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Painting the Australian Landscape with a South-Asian Brush: An Interview with Roanna Gonsalves*

Roanna Gonsalves is an Indian Australian writer based in Sydney, author of the highly-praised short fiction collection *The Permanent Resident* (2016) – also recently published the title *Sunita De Souza Goes to Sydney: And Other Stories* (2018), in which she masterfully fills the contemporary Australian literary landscape with the hardly noticed experiences of Indian immigrant women living in Australia. Gonsalves was born in Mumbai and moved to Sydney in 1998. She has been the recipient of various awards concerning both her academic and writing career: the 2018 NSW Premier's Literary Award Multicultural Prize, the 2017 Australia Council Literature Board Grant, the 2013 Australian Prime Minister's Australia Asia Endeavour Postgraduate (Outgoing) Award, and the 2011 Australian Writers Guild Award (with colleagues), Best Script, Community and Youth Theatre. She is co-founder and co-editor of *Southern Crossings*. Her publications in the prestigious journals and magazines *Peril*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Overland*, and *The Conversation*, together with her participation in multiple writers' festivals, conferences and teaching of several creative writing workshops in Australian universities and schools, clearly demonstrate Gonsalves' versatility and social commitment. *The Permanent Resident*, her first published fiction book, positions Gonsalves as a sophisticated story-teller with a special gift to transmit stories of tremendous violence, pain and love through a witty use of the language. In this interview, which took place via an exchange of emails at the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018, Gonsalves discusses *The Permanent Resident* in relation to literature, immigration in Australia, class, gender, religion and whiteness.

Pilar Royo-Grasa Dear Roanna, you are a very socially-committed writer, who has extensively published articles on the existence of race, class and gender barriers within both Australia and India, and the cultural, political and literary ties that unite both countries. In *The Permanent Resident* you compile 16 short stories that show the yearnings and struggles undergone by Indian migrant characters living in Australia. Why did you decide to write on the topic of migration by using the short story genre?

Roanna Gonsalves Firstly, thank you so much for the care you have taken to read my work and for your very insightful questions. I am truly honoured and lucky to have such an astute reader as you, Pilar.

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When writing *The Permanent Resident*, my aim was to play with language to chronicle the lives of those not often represented in Australian literature. I hoped to do three things: to explore the sense of fractured time experienced by outsiders, to push the formal boundaries of the short story form, and to chronicle the 'multicultural real' (Ghassan Hage's term) of contemporary Australia. I am aware of my particular position where race, gender, class and religion intersect in constraining and enabling ways. In this collection I take my scalpel to patriarchy, to the female body, to the Catholic Church, to aspirational Indian immigrants, to white Australia, and most perilously to the fictional narrators of my stories. This book attempts to break new ground by charging the Australian literary landscape with Indian Australian lives. I have tried to make every story formally different from every other story in this book, even as the themes of each story resonate with each other.

I chose to write short stories rather than a novel because each encounter could be treated as a discrete piece of narrative. I wanted to comment on a diverse range of experiences of women who are first generation immigrants to Australia. I was inspired by Claude Monet and his recurrent painterly explorations of French water lilies, Alice Munro and her excavation of the lives of women in rural Canadian towns, R. K. Narayan and his persistent investigations of South Indian village life, I wanted to hold up the Indian Australian woman and examine her from multiple perspectives and planes of physicality, returning to this subject in every story.

Most of the stories are written in the first person because this point of view offered an immediacy and intimacy in relation to character interiority that such content required, because such characters are not encountered in Australian literature often enough.

