

## ***Right of Way as a Political Document***

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**Abstract:** The Asian Women Writers' Collective (AWWC) published their first anthology, *Right of Way*, with The Women's Press in 1989 in London. A core group of eight members in the organisation conducted workshops, secured funding and gave Asian women a platform for self-expression. Its aim was to reduce the isolation of Asian women, hitherto unpublished, through the workshop process. They all sought visibility, credibility, and access to institutions, publishers, and other groups in the community. The workshop method was useful to them as that was the only way towards self-discipline. For most of the original ten members and others, the time devoted to writing had to be managed and since there was no money, it turned out to be a complex process. The book consists of short stories and poems by new authors. The workshops read aloud, discussed and debated to focus on good writing that had a special resonance for the Asian woman in Britain whose voice was unheard. For instance, the poem "Blood Lust to Dust" by Rahila Gupta, is dedicated to Balwant Kaur, an Asian woman murdered by her husband in front of her children at a South London refuge. The poem was also read at the Balwant Kaur memorial campaign. The Asian Women Writers' Collective published five different anthologies subsequently and many of their writers continue to be related to Asian writing, drama and film today. *Right of Way* is a historic document, a political act of considerable strength, created at the height of a hostile political environment in Britain. The paper assesses the role played by such collective movements and suggests a way forward.

**Keywords:** Women's Press, Asian, women, collective, workshop, outreach, racism, funding, class, stereotype, balancing.

One of the richest body of English writing has come from Britain, and women of Asian origin have made a prominent contribution to it, though their male counterparts get more visibility everywhere. As with most multicultural writing, the 1980s was the period of its finest bloom. But to find not one, not two, but a whole bunch of writers collectively publishing through a progressive women's press in a more or less hostile environment, lacking financial backing is indeed a remarkable literary event. This paper seeks to identify the The Asian Women Writers Collective (AWWC) which published their first anthology, *Right of Way*, with The Women's Press in 1989 in London as a literary landmark.

The anthology consists of short stories and poems by eight new authors: Rahila Gupta, Ravinder Randhawa, Rukshana Ahmad, Sibani Raychaudhuri, Kanta Talukdar, Shazia Sahail, Meera Syal and Leena Dhingra.

The lines from the poem “Blood Lust to Dust” by Rahila Gupta seems to encapsulate the essence of the anthology, and express its manifesto through images of release, the lifting of a lid, and the raised fist. This poem was read at the Balwant Kaur memorial campaign:.

You will not be consigned to dust  
Time must not heal  
Nor memory conceal  
Your blood will not congeal  
Our actions  
This is not one more obituary,  
Not one more nail  
Sealing the covers of our oppression  
This is but the lifting of the lid  
That made us go on seething  
Come, we will show men what fear is  
When courage stalks a woman’s raised fist. (pp. 133-134)

Balwant Kaur was brutally stabbed to death in front of her children by her husband after she escaped to a shelter. This paper traces the growth, development and dissolution of this collective, first, and aims to critique the literary content of the first collection. Besides the literary and socio-cultural aspects of this work, I would also like to discuss the sustained effort of maintaining a collective identity and social activism which survives even today among many of these writers, although in a different form.

A brief history of the genesis of *Right of Way* will be interesting at this point. Writers, activist and outreach workers from London and the districts got together in 1984 under the initiative of Ravinder Randhawa with the support from Black Ink, and funding from first the Greater London Council, then the Greater London Arts Association and finally the Lambeth Council. Rahila Gupta, Rukhsana Ahmad and five other women writers joined to write and read each other’s works at workshop sessions. Soon a collective was formed which invited poets and writers of colour for readings and attracted the attention of women writers from other Asian countries of origin. 1988-89, was a very productive year for the AWWC, with as many as 40 programmes including celebrations on International and Asian Women’s Day, Gay Pride, public readings or *mehfils*. The AWWC conducted workshops and writing courses for specific purposes like writing for television that year. Activity of the Collective continued slowly and sporadically till the Lambeth Council completely withdrew its funding in 1996. Working from home, with one

underpaid assistant, the Collective ceased to function by the end of that year, to the grief of readers and members alike.

A core group of ten members in the organisation conducted workshops, secured funding and gave Asian women a platform for self-expression from the late 1980s. Its aim was to reduce the isolation of Asian women, hitherto unpublished, through the workshop process. They all sought visibility, credibility, and access to institutions, publishers, and other groups in the community. The workshop method was found useful to them as that was the only way towards self-discipline. For most of the original ten members and others, the time devoted to writing had to be managed and since there was no money it was exceptionally challenging.

