

What Good Is Poetry? with Tarfia Faizullah

Christiane Wisehart (producer): Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

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Andy (host): Today, we're going to let you listen in on a conversation between two poets about the ethics of their craft. DePauw University Professor Joe Heithaus sat down with University of Michigan Professor Tarfia Faizullah to discuss her newest collection of poetry, *Seam*. All of the poems in *Seam* stem from interviews she conducted in Bangladesh with women who were victims of sexual assault.

Joe Heithaus (guest interviewer): [pull quote]What good is poetry?

Tarfia Faizullah (guest): Oh no. What good is poetry? What good isn't poetry?

Andy: Stay with us for more from this fascinating discussion.

[music ends]

Andy: Our producers, Christiane Wisehart...

Christiane: Hello.

Andy: ...and Sandra Bertin...

Sandra Bertin (producer): Hi.

Andy: ...are here with me to set the stage for this interview.

Christiane: But before we get started, we wanted to let you all know that Tarfia Faizullah's poetry and the discussion about it contain accounts of sexual assault and violence.

Sandra: There are also references to sex in general, so this discussion might not be appropriate for young ears.

Christiane: Tarfia Faizullah's collection of poems, *Seam*, came about after she won a Fulbright grant to travel to Bangladesh to interview birangona. And "birangona" is a term that you'll be hearing over the course of the interview, and it refers to the over 200,000 women who were systematically raped during Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan in 1971.

Sandra: Tarfia interviewed many of these victims of sexual assault about their experiences during the war, and after. Her poems reflect the point of view of the women she interviewed but also examine her role as the interviewer. Here's just one of the poems that came out of those interviews

Tarfia Faizullah: [Poem Reading] “Interview with a Birangona Number 3”. Would you consider yourself a survivor or victim? Each week I pull hard the water from the well, bathe in my sorry, wring it out, beat it against the flattest rocks. Are you Muslim or Bengali they asked again and again, both I said, both. Then rocks were broken along my spine, my hair a black fist in their hands pulled down into the river again and again each day, each night, river, rock, fist. The river wanders this way, breaks that way, that is always the rivers play.

Sandra: Her poetry is so powerful.

Christiane: It really is. And the conversation we’re about to play for you all brought up so many interesting ethical questions when it comes to writing poetry, like what makes it okay for someone to write in another person’s voice? Should poets or artists set rules for themselves when writing about sensitive subject matter?

Sandra: Yeah, and as much as I want to unpack all of it with you, I think we should just play the interview for the listeners.

Christiane: You’re totally right. So here’s Joe Heithaus interviewing Tarfia Faizullah:

Joe Heithaus: I was struck by how you, a Bangladeshi American woman, could go back in time and place from before you were born and write so carefully and beautifully about such a tragedy. How does one go about writing about such a difficult subject from such a distance of time?

Tarfia Faizullah: That’s such a great question and I think one that I think of a lot sort of whether or not we are agents of history and agents of memory that we haven’t necessarily experienced or lived through. I suspect that that’s what inheritance is and why inheritance is such a difficult thing to both carry and also ignore. Even if I didn’t live through that time, I think that as inheritors of trauma and I think we all are no matter where in the world we are, we are inheritors of some kind of trauma or another. I think we can feel it. I think that poetry, art in general but for me poetry kind of allows a place to work out some of those feelings that we have of sharing this inheritance of trauma and trying to understand how it may or may not affect us in the present moment. Also what kinds of responsibilities we have to acknowledge what is difficult and what has happened to our predecessors in such a way that maybe we can move forward into the future and avoid the same mistakes that some of those who came before us made.

Joe Heithaus: I wonder about the various kinds of license a poet has. I wonder if a man or someone without a connection to Bangladesh could even try to begin to tackle the subject. While you share gender and have a cultural connection to these women, what in essence allows you to write so intimately about this subject?

Tarfia Faizullah: I really don’t know the answer to that. I guess I sort of feel like I think we know when we are playing with someone else’s materials. I don’t know why I think that. I think it’s sort of an instinct that we understand when something belongs to us to sort through it and when it doesn’t. To use an example, I feel like I did try to write say a few poems from the perspective of Pakistani soldiers because I have this feeling of maybe it should be a balanced perspective. I

put air quotes around balanced because I think any perspective is loaded one way or the other and in fact it's really difficult to come up with a balanced perspective.

