

## REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture36

### Lecture 36: South Asian Diaspora Post 9/11: Reading Marina Budhos' Ask Me No Questions

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. So today we are going to study the South Asian diaspora post-9/11 through our reading of Marina Budhos' novel Ask Me No Questions. So according to Goodreads, the novel Ask Me No Questions by Marina Budhos is, I quote, a moving story about two teenage sisters, originally from Bangladesh, whose family lives illegally in New York City.



After 9/11, immigration regulations changed, forcing the family to seek asylum, unquote. So, this novel was first published in 2006. The novel's setting is New York. It was awarded the James Cook Book Award in 2007. So coming to the author Marina Budhos, we see that Marina Budhos is an American writer who was born in New York to an Indo-Guyanese father and a Jewish American mother.

So we see that her pedigree is quite multicultural and hybrid. So, Budhos has been published in numerous publications including The Nation, Ms. Magazine, Lit Hub, Ploughshares, The Kenyon Review, as well as the Asian Pacific American Journal. She received an NEA in Literature as well as an EMMA, or Exceptional Merit Media Award,

and a Rona Jaffe Award for Women Writers. She has also been honored with an Asian American Award for Literature.

Marina Budhos won three fellowships from New Jersey's Council on the Arts. She went to India as a Fulbright Scholar and is currently a Professor Emerita at William Paterson University. Her writings on immigrants come from a very personal space. As she herself states, I quote Budhos: 'I grew up in Queens, New York, in Parkway Village, a community built for UN families and a haven for international, mixed, and American families during the ferment of civil rights and social change.' Over the years, I have come to understand that this sense of crossing over, of mixture, permeates my way of seeing the world, and it drives my writing too.

I am an adult author who crossed over into young adult fiction, a writer who frequently crosses over into nonfiction, and a writer who loves to create worlds that capture these cultural complexities. Some of the other works by Marina Budhos include *Watched*, *Sugar Changed the World*, *We Are All We Have*, and *Tell Us We Are Home*. The novel *Ask Me No Questions* was originally published in the year 2006. Set in the context of the rise of vilification of Muslim immigrants in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Marina Budhos's novel *Ask Me No Questions* presents the story of a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant family. The narrative centers on three daughters—Nadira, Aisha, and Taslima—as well as their parents, all of whom are seen as struggling immigrants

seeking asylum in Canada. *Ask Me No Questions* is a novel narrated by Nadira, a teenage Bangladeshi girl who, along with her family, is in America on expired visas. The novel begins with the family's journey to the Canadian border in order to seek asylum. The opening lines are as follows: 'We drive as if in a dream.'



Up I-95, past the Triborough Bridge, chunks of black ice float in the East River, while Ayesha and I hunch in the back, a green airline bag wedged between us filled with Ma's spiced potatoes. As they drive toward Canada to seek asylum, words keep drumming in their minds. Words such as special registration, deportation, green card, residency, and asylum. We live our lives by these words, but I don't understand them. They cross the U.S.

border, but they are told that Canadian asylums are all filled with refugees from the U.S. So they have to return to the U.S. While returning to the U.S., immediately after crossing the border, Nadira's Abba, or father, is arrested and put into a detention center. This entire novel therefore revolves around how these two sisters, Nadira and Aisha, struggle and finally rescue their father from the allegations that he might be secretly associated with funding the 9/11 attacks.

Now, the September 11 attacks, commonly known as 9/11, were four coordinated Islamist suicide attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda against the United States in 2001. On that morning, 19 terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners scheduled to travel from the East Coast to California. The attacks against New York City and Washington, D.C. caused extensive death and destruction, with about 2,750 people killed in New York, 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 more in Pennsylvania. This is, you know, official information from Wikipedia and Britannica about the 9/11 attacks.

So September 11, 2001, is a date etched in the memories of anyone who experienced that day or witnessed the events unfolding in New York City and Washington, D.C. This date changed how the international community conducts its affairs. Since 9/11, security has become the foremost concern throughout the world, with the fear of terrorist attacks uppermost in the minds of states, governments, and their citizens. According to Derek Rubin, I quote, 'The events of September 11 had a profound impact on the geopolitical restructuring of the world.' The United States asserted its hegemony, declared the existence of an axis of evil, and set out to combat terror throughout the world.

