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### [Episode 119: Shagufta K Iqbal](#) -- (31/10/2018)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Shagufta K. Iqbal

#### **Introduction:**

**DT:** Hello. Welcome to episode 119 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. How are you? We seem to be hurtling towards the end of the year and the trees in the south west of England are now resembling the interior of 1970s’ caravans, but I’m sitting in the blazing sun, which is momentarily nice, but probably signals doom for the world and us.

This month's guest is Bristol-based poet Shagufta K Iqbal. I met up with Shagufta back in early October 2018 at her home in Bristol, to discuss the many facets of her career, which I won't go into now as she covers that perfectly herself in her own introduction coming up in just a moment. As well as her writing, we chat a lot about the collaborative nature of providing platforms for other writers, focusing on the role she played in founding the YoniVerse collective, a platform and support network for South Asian women writers.

It's also been a while since I've had a guest on that would define themselves as firstly a spoken-word artist, so it was great to hear another writer's thoughts and experiences of making the transition from successful stage presence to published author. Before the conversation, a huge thank you to everyone who's bought a copy of our anthology *Why Poetry?*, either from a bookshop or direct from the publisher Verve Poetry Press.

Just a quick reminder that our funding from Arts Council England ends this month. After that, we'll need to look at other ways to fund the various aspects of the series. My main focus at the moment is to secure the money to continue to transcribe the podcast. Each episode currently costs around £80 to transcribe and it's something I don't have the skill or time to do myself. All the money we make from the book will be reinvested into making the series as accessible as possible, so if you buy a book, you'll be directly playing a big part in that accessibility.

Link to the book in the episode description. Side note: if you can't afford to buy the book, then ask for it at your library. I'm sure they'll get it in for you. I'll be back at the end of the episode to share a poem from the book. Speaking of transcripts, you can download a full transcript of this episode over at our website, [www.lunarpodcast.com](http://www.lunarpodcast.com)

Also, don't forget to check out our companion podcast, *A Poem A Week*, in which we bring you, you guessed it, a poem every week, from the likes of Andrew McMillan, Deanna Rodger, Raymond Antrobus, Emily Harrison, Will Harris and Meryl Pugh. All episodes can be found wherever you get your podcasts or over at our website. Something's flying overhead. That's probably enough from me. Here's Shagufta.

### **Conversation:**

**SKI:** I'm Shagufta K Iqbal. I'm a poet, experimenting with film sometimes and a writer, workshop facilitator, founder of YoniVerse. I'm mostly here to talk about the *Jam Is For Girls, Girls Get Jam* poetry collection, which is a debut poetry collection and it's titled after a poem called *Jam Is For Girls, Girls Get Jam*. It's probably one of the first spoken-word pieces I wrote. I really like it for that reason because it forced me to go down into another way of writing poetry that wasn't just page poetry, it was much more conversational, it was about speaking with your audience.

I started writing a poem many, many years before this and I couldn't finish the poem. I think I was too emotionally caught up in the narrative of that piece and I put it away. It revived itself through this and came and spoke to me in this way. It's about being Punjabi, about being

brought up in the UK as third-generation Punjabi and Punjabi culture is, particularly in rural parts of Pakistan, where we're from, very farming based and so the men would go out and work the fields and do all the hard labourers' work and the women also would do all of the hard work, but for some reason, they would get the vegetables and then men would get the meat.

They would get the jam for breakfast, the men would get the eggs and so when we came over here, that mentality stayed, even though the lifestyle and the culture here had changed. So I think one of my biggest reasons for being a feminist, even though I didn't really like eggs, I was making a very strong point about why we still continued with these gender roles, even though they no longer needed to exist in this society we lived in. So it's called;

### Jam Is for Girls, Girls Get Jam

But we awoke to the sizzle of eggs in the pan.  
I like mine well done  
and my sister likes hers with the yolk just so.  
Yes, we were girls, yet we got eggs, not jam.

*But.* We were made to know:  
I was not born boy,  
I was not born to be man,  
I was born to be given away  
and that's why girls get jam.  
And that is why I have not one  
but three beautiful sisters.  
Because I was not born boy.

And I was made to know that:  
I escaped the desert sands,  
my mouth was not placed over with hand.  
I was lucky enough to be born after the gift of the Qur'an,  
to be protected by the word of Allah.  
And still my *Ummah* chooses not to see  
the light bestowed upon us by Allah.

Yes, bones lie scattered  
criss-crossed through the deserts  
under the feet of our beloved prophets.  
And like my mother the desert heat suppresses secrets,  
and mass graves under sand dunes.  
No, I cannot tell you why that girl child,  
buried breathing, lies in the embrace of the Sahara.

And yes, I must cover.  
Live enshrouded.

Black cloth grazing against my skin,  
protecting me from everyone else's sin.  
My face, my eyes, my lips, my words and my honesty.  
And yet I must pluck, and wax, and squeeze, and polish, and lipo,  
and smile, full lips, big tits, designer vagina.  
Because this way it gets called freedom.  
You see, my identity and my honour lie not in me,  
but in those who own me,  
and oh, how they adorn me.  
I tinsel like Christmas tree.  
Purple bruises sparkle against my face.  
Because in the land of the free,  
by the man I love, I am battered every fifteen seconds,  
and in the land of democracy  
I was only given the right to speak in 1918  
'Shhhhhhhh, yes,' he said, 'husssssssssh,'  
because only in 1991 did it become rape.  
So, 'Don't say a word,' he says.  
But I, I've just got to ask, is that why even today  
only 4.2% of rape cases lead to conviction in Bristol?  
Yes, they all just let him walk away.

Because I was not born boy,  
I was not born to be man.  
I was born to be given away.  
And that's why girls get jam.

