

## Feminist Caucus in Conversation with Sadiqa de Meijer and Shazia Hafiz Ramji

League of Canadian Poets, September 2020

**Sadiqa:** Leading up to this conversation, we've already exchanged a few thoughts about writing, and I'd like to ask you more about one thing you said to me which was, "I've been thinking about the many ways in which silence has played a part in my life, especially in the lives of women I know. I think that my job as a writer is to sit with silence and to urge it outwards into voice." I'd love to hear more on that thought.

**Shazia:** Yeah, you know, when you asked me that over our email exchange, I really had to think about it; when you asked me about speaking more about silence, I almost shut down immediately. I was like, oh, what can I say, because it's so complicated. I think silence in my own life has been really positive and renewing. I spend a lot of time alone. I need a lot of time alone. But, I know that the silence in the lives of the women of my family especially, hasn't been the same. It's kind-of a different kind of silence and it has to do more with shame and historical and patriarchal oppression and erasure. And I feel like it's my responsibility to my ancestors and myself to give voice to that silence because I feel like breaking it in some way is going to heal me and the ancestral sort-of trauma and pain that's in my body. I've been thinking a lot about healing too and how breaking silence can be a kind-of healing. What about you?

**Sadiqa:** Well, I think that's quite profound what you're saying about silence and I recognize too, that it can have those different qualities to it; a sense of being silenced of something that's actually needing to be said that hasn't been or can't be safely said or is repressed and on the other hand, the gift of a silence that feels safe and renewing and a place where I think, writing wise, we can come to hear a voice that might be a writing voice inside of us. That silence is also often necessary for that.

**Shazia:** So, how do you practice that in your own life? How do you sort-of cultivate that inner voice that arises from the silence?

**Sadiqa:** I have to say that, in that sense, my writing feels very colored by parenting over the past 10 years so, that kind-of silence has been a precious commodity. It's been relatively rare and so it's something that I seek out when I can. I go for walks; I do have my own room for writing. I have a room of my own and it doesn't have a lock but it's good enough and I'm really fortunate for that. It's also a place I can go to do that work, but I've learned to take what comes like the small, short intervals of silence and to sometimes kind-of curl into them even when they don't feel like they're going to amount to much because it's what there is and so, I'm sure my writing would be different if that wasn't the case but I don't mind that. We all have forces in our lives that shape what we're able to make and how and so that's part of what generates my current projects and my voice is that there isn't really that much silence in my life, I suppose. How about yourself?

**Shazia:** Yeah, I find it really difficult too. I live alone, but I feel like I work really hard to maintain living alone, especially in Vancouver. The rents are so high, so it's pretty difficult to find a small space to stay alone. But yeah, I would definitely say it makes me feel like an outsider in a way because I cherish silence so much. I'm constantly just trying to save whatever silence I have in my life and sometimes people get offended when my boundaries are too strict or you know, sometimes people don't understand why I want to be alone so much. Yeah, I think I hide it sometimes because it's so precious to me. I'm constantly struggling to find it too. I take on so much work to have this place, to stay alone, but then I have to consciously mediate, consciously go for a walk, just to cultivate that voice for the poems and for the novel. Especially right now, I feel like I'm really struggling because I'm writing the novel through poems. So, I'll write a poem and it'll be a scene for the novel but I constantly have to stay steeped in the images or I'll lose it if I come out into the world too much and start to do too many things. So, I'm constantly trying to keep it.

**Sadiqa:** So, you're building a whole sort-of alternate dwelling place almost for yourself with the project.

**Shazia:** Yeah, I'm really trying and I feel the novel is really testing that for me. With poems, I feel like I can have brief spaces of silence, about half an hour or even at night, and I can write a poem or write a draft of a poem or something. With a novel, I find I really have to sustain it.

**Sadiqa:** Right.

**Shazia:** It's been challenging.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah. How does that silence relate to the one that isn't voluntary? I mean, do you start to hear those voices that you've alluded to that might be ancestral or have to do with women in your family and around you? How do they come to you and how do you start to translate their silence into words?

