

Understanding Poetry 1 : Sisters

**BA (Prog.) Ist Year
English A
Course Title: Fluency in English
Unit 5: Understanding Poetry 1**

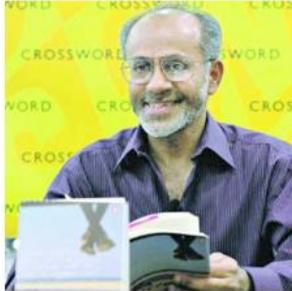
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Biographical Notes

Saleem Peeradina is Associate Professor of English at Siena Heights University, USA. His publications include several books of poetry, *First Offence* (1980), *Group Portrait* (1992), and *Meditations on Desire* (2003). Among his prose works is a memoir, “A Distant Country,” which was later published as *The Ocean In My Yard* (2005).

Here is a newspaper photograph of Peeradina reading from his latest book, where you may notice that the cover shows a pair of misshapen, awkward, dangling feet. These feet were made for walking, cycling, exploring the city of Bombay in the 1950s and 60’s where Peeradina grew up and where he saw, heard and felt the emotions of the unfolding years.



Saleem Peeradina was born in Bombay in a large, middleclass Muslim family. It was a difficult childhood in some ways because his father, a doctor, did not support the young Saleem’s wandering imagination or his inclination for the arts. His closeness to his “ma”, who was a gentle home maker preoccupied with ministering to the demands of the family, is noted in Peeradina’s memoirs. From the twelve windows of his Versova Road house, young Saleem watched the world and dreamed of poetry, music and painting. Saleem Peeradina writes about these years with a poignant understanding, making his book *The Ocean In My Yard* an adult’s perspective on boyhood. As he says, “Before my feet acquired sight, I had traveling eyes. Since home life—having the walls and roof attached to your skin—was a shell you couldn’t cast off, windows served as a lookout. There were twelve of them starting from floor level and reaching seven feet up, plus the slats in the toilet and ventilators in the bathroom, providing extraordinary views of neighborhood life.”

1. Mumbai on the net : <http://www.mumbainet.com/>



The many aunts and uncles, cousins, their foibles and misadventures make up the texture of Saleem Peeradina’s memories of a Bombay neither reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s magical

realism, nor as yet changed into Suketu Mehta's urban portrait of a "Maximum City." The review below gives you a glimpse of Mehta's achievement in his non-fictional view of Mumbai. The quote is followed by Rushdie's praise for Mehta, which sets up link between two rather different yet highly effective methods of representing the city. Rushdie, as you might know received high acclaim and won the Booker prize for his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). The book takes its title from a speech given by Jawaharlal Nehru on the midnight of 14 August 1947 when India became independent. Rushdie presents the history of the nation through the device of "magic realism" wherein fantastical situations determine the tragedy as well as comedy in Saleem Sinai's life, mainly spent in Bombay. "Maximum City is narrative reporting at its finest, probably the best work of nonfiction to come out of India in recent years ... The depth of Mehta's evocative and beautiful prose keeps things lively. Indeed, Mehta's most impressive skill lies not in his documentary prowess but in the psychological acuity of his writing: we come away from his encounters feeling we know the inner lives of the people he has depicted. In this sense, Maximum City is more than a consideration of the material limits on urban living; it is a profound meditation on the existential (and even spiritual) longings that persist despite those limits." — Akash Kapur, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Suketu Mehta's Maximum City is quite extraordinary—he writes about Bombay with an unsparing ferocity born of his love, which I share, for the old pre-Mumbai city which has now been almost destroyed by corruption, gangsterism and neo-fascist politics, its spirit surviving in tiny moments and images which he seizes upon as proof of the survival of hope; and the quality of his investigative reportage, the skill with which he persuades hoodlums and murderers to open up to him, is quite amazing. It's the best book yet written about that great, ruined metropolis, my city as well as his, and it deserves to be very widely read." — Salman Rushdie

Read up on Salmaan Rushdie's magic realism from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salman_Rushdie or check the lesson on "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" in this series of e-lessons on the text book, *Fluency in English*.