And like traitors they say we gave away land,  
we do not carry on our fathers' names,  
we disappear in family trees,  
no one can trace who we are,  
there is no leaf left for me.  
And silent as sweltering nights,  
we are considered to have come from thin air.  
Giving birth to strong sons,  
serving great husbands,  
and burning to death on funeral pyres.  
the Ganges just rolling on by,  
unperturbed by that smell of burning flesh,  
that stench of charred hair,  
that one tumbled down a honey-brown back.

And they remind us  
that we got lumbered with jam,  
we were born to be given away  
and no one loves those  
who aren't here to stay.

**DT:** Thank you very much, Shagufta. It's always amazing to hear people read for the first time away from an audience, because I've often seen my guests speak at spoken-word events or more staid readings, it's always a very different thing when it's one-to-one and you're sitting in someone's very lovely home and they've welcomed you in. What do you do after a poem like that? It seems very glib to say 'Hello, welcome to Lunar Poetry Podcasts, let's get going'.

Maybe we use that point to start because we were speaking very briefly before I hit 'record' about this question of who we're trying to talk to and why are we choosing the method, or any method, to talk to people. Throughout the archive we've had a lot of people who would class themselves first and foremost as spoken-word artists or poetry slammers or performance poets, it's been a while since we talked directly about how we make the transition from stage to page. I'd like to acknowledge this conversation will go nowhere near discussing any divide between those two things, I just think it's interesting to talk to someone who started in the way you did, in your initial interaction with poetry, what was the attraction to come to a book? Perhaps we could just talk a bit about how you got started first and we'll naturally come towards the book.

**SKI:** I suppose for me, writing is very much about making sense of the world as I know it. For me, it's a really good way to process my own emotions and feelings and thoughts on a subject matter. I started writing, for me, I think I go between stage and page and at various points of my life, I feel more comfortable in a stage space and other times, I feel more comfortable in a page space.

I think all spoken-word poets should be comfortable with page because I think if you're going to perform something, you've had to have worked on it on that page or on the phone as they do these days. I've started doing it myself so I can't say anything about that. That's where the writing came from and I studied at Bath Spa University so I was doing a lot of page poetry at the university and exploring my voice through that.

Bristol had a really good spoken-word scene, we had Lucy English and Glenn Carmichael, who were pioneering a lot of the slam that was happening. I started going along to those events as a really good way to hear poets that weren't dead poets and contemporary poets and poets living in the same communities and societies as me and the issues that were pertinent to their lives and how that interlinked and intertwined with some of the concerns or some of the questions that I had.

That seemed like a really good way to learn about my contemporaries and therefore learn about my own work. So that's kind of how I got into spoken word. I really like spoken word because I feel it stops you from being a lazy writer, because you are so aware of your audience and not just at the writing stage, but at the stage where you're engaging with the audiences. I think it's interesting reading to somebody who's just a singular person in front of you and then trying to engage with an entire room full of people, a theatre full of people.

I think it forces you to work really hard and forces you to think about the way you're communicating your work, otherwise you can end up being very much in your own head. I suppose also being a writer who is a woman of colour, sometimes you feel that you're very aware of your audiences about the nuances they get in your work, whether it's landed in the same way that you've actually spoken out what you think is the truth.

I think I've sometimes deliberately tried to seek out audiences who are similar to myself in background, so that I feel the stories I'm telling are maybe authentic or land with somebody else in the same way and actually, I'm not making this all up, it's not just me who's kind of saying 'oh, this is the truth'. It's a very vague way of saying...

**DT:** There's a couple of very important points in that. Let me try and divide them clearly so you can respond or ignore them. Recently, the poet Niall O'Sullivan, who for the last 14 years has hosted Poetry Unplugged in London, a regular open-mic night, has been writing a series of thoughts and ideas about spoken word on Twitter, which he does quite a lot, but more recently, he's been hitting some really interesting points.

His contention that a lot of spoken-word artists and fans will claim that they like the art form because it links them to a very, very, very old oral tradition and his point is that spoken word is rooted in writing, it's rooted in the page because unless you're improvising, most work has been worked on either pen and paper or, like you said, smartphones and tablets.

The second point was that you have that immediate connection with the audience, they're there, you can't hide from them, it does force you to acknowledge them in a way you might not do, writing in your traditional poetry garret, all alone, when you've isolated yourself from the world because the world doesn't understand you.

Perhaps what is missing for a lot of people that get into spoken word, and maybe it's an attraction for getting stuff on a page, is that editorial conversation you might have, of OK, this is how something hits in the moment, this is the emotion it drags out of our audience, but where do you go if you want to talk about the longer-lasting effects of that poem? Through Twitter, you might hear something, but it's unusual to hear what lasting effect your poetry has had on someone.

**SKI:** OK, three questions. Let's start from the beginning with a lot of spoken-word poets saying it's going back to oral traditions of storytelling, Beowulf for example and other cultures which are rooted in oral traditions. Yeah, I suppose there's a truth to that. I also think spoken-word is slightly different. I think a lot of that storytelling, that traditional oral storytelling, had not always but mostly had a really nice rhythm, a really nice rhyme, I'm thinking of the Koran, for example, so a lot of people who don't speak Arabic know the entire Koran off by heart sometimes and that's quite amazing to me because it's a big old book.

It's through the rhythm of it. It was there to be embedded in your mind. A lot of spoken-word poets now don't use that rhyme and use free verse, so I feel that it's not so easy to remember. You've got to experiment with the page and you've got to experiment with seeing it written down. We live in a society where writing is very much part of our culture and our canons. So that's one thing.

About the audience, speaking directly with the audience, in one respect I think it's really good because it forces you to engage directly with an audience, but I have also noticed sometimes when I start to go to regular poetry nights, sometimes, the same thing will come up again and again and again and there's a danger of people performing in silos and working in these spaces where it's just echoing back the same sentiments and getting a click from an audience for saying something that's being going round on social media or being politically current in your work and maybe losing the poetry. I think that's where the danger is

When I say you need to write with it, it's you need to spend time. Even if you're somebody who doesn't particularly need to see your poem on a page, you need to spend time in saying 'what is it that makes this a poem?' and not such a series of political statements and there are times I've gone to poetry night and thought 'that person's brilliant, they got the entire audience up on their feet and really engaged and in agreement with them, but at what point was that poetry? At what point did they make me see the world in a different way or did they just lay witness to what's happening around them we all agree with?'

