

**Teaching Guide**  
*summonings* by Raena Shirali

## Table of Contents

Suggested Readings To Pair With <i>Summonings</i> .....	3
Creative Writing Prompts Inspired By <i>Summonings</i> .....	5
Discussion Questions That Explore Craft And Argument (Book As A Whole).....	6
Discussion Questions That Explore Craft And Argument (Individual Poems).....	7
Discussion Questions That Explore Personal Connections.....	9
Classroom Activities: Kick-Starting Discussion .....	10
Classroom Activities: Form Analysis.....	11
Classroom Activities: Persona Analysis .....	13
Projects And Writing Assignments: The Persona Assignment.....	15
Projects And Writing Assignments: Researching The Myth .....	16

## Suggested Readings to Pair with *summonings*

### Creative Writing Classrooms

Brown, Stacy Lynn, and Oliver de la Paz, ed. *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*, University of Akron Press, 2012.

Hazelton, Rebecca. "Learning the Persona Poem" *The Poetry Foundation*, May 9, 2014.

Hong, Cathy Park. *Minor Feelings*, One World Publishing, 2020.

Rekdal, Paisley. *Appropriate: A Provocation*, W. W. Norton, 2020.

See list of poets to teach alongside *summonings* below.

### Women's and Gender Studies Classrooms

Tamin, Baba. "Magazine: Meet the Indian women hunted as witches." *Al Jazeera*, June 5, 2015.

Masoodi, Ashwaq. "Witch Hunting | Victims of superstition." *LiveMint*, February 23, 2014.

Matthan, Ayesha. "Woman or Goddess?" *Indian Divine: Gods and Goddesses in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian Art*, 2014.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Macmillan, 2004.

Washuta, Elissa. "White Witchery," *Guernica*, February 14, 2019.

Villarreal, Vanessa Angélica. "Break the Spell: Witchcraft is Capitalism's New Trick," *bitch media*, November 23, 2018.

### Asian American Pacific Islander History or Survey Classrooms

*Asian American Literature: Rethinking the Canon*, The Massachusetts Review, Volume 59, Issue 4. [Link to introduction.](#)

Hong, Cathy Park. *Minor Feelings*, One World Publishing, 2020.

Kitano, Christine, and Alycia Pirmohamed, ed. *They Rise Like a Wave: An Anthology of Asian American Women Poets*. Blue Oak Press, 2022.

See list of poets to teach alongside *summonings* below.

Thayil, Jeet, ed. *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets*, Penguin India, 2022.

### **Anthropology Classrooms**

Chaudhuri, Soma. *Witches, Tea Plantations, and Lives of Migrant Laborers in India: Tempest in a Teapot*. Lexington Books, 2013.

Mullick, Samar Bosu. "Gender Relations and Witches among the Indigenous Communities of Jharkhand, India." *Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia: Patriarchy at Odds*. Kelkar, Govind, and Dev Nathan and Pierre Walter, editors. SAGE Publications, 2004.

Munshi, Indra. "Women and Forest: A Study of the Warlis of Western India." *Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia: Patriarchy at Odds*. Kelkar, Govind, and Dev Nathan and Pierre Walter, editors. SAGE Publications, 2004.

### **Poets whose work pairs well with Shirali's (Creative Writing Classrooms, AAPI Classrooms)**

Aria Aber	Bhanu Kapil	Solmaz Sharif
Kazim Ali	Kirun Kapur	Monica Sok
Cathy Linh Che	Rajiv Mohabir	Nomi Stone
Tarfia Faizullah	Cynthia Dewi Oka	Emily Jungmin Yoon
Aracelis Girmay	M. NourbeSe Philip	
Marwa Helal	Paisley Rekdal	

