

## REPRESENTING “THE OTHER INDIA” IN TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC SPACES

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Marlon Ross in his chapter in *The Construction of Authorship* (1994: 231) claims that what differentiates a writer from an author is the latter’s ability to “transmute” and “transport” knowledge to a public space, thus “transversing” the distance between the self and the other. Such knowledge or experience is then rendered “knowable, shareable and answerable”. This article explores some of the ways in which the Indian non-fiction writer and journalist, Sonia Faleiro, is positioned as someone with a privileged knowledge about the lives of Indian marginalised subjects, and the ability to translate those experiences for a transnational middle-class audience. She is also tasked with having an ‘authentic’ personality that her readers can relate to, interact with, and in some ways hold to account. This article, with its focus on empirically understanding Indian middlebrow writing, showcases some of the characteristics of literary celebrity in the postmodern cultural sphere, its focus on affective citizenship, and purported significance to upholding the cosmopolitan values of plurality, social justice and democracy.

“I wanted to write about people who didn’t have to look around them to understand that there was a significant unevenness in our economic and social development.”

Sonia Faleiro, in her talk at 5x15, October 2011.

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Marlon Ross, in his chapter in *The Construction of Authorship* (1994, p. 231), claims that what differentiates a writer from an author is the latter's ability to "transmute" and "transport" knowledge to a public space, thus "transversing" the distance between the self and the other. Such knowledge or experience is then rendered "knowable, shareable and answerable". This article explores some of the ways in which the Indian non-fiction writer and journalist, Sonia Faleiro, is positioned as someone with a privileged knowledge about the lives of Indian marginalised subjects, and the ability to translate those experiences for a transnational middle-class audience. In her role as a narrative journalist and an author, she is also tasked with constructing an 'authentic' personality that her readers can relate to, interact with, and in some ways hold to account. In this article, I discuss the way in which Faleiro's agency in these regards are shaped by and, in turn, shape the field of Indian middlebrow writing and publishing. This article, with its focus on understanding Faleiro's transnational literary celebrity and cultural impact, thus critiques the assumptions and politics behind affective citizenship, and middlebrow writing's purported significance to upholding the cosmopolitan liberal values of plurality, social justice and democracy. In essence, following Carolyn Pedwell's (2014b) critique of liberal narratives of empathy and transnational politics, this article problematises the assumption within certain theories of empathy that a more accurate knowledge of 'others' will result in more ethical political action (see for example, Aden's 2019 article, "How Empathy Will Save The World").

A review of Faleiro's book *Beautiful Thing* (2010) published in the British newspaper *Independent* (Sanai, 2011) credits the author for "her striking empathy, sensitivity, and sharp ear". In the following sections I have adopted a narratological lens whilst conducting a close reading of selected texts penned by Faleiro to explore the ways in which empathy is performed by the author and evoked in the reader within these texts. Moreover, I have also performed a discourse analysis of selected interviews and paratextual elements surrounding the publicity and reception around Faleiro's works to discuss the assumptions and ideologies within the specific cultural field of Indian middlebrow writing in English. In my approach to empathy and transnational publics, in addition to Pedwell's (2014a, 2014b) work alluded to before, I have also drawn upon Berlant's (1999) work on affect, intimate publics and citizenship. Moreover, I use methodological tools from cultural studies, namely self-positioning (or literary position taking, Brouillette, 2007) and media framing (frame analysis, Goffman, 1974) to analyse

the ways in which empathy is foregrounded in the construction of the author in the media coverage of and following the book, *Beautiful Thing*. Anthea Garman’s (2007) analysis of South African poet and journalist Antjie Krog, which combines methods from Bourdieusian field theory and media theory (media framing and values), is an important precursor to the methodological approaches I have taken in this case study, particularly relating to Faleiro’s agency within the field. This article does not focus as much on the neuro-scientific differences between the experiences of empathy and other related affects; instead it examines the discourses around narrative non-fiction as a genre to problematise the seemingly natural relation within public discourse between these narrative forms, which claim to give an accurate understanding of ‘the other’, evocation of empathy within readers and transnational political action. This article contends that the discursively constructed author-figure is key in facilitating the cultural industry’s stakes in the “empathy economy”, which Pedwell (2014b) links to transnational neoliberal capitalism. Driscoll (2014, p. 168) makes a similar claim about the role of authors in the production of affect felt by the reading publics: “The ephemeral and intimate connections with authors is key into the emotion of the new literary middlebrow”.