Learn more about Suketu Mehta's novel about Bombay, *Maximum City*, by clicking on www.suketumehta.com

Saleem Peeradina is taken up with the fluidity of interpersonal relationships and proves a keen observer of details. In a chapter titled, "A Voyeur is Born," if his intent is taken for its playful meaning, the young boy remembers the smell of the streets, the taste of the mutton curry and the "gumbooted road worker walking in the black shimmer of tar mending potholes." Vivid too are his memories of adolescent sexuality, particularly when he is made a convenient masseur to "Aunty". He recalls how "Another form of permissible touching was by way of massaging weary limbs... Most often, aunty would lie on her stomach and want me to walk all over her back; other times I was on my knees gently karate-chopping and kneading her body." Honest and forthright in his reminiscences, Saleem Peeradina is acutely self reflective too. He decided to become a teacher despite his father's warnings that "teachers lived in penury". Peeradina left for the USA in 1971 to do graduate work at Wake Forest University. On his return, he taught at Sophia College, Bombay, founded The Open Classroom, and was Bookpage editor for Sunday Express. He moved to the USA in 1988. While teaching in Bombay, he published poetry in magazines such as *The Illustrated Weekly*, and came up with his collection, *First Offence*. Since 1988, Peeradina has continued to live

and work in the USA. Perhaps in a late answer to his father, Saleem Peeradina says now "The teacher should resist with all his honour not to use the student as a spittoon into which he can squirt his ideas, or a blank slate on which he can inscribe his brief. The worst thing that a teacher can do is create clones of himself."

Contact the poet and teacher at <speerad2@sienaheights.edu>

THE POEM "SISTERS"

One, not quite ten
but ahead of the other, younger
whose five plus will never catch up
with the big one's lead
no matter how good she acts,
or how hard she cheats.

Like any disadvantaged species
she has turned the handicap
in her favour: she's bolder,
sneakier, sweeter than honey,
Obeyer of commands, underminer of rules,
Producer of tears, yellor, complete

Turnaround. The older one gets
the tough end of it. Most times
blames end up in her sullen face.
Fights back, she argues, attacks
me for taking the wrong side.
I sweet talk her the way all parents

At all times have tried explaining
to the elder child. Living up
to her inheritance, she blazes back
at my moralizing. On bad days
I shout her down, immediately
regretting my words.

But even as she retreats
into simmering silence, she stands her ground
knowing me to be unfair. Secretly,
I rejoice at the lesson never intended
but so well learnt: how to overcome
fathers, real and imaginary.

EXERCISES:

Go to a companion file to hear a reading of this poem, “Sisters.”

Pay attention to the pauses in the reading and think about whether they match or do not match the line breaks in the printed poem.

Read the poem aloud, yourself, putting in your own pauses and consider why you have made some changes. Do they alter the meaning of a line if you read differently?

For example, read aloud the following lines from Stanza 3.

Turnaround. The older one gets
the tough end of it. Most times
blames end up in her sullen face.

Should you pause after ‘Turnaround’? Why, and for how long? Where would you pause next: after ‘of it’ or ‘times’ in the next line? Would meaning change by these different pauses?

If you find this exercise enjoyable, try out a few more lines.



Explanation of the Poem

STANZA 1

One, not quite ten
but ahead of the other, younger
whose five plus will never catch up
with the big one’s lead
no matter how good she acts,
or how hard she cheats.

Explanation: The poet begins by giving the reader the exact age of the sisters, one is ten and the other is just above five years. They are the poet’s/speaker’s daughters but he does not use

that word “daughters” in the poem, it is only implied in the manner in which he describes the “sisters” and how the poem leads to the last stanza where a “father” is directly mentioned.