I think that's where sometimes for me, the danger lies, with being in those public spaces of just talking with an audience because you lose the poetry where you sit down and you see a line actually written down on a page and you've read that line somewhere else or you've seen it on a hashtag, on an Instagram post, it feels like you need to work harder, that's not good enough. That's what I feel about the danger sometimes of being too performance-driven.

**DT:** I'm nodding, I don't want to take over too much with any of my own opinions, but I do feel there's a very real danger that spoken-word poetry falls into eliciting only emotions from people because that can be done through rhythm and pace and repetitive action. That is not to take away from the fact that if you are able to do that to an audience of 60 to 1000 people, that's an amazing thing to be able to do.

**SKI:** Yes, but does that make you a poet or does that make you a performer?

**DT:** At what point did you start asking those questions of yourself?

**SKI:** Probably towards the end of when I wrote the collection and started taking the collection out and started performing it and felt sometimes in performance, the work was lost and I really wanted to say 'I've got a book so if there's a poem I really like, why don't you spend some time with this poem?' I think also because I've got a background in literature, there are times when I've gone back and read a poem or gone back and read a book and reading it the second, third, fourth time, you pick up something new every time.

There's something quite nice about spending one-to-one time with a piece of literature or a piece of spoken word that's moved you because you can listen to something online and it moves you the same way. So I think that's when I started having those questions about what performance meant and at what stage I needed to attend to being a performer and being a writer.

**DT:** Before you started asking those questions and considering more the different layers in your work and how different poems may function differently in different settings, do you feel like had you asked that question of yourself earlier, do you feel like you would have got any answers? Do you feel there would have been a support network of people that could have helped you to begin to consider, without physically printing a book?

**SKI:** I think the lead-up towards a book, so lots of things are happening at the same time. The book is almost 10 years of writing, so there were times when I thought 'this poem shouldn't sit in this book', but actually it's part of an ongoing journey within the narrative of the book because it's such a long period of time and that's the thing with most spoken-word artists who are recently getting books out. Salena Godden, who's been performing for a very long time, has released her first collection after so many years and so her voice must change within that.

I learnt a lot working with Apples and Snakes, I remember doing a project with Jasmine Gardosi who is a Brummy-based poet, a brilliant performer and a brilliant writer, and I remember she performed a piece of poetry, I was holding my breath the whole time, she really took you on this journey and I remember how powerful she made her words.

Sometimes I think when you are a writer, you just quickly want to get your words out there, just let everybody know 'this is the story I'm telling, this is what it's about', whereas she really played with suspense and how she sometimes dragged a series of events out and stopped and just how in charge she was of her tone, how in charge she was of the way in which she delivered that work. Then I saw Deanna Rodger perform as well, who is now also a Bristol-based poet, but originally from London and she performed a poem, she wrote it originally as a love poem and performed it as a really cynical...

So we were doing this thing with Blahblahblah at the Wardrobe Theatre, which was on Valentine's Day, so it was Love Vs The Cynics' team, so we did a slam. I think she didn't have a cynical poem, but she turned her love poem into a very cynical poem criticising love. The only thing she changed was her tone and the way she delivered it. Everything else is entirely the same, she didn't change a single word of the poem, but the way she delivered it, I thought it's just incredible when a performer is able to do something like that, just by using their tone and not changing the words.

**DT:** Part of the purpose of having the podcast is to include, without any divide and seams between them, people who would be considered purely page poets and people who would be considered purely performance-based, was to create a space where these conversations could be had, rather than having to wait to see a performer who challenges you on stage, because even if you see that on stage, you're not necessarily going to have the space to talk to the person about what it meant to you, how it might influence you and how many of us have friends that understand our work deeply enough and would understand the questions we're asking of ourselves as writers and artists.

That leads me to asking how much of the collection is you responding to wanting to produce a book and a collection of work where there was a vacuum and where you felt that conversation should be had? You can take that in any direction you want, but I'm thinking

purely as an act of writing and being published and how that feeds into starting up an initiative like YoniVerse, which seems to be about maybe identifying a vacuum and providing a platform to talk through space and ideas?

**SKI:** OK, so with the writing, I think if you were a spoken-word poet and writing in the 90s and you're writing in the early 2000s, you are not writing for a poetry collection, because you will never be published. You just never had any inkling you were looking at a poetry scene as it is today, even though poetry has had its ups and downs and spoken word has had revivals, especially when it looks over the Atlantic, there are things we imitate that happen in the States, but I didn't write for a collection, I wrote because I felt I wanted and needed to write and I enjoy the process of writing.

So when Burning Eye books came up and now you've got Verve Poetry Press and quite a few presses publishing spoken-word poets, it's really exciting for spoken-word poets because you realise you are producing something that's lasting and it comes together in one book, rather than all these bits of paper you have everywhere or bits of poems on phones. I wasn't really writing for a vacuum in that sense of filling in a gap, because I was always aware that as a spoken-word poet, there are only particular audiences you would be able to engage with.

I'm not Carol Ann Duffy, I'm not Shakespeare, I'm not going to have access to all the audiences that they had access to, so I was always aware that I am possibly writing for a small community or somebody on my doorstep or literally those small spaces, because literally nobody know who you are or what your work is. Unless you're very good at knowing your marketing, you're not going to get out there, so I think the collection really came into fruition when I saw some of my contemporaries being published.