**Shazia:** That's such a good question and I'm so glad you asked me that because I was trying to articulate how exactly. I guess I feel like I receive images and voices. You're a poet so you'll understand, but that might sound a little crazy to other people, but it's just that the more quiet I am, the more I can pay attention to these sort-of like stray or random images that will come to me, and they're almost always connected to my past. I guess because I've been reading so much about it and trying to talk to my family about it so much and so, I think I've become more attentive to them and have started honoring them as opposed to letting them pass. And I've only been able to do that since I've started to sustain the silence for the novel.

**Sadiqa:** That doesn't sound crazy to me at all. *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** I mean culturally, I think we tend to kind-of easily accept that physically, we're made of our parents and their generations going back. We have their biology and genetic material

and the cells have been passed on, but I think that's also so true of our less material parts like our spirit or what we might want to call it and so, the idea that images or voices are coming to you through that channel, I feel is very natural and I can relate too, to the idea of needing to pay attention and listen to them and give them voice in some way. Part of what you're saying makes me look forward to when there might be periods in my life where parenting isn't quite so hands-on anymore and then, it'll be interesting to see what comes in a longer interval of concentration. But, I also hear what you're saying in that it can be challenging to combine that with real world living and to sustain that place that you're going to for yourself.

**Shazia:** Yeah, it can seem selfish to people outside of yourself, but I'm curious about your process though. Do you also work with the voice in poetry or do you come to images first? How is it for you?

**Sadiqa:** I do tend to have worked mostly with poems that start sonically. I find a phrase will come to me often and it'll be a phrase or a few words that have a certain sort-of charge around them that I know I want to write a poem with them and I go from there. And so often, even the outward movement from that single phrase tends to be on a bit of a sonic basis, that the way it sounds is the way that it echoes out into the rest of the poem's structure. So, having said that, what I'm now working on is a project poetry-wise that doesn't do that because of course, I think as writers we're also often just curious to push ourselves or to see what happens if we vary our usual approach and so, in this case, it's a project that's very much looking at and thinking of having a mixed background and so, I'm talking about two places called the Mother Country and the Father Country, which are partly geographically real and partly imaginary, but with those two prompts, I am working with images more. I just go to each of those places and try to imagine them more and more fully and start working with their tensions and interactions and so, it's not that approach I've had in the past of waiting to sort-of hear a phrase like that in my mind.

**Shazia:** Right. I'm so curious about how you conceptualize it in terms of Mother Country and Father Country. So, does that also have to do with parentage, but also, land? Do you have actual places that you're thinking about as the countries that you're then transposing into these imaginary sites?

**Sadiqa:** Yes, that's right. So, it's both and it's also the way we originate differently from our mother's and our father's bodies - all of that and in the relational aspects between daughters and parents, between myself and my parents. My mother's country of origin is the Netherlands and my father's is Kenya. But at the same time, what you and I also talked about briefly earlier is, even my father's country is sort-of a notion that is easy to fragment once again because his family came from Pakistan and Afghanistan and of course, Pakistan didn't even exist geographically –

**Shazia:** Right, right.

**Sadiqa:** - when his great grandparents came over from there and so, there are all sorts of ways that the idea breaks into not just pieces, but currents I would say; currents that sort-of spread out from each other and I think that impossibility of naming a single place and you know, the fact that it becomes kind-of prismatic in nature, is part of what I'm interested in.

**Shazia:** That's so beautiful, so well said. I can't wait to read it.

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** Well, thank you very much. It's always nice to hear really early encouragement *[laughs]*, so I appreciate that.

**Shazia:** Yeah, you're one of the few people I've found who is also mixed and also has similar trajectories in my life. You know, my dad's family is from Kenya too, from the coast, and so they are twice displaced as well, like India and Pakistan weren't in existence when his ancestors moved to Kenya. I feel that the nuance gets lost, the nuances of the identities of my dad's ancestors and the more distant ancestors. It gets lost once we've settled elsewhere, and I'm really interested in what it would look like to try to bring that nuance back.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, exactly. Those relationships are so complex and it's part of also why it's also been so great for me to make this connection with you because I think we both recognize that it's rare to embody that background –

**Shazia:** Yeah

**Sadiqa:** - in this country and it's really meaningful for me to hear someone else talk about it too and to see it come up in your work.