In the opening lines, a contrast is built up between the older one who presents a kind of norm to which the younger one aspires to catch up. Here the active player is the younger child who acts “good” when she thinks it will help her cause, or when she “cheats” if she thinks that will cleverly get her past the adults.

The poet takes an indulgent view of the children, watching the game of the young one trying to reach the position of the older child, and yet the poet/observer knows that in a chronological sense, the one in the lead will always remain so. This, however is the adult viewpoint based on rationality. The child at the age of five has a different view of “leadership” and imagines that she can overtake or displace the older sister if she acts in certain ways.

It appears then, that the opening lines position the three characters in this family drama: the father and the two daughters, where the younger one has a sense of rivalry towards her older sibling.

Consider the following issues:

1. Interestingly, there is no mention of a “mother” in this family portrait. Do you find this surprising?
2. Why is the poet/father the silent observer?

STANZA 2:

Like any disadvantaged species
she has turned the handicap
in her favour: she’s bolder,
sneakier, sweeter than honey,
Obeyer of commands, underminer of rules,
Producer of tears, yeller, complete

Explanation: The focus continues on the younger sister, but the specific observation turns to note a more general principal of survival that the “disadvantaged species” finds indirect ways of asserting itself, that so called “weakness” can be turned into an “advantage.”

An allusion may be seen to Charles Darwin’s treatise, *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. It offers a theory of evolutionary biology and claims that species survive by a process of “natural selection” and that the traits of the stronger species are reproduced through their inheritance over generations. Though the book is written as a scientific document, it has attracted the attention of common readers from the time of its publication and often given rise to controversies.

For more information, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Origin_of_Species

The second stanza of the poem “The Sisters” refers to the younger child as the “disadvantaged species” and suggests that such a person learns to overcome the “handicap” or obstacles on the path to attaining her goals. So the child displays various moods, those of boldness as well as guile. She can obey rules and at the same time cleverly undermine them.

In other words, the child adapts her behaviour to the circumstances in order to get some advantage and in her various acts, she tries to “fool” or confuse the adults.

The point is that Peeradina deliberately plays upon the reference to Darwin in a jocular manner. He overstates the child’s viewpoint in order to show her strenuous efforts to gain position over the “naturally” senior status of the older sister. This method of contrasted images causes amusement through exaggeration. The child’s histrionic acts of crying, cajoling or bullying are called “survival tactics” of the weak, or in more serious discourse, certain kinds of behavior are called the “weapons of the weak” (See the writings of James C. Scott for elaboration).

The vocabulary in this stanza deserves a closer look. Words such as “obeyer”, “underminer” or “yeller” are unusual even though you can find them in the Concise Oxford. These words cannot be called neologisms, (unlike Rushdie’s coinage “chutneyfication”) but there is an inventiveness about the way they appear in Peeradina’s poem. We can construct their meaning quite easily even though we recognize the unfamiliar vocabulary. Why would Peeradina do this? One guess is that writers like to experiment with language and come up with new or rare expressions. However such innovation must be useful in its context. Here, the poet is giving us a lively picture of the child who is cleverly modifying her weakness into strength. The parent is not fooled, but amused by the tactics. To record the images, the poet/parent tries out new combinations of words, and largely succeeds, I think.

Do you agree? You may not, because the same behavior of the child could have been reported in standard, familiar English. What words can you substitute for the innovations?

Notice also that Stanza 2 does not end in a full stop but has a run on line to the next Stanza.

According to Peeradina, “The run on line or enjambment, is one of my favorite devices to display sudden turns or rhythmic variations and to jolt the reader into being an active reader.”

STANZA 3

Turnaround. The older one gets
the tough end of it. Most times
blames end up in her sullen face.
Fights back, she argues, attacks
me for taking the wrong side.
I sweet talk her the way all parents

Explanation. The first word of the stanza completes the sentence of the previous stanza. The younger child is capable of making a “complete turnaround” or “demonstrate a different behaviour” if it suits her cause. The cleverness of the child is still highlighted, but watch the cleverness of the poet. He has turned the poem from one stanza to the next by using the word

“turnaround.” So the reader is made conscious of the artistry of Saleem Peeradina and will not see the poem as just a story about two sisters watched over by their father.

