

Remapping Canada: An Interview with Mariam Pirbhai

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Mariam Pirbhai was born in Pakistan and lived in the Philippines and England before settling in Canada. She received her PhD in English from the University of Montreal and is Professor of English in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her academic publications include a monograph entitled *Mythologies of*

Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture: Novels of the South Asian Diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific (University of Toronto Press, 2009) and a co-edited collection of essays *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature* (Routledge, 2013). Mariam Pirbhai's short fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals, including the *Dalhousie Review* and *jaggerylit*, as well as in anthologies such as *Pakistani Creative Writing in English: Tracing the Tradition, Embracing the Emerging. Outside People and Other Stories* (Inanna, 2017) is her debut collection of short stories for which she was recently awarded the IPPY Gold Medal for Multicultural Fiction. The novelist Shani Mootoo has noted that "as Diane Arbus is to photography, so is Mariam Pirbhai to literature—bringing forth the margins, but nobly, with understanding and an unusual generosity in her handling of contemporary society's machinations." In the following interview with Maryam Mirza, Mariam Pirbhai reflects on the transformative power of fiction, the trope of social invisibility, and the emergence of South Asian Canadian literature.

Maryam Mirza: Dr. Pirbhai, what is it that makes you want to write fiction?

Mariam Pirbhai: Mohsin Hamid, whose writing I greatly admire, said somewhere that storytelling alters the storyteller. And a story is altered by being told. I think I am drawn to this aspect of fiction—as something that has the potency and power to be transformative. To imagine a world, as Hamid says, against the “tyranny of what was and is.”

Maryam Mirza: Do you see any challenges in being both an academic and a creative writer or do you see the two roles complementing each other?

Mariam Pirbhai: I have written a blog post about this subject, titled “My Two Writing Selves: A Heady Affair”. It can be found here:

<https://brocktonwritersseries.wordpress.com/2018/01/03/bws-10-01-18-mariam-pirbhai/>

The long and short of it is that while the two roles complement each other in a variety of ways—e.g., the love of research or the discipline of revision—finding the time to write is the biggest challenge. Time is always in short supply. But there is also a level of freedom in creative writing that is otherwise harnessed in scholarship and academia.

Having said this, most of the issues and concerns that drive my work as an academic and as a teacher—global migration flows, diasporic identities, citizenship and race, the histories and structures of western imperialism, precarity, labour histories, transnationals—have driven, at least to date, much of my creative writing.

Maryam Mirza: In your short story “Sunshine Guarantee”, the protagonist Lucita, who works as a chambermaid in a tourist resort in Mexico, seems almost startled to realize that “sometimes she couldn’t tell the difference between what she called the ‘visible staff’—the pool side animators, the fitness club trainers, the life guards, the bartenders—and the guests. They were usually lighter-skinned, spoke English and were generally perceived as untouchable, unlike the invisible army of chambermaids, security guards, busboys, gardeners, dishwashers, and sweepers, who were not meant to be seen.” “Sunshine Guarantee” and, indeed, most of the other stories in this collection address various forms of social (in)visibility and are concerned with the tyranny of hierarchies, often in a microsetting (such as a hotel). Could you tell us more about your interest in this trope?

Mariam Pirbhai: Yes, invisibility is a major trope throughout this collection. I think I was writing these characters and contexts with the concept of the “visible minority,” which is an official state designation for non-European or non-white people in Canada, critically in mind.

As I was writing these stories, I felt that those deemed “visible minorities” because of their purported markers of ethno-racial difference, are actually “invisible” people, in many ways—invisible not as a result of some self-induced condition, but because of the hierarchies or

roadblocks that deny them a space, as equals, within their own societies—reminding us that citizenship is not “lived equally, freely, or in solidarity.”

Even though this story, “Sunshine Guarantee,” is set in Mexico, Lucita’s invisibility vis a vis her “lighter-skinned” co-workers, the white tourist, or indeed her managerial “superiors,” parallels the kind of invisibility experienced by my other characters in Canadian settings, as is typified by the story “Chicken Catchers,” narrated from the perspective of Caribbean and Latin American migrant farm labourers holed up in a barracks-style accommodation on a southern Canadian farm. (The majority of seasonal agricultural workers—up to 40,000 per year—come to the province of Ontario. From 2000-2012, Ontario alone received approximately 800,000 temporary migrant workers [or 40% of total TWFs in the country] in this and other sectors.)

