

Interviews

A Living Legacy:
An Interview with Saleem Peeradina
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Abstract: In this interview, Indian-American poet Saleem Peeradina discusses the effects of immigration on his writing, his writing process, the relationship between his academic and literary work, his advice to younger poets, the challenges faced by poets writing in the diaspora, and other topics.

Keywords: diasporic Indian poetry, Saleem Peeradina, multicultural poetry, interview

Saleem Peeradina is the author of *Group Portrait*, *First Offence*, *Meditations on Desire*, *Slow Dance*, and the memoir *The Ocean in My Yard*. He participated in the revolution in the Indian poetry scene in Bombay in the late 1970s and early 1980s that brought a sea change to Indian poetry written in English. After receiving an M.A. in English Literature from Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, he taught at Sophia College in Bombay, where he spearheaded the creative writing program in 1980 as part of the college's innovative offering, the Open Classroom. He moved to Michigan in 1988, and in 1989 he began teaching in the English Department at Siena Heights University, Michigan.

Peeradina, a contemporary of such stalwarts as Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das, captures in his work the post-independence modernization movement in Indian poetry that accompanied the nation's journey of decolonization. This interview offers a glimpse into this phenomenon of modernization and the effect of immigration on his poetry.

The interview took place via email in the spring of 2014.¹

You wrote Slow Dance, The Ocean in My Yard, and Meditations on Desire during your years in Michigan. Can you describe for us the effect immigrating to the United States had on your writing, your family life, and your feelings about location?

Peeradina: In *Group Portrait*, I had begun the cycle of poems “Family Mirror” while I was in Bombay. Then, in 1988, came the move to Michigan initially for one year, but which turned into an extended period. This change of locale set into motion so many new challenges, as if I was hit by a shower of meteors. And it called for rapid responses on two levels—real life, every day in real time, and the measured, reflective response expressed in writing. Out of the latter came “Sisters,” “Speculations,” “Michigan Basement I,” and “Michigan Basement II” (*Group Portrait*). You can tell that the topography of domestic space as described in the basement poems captures a new psychological dynamic. The manuscript was accepted by Oxford University Press in India and the book was published in 1992.

Next came the series of poems that started as a game to keep my mind from being totally ravaged by junk TV on the nights that I had to stay up late to pick up my wife from work at eleven p.m. As the short poems rolled out, I got drawn into the enterprise in a serious, methodical fashion. There were cues from classical and medieval devotional poetry marvelously rendered in English translation by A. K. Ramanujan that were guiding my hand. Into this were blended stylistic and romantic flourishes from the lyrics of Urdu writers working in Hindi cinema whose songs I grew up singing. And quite felicitously, the discovery of Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*. The total added up to sixty-four numbered sections, never longer than a page each. While they were finished in the early 1990s, and parts of the cycle were published in literary journals, *Meditations on Desire* did not come out as a book until 2003.

When I say ideological challenges, I mean those manifesting themselves in cultural differences as a result of geographical dislocation. Even when one’s habitat is stable, most of us operate out of conflicting desires, contradictory pulls. But the writer is especially prone to these pressures,

which are intensified when a shift in location occurs. For me, writing poetry is like doing ethnography: as a poet and social commentator, I am always in the field. The gestures, products, and systems of culture are my raw material, the vital signs of life. I am simultaneously witness, participant, and scribe. I am never off-duty.

And while the altered states of being in a new place cause disturbances, even turmoil of a sort, for the writer it presents rich new resources. Through the heartache and spiritual disquiet, the central questions were always: How to make oneself at home? How to belong to the new community? How to understand American ways? How to give meaning to our lives?

What came out as a result of my observations, reading, and reflections was a long essay entitled “Giving, Withholding, and Meeting Midway: A Poet’s Ethnography.” This was published in 1998, in an anthropology textbook edited by Philip R. DeVita and James D. Armstrong in the second edition of their collection by various hands. It was called *Distant Mirrors: America as a Foreign Culture*.

