

INTERSECTIONS RADIO

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TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to KXRY Portland on 107.1 FM, 91.1 FM, and streaming online at XRAY.fm. I'm Sarika Mehta. Welcome to Intersections Radio, a new independent podcast which also airs on XRAY. Intersections Radio is the show where we geek out on all things intersectionality.

Today, I'm featuring a new author, Chaitali Sen. Her debut novel, published by Europa back in October, is called *The Pathless Sky*. It's the story of a couple navigating their relationship through a country's political turmoil. The country is fictional, as are the various provinces, but these provinces and their idiosyncrasies speak to each character's sense of home, entitlement, and in fact, documentation.

Chaitali's work is unique in that she purposefully strayed from writing from the South Asian American experience. And, she's a first grade teacher, which means she had to live a double life before the publication of *The Pathless Sky*. We met up on Skype to talk about her book, how the South Asian political scene of 1990s New York shaped her world view, and her double life of teaching and writing. This is Intersections Radio.

Chaitali Sen, welcome to Intersections Radio.

CHAITALI SEN: Thank you for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: First, tell us a little bit about yourself, and what led you to this novel, your first novel, in fact.

CHAITALI SEN: So, I grew up here in, actually in the northeast, mostly, outside of New York and Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. And, I'm in my 40s now, my day job is as a teacher, I teach first grade. I've been teaching public school for about 20 years now. But I've always written, and I, you know, I've had some short stories published. I have an MFA from Hunter, and about 6 years ago I had an idea for a novel. It was actually my third novel that I've started, but this one just kind of stuck. And so 6 years ago I started working on it, and just in -- early in the mornings, on weekends, on summer vacations, I would just bang the keys and knock this novel out, and, you know, something about these characters just stuck with me, because I have started other novels that I didn't finish. So, you know, this one, I think I have a better sense now of when something's going to stick and I'm going to finish it, and this was the case. But I think I consider myself mostly a novelist.

SARIKA MEHTA: And this is your debut novel, *The Pathless Sky*. In your own words, tell us a synopsis.

CHAITALI SEN: So, mostly this novel follows a couple, a man and a woman, who meet in college and fall in love, but they find their relationship continually thwarted by circumstances beyond their control. You know, mostly beyond their control, and very much related to a civil war that happens in the girl, Mariam's, home province, before they were born. And I should say that the novel takes place in a fictional country. It doesn't exist and there isn't a corresponding country in the world, it's not a stand-in for a different country. It's just, it's a completely fictional country that has a certain, you know,

geopolitical spot in the world, but it's big. But, anyway, so, in this fictional country there was a civil war, and there's later the repercussions are affecting the relationship of this man and woman, John and Mariam, who eventually marry. But, you know, these stumbling blocks keep interfering with their relationship. You know, sometimes in smaller ways and sometimes in more serious ways.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. I wanted to talk more about the fact that it was a fictional country in a moment, and the political turmoil that affects their relationship. I want to back up for one second. How was the development of this novel and its characteristics different from your previous published writing?

CHAITALI SEN: I think I was going through a period where I was working a lot of just kind of fictional spaces. So, I have, I had a short story, and this novel actually was a short story that wasn't working as a short story. But, I have a few short stories that also took place in fictional countries, where I guess the characters were maybe ethnically ambiguous, and I had various reasons for doing that, some of them were good, some of them weren't. And then I had one story that was published in New Ohio Review that, where the place isn't name, but it is a real place. And people who read that story can probably guess pretty easily what place that is.

I guess when I really started publishing short stories, I just really wanted to stretch, stretch out what my perceived limitations were, so, like, in the very beginning when I was writing short stories, I was writing a lot of stories about, you know, India and young women who were immigrants. You know, just sort of similar to my experience, and I just started trying to stretch and break myself out of that, not because there's anything wrong with it, just because I had other stories I wanted to tell, and I wanted to see if I could do it. I started getting some good feedback on them, I started getting published, so, I think I just, it helped me prove to myself that it could be done. And, you know, now I feel like I could go back to writing stories about, you know, Indian immigrants, and these stories where, in the beginning, it felt like I was limiting myself to that, but now it's like, I just feel like I can write whatever I want to write about.

So, this, in that way, this novel was sort of an extension of what I was exploring through short fiction. But, sometimes, you know, you do a story and it just, you realize it can't be contained in the story form, in the short story form, so, you have to expand it, and that's what happened here.