Sometimes an attempt to create a balanced perspective can actually damage the material that you are working with. I felt like in a way the male perspective was sort of ultimately damaging to the poems that I'd already written. It felt really wrong and out of place. In fact, I think and I hope that somebody has written from those perspectives though I feel personally that I am not the person to do that. Again, I feel like we know when we are messing in someone else's sandbox so to speak. Part of that, I think the best we can do is be as mindful as we can with the materials that we are dealt with and as mindful as we can about how we use those materials and to what end.

I had this experience recently while I was in Bloomington Indiana. There was a little shop that sold south Asian wares. The shop owner turned out to be Pakistani, and he and I had a really interesting conversation about what the war meant to him. I had a copy of *Seam* with me so I gave it to him. It was an interesting moment because I feel like in some ways you might think given the subject matter of *Seam* that I would be anti-Pakistani. In fact writing *Seam* just kind of gave me a sense of real compassion for so many people who were affected during war time. On either side, there are damages I think.

Joe Heithaus: As I interview, I'm struck by your "Instructions for the Interviewer" that the poems, what strikes me about the poems and what I love about the poems is that they don't just trudge into this subject in any way, that there is a kind of self-consciousness that is really informing self-consciousness. The interviewer who is some version of yourself I suppose, is always being instructed and is always thinking throughout this whole thing. Can we get you to read some of the poems?

Tarfia Faizullah: Yeah, for sure. It's so interesting that you bring up the interviewer as some version of me and that's true. I really felt like I had to create a role for the interviewer. Like I had to give her a specific job. I couldn't just approach it as myself. I created the character of the interviewer in some ways that she could have these responsibilities that she was sorting through over the course of the book. This is the "Instructions for the Interviewer."

[music begins]

Tarfia Faizullah: [Poem Reading] Once she'll say, "I didn't know there was a hollow inside me until he pushed himself into it." Once you learned that inside you it was not hollow but *Seam*. Color of the rim of the river, tonguing the long dark shore of stone. Reflection of yourself. An endless ripple and corrugated metal with the silver bangle circling now her thin dark arm. Take the tea she offers. Once she will say, "I was young like you." Once you wanted anyone to fill you with blue noise. Once you didn't know your own body's worth. Put the porcelain cup down, let it slide into the saucer's waiting hollow.

[music ends]

Joe Heithaus: My theory on the book is that or on that interviewer is that she is a saucer. That she is this not as deep place holding a really deep vessel. A vessel filled with pain, with memory and that the interviewer in some ways has this job of having to hold a difficult vessel. I don't know, I wonder if ... It turns out that the form of the poem right, couplet, couplet, couplet, couplet and then there it is, the saucer's waiting hollow. That the interviewer herself is the saucer's waiting hollow. The person who's willing to take in all of the stuff and hold it carefully.

Tarfia Faizullah: That's such a beautiful reading of both the interviewer and of the cup and the saucer. 1 of the things that so interesting about Seam to me as somebody who wrote it is that often times what it's doing is invisible to me I did feel that way, I was drawn to Bangladesh. I started writing these poems in graduate school I think and I hit what I described elsewhere as an ethical wall. I really felt like I needed to be in Bangladesh, to be in the landscape of that place. I also felt very strange about writing poems from the perspective of women who were still alive. I feel like in some ways I went to Bangladesh to not necessarily just transcribe their stories but to ask permission in a way. To just make contact with them and share some sort of physical space. In the course of that I realized so many things about myself. I realized it felt like I really thought I was going to be writing a really dark book ultimately. 1 that sort of ends in darkness because I was also going through a difficult time in my personal life as I was working on these poems both in Bangladesh and afterwards.

I did feel this, the weight of so much and a desire to try to see how much I could actually carry. How much I was willing to let come in. I felt to use the saucer and the cup metaphor a little further. I really felt broken open by my time in Bangladesh and by my time with these women. I felt like 1 of the things I learned is that if you break something open, it allows something else to come in. I felt like as a really shy private person going to Bangladesh and encountering these women and being willing to be questioned by them and question them. There was some sort of both a breaking open as well as a settling feeling like that feeling of a cup into a saucer, the way it feels like. They really fit together somehow. I also felt that feeling as well of understanding something about my relationship to history and therefore to these women as well.

Joe Heithaus: There are 3 poems where the narrator or the interviewer has to acknowledge her various emotions, desire, shame and grief. Can you talk about how those poems came to be and how we go from the instructions to the interviewer to the interviewer really having to look inside at her own emotion?