**Shazia:** Yeah, I was in Victoria over the weekend and I went to Russell Books and I was so surprised to find a novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, who's a British, Kenyan writer.

**Sadiqa:** Right.

**Shazia:** The novel is very much about just the mixed families and the secrecy that can come from being mixed in places like Kenya or in south Asian families in Kenya and south Asian African families in Kenya and the secrecy and the taboo that it sort-of takes on after generations down the line; that silence sort-of builds.

**Sadiqa:** That's fascinating. I want to look for that because I know I've read another book of his that I really loved but I don't know that one.

**Shazia:** Oh, nice.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, that's very much a narrative current in my own family and it's almost as if there are layers to colonialism and to de-colonialism that don't even come up in conversation here locally so much because we're focused on the white –

**Shazia:** Yeah.

**Sadiqa:** - well, the white/Indigenous, white/brown, light/black divide, all of those. In Kenya, there are whole other strata of oppression and of inherited worth that were created by colonialism among the in-between people who aren't white.

**Shazia:** Absolutely. I feel, you know, when people especially talk about things like British India, it's almost seen as like a by-gone era of things that are like, no longer in existence, but the more that I've been working on the new poems and the more I talk to people like you, I just feel like it's so present in my life. You know, the history of empire, it's essentially shaped the entire way my family has moved across the world and the places that we've ended up in. It's still so present.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, that's fascinating and I don't know if this is the case within your family as well, but I find that also, in a certain generation, there can be a reverence for that colonial power, and it's not purely reverence, I don't mean that, but there's a sense, in both my family, a sense of recognition of it's problematic nature, but on a very much more personal level; there are still a lot of internalized senses of the British golden standards -

**Shazia:** Yeah.

**Sadiqa:** - that is also so complex to work with and in a way, I think we might be one of the first generations to be able to really safely critique that and undo it in ourselves to the greatest extent possible.

**Shazia:** Yeah, so well said. I definitely have seen that kind-of reverence of like, Naipaul's generation.

**Sadiqa:** Right.

**Shazia:** Yoon Naipaul has this reverence for England too and in so much of his work. On my mom's side, my grandpa, too, is mixed Irish, south Asian and Persian, -

**Sadiqa:** Yes.

**Shazia:** - and he had a lot of reverence for the empire and it came through in the way my mom speaks about him and the way that she spoke to me about England and even about Canada.

**Sadiqa:** That's very interesting. I don't want to draw you out on a work in progress, you only have to say what you're ready to say, but did the novel look at those questions in some way?

**Shazia:** Yeah, I'm struggling with it. I'm hoping that the poems will open *[laughs]* something, will open a way for me to speak about that without sounding too grading, too judgmental. Right

now, I feel like I'm at a really raw place where I'm struggling to understand. But I'm trying to move myself towards this like, nuance understanding of how somebody could feel that way at that time and why they might feel that way. It's a lot of research actually.

**Sadiqa:** That can be a hard leap to make when it seems we have a sense of moral clarity about the situation now, in retrospect.

**Shazia:** Yeah and you were saying like our generation, you know, we have a good vantage point to critique it and I feel very much that that's very true, that we are situated in a good spot to critique it. So, I feel strongly about that. It's difficult for me to imagine the other side, so that's my challenge that I'm setting up for myself right now and it's difficult. *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, I can really imagine that and is travel part of the research for you?

**Shazia:** Luckily, when Port of Being came out, I ended up going to Dublin to read at a conference there and that unlocked so much of the historical research I was doing. It just ended up being very coincidental that the family was rooted there on my mom's side and so, I guess I did traveling before COVID when I could. *[laughs]* But I've never been to like, India or Pakistan or Iran and I don't think you can go there to be honest until it's a little bit more safe. Have you done traveling to the Netherlands and to south Asia and Kenya?

**Sadiqa:** Well, I have not been to south Asia, though I would love to someday, but the Netherlands is the country we physically immigrated from to Canada and so, I've been back there the most over the years, not regularly in the last two decades but before that when my grandparents were alive. We would go every one to two years for a little while, so I know the Netherlands well. Kenya is a little more of a sense memory almost. I think I was 7 the last time we were there.