PRG On the 26th of October 2016, the magazine *Peril* published your enlightening article on the topic who may be an Asian in Australia. In this article, you describe the kind of "gentle awakening" (para. 12) to your Asian identity that you experienced at the Asian Australian Research Network (AASRN) conference that had been held the previous year at Melbourne. As you state, this conference made you aware of the multiple affinities that you share with the other Asian critics, writers and artists who also attended that conference, and whose identity, like yours, had been touched by the process of colonization that your respective countries had undergone. However, at the beginning of the article you also express the concerns you had about being regarded as an intruder in the Asian Australian community of the conference due to your Indian background. As you state "I was not sure what to expect face-to-face at this conference of people who were legit Asians, unlike me whose position as 'Asian' in Australia seemed to be precarious at best. More than likely, I would be an outsider, observing discussions about Asianness in the Australian context: all about China and Indonesia and Vietnam, Japan and Malaysia and Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines, Korea, and Cambodia. Perhaps there would be thickly drawn borders around what it meant to be Asian in Australia. I would have to mind the gap, although in a different way from that intended by higher-ups of the underground transport service of our former colonisers, potent though the resonances may be, aware, again, of my difference" (para. 11).

Could you please elaborate a little bit on what were the types of "thickly drawn borders" you thought you could come across? How can these be negotiated?

RG In Australia, the term 'Asian' often refers to those of East Asian heritage. It can be a term used to reflect the shared histories of colonisation and immigration and racism faced specifically by those of East Asian background. The "yellow peril" is a xenophobic term that was used to refer to Chinese and other East Asian communities. Being from South Asia, or the Indian sub-continent, our positions are slightly different from East Asian communities. We are enabled and constrained in different ways. For example, as a consequence of British colonisation, the English language is the first or second language of many Indians, an enabling privilege not shared by immigrants from mainland China or Vietnam for instance. While most South Asians don't usually have to bear the brunt of the harmful racial stereotyping brought on by the trope of an "Asian invasion", we are often considered shifty, cunning, dirty, smelly, untrustworthy etc. The AASRN conference helped me see how we also have similarities, which are actually often the consequence of similar class positions. I suppose, just being open to others, to be willing to listen to others is one way to negotiate any kind of border.

PRG Let me borrow the affirmative question that Suvendrini Perera posed at the AASRN conference that you cite in your article "what if the ground beneath our feet turns out to be the sea?" (para. 15) to introduce my next question. Your short story "The Permanent Resident" opens with a similar use of the metaphor of water. At the beginning of the short story, Rekha, the autodiegetic narrator of the story, states: "In the end it is not the water that gets to me, but my incapacitation in the face of solidity" (Gonsavles 2016a: 265). Rekha is a character whose fear of water stems from a traumatic experience she had during her honeymoon and her subsequent ill-fated marriage relationship. This somehow derives into a kind of self-blame attitude and makes her afraid of anchoring to a similarly disappointing relationship. Water is a recurrent motif throughout the whole collection. Could we say that the title of this short story which also gives the title to the whole collection, *The Permanent Resident*, is quite ironic, as the stories told in the collection make it clear that residency/ identity cannot be permanent, it does not always remain the same, but, like the sea to which Perera referred is fluid and full of potential? What are the anchors that refrain us from diving into the water and swim?

RG What an insightful question! Yes, I agree with you, identity is always fluid, contextually-dependent and evolving. And yes, absolutely, I have tried to infuse the collection with a sense of this condition of impermanence, precariousness, transience and ephemerality, in the search for permanence and solidity that immigrants and outsiders must often negotiate. For the characters in my book, they often have to find their anchors within themselves, make them up, construct an anchor on the fly, rely on themselves in a country where they have little history and networks of support. Sometimes they do find anchors, like at the end of "The Dignity of Labour" where it is shared laughter across race lines but with gender

and class solidarities that brings on a renewed sense of self. Sometimes the anchor itself is unstable, like in "Up sky down sky middle water" and "In the beginning was the word", and "Soccer mum" etc.

PRG According to Ien Ang, diasporic identity is double-edged. "It can be," Ang argues (2001: 12), "the site of both support and oppression, emancipation and confinement". Do you agree with Ien Ang's argument? Would you like to comment on it? How can this double-edged diasporic identity be negotiated from the field of the arts?