We note how this stanza “turns” to focus on the other sister, the older one. She is acted upon, but capable of retorts. Being older, she is disciplined, in contrast to the younger one who is allowed to throw tantrums. She is “sullen” about this but when pushed too hard into accepting the so called “responsibility” of the older sibling, she can fight back and talk back to defend her position.

The stanza shows an interactive relation between the father and older daughter, and the observer/ poet enters the action in the “I” of this narrative. This child, though only ten, has a good understanding of the dynamics of paternal conduct. She tells the father that he is taking the “wrong side”, presumably in tolerating the younger one’s demands and tantrums. One can imagine that the parent asks the older child to be patient and tolerant and accepting of the unruly younger sister. But the older one is in no such mood and squarely accuses her father of being unfair. The father knows that the ten year old is morally right and has seen through the games that the parents play to keep “peace” among children. So the father talks and reasons with the older child who is capable of understanding the rationale. Carrying over from the previous two stanzas, the third ends by contrasting the reasonableness expected of the older child with the unruliness accepted in the younger child. The parents, it appears, have different standards to each of the daughters.

Notice the moving of the issue of “parenting” from the particular to the general. The specific instance in the poem is that of a pair of sisters and their father’s relationship with each of them. This stanza concludes with an observation on parenting as such, thereby alluding to stereotypes of parental behaviour. You may wonder here how the father can assume that he is resorting to “sweet talking” or cajoling and pacifying the older child as “all” parents are said to do. We observed earlier that this poem does not introduce the figure of the mother. So how can the father talk about “parenting”? Is this a problem in the poem that the father assumes the role of the mother as well, and further expands his individual experience to encompass that of parents in general? [See Peeradina’s own comments refuting this in the interview added to this lesson] Notice further that such generalization does not differentiate between people of different region, social group or cultural practice.

STANZA 4

At all times have tried explaining
to the elder child. Living up
to her inheritance, she blazes back
at my moralizing. On bad days
I shout her down, immediately
regretting my words.

Explanation: Again, the run-on line links the two stanzas 3 and 4. The universalizing tendency is further emphasized in the opening line here because now the poet claims that through all ages and all times, parents have tried to “explain” things to the elder child. The implication is that reason and tolerance is expected of the older sibling while the younger one gets away with unreasonableness and moods. Is this true according to your experience? What could be the cultural causes for such differential treatment towards one’s children? Notice here that by now the poem has also obscured the gender component. The poem is about

sisters; but in the second line of the stanza 4 we are referred to the conditions prevailing for
“the elder child.”

Then the poem changes track and suddenly returns to the immediacy of “the sisters” being described. The older child protests about the unfair expectations from her: “she blazes back at my moralizing,” says the poet/father. The loaded word here is “inheritance”: whose inheritance and what inheritance makes the ten year old protest against her father? If you recall Darwin’s book *On the Origin of Species*, you will remember the importance of inheritance in a species. The strong as well as the weak members are marked by their inheritance. The survival of the fittest is ensured by such a process. The elder child is expected to be the stronger one, the younger child has already been called the disadvantaged species in an earlier stanza. Biologically this may not be true, but the poet is reminding us about traditional hierarchies in families where roles are given and built up through acculturation.

The father’s position in this relation also turns difficult. He knows that he has been caught out in his “moralizing,” that the child also knows that the father is making the customary distinctions in the role expectation of his daughters. The father is caught in the trap of tradition. When challenged, he shouts her down, using authority over reason. Deep down he knows he is wrong, and he feels some regret.

The conflict in the father takes an interesting form. The universalizing tendency in the poem aligns the father with the general category of parents; the individual in him sees through the injustice of the given roles. The father who shouts at the elder child is the traditional father; the one who regrets such action is the individual father who is also the poet-narrator. The authority structures have been set up in the poem and are soon to be dismantled.