I remember thinking 'wow, Vanessa Kisuule's been published, Rebecca Tantony's been published and Lucy Lepchani's been published and these are people I know. I drink with them, I've had tea with them, so possibly, maybe I could also be published. I started then working on the collection as it is and started to really focus on doing that and put together an application to the Arts Council to get time to write and I think that really made me think about my work as a professional writer.

That's the other problem with being a writer, you always think 'oh, it's something I do on the side' and it's not something that's serious, it's just I dip into it. When I spoke to a colleague or friend of mine, she said 'why don't you get some protected time to write? Submit an application to the Arts Council, that's what they're there for.' I think I hadn't really thought of myself as a serious writer up until that point, so that's when the collection came into being. In terms of the, we were talking about finding audiences and finding spaces where we feel there is a gap.

**DT:** What I do know about the YoniVerse, is it's not simply an attempt to put events on, it's not audience-focused, it's participant and artist-focused and it's about providing an event, I don't mean safe space in the way it's come to be politically charged now, but having a space where people feel comfortable. At what point do we go from this conversation about how we interact with the audience, how do we become community-focused as a producer and collaborative artist?

**SKI:** OK, so I think for a very long time, for some strange, naïve reason, I thought 'I'm the only female brown poet who's writing poetry' and then I was being booked for gigs, I mean all poets face this, but I think if you come from a disadvantaged background, where you are maybe a minority background or have a disability or from the LGBT community, you're always wondering at the back of your mind 'am I being booked to headline this gig because I'm ticking a box or am I actually a good poet?'

It's something you're always trying to grapple with and I remember just wondering this and going on Facebook and just Googling other South West poets and I came across a poet called Amani Saeed, who was in Exeter at the time and she was doing a few gigs that I'd also done. Part of me was 'argh, she's going to take all of my gigs, she's the new young brown poet, I'm no longer needed because there's only ever room for one of us' and then I thought 'actually, let me reach out' because at the time, I was working on a few projects in Bristol with other South Asian women.

They weren't necessarily creative spaces, but around public engagement and creating communities. I think I realised growing up, particularly watching 90s' politics, where it was a lot of fighting over the same pots of money and funding and often, people would be brought into an organisation as the mouthpiece for a certain community and then they would become a gatekeeper. You had a real issue around mentorship and a real issue around, sometimes I would go into an organisation and there was an older brown woman who I thought I could reach out to and she would help me and tell me how she got to the stage she's gotten to and actually, there wasn't that solidarity there, I think because it was a rivalry.

I know where that comes from and why that's been set up in that way, so I thought 'I'm not going to do that, I'm not going to be that person, I'm going to be kind'. So I reached out to Amani and we met up and had a chat and it was amazing. All the qualms, the doubts you have as a writer... our stories really resonated with each other and we started having a conversation about 'do you think there are more of us? How many do you think there are? Where do you think they're based? What do you think if we all came together and started writing together?'

Initially, we just started looking out and stalking people on social media and there are now tons of us, but at the time, we found Shareefa Energy who's based in London, she's incredible, Afshan Lodhi, who's based in Manchester, Shruti [Chauhan] who's based in the Midlands. We had Anjoli who's also based in London and Sophia Thakur who's also based in London.

We came together and every time we reached out to one of the poets and said 'this is what we're thinking of doing, coming together and collaborating and supporting each other and having a network where we help each other out or if there's any stage of my journey that can help your stage of your journey, let's provide that support'. It started off as a Facebook group and now it's a WhatsApp group. 'What's the YoniVerse?' It's a WhatsApp group, basically, lots of memes get sent round.

It was an amazing revival of my work and I think writing together with that group of women really changed the way I wrote and being part of the, so what we do is we encourage other writers and emerging poets to come forward and use the spoken word Golden Tongue, which

has a house at Rich Mix, and also we do the writers' group, so we host a writing workshop on a monthly basis. At the moment, it's on a bit of a break. It's due to start again in the new year at the Free Word Centre. We encourage people to come together, write together, and provide a space for them to perform, where they feel safe and comfortable to do that.

It has changed the way I write. I think often when I was writing poetry before, if I made any cultural references, I would then within the poem, explain that cultural reference. Actually, that was kind of detrimental to my art because it's like telling a joke and then explaining your joke within the joke. It stops being funny. It changed my writing in that I started to write much more concisely and expected my audience to get what I was saying because that's the space I was performing in.

**DT:** I think it's really important to bring up ideas like feeling like being the only one. It's a direct result of the way so many panel-talks and events are put on, that there is only ever one example of anyone that doesn't fit the societal norm traditionally attached to poetry. My maternal grandfather is from Spain, so all his brothers are Spanish and I grew up around flamenco guitars and singing. On my father's side is a very, very London, working-class background and family and I couldn't see any of those voices on either side of my family represented in poetry.

I've since found them, but it takes a lot of searching and if you don't know where to begin looking, you're never going to find it. What spoken word allowed me to do is to introduce that language I'd grown up with, a way of talking and communicating and to deliver that outright and then develop it into something that's now more considered, but it has allowed me to write in a way I don't think I would have learnt without the immediate reaction of an audience.

I wonder how much that then plays into the reason I started the podcast, which is a community idea, it's a collaborative idea, I feel every interview is a collaboration with a guest. I don't feel like it's something I'm producing on my own, because it isn't, because that would just be a monologue from me. I don't even know if that's a question, but if there's anything you feel rings true...

**SKI:** What you're talking about in terms of your maternal grandfather and the flamenco and that element of art seeping through is really interesting. I kind of felt I was between two spaces, maybe you felt that in the same way. I'd go to poetry nights, poetry recitals, for example, I remember being young and going to see Carol Ann Duffey recite poetry, I'm a big fan of Carol Ann Duffy's work and then going to what would happen in our local community, called mashyras they were poetry nights, people would come together and it was spoken word for me. Somebody would go up on the stage, they would share a poem, it was usually dominated by men, it was a very male-driven space and the audience were so interactive

Like here, we click, the audience there were like 'stop, stop, stop' to the poet, 'start from the beginning, I want to hear it all from the beginning' and halfway through the poem. The poet would start right from the beginning and it was great because they were like 'yes, they really like it, they want to hear it again'. There were two different spaces where it was happening and I was in between, not really able to fit in either one, so I think that was where the

YoniVerse came in terms of, you're right, finding a space where there is a balance between the two of them.