### **Authorial Positioning and Agency as Methodology**

Sonia Faleiro is best known internationally as an Indian journalist and author of *Beautiful Thing*, an award winning book-length work of narrative non-fiction about Mumbai’s dance bars which has been translated into several Indian and non-Indian languages and published by major publishing houses in India (Penguin/Hamish Hamilton, 2010), the UK (Canongate, 2011), the US (Grove, 2012) and Australia (Black Inc., 2011). She is also one of the founding members of the international longform journalism collective, Deca, and has written numerous works of journalism in national and international publications. Authors like Faleiro are journalists who have emerged, through a combination of self-positioning and media framing, as authoritative translators of the experiences of Indian marginalised subjects for a middle-class cosmopolitan audience. Their authority and legitimacy, when speaking about marginalised subjects, arises, at least partly, from their status as actors in the cultural field who seek fame not (just) for their own sake, but to draw public attention to social problems and injustices.

While working in *Tehelka* in 2004, where she was initially a feature writer, Faleiro became interested in reporting about marginalised subjects. She says that this was motivated by a phenomenal increase in farmer suicides in a rural area of India, and her drive to get “a view from the inside” (Faleiro, 5x15, Oct. 2011). She also wrote journalistic pieces about the urban poor and marginalised communities – “*hijras*, sex workers, pimps...rag pickers, domestic workers, kids who didn’t have enough to eat” – as discussed below. After the publication of *Beautiful Thing* she continued writing about the Indian marginalised in publications with a global reach - *The New York Times*, *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *Guernica*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *Vogue UK*. Her journalistic article-length works have travelled further; she has appeared in more interviews, her work has been discussed more in the form of book reviews and by renowned Indian authors, she has been invited to speak at literary festivals internationally, as well as had her opinions solicited on current, often political, events. Moreover, she has also gained a wider platform to discuss the state of journalism and writing, especially about the marginalised. She introduces herself to an international audience in her TEDxAmsterdam Women talk in 2011 by saying: “I am going to talk to you about writing about the margins which is what I do. I am a reporter. And what I write about is people of subcultures that live outside of the mainstream.” Faleiro therefore positions herself self-consciously within transnational public spaces as a writer who resists the foci of the mainstream press through her focus on Indian marginalised individuals and groups, and she highlights the fact that these topics are personally meaningful to her.

In this article, I specifically discuss how Faleiro deploys empathy to position these texts, and herself, in opposition to mainstream narratives mediated by news in the public space. In what follows I study the texts using concepts of focalisation, narratorial involvement and interpellative subject making. To this end, following Nieragden’s article (2002, p. 686) revising the hierarchical levels of focalisation and narration, this article adopts both Gerard Genette’s definitions of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators, and Susan Lanser’s scale depicting the level of involvement of narrators in narrative texts. The alterodiegetic narrator (from Lanser’s scale), or an uninvolved eyewitness, Nieragden proposes, might be “a genre-specific feature of non-fiction or documentary non-fiction, also known as “new journalism” (p. 686).