SARIKA MEHTA: Actually, that was another discussion point you'd brought up, that you felt, I think you were quoted at the Asian American Writers Workshop, that you felt a lot of pressure to write from the experience as a South Asian American. And this book deviates from that, you know, like you said, the characters are ethnically ambiguous, the country is invented. The political turmoil could have taken place anywhere, I mean, I was feeling sometimes as though I was reading about the Serbo-Croatian War, and sometimes it was modern day Syrian refugees. So expand on that a little bit.

CHAITALI SEN: When I started this novel, and even when I started the short story that it was based on, I had the characters in mind, I had a situation in mind, but I didn't really want to write an American story, even though, I mean, there are definitely situations that would have worked in an American context, where I could have sort of still explored the themes in this novel. But I just didn't want to, I didn't want to write about American characters, but I did want to capture a feeling of characters who were very connected to the place where they were born, you know, their families have been there for generations, there's a very palpable feeling of home, and that's not something I was ever -- you know, that's something I really had to imagine, it's not something that I grew up with, so for me, the only way to, and maybe that's one of the reasons why I didn't write an American story, because I couldn't capture

that, that feeling of just being so connected to the land over generations and generations.

And I think there are things in the political situation in this book that are similar to things that happened in the US and in India. The reason I didn't set it in India is because I just -- I don't know India well enough. I left when I was two, I haven't visited a lot, you know, and I have a vague idea of some of the political conflicts in India, but I don't know them intimately, so, you know, that was, that -- trying to get that feeling of, you know, just imagine what does it really feel like for this, these characters to have this relationship with the place where they were born. And once I decided that I could set the novel in a fictional country, that became maybe a bigger theme that I knew when I was setting out, I wasn't sure that that was going to be as much of a theme as it did become by the end. But I think it really is about characters and their feelings of home and leaving that home.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, it brings up another question that I had, which is about this sense of home. These are invented cities in which, you know, the story takes place. So there are places, Sulat and English Canal and Luling Province, Alexandria, and Mount Belet. Maybe describe some of these places and how, how they shaped the story and the characters' relationship with these places.

CHAITALI SEN: So, the characters first meet at college.

SARIKA MEHTA: I think it was Mount Belet.

CHAITALI SEN: Yes, Mount Belet is where they meet. So the funny thing is that these places that are fictional places, the landscape and geography is very much familiar to me. So, a lot of these landscapes might be recognizable to people who live in the US. So Mount Belet is like a university in, at a higher elevation, and there are gorges, and, you know, it's very dramatic geologically. There are waterfalls, and, so that's very similar to Cornell, where I was an undergrad. And then, Alexandria is their capitol city, that's where John is from, and that's, I guess, where the, the city where the country's elite tend to come from.

And, you know, I mean, every country has cities like that, so, that wasn't too much of a stretch. Luling, so Luling is actually the name of a place in Texas that I've never visited. But, Luling, a lot of it is based on, like, the semi-arid environment around Austin. And then, I would say the one place that really is completely, just completely was made up, is the province where Mariam comes from, and English Canal, and the name English Canal I just, I studied atlases a lot, and I just looked at places, and different names for places around the world, and I kind of, you know, when something caught my eye I would just make a note of it, and there's actually a town, I think in India, called English Bazaar, and I just thought that was so charming and, you know, just an interesting name for a place, and so that's where I got the name English Canal. But, that particular place is not based on any place that I am familiar with. But, you know, that's a, the center of this province where there was a civil war. You know, in some ways, I think it's a little bit different from the rest of the province. There's a university there, there's a college there, but it's, it also contains some of the conflicts of the province.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. And one of the conflicts that happens, you know, before Mariam is even born, directly effects the rest of her life because of, let's call it documentation complications, you know, and that speaks to her understanding and her sense of home. And I'm curious if, in your real life and your life experiences, and maybe even as a teacher, if you had any kinship with Mariam in that understanding, or if I'm digging too deep to find something autobiographical.

CHAITALI SEN: No, absolutely, I mean, obviously I'm not undocumented, and, you know, my parents

came through the, you know, '65 immigration act, and, but, I don't think you can really be, at least in urban spaces in this country, without knowing people who struggle with documentation. I certainly have, through teaching and through just, you know, having friends and being part of the South Asian community in New York, where I was for, you know, 11, 12 years as an adult. So, that and the idea of, just, separation and families being displaced and dislocated from each other, and, you know, those were all things that were on my mind as I was writing Mariam's character and writing the novel.