RG It depends on each individual, and their context, I think. For refugees incarcerated by the Australian government, there is no question of support. For women duped into arranged marriages to Indian Australian men, only to be abused when they get here, there is little emancipation in diaspora. It is a living hell for them, marooned without supportive networks of family and friends. For some of us who are highly educated, who speak English as a first language, who are culturally Christian, we derive legitimacy and status from these privileges. But for us, race, gender and class entwine in ways that can be exclusionary. Just take Australian literature for example. You just have to look at the bookshops, the literary prizes, to get a sense of who is being legitimised by the gatekeepers. Often it is rich, white men who have deep networks of support here. And I'm only talking about literature. Magnify this ten times for an idea of what it is like in everyday life. I've written about my experiences as an international student in India, exploring these complexities, in a radio documentary called *Doosra: The life and times of an Indian student in Australia*.

PRG Turning back to the metaphor of water, I would like you to comment a little bit on the symbolic meaning of the ocean. In your article "Who is an Asian?" you appeal to the two oceans, the Pacific and Indian I assume, as the bond that ties together Australia and its Asian neighbouring countries. These oceans, you argue, are a container of "shared and unshared histories of colonization, our stories of ancient but criss-crossings, […] the traces we have left of each other and upon each other, present even if undocumented" (2016b: para. 16), and a potential for possibility. Would you say that your writing tries to track those undocumented traces?

RG That's a lovely and astute reading of my work, thank you. Yes, I didn't do this consciously in the book, but I am very mindful of the shared histories, both pre-colonial and colonial, both geological and political, and the often concealed "hydro-powered" traces between Australia, India, and Asia more broadly. By this I mean the geological connections between the landmass of Australia and that of Asia, some of which are submerged under water yet no less real to me. I mean the criss-crossings across the Indian Ocean over millennia for curiosity and adventure, for trade, for refuge, for survival. I also mean the means of sustenance provided to us by shared rivers and by our shared oceans. The rain falls, and water vapour rises, without consideration for geo-political borders. Hopefully this awareness has infused the work like salt that is invisible but gives a curry, or an ocean, its taste.

PRG Significantly enough, there is a moment in the short story "In the Beginning Was the Word" in which Australia is described as "a Pacific country pretending to be Atlantic" (Gonsalves 2016a: 159). This wish to hide their Indian identity and fit into Western paradigms is shared by most of your characters. To mention just a few examples, I am thinking of characters such as the couple of Bibiana and Martin, who appear in the short story that I mentioned earlier, or Gloria and Tony, who host the autodiegetic narrator of "Full Face" when she and her husband first arrive in Australia. Both couples try to prove their higher status, difference from other Indian immigrants and integration in the Australian society through the furniture of their house. Yet, as Angie notices when she is invited to Angie and Martin's house, the "labored showiness" that she adverts in Angie and Martin's ostentatious decoration "is to be understood and accepted as one understands and accepts one's teenage embarrassments" (158). Would you like to comment on Angie's reflection?

RG I was trying to poke fun at the pretentiousness of the narrator here, to take my authorial scalpel to the narrator too, not just to the other middle-class aspirational characters. I wanted to write characters who cannot help but be surrounded by Whiteness (conceptualised as in Ghassan Hage's 'White Nation'), surrounded by the dominant hegemonic structures of Whiteness as the norm in Australia. So, it is but natural that they would want to be White themselves, in whatever way they conceive of it.

PRG An argument that is recurrently used to defend the righteousness of the characters' decision to move to Australia is the country's Christianity. To mention but one example, in the short story "In the Beginning Was the Word", Bibi says to Angie, "it's a Christian country […]. No Hindus burning churches and raping nuns. The Catholic church is strong" (Gonsalves 2016a, 159). Is Australia becoming a refuge for Christian Indian migrants?

RG I think the situation for any minority in India is quite precarious right now. It has been so for decades but is exacerbated with the current dispensation. I think minorities who feel threatened or stifled whether for economic or intellectual or religious reasons, and have the capital to emigrate, often do so to countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada. One political thrust of the book was to subvert narrow expectations of what it means to be Indian. So, I deliberately chose to write about a different kind of Indian from the stereotype of the North Indian upper class, upper caste Hindu. There are many ways of being Indian, and I wanted to write about ways of being Indian that provide a different picture from the stereotype.