## Beginning with Mumbai’s Bar Dancers

In the epilogue and acknowledgement section of *Beautiful Thing* (2010, p. 224), Faleiro mentions that she conducted hundreds of interviews across Mumbai “to understand the world of the bar dancers”. A series of six articles published in *Tehelka* in 2005 features profiles drawn from these preliminary interviews and research that eventually resulted in the book, *Beautiful Thing*. The articles report on the experiences of the lives of people who were affected by the 2005 ban on Mumbai’s dance bars. What started as an interest in the “complex, layered, and hierarchical subculture that is the world of Bombay’s dance bars” (Faleiro, 25 Nov. 2010) resulted in Faleiro’s resolve to write a book. Following the publication of *Beautiful Thing*, her former journalistic works on sex workers are mentioned in almost every interview and talk as evidence of her knowledge about the topic of the book. For example, a report profiles Faleiro as an “author” who has “spent years chronicling the lives of the city’s sex workers” (Gomes-Gupta, 12 Aug. 2008). These former articles, when discussed as in interviews as precursor to her book, serve to establish not just her authority and knowledge about her subjects, but also her longstanding passion and interest in documenting lives that are normally invisible in transnational public spaces. A reference to her career as a journalist, and her journalistic work, positions her as both authoritative as well as being authentically interested and invested in this work for more than a decade.

Faleiro’s intention in focusing on such stories is expressed in an interview with *The Hindu* (2010): “It’s self-evident that I was deeply moved by everything I saw, and that I, like anyone in my position, suffered feelings of hopelessness and helplessness... what I wish from this book is that people will see a certain kind of person differently. Because seeing is the first step towards understanding.” “Empathy” or “affective ability” (Pedwell, 2014a) is called upon in such public statements as a means to bridge the gap between the publics with “different social and cultural” backgrounds, across “national and geo-political boundaries”. The role that writers like Faleiro imagine for themselves seems to be to both empathetic and able to evoke empathy for marginalised subjects from a globally dispersed middle-class audience. The narrative and discursive means in which she does this is the subject of the analysis that follows.

Faleiro highlights the differences between her world and the one she writes about explicitly in *Beautiful Thing* (2010, p. 7). She lived

then in “Bombay’s Manhattan” – “a place so special it deserves its own borders”. Faleiro’s relationship with her subject Leela, and an interest in her life, accounts for Faleiro’s motivation to traverse these “borders” in the book. This difference in subjectivities which Faleiro highlights in the book also allows an interesting discursive strand to emerge around her work – the narrative of how this distance is traversed through her research and writing. For example, in an interview with the blog *Curious Book Fans* (11 Oct. 2011), Faleiro replies to a question about the “different worlds” of her and her subjects in her book as follows:

If you’re a reporter in India reporting on marginalized communities for the English media it’s almost certain that your social and economic background, and therefore your life experiences, will be very different from those you write about. But that doesn’t mean that you can’t learn about the lives of others. You can, if you invest the time and have interest, sensitivity and compassion.

In another interview (*Reuters*, 25 Nov, 2010), she mentions further on the topic of establishing trust with her subjects: “They spoke to me because as a reporter I have developed a reputation for being upfront and honest, and because as a person I’m respectful and non-judgmental”. An important point to note here is that the interpellative ‘you’ in the quote above is aimed at both other journalists and middle-class audiences. An investment of time as well as affective labour is called upon to bridge the socio-economic divide defining the differences in experiences between middle class individuals and the subjects she writes about; but she doesn’t place a similar emphasis on her subjects developing these affective skills to communicate or understand in her writing or talks. In fact, in her book, Faleiro often cites Leela’s disinterest in Faleiro’s own life or experiences in their interactions.

In the fifth article in the series, “My Love Encloses a Plot of Roses” (29 Oct. 2005), Faleiro mentions that Vaishali, who used to be an orchestra singer in Manali Bar, was not able to procure the “more lucrative career” of a dancer because she was not beautiful enough. Vaishali, however, felt that her singing career in the bar gave her respectability and was a way of “honouring her parents”, although she is a “bar girl who from the age of 11 had used her body to better her life”. In *Beautiful Thing* this form of precarious respectability is explained by Faleiro as such:

When some people saw Leela they saw a *dhandewali*, working girl. But when she saw herself...she saw a bar dancer. And the difference to her was the difference, she said, between the blessing that was my life and the blight that was hers. (2010, p. 15)