The Western world was convinced that a true clash of civilizations was occurring between Christianity and Islam, and the only solution was to combat fundamentalism with the military might at its disposal. In the prepared remarks for the U.S. Mayor's Conference, which was held on October 25, 2001, John Ashcroft, the former Attorney General of the U.S., stated, I quote, 'On September 11, the wheel of history turned, and the world will never be the same,' unquote. So the world underwent significant changes, especially for Muslims in the U.S., following the events of 9/11. In response to the attacks, the U.S.

initiated the war on terror, during which President Bush urged the so-called 'good Muslims,' as the U.S. understood them, to stand against Islamic terrorism. This period also saw major changes in U.S. security policies. So the security policies included the establishment of the Patriot Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security through the reorganization of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

These policies also encompassed federal practices, which included mass arrests, unwarranted arrests, detention without charges, special registration for Muslim immigrants from specific countries, deportation, as well as ongoing surveillance by the FBI. So the antipathy heightened to a degree where President Bush had to assure people that not a single person should be bothered or harassed because of their religious or ethnic identity. However, as we know from the ground reality, the situation worsened, and hate crimes increased. Gradually, South Asians and Southeast Asians were also subjected to harassment, targeted hate crimes, as well as surveillance.

The Sikh community, for instance, because of their beards and turbans, faced discrimination as they were often conflated with the Muslim identity. They were mistaken as Muslims. This is a CNN report by Moni Basu on September 15, 2016. According to Basu, for Sikhs, the turban is not about culture. It is an article of faith that is mandatory for men.

The turban is also a reason why Sikh men have been targeted and attacked in America, especially after 9/11. Turbans were featured in the Sikh Project, a 2016 exhibition that celebrated the Sikh American experience. British photographers Amit and Narup partnered with the Sikh Coalition for the show. This photograph is of New York actor and designer Waris Singh Ahluwalia, who was removed from an Aeromexico flight in February after refusing to remove his turban at security.

So that's the kind of racism, that's the kind of violence that erupts and that never stops post-9/11. based on, you know, ungrounded suspicion, and there would be rampant, unwarranted arrests, interrogations, and deportations taking place. So, a series of novels emerged in the context of the 9/11 attacks. Some of the most prominent works by South Asian diaspora writers include Hari Kunzru's 'Transmission,' which came out in 2004; Kazim Ali's 'The Disappearance of Seth,' which came out in 2009; Mohsin Hamid's 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist,' which came out in 2007, and Mahmud Mamdani's 'Good Muslim, Bad Muslim,' which came out in 2004.

So at the turn of the century, we see a number of these writings, you know, discussing and sharing views about the post-9/11 scenario in the U.S., and these writings are coming from the South Asian diaspora. So 'Ask Me No Questions' is an important novel set against the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks and what happens to a Bangladeshi immigrant family afterward. The opening of the novel shows that Nadira and Aisha's father, the character of Abba, is put in a detention center. So the two teenage girls' father has been put into a detention center without any official charge against him, and how the entire family has been rendered helpless and vulnerable because of this.

and their mother stays in the shelter. Although she is not behind bars, we see that she has not been arrested, but she is staying in the shelter to help her husband in whatever little ways she can. Ayesha and Nadira return to stay with their uncle and aunt. Initially, they are informed that their father will be released upon payment of a \$5,000 bond. However, as the investigation proceeds, new charges keep arising.



Their father is accused of lying about their residence on application papers. And more seriously, he's accused of donating money to a political association through a mosque. So there is a kind of framing where this man is projected as a fundamentalist, an Islamic fundamentalist. And this becomes something very serious post-9/11. He is detained in the shelter, and if these charges are proven true, the two sisters fear that he will be deported.

In fact, the family will be deported. Ayesha is portrayed as the smarter and cleverer of the two sisters. In fact, when the novel opens, Ayesha draws the attention of her teachers as a brilliant student, and she expects to receive a scholarship for her higher studies. We also see, as readers, that she becomes the valedictorian of her college. However, being the smarter child, while Ayesha is expected to help her father get out of jail, we see that she

faces a nervous breakdown eventually when things go out of hand, worsening after her uncle Ali is also arrested.

Following her father's arrest, her uncle Ali is also arrested, which leads to a smart girl like Ayesha breaking down. However, Ayesha is saved by her sister Nadira, who is not seen as a very promising girl. She's physically a heavy girl. So she has this appearance, which is very mundane.

Perhaps she doesn't come across as a very sharp person. And she's assumed to be someone dull and nervous, you know, and afraid of doing things independently. So however, we see that when Ayesha cannot act in the face of an emergent situation, Nadira comes to help.

There are typical explorations of first generation and second generation diasporic problems that are addressed in the novel. In this regard, the character of Nadira their mother, Ayesha and Nadira's mother, becomes symptomatic of the problems of acculturation that are faced in a diaspora, especially by the women in diaspora who are not really a service class, who are not really working outside, who just travel to a new land with their husband and family. So Nadira and Ayesha Ayesha's mother is symptomatic of all these problems, these vulnerabilities that a woman is exposed to after she relocates to a new land in the West.