Tarfia Faizullah: Well I started out with just the poems written from the perspective of the Birangona, the war heroines I spoke with. The longer I was I Bangladesh, the more conversations I had with them, the more I realized that maybe there was some value to having the interviewers perspective in some ways. I also felt like I wanted to create a range of perspective and so there are the interview questions which the poem is written from their perspective. There are interviewer's notes which are in 2nd person and then there's the interviewer's acknowledges which are a different perspective entirely. Almost like a further zooming out so that the interviewer in some ways has to look at herself. Those three feelings

were ones that I felt were both tangential to the experiences I was having with these women but very much connected to them at the same time.

Desire, shame and grief were all things that I felt like were emotional experiences that I was having that were in some way triggered by or enlivened by conversation with these women. It also felt to me like I was trying to find stories or resonances between us. I felt like we really were engaged in some kind of dialog rather than a one-sided conversation.

[music begins]

Tarfia Faizullah: [poem reading] “The Interviewer Acknowledges Shame.” After she has ducked through the low slung metal shack, the war raped women she’s come to visit offer tea drowsy with sweet. They begin to speak unlocking the desiccated coffins of their grief. The video camera’s lens blinks on their dawn thin faces until daylight spools itself back into darkness. “Anything,” she says, “you’d like to tell me? Anything you can remember.” She ducks back under the clothes line heavy with faded sorry out to the main road, after the rikshawala peddles across town to a small heat spattered hotel room. She wraps a dark silk scarf around herself until twilight and rubs her eyes riverbank raw until she lies on the hard narrow bed and begins to touch herself.

After the familiar art shattering, she wishes she could cry because that’s at least might be redemption for each broken body that can’t be restored. She doesn’t feel shame’s dark circle tightening after awaking to the mirror, dust webbed nor when she boards the bus back to the city. Sunlight fades the open windows into white dreams. A child bends down to elevate a pink blossom away from a green field. It’s later when she arrives back at a borrowed flat, begins to strip off travel pungent clothes and smells her own body’s resonance mask. It’s when she sits down naked at the dusk to rewind and fast forward through all the pix-elated footage of the women’s kerosene lives, it’s when she begins to write about it in third person as though it was that simple to un-nail myself from my own body.

[music ends]

Joe Heithaus: Let me ask a more general question, what good is poetry?

Tarfia Faizullah: Oh no. What good is poetry? What good isn’t poetry? I think poetry is instinctively one of our most innate forms. I think it began as an oral tradition, its available still to the illiterate. I’m really struck by the landau which is a form that the pasture women of Afghani tribe have created and populated. In some ways the landays is a couplet. It’s often times playful or has playful sort of bold content. These women share these couplets between them as a way of communicating or acknowledging things that perhaps one wouldn’t expect women who live in particularly conservative way, would feel. Just the acknowledgement of someone’s interior life is so hugely important and so valuable.

I think poetry can do that. Poetry can allow us a place and a forum to understand better the conversation that were all naturally having between our interior lives and then the external world.

I think the question is maybe not so much just poetry matter but in what ways does it not matter. I can't find very many actually. I think it's part of our day to day lives. It's one of the 1st things we're taught when we're young. Whether it's in the form of nursery rhymes or in hymns or poetic tradition pervades many art forms of wants to this day. It's incredibly important.

Joe Heithaus: Is there an ethic to poetry? Are there places in poetry where maybe people dare not go or if they go there they should take into consideration certain things?

Tarfia Faizullah: Well I think that there is always a risk involved. I think that we're, I feel like Seam is incredibly problematic as a book. It doesn't do anything directly for the women who underwent such horrors, it doesn't take away it doesn't erase that history. In some cases it may not even get any number of these women's experiences right. I felt sort of helpless before this material and that helplessness made me want to take a risk to try to write it. I guess I would say that to me the ethics of poetry comes down to how mindful you're practicing discernment. I think that poetry is a form that makes you think about discernment. Is it this phrase or that one? Is it this image or another? Is it this word or another? It makes one think I think about the history of language as well. I'm thinking about how every single word in the English language has some sort of etymology or history. When we're using those words we're conjuring in some form of fashion or re-populating those histories, the history of those words, the history of that language.