I think what's really interesting is that poetry was perceived as a very academic thing, in both of those spaces. In the South Asian, it was very male-dominated and then you used to have lots of people who wouldn't book me but would book a spoken-word poet who was male and would usually go and perform at Islamic events or fund-raisers and they were often talking about politics, about Palestine, and my poetry didn't fit into that space, but also it didn't fit into particular spaces here. That's why the YoniVerse really works for a lot of South Asian women, well, female poets, we say 'womxn' with an x, so it's open to non-binary and trans women

Then I think what we try to do is play with those two spaces, try and bridge that gap and bring one into the other space and realise there are poets, that we don't know our poets. The amount of times I've spoken to a taxi driver who is a poet, has been writing poetry, has told repeated lines of poetry to me, so you find poets in the spaces you don't even imagine exist. Writing is something we're all compelled to do in some way, many of us are.

**DT:** At least communicating with people. With a bit of distance away from someone and a pen and paper, they can communicate much more openly and be honest in a way that's more representative in their head to how they feel and they can do that in a poem in a way they may not be able to face to face. In case there's anyone listening and they think they're the only one, as a reader or writer, how would people get in touch and find out what's going on?

**SKI:** So find out through our social media accounts, so we always update events coming on. We run monthly events at the Rich Mix, again it's all up on our social media, and we're currently working as a collective on a show we're looking to tour and we're also working on a poetry collection.

**DT:** I'll put links in the episode description. For anyone that doesn't know, Rich Mix is a venue in Bethnal Green in East London.

**SKI:** Sorry, I'm very London-centric.

**DT:** It's difficult when you know London intimately, I'm aware of it myself. There would probably be a lot of crossovers if people want to revisit our 100<sup>th</sup> episode, which is with Rachel Long, founder of Octavia Collective, and two members, a huge amount of crossovers. I believe with Amani Saeed especially.

**SKI:** Anjoli goes between Octavia and. We also work with Zara who goes between the two spaces. Octavia very much inspired this, but we felt the need to have a South-Asia-specific space and that goes back, I think, to the fact I grew up in the 90s, I felt 90s' politics was a little bit lazy and that we all were politically black and by being politically black, we were missing all the nuances and prejudices that the South Asia community have. I felt that we needed to address those things, but Octavia was very much the reason why I thought a collective was the way to go.

**DT:** The point you just made was very eloquently put and I would have done it quite clumsily. We'll take a second reading if that's OK.

**SKI:** I think at this point, it would be appropriate to have a short poem that I've written for my daughter. I probably wrote it because I had very much started this conversation with the other collective members, this idea about why we are creating a collective and what the purpose of it is. A huge part of it was when I was working in schools and doing workshops, I noticed South Asian girls were still the ones who, so many years after I left school, were very reserved, even when I would come in and they would see a brown face delivering a workshop.

But at the end they would be full of questions and I wondered why they weren't taking up spaces in the same way and all the things they're having to navigate to make sure their voices are heard and how taking up space is very difficult for South Asian women, not just in British society, but in our own communities and how European beauty standards is also something that keeps getting pushed on South Asian women.

So when I was pregnant with my daughter, people kept giving me advice about how to be a mother to a daughter and a lot of the advice was around her skin complexion and I would be told things like 'drink more milk', which was supposed to make my child come out lighter skinned. I thought 'no, I probably shouldn't be having sex with a darker-skinned man if I was going to have a lighter-skinned daughter', that's not how it works. But it was amazing how a lot of the advice I was being given was around how she was going to look and how she needed to be lighter skinned and how that was going to help her in society.

I remember growing up with very much bearing this in mind between me and my sister and how we had inequality. I've met many sisters, there will be a lighter-skinned one and a darker one and how that puts a rift between their relationship and so that's a really long-winded introduction for a short poem, but it's called Truth and it's dedicated to my daughter.

### Truth

I wrote this poem for every time  
I turned the pages in *Asiana* magazine  
and was confronted by skim-lightening products.  
I wrote this poem for every time I switched on  
BBC 1Xtra and BBC Asian Network,  
and it was all light-skinned girl and *goriya veh*.  
I wrote this poem when *Diya* magazine  
quietly enveloped into my home,  
my letterbox revealing how Indian models  
were replaced with European ones.  
I wrote this poem when Kajol made  
a comeback with *Dilwale*,  
her Frida Kahlo self-acceptance  
now a heavy white cloud  
on a once-sunny day.

I wrote this poem when I was nine,  
and my sister's defiance  
was held together by  
the brownness of her skin.  
I wrote this poem  
when I looked into my daughter's face  
and folded away lies into my hands,  
held instead a mirror to her skin.  
Showed her she is her foremothers.  
Showed her she is her ancestors.  
Showed her she is her goddesses.  
Showed her she is  
the living energy of the sun.  
Showed her she is truth,  
and truth is courage,  
and courage is beauty,  
and beauty is her.

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**DT:** Thank you. In the second half of the conversation, let's focus on the direction your writing is taking now. *Jam Is For Girls* came out in 2017, so as is the natural order and pace with which poetry collections are written, that probably reflects stuff that is a few years old now, so I wonder if we could talk about how you see yourself as a writer now and how that has been different and also influenced by having your debut book being a collection of poetry.

**SKI:** I suppose once you have a book, you can say to funding bodies and also your mum 'I am an official writer, I count for something now' and it allows you to really work on the ways you write and create art. I'm currently writing a second poetry collection, but I really want to take my time with this one. This one took 10 years to write and I'm saying I want to take my time, but I want to take my time on each poem and work with mentoring.