Though not common knowledge, my essay writing has been an important part of my writing life. In Bombay, this had been central since I was a graduate student. In addition, I wrote reviews of movies, theatre, art, and of course books. I conducted interviews for print publications and later for a nascent television channel. Poetry came alongside, so I was going full throttle on several fronts.

Can you say more about some of the unexpected events that spurred your writing?

Peeradina: The writing of *The Ocean in My Yard* came about in fortuitous circumstances. The event that precipitated the undertaking of this project was the death of my father in 1990. It was the end of a generational era. And while I had made my physical separation from him when I came to the US to attend graduate school at Wake Forest in 1971 and then again in 1988 when I came to Michigan as an exchange scholar, the psychological ties were not sundered until his passing away.

This was a finality that demanded an accounting of our relationship. And since this could not be accomplished in isolation but was necessarily connected with the rest of the extended family, the story of my growing up, and the corner of Bombay where it started, I was seized by a compulsion that would not rest until I had recorded it. Looking back and sizing up my past became an urgent call.

The geographical distance was the ideal space to be situated in to give my story the objectivity that it needed. I had always worked from the deep well of memory, and this time, the reconstruction of the events of my life took shape with passion and intensity. But to make it more than the telling of an individual life, I had to frame it as a tribute to my family and a love story of the suburb, the city, and the subcontinent that nurtured me.

I took the summer of 1993 off and worked steadily all day. I had a rough draft of the major portion of my narrative, and the following year I rewrote/revised it, minus one chapter that remained stubbornly out of reach. I had to devise a strategy—writing in the third person—which finally worked. And this is explained at the beginning of that chapter. I do not know if the memoir would have been written had I been *in* Bombay, or if it would have come out differently. One thing was sure: I had to make conscious choices regarding who my reader was going to be. It was the reader in India and the reader out here, as well as the reader in the global marketplace. That meant making particular decisions about how to reach multiple audiences in the language they could grasp without explaining too much. It involved the careful use of Indian terminology in the English I grew up speaking and using for literary communication. These assumptions would have been different if I had been situated, say, in Iceland or South Africa or Australia.

Your early poems are marked by irony, description of place, and realism that were characteristic of the kind of poetry that came out in the 1970s that attempted to decolonize itself from Anglophone traditions. The poems in Slow Dance continue that early trend but seem to evolve in a slightly different direction. The poems are not compelled solely by domestic or particular life experiences. For example, the Hiroshige pieces take the reader outside this

arena. Did change of place push you in new directions in your poetry? To what extent were you influenced by the experimentation in poetry around you in the States?

Peeradina: By new resources, I meant, as I have already identified, the new environment, which provided new subject matter and ideas. I have stated elsewhere that truly getting to know and understanding a new place takes a long time: To feel a landscape in your bones takes years of deep contact with it.

You have to be nurtured in that soil: weather its storms, absorb its minerals, be penetrated by its fecundity. So it took a dozen or more years before I could establish a “familiarity” with my surroundings, its language, and its conventions.

These are some of the poems that resulted: “Windy Day Chime,” “Cliché Nation,” “Today’s Special,” “Split Frame,” “Protocol,” “Seasonal,” “The Rite Stuff,” “For the Birds,” and “Song of the Make-over.” Correspondingly, out of the old familiar landscape came “The Old Neighborhood,” “Mumbai in Thirteen Clicks,” “To Whom it May Concern,” “Ode to Her Legs,” “Letters Crossing,” “Testament,” “Bombay Times,” and “Dream” (*Slow Dance*). As you can tell from these poems, both continents, both cultures, both lives—the before and after—continue to influence my writing.

As for literary influences by American poets, or movements in poetry, I would say that while I enjoyed reading individual poems by any number of contemporary poets, I was in no need of finding mentors. One tends to emerge out of that search when the days of apprenticeship come to an end. For the poems in *First Offence*, I owed a lot to the poets I studied in college. Thereafter, I was on my own.

