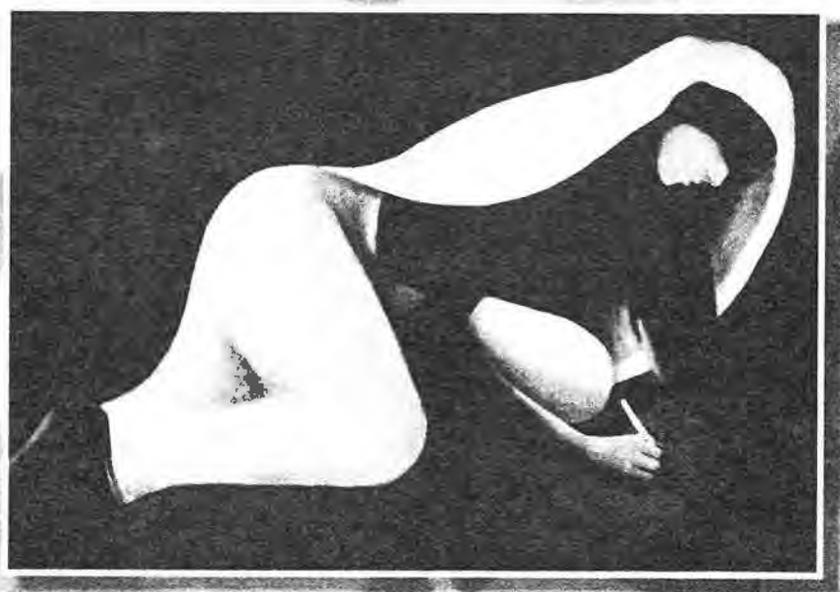


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# Indian English Women Poets

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*Editors*  
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## Why I Write

FEROZA JUSSAWALLA



One day I was on a train to Kew Gardens in London with a group of students from the University of Texas at El Paso, where I had taught for twenty years. Suddenly, poems started dropping into my head. At Kew, I bought one of their beautiful flowered journals and started writing them down. Kew has been the inspiration for many a poem, not just the beautiful ones, collected in my collection *Chiffon Saris* (TSAR Press and Kolkatta Writers Workshop, 2003), but also the hard ones. That afternoon, I stood in front of the Sea Horse tanks under the Palm House and pondered over the transparent and translucent beauty of the winged creatures. But the poem that came out expressed sadness at a long forgotten abortion. But the sea horses became my mascots. I wear a sea horse pendant when I'm writing and keep a sculpture on my desk.

Though I say I started writing that day in London, I have always written. At a very young age, I wrote for *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and for *Mirror*, which published my early stories. *Mirror* also published, when I was barely a teenager, a report I had written on the Kirk-Patrick twins, a story that has now gained

wide coverage as a result of Dalrymple's book, the *White Moghuls*. My mother was principal of the Women's College, then called the Zenana College in Sultan Bazaar, Hyderabad. We lived in the Principal's Lodge which was the old ADC's residence with an impressive beam that said built for So and So, in the employ of Her Majesty's Service. I remember the claw feet tubs. I wrote many a poem there—about the hanging Mango trees. Sarojini Naidu was my inspiration. As a child I was made to recite 'Bangle Sellers,' and 'Lightly, Oh Lightly/ We bear her along, / She floats like a laugh/ at the end of a song'. My mother did much to clean up the old Residency, to make the chandeliers (that have now fallen in disrepair) clean and shiny. Gold paint was brought from Germany to touch up the ceiling of the Durbar Hall. The Hyderabad writer, Bilkiz Allauddin, performed a play about the Kirk-Patrick twins in that new and shiny Durbar Hall. When Dalrymple's book came out, we all felt quite proprietorial about the story. That was my first piece of published writing and I must've been about nineteen at the time. I have a musty copy of that article in my files.

I was well on my way to becoming a writer when I got admission to the M.A. program at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. While Utah had an excellent Creative Writing program, the scholars I was working with did not have much respect for creative writing per se. While they respected the texts they wrote about, they disdained the new writers! This dichotomy was interesting to me and I kept my creative writing under wraps. The more I did so, the more I was entranced by the romanticized notion of hiding my work away, à la Emily Dickinson—stuffing my poems into hidden holes in walls.