STANZA 5

But even as she retreats
into simmering silence, she stands her ground
knowing me to be unfair. Secretly,
I rejoice at the lesson never intended
but so well learnt: how to overcome
fathers, real and imaginary.

Explanation: This stanza depicts a poignant moment of self realization in the father. He observes the ten year old getting cowed down by his authority and turning silent. But her protest has not been calmed into an acceptance, it is “simmering” and may resurface at any moment. One can almost see the play of emotions on the face of the child and she may appear defeated. The poet captures every passing expression. Earlier he had described her “sullen” face, now he notes the “simmering silence.” See the use of words beginning with “s” which bring about what is called an “alliteration” or the repetition of the same consonant sound. The poet continues to use the “s” sound in another important word, “secretly”, which reflects the private thoughts of the father as he watches the daughter.

The lines describe the use of “body language”, that is, gestures and postures that are not accompanied by words but strongly suggest a mood or attitude. Here we find the father and daughter utterly silent, he in a state of regret at having shouted, she having turned “sullen” by his authoritative control. The focus shifts to the interior thoughts of the father, and he

“rejoices” at the daughter’s anger at him. This may appear as a strange contradiction of the stated intention of the father who wished to exercise control over a rebellious child. He has succeeded in silencing her, but that is not what makes him rejoice. In fact the reason for his joy is the contrary: that he has not been able to suppress her protest against his authority. The child may be physically quiet, but her expression is vividly hostile to him. And the father is glad—that his daughter has a spirit of her own, can hold her ground, that she cannot be coerced by traditional parental authority. She may appear defeated but she is a winner because the father recognizes the strength of her protest against his authority.

The intended lesson, that of accepting the norm about older children being obedient is never learnt by this child. It is the father who learns of the falseness of such expectations. The phrase “fathers real and imaginary” brilliantly collapses the world of the particular and the world of the general. The imaginary “father” is “patriarchy” or the “rule of the father”: The word patriarchy comes from two Greek words – patēr (πατήρ, father) and archē (αρχή, rule). Until lately most civilizations functioned by granting authority to men and boys over women and girls. While discussions on “patriarchy” have extensively shown up the unjust powers traditionally held over women, they have also exposed how men too are trapped by patriarchy into role expectations that they may not wish to fulfill.

You may click to <http://www.answers.com/topic/patriarchy?cat=technology> for a series of definitions of patriarchy along with the use of the term in various disciplines.

The poem “The Sisters” ends on a note of unexpected reversal where the father set out to teach a lesson of discipline to his child but ended up learning a lesson about meaningful protest from the young child. If one were to generalize through larger contexts, one may say this is a poem about subversion. The child appears to obey, but in fact registers her protest in a studied silence. The father ends up respecting her viewpoint. Outwardly he cannot acknowledge this shift of power because that would overturn habitual equations in family life. Inwardly he rejoices at his elder daughter’s instinctive show of strength and call for justice. [Again a bit of over-reading here? The kind of experience described here is one that I and my wife have shared in dealing with our two grandsons and I have also seen the children’s parents , both mother and father, going through a similar experience. So it does not seem to be a matter of gender. Also, the question should be asked: if there is subversion, what is being subverted.? And is the thing or attitude being subverted unequivocally wicked?

These are of course matters of interpretation, so we can have our differences.]

Let us not end the explanation on such a sombre note because that would falsify the tone of the poem. It remains in its vocabulary and presentation a thoughtful vignette about a father and two siblings. The layers clustering around the surface story bring in the resonances that readers will carry away. Its vivid picturization also speaks to our personal experience as a sibling in a family and the squabbles that are a part of one’s upbringing. Saleem Peeradina writes of the ordinary with an extraordinary grace.

Exercise:

“Fathers, real and imaginary”. What do the following images convey about a “father”?