I guess I would say there is some ethics in discernment. I think that's why the word ethics can even come up in relation to an art form because in art form whether it's poetry or sculptor or painting is in some ways a simulation we're creating of what we suppose our lives to actually be like. I'm thinking about say, whether or not folks who painted in those pay caves in Alaska that they found of those ancient paintings, I wonder if they questioned the ethics of trying to create impressions of their experiences and of their lives. I think that in this day and age where we are working to build a multicultural democracy in America, but I also think that the entire world has engaged in this moment of globalization, I think the questions of discernment are becoming rapidly very important as we try to understand how we can be different from each other but simultaneously share a space and what that means.

I feel in the same way poetry asks me to think about those questions. What things share can and should a space. What things that don't seem like they can share a space actually do quite beautifully share a space in some ways like beauty and suffering for example. To me they seem to occupy 2 seemingly disparate realms but they often occupy the same space. Just because a country is war torn doesn't mean it's not beautiful for example. I even sort of think of how watching say the community gather around somebody who's lost a loved one, you can see that there is an ebb and flow to the way that we separate and come together at the same time. I guess I think that ideally speaking, poetry allows you to behave more ethically because you're thinking more mindfully about how to discern between choices.

Again I feel that for me has come with come after years of trying to understand and getting really wrong, what poetry can and can't do in some ways. For me something that I tell my

students is that there is a beautiful courage in failing because you've at least risked trying something that is unutterable in the first place anyway.

Joe Heithaus: Stealing your question from seam, why call any of it back.

Tarfia Faizullah: Oh God, why call any of it back. I guess something that I ask myself a lot because I try really hard to be very much in the present moment. I feel like there're times when there is nowhere but the past to look for answers to some of these questions I think we have. Of what does it mean to be a human? What does it mean to try to ... What does it mean to hurt others? What does it mean to be hurt by others? I guess I feel like the reason to call any of it back is to try to see if instead of just dumping up a past as though it's garbage and let it stay in these huge messy heaps. I wonder if there is some power or some deeper sensitive compassion or understanding we can have for not just the past but also for the future.

You know poetry and looking at the past through poetry allows us to illuminate some of those dark corners that we might be ashamed to look at. I think something about bringing some of that into the light can allow us to move on from it and not carry it as though they're sort of chains. Like I think one of the things that writing Seam helped me understand is that you can simultaneously remember and let go at the same time. Both actions are important in terms of considering what we can do in the present moment to be more compassionate to ourselves and to others, also sort of reminding us that's the thing we can do in the future as well as in terms of how just life tools.

Joe Heithaus: Did you set any rules for yourself going into the interview and if so did they change? Did you set any rules for your own writing?

Tarfia Faizullah: I'm always giving myself stern talking-to's and I gave myself the stern talking to right before I went to Bangladesh. I told myself that I may not write a single poem from this experience but that I had to go and be open to what it was going to show me. When I applied for the full bright, 1 of the things that I said in my proposal was that I wanted to write a book of poems about these experience but, realistically I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do that. I didn't want to force a book into being.

When I went to Bangladesh, it was a hard thing at first just to live there and then a hard thing too, to try to find people who would know where to get in touch with some of these women who had undergone that. It's not that I could take a Craigslist out and be like, "Hey women who have undergone this horrible trauma, would you be willing to speak to me?" A lot of it was me carefully just asking questions to what I was trying to feel out as being the right people who might be able to point me in some direction. Eventually I met a scholar whose friend was a freedom fighter.

A female fighter during the war, her name is Sofina Lohani. She, after the war was over had created basically a safe space for a number of these women. I spent time with her and some of the women in that community. One of the rules that I imposed upon myself was that I was going to be open to what the conversations were going to be like and not necessarily impose anything super strong onto the conversations. I would just go and I would meet with these women and try

to get to know them. I'd have my questions but I didn't ask them say like in a way that felt really back, like one sided I guess. It wasn't like I immediately showed up had the questions, went right into asking the questions. We actually hang out quite a bit. They were curious about me and they asked me a number of questions as well.

One of the filters that was immediately created was that the questions in some ways had to have a corresponding answer that did not necessarily directly answer the question, because that felt truer to how the conversations actually were. Plus, I think that when we're asking people to go back into their past, go back into memory the answers don't come out linearly in the first place. I tried to acknowledge that the way their history is and memories often told slant by slanting their perspectives a little bit away from the questions.

Another filter I created was by point of view. It was important for me to adopt multiple point of views and the longer sequence. Needing sort of creating those three different point of views really helped me winnow down what really needed to be said versus what poems just felt like it was good or potentially past master.

