“I ground myself in multiple spaces”: Sehba Sarwar in Conversation with Maryam Mirza

Sehba Sarwar was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan, and has been based in the United States for more than three decades. An author, activist, visual artist and educator, Sehba Sarwar is the recipient of numerous prestigious grants and awards, including the first prize in the Free Speech Category at the 2011 Houston Art Car Parade, an Artistic Innovations grant awarded by the Mid-America Arts Alliance, and the 2019-2020 Individual Artist Grant awarded by the Pasadena Arts and Culture Commission and the City of Pasadena Cultural Affairs to complete her memoir. She has also served as Artist-in-Residence at the Mitchell Center for the Arts, University of Houston. Moreover, her writings, as well as other material about her life and work, are archived at the University of Houston.

The Pakistani writer Bina Shah has described Sarwar’s voice as ‘clear and true, breaking boundaries no matter what format she chooses to express herself in’. In this interview with Maryam Mirza, Sehba Sarwar talks about the many creative hats that she dons, and reflects on her abiding preoccupation with borders, boundaries and identities.

The poem “Rotation”, discussed below, has been reproduced at the end of the interview with the kind permission of the author; an audio recording of the poem can be accessed by double clicking the following icon:

Maryam Mirza (MM): Your novel Black Wings was first published in 2004 by Alhamra Publishing, a Pakistani publisher, and a new US edition came out last year. What was your experience of revisiting a published work? Do you see the latest edition as a palimpsest or do you perceive the two as distinct literary works?

Sehba Sarwar (SS): That’s a great question. I have personal attachment to both editions. For me each edition is different in many ways, but for the average reader and critic, the two versions of Black Wings are largely the same. In 2018 when Minerva Laveaga, then-editor of Veliz Books, expressed interest in publishing a second edition of the novel, she wanted to make the work available to readers and classrooms in the US and Europe. By then, the Pakistani version had run out of print, and Alhamra Publishing was no longer active. I was excited at the opportunity to have the novel back on bookshelves around the world. I took on the second edition, expecting to make a few edits and return the manuscript to Minerva. But when I opened the file, I found that over the course of fifteen years, my writing style had changed. My language is more compressed. I ended up doing a rewrite—I chopped 25,000 words. The content largely stayed the same, though I made a few changes toward the end of the novel. I won’t be specific since I don’t want to offer any spoilers. I’m attached to both covers because they feature artwork by

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special people including my daughter, sister, and best friend. But as I said, most readers wouldn’t notice the difference between the two versions. So in that sense the new edition is a palimpsest

MM: In Black Wings, you are preoccupied with fractured relationships, whether it is the breakdown of Yasmeen’s marriage or her strained relationship with her mother Laila. Can you talk about your interest in the intersection of temporal, geographical and emotional distance?

SS: The personal fractures that Yasmeen experiences—with her mother and her life in Karachi as well as after the collapse of her marriage—are connected to the splintering that occurs after the death of Yasmeen’s twin brother Yasir. When Yasmeen begins a new life in the US, she cuts off from Pakistan. In a sense, she’s reliving the fracture that her mother’s generation experiences after Partition when crossing a new physical border and adjusting to life in Pakistan. Historical events are critical to the narrative since the opening scene in Black Wings is set a few months after 9/11 when new borders are drawn within the US, making Yasmeen feel more disconnected from the community around her. On a whim, she invites her mother to visit her in Houston. Yasmeen’s personal boundaries begin to collapse when her mother shares stories with her grandchildren, Yasmeen’s daughter and son. Through the cycle of storytelling in which truth and fantasy are intertwined, Yasmeen has to contend with her own past and her family’s history.

In some ways, Black Wings contains elements of my own life. My family is fragmented because of our history in India, where some family members remained after Partition. After more than thirty years of producing fiction, novels, essays, and artwork, I do recognize that displacement and migration remain central themes in my work.

MM: How do you conceive of the relationship between activism and literature?

SS: I was raised in a home where there was no line between activism and literature/art, and I was politicized during my teenage years in the late seventies and early eighties when I marched on the streets with Women’s Action Forum (WAF) alongside my mother, sister, and family friends. Also, before flying to the US to attend college, I worked at the Star evening newspaper, which was a hub of dissent where many women activists and journalists were trained.