## Creative Writing Prompts Inspired by *summonings*

- Try writing a poem that does not use a single period. Use commas or line breaks and stanza breaks, instead, to clue the reader in to where a pause should be inferred. See “lucky inhabitant” and “one red thread through the middle” for examples.
- Locate a news or research article that elicits strong feelings from you on both a personal and societal level. Just as in *summonings*’ use of research, write a poem where you sample from the original language of that article in a poem. Begin by working through the article and circling or highlighting language that you find meaningful, troubling, inciting, unsettling. Then, at the top of the page on which you will write this poem, write down those meaningful words, isolating them in quotation marks, italics, bold-face, parentheses, or even brackets. Then write a poem, staying focused on the topic of the original article, where you use each of those original words one time (you can copy and paste them down into the poem as you write). Be sure to attribute your poem to the article in question by including an epigraph (e.g. “*-language in italics is sampled from Naming the Witch*”). For examples, see poems like “the village men find some [fellowship], [hunt]” or “ghazal against [declining to name the subject]” or “[every woman is a potential witch].”
- Consider the poem as conversation, as field on which to work out interpersonal conflict, dilemma, scenario. As in “daayan & the mountains : i” and “daayan & the mountains : ii,” use the left margin to indicate when Voice 1 is speaking, and an indented or right-justified stanza to indicate when Voice 2 is speaking. What would these voices say to one another, if only they could? What are the unsaid, unspoken, unutterable truths that define their relationship? Title your poem “[Voice 1] and [Voice 2]” and, if you’re feeling adventurous, come up with a subtitle as well.
- Continue the tradition of The Rachel McKibbens Prompt. Write a poem using “and then” as your anaphora, making sure to begin each sentence or line with that phrase. Minimum 15 lines. When you think you have arrived at the end, push beyond into yet another “and then” (see “at first, trying to reach the accused” for an example).
- If anaphora is not your style, try this prompt to push past, deeper into, and through a subject you obsess over, keep coming back to, can’t let go, won’t let go. As in “[every woman is a potential witch],” “on projection,” and “summoning : ash in my palms, ash on the streets,” write a long poem in sections that are divided by a mark of punctuation. For the first section, follow one stanzaic form—you might try tercets (stanzas with 3 lines each), for example. For the second section, try a form that you feel is at odds with the first one (maybe a one-block stanza if the first section was in tercets, or maybe couplets, if you feel the number 2 is more at odds with the number 3). Consider this an exercise in **counterpoint**: use the form to create tension, and the content will follow. Minimum 5 sections.

### Discussion Questions that Explore Craft and Argument (Book as a Whole)

- What have you learned about witch hunting in India from reading *summonings*? What gaps in your knowledge still exist? Why do you think the author left some questions unexplored, or unanswered? What argument might the author be making by doing so?
- What do you notice about poems whose titles begin with the word “summonings”? How, thematically, do they relate to one another? How do they relate to the title of the book?
- While *summonings* contemplates a central narrative, it does so without engaging in any narrative poems. What story does the ordering of the collection tell? Why are the poems divided into sections? How does each section work independently? How do the sections work together?
- Each section break in this book is accompanied by a quotation from a woman who has been accused of being a witch in India, and who was hunted and tortured because of that accusation. What do you make of the decision to include these voices within the text? Why might they be positioned as they are, between poems? How does each relate to the section it precedes?
- Throughout *summonings*, the author moves between writing persona poems, writing poems that interrogate the idea of a reliable speaker, and poems that do seem autobiographical. Why include all these perspectives within this text? What does the collection gain from this decision? What does the decision to include so many voices invite the reader to consider?
- While several poems in *summonings* are written in “far persona” (where speakers are clearly unaffiliated with the author herself), some are written in “near persona” (where speakers seem to be closer to the author’s geographical location, demographic, and voice). What is the balance of far vs. near persona poems in this book? What comment is the author attempting to make on persona writing? What does it mean to write in persona, for this author? For you?
- The poems in *summonings* take on a variety of formal approaches, from tercets that step backwards towards the left margin from the center of the page, to center-justified one-stanza pieces. Choose 5 poems in the book that each use a different formal approach and compare their forms. Does each resonate thematically with the book’s project as a whole? Do any stand out as particularly interesting or strange? Why? What does this selection of poems demonstrate about the book’s formal approaches as a whole?

## Discussion Questions that Explore Craft and Argument (Individual Poems)

Women's bodily autonomy is a central concern of this collection. Poems whose titles begin with the word "summonings" explicitly address the speaker's agency, or lack thereof. Of those poems, a group are written in second person address. These include "summoning : you didn't submerge your head in the river," "summoning : you are not a myth," "summoning : wanderless," and "summoning : ways you asked for it."

- How does writing in second person ("you") work to address issues of consent and agency in these poems? What does the second person allow the author to say that first person could potentially preclude?
- Other than issues of consent and agency, what are some thematic concerns of these second person poems? Why do you think those issues come up when the author uses "you" to address both her speaker's self and the reader?
- Describe the tone of the ending of each of these poems. How does the speaker feel? How do you feel? How do those feelings, across the "summonings" poems, connect?