So, you know, and absolutely, some of what made it into the novel was based on those questions that I had, just, you know, from being a person in these urban spaces in, you know, these last 20, 30 years, documentation is an issue here, and, you know, it's just in our, the way geopolitical system works these days. There is a necessity of documentation. There are people who are, you know, for several reasons, have to work around those laws and then there are consequences. It creates a different circumstance, and people who are documented have more privilege than people who are not documented, no matter how you look at it.

So, I wanted to see what that would do to a relationship that's intimate, you know, in this situation it's between -- and Mariam doesn't realize that she's not, doesn't have the proper documentation until much later in her life, but it was interesting to see how the pressure of that, having to work around that issue affects people who are, you know, very intimately connected.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right, absolutely. You've mentioned a couple of times that you were very involved in the political scene of South Asian Americans in New York, I think in the '90s, that's when it was really in its heyday. For our listeners who aren't familiar, maybe describe what that is, and your place in that.

CHAITALI SEN: Yes, so, in the late '90s, there was, I think there were just a lot of people who, you know, ended up in a certain space. So in this case, it was in New York, but I'm sure that this was replicated in other cities around the country. So, a lot of young people in their 20s and early 30s, who had grown up either in -- who were from South Asia, who had either grown up in the US or had come later, and so I think there was just a really vibrant time of all of these people coming together, and I think sharing, you know, their various experiences, and from that, a lot of different political groups, you know, artistic and political groups, formed. So, you know, SAWCC, South Asian Women's Creative Collective started around that time, and that was a really important group for me. I, you know, I was not a founding member, but I kind of witnessed the beginning of it, I was on the executive board early on. And I, if I hadn't been involved in that group and come across that group, where all these women were starting to talk -- think about what it was to be an artist in our community, and in our time, if I hadn't been a part of that I don't know that this book would have ever come about, or that I ever would have kept writing.

So that was one of the groups that were really important. I was mainly active in a group called South Asians Against Police Brutality. We formed when a Haitian immigrant named Abner Louima was raped in police custody.

SARIKA MEHTA: Oh, my god.

CHAITALI SEN: And, so we kind of formed because there was going to be a big march across the Brooklyn Bridge, and so we, you know, just a bunch of friends and I made a banner, we marched across the Brooklyn Bridge, and we just couldn't believe what kind of reception, just our banner, all it said was South Asians Against Police Brutality, and the reception we got was just tremendous, because, you

know, here was this group that wasn't at the time directly affected by police brutality, so the fact that people were going out, and it wasn't just, you know, other South Asians were there, even if they weren't directly a part of South Asians Against Police Brutality, but, to be a visible presence there, you know, just as an act of solidarity, was really powerful.

But, you know, there were just so many groups, and I think that Asian American Literary Journal has an issue that's just about this period, and about these different groups that had formed during that time. And a lot of these people are still active, maybe not in the groups, I mean, South Asians Against Police Brutality is not around anymore, but, you know, there are people who are active in -- still active in that issue. And some of the groups are still around, like SAWCC, but, I mean, that was a time when there were just so many groups starting, and everybody sort of knew each other, and there was a lot of dialogue going on, a lot of discussion and, you know, a lot of political wrangling and arguments, but, you know, just, you know, in the interest of moving things forward, it really was an amazing time.

It wasn't a time when I got a lot of writing done, but it, you know, it definitely, I think, you know, formed my world view, and integral to how I, you know, the things that were interesting to me as a writer. And then finally, I left New York in 2005, just, you know, because I wanted to write, I didn't want to be so distracted by everything that was going on in New York, not just politically, but it was so important to me, and if I hadn't been there for that time, I just feel so lucky. If I hadn't been there during that time, I would have, I'm sure I would be a very different writer today.

SARIKA MEHTA: It was a really exciting time, I remember when I was doing a lot of research towards my masters thesis, that a lot of what I was reading was literally from New York, published in the late '90s. It was definitely an exciting time to be there and some of us had to miss out on it, but. Well, as you mentioned, you know, you left New York, you live in Austin, and I didn't realize you were a first grade teacher, which I'm just going to say, that's awesome. Well, I was curious, you know, now that you live in Austin, well, it's been, you know, 10 years, but, how does your current life and how does teaching feed into your -- does it feed into your writing, do you just lead really separate lives? Talk about that a little bit.

