

WEERAPPULIGE NIPUNI DISSANAYAKE\*

## An Interview with Sanjena Sathian

Sanjena Anshu Sathian is an Indian American writer born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia (USA), by parents from South India. Since ever passionate about writing, the author entered Yale University after high school, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 2013. After receiving the valuable “Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans” – specifically for immigrants and their children – which allowed her to study at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she graduated in Creative Writing with a Master of Fine Arts degree (2019). She first worked as a journalist in San Francisco and as a reporter in Mumbai. Her works include articles and novels focusing on social and cultural identity issues related to immigration.

Sathian is one of the youngest and most respected Indian American writers and journalists on the literary scene. Beyond her artistic career, she teaches at Emory University in Atlanta. Her debut novel *Gold Diggers* (New York, Penguin Press, 2021) is an engaging story built around the social pressures on an immigrant family, gold thefts and alchemy in pure Indian tradition.

My closeness to that tradition, combined with the experience and curiosity of my lecturer Simona Beccone, led us to choose this novel as the object of research and focus of my thesis.<sup>1</sup> I started from evaluating the possibility of including *Gold Diggers* among the literary texts that activate the alchemical code. In the course of a deeper analysis and interpretation of this work from an alchemical perspective, many compelling social issues emerged as well. In 2023, holding a one-to-one interview with Sanjena Sathian offered me a precious opportunity to better assess what I had analysed and discovered during my research.

WND: To open our interview, I would start with a personal question: beyond the word ‘writer’, how would you define what you do in life?

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<sup>1</sup> See W.N. DISSANAYAKE, *The Alchemical Code in Gold Diggers by Sanjena Sathian: Chrysopoeia and California Gold Rush*, BA Thesis, Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics, University of Pisa (Supervisor: Professor Simona Beccone; Date of discussion: 16 February 2023).

SS: So, writing novels is my main work, and I also do some screenwriting. I teach. Teaching is fundamental to me. I teach at Emory University, which is here in Atlanta, Georgia. Yes, so these are the things that I professionally do.

WND: Was there a particular event or literary work that led you to write novels?

SS: I'm sure you're similar, but if you grew up reading, you love many books. I grew up reading Enid Blyton's novels, Salman Rushdie and Anita Roy. The writer I think spoke to me the most in Graduate School is Hanif Kureishi, who wrote a story called *The Buddha of Suburbia* – and Zadie Smith, who is also crucial to me. I wrote my thesis about Zadie Smith when I was in college.

WND: How have you experienced your relationship with American society as a second-generation immigrant?

SS: I mean, it's so complicated, as you know. I grew up feeling like this was the only place I would ever feel at home. This is the place of my nationality, my passport, all those things. But I also grew up in the American South in a very conservative environment in the years after 9/11. And so, during that time, it was not very easy to have brown skin in America. No one knew whether you were Muslim or weren't; there was horrible Islamophobia, there was awful discrimination, and you could just feel that you sort of weren't welcome. In the days after 9/11, I was 10 when it happened. My parents were much more afraid than I thought I had realised then. Someone came to my dad and said, "Do you need help staying in the country?" and he said, "We're citizens, you know?". And they said, "You need to be careful, like something bad is going to happen to people who look like you". It's easy to forget that, I think. I don't know how old you are, but many people have forgotten that era: when there was a war, and America was just invading. But that's always how it goes, right? We often know the least about the generation just a few years older than us. But that era of American politics shaped the American politics we live through now, right? You don't get Trump without Bush. And I think Trump was so bad that people have forgotten that Bush was also like a war criminal. And so, I was growing up in that era of America where I knew that America was my home, but I also felt a little bit like an outsider. And I think things have changed, in part because the number of Indians who've immigrated to the US has gone up and up and up over time. We're a relatively wealthy immigrant group here. Still, it's a strange diaspora to be a part of because you both have a lot of privilege because people are coming here on tech visas, they're coming to be doctors, they're coming to get to university, so you have all of this social and cultural and often economic privilege. However, then there are other ways where you're still an outsider. So that's the diaspora I grew up in.

WND: What led you towards conceiving this novel?

