

Fiercely intelligent and formidably creative, Lewisham-based poet Rhiya Pau is a talent to watch, with her award-winning collection *Routes* set to hit bookshelves later this year.

The evening I speak to Rhiya, she has just completed her final edits to *Routes* – her debut solo work – and submitted the manuscript to her publisher Arachne Press, an influential indie based in Honor Oak.

Given the significance of this milestone, it's not surprising that her voice echoes with the mixture of elation and exhaustion familiar to anyone who has ever toiled in the forbidding shadow of a deadline. "I've been in editing mode," she laughs wearily. "It is a functional rather than a creative process. The editing period is very tiring."

Rhiya's personal journey is a fascinating story, and essential to understanding her work, which is underpinned by the personal and cultural contexts from which she has emerged.

"I was born in London but my family migrated to the UK from India via east Africa," she explains. "That was a very common route for many of the south Asian diaspora who are now in the UK. Different parts of my family came to the UK from different places in east Africa, mainly the towns on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya and Uganda.

"Much of our community had originally been brought there by the British as indentured labourers to build the railways. As we trace our history as a community, our migratory patterns have been influenced by colonial pressures since the late 1800s.

"In a wave of nationalism in the 1970s, which followed independence from the British, Uganda expelled approximately 60,000 Asians from the country, many of whom went on to claim asylum in the UK.

"Many south Asians left Kenya around the same time due to increasing discrimination from the ruling government, and as citizens of the empire they were also able to migrate to the UK. The migratory route of my community is something which I've always been fascinated by and forms the basis of *Routes*."

A major influence on Rhiya's work is the personal backstory and legacy of her late grandfather. "Bapuji was a leader in the community, so growing up I spent a lot of time around him and his peers observing how our community was built and upheld.

"Community building was his life's work. He was born in Kenya, and in the 1940s he travelled alone to India to be a freedom fighter in the Indian independence movement. He spent some time living in Mahatma Gandhi's ashram, attending protests and in one incident was even shot in the leg. Later, when he was living in the UK he was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his services to the community, an accolade he was incredibly proud of.

"Alongside documenting our migratory histories, my collection looks to explore these conflicts of identity that feature throughout our community. Bapuji was a bold and principled man, who was unafraid to stand by his convictions in the face of disapproval. In *Routes* I hope to pay tribute to his legacy. It is only by examining our history that we

"Linguistic verve":
Rhiya Pau's debut
poetry collection
Routes is out in
November



RHIYA'S ROUTES

WORDS BY LUKE G WILLIAMS ■ PHOTO BY LIMA CHARLIE

This September will mark 50 years since the first Ugandan Asian refugees arrived in the UK – a subject explored in local resident Rhiya Pau's hotly anticipated debut poetry collection



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While writing *Routes*, Rhiya ended up living in Lewisham "by chance" after a friend bought a house in the borough. She relishes living in south-east London, and has formed a firm connection and working relationship with the Migration Museum in Lewisham Shopping Centre.

"I'm so happy I ended up in Lewisham," she says. "It definitely feels like home. Wherever I'm located I think it's important to become involved and connected with the local community and I've found that in the Migration Museum.

"It's somewhere I go to a lot to find inspiration. Last year my dear friend, the incredible poet Ankita Saxena and I ran Origins Poetry, a multi-disciplinary arts fundraiser for the museum and we are in discussions about running some workshops there later this year."

Based on the extracts supplied by her publisher, and her performance of her poetry that can be found online, Rhiya's work defies easy classification. Her poems are experimental yet accessible; intelligent and academic, yet also personal and instinctive – and extremely moving.

"I think I'm still finding my voice," she admits with refreshing candour. "This collection is very eclectic. Inspiration has come from some traditional Eastern poetic forms, with descriptive and prosaic narrative lines, and some broken ghazals. My work has also been influenced by my study of physics and philosophy at university and I have experimented with bringing scientific ideas into my writing.

"In many ways I consider poems to be thought experiments. I try to think about how the reader is going to interact with my poems and how the poems are going to challenge the reader's boundaries and imagination."

Before her first collection has even been published, Rhiya has already won two major awards. After scooping a Creative Future platinum poetry prize last year, she was named as one of the seven winners of the Eric Gregory award – a prize for poets under 30 – for 2022, with the judges hailing *Routes* as a "work of humane intelligence, formal experiment and linguistic verve".

"Winning the award was very unexpected," Rhiya admits. "I am ecstatic. I really didn't expect to be publishing a book, let alone an award-winning book. I'm still processing it to be honest!"

Something tells me that it will be the first of many awards to come her way. As for what the future holds, she says: "I would love to write more non-fiction and fiction as well. But now with the manuscript finished, I just want to read and explore and open myself up to new ideas."

can begin to answer – what is worth holding on to? What memories, what stories, what truths? When we piece these together, what is the narrative we choose to tell? And how are we going to address the silences that remain? Poetry can be a platform for these conversations."

Somewhat ironically, it was the successive lockdowns of the last two years that helped Rhiya form the necessary work ethic and thinking space to write *Routes*. "The beginning of the pandemic was definitely a turning point," she admits. "I suddenly felt like I had so much free time as I wasn't having to commute any more.

"I've been writing since I was about 11 or 12 – a mixture of poetry and fiction. It's always been a way that I have processed the world and a way that I imagine. But there have often been times when I have taken long breaks from writing; for example, when I was at university and having to read a lot and write academically.

"I'm also quite extroverted and writing can be a very solitary discipline. Distracted by my social life, I can find it hard to make the time to write. The pandemic was a catalyst for me to improve my discipline. I have a very close friend who is also a poet and we got in the habit of writing daily. While it's not what every writer needs, that practice and routine really helped me."