PRG At the same time, your collection of short stories seems to criticise the shameful history of the Catholic Church in Australia and the double-morality that governs some of your Indian migrant characters. Internal conflicts are established between them, I am thinking, for instance, of the rivalry that exists between the Marian Mangolorean Indian Australian Organisation (MMIAO) and the South Asian Association of Catholics in Australia (SAACA) in "Cutting Corners". Would you like to comment on the strength that this type of associations

is gaining in Australia? Do Indian migrants carry with them and replay in Australia the conflicts and tensions between different religious, ethnic and cultural groups that already exist in India?

RG Oh yes. As with most immigrant groups, my characters' sense of the homeland is stuck in the time at which they left. So of course, the old conflicts and solidarities are carried here, as happens even with the Anglo-Celtic diasporas here. It's not particular to Indian migrants. The tribe is often a source of conflict but also a source of support. In "Cutting Corners" I was trying to explore the comedic potential of a group of pretentious immigrants getting together while acknowledging that this comedy rests on their intense need to fit in in a society that doesn't think much of them.

PRG Bibi shows a complete lack of empathy and even contempt for refugees' arrival in Australia. Given her migratory background, one may expect her to show a more sympathetic attitude towards them. Would you like to comment on the political and social responses that the current arrival of asylum-seekers in Australia is arising in Australia and the role(s) that literature is playing in it?

RG It's often been observed in Australia that contrary to expectations, many immigrants are against newer immigrants coming in. I experienced this first hand when people I know and love, fellow Indian Australians who are some of the kindest people in the world, had very strong opinions against refugees. It's as if certain immigrants see themselves as exceptional while all other immigrants are the great unwashed that must be kept out at all costs. For Bibi and other characters like her, they are insecure about their own place in Australian society, insecure about their own legitimacy, because of the pervasive Whiteness of Australia. So, in order to feel more secure they must put down or oppress others like them. One way to surmount these issues and to increase empathy is to listen to stories told by others. I think the main reason Australians have been moved to protest strongly against our government's abuse of asylum seekers is that we have heard the stories of asylum seekers in detention, in their own voices, through their own words, published in print and online, through their art, and their films. It is their stories that have moved us as a nation. This is the way literature has worked in relation to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Australia. Hopefully our collective outrage and ongoing protests at different levels, catalysed by story and by literature, will help effect change for those suffering so terribly because of our government.

PRG What made you feel interested in Australian literature? Did you find any niche in the field of Australian literature or the literature and writing courses that you took when you move from India to study in Australia and that you felt that you could somehow contribute to filling with your writing production?

RG I've always been a reader and a writer, and so was naturally attracted to the literature of the place in which I live. I wanted to chronicle contemporary Australian life, the way I ex-

perienced it. I felt I didn't see people like me present in Australian literature as much as we are present in Australian life. A contemporary exception of course is Michelle De Kretser's work, which has been a source of strength and joy to me. I wanted to contribute to this tradition of writing about contemporary Australian life in all its messy and glorious diversity. I wanted to take what I call a "literary selfie of a country". By this I mean that it is important to have self-representation in literature, so that not just the mainstream but especially the marginalised may speak in their own voice. This would give us a less lop-sided sense of what it means to be part of a country or a nation. There is a long history of the powerful taking the stories of the oppressed and telling their stories for them. You see this when it comes to the stories of indigenous people, refugees and asylum seekers, and other oppressed and marginalised groups. This becomes problematic because of the power imbalance, particularly when there is a colonial relationship involved, when the marginalised are not allowed to speak for themselves, denied access to literary networks and circuits of production and reception. I've written about this in a piece called "See me showing you me" in *Overland*, and "Selfie is not a dirty word" in *The Conversation*.

