BOOK REVIEWS

SPARROW
Supplement

SOUND & PICTURE ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

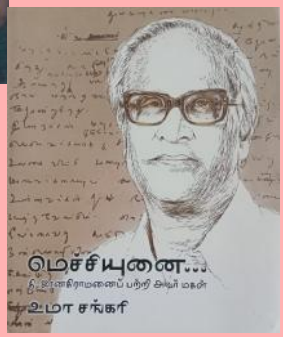
Memories Linger On

-C S Lakshmi

Peru Ninaivin Siru Thulikal
(Some Drops from a Vast Memory)
Author: Siva Thiyagarajan
Publisher: Manaosai Verlag, Germany
Year: December 2020
No. of Pages: 84
Price: Not priced

Comrade Amma: Makalin Paarvaiyil Maithili Sivaraman
(Comrade Mother: Maithili Sivaraman
Through the Eyes of Her Daughter)
Author: Kalpana Karunakaran
Publisher: Bharathi Puthakalayam, Chennai
Year: 2018
No. of Pages: 64
Price: Rs.50

Mecchiyunai: Thi. Janakiramanaip Patri Avar Magal
(When You Are Appreciated:
Thi. Janakiraman's Daughter on Him)
Author: Uma Shankari
Publisher: Uma Shankari, Hyderabad
No: of Pages: 80
Price: Rs.150



Sivagamasundari or Siva as she was called, is the mother whose two sons became martyrs in the cause of Tamil Eelam. Her eldest son was a teacher and a poet who got caught in an army attack and lost his left leg and left hand and had to be hospitalised. His passionate poems on freedom for the Tamils were aired on the LTTE radio broadcasts and were recited in many poetry meetings. While his mother and father were in Vavunia the son was in Vattappalai. And a huge war was going on in the area between the two cities. Meanwhile, the father passed away.There could be no communication and it was the LTTE cadres who became the bridge of communication between the parents and the son. The mother was persuaded to come to Germany by her other children and her son died without seeing her. The mother Siva, whose full name is Sivagamasundari, was called Siva, Sundari and as Morrisamma by many who were friends of her son "Morris" (real name Bharathan) who died fighting the Indian army in 1989. Her second son was called Saba in the LTTE and his real name was Mayuran. And many called her Mayuranamma. Saba (Mayuran) also died while fighting, in 1993. This book is about the memories of others of Siva and her own memories of being in Sri Lanka while two of her sons had joined the LTTE and one of them was writing poems of resistance. Her memories of what it felt to lose Morris are very movingly written. Recalling his last visit to Paruthithurai when she had gone there from Jaffna, where she had shifted due to the harassment of the Indian army, she describes the visit in great detail and also how she walked alone to the army camp to ask for his body.

"…The next day my daughter and I along with Master

Thirunavukkarasu went to take the body of Morris from the Mandigai hospital. Post master Mahendar also joined us.

The army had issued strict orders to the hospital that without its permission his body cannot be taken by anyone.

I must have my son's dead body.

I got ready to go the Mandigai army camp to get permission to receive my son's body. My daughter Chandra was very anxious about my going there by myself. Everyone was scared that the army may harm me. They were hesitant to send me alone. I calmed down everyone and began to walk towards the army camp.

I could clearly see the guns at the army Sentry Points being pointed towards me. I understood well that in the next few minutes anything could happen. But some force that was activating me had taken hold of me. I was walking towards the camp ready to face anything. Even before I had walked half the distance I saw army commanders awaiting me at the entrance.

When I reached the entrance I told them, "I am the mother of Morris."

That was it. An army commander hurriedly came towards me and held me by the hand and took me in and made me sit on a chair. They prepared tea and served me hot tea. Three of them who looked like they held high positions in the army came and bowed before me. Then they told me, "Amma… your son is a great person of valour. Seeing his capabilities, all these days we had assumed that he was an elderly person. We could not believe it when we came to know that he was such a young person. He was a good man. We understand that people love him because he is such a good man. You must be proud to have given birth to such a valorous and courageous boy. It is our duty to pay our respects to you. You are a valorous mother. We salute you…." They spoke in English and folded their hands before me with respect.
I could not believe that moment.