**Shazia:** Oh wow. What do you remember, if I can ask?

**Sadiqa:** Well, interestingly, I remember quite a lot and I'm not sure what to make of that as far as the amount of detail that I do hold, except that I think it must have been a really good feeling place to be. You know, that there was a sense of soaking in lots of experiences. Yeah, we lived there twice in that time when I was a young kid with my father's extended family and so, I do remember that period fairly well and I also remember the return to the Netherlands and how I had certain small habits that were heavily critiqued when I started going to school in that culture. The one that stands out for me is smiling too much. I guess that part of Dutch culture is you don't smile unless you have a good reason. *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** In Kenya, that's not so much the case and I think I had sort-of taken on the friendliness of being out in the street and just a smile being kind-of a default way to greet strangers. So yeah, I remember small corrections made like that to my bearing after we did come back from Kenya.

**Shazia:** Wow, that's so fascinating. I haven't thought about that but it's so true. How do you think those corrections were felt or were made?

**Sadiqa:** That's a great question. I feel that they feed right into the trope sort-of makeup of racism or forms of it because I think the association, for example, with smiling for no reason, was that maybe I was kind-of daft, you know; I wasn't all there because I was this state of baseline happiness or something *[laughs]* that wasn't right and so, I remember feeling that edge of judgement around that we're not just trying to ask you to fit in, but we're warning you that this is not what sanity looks like to us. *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** Right.

**Sadiqa:** That's obviously not how 7-year-old girls spelled it out but yeah, I remember that feeling about it and then I learned. I learned over the months and maybe that year to hold it in and to be grimmer. And it's fascinating to me that that whole unfolding of what part of you becomes dominant, what part of you is permissible, is so dependent on place and culture.

**Shazia:** Yeah, its almost like in a way, the place has rewritten your body and your expression.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, exactly.

**Shazia:** So fascinating.

**Sadiqa:** That's a really good phrase for it. And you mentioned very briefly the title of your book, "Port of Being", which, I think is so beautiful and I wanted to ask you about the title and about port cities in general. I mean, you're living in one, in Vancouver, but tell me more about how that plays into your work.

**Shazia:** You know to be honest, even though I wrote a book called Port of Being, I didn't really concretize ports too much. They were just always places. Ports were always just something I felt drawn to constantly and only after writing my book, I realized that my parents and my grandparents and my ancestors all lived in port cities like Bombay, Bander Abbas and south Iran and Mombasa and Zanzibar; everything has always been a port. And even when I visit any country, I always go to the port if I'm feeling kind-of like I want to feel at home. It's just so strange. You know, ports are spaces of movement and transience, so it's like, what does it mean for that kind-of place to feel like home? I still don't know –

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** - but it's something that I'm constantly drawn to.

**Sadiqa:** I think that's fascinating and I can relate to that feeling very much. I love cities like Rotterdam and yeah, as you said, Mombasa was a very long time ago, but ports are fascinating and I wonder if in some way, they are more likely to come up in diasporic origins in our history -

**Shazia:** Yeah

**Sadiqa:** - because the rest of the world, in a sense, is within reach, is right there.

**Shazia:** Yeah, there's spaces of intersection for sure. You know, where so many cultures mix and merge and I think the ports probably explain my identity, *[laughs]* -

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** - which is, you know, as a Muslim woman of Indian, Pakistani, Persian and Irish decent and everybody came from a port. *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** So true.

**Shazia:** Yeah.

**Sadiqa:** Yes, and even linguistically, the whole Swahili language –

**Shazia:** Yeah.

**Sadiqa:** - was a slow merger that happened because of trade and seafaring.

**Shazia:** Yeah. That's so true. There are so many words in Swahili that are also in Urdu and also in Arabic.

**Sadiqa:** Right.

**Shazia:** They're like interchangeable words.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah.

**Shazia:** Your new book, "Alfabet/Alphabet", how have you been working with language in that because it's very much about language, right? So, have you been looking at etymologies or?

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, so the book has that title because it consists of 26 little essays, so there's one for each letter of the alphabet.