Maryam Mirza: Given my own interest as a researcher in the literary depiction of domestic servitude, I was particularly intrigued by the short story “Corazon’s Children”, featuring a Filipina protagonist who works as a cleaner in Vancouver in order to provide a better life for her children in the Philippines. What drew you to the figure of the transnational domestic servant?

Mariam Pirbhai: Much of my earlier academic research focused on the history of Indian indentured labour in the former British Empire’s overseas colonies. As we continue to rely on transnational or globalized labour, I am struck by the similarity between colonial and contemporary forms of “bonded” or temporary migrant labour. In this story, Corazon is, as you say, part of the transnational domestic labour force.

As a domestic worker employed in Canada, Corazon’s story specifically brings to view the gendered dimension of such labour—that is, the so-called “feminized labour sector” that generally includes low-skilled jobs in manufacturing or the global care chain. When one throws motherhood into the mix of gendered transnational labour, a terrible irony of circumstance ensues where a female migrant is helping to care for a family or manage a household at the sacrifice of her own children, family and home.

In this story, Corazon is caught in this paradox, agonizing over the sacrifice she has made in leaving her children behind as she holds on to the dream that her temporary work will eventually facilitate hers and her children’s permanent migration to Canada. (There is a whole history, here, of Filipina migrant workers who have advocated for and won the right to settle in Canada. It is one of many examples of courageous agency on the part of women labourers and migrants that we rarely hear about.)

Suffice it to say, that the stories in this collection focus on individuals in different working conditions: a chambermaid, a domestic worker, farm labourers, a factory worker. Others are nurses, bankers, civil servants, and some are even unemployed or unable to make use of their skills. Neither one is any less or more important than the other; it is the value placed on

their labour that I guess I am exploring here—particularly as it is further complicated by migration.

Maryam Mirza: One cannot help but be struck by the strong multilingualism of your debut collection: the short stories are interspersed with words, and sometimes entire phrases, in Urdu/Hindi, Arabic, French and Spanish but also Jamaican and Haitian Creole as well as Tagalog. It seems to me that your use of multiple languages is not only tied in with your adoption of the realist mode, but is also a way of contesting linguistic hierarchies.

Mariam Pirbhai: Thanks for commenting on this aspect of the collection. For me, multilingualism is a natural aspect of our multicultural cities, our hybrid cultures—our world. Monolingualism seems like the enforced and unnatural condition.

I hope the collection's diverse range of languages, like its cast of characters (Caribbean, Maghrebi, South Asian, South-East Asian, etc.), not only contests linguistic hierarchies but also relational hierarchies, in so far as our points of interconnection and interaction are as multifarious as the diasporic groups who populate our cities.

In this regard, I also wanted to break with the implied hegemony of English as our default lingua franca, and focus on inter-ethnic encounters that bring to view other levels of interlingualism and multilingualism. For instance, in "Air Raids," a young Pakistani-Canadian woman living in Montreal has to rely on French (her third language) to communicate with her Moroccan lover; at the same time, both characters are part of a wider Muslim diaspora for whom Arabic is, at least implicitly, another kind of language of mutual recognition.

Maryam Mirza: Your choice of names for the characters in the collection *Outside People and Other Stories* is also quite striking. I'm thinking, for example, of the Canadian Indian couple Radha and Krishna in the short story "Crossing Over". What's the significance of character names in your fiction?

Mariam Pirbhai: Radha and Krishna, like their counterparts Mumtaz and Akbar in the story, are definitely my way of having fun with some of the themes in this story! And of course names and naming are always markers of identity steeped in our histories, which takes on a particular hue given the ethno-cultural diversity of these characters. So I guess you caught me out in the act of playing with names here!

Though I will say that over-thinking names can also collapse into a form of overkill. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and all that. On the other hand, the absence of names is also interesting. In the title story, for instance, the male and female protagonists are nameless. But I'll let you be the judge of whether this is something worth reflecting on further!