Nadira's mother feels the anxieties of a new diasporan, struggling with the host country's language, culture and clinging on to her traditional values. So soon after arriving in the New York airport, Nadira's mother's hand felt tight in Nadira's hand and I quote, her mouth became stiff when the uniformed man split open the packing tape around our suitcase and plunged his hands into her underwear and sarees, unquote. So this is the kind of violation that a woman coming from Bangladesh to just landing in New York airport faces, the kind of security checking that the family undergoes where there is no question of privacy. It's not even a female security person checking a woman's bag.

There is no sense of respect and no cognizance of the dignity of a woman and her right to privacy. The fact that a man is splitting open a woman's suitcase and plunging his hands into her underwear and saris—and as a result, the kind of nervousness, the kind of uneasy feeling that this woman is facing—is depicted very well toward the beginning of the novel, right? So initially, Nadira's mother is afraid to go outside, and she insists her husband make an extra lock for the door. She secretly considers going back to her homeland, especially, I quote, 'in the winter when the sky turned dark and the cold sliced her ankles and blew up the sleeves of her coat,' unquote. She feels exposed.

She feels seen. You know, she feels judged, and she feels discriminated against. She doesn't feel ready for New York society, right. And she is, you know, well within her rights to feel violated.

Actually, a violation of her privacy is happening constantly where the gaze is. The constant collective gaze that she's enduring is enormous, right? It almost diminishes her, and she feels she's not ready. She's not ready for this Western society and its expectations. She even feels uncomfortable going to restaurants, fearing that she wouldn't be able to answer the waiter's questions in English.

So speaking English becomes difficult, you know, something of paramount importance. Once a visible minority is unable to respond in English, and this is something we also see in a film like *English Vinglish*, right? The language is given so much emphasis, so much importance,

And once a person cannot speak English, once a person looks different, dresses differently, eats differently, and doesn't speak the language, the person is completely othered, invisibilized, and in a more extreme situation, such a person could be criminalized or demonized, right? Finally, however, towards the end of the novel, we see that the mother changes her dressing style entirely to fit into American society, so that they are accepted as one among the Americans. You see this oneness, this assimilation begins through one's appearance, the tangible appearance. American society sometimes seeks justification, you know, if someone is dressing and, you know, eating differently.

So as a way of merging with those expectations, we see that Nadira and Aisha's mother, for a change, is dressing like an American to be accepted by them. On the final court session of Abba's trial, Ma shocks everyone in the family. So this is from the text. I quote, When Ma comes out, we are all stunned.

She looks beautiful, if a little strange. No shalwar kameez with embroidered cuffs at the ankle. No billowy chiffon dupatta. She is wearing a Western-style dress. It's a blue and red pattern with a thin yellow belt that cinches tight at her waist.

Her hair has been swept up into a gleaming black topknot. She looks like an airline stewardess, nervously brushing crumbs off the table, checking and rechecking that the stove is turned off. So the anxiety of a sense of belonging and desperation is visible in this excerpt. Therefore, the novel documents several episodes of angst and trauma that the

family faces in such a situation, where they are part of almost a panopticon. They are being questioned.



They are being detained and interrogated. They are seen as criminals or antisocials, associated with the 9/11 attacks, as fundamentalists. All kinds of suspicions grow around this family, where, in this situation, many South Asian Muslims and Muslim immigrants were forced to return home. Against this backdrop, we see the mother gathering all her efforts.

It's so kind of heartwarming, but as a reader, you know, from India, South Asia, one could also say it's also so heartbreaking to see the mother, you know, changing herself so much with so much effort to dress up like an American—the kind of last bit of courage she's bringing in to dress up like an American, a true-blue American, so they are accepted, lest they be deported. So she's gathering all her effort, she's gathering all her courage to dress up like an American and and this is an appeal to American society to own them, to consider them, accept them as one among the Americans. So they are not deported.

So they are not othered. They are not forced to go back to Bangladesh. It shows the plight, but also the courage of a woman. Like I said, it's so heartwarming, it's at the same time so heartbreaking to see a very shy, nervous woman, you know, kind of breaking all her inhibitions and dressing up like that and coming out in public.

What kind of desperation might have forced her to be that way, to appear in that way in public? So the atmosphere of racial hatred permeates the entire novel. When Nadira's uncle Ali laments that under the Special Registration Act, Bangladeshis are treated the same as Pakistanis, the character called Taslima points out that to the Americans, all brown people are the same. Be it a Bangladeshi, be it a Pakistani, they have actually forced a common

kind of umbrella, blanket identity onto all South Asians or all non-whites, for that matter. So, what is interesting about Marina Budhos' portrayal of racial hatred is her attempt to highlight the subtle distinctions between the American state and its citizens.

So, the state policies work at one level and the citizens respond to these policies from the ground zero in a different way. Sometimes they agree to some of the policies that the state makes. Sometimes they find their own way of interpreting these policies. So citizens can be more human. Citizens can be more or less than the policies of any given state.