Some of the major practical challenges before the writers were: taking care of daycare facilities for the members' children; writing without "the elitist notion of being born with a talent" as said in the Introduction (p. 5); also dispelling the romantic notion of being able to produce inspired writing after managing career and home. A common problem the writers shared was that of continuing to write steadily and with a disciplined target in order to meet the Thursday evening reading sessions. Translating, deciding on artistic criteria, meeting at a common political and social position acceptable to the increasing number of members were other seemingly arduous tasks, performed with a lot of debate, discussion and an open-minded approach. Yet Ravi Randhawa and her group were successful in publishing their first collection in 1988 with Women's Press, and then their second work,

*Flaming Spirit*, published by Virago in 1994, had its own editorial demands: it had to still reject and suggest modifications to years of work which more or less fulfilled the collective's agenda to committed and new writing. The rigours of publishing also took away the main focus of the collective: "of developing writing in the community, of doing outreach work with Asian women in a wider context." (p. 5). These writers bring out the oppression of people caught in any typical closed society as well as criticize the intolerance and indifference of the white community.

The style is generally pithy, the tone remains gentle yet firm as in ShaziaSahail's and SibaniRaychaudhuri's writing, occasionally ironic or dry as in Randhawa's stories. MeeraSyal's "The Traveller" (96-105) is a bit of a surprise, following much of a SunitiNamjoshifabular structure in a story of a travelling bird-woman and its nurturing of a young girl. However it is written with an infinitely gentle mockery about the real world from which the bird-woman had escaped. The poetry in this volume is clearly protest poetry with its irony, sarcasm and anger suitable for a general readership unused to much verbal or metrical jugglery and gimmicks of imagery. Especially noteworthy are ShaziaSahail's poems, "Buying Romance" (154), "Face" (149), "Veils and Windows" (131). SibaniRaychaudhuri writes expressing disillusionment about the contemporary British Asian girls carrying dreams of careers until they are sixteen and must start queuing up for just jobs and the dole, in her poem "Careers" (18), or about African women addressed by Indian women on a shared history of oppression called "A Letter Long Overdue" (61).

The short stories and poems are based on themes closest to the lives of the writers themselves. Only three stories are set in India: the rest are all about their lives in the diaspora. They deal with themes close to women's hearts, like the process and the aftermath of motherhood: the physical changes, the psychological changes, abortion, miscarriage, confronting the challenge of a physically disabled child, cot-deaths and abandonment. There are numerous stories that deal with love and betrayal, and race being one of the many challenges to happiness. Discrimination at the workplace, the perils of a closed society, the double lives led by young Asian girls at home and away, are some of the other themes. Overall, there is no stridency and no virulent attack against race or gender stereotypes, thus the literary quality of these stories and poems is quite high.

In terms of language and style, the stories and poems are innovative and experimental, they remain genuine products of the Workshop experience during which stories and poems were read aloud and revised according to the pool of suggestions, and were re-read, and approved before they were ready to be published. The authors wished to portray with authenticity the real lived experiences of the host land and the home, thus they were ruthless with inconsistencies or anything that jarred, and anything that smacked of bias and prejudice. The language has smatterings of Hindi but no glossary was appended to the book. The verse is also very controlled and terse, and is redolent of the harsh realities pertaining to loss and heartache. Baby Talk I and II (pp. 67- 68) is memorable, speaking of the sense of loss of the mother of a disabled child. MeeraSyal's story "The Traveler" (96-105) is written with a poetic sensibility completely alien to anything written by her. It creates a mythical traveler bird-woman who is free to travel and to relieve and rescue others in exploitative situations.

What happened to these writers and what are they doing today are some of the vital questions that arise. Authors like Shazia Sahail and Kanta Talukdar have not been part of later brigade of writers who emerged on their own after the Workshop, but are scholars and writers in different areas, associated with NGOs and the academia as independent writers. However among the debutantes, many later writers like Rahila Gupta, MeeraSyal, Ravinder Randhawa, Rukshana Ahmad, Sibani Raychaudhuri and Leena Dhingra have continued to write.

Ravinder Randhawa was born in India and grew up in Warwickshire. In 1984 she founded the Asian Women Writers Collective, which published two major collections: *Right of Way* (1989), and *Flaming Spirit* (1994). She is a frequent speaker at universities in the United Kingdom and abroad, and is also a member of PEN International. She was the Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Tonybee Hall and is currently a Fellow at St. Mary's College, University of Surrey. She is the author of the acclaimed novel, *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987), the teenage novel *Hari-jan* (1992), and the highly praised *The Coral Strand* (2001) and has contributed short stories to many anthologies in the UK, USA and Europe, as well as non-fiction articles.