I began to shiver. All my frozen emotions came up in waves. Tears blinded my eyes! The courage that I had held on for so long got scattered like clouds.

I stood up. I could not see the road through my tears. I did not wipe those tears. I started walking with them towards my son's dead body." (p.26)

Through such notes and vignettes the book is able to bring the image of Siva, the mother of three martyrs, before our eyes.

Mythili Sivaraman was an activist who functioned in the public sphere. Everyone knew about her activities and her thoughts which were either in the news or were expressed by her in her writings. But to Kalpana Karunakaran she is not just a comrade in action but a mother; so her memories of her mother speak about her many different facets which only a daughter would be able to experience and feel. She calls the book *Comrade Amma*—a mother who was a comrade. In her preface she says, "My mother was an extraordinary woman. The journeys she undertook in her life and the experiences of those journeys are countless. This book is not a complete biography of Mythili Sivaraman. I have no second thoughts about the need for such a comprehensive biography being written. But that is not what I have tried to do in this book….This book reflects the way I have seen, understood and felt my mother…." (pp.5-6)

Kalpana begins the book with the lines, "…My childhood memories of my mother are my mother's typewriter and its sound which was lullaby to me. As far as I was concerned mother's qualities meant writing articles, typing them, marking the newspapers for news items, giving public speeches and passionately discussing with friends who would come home. I had never seen my mother with a kitchen ladle in her hand…"(p.11)

Kalpana then talks about Mythili's education and how she went to the US for further studies and how she visited Cuba secretly while she was in the US, going through Mexico. On return, she joined the CPM after the Keezhvenmani massacre where poor farm workers were burnt to death and after joining the CPM she became active in the trade unions and then in the women's association. While the women of the association would gather in their hall and rehearse songs, little Kalpana would circle around them in her tricycle.

In fact, Kalpana was given a very political name initially. She was named after K Ajitha, the famous Naxalite, from Kerala. Her paternal grandfather got very upset with the name. He felt that the child's mind would be poisoned with the name. Her cousin used to learn Kathak dance and the teacher used to come home. Little Kalpana also used to imitate her dancing. The teacher named her Sitara after the famous dancer Sitara Devi. Once someone asked her father the child's name and for the life of him he could not remember the north Indian name. Then he thought of naming her Thamarai (Lotus). But Mythili thought lotus would only mean something beautiful and a statue. She wanted her daughter to be more than that. They arrived at Kalpana in memory of Kalpana Dutt who had participated in the Chittagong incident in 1930 fighting against the British. So Kalpana the child was.

Kalpana learnt a lot from her mother about what a woman's qualities should be. Her mother never wore silk saris or wear jewels. Nor did she wear the customary mangalsutra which married women wear as she had got married in a different way. An incident she narrates is like a metaphor of mother-daughter relationship. She recalls an incident when her mother was braiding her hair getting her

ready for school. Suddenly there was noise. Women from the slum area nearby had gathered with empty pots. Her mother ran out and told them, "Sit there. Don't let the bus go." She was trying to turn the crowd that had gathered for water into a protest. Her mother just throwing away the comb and transforming into a women's association leader, did not surprise Kalpana for that was her mother's nature. Mythili's struggles for justice, her ever busy life opened the doors to a different world to Kalpana which she began to realise slowly. Initially she was taken care of by her maternal grandmother. Her mother and father did not impose anything on the child. Influenced by her devout grandmother who did pooja in the house, when Kalpana scribbled on the bathroom walls 'I love god', her atheistic parents never once objected. Her mother seemed always busy not bothering about Kalpana's clothes or her school performance, but that she was always on her mind she found out when she saw a letter from her mother to her father written in 1980, when she had gone to China on the invitation of the All-China Women's Federation. Mythily had written to her husband saying Kalpana needed a haircut and that he should check if she is being given a proper "girl-cut".