One day I was writing an article on diaspora writers and it came to me that in the U.S., those of us who had immigrated had become 'Chiffon Saris,' not authentic saris. I entitled that essay, then published in the *Massachusetts Review*, as 'Chiffon Saris'. I ended it with the ending of one of my best-loved poems—one that everyone loves when I read it:

In the new world  
This is what we have become  
Chiffon saris  
—Anomalies—  
Is it hetter to be

—Dharmavaram—  
—Conjeevaram?—

That was the beginning of a series of poems on the immigrant condition. I took my strength from the fact that I lived among immigrants both in El Paso, TX. and in New Mexico—not only contemporary immigrant populations, but peoples who had migrated to the Americas over generations. I felt a special solidarity with them and still do—with the plight of those who attempt to immigrate and to assimilate. I loved northern New Mexico. Before I moved there in 2001, I travelled there often. I felt a special kinship with the Native American population, almost as though I had walked across the Bering Strait with them. The first poem in *Chiffon Saris* is entitled 'Indian', and it is about meeting a Native person in Taos Pueblo. I do my best writing in Taos Mountain's 'sacred mothering shoulder,' as I call it in my poems. On that mountain, in D.H. Lawrence's ranch where Frieda interred his ashes, I have received many a poem, and many an essay in the Mabel Dodge Luhan house—which is now like an artist's colony—just as Mabel and Lawrence had conceived it. Mabel Dodge Luhan was one of Lawrence's admirers and possible mistresses. I find that I am unable to write at home even though I have built myself a beautiful study on top of my garage! There are too many distractions, food to be cooked, laundry to be done etc. etc. etc. In the U.S. we do not have the luxury of servants.

But, to get back to the kinship with the Native Peoples, my poem entitled 'Indian' ends:

We are all the same people  
Coming to fill this vast diaspora.

The cousinship of experience, of being a 'diaspora person,' and *individuales colonizados*, subject to the whims of immigration police, called in the colloquialism of the Southwest, 'La Migra,' was the inspiration for many of poems. La Migra is also the name of the hide and seek game that children play in the southwest. One day while commuting back from work on I-25, I saw an immigration van carrying a 'Mexican' in a cage! I wrote down on a post it on my steering wheel, 'We play a game, he and I.' That became my poem, 'La Migra'. My poem, 'Meeting the Mayflower,' starts out:

What would have happened  
if the Mayflower  
had been met by immigration police?

The oliveness of my complexion many a times has given me the permission to pass as Hispanic, but this has also led to having to explain myself, as in my poem Spanish. In my poem, 'Tierra de la Luna,' I write and say often to myself:

*Soy de la India,  
pero tambien the Nuevo Mexico.*

People wonder who and what I am. I am from India but also from New Mexico. I have lived there longer than I have lived here and it is this *conditione humaine* that gives rise to my poems. My friend, the writer Denise Chavez, calls me an honorary Chicana, a 'spoonful of curry in a bowl of chile'—or is it the other way around? To use Salman Rushdie's expression—'I'm chutneyfied'. I say that I have been nurtured in the salty soil of the New Mexican desert *abajo la luz de la luna*—under the golden disk of the large New Mexican moon, the wolf moon, the coyote moon the blue corn moon of Pocahontas—all the ways the moon is described in southwestern U.S. I perform *Karva Chuuth* with my Punjabi friends in Albuquerque, waiting for that large disc to come over what we call the Sandia mountains, or the water melon mountains. Our fasts always go longer than those of any Indians, because we have to wait a long time for the moon to appear to start the feasting after the fasting—because it takes a long time for the moon to appear over our tall mountains. I write about this in my poem called 'fasting and feasting'.

This cross-cultural mix has caused me to write a fair amount of political poetry about racism, exclusion and marginalization. But there is one poem that I have been afraid to publish. It was one that came to me in a big lump in my throat in a Natalie Goldberg workshop in Albuquerque, at the beginning of the Iraq war. It was something she had said about writing from the 'fire in your belly,' that got that poem out. Ever since then I started studying with her! A company from Fort Bliss in El Paso had been captured. Since I had taught in El Paso for so long, I worried that it could've included my students, particularly one Charlie Miller. There was a Corporal Miller who had been taken. I gasped, 'Lord save our sons from ambush,' and then wrote it down thus:

Lord save our sons from (am)Bush.

Those were the days when anyone speaking out against the war was put on an FBI list.

Many a day, I have regretted not lending my voice to poets against the war. Many a times, my friends at the Lannan foundation, particularly Frank, have chided me for this. And I've asked, 'Will you come and bail me out?' It is much easier for outspoken Americans to speak out than for those of us who have made our home there and have families and children to be responsible for. It is also much easier for writers like Arundhati Roy to fly into America at high paid honoraria, throw a few barbs at Bush, and fly home to their penthouses in London or Mumbai. It is akin to being a hit-and-run driver who not only gets the benefit of the doubt, but also is awarded compensation, actually rightfully due to the one who is run over! There are days I feel like the one run over. The immigrant condition is one of being run over. And yet there is no going home. We have become foreigners in our own land—quite rejected as being those who have come from 'Amrika'—but do nothing to take other's back—ones who look around and complain about the poverty and the pollution—ones who promptly get sick with the carbon footprint on our throats—no sooner than the fact that we are here.