PRG I'd like to ask you a question related to the increasing attention that Asian Australian writing is gathering in the publishing industry. In her article "'Voice-Niche-Brand': Marketing Asian-Australianness" Merlinda Bobis claims: "this is the perennial difficulty encountered by the migrant writer: how to be understood, how to be understood in one's own tongue? […] how to be understood here – how to be accepted?" (2008: para 11). As she claims, the term "Asian-Australian" has been turned into a brand by big publishing houses to the extent that writers may be pushed to tune their voices to what the market expects from them. Do you agree with Bobis' critique of the market's attempt to group all Asian-Australian writing into a generic brand? What strategies may be used to avoid one's voice be silenced or, to put it in Bobis' terms, "hijacked" (para. 33), by the market?

RG I feel there are so few Asian Australian writers here and the struggle to get published and then the longer struggle to get noticed, to get programmed at festivals, to get bookshops to consider stocking your book, to hope reviewers will review your book is so gruelling that I am unable to wrap my head around the idea of an 'Asian Australian brand' in the sense of a commodity that is raking in profits. It is so alien to my experience of being a writer. However, I agree with Merlinda Bobis' sense of the tendency to lump all Asian Australian writers into one category as if we're one homogenous lot. I feel my task as a writer is to explore these nuances, of class, ethnicity, religion, age, political attitudes etc within our communities, to add more layers to the complex stories about this complex country called Australia.

PRG Your short stories deal with thorny political questions that put at stake the vision of Australia as a happy multicultural country. Your collection of short stories brings to the fore the violent racist attacks to which migrants are subject in Australia, and some of the anxieties and obstacles that they find in their quests for gaining the approval of their permanent residency. Has any of your writings been rejected on the grounds that the Australian read-

ing public may found it too offensive, as occurs to the piece of writing that your character Lynette reads out in your short story "The Skit"?

RG I have had a lot of writing rejected over the years, but I couldn't provide a definitive reason for the rejections as I wasn't given any. Often you just get the silent treatment. But these particular stories in *The Permanent Resident* were not rejected, except for "The Skit". I submitted "The Skit" to numerous journals including prominent literary journals in Australia. I wasn't given any reason for the rejections. *Mascara Literary Review* was the only literary journal willing to publish "The Skit". In my work I pay homage to great writers from places like India, not only those in the Euro-American canon. So possibly my work is not understood by those who are unaware of Indian writing maybe, I don't know. I'm also interested in characters of immigrant, non-white backgrounds who are at the coalface of Australian life, driving the country, cleaning the toilets of Australia, serving its citizens their exotic food. I'm not writing to fit the stereotype of the Indian immigrant who plays cricket and has a big Bollywood wedding. This also may be a reason for the work not fitting a particular box. That said, I have been humbled and thrilled by the warm and generous reception of the book by reviewers, readers, students, academics at universities who have found the book interesting enough to get their students to read it and write about it, and I am so very grateful for this. It makes all the rejections seem trivial.

PRG Could you please talk a little bit more on the kind of reception that your collection of short stories has had in India and Australia?

RG I've been humbled and thrilled by the reception to the book. It has not yet been a year since its publication, and the book has been reviewed with such generosity and insight and love by so many fine reviewers. It features on several lists of must-read Australian books and has been put on the syllabus of courses in Australian Literature, Postcolonial Literatures, and Creative Writing, at a number of universities in Australia. I've had the joy and honour of interacting with students who have read and written about my work with such perceptiveness. I've been lucky to be invited to participate in numerous writers' and readers' festivals. I feel there is a deep need for such stories about life as an outsider in Australia, and that's why they've been embraced so warmly. I am really grateful for this reception, it's completely unexpected and so all the sweeter and all the more treasured.

In India I was touched by the warm reception at the Goa Arts and Literature Festival, where I was lucky to be invited by Vivek Menezes to launch the book at the inauguration of the festival. I was blown away by the response from the Goan media, the colleges I was invited to speak at, readers, and fellow writers. I felt I was at home and embraced as their own and that is a feeling I will always remember. Goa is my grandmotherland and my grandma would have been so proud to see this happen.