SS: I have been working on trying to write a novel about the Atlanta suburbs where I grew up for probably 12 years. I started working on it when I was younger than you

and put it aside a couple of different ways; the writing was bad and uninteresting. And then, when I went to Graduate School, I got a Master's in Fine Arts, which I think is a particularly American way to study. To become a writer, you're paid to work on your fiction or poetry for two years. So, when I went to get my graduate degree, I suddenly had nothing to do but write. I was being paid to write fiction, which is very rare. And during that time, I returned to that material, and my taste changed a lot. So, I had gone from reading very serious writing for several years to wanting to write a little more playful stuff. So, I was reading a lot of people who do modern magic realism, like the American writer George Saunders and Miranda July; I love Haruki Murakami, the Japanese novelist. There's a playfulness that I got from all of their work that changed the way I was writing, changed the way I was thinking. And so, I started writing a project about immigrants who steal and drink gold, and I didn't think I was writing anything about my childhood growing up; I thought I was writing just this fun, strange story about people stealing and drinking gold. And then, at some point, I realised I needed to decide where the story is set, like where they are doing all of this. Then I realised, well, I know the world I came up through very well, I know the Atlanta suburbs, so I set it there. So, it actually kind of worked backwards into writing about the world that I came from. It was a short story at first and a lighthearted idea. Wouldn't it be weird to steal and drink gold? And then, because the conceit of the gold was so interesting to me and I needed stuff around it to make it work, I ended up returning to the material about my childhood and then combining that with the second half of the book in California, where I spent my 20s. So, the combination of those two grew out of necessity. I just had an idea that I had to follow.

WND: What about the gold thefts? Are they real?

SS: Actually, when I was growing up here, there was a spate of gold thefts around the Atlanta suburbs. It happened in California and Texas, and New Jersey. Basically, anywhere where there were rich Indian people or upper-middle-class Indian people, there was gold to be stolen. And so, there was some organised crime where local gangs realised that those Indian people kept a lot of gold in their houses, stake out the house, watch, wait and see. Indians leave the country often, so people leave and go home to India every December around Christmas. And so, you have a month to break into someone's house and take some of their gold. So this happened when I was a kid. It didn't happen to my family, but I heard rumours about it, and my mom kept saying that she thought it was Indian people behind it. And I remember saying, "That's crazy; there's no way it's other Indian people". And she was like, "You mark my words, they know, and they have some connection to the community. It's happening from the inside because they know whose houses they are, where to look for the gold in the house, and when people will be out of the house". I found that interesting. And I thought it would be cool to imagine what kind of suburban Indian woman would become a gold thief and what kind of person that would be. And that's how I got Anjali.

WND: Of all the characters in *Gold Diggers*, which one do you feel closest to and share a common ground with?

SS: I probably look like I have the most in common with Anita because she is put together as a young Indian woman, and I originally started writing the book from her perspective. I wanted it to be the story of a woman whose mother was a gold thief and what it did to their relationship. But as I wrote her, I realised that she was not the right voice for me. The main problem is that she's defined by her ambition. She'll do anything to succeed, which means that she's not very much fun. She's very boring. She gets a little more interesting later, but I didn't want to spend hundreds of pages with her. The book became fun for me when I discovered Neil's voice. The idea was about this mother and a daughter, but then I couldn't tell the story when I was writing from the two of their perspectives. So, I took a step back and wondered who else would be in the picture. And I was like, maybe it's a neighbour, perhaps a guy who is in love with Anita and was fascinated by this family for some reason. And he has his own story to tell. As soon as I imagined the possibility of a third person looking in on their drama, that's when I got Neil. It became very clear who Neil was, what I was going to do with that voice, and I could separate parts of myself into Anita, parts of myself into Anjali, and the bulk of me into Neil. Neil and I are obviously very different in many ways, but I felt like I could write a 15-year-old boy and a 27-year-old graduate student in history who's doing a lot of drugs. I felt that I got just enough of myself in Neil and the fact that he was male, that he had qualities that were not like me, that he's more of a screw-up than I ever have been meant that there was space between him and me. So, I could give him a little bit of me and leave room. I think that's a productive place for any fiction writer, you choose a character and give them a little bit of you, but then you have to make up the rest because otherwise, I get stuck if one character is exactly me and everyone else is not me. I need to be able to say, "A little bit of me goes here; a little bit of me goes there".

WND: Did you plan to include alchemy and magic realism from the very beginning, or was it a later addition?

SS: It was a little bit of both. The gold theft came first, and then I realised that I didn't want my characters to have to turn that gold into cash. I didn't want to have to write about money laundering or foreign bank accounts or things that would be required if you are a gold thief and you use the gold for money. So, then I had to think, "what else do people use gold for?", and I took maybe a couple of weeks to think that over when I was working on other things just wondering, "OK, if I have these gold thieves, I don't want them to use it for money, what else could they use it for?", and at some point I decided "what if they drink it" and "what if it's ambition". I don't really know how I got there: I just decided and it just came. I think the reason it probably came to me is that in the Indian diaspora I grew up in, the most prized possession was ambition. What you wanted was to be the ambitious one, and you wanted to be the one who succeeded. And so, when you're thinking about what the most valuable