I want to work through courses, I want to work by getting funding to make it happen and make it exist in a way, you know, you've worked to look at it as a collection, rather than 'I'm just writing because I have the impulse to write'. I think that's the way the second collection is coming together. My voice has changed very much from when I was writing 12 years ago and the stories that will be reflected in the new collection are reflective of a new generation or a generation of women who are in similar spaces as me, in their 30s.

I really want to pay homage to a lot of the stories from Punjabi culture, which I've always grown up knowing, but never felt had a place in my writing because I felt like my writing was very British. Now, I want to mix the two. The first collection was actually broken into the different rivers of Punjab, so Punjab literally means 'five rivers', 'punj' meaning five, 'ab' meaning rivers, so rivers play a really big part in my writing. So almost all the five rivers in Punjab, which is a region that crosses between India and Pakistan, so a lot of people are devastated at the fact that five rivers that flow into the Indus are now so separate from each other.

All of those rivers have their own myths and their own stories and their own love stories, so you have Heer Ranjha, which are kind of Romeo and Juliet stories and I really want to talk about the idea of romantic love and what that means in the world we live in today. So that's one collection I'm writing as a follow-up from this one, The second piece I'm writing is a coming-of-age novel, which is a very different way of writing. I think with poetry, I really enjoy it and it's those short bursts of emotion or thought you can get into a small poem, sometimes a longer piece, a three-minute or I've worked on poems that are 10 minutes long, but it's quite contained.

Every word, every line, has to work harder because you've got to make sure everything is utilising the space correctly in the poem, but writing for a sustained period of time and meeting other novelists and authors who are pulling their hair out because they are at year number three with their same novel is an interesting area that I'm now discovering in my own writing. This poetry collection is very much the basis for the novel and it's been something that's been brewing at the back of my mind for a very long time.

I think I was doing the thing all poets do now, where we all have a solo show, so I started working on a solo show and every time I would sit down to write a script for the solo show, using this poetry collection, it kept writing itself as a novel. I couldn't get it to write as a script for theatre, so after repeatedly doing that process again and again, I decided actually that if it was writing itself as a novel, let me try and experiment and see if I could write it as a novel.

So I've started writing a few pivotal scenes and then said 'actually, you're a creative, you're a professional writer, so see if you can get any support in this' and then submitted to the Arts Council's new Developing Your Creative Practice grant, which I love. It is relatively new.

**DT:** Was it January this year, the first round?

**SKI:** Yes, so they usually have the grants for the arts, which is very project-driven, very much about creating an end product and this is allowing artists to just experiment with their art, to experiment with their voice, it's almost like creating art for the sake of art, rather than how many bums in seats or how many audience members.

**DT:** There's a critical difference with this funding, isn't there? You don't have to imagine an audience because there is no obligation on you.

**SKI:** Yes, it's literally you being able to go away and just experiment and try new things and not have to have an end product, which is always the pressure. The amount of times I'm working with creative... Essentially, you're applying because you want to write, but when you are applying to do a project or get a grant for the arts, what you're doing is everything except for the writing. So you're running the workshops, you're going into schools, doing all the other things, but you're not doing the writing.

This has been a godsend. I feel really lucky I was selected and offered this fund. I'm working with an amazing author, Sarvat Hasin, who is the author of a novel called This Wide Night and has had a new one come out this year. She's been mentoring me in making sure that I'm hitting those milestones because I think it's quite easy to talk about your novel to people all

the time, 'I'm writing a novel' but not actually writing it, so having somebody who's been through that process break down some of that process to you has been really useful.

**DT:** For anyone listening who's interested in Developing Your Creative Practice and what that might mean to them as an artist, if you go back and listen to episode 114, it's me in conversation with Gemma Seltzer, then of the Arts Council who instigated that funding. It's like a half-hour breakdown of the difference between that and the existing project grants and what the difference is and some tips on applying and whether it's relevant for you, because we're talking about ideas of community but where do you go for this information?

It was very important for me, as someone who's had, luckily enough – I say 'luckily', it's actually a huge amount of work – three project grants from the Arts Council to fund this podcast project. It was very difficult to find information the first time I applied. Had I had access to a certain amount of information, I could have shaved five, six months off the initial application process. Anyone wanting to know any more about project grants can go to my website, there's a page on there called Series Evaluation, where I've published the first year's spending for my project.

It breaks down the costing and gives you an idea of what the Arts Council will actually fund and what you're able to use the money for. That's a side note. Again, I'll put links in the episode description just because it feels relevant to the conversation we're having.

**SKI:** I think it's hugely important. In fact, when I received the funding, one of the things I put together was, if anyone wants to look at my application form, you're more than welcome to, because it's such a daunting thing, but once you see what some other artists have submitted for, I think it makes it much more accessible and easier to know there are people who are doing it who are saying 'look, speak to me if you need advice'. I think it's so important that people tap into that pot of funding and find out who your literature representative is as well, that really helps if you chat to them.

**DT:** Definitely. I just want to go back to a quick point you made about how you view the way you're writing. You said you want to take your time. That is sort of a funny thing to say when the first book took 10 years, but it's a common thing I hear and something I experienced myself, that almost feverish engagement we have with spoken word when we first start, there's all these gigs you don't know about, all these people you don't know about and the whole thing can feel like a whirlwind.

There was a decade for you, four years for me, even if you took Salena Godden, for whom there's almost 25 years and if you spoke to Lucy English as well, they would have the same feeling of how quickly that would all pass by and the conscious decision to say 'no, I need to slow down now'.