This statement utilises the third person voice of the heterodiegetic narrator's; although it seems to represent Leela's viewpoint about the “hierarchy” of Mumbai's sex industry, and is therefore an example of heterodiegetic figural focalisation (Nieragden, 2002, pp. 691), as it directly relates to how Leela sees herself (according to the narrator). Faleiro further explains in her book,

all of these women (sex workers) ranked below Bombay's bar dancers, and this was partly because selling sex wasn't a bar dancer's primary occupation and because when she did sell sex she did so quietly and most often under her own covers.... Although they all did it, no bar dancer ever admitted to *galat kaam*. (*ibid.*, p. 14).

The second statement suggests that the narrator is perhaps more alterodiegetic (involved in ‘questioning’ and observing), as she offers a judgement that is contradictory to those of the individuals she interviews. Both these narratorial assertions are borne out by Faleiro's interview with Geeta, a bar dancer, in the second article in the series, “Camera, camera, who's the saddest of us all?” (2005), in which the latter is quoted as saying, “I only returned calls...Illegal activities take place outside the bar, where it is up to the girls to do as they please.” Therefore, it seems that perhaps Leela is not the sole focaliser of the book, but as in this instance, is tasked with representing views which the author has found to be typical amongst bar dancers while observing their life-world. This centrality of Leela in the discourse surrounding *Beautiful Thing* serves several important functions which I will discuss in the next paragraph. But by not privileging her factual observations as a journalist who has studied this social milieu for years and the fictions her subjects tell about their own lives, the narrator, Faleiro, attempts to construct herself both as an accurate observer and an empathetic storyteller. Given the fact that the worldviews of the middle- and upper-class reading public would likely be more aligned with Faleiro's own, she is able to contextualise and highlight the gap that a difference in social

capital and agency renders between her readers and her subjects. The implicit suggestion within this narrative choice is therefore that Faleiro's own experiences and affective labour in bridging this gap is essential in understanding the subjective realities, lives and perspectives of this marginalised group of people.

In the book (2010, p. 6), as well as in several interviews and talks about the book, Faleiro brings up Leela's "optimism", "larger than life personality" and "magnetic vivacity"; further, in the book, she mentions "only [Leela] could teach me what I wanted to know", which is to understand the "mysterious" world of dance bars (2010, p. 13). As a protagonist who has been referred to as "unforgettable" (Kate Holden, interview with Faleiro, 2013), Leela does more than just humanise the suffering and hopes of thousands of bar girls who lost whatever little agency they had managed to gain over their own lives following the 2005 ban. Firstly, her relationship with Faleiro authenticates the author's 'insider' status in a "hidden world" (back cover of *Beautiful Thing*) and allows the author to position herself as an alterodiegetic narrator in the book. This is not just an aesthetic choice, but also foregrounds the sympathetic eye she brings to observe and understand the reality of the individuals she writes about. So although Faleiro continues to comment on social realities she observes, a role shared with novelists in the cultural sphere, *Beautiful Thing* as an account of real people, and Faleiro's relationships with them, accords a truth claim to it, and in this sense elevates it above a novel in terms of authenticity on a similar topic. The second way in which Faleiro's relationship with Leela is important to the book's believability and success with a middlebrow reading public, therefore, is that the fact that the author actually experienced empathy for the (real) characters because her friendship with them accords the text authenticity.

This discourse regarding the authenticity of Faleiro's work continues in her subsequent public engagements, for example, her public talk for TEDxAmsterdam Women (Nov. 2011), as well as her talk at 5x15 in London (Oct. 2011). In her London talk she mentions her choice to substitute her "middle class opinions, no matter how sensitive or well-informed" for a more "inside out view" in her writing on her subjects' lives. Speaking from platforms in global literary centres like London, in events which feature popular writers who are renowned transnationally, like Jeannette Winterson, Neil Gaiman and William Dalrymple, Faleiro seems to be well-positioned at this point in her career to address a global English-fluent audience. Her position as an author representing