currency is, it's going to be ambition. The magic was my idea first and then I started doing more research because, when I'm writing magic especially, I like to read about myth, fable, and other traditions to see if I can get ideas. So, I was reading a lot about alchemy, and I realised that there is a record of people that tried to make gold for years and years. I think I knew what alchemy was, although it didn't click. I hadn't realised that I returned to this thing that humans are always trying to return to, which is gold is so beautiful and we want it for ourselves, in an unlimited supply. And I realised that I had created a magical device in my book that was very similar to what the history of alchemy was. So, then I started reading more and understood that I wanted the logic of the alchemy to infuse the book. The fact that there is a separate plot where Anjali is making her own attempts to brew gold, that was just a completely different plot that came up later when I was drafting, because I realised that she had her own desires, which were bigger than "I want to get into a good school" because life has passed her by and she hasn't had that opportunity. So, I wondered what she would want, and thought that her desire could be linked to this more ancient, universal desire that a lot of alchemists had, which is, "I feel that time is passing me by, I feel myself growing old, I worry that I will not be young and powerful and beautiful anymore". And that's so universal. So, I was really excited about the idea that I could show you the spectrum of desire: how desire manifests when you're a teenager, how it shows up as ambition, how it shows up as greed, and how it shows up as a desire to live forever.

WND: Since alchemy does not seem to play such an important role in American culture, did you have difficulty researching relevant documents, or did you rely on your family's cultural heritage?

SS: Yes, it was mostly reading. I think this happens a lot for children of immigrants. Our parents know things because they lived them. But I was not having everything passed down to me. If I had come to my mom and said, "What do you know about drinking gold?" she would have answered, "Yeah, someone, somewhere, must have done it" [*laughter*]. She has not spent her life obsessing over it. But if you live in India, Sri Lanka, or in the 'motherland', there is probably more and I had to just research it. When my grandmother read the book, she said, "This is not how Ayurvedic gold drinking goes. It goes like this!". I did not know that was real, but OK [*laughter*]. The family research helped when I spent a lot of time talking to my maternal uncle, who attended IIT Bombay. He helped with the research on that chapter, and his wife, my aunt, answered many questions about growing up in Maharashtra in that period because my family is from South India, so I did not know much about what it would have been like to grow up in Dadar. I had lived in Mumbai when I was in my 20s, but I didn't know what Dadar in the 1980s, that middle-class neighbourhood in the heart, was like. I did not know IIT Bombay. So, talking to my family was very cool for those sections, the 1980s India chapters.

WND: How long did you stay in India during your twenties?

SS: I lived there for two years between 2015 and 2017, and I was there again in 2019, and I got locked out during the pandemic [*laughter*]. But Bombay especially is an extraordinary place, it's so alive, with 21 million people. It's like New York and Los Angeles combined with a little of London. So, getting a relationship with India that wasn't just mediated through my parents was particularly important to me. They had their particular idea of what India meant, and, for them, it's a fairly conservative Brahman South Indian on my mom's side. There's something very exciting about going to where your parents are from or that you have some parent's connection to and being able to encounter it on your terms. So that's what it was for me. Living in Mumbai was my chance to experience India outside of its definitions.

WND: I think every reader has his/her own interpretation when reading a work. In the case of *Gold Diggers*, what is the message you want to convey to your readers?

SS: Not sure there is a message. I can tell you what I was dealing with when I wrote. I wanted to understand whether the ambition I had been raised with was the essential thing required to succeed in a new country, or whether it did damage. And the answer is: both. You have to have it, and also can be too much, and I also wanted to understand how much desire was greed. When does the desire to become yourself and articulate your identity step into greed? When does that cause damage? And so, I think there's less of a message and more of a set of questions that the book circles all the time. And it's funny because, now that the book has been out for a while, a lot of people, when they talk to me about it, want to know what my 'solution' is to the problem of ambition. Like, so are you still ambitious? Of course, I am [*laughter*]. Is it good? Sometimes, not always. I think it's really dangerous. I learned a lot about the idea of desire as I was writing it, which is that some of the things that I was raised to believe were good values. Fundamental American values are also the things that make America terrible. People tell you that the gold rush is this moment of American ambition where gold was discovered in California, which was exciting.

There was a huge boom in industry along with that quintessential American period of history where everyone was innovative and entrepreneurial. I was told that as a kid, and now in adulthood, and I ask myself "Is it always good to be innovative and entrepreneurial? Isn't a lot of damage in there?". The land grabs leading up to and around the gold rush caused many Indigenous peoples to be dispossessed of their lands. There was forced labour. Immigrants who came to seek their fortune were killed, lynched, raped, and attacked. These things that we call 'incredible American experiences' are also completely laced with violence. And so, the message I'm interested in is finding out how both of those things can be true.

WND: In the novel, there is an association between gold and ambition. Where did the idea of associating these concepts come from?