The years when symptoms of Alzheimer's began to show and how she cared for her mother in those ten years are written by Kalpana in a heart-rending matter-of-fact manner. She ends it by quoting a few lines from a book of her mother:

"You cannot take what you have not given, and you must give yourself. You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere." (p.64)

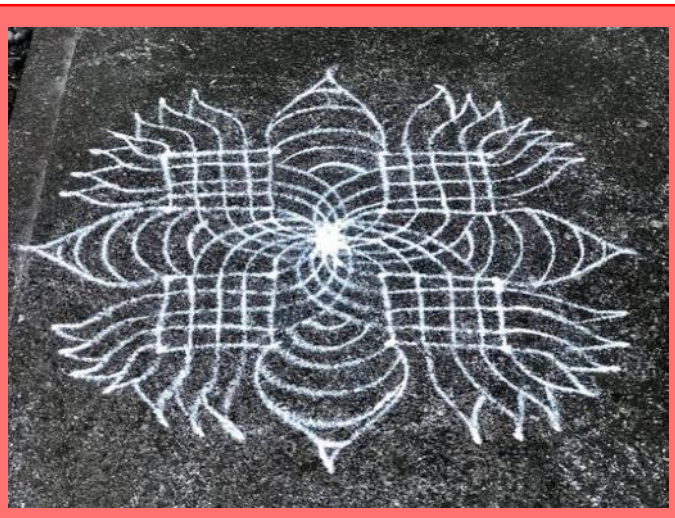
Kalpana says those lines told her about the depth and the meaning of her mother's life. Those lines and her mother's image as the Revolution remain deep in Kalpana's mind, she says, and that gives her the courage and inspiration to live and question her own life. Can any mother offer more to her daughter, Kalpana asks.

Thi.Janakiraman's daughter Uma Shankari's reminiscences of her father, the legendary writer, is a pictorial biography of her father's family, his own family with wife and children, his career in the radio, his love for music and his life as a writer. She also writes about what it is in her father's writing that makes her admire him as a writer. She says her father's writing had an ennobling sentiment which she could relate to. Where the family was concerned, he loved girl children and he had a way of relating to women. Wherever he travelled he would bring saris and gifts for his wife and Uma. She says he had a softness which was very feminine, in him.

Her father had inspired an entire younger generation of writers by writing about sensitive elements including bodily frailties that make relationships but as a father he had his way of confronting problems. When Uma wanted to have an inter-caste marriage he took nearly three years to accept it and even when he accepted it, he asked her elder brothers to go for the occasion of registration of the marriage because his wife, Uma's mother, refused to accept the marriage and he wanted to stand by her. And later he arranged for an Arya Samaj wedding even though he did not attend the wedding, again for the same reason. Later Uma's husband becoming a much loved son-in-law and her mother breathing her last with her head on his lap, are stories Uma does not elaborate here but obviously they have been very much an important part of her life.

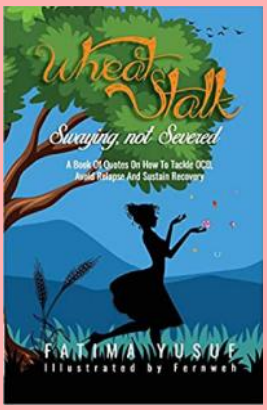
Uma says she liked her father's nature of watching the world quietly without calling attention to himself. She asked him once why he had given up wearing dhoti and kurta after coming to Delhi and had switched over to pants and shirts and he told her: "I am a writer. I want to watch the world hiding myself. I only want to write about the world. If I dress up differently I would become conspicuous and people's attention will be drawn towards me. I won't be able to see. I don't like that." (p.73) Sundara Ramasamy, the well-known Tamil writer, had once referred to him as the person who sat on the chair in the last row and watched the world. Uma recalls it and says that was an apt description of her father.

Uma writes about small incidents and also some major ones without too much elaboration or details. She allows the photographs to tell their own stories. She writes gently distancing herself even while being part of the story and her reminiscences of her father, whom she admires a great deal, flow softly like a quiet river.



