

Getting to know Desi literature

Somewhat fantastically, I always thought of the Indian culture as being akin to my own East Asian culture. Something about the way any older woman was an “auntie,” something about the fragrance of the food I thought I knew so well, maybe. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t have Indian friends in my life or when I didn’t experience Indian spices and flavors as familiar.

I viewed it as so familiar that I never bothered to look at Desi literature as a subject to be studied all on its own – or maybe it’s more accurate to say that I never looked at it as needing to be appreciated on its own. I assumed that the Desi culture, and with it, Desi literature, was just part of my background. I assumed that I would be taught it, that it would make its way onto my shelves all by itself. (“Desi” is from the Sanskrit “deśá,” and it literally means “from the land.” In some circles, it comprises work and culture from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; here, we are using it to comprise specifically work from India itself.)

I was wrong, of course: In 2016, when I took the first audit of the books that comprised the last 100 books I read, I was stunned (and yet, why?) to see that not one of them was by an Indian writer.

Writer and educator Jenny Bhatt knows that this dearth of exposure to Desi literature is a problem many of us who love literature encounter. In early 2020, when she herself had two books due out, she took a hard look at the literary landscape and realized very few Desi books were making it into the mainstream. The *New York*



Times, she told me, rounded up its 100 books of the year. She noticed only one was a short-story collection, like hers. And, she adds, the paper had very few books by writers of South Asian origin. “When it’s your own book,” Bhatt said, “you’re paying closer attention. You’re looking for, ‘OK, they didn’t take my book, but did they take any other [South Asian writers]?’ There would be entire lists where there would be literally no South Asian writer.” Bhatt felt something needed to be done, and so she took matters into her own hands. Since April of 2020, her podcast and its accompanying website, Desi Books (desibooks.co), has featured over 125 writers through interviews and features, and covered nearly 300 writers in roundups and lists, she told me.

Bhatt’s big push to highlight Desi literature uncovered a few holes in the literary establishment’s coverage of literature that affects even those outside the literary establishment: “It’s not necessarily that they’re willfully saying, ‘Oh, we’re going to exclude these people’ – they just don’t *know*,” she told me, referring to the sheer number of Desi writers producing work. “And so that for me was, ‘OK, well, we as a community are going to have to amplify each other. We as a community are going to have to unite and have a platform that we can showcase.’ I couldn’t find that platform, so that’s why I created Desi Books.”

Bhatt points out that independent book influencers also need to cast a wider net: “There’s a little bit of gatekeeping happening in book reviewing,” she said. Publicists at book publishing companies, she reminds me, may be handling five books but only really push the ones they feel are a sure win with book review editors, leaving other books on their list out in the cold. Bhatt says that when she writes book reviews, she’ll send her editor a list of five or six books for consideration, and “even though [the editor] happens to be brown or Desi in origin,



they also go and look at NPR and *New York Times*, so the [more popular] books are the only ones they know.

“When the pandemic hit,” she told me, “I had two books coming out in two different countries. I had my own short story collection [in the United States], and then I had a translation [I did come out] in India. I couldn’t travel, couldn’t do anything with either. I was working in Silicon Valley before this, and I had a different career, different connections. My sense of a literary community was really not there. And so when you find yourself in a pandemic where you’re doing everything virtually, and you suddenly realize, gosh, you know, it helps to know people ... so that they will share your book on social media; of course, that’s huge, and that helps. But it’s also knowing people so that you can connect with them for interviews or knowing folks who might be interested. With this subgenre of literature, Desi literature, it’s not mainstream enough. I would say it’s only been in the last three to four years that you started to see our books being reviewed at NPR and seeing more of them in the *New York Times*.”

“When you are not mainstream in terms of your community of writers, then you know that it’s going to have to be each of you lifting each other up. A rising tide lifts all boats, but that rising tide isn’t just going to rise by itself; it’s the community that has to do it.”

Bhatt used social media to connect with other writers who had books coming out with the idea that they could team up for events, and from there, Desi Books was off and running.

The community she was building gave Bhatt an even deeper lens into the world of Desi literature. “For the longest time, it was almost like agents and editors began to expect, you know, this sort of genteel, educated immigrant story...about a very specific subsection of

society and culture,” she told me. “And then for a while, we had a slew of books that were focusing on describing certain Indian foods in a certain way. Within our Desi community, it actually became a standing joke. We call it ‘mango discourse.’ [When] you see that people are describing mangoes in their Indian fiction or novel, you know they’re pan-

“When you are not mainstream in terms of your community of writers, then you know that it’s going to have to be each of you lifting each other up. A rising tide lifts all boats, but that rising tide isn’t just going to rise by itself; it’s the community that has to do it.”

dering to some other kind of writer. And then you’ve got some of the Desi writers saying, ‘Well, but you know, what’s your exotic is my normal. I grew up with mangoes.’ But the point was it’s the way it was written, the way it was done. It’s how you’re writing about them for a white reader.” Bhatt points to some other flavors of mango discourse: the arranged marriage; discussions of saris; slums. But she’s careful to note that these subjects are not taboo, rather that they need to be handled with more sensitivity and nuance: “I’m not saying we shouldn’t

write about these things, but...what happens when a diaspora writer tries to write about stuff happening in India where they have not – they may have lived there for a while, or they’ve never lived, that they’ve just visited there?” she asks.

“What these writers are doing is taking advantage of what [they] think is an interesting plot point,” Bhatt says. “I love that you find your parents’ country fascinating and interesting. There are ways to indulge that interest. If you’re going to bring it into fiction, you have a responsibility.”

Bhatt also notes that this plays into an issue with audience: readers who have intimate, everyday knowledge of India will care about one type of authenticity, whereas “diasporic reader[s] who just visited, you know, India in the summer vacations – they just want to evoke that vacation sense when they open the book, right? They’re not looking for the writer’s responsibility and the writer’s veracity.”

Bhatt leans on her own expertise as a writer of fiction to elaborate: “I feel... my job, if I’m writing about India, is to challenge those stereotypes and biases. It’s not to reinforce them. It’s not to make the reader feel like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s the India I know.’ For me, a good book about India or a good story from India is when it challenges the reader’s idea of what they thought the country is. Otherwise, why invest all those hours in reading a book? I want the person to feel like, ‘OK, that really shook my idea of what I thought I knew about this place.’

“That’s what I mean when I say sense of responsibility. Your job, given that there are so many misconceptions, should be to clear misconceptions.”

Yi Shun Lai is the author of Pin Ups, a memoir. She teaches in the MFA program at Bay Path university and is a founding editor of Undomesticated Magazine.

Visit at undomesticatedmag.com.