Socio-Cultural Issues

From the above explanation it is possible to highlight the socio cultural issues touched upon in the poem? Can you elaborate on the following:

1. The expectations from an older child in a family.
2. The “spoilt” younger child
3. The authoritarian father
4. The survival of the fittest in a community or family situation
5. Patriarchy
6. Subversion of authority
7. Silent protest vs noisy protest
8. Inherited beliefs in power structures

Consider the following: The poem is about a father asserting his authority but ending up with learning from his elder daughter that his authority is justifiably challenged. Both the father and the daughter “learn” this lesson.

The creation of new words -- obeyer, underminer, producer -- gives the younger daughter

"agency" as a doer and subverter of things.

Why is the mother absent from this scenario? Why are sons not shown but daughters? Is Peeradina deliberately using a father figure, traditionally authoritarian, and daughters, traditionally subdued, to better show the dramatic reversal?

Had a mother featured in the narrative, what kind of a role would she have played?

Had the poem been about "Brothers", how would the "lesson" about justice become modified?

Can you write about the experience of a friend who has faced such situations at home?

Discuss the following observation about the sisters and their relation to the father: "The kind of experience described here is one that I and my wife have shared in dealing with our two grandsons and I have also seen the children's parents, both mother and father, going through a similar experience. So it does not seem to be a matter of gender. Also, the question should be asked: if there is subversion, what is being subverted.? And is the thing or attitude being subverted unequivocally wicked?"

Language in the Poem

1. This poem comprises of five stanzas, each containing six lines. The lines do not have rhyme in an obvious manner, but they have a carefully controlled rhythm. When read aloud, the emphasis falls on certain words and creates a pattern of contrasts and parallels in ideas and vocabulary: older/younger; I/she; attacks/silence; real/imaginary. Can you find other examples?

2. Some lines are startling for their compressed meaning:

- how good she acts,
- or how hard she cheats.
- Obeyer of commands, underminer of rules,
- I rejoice at the lesson never intended

Are such lines effective?

3. Creation of new words and phrases from familiar ones:

- Obeyer of commands, underminer of rules,
- Producer of tears

Can you write these in familiar English vocabulary?

4. Run-on lines:

I sweet talk her the way all parents

At all times have tried explaining
to the elder child.

Are such lines “poetic”? Is it only because they are “run-on lines”?



In terms of language and a narrative vignette, read Saleem Peeradina’s poem given below. Do you notice any similarities of technique?

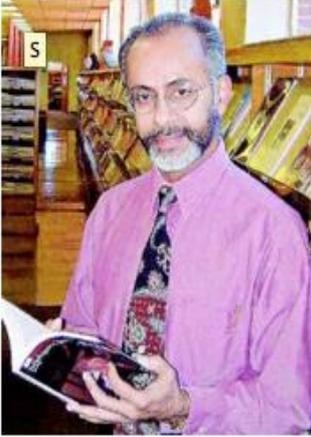
Split Frame

In a landscape of human rubble
The woman sits like an upright bag
Of bones. She has the head of a fly.
The child she cradles has beseeching eyes
And gluey nose attached to a swollen
Ribcage. The woman is transfixed

Staring at a TV screen
Featuring a contest to see who can eat
The most hamburgers and hotdogs
In record time. The winner leaves with cash,
A belt embossed with gold lettering,
And an over-stuffed stomach.

Interview With Saleem Peeradina

INTERVIEW WITH SALEEM PEERADINA



Malashri Lal : Hello Mr. Peeradina. I am creating an e-learning lesson on your poem “Sisters” which will be read by students in the BA Programme in English at the University of Delhi. Could you please tell us the circumstances which led to your writing the poem? Is it based on your experience or is the situation entirely imaginary?