I continued to make astonishing discoveries and began to assemble my favorite companions for the road—not to draw upon their practice but to set for myself standards of workmanship and quality of insights, to let their light illuminate my journey.

The Hiroshige poem became part of my “Landscape” poems. “Exhibit A” (*Slow Dance*) makes unnamed references to the work of American painters of the frontier. They depict an unspoiled Eden without any

signs of danger. If there is any hint of that, it is lurking outside the frame. We “buy” this splendor and install it in our homes and it becomes a window into a world long gone.

“Exhibit B” (*Slow Dance*) came out of a visit to a touring Hiroshige show and it just held me spellbound. It is the poem I have most enjoyed writing because it presented me with the challenge of finding verbal equivalents to painterly images. Hiroshige’s task of simply looking long and hard and not missing anything became a parable for the work poets also have to do. It has been my explicit credo and I got a chance to restate it, or rather demonstrate it through the work of a master artist.

Is it something new, my interest in art? Not at all. I started as an artist and I wrote about art and conducted interviews with artists in Bombay from the time I was in college.

Saleem, can you pick a poem, or even a section of a poem, and describe the process of writing it—any discoveries you made, revelations you had, and so on in your journey toward the final draft?

Peeradina: Let me do this with “The Old Neighborhood” (*Slow Dance*), as it contains some typical elements of the way I use imagery, tone, and technique; how the global and local are intertwined; how the personal story is rooted in social history; and how all this adds up to the statement the poem makes.

Geography was my favorite subject in school, and maps and atlases were always close at hand or on the walls. Next, having started as an artist, the visual sense predominates in my writing. The two working together account for the physical descriptions and sensory language in my poetry. And having developed an addiction to the movies early on, my hand and eye movements work cinematically.

So the poem starts with the camera pulling away, zooming out swiftly from street-level details to a satellite shot of the subcontinent. The perspective jumps even further out to meditate on the passage of time—“a quarter century” (5)—where the years have been spun around by the revolving earth, and the news and memories, seemingly lost, have been

preserved in letters. The poem gestures toward the pile of mail steaming with memories of the narrator's story.

A watchful, tentative relationship of "intellectual buddies" is suggested which went nowhere but glowed with concealed ardor. The bungalow on the hill is a protected space surrounded by a constantly developing and deteriorating city no different from urban areas elsewhere affected by urban blight with its intoxicating mix of commerce and glamour, noise and stench, and the recurrence of communal riots. The accidental meeting releases a flood of stories "tumbling / Out of your mouth" (30–31) about "expeditions in distant continents" (32) as well as the homes occupied and families raised. This time the geography is more geological. The aging of the earth over millennia with "rich formations of rock and silt" (36) provides the same richness, beauty, and solidity to their lives, layering their "being" with an "age-defying crust" (35).

The tone and temper this poem establishes and the statement it makes is similar to Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." (I am in no way suggesting my poem is its equal, simply offering an analogy.) After the dismal state of the world at the turn of the previous century is spelt out by Arnold and the sea of Faith has ebbed from its shores, what is left for us to hold on to is human love and commitment. What is found by the speaker after a long absence in "The Old Neighborhood" is a resurrection of the heart sparked off by a haunting melody of an old friendship that still has life left in it and is to be cherished. The wide angle of the opening frame comes to a lurching halt in a close-up of the embrace.

In conclusion, I would like to talk about the cultural moment in which the poem finds its origin.

The experience recounted in the poem is a reflection of an ancient urge—of travel, journeys, and migrations—now happening in greater numbers and added momentum so as to become a new paradigm. All the adventures associated with this undertaking come with a fair amount of displacement and disruption. (I have dealt with the pain and loss involved in the process in another poem, "Song of the Makeover" [*Slow Dance*].) Here my focus is the periodic return visits to the "homeland" and chance meetings that rekindle old friendships, even if briefly. This has happened with unfailing regularity on each of my visits to India—

an unanticipated encounter or one that is tracked down via a source or traced through Facebook. The former of course carries the greater charge.