The Lightness of Being

-C S Lakshmi



Title: Wheat Stalk: Swaying, Not Severed
Author: Fatima Yusuf;
Illustrator: Fernweh
Publisher: Becomeshakespeare.com
Mumbai, Year: 2020
No. of pages: 146
Price: Not stated

Wheat Stalk is a self-help book which is a book of quotes on how to tackle OCD, avoid relapse and sustain recovery. It is not the kind of book that one normally picks up while travelling or relaxing. It is not the how-to-win friends-and-influence-people kind of self-help book that is meant to enhance one's career prospects. This book is about how Fatima Yusuf, the author, has battled with OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) from the age of 13. She talks about her personal challenges and difficulty in overcoming the disorder and how she persevered not giving up the fight.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), as the Foreword explains, is a "common chronic and long-lasting disorder in which a person has uncontrollable, recurring thoughts (obsessions) and behaviours (compulsions) that she or he feels the urge to repeat over and over." One can read many books (therapy texts) available but it takes courage for a person who has gone through the disorder and has overcome it to write about the trauma of the illness. This book talks about personal trauma, hurdles that are crossed and about being pulled back every now and then. It is not a book based on self-pity but a book that tells you that intervention alone is not enough to deal with the disorder. One needs self-control, self-introspection, self-training and above all, self-forgiveness.

In small paragraphs with beautiful illustrations Fatima Yusuf takes you through how to retrieve one's forgotten memory of normalcy, how to confront fears of say, exams, how to know to pick up the key to open a door to enter a building and to repeat the process with all the buildings, how to overcome regrets about missed opportunities, how to know when to hit the ignore button when faced with unwarranted criticism and how to be gracious with rude people for one's own sake. She also makes the very important observation that one's addiction is not one's own problem; by taking care of oneself one is taking care of everyone around one. "Let's be wheat stalks" she says, "let's bend, not break. Let us see the gale as only temporary passer-by. Let's not panic."

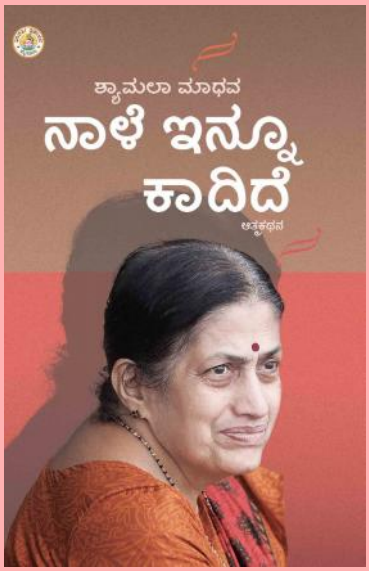
Caught in OCD, One may want to discontinue studies. But one needs to think of studies as not one's entire life but just one piece of the puzzle and then studies become the process not the end.Memory is also an important part of coping. By remembering the signs of a breakdown one knows how to prevent one. One also learns how to deal with relapses when one learns to balance an obsessive habit with leisure time with other things. There is a lot in recovery that has to do with one's own self: one's ego, one's pride, one's need to take short cuts. But one has to be also kind to oneself. One needs to forgive not just others but oneself too.

It is possible to find light at the end of the tunnel. Like Fatima says at one point, coping and struggling may be slow-paced, humid and exhausting but it is possible to rise from the ashes and find one's wings. It happens when one learns to find one's inner strength and not blame others or the environment for one's collapse. "Soaring seagulls," Fatima says, "don't have the time to squawk."

What makes the book not a series of encouraging quotes but a book where a personal story unfolds is, at every point Fatima gives an instance from her own life of getting caught, falling and rising. The metaphor of flying may seem like a cliché but when one who has felt the lightness of being unburdened resorts to such metaphors and symbols, they cease to be clichés.

Delving into One's Soul

-Jayashree Kasaravali



Title: *Naale Innu Kaadide* (Tomorrow Still Awaits)
Author: Shyamala Madhav
Publisher: Bharati Prakashana, Mysore
Year: 2021
Pages: 254 pages plus 24 photo pages 278 pages.
Price: 250/-

An autobiography is an effort to explore one's soul anew. Usually those who set out to write their autobiographies do not merely open their memory vaults; for, as one walks back on the memory lane, and puts everything into words, one comes face to face with one's past. In this effort of recording the past, many unforgotten and unpleasant events may get prioritised leading to glorification of one's experiences unknowingly. This limitation needs to beconsciously overcome and an autobiography has to be written carefully with a lot of caution. Otherwise, in unveiling one's world, 'I' may get more emphasised and it may turn into a consent for personal nostalgia.

