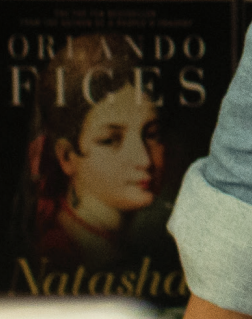
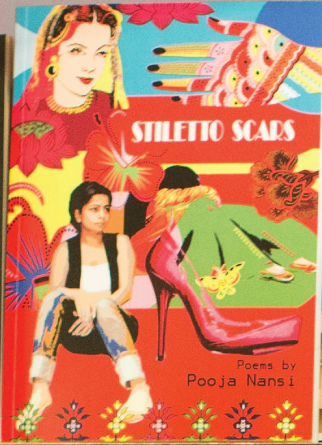


POOJA NANSI





“Pooja’s poetry often touches on her identity as a woman and an ethnic minority.”



APART, 2014
Photo credit: Jon Gresham

Pooja Nansi (b.1981) is a poet and performer. Author of two poetry collections – *Love is an Empty Barstool* (2013), and *Stiletto Scars* (2007), as well as the co-author of *Local Anaesthetic: A Painless Approach to Singaporean Poetry* (2014) – Pooja’s work has been showcased extensively both locally and abroad in key cities such as London and New York. She has also been regularly featured in international literary festivals.

Pooja’s poetry often touches on her identity as a woman and an ethnic minority. Her writing has been referred to by *The Business Times* as “becoming something of a must-read among hyper-literate young people”. The popularity of her poetry is evidenced by her collection *Love is an Empty Barstool* being in its third print run.

In 2009, the British Council selected her to participate in the global project *Speechless*, where she embarked on a one-month tour of the UK to explore issues surrounding the freedom of speech. She was also featured at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival in Indonesia and the Goa Literary and Arts Festival in India in 2015 as well as the Queensland Poetry Festival in 2016. In 2015, she also represented Singapore at the London edition of *Singapore: Inside Out*, an event aimed to showcase Singapore’s contemporary creative scene.

Pooja’s work leans toward the multi-disciplinary and pushes poetry into the realms of music and theatre. She was recently commissioned by Checkpoint Theatre to write and perform *You Are Here*, a one-woman show addressing issues of Singaporean identity and migrant family histories. Since 2013, she has also curated *Speakeasy*, a monthly spoken word and poetry showcase which plays to consistently packed audiences.

Pooja’s dedication toward creating platforms for the next generation of writers and poets is evident. She runs the Singapore chapter of *Burn After Reading*, a collective first started in London aimed at young emerging poets who are encouraged to write, read, perform and publish. In 2015, she also served as a mentor at a workshop series aimed at helping young poets put together their first collections. The National Institute of Education has invited Pooja to speak to beginner teachers on strategies to introduce Singaporean literature in their classrooms, and she continues to work regularly with schools and teachers to make poetry accessible and relevant to the lives of young people. ■

A CONVERSATION WITH POOJA NANSI

*Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts.
Who or what were your key influences?*

My earliest memories with the arts all revolve around my parents who are both artists in their own rights. My mother is a trained classical Indian dancer and my father wrote, directed and acted in plays for the Gujarati community. They are also both voracious readers. I grew up constantly around music and rehearsals and painting theatre sets on the weekends and endless trips to bookstores and libraries. I credit all my love for music and writing entirely to the exposure my parents gave me as a child.

What are some of the biggest challenges you faced when creating new works?

What I find most challenging about creating new work is staying true to the things I want to write about and staying true to how I want to write about it. Performance poetry is often a little misunderstood for not being as 'literary' as writing for example, sonnets. Writing about personal subject matters is often considered not as worthwhile a subject matter as writing about nation building, or the larger Singaporean condition (as if nation building could ever be divorced from issues of the self).

There has existed for a long time, this strange, and in my opinion, largely artificial divide between 'page poems' and 'stage poems'. As a young poet, I found these labels limiting and constricting and the challenge was often to block out all white noise and remember what it was that moved me to write rather than to

write with that constant question of self-doubt in my head: "Am I doing it right?"



"What motivated me was largely my stubborn and selfish need to write and create work about issues that were urgent to me. Issues that I felt weren't being addressed enough."

What motivated you to continue in spite of these challenges?

What motivated me was largely my stubborn and selfish need to write and create work about issues that were urgent to me. Issues that I felt weren't being addressed enough. Stories I wanted to read but could not find enough of. Stories about being a child of immigrant parents in Singapore, stories about growing



YOU ARE HERE, 2016

Photo credit: Crispian Chan | Photo courtesy of The Esplanade

up an ethnic minority in Singapore, stories about the female body. Whenever I get stuck I remind myself of these lines from poet Dorianne Laux:

*If you don't write, it won't
get written. No tricks. No magic
about it.*

What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's literary arts scene?

I think the scene is small but really fierce with many people working hard to make Singaporean literature visible. But writers are pointless without readers and I think the reading culture in Singapore is extremely worrying. Pragmatism and productivity are ingrained in the DNA of many Singaporeans and reading poetry and fiction do not factor into daily lives.

The vast majority of Singaporeans are unaware of the wonderful range of work being produced by Singaporean writers and I hope over time, we grow into a country that cares about its stories because concrete and steel can be torn down, but stories have a way of persevering through generations and reminding us of who we are and where we come from.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you?

Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

It is an important affirmation and I am grateful for the platform and opportunity as well as the doors it opens for me to do the work that I think is important. Moving forward I would like to think about how I can create support systems for aspiring writers who are struggling with many of the things I struggled with. I would like to work toward creating work which addresses why it is important to bear witness, to acknowledge difficult issues and feelings, to say things other people, for whatever reason, cannot say. I want to wade further into uneasy waters, because really, it's there that the things worth exploring are waiting. ■



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

- Haresh Sharma – How sweet, how surreal. I watched your plays as a wide-eyed teenager. Just to be nominated by you is affirmation enough.
- Tania De Rozario – For the entire spectrum of sanity, sisterhood and support.
- National Arts Council – For your support and belief that Art is so very, very necessary.
- Jacob Sam-La Rose, Cyril Wong, Alvin Pang, Yi-Sheng, Dan Prichard, Chris, Felix Cheong, Paul, Kai Chai, Ethos and Math Paper Press – For lights that guided, for doors that opened, for beginnings. Thank you.
- Anjana – Mango Dolly, music muse. Miles apart do not change what you mean to me.
- Joel Tan – For eyes that see what I cannot, for your brilliant mind, for being a partner in crime.
- Kenny Leek and Prashant Somosundram – For magical spaces where poets and poems can roam wild and brave and free.
- Deonn, Sam, Tze Hern, Chee Wai, Jo, Maryam, Amitha, Michael, Farah, Lubna, Al, and Jacob – Oh, I have made myself a tribe out of my true affections.
- Caroline Gordon – For without you, I would surely go mad.
Mom and Daddy – You are at the center of everything I am and ever will be.
- Aches – For being my earliest reader and critic; *and*,
- Bart – Being married to you is my favourite poem.