‘authentic’ voices of the Indian marginalised despite being divided from them by class and socio-economic situation, therefore, is legitimised by the discourse about the difficulties of empathetic identification with them, as well as the rigour, affective labour and time taken to overcome this in her narratives. In so doing she also differentiates her own writing from that in the Indian mainstream news reporting. In a conversation with William Dalrymple (2010), she elevates the motivations behind her writing from the economic factors which drive mainstream journalism as well as the fiction market by saying that she was afraid that nobody might read her non-fiction book, as “fiction sells”. The commercial success of her book has of course afforded her a much larger platform from which she can propound the importance of such narratives in extending public discourse to include the marginalised concerns of the subjects she writes about. In the next section, I discuss the extent to which her efforts have succeeded in bringing about a change in public discourse. This discussion is necessarily limited to observable textual conversations around her work, but provides a starting point to critique the assumptions regarding empathy, affective responses and socio-political action in liberal narratives.

### **Narrating “The Other India”**

In the article “Survival Without Adult Supervision, Stark Reality in Rural Bihar” (25 Jun. 2012), which was published in the “India Ink” column in *New York Times* following the publication and success of *Beautiful Thing*, Faleiro draws attention to the plight of a family of three orphaned siblings who have been living on their own with very limited and sporadic help from their relatives, who are desperately poor in an equal measure. Anil, 14, lives in another state where he works full time in a brick kiln and sends money back home when he can. The two younger siblings, Meena, 10, and Sunil, 11, go to school, where sometimes they get a free hot meal; they take care of themselves, and cook with whatever food their aunt, Savithri Devi, can afford to send them after feeding her own family.

In a subsequent article “For India’s Children, Philanthropy Isn’t Enough”, published in the Opinion column of the *New York Times* Sunday Review (15 Sep. 2012), Faleiro picks up the narrative where she left off. Following the first article, there had apparently been an offer from a reader based in the United States, a “record producer in Los Angeles”, to pay for the children to attend a school run by the charity

Bachpan Bachao Andolan. The offer was refused by the children's relative, who claimed that she was capable of looking after the children herself. Faleiro's article addresses the question: Since this offer could have lifted the children out of the poverty and vulnerability of their current condition and improved their future, why then did their relatives refuse to take it? She does this by highlighting and bridging the gap between the worldview of the intended readers, to whom this decision might suggest heartlessness on the part of the children's relatives, and the subjective experiences of the latter that explains it. In order to bring the reader to understand this decision, in the second article, Faleiro tackles the relationship between the lack of regulatory structure implementing ambitious government programmes to alleviate poverty and its impact on a population rife with intergenerational poverty, where men and women are forced to prioritize their daily survival. Moreover, in the second article, Faleiro mentions that when she wrote the first article, "E-mails started to pour in the next morning"—one of which was from the record producer. This section attempts to explain some of the narratological and discursive means through which these articles were able to garner such a response from the readership.

The opening sentence of the first article signals the distance in the subjectivity of the imagined reader from the lives of the central subjects in the article: "Meena Devi is unlike any little girl you will ever meet." Describing the "daily routine" of the child's life, based on her conversation with Meena, Faleiro refers to it as "extraordinary", presumably next to the 'ordinary' lives of the presumed reader. So, although Faleiro later stresses the surrounding poverty and helplessness of the villagers around this family that renders the latter's suffering and vulnerability quite 'ordinary', if still pitiable, the focalization in the opening paragraphs is of the presumed readers' point of view, through which this 'ordinariness' is considered "extraordinary". Anil, the oldest sibling, is a "youngster cursed with an adult's sense of responsibility. They go because otherwise they and their family will starve." This description suggests an ideal of 'ordinary' childhood as one where children are supervised as well as protected by adults, do not live on their own, are not expected to take upon themselves the responsibility to feed themselves and their siblings, or to work full-time in risky workplaces. This initial focalization of the reader's reality or point of view serves to interpellate the reader as an individual inhabiting a 'world' that offers a greater amount of structural privilege compared to the one inhabited by Meena and her family.