Most autobiographies evoke curiosity in others, because one would like to know how that person has overcome the adversities of life and how that person has found the solutions to personal problems. In a way, an autobiography is part of history too, for it is full of unique experiences of a person in different periods of a lifetime. It can be considered as documentation of the history of a particular time period.

Shyamala Madhav's *Naale Innu Kaadide* (Tomorrow Still Awaits) is a unique autobiography, written in a different style altogether. The writer has kept an invisible distance throughout her elaborate narrative about her life's journey. While describing the personal, cultural and social aspects of one's life, psychological evolution of the person is revealed quite naturally. When the simple needs of life like a house to live, relations to depend on and an occupation to lean on are denied making it unbearable, Shyamala Madhav's autobiography dwells on the extent of its impact. The book is full of dense details of a profound life experience.

Usually autobiographies are full of personal details. Especially women's autobiographies are so full of their hardships and their numerous painful stories, that they torment us to no end. There are instances of quite a number of autobiographies written by women who have overcome courageously—the same helplessness, same outrage and same adversities that have bedevilled women right from the olden days to the present—and built their lives successfully. It is not an easy task to reveal one's life, along with all its swallowed bitterness and secretly kept cruel truths. Such autobiographies naturally invoke sympathies in us and our deep sigh mingles with the saga of their life.

Shyamala Madhav's autobiography, however, is different. It is a story of sweet perception without the least of

bitterness. The way the writer stands outside her personal life and examines it, makes one wonder whether it is really possible for an autobiography to be like this. Life need not be just the hardships of a private life. It is much more than the pleasures and pains therein. The way Shyamala has shown that even for a woman her creative output can be more important than the upheavals of her personal life, as in the case of men—is unique.

Even though Shyamala opens up with her childhood experiences with her near and dear ones, we do not get the intimate details. The book brings to life her splendid childhood in the small coastal town Uchila with an enchanting natural splendour of hills, canals, river and greenery, her schooldays, her mother as a disciplined teacher, dignified personality of her father, loving siblings, childhood friends, exceptional neighbours, respectful teachers and a house full of innumerable relatives and acquaintances. The richly depicted saga of her life enlivens the mind of the readers.

In fact, each and every person who enters her life is important here and worth a mention. No interaction is insignificant for Shyamala to jot down. Every relationship is dealt with prominence and Shyamala remembers each one of them with wholehearted warmth and love. Even though there are a lot of minute details about her relatives, neighbours and childhood friends, a dignified distance is maintained throughout the narration, regarding their private lives.

With innumerable characters, countless encounters, sweetest of memories—it is a wonder how Shyamala could remember and document them all. Her dear Bellamma, Bhamanti, Sharada, Swarna, mentioned again and again in the book, become part of our lives. They get etched on our memory as characters living around us. Even the dogs and cats of the household are members of the undivided family. Their selfless love and unique services are reminisced with fond affection.

Even though Shyamala is living in Mumbai for the last several years, her hometown is still fresh in her mind. The undaunted passion for her hometown Uchila, the sea, the river, the forest, Besant School and other things exude in such abundance in her writing that the readers are simply carried away to their respective hometowns. Still surprisingly, Shyamala never enters the inner details of her life, because, maybe it was not her intention to do so to begin with.

She is equally in love with the city that is Mumbai where she settles down after marriage. Not only that, she loves and enjoys each and every place she visits with the innocence of a child. There are also details about her various activities, the mental preparation before the tough work of translations she undertook and fruitful and pleasant meetings with various people which helped in her intellectual development. But at all levels, a dignified distance is always maintained without fail.

Shyamala is deeply moved by the extreme changes taking place in Mangalore at present in the name of modernity in contrast to its serene natural beauty during her childhood. Standing now at the other end of civilization lost in the plethora of newly constructed highrise structures and reminiscing about the warm childhood days, her writing is full of pain and nostalgia.