PRG Sanjay, another character of "The Skit", states: "You can't make an Aboriginal character a perpetrator, even if he is only half Aboriginal" (Gonsalves 2016a, 47). Do you agree with

Sanjay's statement? Could this tendency to forbid Indigenous characters to take the role of perpetrators be regarded as another way of depriving them from their humanity? How can this tension between an excessive idealization and the stigmatization that Australian Indigenous peoples have lived and continue to live be navigated?

RG Good question. I don't know how to negotiate that tension. For me it is an ongoing quest to learn more, to try to understand better how we as immigrants are beneficiaries on indigenous dispossession and what we can do to dismantle this. Anne Brewster's work has been quite instructive for me. Writing about Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, Brewster notes, "Without wanting to highjack or erase the specificity of cultural recovery for indigenous communities, I'd like to suggest that, in the Australian context, cultural recovery can also function to (re)connect white and other non-indigenous people to the bodily history of colonisation and (re)establish and (re)configure cross-cultural relations with the indigenous owners of this country. Recognising cross-racial kinship – that is, cross-cultural intersubjectivity and intercorporeality – entails a recognition of indigenous prior occupancy and geopolitical autonomy; of indigenous sovereignty. It also entails an acknowledgment of the founding role that indigenous people played as 'pioneers' (159) in the establishment of modern Australia, that is, in the pastoral industry and other industries such as whaling and pearling". (Brewster 2011: 69)

PRG As your stories show, migration implies not only the physical movement from one place to another but also a movement to a lower class layer. Would you like to comment on this movement? What other kinds of movements does migration imply?

RG Migration is always about change and renewal, destruction and creation, in an ongoing cycle. Sometimes it's about moving down the class ladder, sometimes it means moving up. It depends on the specificities of the individual context I think. But it usually involves a state of flux.

PRG The jobs which your characters take seem also to be gendered. Could you comment on the extent that gender issues interact with issues regarding employment?

RG Gender is a huge barrier in our patriarchal society, as we all know. Gender becomes more of a barrier once a woman has children. I wanted to explore this in my work. A flexible workplace is so important when one has to pay the rent and also feed the kids, and I've been lucky to have this over the years. Sometimes this is not possible for most immigrant women. This is a huge and sometimes insurmountable barrier. I wanted to explore this a little in fiction.

PRG Marriage and motherhood are two recurrent themes of your collection. Why did you want to write about these topics?

RG I wanted to write about these topics because they don't often get written about although they are the bedrock of human life. The grand narratives are lauded, but I wanted to illuminate the intimate narratives too, to make the intimate grand in some ways, that was my intention.

PRG Why did you choose Sydney as the Australian city to set your stories? Can you see any difference between Sydney and Melbourne as regards the situation of the Asian community living there? I take it that the Asian community in Melbourne is even bigger, why is this so?

RG I set most of the stories in Sydney because I wanted to understand the relationship between character and place in fiction. I wanted to do this from different points of view of one place. That's why I chose to set most of the stories in Sydney, in a very particular kind of Sydney, grungy, immigrant suburbs, not often written about in literature. I'm not sure why the Asian community is bigger in Melbourne. I'd love to write stories set in Melbourne and other parts of Australia one day.

PRG Would the stories be different if they were set in rural Australia?

RG Australia is a settler colony, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have never ceded sovereignty. It is easier to forget this truth in the bustle of the city where human presence and history is vacuumed into the concrete. Outside of the city, with fewer man-made structures, one comes face-to-face with the power of this ancient land. So, it is harder to forget the people who lived with this land for thousands of years. Their presence is everywhere. My stories are mainly set in urban Australia. Had they been set in a rural setting, the interaction with place and indigenous presence would have to be quite different. The external struggles of the characters would be different. Also, rural Australia is quite unlike urban Australia in its cultural makeup. So there again my characters would have to deal with issues vastly dissimilar to what they currently deal with in their urban environments. There would not be a bashing at a suburban train station, for example, nor an annual Christmas dance of the Christian Indian Association. But the interior conflict would be quite similar I think, only because most of my characters are struggling with the basic human need to be loved, and that need crosses space, time and cultures, and also crosses the rural-urban divide.

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