

## INTERSECTIONS RADIO

### INTERVIEW WITH MOAZZAM SHEIKH

#### TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to Intersections Radio, the podcast where we geek out on all things intersectionality. I'm your host, Sarika Mehta. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in.

The Chicago Quarterly Review is a literary anthology that invites aspiring and established writers to submit fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Any writer can tell you the challenges of getting published, and the topic itself has been discussed by so many authors on this show. The wonderful surprise of this latest issue, Volume 24, is that it's the South Asian American Issue. That's the title, and there are 46 south Asian American writers featured. Forty-six, and in fact, two of those writers, Nayomi Munaweera and Chaitali Sen, have been guests on this show.

Today, I am chatting with a senior editor of the South Asian American Issue of the Chicago Quarterly Review, Moazzam Sheikh. He's a writer and translator who lives in San Francisco, and author of two collections of short stories: "Cafe Lahore And Other Stories," and "Idol Lover And Other Stories." His fiction is also featured in the South Asian American Issue. Moazzam Sheikh joins me today here in San Francisco, at Cafe Trieste. This is Intersections Radio.

Moazzam Sheikh, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: A pleasure to be here with you, Sarika, thanks for flying in.

SARIKA MEHTA: Tell us a little bit about yourself for our listeners.

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Well, I have been living in San Francisco for almost 32 years. I've seen lots of ups and downs, what you earlier mentioned, the dot com boom and bust and boom again, and the displacement, and the emergence of tent cities, and needle shooting, and I just told you about the incident at the library. So I find myself very much part of the local political and literary scene and movement.

Originally I'm from Pakistan. I came here in 1985, and I studied cinema and then library science, and through just a series of incidents, or accidents, I veered towards writing, and then translations.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, let's get some background on the literary publication of the Chicago Quarterly Review. First, tell us what's unique about this literary publication, and how the South Asian American Issue came to fruition.

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Well, you know, as a literary community, or as a minority, immigrant minority, you develop a collective voice, because there are issues that impact everyone, and so it's not as unique a phenomenon. We've had anthologies of such nature by Chicana and Chicano writers, African American writers, LGBT, so it's actually following in the footsteps of other marginalized groups, and assessing where we stand in terms of our political views, and comprehension.

There have been attempts before, not a whole lot, and you can actually, you know, find that in my introduction here. But I think this is so far the most comprehensive. But I think at this point, the, you know, the migration that started around the '70s and the alienation that the kids of that generation felt, and growing up in small towns and suburbia, and big towns, and, you know, all the places.

There was a time when south Asian writers could not talk about every issue they felt like needed to be addressed. There's like a pressure, but I had been sensing that we're at a time, and maybe because of the Iraq wars and the fiasco in Afghanistan, and in the explosion of the media, social media, and in that, the people have been exposed to so many different layers of truths and lies. But this issue's more, you know, not completely successful, but more dedicated to how we view ourselves as part of America, that we're not taking up the world, you know, what Rushdie's novels have tried to do.

SARIKA MEHTA: What do you mean by that?

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Well, it's not about India. It's not about colonization, you know. Our issues are more specific to what our country is doing and how it impacts where we might have come from and trying to understand why we are here. But, America, it has its own struggles, you know, such as Black Lives Matter, and, you know, education, and, you know, you were talking about earlier how the academic part, academic debates, are going to disappear because the young academics are not being hired, the whole tenure issue, that they can't even freely write about certain issues because they may not get the tenure.

So, we, the newer generations of south Asian American writers, have to start looking at the issues of homelessness, the corporate greed, and, you know, are we comfortable enough to criticize the wars? Do we, you know, feel comfortable that we are as American as anybody else, and we can actually criticize the status quo, and not feel like, oh, we're still grateful immigrants. And so that is a turning point in my book.

SARIKA MEHTA: We're definitely going to talk more about that in a moment. I just wanted to take a step back and talk about the actual publication. What were some of the challenges in making this happen? You said that there were anthologies previously. In this anthology, I mean, there are 46 south Asian American writers who contributed, and it's not a monolithic group of people, it never is when we're talking about art, but, it is very easy to sort of paint this wide brush of calling this group the Latino group, and this group

the African American group, and this group, you know, the south Asian group. And, these are writers who are representing our community, but at the same time, a wealth of intersectional identities.

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Well, it's a tough one, because there are shortcomings in this anthology which nobody has picked up yet. For example, there's no writer from Bhutan. There's no writer from Nepal. Should we include Afghanistan in it or not? So, it has ended up becoming very much the big force, you know, and hopefully in the future we can correct that. The, you know, I mean, I relied on other people, you know, the second round, like, hey, do you know other writers that I, you know, and, if there were writers from Nepal, and there are, out there, you know, and it's just that I, you know, were not impressed by their work, or there were not many, you know, there's one police writer, but he's very well published and that kind of stuff, you know, and I didn't want to go in that direction.