Saleem Peeradina : **It is grounded in my own experience. Most of my poetry is. It is part of a cycle of poems centering on family. And this one explores the special father-daughter bond as well as sisterly dynamics. The humbling of the father is a timely lesson for him but he rejoices at the daughter’s pluck because she must function in the real world and is getting ready for it.**

ML: When you speak of “sisters” in terms of the power structure of the older and younger sibling, you do not seem to place them in any specific cultural or regional context. There is a universalizing tendency that I notice. Is this deliberate on your part? And if so, why?

SP: **It is the older child/younger child syndrome. The dialectic is psychological and cultural as well. Is it universal? I don’t know. Is it deliberate? At the time of composition, poets don’t necessarily weigh rational choices. Poetic statement comes out of poetic logic. Does the older sibling carry the greater burden in all cultures ? I don’t know. As for the tendency to universalize, the more particular an observation is whether in prose or poetry, the more universal it can become. Yes, I do always keep this in mind to enable the reader to enter my world.**

ML: The ending of the poem depicts a poignant moment of self realization in the father. What do you mean by the phrase, “fathers, real and imaginary”, or would you rather not explain? From my feminist perspective I would say that the poem subverts parental authority. Would you agree?

SP: **yes, I agree. The real father is the “training ground” for the adult woman in whose life future male figures may arrive. They will invariably arrive with promises but may**

end up exercising control over the woman. The “imaginary” carries the allure as well as the menace. In her own mind, the woman may tend to minimize the negative, so treat it as “imagined”, while wishing for the dream man.

ML: It is intriguing that in this poem about family relationships, there is no “mother” figure. In most poems of this nature, the mother is central. Did you deliberately leave out the mother, thus allowing the father an opportunity to learn about the intricacies of parenting? Do you have a poem about a “mother” that the students could read for a comparison of viewpoints?

SP: Are you calling for equal representation ? Just kidding. No, it is not deliberate on my part to leave the mother out. The section on family poems is called ‘Family Man’, so yes, the speaker is focusing on his own role. Poets tend to be narcissistic, you know. But there is distance too in the other poems where the speaker is referred to in the third person.

I do have a poem on my own mother called, There is No God, in my first book.

ML: The language of this poem and also its stanza form are brilliant. The poem appears to be simple, but neither in form nor content is it so. Would you please tell us about some distinctive features of its imagery and language?

SP: Thank you. Not my place to assess that part. I trust you will do a fitting critique. As a rule, I try to make my words do many things at once – to resonate on many levels from the sensory to the ironic to the ideological.

ML: A final question about the creative process. What is the most important source of your creativity? Is it memory, poetic influence, personal experience, ideology, an image, or something else? Thank you very much for answering my queries.

SP: Usually, all of the above and more, including art, movies, science, etc. I have examples of each. Lately, I have composed some poems based on first lines of old Hindi songs and ghazals. See Song of Subversion and Song for the Misled in another Macmillan anthology called Magic Casements.

Other Poems by Peeradina

A poet writes in many moods and in different persona. Read the following poem by Saleem Peeradina. According to him, “Song of Surrender is in 5-line stanzas. It takes off from the song, Lag ja gale, ke phir ye haseen raat ho na ho...”. This is one of his several poems that has a connection with Hindi film music. In your reading, who is the “I” in this poem? Can you find a link with other love lyrics in Hindi films? Are there any similarities between “Song of Surrender” and the poem “Sisters”?

Song of Surrender

Hold me close--
for a night as pure as this
May never return. Stay with me awhile--
For in this birth
Our paths may not cross again.
So what if this tryst
has no tomorrow.
The dreaded guest is at the door.
When his work is done
I will have drawn my last breath.
Why try to reason
what is beyond reason?
You bestow upon me more
Than I'm seeking. What little I give
I lavish upon your yearning.
If this will fill
our begging bowls
Why should laws, oaths, hold us back?
Stretch your arm and take my hand.
History has already written us.

The lesson pointed to the mother who was absent from the poem “Sisters”. Peeradina in his interview mentioned another poem about a Mother. Read below and think about the emotions expressed in it.

