



Book Review: *The Subtweet* by Vivek Shraya. Asma Sayed and Jacqueline Walker
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***The Subtweet* by Vivek Shraya (ECW Press, Toronto, 2020)**

Reviewed By Asma Sayed and Jacqueline Walker

Vivek Shraya is a multi-disciplinary Canadian artist and Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Calgary. Self-identifying as transgender, Shraya is of South Asian origin and her work has been nominated for multiple prestigious awards including the Lambda Literary Awards and Polaris Music Prize. She is the author of more than ten books.

Shraya's latest book, *The Subtweet*, focusing on the rise and fall of a friendship between two female artists, not only draws out complicated human relationships but the bitter reality of a Canadian cultural scene heavily dominated by White artists. The novel follows Neela Devaki, a Toronto musician, and the unexpected friendship that forms between her and fellow artist Rukmini. The friendship begins after Rukmini's successful cover of one of Neela's songs, but while the two initially develop and enjoy a close friendship—one that mutually enhances their skill sets as artists—insufficiently addressed anxieties and jealousies make the relationship increasingly precarious.

As Neela's work as an artist often goes underrecognized, the widespread acclaim that Rukmini's cover receives, along with the subsequent success of Rukmini's career, causes Neela to question the value of her own work, her place in the music industry, and her relationship with Rukmini. Though Rukmini and Neela share feelings of artistic, and sometimes personal, inferiority to each other, these feelings go largely unvoiced. As Rukmini's career seemingly skyrockets, the two women struggle to stay in consistent contact, making their once-easy closeness difficult to sustain. Neela's and Rukmini's uncertainty towards each other is exacerbated by their continuous exposure to online activity, where they struggle to discern the true feelings and intentions revealed, if at all, in their tweets and Instagram photos. In this social media landscape, the subtleties and distortions of online engagement seem to intensify Neela's doubts about Rukmini. Eventually, such assumptions about the other person's intentions, along with external pressures and internalized anxieties, become too difficult for the women to manage, setting the stage for a dramatic unravelling of their friendship.

Neela's sense that Rukmini has essentially 'sold-out' by performing for mostly White audiences resonates with others online, who begin raising questions about the purpose, role and authenticity of representation. Neela's subtweet, and the online frenzy that follows it, calls into question the value of artist diversity in particular. When artists of colour perform within what essentially amounts to a White supremacist entertainment industry, where White artists are preferred, and artists of colour are recruited to bolster producer portfolios, and the art is consumed by predominantly White audiences, does representation become moot? Some affirm this criticism by pointing out the optics of Rukmini, a light-skinned person of colour, being invited to perform as an opener for a White artist as opposed to a performer like Neela, whose skin is darker, being offered such an opportunity. Though these are points worth considering, it is not clear that concerns of inadequate representation should be levied against Rukmini, a trans artist of colour, as opposed to the flawed music industry itself.

Neela and Rukmini's relationship ultimately fractures under the weight of misinterpretations, insufficient communication and the burdens of trying to succeed in an industry generally hostile to communities of colour. Shraya's novel demonstrates how the hierarchical structure of the music industry functions in tandem with the internalized pressures of White supremacist ideology to divide artists of colour rather than to support and empower them. The ability of artists to collaborate becomes hindered by such forces, leading to misdirected criticism of those who already must contend with the racism and misogyny of the music industry. For instance, referring to Rukmini's treatment by one of the White artists, Hayley, Neela says: "[Hayley] had squeezed what she wanted out of Rukmini – underground cred and a badge on her allyship card – and could now toss her aside like a dried-up piece of fruit. One way or another, white people always found a way to fuck a brown woman over" (174). Raising concerns about White supremacy, White fragility, and the White saviour complex allows Shraya, albeit through her characters, to raise many issues relevant to contemporary times.

Fast paced and with scathing assessments of the established hierarchies of the entertainment industry, Shraya's novel centres the voices of South Asian Canadian women. Shraya presents the industry as marked by ignorance, arrogance and oppressive Whiteness, all while acknowledging the difficulty of achieving success as an artist if one chooses to reject or challenge the industry's tenets. The book reveals the ways in which concepts of equity and diversity are used as buzzwords these days. Both Neela and Rukmini are simply facades for the hegemonic music industry which does little to dismantle power hierarchies. Additionally, Shraya depicts the intensive micro-manoeuvring necessary for recognition within the social media landscape, and the toll that it can take on one's health, perspective, and friendships. The narrative moves forward through tweets and subtweets, details about photos on Instagram, and media reports and interviews. It is a reflection of contemporary society's culture of instant gratification and acknowledgement through "likes" on social media. Thus, the novel not only draws attention to the power of social media but also its fragility. Ultimately, the book celebrates and

acknowledges the art and the struggles of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) women in the music industry. For those interested in an interactive experience, the book provides a link to download the songs included in the novel.

Dr. Asma Sayed

Dr Asma Sayed is Canada Research Chair in South Asian Literary and Cultural Studies at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on Indian Ocean Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and South Asian diaspora in Canada.

Jacqueline Walker

Jacqueline Walker is completing her dual major in English and political science at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada. She is interested in social justice, animal rights, gender studies and the intersections between these areas of research.