In the sixth paragraph, Falerio reports “Almost three years ago, on August 8, 2009, Meena’s mother, Phoolmanti Devi, died of starvation.” Despite the apparent neutral tone, the extent of the subject(s)’ marginalisation is highlighted in this statement, given the fact that death by starvation is not a normal condition experienced by the assumed global readership. However, paragraph nine mentions that “the cause of Mrs. Devi’s death surprised no one in the village”. This is perhaps the point in the article where there occurs a small but significant shift in the focalisation: Faleiro explains the conditions of the villagers’ daily life, their caste-based marginalisation, and their exploitation due to their desperate poverty, which forces them to migrate and work in slave-like conditions for minimal pay. The shift is small, because the following paragraphs still exhibit external focalisation; however, once the article establishes the distance between the marginalised subjects and the readers, it moves on to construct the context or the subjective reality within which the subjects’ actions, speech as well as otherwise, are situated. This may assist middle- and upper-class readers to understand Faleiro’s subjects and what could be seen to be quite heartless decisions taken by the children’s neighbours and the legal guardians. Savithri Devi Manjhi, for example, can barely afford to feed her own family of four. So although she is the closest relative the children have and lives nearby, the fact that she only sends them food sporadically, as well as the fact that she has sent the oldest brother, Anil, to work in unsafe conditions, can be seen in light of her own poverty and desperation:

The Manjhis are the product of intergenerational poverty and caste-based marginalization. Like their parents, they’re poor, illiterate and seasonally employed. They don’t think beyond their daily survival. They’re also aware that no matter how bad life gets for them, public assistance is unlikely, and change is an impossible dream... They may have empathy for their niece and nephews, but they can’t afford to act on it.

The focus on children, as the ways in which their childhood is shown to be lost, or not afforded to them due to the poverty and lack of institutional support, as well as the dire future awaiting the kids which is presented as inevitable is evocative; it serves to affectively engage the reader. This assessment of the children’s situation is vocalised by the representative of the NGO Bachpan Bachao Andolan, who is fundrais-

ing to help the children. The article also mentions the amount of money required to look after the children every month. In this manner, the article therefore serves to call upon readers to not only invest in the fate of the children through sympathetic involvement, but also to play a more active part in redressing their situation through financial donation. This latter point is evidenced by the fact that the readers indeed responded by asking how to donate for the children's schooling. In addition to the fact being mentioned in the second article by Faleiro, it is also evident in the 'Comments' section following the article.

In a similar way, Faleiro, writing a second article about the same individuals, also shows a level of involvement with the characters that belies the apparent heterogeneous narratorial involvement suggested by the third person voice utilized in most of the first article. However, whereas the first article primarily relies on Faleiro's conversations with various individuals, supplemented by what she observed on her visit to the children's village, in the second article, Faleiro draws on her involvement and experience of reporting to present the readers with her opinions. Simply put, in the first article the narrator reports what she *sees* and *hears* (observer), in the second she reports what she *thinks* and *knows* (expert). Her sense of agency here can be understood on the basis of her response in an interview with *The Hindu* (25th Nov. 2010). She says:

In the past, people have asked of how they could contribute to bringing change to the life of a marginalised person I've written about, and I was able point them towards the appropriate person or organisation. But the issue here isn't small sums of money. What we're talking about is a change in what we see and how we see it...I'm a writer and I've done the best I could. But change is a collective responsibility.

Here Faleiro seems to implore her audiences to move beyond sympathy and philanthropy and think beyond "small sums of money". Her writing, although still situated within the "structures of feeling" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 32) that mediate her middle-class readers' interest in her subjects, is here positioned as being more ambitious than that. What she is asking from her audiences is a transformation of their privileged worldview through empathy with those subjectivities that she attempts to accurately and sensitively portray in her writing.

