

## thearts

## Rutgers Professor Targets Fundamentalist Islam Using Poetry

In December 2008, Rafey Habib, a professor of English at Rutgers University in New Jersey, posted a video on YouTube of himself reciting his self-penned poem "To a Suicide Bomber."

YouTube, which provides a social networking component to people posting educational, entertainment and promotional videos, is known as a successful forum for launching young careers such as those of Lin Yun Shun or Susan Boyle whose videos immediately bought them celebrity status.

In Habib's case, the popularity of his YouTube video (it has received more than a million hits), and the void within the international Muslim community to speak out against fundamentalist Islam, inspired him to pen his first book of poetry, the



Kavita Ramdya

English-language "Shades of Islam: Poems for a New Century" (Kube Publishing).

Born in India, educated in England's Oxford University, Habib is not a recent dabbler in poetry; in fact, much of his background is in writing poetry criticism and he has even published six books about the medium's history and structures, both grounded in the East and the West.

However, "Shades of Islam" is his first foray into writing poetry

as opposed to writing about poetry.

As a result, Habib takes an ancient form often times used throughout its history to express love, poke fun at corrupt politicians or record history and adapts it to the very timely and relevant topic of fundamentalist Islam and its impact on Muslims within the global community as well as how it has determined the course of world events since 9/11.

Habib's poetry has a quintes-

entially political aspect to as it speaks directly to fundamentalist Islam, and differentiates the various "Shades of Islam" from popular and mainstream notions of what subjects contemporary poetry should speak to (love and romance), a phenomenon also reflected in the popular music industry.

"Western poetry is now depoliticized, more personal," Habib explains. Poetry is "art for art's sake, written to be enjoyed, whereas for most of history, poetry has more than an aesthetic purpose." Poems like "To a Suicide Bomber" and "Hijab" recall a time in the poetic tradition when the literary form was popularly employed to express political ideas and social criticism.

Since taking on his poetry project, Habib has spoken at a

wide variety of forums, including in universities, churches, temples, synagogues and mosques against "Muslim complacency and myopia, [probing] racial and religious stereotypes ... and expressing the dilemmas on a path to true faith."

When asked whether his background in poetry criticism has informed his poetry, Habib responds, "It makes you aware of limitations in your own poetry."

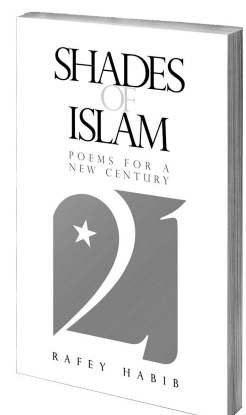
In "To the Muslims of the Twenty-First Century," Habib describes a common phenomenon in the global Muslim community:

Muslims who fluently read the Quran out loud without understanding the meaning of the language. In it, the poet describes a widespread ignorance about Islam amongst Muslims in addition to the global community. "A Prayer for Gaza," one of the more political poems in the collection describes, according to Habib, how "underneath this conflict we're all the same. It appeals to the compassionate nature on all sides. We all want peace and compassion." The poem, ultimately and despite its overtly-political nature, is an "assertion of our common humanity, our conflicts."

The poem I most favored in the abridged collection I read is "Hijab." The poet describes how women wearing a hijab are fully clothed until closer inspection reveals that certain body parts (hands, feet, lips) may be left exposed and decorated with such care that is telling of the woman. He describes how a woman might be wearing "Your scarf, your veil, a hair/Askew, hanging loose..." and "painted nails/Both hands and feet, sometimes/Red and once dark green. And bangles/Too, and small gold anklets..."

When asked about the poem, Habib describes how "young women want to look attractive, but how do you obey Muslim laws and look more attractive? Attractiveness will come out despite traditional dress. Muslim women will still wear makeup."

Habib's "Shades of Islam: Poems for a New Century" will be available in September.