At this juncture I am reminded of our senior Kannada writer Usha P Rai's autobiography *Yaava Naaleyu Nammadalla* (No Tomorrow is Ours). In the first half of her book, she constructs the cultural and social world of Udupi in the 50s and 60s and then elaborates on the changes and transformations that have occurred later in great detail. Shyamala Madhav while describing her childhood days touches upon the communal harmony in the area in spite of the changes and conversions that took place in the society as well as in her family. This I feel is an important observation even from the historical point of view.

In the present angst-ridden difficult times, when optimism is languishing, Shyamala's title is full of luminosity with a promising light. It inspires us to look into our lives afresh. After a fulfilled life with both bitter and sweet memories, the way she goes forward picking up only the sweet memories is exemplary. The writing of an autobiography is in a way a process of self-maturity also. The self-restraint, patience and discretion in her writing bring gravity and decency to it. The balanced and sober writing of Shyamala Madhav has added to the value of the book. It is a well woven narrative of a mature mind. Perhaps this healthy outlook of life is the reason she could dwell into the difficult field of translation in the manner of meditation. The very act of savouring the pleasant memories and waiting for a new tomorrow at the dusk of one's life is such a positive and beautiful concept. Let that confidence be there in all of us.

—Jayashree Kasaravalli in Kannada translated by Mithra Venkatraj

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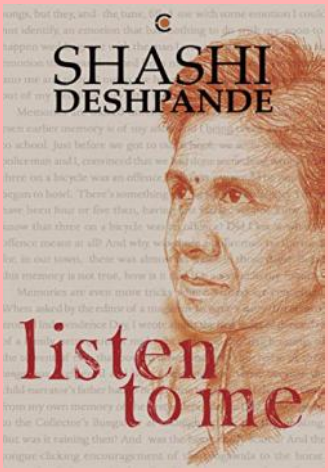
Positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.

Transformation Through Words

- Semeen Ali



Title: Listen to me
Author: Shashi Deshpande
Publisher: Context
Year: 2018
Pages: 370
Price: Rs.699/-

There are two extracts from Shashi Deshpande's autobiography that I would like to quote before we embark on a journey into her book.

"…A woman who realised that her life mattered, that it was important to her, if not to anyone else, because she is a human being. And that she, only she, was responsible for it." (Pg. 183)
"…I realised that to write is to know the power in yourself, it is to defeat powerlessness… Once having gained power, once having freed myself, so to say, there was no way I would renounce this power. I had to go on writing." (Pg. 269)

These two quotes alone speak volumes about the writer and the individual; about a search for that self that one discovers in the process of unravelling the set norms and regulations that hound a person who wants to be set free. In this case, it is the search and a reinterpretation of the definitions that revolve around one's gender that threaten to tear down the fabric that has already been woven around one's identity. The book begins with a prelude where Shashi lays down the rules she has made and lives by. She does not begin with talking about herself; rather it is her act of writing that she puts forward and talks about. The self that comes out while writing and a self that remains hidden. The conflict that rises between the two is what seeps through the pages of this book. She considers memory to be an unreliable narrator and one agrees with her, as the colouration that the passage of time spills on one's memory is hard to disassociate from. The memory can no longer be relied on fully as time acts as a story teller and brings out a parallel world which may or may not be adhering with how that reality might have been. One's personal history and the role memory plays in creating those histories lead to the formation of a personal identity. She considers writing about oneself as a disease but also concurs that one cannot escape it as it is a part of human desire. For it is through what one writes can one make sense of the world that they live in and *who* they are. The act of defining oneself in the way one wants to; is what writing brings along with it. Autobiography then turns into a mechanism to understand one's self and the various realities that one has lived with and continue to.

Identity—the questioning of an imposed one and the dissolution/creation of it to a certain extent forms one of the central themes of the book. One of the ways to make sense of it is to go back to one's roots. Begin from the beginning and that is exactly how Sashi proceeds. One's concept of the self begins from the place one comes from, the name that is given and the many ways in which a community comes together to directly/indirectly contribute to the construction of an individual. I have used the word "construction" as all the 'isms' that follow us around are a product of social and cultural environments.