My parents were passionate supporters of the arts. They hosted poetry, music and dance recitals in our living room, sofas pushed back and white sheets spread on the carpets for guests at these interactive gatherings. Their network included poets such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmed Faraz, Habib Jalib, whose voices are symbolic of the protest movements during the Zia and Ayub dictatorships. In our home, there was no line between activism and art—art was activism and activism was art. The term “social justice” has become popular over the last decade. My parents were part of Pakistan’s social justice movement from the fifties onward when they arrived in Pakistan after leaving their home cities in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India. While my father was in medical college, he led Pakistan’s first nation-wide student movement, the Democratic Students Federation (DSF), and was jailed for a year in the 1950s along with hundreds of other progressive activists. My mother Zakia Sarwar, an educator, participated in hunger strikes for teachers’ rights during the sixties. My parents continued their support of the arts through the seventies and eighties during Pakistan’s darkest history. Also, my sister Beena Sarwar is a journalist involved in peace and democracy movements and has connected me to resources including Himal SouthAsian (published originally in Nepal, now in Sri Lanka), and to writers such as Arundhati Roy (India) and Salman Rashid (Pakistan).
When I write or create art, I don’t have a message in mind. I allow the work to unravel. Since being published, Black Wings has been tagged as a feminist text, which makes sense since the protagonists are women. In the novel, Yasmeen resists being defined in the stereotypical image of “immigrant;” she has a career path and views herself as transnational. Through stories that Yasmeen and her mother share with Yasmeen’s children and each other, the border between India and Pakistan is erased, and the Pakistani army’s violence in Bangladesh is revisited.

**MM**: You founded Voices Breaking Boundaries 20 years ago; can you tell our readers about the kinds of voices that the organization has sought to foreground, as well as the kinds of boundaries that it has worked to contest since its inception?

**SS**: I initiated Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB) as a women’s literary collective in fall 1999. At the time in Houston, there were few opportunities for emerging writers to share their work. Within a year, I received grants to support the project. In 2001, after a successful screening of South Asian films, I could no longer manage the collective through my personal bank account. I formed a board and filed for non-profit status. A local non-profit offered me an office space and the organization took off. After 9/11, VBB’s work became even more urgent. In 2002, I collaborated with several Houston writers to create a series called *Words for Peace*. At the first event (that was pre-Skype), we created a production in which Arundhati Roy, Salman Rashid, Irena Klepfisz, and Naomi Shihab Nye read work over a speaker telephone while we projected images on a screen. Bapsi Sidhwa, who lives in Houston and served on VBB’s first board, also participated in the event. Over the years, we received grants through local and national arts foundations including the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Currently, the organization is dormant, though our website is still active ([vbbarts.org](http://vbbarts.org)) and we still have publications to sell. Ultimately, my goal was to create connections across borders and feature alternative perspectives about the world.

For the first two years, since I was teaching full-time, I only paid myself when I ran workshops, but in 2004, after my daughter was born, I could no longer dedicate time to the organization without pay. The board and I raised funds for a part-time position that went on to be a full-time salaried position with health benefits and competitive salary. At the time, I didn’t realize how radical it was for a transnational person of colour to create a professional non-profit arts organization that offered salaried positions, paid artists, and wasn’t operating on a “volunteer” model.

After I began working full-time, the organization’s most popular series was our *living room art* productions through which I collaborated with artists to transform residential homes into art spaces. When my father passed away in Karachi in 2009, I created a production, *Honoring Dissent/Descent* in the house that my husband and I had purchased in Houston. I wanted people to know about my father’s work in Pakistan. After the night ended and more than 400 people passed through our home to witness videos, performance, visual art, and music, I realized that I was replicating gatherings that my parents had hosted in our Karachi house. *Honoring Dissent/Descent* kicked off a new series for VBB through which I co-curated *living room art* productions each year. The productions tackled issues including race, women’s rights, immigration. The last of the series, *Borderlines*, was a 5-year project (2014-17) through which we explored connections between border regions in South Asia and North America. I was lucky to be able spend time in Karachi, Delhi, Dhaka, and Toronto to conduct research for the project, while other members of the organization visited Mexico CDMX.
MM: Since 2013 you have created several variations of a multidisciplinary initiative focusing on notions of home and belonging. It encompasses a number of exciting projects, such as On Belonging, What Is Home? and Reclaiming Home. Has your understanding of “home” shifted as a result of this project?