## Symbolism Saturates Graphic Novel Illustrated by Tribal Artists

By RAMA LAKSHMI

- NEW DELHI

When tribal artist Durgabai Vyam was asked by a publisher to draw for a graphic book about caste untouchability in India, she leafed through the celebrated titles laid out in front of her - books by Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Osamu Tezuka and Marjane Satrapi. She was aghast.

"The books were full of boxes. I did not want to do a book that cages art in little boxes," said Vyam, 35, recalling her first brush with the literary genre that is slowly taking off in India. "I like to draw in open spaces, where they can breathe."

Two years later she got her wish, and two years after that, she managed to finish her first graphic book without boxes. And in doing so, Vyam may have revolutionized the format of the genre.

Vyam and her husband, Subhash Vyam, just put final touches on "Bhimayana," a graphic nonfiction book about Bhimrao Ambedkar, a revered 20th-century leader of India's untouchables, now known as Dalits.

The topic is similar to many internationally acclaimed graphic novels that deal with grave themes such as the Holocaust, Palestine and the Bosnian war.

But this book is different in that it jettisons sequential, cinematic narrative style and brings visual magic realism into



Tribal artist Durgabai Vyam gives finishing touches to a graphic book called "Bhimayana," which deals with the Hindu caste system.

a new universe. Symbolism tells the story. The Vyams are renowned practitioners of Gond tribal art, traditionally painted on floors, walls and doorways of mud huts in villages.

The indigenous art form made the transition to paper and urban galleries only three decades ago. The edgy graphic book is the latest incarnation of their ancient art.

"Bhimayana" traces Ambedkar's personal battles with untouchability and the 3,000-year-old hierarchical Hindu caste system, which regards the Dalits as the lowest level. The grim graphic book depicts him as a thirsty boy desperately seeking water in a segregated school, as a young traveler denied a bullock-cart ride and as a young man being thrown out of a motel.

The lake where Ambedkar agitated for access to water takes the shape of a giant fish; a road winds across the page like a snake; a desperately thirsty

Ambedkar at school is shown with a fish inside him.

A train runs on wheels that look like coiled snails; trees grow legs and race along as the locomotive's steam billows like long, flying locks of hair. When Columbia University graduate Ambedkar is thrown out of a motel because he is an untouchable, the Vyams draw prickly thorns all over his body.

"Ambedkar must have felt like he had thorns on him, because nobody would touch him," explained Durgabai Vyam, an unschooled, bony woman in an orange sari with bright bangles jingling on her wrists.

She was only 6 when she learned from her mother how to plaster the mud walls with cow dung, collect clay of different colors from the forest and paint on the walls. She illustrated a few children's books before "Bhimayana."

Symbolism is central to the Gond art world; nothing is perceived literally. Subhash Vyam,

40, dismisses realistic representations as "ditto art."

Years ago, the couple drew the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks after hearing about them on the village radio. They never saw the troubling newspapers and television images. Their painting showed two tall thatch-roofed mud huts and a bird gently swooping down to hit them.

Even the speech bubbles in "Bhimayana" are shaped like animals.

"If you speak sweet words of truth and justice, then your bubble is like a sparrow. If your words are going to sting and cause pain, then the bubble is like a scorpion," Subhash Vyam said.

About 40 percent of the text and dialogue were changed to suit the drawings. For example, the Vyams inserted bats in the scene before Ambedkar falls from a bullock cart, because a bat is considered a bad omen. The publisher inserted text explaining that bats are a bad omen.

"I want people to pick up the book for its beauty and get to know the ugly social reality of India," said S. Anand, who published and co-wrote "Bhimayana." Anand runs Navayana in New Delhi, which publishes anti-caste books. He also inserted news of caste atrocities in contemporary India into the book. The graphic book, in its final stages, will be released in October in English and three Indian languages. Discussions continue with publishers and agents in the United States and Britain.

- THE WASHINGTON POST