Throughout this collection, "daayan" speaks to us both in the titles of her poems and in the bodies of those far persona pieces. Choose three poems written from the "daayan" perspectives and use them to consider these questions.

- Is daayan's voice consistent throughout these pieces? What are the similarities? Differences?
- Is daayan one woman, a group of women, all women, or none of the above? Why?
- In the Foreword to *summonings*, the author notes that "an ethical poetics must be grounded in the inevitable failure to embody the Other." How do you see this concept as relating to the daayan poems? Is it possible to speak "authentically" from the perspective of a woman accused of being a witch? Why or why not? (Note to instructors: this question could spur a debate involving appropriation, cancel culture, ethics, fiction writing vs. poetry/non-fiction writing, or all the above. It pairs best with students' exposure to *Appropriate: A Reckoning*, as noted in the reading list on page 3).

As Shirali notes in the Foreword, "these poems explore how antiquated & existing norms surrounding female mysticism in India & America inform each culture's treatment of women."

Poems that explicitly consider Indian and American attitudes towards women within them include "lucky inhabitant" and "[every woman is a potential witch]."

- Why does this book use the concept of "the witch" to connect Indian and American culture? And how does each poem draw those connections? What lines, specifically, show the author considering those connections? What argument is she making about the relationship between these cultures, and why?
- In "[every woman is a potential witch]," Shirali writes, addressing a "daayan," "what would you think of the western trend toward prophecy." Why is this query not framed with a question mark? What do the mentions of American women "wear[ing] chokers & carry[ing] crystals / in their pockets" make you think of? Why are they being mentioned here, and how are they related to women who are *actually* tortured for being accused of witchcraft in India?

“coldplay goes to india to shoot during holi & i just have to keep living my life,” “pastoral with keys clenched, as a weapon, in my fist,” and “i make a toothpick diadem & crown myself token” are some, but certainly not all, of the poems that do not focus explicitly on witch hunting.

- Describe the speaker of “coldplay...”. What are her concerns? How would you describe her tone, diction, voice?
- Now, describe the speaker of “pastoral...”. What are her concerns? How would you describe her tone, diction, voice?
- Finally, describe the speaker of “i make...”. What are her concerns? How would you describe her tone, diction, voice?
- In what ways do the speakers of these poems differ? In what ways are they the same? Does the speaker’s attitude shift or evolve through the progression of these poems in the book? Where does she arrive, at the end of “i make a toothpick diadem & crown myself token”?

### Discussion Questions that Explore Personal Connections

- What kinds of messages around cultural belonging or identity do the speakers grapple with in *Summonings*? How do those messages resonate with your own experiences within your culture(s)? Do you feel distant from your heritage? Close to it? Both? Neither?
- How do you see the themes of this book resonating in the world around you today? What remnants of colonialist policies still linger in our society? In what ways are women, or any other marginalized group, being hunted? Is that hunting formalized/legalized, looked down upon, or considered illegal? If it is looked down upon or considered illegal, does that stop it from happening? Why or why not?
- To what extent do your culture's myths come up in normal conversation? For example, the idea of a "witch hunt" was recently appropriated and warped by Donald Trump in his 2016 run for office. This appropriation depended on American culture having a unified referent for the phrase "witch hunt" that also erased its very victims—that is, women. What are some of your culture's mythologies that have been weaponized? How does that affect you? How does that affect the real people who are or were once oppressed by that myth?
- Which of this book's thematic concerns resonated with you the most, and why? (Witch hunting, sexual assault, rape culture, consent, colorism, colonialism, patriarchy, identity, heritage, appropriation, grief, distance, loneliness, hope, prayer, incantation, ethics and ethical writing).

### Classroom Activities: Kick-Starting Discussion

This discussion is meant to initiate conversation about *summonings* with students of any age group, and pairs well with a lesson on imagery for younger students or introductory courses.

*Note: Instructors might begin this discussion urging students to take notes, especially if it is being paired with one of the projects/writing assignments detailed later in this Teaching Guide.*

To begin discussion, ask students to create a list of 10 words used in *summonings* that stand out to them as meaningful. These can be images, but do not necessarily have to be (see note above). Then, ask students to pick one word from that list that they think strongly conveys some important or central aspect of the book's messages/themes. Distribute dry erase markers or chalk to students and ask them to come write that word on the board. If the word they chose is already on the board, they should begin a tally mark next to that word. Essentially, as a class, you will create an informal word cloud for *summonings*.