SS: I just decided it, and then I had to explain later [*laughter*]. So, it's not all very clearly mapped out. But it made sense when I worked it out later. Ambition is the

most prized currency in the corner of Indian America I come from, and gold is a gift you give to people; I'm sure it's similar in Sri Lankan communities. You give someone gold on an auspicious occasion, right? This I'm actually wearing is my baby gold, from when I was born; I still wear it frequently. Someone gives you this and says this is your financial security. It's like giving people a stock or a bond. It's financial security, but it also has that extra auspicious, sometimes religious component with people saying, "I am endowing this gold with all of my hopes for you and your success". And that happens. It happens when you're born, on important birthdays, when you get married, if you get married. So, all of these moments where we endow gold with that meaning, it just made it easy to say, "Well, of course, that's what the gold contains", because the magical device that I'm using, I'm literalising something that's already true. I'm just adding magic to something already true, like we all invest all these cultural and social meanings into gold.

WND: During my research, I noticed that the names of your characters have also a special meaning related to Indian culture, or to the culture of gold (e.g. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity). Did you choose the names for their real meaning or according to a personal taste?

SS: I choose the first name that hits me and stick with it for the most part. In some cases, there are these accidents afterwards where you realise, oh, I named this person the Goddess of Prosperity. So maybe that was in the back of my mind. The funny thing about Hinduism is that there are so many gods and so many meanings that you'll accidentally hit on a symbol, no matter what you do. So, I tend not to start with a symbol, but I hit on a symbol accidentally. Hinduism goes on forever. There's such a huge pantheon of gods.

WND: Has the alchemical code been activated in a conventional or satirical sense?

SS: One of the funny things that happen when learning about alchemy, as you probably realised from your research, is related to poetry, the language of poetry, and literary criticism; a lot of it comes from alchemy. If you go through any Shakespeare play, you see metaphors of alchemy everywhere because it's one of the best symbolic, religious, and spiritual languages for discussing the concepts of change (internal, poetic, adolescent), desire, and all of that. Alchemy gives us a vocabulary for it. And so again, I didn't have to create it, it's just there. The connections are already linked, and one of the great things that come up when you discover something like that is synchronicity. You just start to see connections everywhere. And that's when you know that you have something worth writing. It is when you can move associatively and do not have to reverse or engineer it from the forward-back. About satire and things like that, yes. I think it depends on who reads the book. Some people read it as a straight satire. People have called it a comic novel or a satire, but I don't think it's just that. I think I use comedy as a component of realism. If you like Rushdie, you've probably heard him say this. He says that "magical realism isn't unreal to the immigrant". When

he's using magical realism, he does it because it's a way of better exploring what reality feels like for the person he's writing about. I think comedy is similar: it is a kind of realism. If you see the world as inherently absurd as I do, as Nikolaj Gogol did, or as Kafka did, then your job is to include the satirical element as part of your realism. So, it's not just a joke; it's not just a comedy. That's my hope, anyway.

WND: In your opinion, can alchemy still have any role in science and other fields of knowledge, or is it bound to remain a 'metaphysical' discipline?

SS: I don't know. I've heard from people who read the book that they believed that what I called 'magic' is real to them, so it's real to some people. I think of myself as a set of metaphors. I think it's a beautiful set of languages for trying to describe what it is to want more and to want to make more, but it feels poetic and metaphorical to me. But that's just me.

WND: What advice would you give to people living in a similar social context as your novel's characters?

SS: I think it can be really lonely to feel like you're an outsider, but it's also our best advantage. You don't belong anywhere completely, but because you don't, you can see the world in ways other people can't. This Zadie Smith essay was the heart of my thesis about her book, *Speaking in Tongues*, and it's a speech she gave on the eve of Obama's election. She's British but biracial and talking about Obama, a multiracial man. And she talks about how there's a kind of person who lives in what she calls a 'Dream City'. It's someone who comes from multiple places. They might have a multi-racial background, be immigrants or children of immigrants, or have some complexity that makes them feel like they don't fit anywhere in particular. And she says that is the most significant advantage because everyone who feels like they don't fit somewhere, in particular, belongs to this place called 'Dream City'. And the people who live in 'Dream City' can interpret the world more powerfully, jump into other people's world-views more easily, be empathetic and curious. I read that and thought, wow, that's me. Zadie Smith and I are very different demographically for families, but we have a thing in common: a postcolonial background and multiplicity. And so, I think feeling like an outsider sucks [*laughter*], but it also gives you the power to see what others can't. That was transformative for me. So maybe that's something good to think about.

WND: Do you think that *Gold Diggers* can be included among the texts that activated alchemy, or would you consider it differently?

SS: I think it's a lot of different kinds of novels in one, but I like that people can see it in different ways. Some people would call it an 'immigrant novel', or others say an 'Asian American novel', 'magical realism', 'satire'. I think if that grouping of the novels about alchemy is helpful to you to conceive of it, then sure, put it there!