There is no God

only mother.

Obedient daughter, sister, the eldest
slogger in her father's house

presently:
expected to like with downcast eyes
the singular lord & master always faithfully
yours: wife

Of love:
the essence preserved in a photograph on the shelf

the multipurpose woman
to be taken
into the irreversible process
of motherhood

Become head of the house: wave
both arms like a paternal traffic-policeman

support her
claim to her ancient duties

regularly
after meal sweeping dusty meal
scrubbing washing pause meal
fall at her feet

When it's time to leave

Leave
the picture: right hand top, looking out
from the balcony, mother, with the house behind her
much later, further away
than yesterday, but seeming nearer
than five street-lamps, her sons
never coming home

O Mother
we are in fever
lie by our side, soothe us
mother
with a touch, release
the scripture of your hands
into us
press our eyes into
ourselves, rock us asleep

And mother look after us

(from Indian Poetry in English, p. 120)

Here is yet another poem by Peeradina about "Mother."

Mother

For Tahir
My consumed mother,
they took over the beginning
of your timed end
to lay out formally
and legislate your body
cleansed and bound
in hospital-white

as an object under lens
is probed
and classified.
While others wailed, coffin
touched shoulder briskly
but reverently by the book,
and the mound at the finish
marked,
shut out the sky from you.

But you never left home.

(from Group Portrait, p. 43)

Questions on "Sisters"

1. In the vivid language of the poem can you “see” the younger child acting “good” at times, and “cheating” in a childish way at other times? What could such acts comprise off? Give examples from your experience.
2. Can you write briefly about your own experience of “sisterhood” while growing up, or speak about the experience of any of your friends?
3. What is the main idea of the poem and how does the poet develop it?
4. Does the poet tell us much about the physical appearance of the girls or does he concentrate mainly on their psychological traits? What is gained or lost by his choice?
5. In what way is the poem debunking the traditional ideas of parenting?
6. Who is the “learner” from the experiences described in the poem: the father, the older child, the younger child, the reader of the poem? Give your reasons.
7. Discuss the poetic qualities of Peeradina’s language.
8. The poem has a false appearance of being “simple.” Elaborate.
9. Make sentences with the following words: disadvantaged, turnaround, inheritance.
10. Explain the phrases: bad days, sweeter than honey, fights back.

Website & Further Reading

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Post Script

Father and Son

By Stanley Kunitz

Now in the suburbs and the falling light
I followed him, and now down sandy road
Whiter than bone-dust, through the sweet
Curdle of fields, where the plums
Dropped with their load of ripeness, one by one.
Mile after mile I followed, with skimming feet,
After the secret master of my blood,
Him, steeped in the odor of ponds, whose indomitable love
Kept me in chains. Strode years; stretched into bird;
Raced through the sleeping country where I was young,
The silence unrolling before me as I came,
The night nailed like an orange to my brow.

How should I tell him my fable and the fears,
How bridge the chasm in a casual tone,
Saying, "The house, the stucco one you built,

We lost. Sister married and went from home,
And nothing comes back, it's strange, from where she goes.
I lived on a hill that had too many rooms;
Light we could make, but not enough of warmth,
And when the light failed, I climbed under the hill.
The papers are delivered every day;
I am alone and never shed a tear."

At the water's edge, where the smothering ferns lifted
Their arms, "Father!" I cried, "Return! You know
The way. I'll wipe the mudstains from your clothes;
No trace, I promise, will remain. Instruct
You son, whirling between two wars,
In the Gemara of your gentleness,
For I would be a child to those who mourn
And brother to the foundlings of the field
And friend of innocence and all bright eyes.
O teach me how to work and keep me kind."

Among the turtles and the lilies he turned to me
The white ignorant hollow of his face.

Stanley Jasspon Kunitz (1905–2006) was a noted American poet who served two years (1974–1976) as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a precursor to the modern Poet Laureate program), and served another year as United States Poet Laureate in 2000.