After all students have contributed a word to the "cloud," have them take a minute to survey the class's findings. Ask them what they observe about the words on the board. What images/words were most commonly associated with the text, and why? For each word, be sure to take the time to ask the student who wrote that word down to share their reasoning behind their selection. What makes this image an encapsulation of the book's themes? Or, which theme does this image relate to, and how?

This discussion is meant to be sprawling and unfolding. Follow the themes wherever they take you.

## Classroom Activities: Form Analysis

In this small group activity, students will study lineation, caesura, and stanzaic forms. They will use the distinctions of “end-stopped line,” “parsing line,” and “enjambement” to explore how form and content work together in *Summonings*. Instructors may consider assigning each group a different aspect of form, then having groups present on their findings.

Students should re-read “the village men find some [fellowship], [hunt],” “daayan senses the ojha,” and “daayan gets her name” together, and answer these questions.

### Lineation

- Describe the line breaks in “the village men find some [fellowship], [hunt].” Are they mostly end-stopped? Parsing? Enjambed? What is the effect of the pattern of line breaks you see? What tone, pace, or mood does the pattern create for the reader?
- Describe the line breaks in “daayan senses the ojha.” Are they mostly end-stopped? Parsing? Enjambed? What is the effect of the pattern of line breaks you see? What tone, pace, or mood does the pattern create for the reader? How do these answers compare to your observations about the previous poem?
- Describe the line breaks in “daayan gets her name.” Are they mostly end-stopped? Parsing? Enjambed? What is the effect of the pattern of line breaks you see? What tone, pace, or mood does the pattern create for the reader? How do these answers compare to your observations about the previous poems?
- As a group, identify 1 “line as unit” from each of the three poems that you feel operates as its own miniature poem. How does this line reflect the central tension of the poem at hand? How does the word before/after which the line breaks relate to that tension?

### Caesura/Indentation

- Consider the caesura in “daayan gets her name.” What is the relationship between form and content? Why does this poem include an internal caesura? How does it relate to the poem’s theme? To its tone?
- Describe the indented lines in “the village men find some [fellowship], [hunt]” and “daayan senses the ojha.” Are there similarities? Differences? How does each poem’s use of indentations relate to the poem’s theme, tone, and subject matter?

### Stanza

- How many lines are in each stanza in “the village men find some [fellowship], [hunt]”? Does each stanza have the same number of lines? If so, what could the significance of that number be? If not, how does moving between different sizes of stanza relate to the theme, tone, and subject matter?
- How many lines are in each stanza in “daayan senses the ojha”? Does each stanza have the same number of lines? If so, what could the significance of that number be? If not, how does moving between different sizes of stanza relate to the theme, tone, and subject matter? How do these answers compare to your observations about the previous poem?
- How many lines are in each stanza in “daayan gets her name”? Does each stanza have the same number of lines? If so, what could the significance of that number be? If not, how

does moving between different sizes of stanza relate to the theme, tone, and subject matter?  
How do these answers compare to your observations about the previous poem?

### **Optional: Form Analysis Day 2**

Have students work in new groups. Assign each group one of the poems from Day 1 discussions. Then ask students to work in a Google doc and change the poem's form. They should alter line breaks, insert new caesuras, change the number of lines per stanza, to make the poem as different from the original form as possible, while retaining the original content. Then, students should answer the following questions in their groups.

- Describe the poem's new line breaks. How do these new breaks affect the poem's pace? Does the new version move faster or slower than the original? Are there more enjambed, parsing, or end-stopped lines? How do those relate to the poem's pace?
- Describe the poem's new caesuras. How does white space strategically draw the reader's attention to specific phrases or words? How does that alter the poem's tone, mood, or theme?
- Describe the poem's new stanzaic progression. How does the new number of lines per stanza affect the poem's pace? How does it change the relationship between form and content?

Any of these questions can be tackled as a class or in small groups, and all should hold a central question at their core: how does form relate to content? How does changing the form change our experience of the content?

## Classroom Activities: Persona Analysis

Homework/associated reading: [“Learning the Persona Poem” by Rebecca Hazelton, The Poetry Foundation](#)

### Day 1

Begin class by asking students what they learned from the reading about writing persona poems. Collect their notes on the board. Use their observations as shared/established definitions from which to launch into this activity.