**SKI:** It's not a slowing down necessarily, it's about focused time. When I say ironically 'it took me 10 years to write this collection', but I was writing on the side of being a student, of having a full-time job, of having a full-time life, so when I say I want to spend more time on individual poems, it's that I want to dedicate my time as a writer, so it's got my full attention,

rather than me sitting on a bus and scribbling things together and then editing in a café very quickly somewhere.

It's about me approaching my work in a very informed way, looking at the process of writing and looking at myself as a writer and allowing myself that space to be a writer rather than putting things together where I have possible time.

**DT:** Also, actively seeking mentoring relationships with other writers and placing yourself in a community because while it seems natural for you and I to say a spoken-word poet is a poet and a poet is a writer and a novelist is a writer so we're all part of the same thing, in reality that's not true. Not that anyone is shutting the door on you, but we all go to different events, we go to different types of readings, different panel discussions and it takes time to step out of one scene and get to know people in another.

**SKI:** Yes, there are lots of things I don't know about. I don't know about the world of the novelist. It's very different. I think I am still at the stage where I'm not rushing to find out about the scene. I'm spending more time to find my own voice as a novelist and does it have a right to exist as a novelist or should I be going back to what I'm used to doing, which is poetry? It's about finding my own voice and then when I've found that, where it sits in a community of other writers who write novels or novellas.

**DT:** You spoke earlier about developing the bilingual nature of how you communicate. Is that feeding into the ideas around the novel or is that a more lyrical theme within the poetry?

**SKI:** It's a more lyrical thing within poetry. I've got two heads on at the moment. There is the poetry side, which I'm trying to keep to poetry. Obviously, I will always approach my storytelling as a poet and I love imagery, I love playing with all of those. Sometimes, I'm writing a piece which is for the novel and I think 'this is a really good poem, actually, I should just use the separate bit as a poem'.

So it's difficult to do that, but I think what's really interesting is that I was going through the poetry collection and I've got a poem in here which has one or two lines completely written in Punjabi and I had an index at the back and I haven't included that in the index at all. So there's no translation and I remember thinking 'oh, I haven't translated that for my audiences' whereas other bits and pieces and other words, I had translated. I think within my poetry, I started to go between the two different languages and because it made sense in my head, didn't realise that it would not make sense with every single audience member. It's quite interesting I was thinking in that way.

**DT:** I find it fascinating. Having come to a second language quite late in life, I learnt Norwegian in my late 20s. It feeds more interestingly into this conversation, again, what is our relationship to our audience? How much are we telling them as a poet? At what point do you feel in your development as a poet and writer that not everyone has to understand everything? Again, your point earlier, do you really want to ruin all your jokes by explaining everything seven times and making it clearer and clearer?

Then in that process, that journey, becoming more confident and knowing perhaps people will Google certain things if they don't understand them. Actually, as a poem, is it any less for not knowing what certain words mean? A lot of your readers don't know what a lot of English words mean.

**SKI:** Also, growing up, I say Punjabi, but we speak Pothwari, which is a kind of Punjabi, an oral language, then being a Muslim meant we learnt a lot of Arabic, but we learnt Arabic with a completely Pothwari accent and Pothwari alphabet, so whenever we speak or say any of the prayers or any of the words to Arabs, they have no idea what we are talking about, even though we think we're speaking Arabic. Also, whilst we speak it, even though it looks the same as Arabic, we don't know what we're saying, so I'm used to praying, used to saying things that I have no idea what the meaning is, but it's very emotive.

There are times when I've heard a prayer or I've been in the space where I'm hearing the Arabic language which always has a religious connotation for me, that I don't understand, but it doesn't mean it hasn't had an effect on me or it doesn't mean anything to me. I think being able to be in that space where I can consume a language without understanding the exact meaning of it has made me feel I can do that with my audiences and it should be fine.

**DT:** We need to trust readers more, don't we? And listeners. The times I've had people read poems on the podcast in languages other than English are normally the ones where I get most feedback because people get in touch to say it was really nice to reengage as a listener and question why you're listening to something when you know you're not going to understand. With the poet Mosab Al Nomairy whose interview was in English, but all his readings were in Arabic, he's a Syrian poet and I got so much feedback about the way people engaged and the emotion that dragged out of them without any 'meaning'.

Something I'm thinking about a lot is the limitations of our language. Even though you think by using standard words that you're getting across meaning to people, often you're not. We convince ourselves we're being clear and we're not.

Before we finish, I want to make sure we mention the recent Burning Eye BAME poetry competition that you judged and the three winners, Hanan Issa, who wrote *Where I'm Coming From?*, which I really enjoyed, it's really good, Caroline Teague and Adrian Earle who otherwise goes by the name Think/Write/Fly, he's based in Birmingham and runs the Verse First podcast.

Can we chat a bit about your experience as a judge, how you were invited and whether there were any criteria placed on you to make your decision or whether it was a free role.

**SKI:** I'd been working on and off for Burning Eye and have a really good relationship for a long time and I think we had a conversation about how, until I started looking, I wasn't aware of South Asian poets and you have to look and it's about your networks. Originally, I was based in Bristol, my networks were Bristol. Then you go and speak to people beyond those networks, beyond those circles and it grows.

I think Burning Eye books are aware they are a spoken-word publisher, but they try to make sure they are, especially if you look at the spoken-word scene, it's so diverse, you've got females forefronting a lot of spoken word as well, you've got the Kate Tempests, the Hollie McNishs, you've got many people of colour who are amazing writers, I'm thinking in particular the Jerwood winning poet, Raymond Antrobus. So the voices that come out of spoken word, it's unlike the canon, where you've got to have an established literary background. You come in and if your work resonates with an audience and it's powerful and strong, you can come in and break into that industry. Publishing should reflect that.

Burning Eye are very much aware they are publishing to reflect it. They wanted to make sure as a publisher they are doing that, so when we started having this conversation about the pamphlet, they were very aware they wanted to expand their knowledge of who is a person of colour and a writer out there and look to publish beyond just the South West as well. They do that anyway, but they wanted to look at particularly voices of colour, you've got Heaux Noire who run between London and Birmingham as well, and Birmingham's got a really good poetry scene. Up North, you've also got really interesting voices.