There are exceptions I made, because I thought there work was inclusive, such as Nayomi, and, you know, Nayomi's work that I've included is not a short story, it's a chapter, so I, you know, did bend the rules here and there, and that just shows that no effort is perfect, and we're all human, and every anthology should reflect the choices and vices of the guest editor, and only in that way makes it like a human endeavor.

So, there were those types of challenges in terms of, like, how monolithic we are, you know. We're not as monolithic, it's an artificial category. If you look at the ancient map of India, it has oscillated, you know, the Indus River is the demarcation line and, you know, the Indian empires have spilled into Iran and Afghanistan, and they're -- those empires from the other side have spilled onto the other side, you know. And it's only in modern recent history that we have, the colonial era, that we have gotten stuck with these notions of south Asians. But there is something that binds us, but then again, there's a lot in common between, you know, the food that's cooked in, gets cooked in Bombay and Delhi, and Tehran. It's just a way to, you know, we live in the age of categorization.

SARIKA MEHTA: I want to talk a little bit about audience and community response. At the end of the day, this is written for of course ourselves, as, or yourselves, as the artists, but, for an audience, and, I was curious, given that this is the first time that an entire volume is dedicated to the south Asian American community of writers, what was the overall Chicago Quarterly Review audience response?

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Well, the audience question is tricky. South Asians don't read, more or less. You know, we are a newly developed middle class, so as part of that whole middle class behavior, we do buy books, from Amazon and big stores, and that kind of stuff, but, you know, it will happen and it's happening with the younger generation, you know, as the younger generation begins to live in urban centers, and visit bookstores. So, these factors do matter.

Our audience is not solely south Asians, you know, it is there, as a document for

ourselves to look back, hey. When the first anthology was published, or when the first issue was dedicated, or when the first south Asians were writing, those were the issues, you know, that's where they were, that's how they saw the society, and, you know, they saw themselves as guests. And look, 80 years later, 70 years later, this is where we stand. And if you look at the opening pieces, they're there on purpose. You know, I could have had a different story as the first base header, or whatever, and it would color the anthology slightly differently.

So, it is also for the larger audience. I want the majority of this country, whatever the majority is, I don't know if it's white anymore, or if it's mixed race, or it's middle class, or whatever, to read us, and see themselves through our prism. I would also like to have other minority groups intersect through our literature, like, we're part of their struggle. And that is one of the goals, you know, because the white status quo becomes this place where we need to fight with, and, you know, build alliances with, just an effort to create multi-polar America, in that sense, so I would like very much that African American writers and readers read, and that truly matters to me.

SARIKA MEHTA: After having spoken with so many writers for this show, it sometimes feels like a catch-22. On the one hand, as a south Asian American writer, the work has to be received by a wider audience, especially when it comes to things like novels, and they're trying to sell this in bookstores, and bookstores are saying, you know, with this kind of a name, is anyone going to buy it? Or, really the publishing industry is saying that.

And then at the same time, the writer has to respond to questions like, how can I, by a non south Asian, how can I relate to your work. But no one has ever asked non south Asian writers how can I, as a south Asian, relate to your work. So it's sort of this catch-22. I was wondering if you had any insight, as a writer in this community?

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: It goes back to the whole marketing question. There was a time when a lot of Pakistani writers would not get published because either they were trying to write like Indian writers, or they weren't Indian enough. And I think with terrorism and that kind of stuff, the paradigm shifted a little bit, and everybody has to kind of have those themes, and this is what the wider audience wants.

Which may be true or not, because the wider audience is probably smarter, but we have such a hold on what the wider audience reads through New York Times bestseller lists, even our public libraries work with that model. Give them what they want, keep them dumb, you know, that kind of stuff. You know, I don't want to be disrespectful, but it's like we don't encourage a culture of browsing.

So when things get published, also, south Asian writers are forced to write about grandma frying garlic, and Tamil wearing saree, and that kind of stuff, and arranged marriages, and that sort of stuff, you know, the tags, the fetishes. But I feel that this anthology does showcase that there are no more fetishes anymore. They are writing about issues that

concern probably their children. You know, wars will impact the children they're raising, that whole idea of that we'll retire and go back to India, doesn't apply anymore. You're not going back to India, I'm not going back to India, my kids are not going back to Pakistan, you know?