In small groups, using the Table of Contents in *summonings* as a guide, students will create a list of the speakers in the book, following each with a brief 1-sentence description. For example, once students note that one voice is that of “daayan,” they should identify how we can tell that we are encountering a poem written in “daayan” persona.

In Google Slides or another collaborative online software, have students create a slide for each persona. Slide 1 might be titled “daayan” while Slide 2 is titled “the mountains,” for example. As students generate their descriptions of each persona, they will add them to the appropriate slide.

### Day 2

Review the slides as a class. When appropriate, introduce the concepts of “far persona” and “near persona” to students—“far” being a poem written completely outside of the author’s lived experience, and “near” being a poem written as close to lived experience as a poem can get (terms originated by Shirali in a forthcoming interview). Poems, after all, are not lived lives, not autobiographies, as they are art/artifice by nature.

Once you have established these definitions, ask students what category of persona each slide falls under. For example, “daayan” falls under far persona, something one can glean from reading the Foreword to *summonings*.

Depending on the time you have in class, you may break off here and resume the next part of discussion on **Day 3**.

Have students look back, now, at the Table of Contents. Which poems are missing from your collective slides, or have not yet been categorized as a type of persona? Select one or two as examples and ask volunteers to read those poems aloud. Then engage with the following discussion questions.

- In the poems that the class agrees are not “far persona,” what is the author’s attitude towards writing within that mode? (See “on projection,” “on persona,” “summoning : chai & failure,” and “at first, trying to reach the accused”).
- Given the attitudes/arguments expressed in those poems, what are some of the risks of writing persona poems? What are some of the rewards?

- Why did the author include poems in both far and near persona in this collection? How does each type of poem inform the other?
- What new themes can we add to our class notes regarding *summonings*?

## Projects and Writing Assignments: The Persona Assignment

This assignment works best after the Persona Analysis Classroom Activity. Suggested reading: *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag.

Raena Shirali's *summonings* engages with persona poems, while also calling into question the limitations and uses of writing in persona. Our discussions in class have explored this question widely. Now it is time for you to articulate your own argument on how the persona poems in *summonings* can be interpreted.

In a 5-7 page essay with a clear and original thesis, written in MLA format, pose an argument about the use of persona in *summonings*. Consider the relationship between “far persona” poems and “near persona” poems. What comment does the author make on the nature of persona poems? How does that comment have broader implications for writing persona poems as a whole? Be sure to quote lines from specific poems as evidence to support your claims. Be sure to quote from a variety of poems/personas, to construct a cohesive argument that does not overlook any approach present in the book.

## Projects and Writing Assignments: Researching the Myth

### Overview

You will research the origins of a cultural mythology that you find compelling and present your findings to the class.

### Brainstorming

Select a cultural mythology that you find compelling (e.g. the myth of the witch in India). It is not a good idea to pick a mythic concept that you are not interested in. It is a good idea to pick a myth that you have always wondered about. Where did it come from? How did it become so pervasive? You may even ask how it came to be weaponized, if it has been weaponized in any culture since its inception. Be able to articulate, even at this stage, why you want to learn more about your topic. If you're inclined to say, "because I find it interesting," push yourself one step further and tell me *why*.

### Researching

You are required to include 1 scholarly source (from the library) and 2 internet sources (that are credible and include citations) in your research. You must indicate when you are quoting material (by using quotation marks) and the final slide of your presentation must include a Works Cited in MLA format.

### Creating a Presentation

Use Google Slides or PowerPoint. Your slideshow should have a title slide with your name and the title of your presentation. Your presentation should be 5-7 minutes in length and should include somewhere between 15 and 20 slides.

As you create your slides, create notecards to accompany them. Remember that part of creating a presentation is preparing the visual, and part is preparing the script. Tell us what you found interesting, and why. Put a personal twist on your findings. Relate them to how we experienced the myth in our society today, if applicable.

### Presenting

While your presentation will be comprised of bullet pointed information and images to inform your speech, you will need to present this material extemporaneously—that is, you need to have what you intend to say planned out, on notecards, to help you stay on track as you present, *and* you need to give a presentation that does not rely on reading straight from those cards. The class should be able to sense, by the way you present your research findings, that you have learned, internalized, and almost entirely memorized the contents of your research. Your interest and investment in your presentation should be clear to us by virtue of your eye contact, vocal variety, emotional engagement, gestures, etc.