Except in the case of this particular series in *The New York Times*, the subjectivities Faleiro is interpellating in order to see India’s marginalised in a more humane fashion are not just of the Indian middle-class, but also a transnational readership. Over the next few years in her career, perhaps spurred on further by the election of a Hindu fundamentalist party to the central government in India, Faleiro continues to call the Indian government to account in her articles. This includes a recent piece in *The Guardian* which states that Leslee Udwin’s film about the Delhi rape, which was banned by the Indian government, “does what the politicians should be doing” (5th Mar, 2015). This recent position that Faleiro occupies, in opposition to the fundamentalist policies of the government, has been constructed on the basis of her journalistic articles where she critiques the state for not doing enough for its marginalised subjects. It is interesting to refer here to Berlant’s (2008, p. 6) criticism about the role of narratives about black and working-class subjectivities “based on what suffering must feel like” in order to legitimate the “more privileged suffering” of middle-class white women. These narratives about marginalised groups, Berlant postulates, mobilise “intimate publics” by allowing a language to emerge about the more privileged suffering of the latter. The individuals in the latter group then experience a sense of affective collectivity based on fantasies of belonging to “a common emotional world” (*ibid.*, p. 10) which masks the structural inequalities that they themselves are implicated in reproducing. By writing at first about impoverished marginalised individuals in India and their suffering under governmental regulations, Faleiro’s subsequent articles about Indian middle-class subjects serve to legitimate the experiences of the latter relatively privileged group.

The remit of issues Faleiro can authoritatively address extends beyond those subjects of abject marginalisation she focused upon in 2010 after the release of *Beautiful Thing*. Although she still continues to oppose fundamentalist stances of the government policies from the viewpoint of how they affect the absolute poor, op-ed articles like “The Lynching of Syed Sarifuddin Khan” (20th Mar. 2015) which appeared in *Foreign Policy* show that Faleiro now occupies a position in the global journalistic field which recognises her authority to provide critical commentary on the wider social and political news events in India. The popularity of these stories within a transnational middlebrow readership is not least because it taps into the emotion of the “intimate publics” that transcends national boundaries and brings together indi-

viduals who can vaguely identify with the subjects she writes about, despite being geographically and situationally different from them.

## Conclusion

Whether Faleiro intended to be cast as an “expert” on Indian issues when she first wrote *Beautiful Thing* is debatable. She has tried to distance herself from a position of prescribing policies; in an interview with *The Hindu* (25th Nov. 2010), when questioned about possible “solutions” to improve the lives of her subjects, she says, “I’m not comfortable offering policy prescription — there are people whose job it is to do this and they would know best.” This case study therefore throws some light upon the way literary middlebrow spaces operate: middlebrow authors, by positioning themselves as authors who through the utilisation of narrative styles that highlight the subjectivities of their protagonist(s) and empathetic investment in their writings appeal to a transnational middlebrow audience, achieve a “stickiness” (Murray, 2015: 2015) with audiences which allows them to transcend the field of production and reception they initially begin to garner recognition within. In using this term, ‘stickiness’, I am drawing on convergence media theory, introduced by Henry Jenkins (2006), in order to conceptualise the mechanics of engaging with an affective transnational public to gain greater visibility and symbolic power. We can observe similar career trajectories for Indian journalists Aman Sethi and Rohini Mohan amongst many others. So although Faleiro does speak publicly and affectively about her opinions in the international news publications and cultural spaces, it seems that her intention is to utilise her greater symbolic power to gain even more autonomy for her writing.

However, that the question of offering “solutions” to social problems and inequalities seems to resurface in almost every interview Faleiro has given since the publication leads me to postulate that the emotional connection between the author and the subjects discussed in this article serves an important function in the field of reception of these works by a cosmopolitan middlebrow audience. The middlebrow author here acts as bridge between the narrated experiences of the postcolonial marginalised subjects and the empathetic identification of transnational middlebrow readers. Thus, a break from the journalistic protocol of maintaining an objective distance from subjects that authors claim to take to write these stories also serves to legitimise these narratives within this transnational space.

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