Millions of people now lead double lives in dual locations and answer to multiple loyalties. I have at least half a dozen friends who do long-distance parenting or grand-parenting. Intercontinental passages have become a way of life even for students who study abroad or who are seeking work. Flights from New York or Miami carry planeloads of Latinos/Latinas to various destinations in South America. Even internal travel in a country the size of China where large populations migrate to the cities to work has become a mammoth operation as split families reunite in the holiday seasons. This universal living apart for extended periods of time constantly presents opportunities for such encounters to happen. All this is implicit in the overarching framework out of which I chiseled “The Old Neighborhood.”

The Ocean in My Yard has the qualities of lyric prose, irony, and attention to detail, among many other qualities that I find in your poetry. Did moving from poetry to prose pose any problems? What were the challenges or opportunities? Can you also explain why you chose prose and not poetry as a vehicle for your memoir? You do mention that reaching out to a larger audience was your motivation. I am wondering if your artistic impulse involved more than accessibility in the global marketplace.

Peeradina: Actually, if you look at *Group Portrait*, I did attempt a poetic narrative of growing up, titled “Beginnings.” That was challenging—to have to compress two decades of stories into a few pages. It makes statements but leaves little room for elaboration or development of scenes and incidents. That, clearly enough, points to the key difference between poetry and prose. But I already had a kind of map to take me into the terrain.

Among many reasons to undertake the prose memoir, one was the certainty that I had an original and valuable story to tell about the little corner of the subcontinent on the Arabian Sea that no one else would. I wanted to celebrate this place of origin, explore its peculiar geogra-

phy, give life to the many colorful characters who populated the suburb, establish its links with the larger world of commerce and culture, and trace my development and my eventual “flight” from my roots.

Since I had to frame a timeline, I decided that my first journey out of the homeland would have to serve as a formal closure to my story. This happened at age twenty-seven when I left for the US to enter the Master’s program at Wake Forest University. I also had to sort out other structural issues. I *did not*, under any condition, want a chronological structure starting, “I was born one fine day . . .” Nothing could be more boring. I settled, or should I say, it automatically came out of my poetic impulse, to proceed thematically and work in clusters around a “subject.”

So I jumped in, feet first, on a “preamble” about physical traits and blemishes and knew that those feet would fly at the conclusion of my story. There is one major decision you have to make in writing a memoir: How much disclosure of your personal life are you going to make? Even more difficult is deciding how much of other people’s lives, people close to you, you are at liberty to include.

Different writers at different times come up with varying answers. My basic assumption about telling the personal story was that it requires the writer to be honest. You stick as much as possible to the truth based on facts, however awkward or embarrassing they may be. You do not falsify or slant the narrative to make yourself look good. When I said “as much as possible,” I was making allowances for the accuracy of memory, which is always subjective but can be checked with the remembrances of those events by others. Memoir is wholly dependant on recalling and recreating past times, and memories can prove to be deceptive at times. The reconstruction of the past will also require a selection of details so as to form a smooth, coherent whole. So, much as we try, we will only approximate the truth. “The whole truth and nothing but” is an elusive goal at best.

How much you are at liberty to reveal about family members and friends and others is a tricky proposition. There was always the nagging thought as I was writing, and over the course of numerous revisions, of what the proper balance was between saying too much and holding back.

In fact this was never settled in my mind even after the memoir was published. The question became far more *acute* after publication, because then the words were cast in stone and could never be unwritten. Specifically, I suffered pangs of guilt that I had been too harsh with the portrayal of my father. And whenever I gave public readings, I added an apology if I read accounts in which he appears.

2012 was a landmark year in your life as you retired from full-time teaching at Siena Heights University. Some people feel a void when they retire, and some feel a sense of relief and are eager for new adventures. What has retirement allowed you, especially with your writing? Can you reflect on any insights you have about your writing life while you were teaching the past few decades?