MeeraSyal has won many awards for writing, like the Betty Trask award and an MBE. She wrote three novels, *Anita and Me* (1996), *Life Isn't All Ha HaHeeHee* (1999), and her latest, *The House of Hidden Mothers* (2015), besides the screen play for the film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and

some others. Meera Syal is now better known as a British comedian, writer, playwright, singer, journalist, producer and actress. Syal rose to prominence as one of the teams that created *Goodness Gracious Me* and became one of the UK's best-known Indian personalities portraying Sanjeev's grandmother, Ummi, in *The Kumars at No. 42*. She was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 1997 New Year Honours and in 2003 was listed in *The Observer* as one of the fifty funniest acts in British comedy. Meera Syal was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2015 New Year Honours for services to drama and literature.

Rukshana Ahmad is a novelist, translator and playwright. Her novel, *The Hope Chest* (Virago, 1996), is not particularly well known. But Ahmed is more popularly known for her many plays, including the recent *Mistaken . . . Annie Besant in India*, 2007, and for her work adapting plays by other writers for BBC Radio, such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*. These have achieved nominations and short lists for many prestigious British awards. To promote Asian women playwrights, in 1990 she cofounded the Kali Theatre Company in London with actor Rita Wolf. She is the chair and founding trustee of the South Asian Arts and Literature in the Diaspora Archive in the United Kingdom ([www.salidaa.org.uk](http://www.salidaa.org.uk)), and an advisory fellow for the Royal Literary Fund at Queen Mary's College, University of London.

Sibani Raychaudhuri wrote *Bengali Poetry-English Poetry*, along with Ruth Read, in 1988. She also published *Daughters of the East*, a compilation of stories and poems written in Bengali, English and Urdu by local women in Tyneside, in 1990. Leena Dhingra remains a notable figure in Asian television and writing circuit with her novel *Amritvela*, 1988. She graduated from the University of East Anglia with an MA in Creative Writing in 1991 and a PhD in 2001. She has appeared in soap operas like *Doctors*, *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, *Doctor Who*, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*. Leena Dhingra has also acted in the film *East is East*.

Rahila Gupta and Ravinder Randhawa together managed the AWWC and Rahila Gupta was a member of the Management Committee of Southall Black Sisters, and a leading feminist activist. She is a freelance journalist who has at least thirty articles of note to her credit. She is co-writer of Kiranjit Ahluwalia's autobiography and as a member of the Southall Black Sisters, and she played a significant role in ensuring that a woman, who had fired and killed her husband in his sleep, was stylized as a heroine in her book *Provoked*, later made into a film by Jug Mundra. Her latest book on illegal immigrants as the modern British slaves is *Enslaved. The New British Slavery*, published in 2008.

Other writing by immigrants enjoys much publicity and visibility, though it may be of indifferent literary standards. The collective, however published two short volumes *Read On* (1990) and *If I Say No* (1991), along with their newsletter *Chitti* before *Flaming Spirit* came out in 1994. A reassuringly large number of women joined the group within a few years of their first

publication, showing the highly positive response within the limited sphere of creative writing found as in any given society.

The response to this collection came from Asian and Non-Asian readers and researchers more than reviewers, and there were conferences and seminars within the circle of coloured writers at which some writers were invited. MeeraSyal was noticed as good publishing material as was Ravinder Randhawa, but most of the other writers remain unknown and unread afterwards and thus fell into oblivion. A special issue of a journal published in Germany called *Hard Times* was dedicated to South Asian presence in British culture. One must remember the fame and popularity of Rushdie and HanifQureishi at this time, that itself generated a pale shadow of interest in black women's writing in Britain's literary circuit. But today, to get the copies of these issues one must necessarily contact the used catalogue of Amazon.com, preferably from the U.K. It's important to know that women writers of Asian origin have made an archive, a repository of artistic and written material which could be viewed or read online as well as physically, at SALIDAA, South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, which has almost disintegrated recently, though its online archives can be accessed through Culture 24 (<http://www.culture24.org.uk>). The way this early text, *Right of Way*, is archived and referred to over and over again validates the need for writing this paper to commemorate leading texts that have changed the way we look at the world, and ourselves.