**Shazia:** Oh.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah and partly I did that because I really wanted to have the opportunity to go in as many directions as possible because that's what I've realized when I started to think about language in that essay form and work on things, that it really is so multi-faceted for my relationship to Dutch and to my father's languages as well and so, yeah there are sections that are very anecdotal and deal with my emotional connection to Dutch, the way it feels maternal to me partly because my mother spoke it, partly because that's the language of my early childhood, and then also the question, how does that sound to English speakers? I surveyed my friends and had them all listen to a certain little clip of Dutch and asked them to describe it in a few words, so trying to feel out like, what am I speaking? What does it mean to outsiders?

**Shazia:** That's so beautiful.

**Sadiqa:** Thank you. I guess going back to that idea of what you said about re-writing the body based on where you are, based on place, when we talked about smiling, language, I think, also has that potential effect on us to almost re-write who we are depending on which language we inhabit, or languages. I mean, within Canada and in cities like Toronto and Vancouver, I think that's just one of the most fascinating things is that it's such a wide-spread experience to draw in multiple languages in your life, and also that each of us does that in some way uniquely and privately, you know, that this is the language for our grandparents and this is the language for work. And the book was really humbling in that way because in a way, it's delving into my own experience and it is that; it's a memoir in that sense but also, it makes me feel very connected to others that so many people in Canada are having that experience in some form or another.

**Shazia:** Mhm. A multi-lingual experience. And how did you come to the form of the essay as opposed to poetry? Did you know right away that it was going to be essays instead?

**Sadiqa:** Yes, to some extent. The reason was that when my first book came out, "Leaving Howe Island", I was asked in a couple of interviews how Dutch had influenced the poems, and because I had used a few Dutch words in some of them, there were people suggesting that they could hear the Dutch throughout the English, and it was in trying to answer those questions in conversation that I realized how inadequate my answer felt, that I was just sort-of on the surface of something much bigger that basically *[laughs]* needed to be book-length. I started writing down for myself those thoughts about it. I just kept a notebook for a year or two. Every time that I thought of some aspect of the way language worked for me or how it showed up in my life, the Dutch language, I would make a note of it and I wrote around the subject. And so, I think it was the nature of those notes. They weren't those little bits of sonic input that I associate with writing a poem. It was thought and thought for me is more prose.

**Shazia:** And so, do you regularly keep notebooks as part of your writing practice and observe yourself and sort-of actively look at yourself and listen to yourself? Or was it specifically for this project that you were working in this way?

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, I do. I have notebooks and I wish it was more consistently, *[laughs]* one clearly designated notebook, *[laughs]* but yeah. You do as well, is that right?

**Shazia:** Yeah, I always wish I was more methodical about it.

**Sadiqa:** Yeah. What I do these days is I have, you know those older style of stand up folders where you can put magazines in them? They're cardboard and I use one for each writing project now and so, if a notebook happens to have too many cross sections of different projects, I can separate the pages and also, if I come across any images or interviews or things that seem to really speak to the project, then often I just physically put them in that box and that also feels like something I can do when things are busier elsewhere in life and then return to without feeling like the momentum is totally broken.

**Shazia:** Mhm, mhm. Yeah, I feel like it makes such a difference to have a concrete thing that you can hold for collecting all the thoughts because it makes it feel like there's actually something there, right?

**Sadiqa:** Exactly, yes. It's different from a computer file. Yeah.

**Shazia:** I was listening to a podcast called, "A Phone Call with Paul", and he interviewed Lewis Hyde who wrote this popular book called, "The Gift of Creativity", but he was talking about Lewis Hyde's new book, but Lewis Hyde was talking about his notebook process and how the entire book arose out of those notebooks, and so he's actually formatted his new book the way that he organized his notebooks for collecting all the thoughts about the topics that he was writing about. After I heard that podcast, I thought, I really want to be methodical about the notebooks because before everything was just going in one and I started numbering the pages and trying to organize it with highlights but it just got messier.

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]* Right, yes.

**Shazia:** *[laughs]* Maybe I should try your folder technique. *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]* Well, that's an interesting thing, that new Hyde book. And I'm thinking too, of the poet, Phil Hall, and how I had heard him mention that all his poetic lines come from his notebooks, that it's basically a matter of assembly almost after he keeps meticulous notes.

