of the city that delve into specifics of a personal experience but also include really textured details like objects, surfaces, sounds, etc. I also think my contribution to the narrative of my city would be an alternate narrative to the expected one.

I am most fascinated by the xenophobia that has grown in sentiment in the city, which is doubly interesting because we are literally a city of migrants, except

that some of us are more comfortable in our placement in the city and never have to examine or question our roots. I am also interested in the narratives the government has constructed around the ideas of racial harmony and our multiracial heritage.

On that last point, about Singapore's multiracial heritage, would you say that Singapore's colonial history has any bearing on your writing? Are there any other mainstream cultural representations that you have challenged in your poetry?

A colonial past is a necessary thing to confront when writing about any place that has suffered colonialism, although I feel mostly as though I am writing against accepted mainstream representations of the South Asian ethnic minority in this city. I think my exploration of being an ethnic minority is currently scratching at the surface. I am struggling to find a writer of Indian ethnicity who came before me and directly deals with sexuality and racial identity in the ways I want to see.

What is your reaction towards the expression "the Asian experience?" Have you explored notions of a collective Asian identity in your poetry?

I am a Gujarati woman, a child of migrants living in a city that is a Chinese majority. It's the only city that makes me feel like I am in a second skin but I am also acutely aware of being on the margins. I am constantly trying to figure out where someone like me whose "Singaporeanness" is constantly questioned fits into the narrative of "Asian Identity." I am often surprised by Chinese writers who rail against stereotypical depictions of "Asianness" by Western media while they are unable to see how they themselves stereotype ethnic minorities in their own backyard. I also think about notions of "Indianness" and how a really complex identity is reduced to a set of stereotypes in our social studies textbooks in our Primary School classrooms

What about globalisation? What impact has it made on Singapore overall?

I would say Singapore has always been positioned globally but more and more in the name of progress, we lost heritage sites, or things that genuinely create a sense of Singaporeanness in order to make space for shinier buildings or faster roads.

And how do you think Singapore might change in the future?

I don't think I know to be honest, but I do think we deal with Art as a Utilitarian experience and that's going to come back to bite us in the ass. I also think as we work ceaselessly and carelessly toward progress, we are going to lose our very heart and soul.

Let's move to a more creative question. If the city could answer your questions, what would you ask it? What would your city ask you in return?

I would ask why it is so afraid of difference and failure? Why it needs to be so mechanically perfect all the time. I think it would ask me why I'm not grateful for all it has given me and why that isn't enough.

How important is it to be published in Singapore? Is there a poetry community in Singapore that you actively participate in?

This isn't a simple yes or no question. There are different poetic communities. Some of whom I feel more connected to than others. I have been published outside of Singapore and it's interesting to look beyond and expand my horizons.

And finally, what impact has the National Arts Council's funding had on the development of Singapore's poetic community?

The Arts in Singapore is very generously funded and this has led to a burgeoning of writing but also a sort of dependence on public funding. I suppose English writers in Singapore get more readership and recognition in general than writers in the other official languages because readership for English is more widespread.

Works Cited

Nansi, Pooja. *Stiletto Scars*. Singapore: Word Forward Ltd, 2007.