

Saleem Peeradina, *Slow Dance*. Roseville, Michigan: Ridgeway Press, 2010. 91 pp. ISBN 156-439-133-7.

Once again, Saleem Peeradina has written an accessible and lovely volume of poetry. *Slow Dance* draws from life in the forms of music, social issues, and the sense of a bifurcated self, of being the “other.”

Peeradina has been writing poetry since his graduate school days in Bombay. In 1968, while still a student, he edited and compiled *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*, an anthology that is still used in classrooms in parts of Asia. In the anthology’s introduction, he “set a few ground rules, where none [previously] existed” (Personal Interview). Peeradina took a swipe at laudatory, self-congratulatory poetry and set the bar higher for post-World War II Indian poets. He unapologetically says that his was “the first worthwhile anthology of Indian Poetry in English” (Personal Interview). As a result, a new day dawned for the poets of quality in India.

Many years after editing the anthology, Peeradina has not wavered from this quality of excellence. Rajini Srikanth, who wrote the back cover blurb for *Slow Dance*, calls the poetry in this new book “a poetry of fusion,” the fusion referring to the melding of poetry with “philosophy... anguish, yearning, longing....”

In 1988, Peeradina settled in Michigan, USA, with his wife and their two daughters. He has been a Professor of English at Siena Heights University in Adrian, Michigan for over twenty years. At Siena, he has influenced many aspiring poets.

Slow Dance is a book written by a mature poet, but certainly not by a man who is stagnated or remorseful. While older musicians and poets sometimes languish in mediocrity, Peeradina keeps growing. His vision is sharper than ever, and his sardonic poems, such as “Split Frame,” implore us to look at this world and its tragic dichotomies.

In the case of “Split Frame,” we are taken to a “landscape of human rubble” where a malnourished “woman sits like an upright bag /Of bones./ She has the head of a fly” (9). Here the poet enjambes the last line of the first stanza – “The woman is transfixed” – with the first three lines of the second stanza: “Staring at a T.V. screen/ Featuring a contest to see who can eat/ The most hamburgers” (9). This enjambment, a trademark device of Peeradina’s, has the effect of carrying us forward to the gorging contest, while pulling us backward to the fly-headed woman. Poet/professor Edward Hirsch notes that enjambment creates a “hovering sensation” (279), which is exactly what happens here. The pairing of extreme opposites is horrifying: While a woman

and her baby starve on one continent, people binge on another. For me, this “Split Frame” is a defining moment in this poignant book.

I am drawn to a comment in Edward Hirsch’s book, *How to Read a Poem*. I kept coming back to it while reading many of Peeradina’s new poems. Hirsch suggests that we find different moments, moods, and timeframes to read the same poem. He implies that the poem changes through the different environments that the reader creates.

Indeed, depending upon the reader’s location and state of mind, a poem in this volume resonates differently. For instance, the title poem, “Slow Dance,” feels foreboding in the pre-dawn darkness. As I sit on my balcony before sunrise, I do not feel that “This night blooming into day is enough” (89). But later in the day, while reading the same poem in my living room, I understand that a “Slow Dance” toward old age is perfectly acceptable. In this poem, Peeradina says of the young, “To them I bequeath my fire.” In the security of daylight, this feels like a natural passage, and the poet’s youth is not mourned. But read this under Hirsch’s “single lamp” (1), and you, the reader, may feel some regret for lost youth. As a side note, Peeradina has *not* lost his “fire.”

Peeradina divides this volume into three sections: poems belonging to “Landscapes,” “Songs” and “Slow Dance.” “Exhibit A” describes a pastoral landscape which, depending on one’s mood, begins to feel like Pieter Bruegel meets Thomas Kinkaid. This painting of “cliffs wrapped in mist... lurking beasts/ Declawed, no sign of scuffle” is purchased, and “We buy this fiction/ And make out of it a window on our wall” (1), presumably ignoring the *real* view out of a *real* window. Other landscape poems are about ideological landscapes. “Reflections on the Other,” for instance, is a poem of the “singularity” of the outsider (12). And embedded within it is the founding myth of America, the persistence of prejudice, and the worldwide legacy of colonialism.

Peeradina carries this theme of outsider to other poems. Of the condition that feels to me like an actual, *physical* enjambment, he says, “Every book I publish, every reading tour I undertake, reawakens that past, and while I’m there [India], I feel both native and an outsider to myself. This is what I tried to capture in ‘Song of the Makeover,’ more of the psychological rift than the split public roles I play” (Personal Interview): “What good is this place, this other world,/Where the heart is ill at ease,” he writes of the struggle between two disparate worlds (55). As for settling in America, he says in the poem, “Here I am leading/ Someone else’s life” (56).

International travel, the process of getting to one’s destination, brings about the worst clashes in cultures. Profiling is rampant, and “the other” is often searched more scrupulously. “Inside Story” takes us through Canadian customs and the “marauding hands” of the customs employee, “Plunging past/ underwear” during a carry-on bag search. Despite the blatant and insolent

invasion of privacy, Peeradina plays with his reader, like a cat toying with a mouse. Once the woman's hands are in the "toilet bag," "she rattles, pokes, then casts it aside, belly-up,/ like the day's unusable catch" and invades until "... my guts [are] spilling/ all over the table!" (74-75). Yet this poem is witty enough that we know the voice of the poem does not come from a whiner. Peeradina *never* feels sorry for himself, and while some of his poems reflect the observation of things that are not right – and even abusive – he does not wallow in self-pity.

In fact, while Peeradina admits to incorporating life experiences into his poetry, he has admonished students and others for assuming that the poet speaks only to his own experience and not to a more expansive one:

Settling for the *personal*, limits the universal aspects of the poems. It is hazardous to imagine that everything a poet writes is equal to the experiences a poet has. A lot of these poems have a subjective connection.... The poet is the mouthpiece for the articulation of yearnings that we share, but dare not utter, let alone act upon. (Personal Interview)

In the "Songs" section, Peeradina creates what he calls "a fusion of form and lyrical practices" (41). He starts with two lines from Hindi movie songs, translates them into English, breaks free, and "stakes out a new territory" (41). This is where the lyric becomes the poet's own. Through these "Songs," Peeradina writes of social issues, such as an arranged marriage in "Song of the Mislead": "Finally/ you agreed to pick one/ Out of a string of strangers/ They kept putting on display" (45). In "Ode to Her Legs," Peeradina corners the male readers and says, "Okay, before your eyes start glinting/And your mouth registers the curve of a smile,/Let me tell you it's not that kind of poem..." (58). Rather, it is an ode to the hard-working, unrewarded woman, "Her feet are still plodding. When there is no one else/ To count on, she unfailingly answers/ Your call." Here the poet lures the reader into the real thing he wants to say, by first courting through sexual innuendo, before making the point to those who rely on the slaving woman, that "when those legs fail,/ You will have nothing to stand on" (58).

Slow Dance contains some of Peeradina's best poetry, and I do not say this carelessly. These poems will not gather dust in my home. This is a touching, heart-rending, and praiseworthy collection.

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Works Cited

- Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999.
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- . Personal interview. 16 Sept 2010.