**Shazia:** Yeah, poets are in a way, I think, people who catalog. I remember when I was young I used to make lists obsessively and I didn't know at the time what a poet was or what it even meant, but that list making sort-of impulse is still very much a part of what I do. Do you make lists too?

**Sadiqa:** That's very interesting. Other than to-do lists, I don't think I really do, no.

**Shazia:** *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]* But that's funny. You made me remember a moment when I was in grade school when I'd been sitting in class and I made a list of every student's name and after their name, I just wrote down a short description, a few adjectives about who I thought they were in a book, like something about their characterization or their personality and who they would be and then when I was done, I sat there and I realized I had an incredibly damning document in my hands basically, that if anyone found it, I would be in trouble. *[laughs]* So, I destroyed it.

**Shazia:** *[laughs]* Oh my god! How old were you?

**Sadiqa:** I think I was grade 3 or so.

**Shazia:** Oh my god, that's young. *[laughs]*

Sadiqa: But yeah, early version of my own list. *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** Deviance! *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]* I don't think I put myself. It's hard to be objective on yourself.

**Shazia:** It is very hard. You also just made me remember something too when I was young. I should tell you because it's a deviant memory as well. *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** When I was at mosque when I was really young, I used to get bored, and all of the elderly ladies used to sit in the same row, in the same arrangement, so I made a list of all the ladies and what they would wear and I would go around underneath the chairs at mosque while prayers were going on and make a note of which one had the smelliest feet. *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** I was only 5 or something like that *[laughs]* but that was definitely a poetry moment.

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]* That's amazing. Somewhere, there's a unit of measurement on a scale for that.

**Shazia:** *[laughs]* Right.

**Sadiqa:** If not, you invented it. *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** *[laughs]* The smelly feet index.

**Sadiqa:** Exactly. *[laughs]* I wondered too, with my latest book, Alfabet/Alphabet, both my parents are still alive, and they read the work and I think that was less the case when it was poetry. They love to read but I think poetry is more accessible to them and a lot of it, as we touched on earlier, is almost a kind-of reckoning with the contradictions of some of my past and with the postures towards language and ethnicity and identity that we inhabit in my family. There was a certain sense of risk, like writerly and personal risk, to making that part of our family conversation, and I was very fortunate that it went really beautifully, but I wondered if that's something you come up against in your work and does it ever serve as a silencing power to you, that sense of family?

**Shazia:** Yeah, thank you for bringing that up. That's such a good conversation and such a good question too. When my first book, Port of Being, came out, I hadn't really told my parents about the extent of my addiction; I hadn't really told anyone, and when it came out, I didn't know what to expect. They found out through the CBC interview that I did about the book. *[laughs]* I was prepared for the worst, but luckily, it didn't go bad. They accepted me and they loved me and now I visit them far more often than I used to. I almost feel like the book has allowed me to rebuild my relationships with my family. It's kind-of like brought me back to the world, so I think breaking the silence about it was so good in so many ways. But I never could have done it just one on one through talking, you know?

**Sadiqa:** I think that's fascinating because what we said earlier, that our generation might be among the first to safely examine and critique what happened, and that both of us are interested in voicing things that come to us through our ancestors, I wonder if there's also potential for it to serve as a healing substance in some way within the family. I imagine neither of us wrote for that purpose; when you described expecting the worst and I felt a little bit similarly when I sent my project to my parents, but I wonder if in those silences, no one was really comfortable in them I imagine, right? Even at the time and to start speaking when that possibility has come to us, it feels like that there might be a relief for the generations who had to live with the silence and through the silence.

**Shazia:** Yeah. In a way, it kind-of starts to shape who you write for. I feel like my first book was very much just written for me, and maybe for people who had been through similar experiences, like addiction especially, but afterwards, it kind-of broke my very small world and brought me back into the world of my family and my kin and my friends. I started to think about, well, who am I writing this novel for, you know? Over our email exchange, you said something really beautiful; you said that there isn't a readership for who you can write for and try to leap from a place of belonging and I thought that was so relatable, just based on our histories and the nuances in them. Are you thinking differently of who you write for? How do you think about that question of audience when you write?