SS: All of the projects that you list in your question—On Belonging, What Is Home? and Reclaiming Home—are connected to my memoir, which I started in 2013 while undertaking a two-year-artist residency at the Mitchell Center for the Arts at the University of Houston. As I worked on text, I had opportunities to exhibit, perform, and offer workshops around the theme of displacement and memory, and my memoir evolved into a multidisciplinary project and took on different names. For my site-specific installation Reclaiming Home, I was inspired by spice bead necklaces that are sold in old Karachi at a market called Khujoor bazaar (a market where dates can be purchased in bulk). And my production, What Is Home?, had many elements including a storytelling workshop for undocumented and documented South Asian women, a performance, and a site-specific installation (images can be found here). Most recently, I created On Belonging when I was invited by a Houston museum, the Menil Collection, to create art in response to Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum’s exhibition (photos of the On Belonging installations can be accessed here). For each performance, I extracted content from my memoir and converted the work to performative text. This year, 2020, I am finally back to working on my memoir.

Your question, whether my understanding of home has shifted as I’ve worked on the project is interesting. I’m not sure if my “understanding of home” has shifted. Rather, over the past seven years as I’ve worked on the project through visual art, performances, workshops, and writing, I’ve become more conscious of how the issue of “home”—in a literal and temporal sense—is connected to my exploration of displacement and the urgency of memory. My twenty-seven-year partnership with my husband also factors into my consciousness. He is Chicano with roots in the US-Mexico border that has shifted many times. Together, we’re raising a mixed-race daughter, whose family history connects her to two continents and disrupted borders.

MM: Please tell us what inspired your short story “Railway Track”, which can perhaps be referred to as political detective fiction, set against the backdrop of the rise of racism following the 2016 US presidential election.

SS: In January 2017, former Houston Poet Laureate Gwendolyn Zepeda, invited me to submit a crime story for Akashic Book’s new publication, Houston Noir. I've always been intrigued by crime stories, and my fiction—including Black Wings—contain mystery (though not murder). Akashic Books has a template for its Noir series: Writers have to pre-select neighbourhoods where they will set their stories. I decided to write the story from the perspective of a social worker who lives in the Houston house that my husband and I had owned for ten years in a neighbourhood that was on the east side of Houston and was home to a majority Latinx community. While living in that corner of the city, we had learned about the political leanings of many of our neighbours. Many were progressive while others were more conservative.

Gwen contacted me literally one day before Donald Trump’s inauguration. By then, anti-immigration and racist sentiments were on the rise all around the US—and the globe—and the issues emerged as the story’s backdrop. The story, as it unfolded, was an organic process, but the content makes sense given the dark time in which we live—on a global and local level.

MM: In your short story “Soot”, you present us with an unusual example of border crossing, with its protagonist, a young Pakistani woman, working for an NGO in Calcutta. In “Railway
Track”, we have another Pakistani student living in the US and dating a young man of Indian origin. Your work displays an enduring interest in Indo-Pakistan relations both ‘back home’ and in the diaspora.

SS: “Soot” is based on a true experience. While in graduate school during the late eighties, I had the opportunity to intern at a Calcutta newspaper and spend three months in the city without a police reporting visa. At the time, my mother’s uncle was serving as the Governor of West Bengal, and during my teens, I had visited UP several times along with my mother and siblings. I was always struck by the similarity in landscapes, language, culture, and food. And of course, because we had such close family ties across the border, we never felt as if we were “other.”

