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Book review

**AFTERNOON MASALA BY VANDANA KHANNA**
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Vandana Khanna’s *Afternoon Masala* takes the reader by the hand in a sonorous adventure exploring the “new worlds and old rivers” weaving across our individual paths. *Afternoon Masala* bridges the gap between past and present, India and the United States, who one was and who one is, and even reader and speaker. Shifting from Bombay to New York with the turning of a page, Khanna’s second award-winning book demonstrates how those worlds and rivers forge such paths rather than lead one to them. Rooted in her own journey but speaking to that of us all, Khanna crafts a compelling and fresh inquisition into the self whilst maintaining a charming closeness and warmth like “the bite / of sunlight and chilies.”

Many of the poems have been featured previously in other publications and maintain their own distinctiveness in the time and space of the larger book. Yet Khanna’s poems interact with one another, sometimes pages apart. The collection’s thirty poems are divided into three sections, and the links among poems allow the poetry to speak over such a separation. These connections shift in form—sometimes a word, an image, or a sound—but appear in such a way that the reader can deftly pluck them and appreciate.

When the speaker tells us in the collection’s introductory poem “Insignificant Beginnings” that she is “among all the words / of ancient and holy languages, / there... —in translation,” a path through the collection subtly materializes under our feet, only to be realized looking back, when the speaker bridges the ethereal heavens with the action and fast pace of a Bollywood movie as “the action does the translating” in one of the collection’s ending poems, “The Masala of the Afternoon.” While each poem is home in its respective section, there exist echoes like this and others for which the reader becomes on the look-out, creating a beautiful breaking down of a past locked away and, instead of a preserved past, offering one that curls and folds its way into the present.

Take for instance the way in which “Madame Destiny” intertwines past, present, and future into an understanding of the speaker’s current self:

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Inside, Madame Destiny
Murmured into our hands,
chanting our bad luck away:
aligned stars and ex-boyfriends,
phantom mothers-in-law... Against all prophecies
and promises, our crooked
love lines frayed at the ends
like jeans. Our hope
turned stale as a Hindi
pop song—gone
in the flick and bruise
of a blue bar light.
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This bridging process, seen here with the speaker reflecting on the mystic foretelling of what was and was not to come against the visceral frayed jeans and pop music, unifies the speaker of the past with the speaker of the present. They are separated and united in space and time though memory and premonition, celestial and earthly.

Similar solidifying occurs again just momentarily in “Inferior Goddess”:

I am the goddess
of the laundry basket,
the microwave,
of the backyard,
with earth beneath
my feet, a shag carpet
of a lawn confused
and surviving. Nothing
sprouts as expected.

Each of these elements, related yet different, are shared within the space of the speaker’s body. The speaker acknowledges that even divine awareness does not circumvent the forging of this multi-layered idea of the self constantly in touch with roots and the seedlings of the past. The earth is ever present earth under the speaker’s feet and the associated future embodied in the “surviving” grass.

The title Afternoon Masala offers a beautiful reflection of the poems within. The vibrant, multitudinous and many-formed nature of the masala spice blend allows for a decadent and layered understanding of the self with poems that transcend a static identity. These poems constantly feel the ripples of the past at their toes. Where many collections rely on any number of anchor poems between which others are strung, each of Khanna’s poems is able to maintain its own place and identity while connecting and tethering to poems throughout the collection. In this strong collection, Vandana Khanna is certainly living up to the reputation her award-winning talent has built for her thus far. Her poetic voice embodies an unmistakable sincerity and genuineness in the truths that the poems compel us to consider.