So while the state has put several charges against the Muslim immigrants, we see that there are many white American citizens who fight for the rights of these immigrants. So there are many lawyers, white American lawyers who are American citizens who are fighting for the rights of these mostly Muslim immigrants, who were facing the onslaught after 9-11 attacks. So, in the novel, we see the character of Shada Chhele. You know, Shada Chhele in Bengali means white boy. So, Shada Chhele, Tim is not only Taslima's lover whom she marries ultimately and with whom, unlike her parents, she settles down in the US.

So, Tim is not only Taslima's lover, but also a human rights activist who works against brutal atrocities of the state. The greatest support of Ayesha in the school is her white teacher, Mr. Firedlander. So Mr. Firedlander actually does everything he can to make Ayesha get her fellowship. So these are some of the instances where we see that there cannot be any straitjacketed understanding of any ethnic group involved. Any racial group, be it the white Americans, be it the Muslim immigrants, the Bangladeshis are not Pakistanis.

The Pakistanis are not the same as the migrants from Saudi Arabia. So each has his or her own history, his or her own cultural baggage to carry. And that's what unfolds throughout the narrative. Similarly, the white people do not sum up to define American policies.

American policies are out there, but the citizens, the real humans who have been coexisting with the visible minority population for a long time, many of them can understand the plight of these immigrants as they have to constantly justify their presence, their innocence, and their legitimacy as US denizens. Right. So characters like Tim and Mr. Firedlander are examples of white Americans who facilitate the case of the South Asian Muslims, who treat the South Asian Muslims with equality and equity and do not render them invisible in American society.

So, there are all kinds of people, and that entire spectrum is being unfolded through Marina Budhos' novel. So, as a way of concluding, the novel explores the experiences of immigrants in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. The Special Registration Act was made for Muslim immigrants belonging to specific countries such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. After registration, some of them were put behind bars and were subjected to physical and mental abuse, while others were deported. As we see in the novel, the case of Uncle Ali resonates with this kind of abusive treatment.

**Conclusion**

- The novel explores the experiences of immigrants in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. The Special Registration Act was made for Muslim immigrants belonging to specific countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Pakistan and Bangladesh. After registration, some of them were put behind bars subject to physical and mental abuse, and others were deported. The case of Uncle Ali in the novel resonates with this treatment. He was arrested and was tortured in the jail. Nadira describes her Uncle Ali as a man coming out of jail and being helped by his wife, who is holding up a “thin and wobbling” man who limps. (120)
- Nadira also describes her father thus:  
But the man who walks in is not the Abba I know...Ragged yellow stains show under his arms, and there's little tear at the elbow. His pants off his hips. I cannot believe this is the same Abba who sometimes took more than an hour to bathe, carefully oiling his hair and clipping his toenails. (131)



19

Right, he is arrested and tortured in jail. Nadira describes her uncle Ali as a man coming out of jail, helped by his wife who is holding up a thin and wobbling man who limps. Just on the basis of suspicion, a man is being roughed up, manhandled in jail. This is state-sponsored. This is happening with full support and under the cognizance of state authorities. So that is what surprises, that is what unsettles the reader, right? How state policies can suddenly become so inhuman, how the humanitarian aspect is completely taken away.

Right. And how a person, just on the basis of suspicion, is completely stripped of his basic dignity, which any human is entitled to. Nadira describes her father with the following words. I quote from the novel. But the man who walks in is not the Abba I know.

Ragged yellow stains show under his arms, and there is a small tear at the elbow. His pants hang off his hips. I cannot believe this is the same Abba who sometimes took more than an hour to bathe, carefully oiling his hair and clipping his toenails, unquote. So this man must have undergone so much. It could be physical manhandling, torture, mental torture—stripping off his dignity by just being criminalized.

And the fact that even after such a man is released from jail, life no longer remains the same with that kind of blame, with that kind of a scar on his identity; life does not remain the same. You know, the love for life does not remain the same. This is not the same man, as Nadira observes, who used to take long baths, who used to carefully oil his hair and clip his toenails, who used to take care of his body—because that body has been manhandled. And that too, you know, for a man of his advanced age, it goes on to show what a militant state can do to individuals that it sees, that it perceives as the other.

Right. The enemy. So such enemies need to be neutralized, diminished, disempowered, disabled. Right. And completely not favored until the point comes where they have to go back to their position,

home country, almost treated as refuse, as nobody, as a non-entity. So that kind of diminution of an individual's person, personhood, an individual's existence is happening. So that kind of diminution or complete expunging of an individual's being is happening over here, right? And the kind of pain, the kind of helplessness is a constant tone, a predominant tone throughout Marina Budhos's novel, 'Ask Me No Questions.'



So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet for another round of discussions and a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.