

TLC Showcase

FATHIMA ZAHRA

Introduction to the manuscript 2

Sargam / Swargam 3

About the Writer 6

Introduction

These poems are excerpts from my debut pamphlet 'Sargam / Swargam' (ignition press, 2021). I began putting together my manuscript in early 2019. At the time, this existed as a compilation of poems I had been performing and sharing at open mic nights, poetry slams and live events. They addressed recurring obsessions including belonging, girlhood and relationships.

I sent an early draft (then titled Datepalm Ghazals) to friends and mentors. Their encouragement and kindness allowed me to keep working on them further before sending it to poetry contests and presses. I was fortunate enough to receive time and attention on the second draft of my manuscript through TLC Free Reads.

The twelve page report I received mirrored nagging doubts I had, posed new questions and held a magnifying lens to my work from angles I hadn't considered. The poet had also posed questions about audience, form, line breaks and I went away with more terrains to research. Until this point I was mainly concerned with the narrative, syntax and imagery. The comments were affirming enough to keep working, to keep challenging myself, whilst also prodding me to explore my choices.

In the time that has passed since the first draft, the poems included have changed in aesthetic choices, voice and form. They reflect somewhat the growth in my life and thinking. My pamphlet was the first longform project I had worked on and it evokes its earlier, messier drafts in their obsessions. Some of my favourite pamphlets (Hinge by Alycia Pirmohamed, Doing the Most with the Least by Momtaza Mehri and The Republic of Motherhood by Liz Berry) helped guide my thinking while working on this. I believe the time spent, including the long gaps away from the work, the grace and encouragement by the poets around me and absorbing poetry by means of reading all influenced the making of it.

Excerpts from '*Sargam / Swargam*' by Fathima Zahra

Sargam / Swargam

I mishear my friend say she went to heaven for the weekend/ how everyone was dancing all night/ how her parents lost their frowns in the crowd/ how there were string lights everywhere/ I ask her why she left/ I was six/ God knows I don't still picture Jannah the way I did/ how the class prefect tries her best sermon pitch/ asks/'you know Al-Baik yeah?/they come flying to you in heaven'/ I've downsized my duas since/ they exchange outfits at the gates/asks about a boy/asks about a dead grandfather/of all the heavens I've hoarded/I like the one with the flying boxes of fried chicken best/ the one where the bouncers speak Arabic/ where I don't need the right passport to stay.

* Sargam - This was the name of the community events hosted by the Malayali communities when I was growing up in Jeddah. It is also one letter away from meaning heaven - Swargam.

Ramadan, 2019

We stalk the moon all month round, lick
our lips, till the Adhan goes off on our phones,
dig our teeth into the soft flesh of dates, wash
it down with Roohafza, rinse and repeat. The
scholars paste their eyes to the sky, the crowds
trade their eyeballs for telescopes, watch the
moon turn bashful, wait for henna stains
to appear, a gunshot signal to pull our smiles
out of the closet strutting in their Eid clothes.

Brown girls' anthem

A Golden Shovel after 'Call Me by Your Name' by André Aciman

We die so many deaths before we turn twenty. We,
the schoolyard Kardashians. We sew our stories, rip
them out as the schoolbus pulls up at our door. We out
cast our vile tongues so the aunties won't. Scrape it so
they won't know where to look for nipped buds. So much
is lost in undoing shame. Before we learned glory, we talked of
our love lives to walls. History didn't erase us. We managed ourselves.

About the Writer

Fathima Zahra is an Indian poet and performer based in Essex. She is a Barbican Young Poet and a Roundhouse Poetry Collective alum. Her poems have won the Bridport Prize, Wells Fest Young Poets Prize and Asia House Poetry Slam. She has been featured across BBC World News, The New Indian Express and Young Poets Network. Her debut pamphlet 'Sargam / Swargam' is now out with ignition press.