Maryam Mirza: As you mentioned earlier, "Air Raids", the opening story of the collection, is set in Montreal, while the action in "Crossing Over" takes place

in Halifax and then, of course, there's "Toronto's Dominions", the fourth story of the volume. Was it a conscious decision on your part to give the "Canadian" stories in the collection a varied setting?

Mariam Pirbhai: Much of the literature exploring diasporic experience in Canada tends to focus on a single major metropolitan centre like Toronto. I want my reader to see a Canada as it is both lived and witnessed through the eyes of those so-called "outsiders" who are, in their ubiquity and presence across this vast country, an essential feature of its geography. I wanted to shake things up a little bit and create a new kind of mapping of Canada, not only in its cities but also in its suburbs, its rural spaces, and everything in between.

To extend this figurative remapping of Canada, a couple of stories (like "Sunshine Guarantee" and the title story) are set in Latin America or the Caribbean but are implicitly linked, by way of their characters' family histories, to Canada. This is because I also see Canada not just as a part of North America but also as an extension of the rest of the Americas. Canada relies heavily on socioeconomic relations and activities with its Latin American and Caribbean neighbours (not just with the United States). There is a trans-hemispheric dimension to the Canadian landscape which has not been adequately explored in Canadian fiction, and one that interests me greatly—including the reasons for its erasure in the Canadian psyche.

Maryam Mirza: As a teacher of postcolonial literature, do you think South Asian Canadian literature has any distinctive features which set it apart from, say, South Asian British or American literature?

Mariam Pirbhai: Most definitely. Without getting into some kind of academic rapture about a subject that I am quite passionate about, I will simply say that South Asian Canadian literature is just coming-of-age (or at least coming into its own in a more fulsome way), while South Asian British literature is its older, more mature cousin. South Asian American literature falls somewhere in between.

In the case of South Asian Canadian literature, I think this is because the second generation—particularly those kids of South Asian émigrés who settled in Canada from the 1960s onward—are only just starting to find a voice and platform in the literary world. Without oversimplifying things, this has created quite a shift in the kinds of stories that are now being told, from an earlier generation who began publishing in the 1980s and 1990s (such as Rohinton Mistry or M.G. Vassanji), and who were largely fixated on the homelands left behind, to a younger generation exploring life in Canada more directly or simply pushing the envelope, stylistically and otherwise.

As far as distinctive features are concerned, it is harder to make such comparisons, but I will hazard a few insights. I would say, given the much older and larger communities of Muslim South Asians in Britain, British literature seems more populated by stories that explore the intersections between Islam and the South Asian diaspora. In Canada, the South Asian

population has been represented by a predominantly Hindu- and Indian nationalist perspective, which has obfuscated “South Asianness,” if you will, in all its diversity. At least I would argue that Muslim South Asian perspectives have been wholly excluded here—a pretty major absence, if you ask me! In this vein, the kind of emphasis one might see in the United States on works that wrestle with “terrorism,” the so-called global war on terror or even a post-9/11 era, has been largely absent here as well.

Also, at least in fiction, male writers have generally dominated the South Asian Canadian literary landscape. This, too, is changing. I guess I can count myself among those who are swinging the pendulum!

If your readers are interested in learning more about South Asian Canadian literature, permit me this opportunity to direct them to a special commemorative issue that I recently guest edited, titled “South Asian Canadian Literature: A Centennial Journey.” <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/24278>

Maryam Mirza: I believe you are working on your first novel at the moment. Is it set in Canada?

Mariam Pirbhai: My point about the experience of Muslims being largely absent in Canadian fiction has provided much of the impetus for my first novel (in progress), which is very loosely inspired by the recent spate of attacks against Muslim-Canadian communities, including the mass shooting of worshippers at a mosque in Québec city in 2017, which resulted in tragic loss of life. The novel considers anti-Muslim sentiment through the perspective of four very different families. It’s not something I intended to write. But there it is. Sometimes the story alters the storyteller.

Maryam Mirza: Dr. Mariam Pirbhai, thank you very much.

Mariam Pirbhai: Thank you for your wonderful questions!

The interview was conducted by email during April-June 2018. More information on Mariam Pirbhai’s work can be found on her official website: www.mariampirbhai.ca.