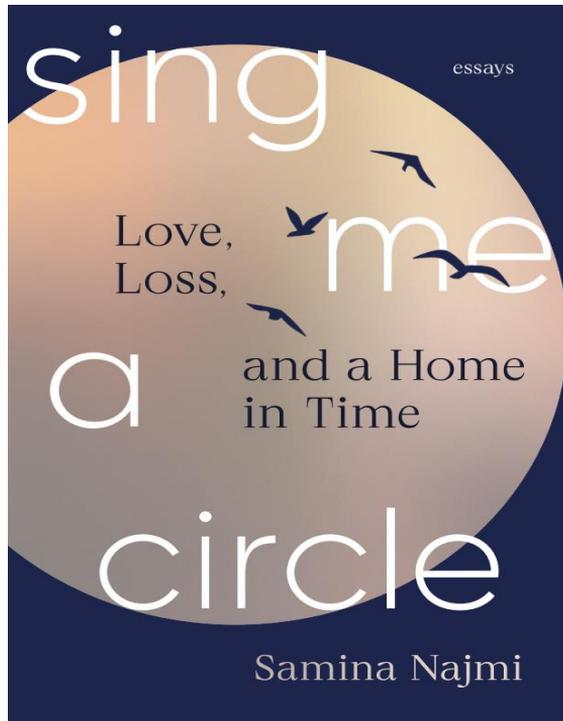


Samina Najmi. *Sing Me a Circle: Love, Loss and a Home in Time*. Minneapolis: Trio House Press, 336 pp. ISBN-10: 1949487482.



In his foundational work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall observes that cultural identity is not fixed and nor is it an inherent trait. He regards “identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constitute within, not outside, representation” (222). This framework is particularly useful when reading work focuses on memory such as a memoir, which is a genre in which the act of narrating becomes inseparable from constructing the self. Samina Najmi, a professor of multiethnic American literature at California State University, exemplifies this approach in her award-winning memoir *Sing Me a Circle: Love, Loss and a Home in Time* (2024) which won the Aurora Polaris Award in 2024. Through 55 personal and lyrical entries, Najmi presents moments of her life as a Pakistani Muslim woman in the United States. In her reflections, Najmi weaves together her experiences growing up in Karachi and London, and her relocation to the United States. She highlights her experiences of diaspora, ambivalence with identity, and cultural dislocation. At the same time, Najmi presents stories that interrogate, among other things, ideas of memory, womanhood, migration, family, and grief.

It is with this grief that Najmi opens the first part of her memoir, introducing to the reader three brief narrations of loss. In “Triptych,” she presents scenes that succinctly illustrate the fragility and vulnerability of life. It is a work of three connected panels and serves as a metaphor for this arrangement in which each vignette functions like a panel that frames a distinct memory of loss in the author’s life. The first vignette involves the death of kittens who sought shelter in the engine of a car. This is followed by a story about the tragic suicide of her cousin Rubina, whilst the third involves a bird flying into a fan in a desperate attempt to evade people. All of these deaths are associated with fans, whether it is a ceiling fan or a fan belt in a car engine. These unremarkable everyday items are now seared into the very fibres of her memory. They have become triggers that bring back memories of Rubina and her death. Rubina appears in the memoir in pieces and fragments. Most notably in the poem “I Remember You in Fragments,” her life seems scattered in fleeting moments which are often captured in items such as family photographs. Najmi remembers an early memory of herself holding the baby Rubina in her arms, a moment captured in a Kodak photograph. Memory functions as a bridge that links distance and time. These fragments link Najmi’s identity not only to the people she has lost, but also her fears of cultural and linguistic loss. She responds to these fears by actively preserving her heritage for her children, especially through teaching them Urdu.

Najmi’s stories highlight the relationship between identity and memory, and how they are central to the narrative of many migrant families because often displacement necessitates holding on to memory as a means of cultural anchoring and orientation. In “Amma” (mother), for example, the author reflects upon the importance of her grandmother in her life, demonstrating how grandmothers often play the role of cultural repositories for migrant families by imparting to their grandchildren fables and folktales of their culture of origin. Through some of Amma’s stories, Najmi accesses intergenerational narratives that help preserve family history and also reinforce Hall’s claim that identity is formed through storytelling. Amma’s own engagement with her writing underscores this ongoing nature of identity as she would continue to write and rewrite her stories many times over.

A particularly reflective piece, “The Straight Lines of a Circle” subverts the assumption that our lives unfold and continue in a linear manner. Najmi thinks about the human tendency to look at our life as linear at the micro level. Yet, she contends that should we look at our lives from a macro perspective, we realise that life is in fact a circle that has no beginnings and endings. This idea not only demonstrates the structure of the memoir but also underscores the nature

of memory and time. Time, whilst unforgiving, is perceived as non-linear and moves forwards and backwards, thus contributing to the circularity of life. The circle, hence, becomes a metaphor for life and memory as it loops, returns, and repeats. Certain events tend to echo across time and repeats itself in the most ironic of ways. For example, Najmi realises that her life is not so different from that of her parents who had migrated to the United Kingdom many decades ago. This treatment of time foregrounds that time is emotional rather than chronological, thus highlighting what Homi K. Bhabha calls Disruptive Temporality. Disruptive Temporality, often experienced by postcolonial subjects, is characterised by the experience of time as non-linear and where the past and present collide. In other words, the past is always emotionally present, as exemplified in Najmi's vivid, rich, and intimate narratives. The past never really recedes or disappears, but it actively shapes one's present. This is important as many of the stories in the collection deal with her sense of belonging, especially when navigating her life in the United States as a Muslim woman.

The title of the book, *Sing Me a Circle*, showcases how numerous experiences of love, loss, and displacement shape one's identity. It is a complex and multilayered memoir rich with imagery and deeply personal reflection. The title can also be interpreted as using circularity to find comfort and feel a sense of homecoming. I believe that Najmi's skill lies in her delicate and emotional narrativization which is masterclass of storytelling where personal moments, no matter how brief, are carefully and intentionally layered. All these make *Sing Me a Circle* a complex, compelling, multifaceted, and complex memoir. Ultimately, Najmi's work joins a larger tradition of the South Asian diaspora which uses storytelling not only to construct and reconstruct the self, but also to reclaim it through representation.

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