CHAITALI SEN: Yeah, so, I mean, for a long time I just kept it separate. When I wasn't -- when I was writing, I wasn't a teacher, I didn't think about teaching, and when I was teaching, when I was in school, I didn't think about my writing at all. And I just kept them split separate, they were two different parts of my identity, and it worked for a long time. It got harder toward the end, when I really was starting to think about publishing this book, that I started to feel really split. And that was -- that sort of culminated in this year, and so the book came out in October, and I, you know, signed my contract last spring, so I decided to go back, not knowing what it was going to be like, because this book is not for kids, as you know. And I was really nervous about the parents finding out, and my principal, and I had to go kind of through this whole, I don't know what else to call it but like a coming out process, where I finally told people at work that I was a writer, too, and I had this book coming out.

And it was actually really surprising, because my, the, my colleagues and my principal were so incredibly supportive and proud, and read the book. I mean, they've like really gone out and championed the book. And some parents did find out. I didn't announce it to them. And they've been great, but I did, I will say that I'm not going to be going back next year, just because I do think it's really difficult to be a full time first grade teacher or elementary school teacher and a published writer who's expected to do things to promote their book. I have a hard time going, you know, like, taking days off to go to a conference. I'm not going to AWP, you know, just, it's getting to be too hard to do both.

But it's been a really great year where I haven't had to split myself. Everybody knows at work that I'm a writer and I really love teaching too. And, you know, it's just one of these things where I, it's really nice that, again, that I got to experience it. And I got to do both, and a lot of times I just, I wished I wasn't torn like that. I wished that I didn't have this passion for teaching, and I wish that I didn't also want to write so badly, because if could just be a teacher, you know, if you really commit to teaching, it's an amazing job, and there are so many amazing things you can do. And, you know, it's very time consuming, it's stressful, but, it's something that I think would have made me very happy if I wasn't also so torn and so hungry to write. So, you know, they're two very intense things that are hard to do together for a long, long, period of time.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, absolutely, that -- they're both very full time and a half commitments, so it's very impressive that you were able to publish while you were teaching. That is not easy.

CHAITALI SEN: I mean, I don't have that kind of stamina anymore. And, like, this year I've tried to get up early again, you know, like, I was like, I did it once before, I can do it again, and it's just not working. I can't do it. I just would rather sleep in, I'm tired, I just don't have the energy, even a year ago, so --

SARIKA MEHTA: That's totally fair. So, now that *The Pathless Sky* has been, it's out there, published, and making waves, what are you working on now?

CHAITALI SEN: I've got two novels that I have been thinking about a lot, and, I started one, and have put that one aside. That one is actually about a young woman who lives in New York, but I'm changing the time period, but it's probably going to be around the time that the Iraq War is starting, you know, around 2003. And the other novel is actually a coming of age novel, about an Indian American girl. So I've kind of gone full circle, where I started writing about American characters who were very similar to me, and moved away from that, and right now that's where my head is, so that's, those are two things, and I'm not sure which one will be finished first. Probably the coming of age novel, because it will be shorter. But those are two things that I'm working on.

SARIKA MEHTA: Can you speak to some of the differences in the writing process, or is it still too early to describe that?

CHAITALI SEN: Yeah, I think it's probably too early, because I'm not very far into the new novels yet. And also I've been distracted by this book coming out, and having to do, not having, it's not a chore, but you know, doing promotion for that, and teaching, and, so, it's like a third job has been added, so I've been pretty distracted. So, yeah, like, maybe, I'm hoping by the end of the summer I'll have a draft of one of these done. That might be really ambitious, but maybe I could probably talk to it more than -- I'm not, I would actually like to say I'm doing this research, but actually, I don't think I can help doing research when I'm writing fiction, so, even for my coming of age novel, because it takes place in Pennsylvania and New York, and like I just did a whole bunch of research on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, just for fun, just because the Verrazano Bridge is the novel, very briefly, so, you know, some of that stuff is the same. I think I'm starting to kind of figure out what my habits are as a writer. But as far as what the process will be, ultimately I'm not really sure yet.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's fair. It's pretty early, and when you do come full circle and get those out, we'll look forward to having you back here again.

CHAITALI SEN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, Chaitali Sen, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

CHAITALI SEN: Thank you so much for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was Chaitali Sen, author of *The Pathless Sky*. To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out IntersectionsRadio.Wordpress.com. Visit the same website for previous episodes of this podcast. And, join the facebook community at facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio. I'm Sarika Mehta, and this is Intersections Radio. Thanks for listening.