Certainly, though Calcutta was different from UP in that Bengali culture is so rich, and the language is different from the colloquial Hindi/Urdu spoken around Pakistan and North India, I still felt welcome in the city. Since I’d spent time in Calcutta, I wanted to write the story from the perspective of a Pakistani living in a land that wasn’t so foreign after all. And in “Railway Track,” Mona Naeem—the Pakistani protagonist—is in a relationship with Sanjay, whose family is from India. The story is based on my experience of Houston’s community, where I have friends who hail from different backgrounds and countries. “Sandstone Past” is another short story that I wrote (13 Stories by Pakistani Women, Harper Collins India) in which the protagonist is a teenager in Karachi. Her best friend is Hindu, and her family has to make difficult decisions about migration. In some ways, the fact that cross-cultural relationships wind their way into my work is a conscious choice—relationships don’t need to be limited by national borders that are, in the end, temporary. That’s why the word “diaspora” feels remote to me. Most people I meet and work with have a history of displacement. Ultimately, I prefer the term “transnational”—because I ground myself in multiple spaces, and I don’t feel the need to select only one as my “home.”

MM: With poignant humour, your piece in The New York Times entitled “A Delicate Matter in the Examination Room” charts the challenges of translation, interpretation and, more broadly, cross-cultural communication faced by immigrants in the US. How did this collaborative piece come about?

SS: Azeb Yusuf, whose story I recounted, in New York Times' Lives column participated in a 2015 women’s storytelling workshop that I offered at the Somali Bantu Community of Greater Houston. I had taught the first version of the workshop for South Asian women earlier that year, but the community centre where I ran sessions didn’t have any space that fall. They connected me with the Somali Bantu Community Centre, where Azeb served as a social worker. She joined my workshop and was a great storyteller. When the New York Times Lives column editor—I had written for them before—invited me to submit another Lives story for their new series, I knew that Azeb would be a great match. The narrative that that she shared is sad and humorous at the same time, serving as a reminder of the challenges in translation—especially in medicine.

Azeb’s story underscores the dilemma faced by translators, as well as by immigrants and refugees, who are well-educated in their own languages but are often judged for not having fluency in the languages used in their adopted lands. Language is so political. Ethiopia is one of the few nations in the developing world that was not colonized by the Europeans, but Ethiopians still have to deal with racism and bias when visiting or living in countries away from their home—if they lack fluency in the language spoken in the nation(s) they adopt.

MM: You have successfully worked in multiple literary genres (much like Rukhsana Ahmad, another Pakistani diasporic writer interviewed in the Creative Lives series). Additionally, you are a
visual artist. Do you see an affinity between specific themes or stories and particular literary genres/artistic media?

SS: Thank you. While I was studying for my Cambridge examination in Karachi—before I flew to the US to acquire my bachelor’s degree—I was a visual artist. I loved working with charcoal and oil painting, and I didn’t think of myself as a writer because I hadn’t read many South Asian writers, who were producing work in English. Bapsi Sidhwa and Salman Rushdie were only just becoming known names. Back then, the syllabus for my Cambridge English literature exams included work by Shakespeare, Jane Austen, the British Romantic Poets, but when I was an undergraduate at Mount Holyoke College, I began to read English text by writers of colour and took creative writing classes. I also studied at Hampshire College with scholar Eqbal Ahmed, who exposed my friends and me to global issues, which later informed my artistic practice. In those days, I was most drawn to producing work in English unfortunately—because my “English-medium school” in Karachi had not offered quality Urdu education. I have written essays about language, so I won’t get into the subject here.

Through the career path that I chose—first by teaching writing workshops in Houston followed by initiating my own non-profit arts organization—I expanded my writing to produce not just fiction but also nonfiction and poetry, and I experimented with art and generated video collages, site-specific installations, and performances. I’ve had wonderful teachers along the way whose work has influenced what I produce. I’m part of a writers’ network called the Macondo Writers Workshop that was started by Sandra Cisneros, and I’ve been fortunate to take a few writing workshops with her and learn from her. I also follow the work of visual artists and projects including Britto Arts Trust (Bangladesh), Mel Chin (USA), Shirin Neshat (Iran/USA) and many more. My bookshelf right now is stacked with nonfiction books since I’m teaching two online nonfiction courses and the texts include: Borderlands: La Frontera by Gloria Anzaldúa, Just Kids by Patti Smith, Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje—and more.

MM: Your poem “Rotation” is a powerful meditation upon the precarious forms of immigration and the surge in anti-immigrant sentiment in the global North. Could you expand on your use of culinary imagery in the poem?