[music]

Tarfia Faizullah: I've worried... you know, when the book first got picked up, it didn't actually make me happy. Like, I felt sort of worried, because I wondered what it meant that these stories would be out and that they would be out in poem form and whether or not sort of taking what they told me or what I imagined, because a number of poems aren't even based on my conversations with them. They're from the imagination as well. And so, whether or not that impulse to imagine and then translate through poetry through the lyric moment something horrific and difficult that actually happened to people, I wondered whether or not it was okay. And I also sort of worried that it was essentially exploitative in some ways because obviously I'm the one here having this conversation with you all. It's not the women that this actually happened to.

And so, I still feel conflicted about this work. And know that you know that in classrooms I think that that subject or that question has come up. You know, is this an exploitative work? Do these poems seek to inform rather than exploit? And my intention was for these poems to inform and explore rather than exploit, but again, I sort of also think that when we create anything and put it out into the world, we do it with a certain amount of vulnerability, not knowing how it's going to be received or whether or not we've done right by whatever it is that we've tried to do.

So, I do feel sort of a number of ethical concerns about the work still to this day. And you know, like I think that the best I can say is that... I think what I can say about it with some amount of certainty is that um I tried, but I think that you know, often times I think that we're not necessarily given credit for trying. We're sort of given credit for how close to perfect we can get a think. Instead, I tried to write a book that seeks to acknowledge its own messiness in some ways. And that was my way of acknowledging that I feel that it's ethically really complicated material.

Joe Heithaus: Ethics is such a difficult word. Truth, maybe just as or more. Do you feel like the poem in some ways got at the truth of their experience?

Tarfia Faizullah: I mean, did the poem get at the truth of their experience? I mean, I think so, but I don't know for sure. One of the things that was really interesting about the life of Seam after it became published was that a number of you know... To me, one number of things that I was worried about, how are other Bangladeshis going to receive this work? And it's been... Some of the poems have been translated. Some of the poems have been used in a play that about... by a group called the Komala Collective. They did a show in London using some of the poems. The show itself is called Birangona Women of War. And so, I think that a number of people who I sort of I suppose think of having some sort of authority on the subject seem to think that I've captured those experiences and those feelings and the poems have been translated into Bengali as well. But again, I think that some folks... I've also you know have had some folks tell me that I got it totally wrong. I had you know a family member tell me that all the women I spoke to were lying.

So, I also feel like there are at any given point any number of perspectives that one could have about this material, and whether or not I got it, "got it right" or not, it's worth the attempt even if it's a failed one, but that... but that ultimately I think the work seeks to get at the truth but I think it's up to the reader to discern whether or not it's done that work or not, and either answer makes sense to me. Whether or not you think it's untruthful that makes sense to me, because I think there's a way to read it such a way that it does not seem truthful. And then, I think there's a way to read it in a way that sort of acknowledges the truth of it.

The truth is hard. I don't even know what the truth is half the time.

[music begins]

Joe Heithaus: Thank you so much for joining us Tarfia.

Tarfia Faizullah: Thank so much Joe it's been a real pleasure to be here.

[music ends]

Christiane: That was incredible. I love this whole interview, but I think the part that will stick with me the most is Tarfia's idea that there is an ethics in discernment. That if you're an artist or a writer, the choices you make actually matter.

Sandra: Yeah, that was really cool. I think my favorite part is how she balances these conflicting perspectives of the truth. She doesn't seem to be concerned that there are people out there who think the birangona are lying because she knows she has captured at least their perspective truthfully. I think that's a beautiful way to think about truth.

Christiane: Totally.

Andy: Joe and Tarfia zeroed in on what I think is one of the more important ethical questions that artists face, taking other peoples' experiences and turning them into art. And what I found striking is the level of thought put in. I think a lot of people easily default to thinking you just

need the person's permission, and you're good. And, Tarfia didn't do that. She focused on a lot of other morally relevant features. She talked about whether or not the art would be of benefit to people whose experiences she was describing. She also talked about what her intentions as an artist were. And those are two very important moral features, and I think it's very easy to overlook those.

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Andy: Thanks for listening. If you'd like more information about the topics we've discussed today, visit our show notes for this episode at examiningethics.org. When you visit, be sure to sign up for our newsletter. You'll be entered into our monthly book giveaway.

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Jessica Keister (intern): [credits] Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Sandra Bertin and Christiane Wisheart produced the show. Our interns are Jessica Keister and Leah Williams. Our music is by Cory Gray and Kai Engel can be found online at freemusicarchive.ORG. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of the Indiana Humanities, DePauw Alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Thank you for your support.