**Sadiqa:** Well, maybe I'm at a slightly earlier stage than you are with that because I'm really interested in what you said, that your sense now of who you're writing for now has shifted since *Port of Being*, and I'm curious to see what will happen after this new stage of memoir-focused writing for me. But yeah, as you said, there isn't a sort-of single easily identifiable readership that I wouldn't have to, in some sense, explain myself to. *[laughs]* And that's why I think there is meaning in our encounter. You know, that's part of the sense of, we don't have to maybe code switch as much in our conversation and we're not identical obviously, but there's that feeling of, ok, you get it. I remember my first few short stories early on, occasionally coming back with some mixed feedback that amounted to something along the lines of, this character is unlikely. You know, that sense that the things, especially then at the level of just exploring short story, I didn't feel like I could write a fully white character. I wasn't inhabiting that in the world, neither it also felt fraudulent to write of a south Asian character who was fully, culturally immersed in that experience as an immigrant to Canada because that wasn't my story either. It's amazing how with writing it's almost like those details will just float up to the surface, you know? Those things that you can't fake and shouldn't be able to fake. It's not that I wanted to not be mixed and multi-religious and multi-lingual in my writing, but it was that it seemed what's normal to me and what I lived seemed that they were unlikely or contrived in some way to mainstream readers or editors at that time. I think that maybe that's gone in two directions now. On the one hand, I have a little more confidence as a writer in my imagination and my ability to say what I don't live as directly but also, it's almost become natural to just write from where I'm at and who I am and what I am and then sometimes, the feedback that comes from my writing group is exactly on the subject. "If you're writing potentially towards

white readers here, this part needs explaining, but if you don't feel like doing that or that's not your intention, then it doesn't." We're able to give each other that sort-of feedback and then it's a consciously weighed decision rather than an accommodation made because that's what is editorially acceptable.

**Shazia:** Mhm. It's so telling just to hear. Thank you for sharing for that by the way, that you received that comment about the characters being unlikely. I get similar comments in sort-of bigger institutional settings about the characters being unlikely and also, unlikable. *[laughs]* I think it's trope of the good immigrant, like all immigrants have to be good and polite and love the country that they're in. That becomes very difficult to write about something transgressive, like an immigrant who is also a drug addict or a thief or something like that, you know?

**Sadiqa:** That's very true. There's such a sense that we should be grateful to be here and that it's inevitably better what we've landed in. And sorry that that is happening, but I think it is a reality. Have you seen it shift at all over the course of your time as a writer?

**Shazia:** I've definitely been grateful for the conversations and publishings that are happening now which are making it easier for me to feel more at home about being unlikely. *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** But I also say, I've just been compartmentalizing, you know? Let's say I'm going to send it to a journal that's very British or very Canadian, I will explain because I know that they're readership might be different –

**Sadiqa:** Right.

**Shazia:** - but for the novel, I've been sort-of just following what Rohinton Mistry did. He didn't explain anything *[laughs]* and I'm trying to do that as best as I can and then figure out whatever explanations I might have to make later on. I think I'm still in early stages.

**Sadiqa:** I think that there's a courage to that and a certain logic too. I think Ta-Nehisi Coates did an interview and I heard him say to the reader, "Just do the work", and he said "If I'm reading a radical feminist essay, that's not my world, but I'll do the work. I'll put in the effort and meet the writer at their place of understanding", and I think it's okay to ask that of our readers, to just make the assumption in the writing that they will make that crossing towards us which is subversive in itself, you know? It's the opposite of the marginalized groups explaining themselves to, say, the more dominant group. I think that asking for that notion, there's a certain dignity and power in doing that.

**Shazia:** That's so beautiful, I love that. I think it would be such a good place to end. Do the work.

**Sadiqa:** *[laughs]*

**Shazia:** *[laughs]*

**Sadiqa:** Yeah, I've very much enjoyed getting to know your ideas and thoughts a little better and looking forward to your novel. I really hope you find the protective space to continue the momentum.

**Shazia:** Thank you, Sadiqa, and I hope we'll continue to be in touch, and I look forward to your essays very much too.

**Sadiqa:** Thank you very much. Me as well.