Peeradina: I retired in the academic year 2012–13. It was a good feeling not to have to follow a schedule, not to get up early to drive in the dark in the freezing winters, not to have to teach composition, not to sit through the churning wheel of meetings eternally drawing up strategic plans!

I also did not have any projects lined up as many retirees do, feeling they *must* be productive or call upon themselves the curse of boredom. With my reading and writing and movie-watching, I knew I would have plenty to do. I would do some cooking and also resume my daily trek to the gym.

I would have loved to make travel plans, except that the rigors of travel seem harder to undertake especially with the health issues I have. I envy friends my age who go on adventures but I console myself by saying I have done my share having gone round the world one and a half times and visited other places several times.

By an unexpected set of events, I started writing again. Sheer chance and new stimulus combined to set off a chain of poems. I had persuaded myself that *Slow Dance* would be my last book, again telling myself I had published six books, that I did not need to prove that my “creative” juices were still working. But the excitement I felt as the “force” took possession of me was undeniable.

I have always had fallow periods in my writing career, some lasting more than five years. New stages in life, new encounters, new experiences have always generated new writing sooner or later. Immigrating to the US and into the American academic setting brought on a host of new challenges—personal, familial, and ideological—providing a rich source of material to mine.

The academic world with its smug, cozy temptations was never suited to my temperament. Its fallout for writers can be pernicious, resulting in a tame academic strain in their writing. There are whole schools of such writing—formally refined, learnedly obscure, but lacking a pulse. I enjoyed the teaching encounter and developed courses and expanded my reading almost recklessly. But I kept my writing impulse and practice detached from academic pretensions. I was part of it but not of it. My writing life was distinct from my academic responsibilities. I must acknowledge though that campus life does provide room for creative endeavors and taking summers off and offers valuable time to begin projects. Thus came about the draft, over two successive summers, of my memoir, *The Ocean in My Yard*, and earlier, *Meditations on Desire*.

It is interesting that you see academia and your writing life as separate, that the poet can be influenced and infiltrated by academia.

Peeradina: Not so much weaken the poet, but turn him/her into a more conventional one. You know what they say about how the school system kills the creativity in kids by subjecting all of them to a uniform formula of tests and a learning approach that caters to the average and does not challenge the bright ones among them enough.

Well, for writers working in the university, the concerns of academia are no less stifling. Mind you, for instructors who are great teachers and scholars, the university offers fertile ground to practice their craft. In fact, American universities have high standards and encourage teachers to distinguish themselves in their chosen fields. Also, there are many writers who successfully combine teaching with writing fiction, poetry, or non-fiction. I suspect that the most accomplished of these lead an intellectual double life, keeping their academic and creative credentials

separate. Personally, I believe that the encroaching of one upon the other taints the creative enterprise—as when the latest fads in theory and critical discourse creep into fictional narrative or into verse.

The M.F.A. programs and the people who run them can also reflect the kind of “fine” but pale and lifeless writing that emerges from them.

What do you think about current Indian poetry written in English? Are there poets in this generation that you admire?

Peeradina: I hate to have to admit that except for stray poems in magazines, I have not closely followed the work of younger poets. There are poets I know whose work I like but it would be unfair to mention some and not others who are doing equally good work. So you will have to excuse me on this question.

Are you currently excited about the subjects you are writing about?

Peeradina: I had been reading up on animals, birds, insects, and ants (one of my interests), and a couple of summers back we had acquired a bird feeder. Out of the combination of reading and backyard observation came a series of new poems. The second set of poems about fruits also started from a series of books—on the history of salt, pepper, spices, tea, and silk, on the trade routes during colonial times, etc. Artists have been fascinated by fruits, flowers, and household objects as still life forms they depict on paper and canvas. Besides, as a lover and eater of fruits it had not occurred to me thus far that there were poetic possibilities to explore in the contemplation of these humble objects. The subject proved quite fertile and the poems combine sensory description with memories from childhood, fruit-lore, and cultural iconography. This varies from poem to poem; not every single poem contains all these elements.