SS: In 2018, author Sorayya Khan invited me to submit for Desi Writers’ Lounge’s “Nomad” edition, which she was co-editing alongside Torsa Gopal. hadn’t written poetry for a while, but Sorayya’s invitation came at the perfect time. I had just finished my On Belonging performance and installation, so I submitted three poems, one of which was “Rotation;” since the first release, I’ve performed the poem many times, and it has been republished. I dedicated the text to my mother, who I pictured when I wrote the poem. The lesson I learned from my mother was that I don’t have to assimilate—I can wear what I want, cook as I please, and be the person I am. The dish that I describe in the poem is one that my mother learned from my grandmother. The popping of the coriander seeds lingers long after the potatoes have been eaten, and the metaphor of the dish underscores that fact that immigrants, refugees, transnationals do not have to hide. I’ve recorded the poem for you—I wish I had been able to weave in the popping sound of the seeds!

MM: From one interviewer to another, how would you describe your experience of interviewing the legendary American singer Patti Smith?

SS: I interviewed Patti Smith twice—both times were wonderful. I first met Patti at LaGuardia Airport. My husband, René, who knows everything about alternative music, recognized and nudged me to talk to her—we were getting ready to board the same flight to Houston. René and
I were returning to Houston after a vacation in New York where we had participated in a protest against the US invasion of Iraq and we had witnessed police on horses and cars breaking up a peaceful rally in Chelsea, Manhattan. Patti Smith had also attended the rally. She was flying to Houston with her Band to perform and to launch her exhibition, *Strange Messenger*, at Houston’s Contemporary Museum of Art. I was already scheduled to interview her because I was co-hosting a radio show, *Living Art*, in Houston’s Pacifica station, 90.1 FM.

I prepared for the first interview by visiting her exhibition, seeing her performance, and reading about her. Afterwards, I kept in touch with Patti. Once her memoir *Just Kids* was released, I invited her to Houston to read. She took me up on the offer and flew to Houston to perform and read from *Just Kids* and also participate in a second interview. By then, I had read her memoir and other works, and have deep respect for her commitment to dissent. Spending time with her was profound.

**MM**: As we speak, the world finds itself the midst of the coronavirus crisis. In what ways has your creative process been affected by the pandemic? Are there any art forms that you find especially appropriate when grappling with the current crisis?

**SS**: Like everyone around us, COVID-19 has impacted me, professionally and personally. Los Angeles, California, where I’m based right now, was one of the first corners of the US to enforce “stay-at-home” orders. All readings and workshops for my spring semester were wiped out. But that reality was faced by most artists and independent workers. The more difficult adjustment has been the impact on travel. I was supposed to be in Karachi this summer with my mother and daughter. Now, I’m staying connected to her by calling her regularly. She’s in Karachi and has not been able to travel either. And the stay-at-home has been tough. I’ve attended a couple of Black Lives Matter protest marches in Los Angeles along with thousands of others, but of course, even with masks, we are at risk.

Given the restrictions that we face today, the art form that I can focus on is writing. I’ve been able to reserve mornings for working on my memoir, and I’m hoping to finish this round of revision by the end of summer. I’ve also formed a couple of writing groups, so I’m participating in regular video meetings. I’m enjoying the process—feedback is such a necessary part of writing. Also, there’s an eruption of accessible readings and talks around the world. I’ve attended quite a few and also offered readings online. In some ways, the virus has flattened distances between people even while the pandemic prevents us from physically connecting.

**MM**: I am really looking forward to the publication of your memoir, which promises to be a fascinating read! Sehba Sarwar, thank you very much for your time and for the wonderful recording of your poem.

Sehba Sarwar’s website can be accessed at: [https://sehbasarwar.com](https://sehbasarwar.com).
Rotation

She heats oil
Rolls puri
Drops flat flour into bubbling oil

You conquer
  enforce rules
  ban travel

In another pan
She pops coriander seeds
Tosses sliced potatoes

You build walls
  deport passengers
  obstruct asylum-seekers

She serves flaky puri
With crisp potatoes
— we devour together

You demand documents
  collect fingerprints
  require face-identification

Our choice: eat, speak, wear
Practice as we please
Where we wish

You cannot hinder climbs
  prevent tide
  stop earth rotation

Like waves we cross
We fly
We roar
We stay or leave
— our movement permanent.