This effort is now continued with an organisation called VAANI which is also charity-funded and publishes poetry and writing by Asian women both online and offline. *Same Difference* is the anthology VAANI published in 2010. Other than that they organise Meet the Author, Workshops, Competitions, Cultural events along with publishing a newsletter, since 2005. This it maybe said that VAANI and SALIDAA carried the mantle of the AWWC forward, giving Asian women writers the right of way in the busy traffic of diaspora writing. However, one may wonder if there is any future for these writers in terms of global presence? When will a Preethi Nair become internationally recognized through syllabi, awards, reviews, film adaptations Booker nominations etc? In fact, when will the writers' presence be felt even in bookstores and catalogues?

We cannot stop at an assessment of the 1989 text: we need to examine the history of these movements, their inadequacies, their responses to other groups, and their reception by the mainstream and book circuits. Hanna Siddiqui, an activist with the Southall Black Sisters, a black women's group in West London, for over eleven years, and campaigner for women's rights, anti-racism and other civil and human rights, writes in her essay:

What of the future? The strength of black feminism lies in political activism and alliance building between black women, and with white feminists, anti-racists, secularists and those on the left who support their position. Mainstreaming our concerns is crucial if we are to have our voices heard, as difficult as that task is. Our common agenda has to be that of empowering black women and ensuring that women truly have the freedom to

define their own identities and choose their own destinies. Perhaps then we can proudly say that we have come of age. (95-96)

Probably this was the main problem of the collective movement: insularity, lack of alliance building with other black and ethnic minority (BME) groups, which, though it was a major part of the initiative in the beginning, petered out in the end. In fact there are many grey areas of collective women's movements in the history of Asian migrations, and this group also follows a similar trajectory.

Diane Margolis develops a framework for cross-national comparisons of contemporary women's movements. She argues that "there cannot be one correct feminism". (379). She suggests that there are many factors that shape a particular movement: the international context, cross-national influences, the nature of the state, the absence or presence of other movements, the effects of conservative or liberal political environments, the effects of centralization or dispersion within the movement itself and on feminist involvement in political parties and elections. Though it does not fall within the scope of this article to analyse each of these, a reference must be made to a few of these factors across the history of Asian women's collectives in Britain, and other diasporic spaces.

Tariq Jazeel for example, writes about an early Sri Lankan Women's Association in the UK which had distinctly colonial overtones in its formation. He explores "the collective practices of members of a London-based, upper middle-class/elite Sri Lankan women's association, formed in 1949"(19) especially members' privileged backgrounds, which brought them closer to the mainstream as opposed to women from the lower classes and non-elitist backgrounds. Thus the 'collective'-ness (emphasis added) of the association is lost.

Though this was not quite the case with AWWC, there was an enormous academic emphasis on the membership and organisational front, which brings with it a certain kind of elitism, and which might have caused some kind of distance to have crept up from the ground realities. Rigours of creative norms were numerous, and the collective reading process remained excessively cumbersome. Also, funding issues always caused such associations to disintegrate. Thus the assumption that a collective will flourish on the creative steam of a few talented women is flawed and idealistic.

It is interesting to examine other causes too. In Dina Okamoto's analysis, she extends theoretical models of ethnic boundary formation to account for the shifting and layered nature of ethnic boundaries. She explores how organizing along an ethnic boundary affects collective efforts at the pan ethnic level: it may be affected by competition with other ethnic or racial groups, and occupational and other kinds of segregation among Asian subgroups depresses the rate of pan-Asian collective action. The results also show that "intra- group competition discourages pan-Asian collective action, and organizing along ethnic lines generally facilitates it"(811) .Though

her extremely well-quantified research is based on Asian Americans, these factors are critical determinants of the success and failure of collective action among Asian groups.

Irene Perez Fernandez finds, in relation to writers like Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali, that there is “a certain reluctance to consider them as British writers and a tendency to label their work as being closer to that of post-colonial authors for ‘conveniently’ thematic reasons” (146). The label sits aptly on the writers of the Asian Women Writers Collective too. Though they write about contemporary Britishness, except Monica Ali, they are referred to in seminar papers and conference themes more than reviews, booklists, or shelves and displays in stores. However, male writers are always making it to the awards lists, their texts are being filmed, and are awarded prizes. Nirmal Puwar assesses the impact of two academic workshops held exclusively for South Asian women scholars and academicians. She states that “In an atmosphere of racism and indifference, without these opportunities the work of South Asian women could easily be undermined by the quiet discouragements of talent killers” (137). The same is true of fiction writing, and *Right of Way* and *Flaming Spirit*, and other publications of the AWWC have to be appreciated because without them, so many voices would remain unheard. Similar enthusiasm needs to be expressed by VAANI, an online Asian writers’ and other artists’ portal with a literary magazine, and other organisations, without which creative expressions of the.

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