Is it normal for a writer to go through a period of not writing at all? Do you suffer from blocks like that? Are you fearful of them? What do you usually do when you simply cannot produce?

Peeradina: I have had fallow periods (I wouldn't call them blocks) when I wasn't writing poetry but was doing book reviews, writing on theatre and cinema, and assorted stuff. After the publication of *Slow Dance* in 2010, I didn't write anything for three years. I was busy teaching and doing readings all over. Then in the summer of 2013 came a burst of poems on subjects I had never dealt with before—birds and fruits. This came as a pleasant surprise—pleasant, because you never know what's inside and around you that will stir you and tease your imagination. Truly, it gives writers the hope that the terrain of writing is inexhaustible. As you can see, in the four decades of my writing career, I have published only four books of poetry—a sparse record and evidently with several periods of not writing. Fearful of *not* producing? Never. Things are always churning below the surface waiting for the right moment to put pen to paper. If you force ill-formed ideas or thoughts into verse the strain will show. If you write just to prove that you can still produce, the effect will be mechanical. To me, the period of not writing is a stage where the soil is renewing itself.

There was another chance element that put into motion a new poem prompted by a dream that one of my colleagues had. It was a mere speck, a single image of a long-past love, and he wondered if I could make a poem out of it. I took up the challenge and within twenty-four hours, I had a poem. I totally invented the setting and the Zhivago reference came out of nowhere, intriguing even me as to its sudden appearance. My friend was charmed by the poem.

Looking back, how would you describe your writing career? What insights can an aspiring poet take away from your practice?

Peeradina: Looking back is an exercise fraught with pitfalls. I may attach more significance to something minor or overlook some key element. Whether it is literary production or the way one has raised children, an outsider is far more likely to be objective.

Overall, I consider myself fortunate to be endowed with the gift of artistic expression and along with that, a critical sense fed by unceasing curiosity and the joy (or pain) of making new discoveries, which one

passes on to readers. While doing public readings, what is irreplaceable is the magic of holding an audience rapt and seeing their eyes glow or tear up. This cuts across age, gender, geography, and culture, making poetry a powerful medium of human connection.

Writing and teaching became parallel careers—the first was a compulsion, the second a passion. I did not “decide” to become a writer; I came to it via drawing and painting. It emerged out of the romance with the English language, out of daydreaming, and out of brooding on the harsh reality of social injustices, class differences, and human suffering.

Making a living by teaching made it possible to sustain the writing enterprise. Poetry is a minority art, but again, I have been among the lucky few who have developed an audience in India. Writing reviews for the popular press opened [my work up to] a larger readership and allowed me to communicate my views on art, theatre, cinema, and books. Both of these activities, along with teaching, which functions as a live forum for intellectual debate, have been important components of my writing career.

The second question is easier to address. This is what I would tell the aspiring poet. First, extract yourself from your narcissism and take a long hard look at the world around you. Be curious, be nosy. Question everything. Next, read voraciously. Compare lists of great books (they're everywhere). Look beyond your cultural borders. Look past today's best sellers to classics of the past. They have survived for a reason—Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Dickens, Austen, Woolf, Yeats, Faulkner, Twain. I am appalled by the fact that half the country is obsessed with vampires and the other half is preoccupied with aliens and zombies.

In writing, try to be original in your perceptions and fresh in your use of language. Avoid clichés. Above all, be self-critical and demanding of yourself. In addition to the writers mentioned, the ones I admire are Wordsworth, Keats, Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Tsvetayeva, Nazim Hikmet, Gabriella Mistral, Vasco Popa, and C. P. Cavafy. This is a totally subjective list and an incomplete one. Taste, discover, and build your own. Don't be shy about adopting models. They're indispensable.

Notes

- 1 Interview edited by the author with Peeradina's permission; additional edits made by *ARIEL*.

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