It's something I'm aware of in our collective. We've got Midland voices, Northern voices, Amani's got a New Jersey accent. It's really brilliant when you hear those new voices come together. In terms of how that was judged, I got the manuscripts, I wasn't aware of who was submitting what, so there were no names attached. It was a brilliant experience. I spent the entire summer, just myself and Bridget [Hart], reading through poetry. I was like 'this is the good life. This is my job, I'm reading poetry'. It was so much fun and so exciting.

I think I expanded my knowledge of who is a spoken-word poet and working in that industry, I think there are quite a few emerging voices and I'm really glad to see there are people emerging as poets and looking to push themselves and take up things, whereas before, we would always doubt ourselves. For me, the three who won were very experienced poets and clearly had spent a lot of time with poetry and read a lot of poetry and really thought about what it meant to be published.

That's why those three were selected. We put together a shortlist and then from the shortlist, we knew who each manuscript belonged to and what their background was and made a decision about the winners. They were all really deserving. We weren't aware of their backgrounds until that shortlist was in place.

**DT:** The geographical spread of the three writers is really interesting.

**SKI:** That was purely by chance. It wasn't strategic that we wanted to have the Midlands, Wales, London, it was genuinely the works that resonated and spoke out.

**DT:** I think it's going to be a really important thing if you are an emerging writer or unpublished because very often, things are London-focused. It seems very positive. Before we take a third reading, I want to thank you very much, I've had a great time chatting and there's so much more we could have talked about. It's a shame these things can't go on for three hours. I don't think the listeners would indulge me on that.

**SKI:** We'll have a cup of tea and continue our chat.

**DT:** And there's always opportunity to revisit things in future as well because there's a lot to think about in this conversation. As writers and artists, our ideas change so much as the process goes along. If people want to check you out, where can they do that?

**SKI:** I've got a website, [www.shaguftakiqbal.com](http://www.shaguftakiqbal.com) and I'm on social media as Shagufta K Iqbal Poet. Instagram, I use a fair bit, I tweet occasionally and I've also got a Facebook page, but I'm not so on top that.

**DT:** Me too, the Facebook page for this podcast has gone right downhill. I'm not sure people can even see it with the algorithms the way they are.

**SKI:** I think you've got to keep paying to get people to see it. That's where you can find me, otherwise you can find me in Bristol or at Golden Tongue in the nights we run in London. I was going to read a particular poem, but I think I've changed my mind after the conversations we've been having. I'll stick to the original one, because we've talked enough about what language means.

So the poem I'm going to share is called Empire and it's something it's taken me a very long time to write, a poem about colonisation and the effects it had on the Indian sub-continent. What that means as a Punjabi as well, where Punjab has been split into so many different sections and the lasting effects of it. I wrote this poem in the only way I knew how to write it, as a relationship.

### Empire

I was doing alright.  
Until I met him.  
Needy, complicated.  
Full of drama.  
It was small man syndrome.  
It was upbringing.  
He was misunderstood.  
He was island.  
Needed to be given a chance.

Everyone said he would be cruel.  
But it happened slow.  
And then suddenly it was  
two hundred years of sorrow  
that sat into my bones,  
into the salt of me.

I had let him hold  
my face in his hands.  
Whisper in my ears.

Let him mute the spice of me.  
He slipped heirlooms off my nakedness,  
fingers, neck, wrists, ankles exposed.  
Put his dick into the soil of me.

I bore the children he denied.  
He drew lines across my body,  
broke me into nationless pieces,  
gave me a blade,  
sat and watched  
blood flow.  
He waited for me to become all teeth and nails and bone.

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### **Outro:**

**DT:** Thanks a bunch for sticking around. If you're interested in checking out the pamphlets we were chatting about, which were a result of the competition that Shagufta judged, get yourself over to [burningeyebbooks.wordpress.com](http://burningeyebbooks.wordpress.com) for updates about publication dates, about what are sure to be fantastic short collections from Hanan Issa, Adrian Earle and Caroline Teague. For updates from us, find us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook or Instagram or @Silent\_Tongue on Twitter and go to A Poem A Week on Facebook or Twitter for our companion series.

If you can afford to do so, do please support us by buying our fantastic anthology *Why Poetry?* I'll be back, probably at the end of November, with episode 120. I haven't lined up a guest for that episode yet, so it will be a surprise for everyone. The next episode will be the last before I take a few months off. I haven't really had a break in the four years the podcast has been going. What with the workload this year and getting the book out, I'm a bit cream cracked, as we say in London.

More details on that break next month. Here's an idea, why don't you get in touch via social media and let me know who you'd like me to talk to in 2019? It seems like a long way off, but it's only 12 weeks away. Here's that poem from the anthology I promised you. It's *Apparition* by Zeina Hashem Beck.

### **APPARITION**

The woman on your balcony  
looks familiar. You offer her coffee  
& she sips, reminds you to get  
that lightbulb in the kitchen fixed, let go  
of that old eyeshadow  
(it's been years) talk to your mother

more often. You tell her you dreamt  
your daughter was sleeping  
like the children on the news,  
& she asks if she can borrow  
your black leather jacket—  
she loves the studs & silver zippers,  
she's tired of roving in this gown  
like this world's merely a visit  
she has to make on morning rounds  
to the ill. You tell her  
your husband doesn't like to read  
the credits at the end of movies,  
always leaves you alone in your seat  
& this scares you. She goes inside  
& down the stairs. She hums, the way  
you sometimes do in supermarket aisles,  
the tremors in your throat  
taking you by surprise  
between the grapes & the strawberries,  
& you almost whispering  
*Hello.*

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That's it. Be good to yourselves and others. See you later.

**End of transcript.**