What I am saying about my creative process is that the well spring is the condition of 'unbelonging' of being a foreigner in both lands, the eyes that see critically the world all around me, the U.S., India, and even Britain. But then what is it that causes us to be attracted to the 'white man,' the Denys Finch Hatton's of the world?

From the cancer of unbelonging sprang the hardened lumps of unforgiveness in my breast—'breast cancer and the myomyometrius degeneration of the myometrium,' a line from my poem, 'fibroids'. My poems 'Life and Death of a Death Mask' and 'Chemotherapy' deal with this.

I have no creative process as such. Suddenly a poem drops—sometimes from a moment of anger, sometimes from a moment of pain and often from just awe. I do not pay painstaking attention to the form. Though that is changing—as I am moving into my Zen Haiku Life.

'Nestled in the crook of Taos Mountain's mothering shoulder'—another line from one of my poems, I have learned to Sit, Walk and Write with my guru Natalie Goldberg of *Writing Down the Bones* fame. I am moving gradually towards meticulous Haiku. I find, however, that it is impossible for me to sit still. I live, move and have my being in 'doing'—in tossing about. I have wasted a whole sabbatical in activity, running for political office on the city council, travelling to India to write a grant—going on pilgrimage and being stampeded, none of the things I needed to be doing on a very precious sabbatical. I should've sat quietly and written my novel which I'm carrying in my head, my book of prayers about how I survived breast cancer by praying in many religious traditions—what I call 'praying in tongues'. Perhaps this is why I am a poet. Short bursts of creativity written on post-it notes at the kitchen counter or on the steering wheel while commuting, as opposed to the sustained still quiet work needed to give birth to the longer process. But as many of my poems bear witness, I am a political animal, much more engaged in doing and doing to make the world around me better.

Consequently, my short bursts of creativity have become isolated to December poems. Larry Morris, himself a distinguished poet of New Mexico and pastor of an inter-denominational church in my adopted hometown, Albuquerque, requests, every year at Christmas, that I write him a poem. And so have been born some of these poetic meditations on each year—some sort of cynical poems—like 'Easter 1998' taking off from Yeats, and from the cloning of Dolly sheep, where I muse whether it is possible to take a string of DNA and from the preserved cross in the Vatican and see if we can resurrect Jesus. There is also one that meditates upon the hypocrisy of Christian charity:

come down from the tree Zaccæus said he,  
come down from the tree  
I am going up to it for thee.

Or, 'Oh Christmas where is thy hope?' But it is in 'hopelessness and hiding that the Christ was born to us'. This year I saw a bumper sticker at the post office. It said, 'Resist Despair' that got incorporated into my poem. Or, they take the cross-cultural turn affirming:

A Zoroastrian, I was raised  
 A magi not, though magic  
 I aspire to  
 Like my ancient ancestors  
 Who followed a star, that first Noel  
 Across continents, to bring  
 Gifts to a child whose rocking cradle  
 Should've and could've given us some gifts :  
 Gifts of peace and harmony...

Meditation is becoming more of my scholarly method also. I find that my recent scholarship has taken a meditative turn, mixing the personal with the political. After all, as Marianna Torgovonik has said, 'the personal is the political'. If I am writing, say on Hanif Kureishi's 'My Son, the Fanatic,' or on Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake*, I find myself ruminating also on my condition, that of my son, that of those of us who are constantly portrayed by the US media as homegrown terrorists etc. But I am also trying to understand why our own people do certain things. I remember my son asking me after the London bombings of June 2006, 'Why are they bombing our own stations?' His favorite station in London, Edgware Road, had been bombed. That question not only became a poem but a long essay on 'Homegrown terrorism,' in Indian novels from Kamala Markandaya's London novels like *Some Inner Fury* to Hanif Kureishi's short story, 'My Son, the Fanatic'.

I believe that writing should issue forth from an engagement with society. I seek to find that still point in my turning world, that still point where the light is, as T.S. Eliot told us. I want that 'white light' to turn into the 'jeweled bow'. That is my writing process and my creative process. I hope I have whetted your appetite enough to want to read my poems—collected not only in my collection *Chiffon Saris* but in magazines such as *Kavya Bharati* and incorporated into essay, such as 'Homegrown Terrorism,' available on the web. I hope my poems can make a difference in everyone's lives.