So, unconsciously, what we end up writing is about what matters here. And there is no frying garlic and exotica, what we call orientalism. You know, and the style, it may creep in, for far more political ways. There is an element of agency that female writers, and even male writers, have to provide agency to marginalized characters, and women do survive in this very hostile immigrant environment by turning the kitchen, and the camaraderie they develop with other south Asian women in their limited power thing, and there's something that has to be said, but that becomes a thing of the past. You know? And we have to remember that, how our mothers survived in this very hostile climate.

But the younger generation's issues are really the issues of the empire, and the ruling elite, and how our kids may end up junkies tomorrow, or cannon fodder for their imperial pursuits in Africa.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, I mean, the issues are just things that anyone could relate to. I want to shift for a second. So, you're also a translator. As a writer, and as a translator, how do each of these parts of your professional and personal life kind of feed into each other?

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: I'm, you know, English is not my first language, I'm very self taught, and I also went to Urdu medium school, which are basically Punjabi medium schools, that Punjabi teachers teaching you in Urdu, and it really doesn't sound Urdu, so, yes, it's complex. And I grew up in a culture where people might make fun of you if you're speaking in English a certain way, and so the jokes, even, took place when we came here and lived with other Indian and Pakistanis, and that kind of stuff.

So the act of translations always going on, and we do come from a colonial background. But those are very complex issues, and translating a literary work is slightly different. You're replicating somebody's work that doesn't concern America, but it's only a literary merit and you think there may be some pride involved, that hey, you know, Hindi has produced great writer, or how come nobody knows Hindi writers in the west, and why is it even important.

I've always had issues with that, that the whole translation enterprise in India and Pakistan is geared towards western centers, which is a very self defeating, you know, why a Bengali audience shouldn't be reading a Rajasthani writer? Why there are no institutions developed with state help and local culture, where Bengali writers can know Punjabi writers? It's colonialism.

You know, we were carrying the legacy, and the joke, you know, remember that in the '90s, Hindi movies, Bollywood movies, started to have their debut openings in the west, in New York and Chicago and San Francisco, because that's where the power was, in our

eyes. And just the word Bollywood, somebody sitting in England has the power, the word Bollywood is not an original word, there was, it was coined by somebody in England, of an Indian background, a BBC guy just called it Bollywood and it clicked, and then there's a Nollywood and Lollywood, and that.

When I was growing up, it was never Bollywood, it was Hindi cinema. So, these are colonial behaviors, these are, you know, we don't even realize, but, they cannot be avoided. After all, we do drink tea and Coca-Cola, but we have to recognize where they're coming from. So translation, literary translation, is a slightly different beast. But it teaches you a lot how to pay attention to every single word.

One of the writers I translated just recently died, Naiyer Masud, and he's being mourned all over the world now. And I remember when I translated his, one of his most famous stories, "Essence of Camphor," we had to go through these fifteen or seventeen drafts. I worked with a native speaker.

SARIKA MEHTA: I believe it.

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Yeah. And she taught me I can't just take it for granted. Language, you have to pay attention to. And so, once I started my own fiction also, I have gone through several stages of where, you know, the level of attention and level of control, and how it's being received by your ear, and by your eye, you know, it's an ongoing process. Even if you're writing it very fast, that it's just like naturally coming to you, and suddenly you have a story. I think it would be a very good thing if most writers were translators

SARIKA MEHTA: That was what I was thinking about, is that you have a relationship with the craft and the field of writing, and at the same time, you're trying to be as authentic and accurate to what was in the original language. And it's not your words, but you are the person who is putting the language there, and --

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: Yeah, you know, it, translation is not only a literal thing, as an immigrant, the process of translation that's happening with you at work, with your friends, you're always explaining yourself, you know, and your friends are perceiving you in a certain way, your colleagues are perceiving you in a certain way. So, it's interesting that, when you start doing actual translations, you begin to realize it's a dialogue between two different cultures, two different language systems, expressions may not match, and it allows you a little agency to become the second writer. It allows you to see in any relationship, whether with a person, with a workplace, with a book, there are different forces involved, and there is a responsibility that you don't want to dilute it.

But then you see, you know, those writers are being retranslated because, the translation done 80 years ago doesn't fulfill the modern sensibility, and that just shows you the depth of scholarship that we lack in India and Pakistan because institutions are not that old.

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

MOAZZAM SHEIKH: My pleasure, Sarika.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was my guest Moazzam Sheikh, senior editor of the Chicago Quarterly Review's South Asian American Issue. You can learn more and buy a copy at [ChicagoQuarterlyReview.com](http://ChicagoQuarterlyReview.com). To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out [IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com](http://IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com).

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