"The town you live in, as a child, the town you grow up in, becomes a part of you; it is like the skin you inhabit, something you are scarcely conscious of."

It is later on that that very place one grows up in, also at times turns into a place that makes one feel uncomfortable about. The development of a sense of self is also tied up with these spaces where one questions/compares oneself with others and their environments. There are moments when it is no longer an easy acceptance of what has been there, rather an examination of what could have been. And a re-discovery of that place of origin not as one peppered by memory and how one grew up there; it now turns into a place of origin for people that one is familiar with on a larger scale. Dharwad, her place of origin situates itself in most of Shashi's writings and

one cannot simply bracket this down to nostalgia. It is a place that makes her want to write.

"Homes are very important to me, as anyone who reads my novels will know."

"Your address, which part of the city you live in, matters."

There are rules to follow and abide by especially when you come from small towns. The idea of a small town being tied up with a close knit community that dictates rather ingrains certain codes and order into one's mind brings up the invisible codes of conduct that one carries within oneself and is not able to shrug them off. The writer gives an example of a visit to their mother's family home in Pune during summer vacations that set off a comparison with where they come from and the way they behave.

"… Here we were made very conscious that we were small-towners; the way we dressed marked us out as inferior creatures…"

"We were not used to playing indoor games, nor to playing so politely."

This extends even in the form of language and education. A familiarity and identification with the English language has been discussed in detail in the book. "I seemed to have lost my sense of myself…"—these words powerfully describe how in an unfamiliar setting, an individual feels. In this particular setting, it is the writer's sense of strangeness in a place where another language is predominant. The idea of an outsider—from the point of view of a person migrating to a new place in search of new opportunities to the point of view of those who reside there. The fear of the unknown runs both ways and unleashes in the form of riots that find a place in this book. The book as it moves along tracing a personal history, does not exclude the politics of the times through which it moves. The intertwining of both makes it a valuable read of the eras that have predominantly been given a much skewed outlook by history. It is refreshing to read them in the context in which Deshpande puts them in her book. The language in question is Marathi and the writer knows the language well but she also points out why it is of advantage in a place like Bombay. "Knowing Marathi made me belong. If I had been identified as a Kannada girl (or a *Madrasi*, as all of us South Indians were called then) I would have been much more of an outsider." She defends her choice of language in which she writes and discusses in detail the various arguments and debates that have been put forward against and in favour of the English language by the *bhasha* writers and by the supporters of the English language. By weaving in the personal with the political, the book brings in the stories that would otherwise remain unheard or remain at the margins. She sheds light on how important artistic freedom is even down to the language that one wants to write in.

In the book, there are moments when the writer discusses the need to write an autobiography or a biography; a constant engagement that requires its reader to be a part of. Questions on what needs to be revealed and of spaces that remain silent; to bringing up an important query—to what extent should one write about others in their own life writing. And which parts to include and which ones to exclude; the idea of privacy and the invasion of it has been a constant preoccupation in this book. There is a need to bring out all in the open for one to heal; for one to make peace with things that otherwise would fester within. What is striking is how since childhood, there is a constant examination of one's identity as a woman. The circumscribed life of girls when they reached a particular age to a short narrative of the writer's mother who hesitates to enter a restaurant back at their home town but feels a sense of freedom in doing so when living in another place. This feeling of restriction finds an echo in the book beginning with how sewing as a class in school is to an extent like being taught how to be "good wives and homemakers." How one of the male teachers on being asked in the class what Draupadi means when she says '*Aham rajasvalaasmi,*' does not even look at the girl students who have asked this question and answers them using a euphemism that it meant that she was menstruating. This is such an important incident to record as it not only underlines how men consider this to be a subject not to be discussed or simply to be kept at the fringes, and how this line by Draupadi creates a connection of this character with the girls who hear it. It is not just as a writer that she has had to face this but also as she traces, from the day of her marriage when one of the customs requires the mother-in-law to change the name of her daughter-in-law. She resists it successfully but also realises that being married, that idea of freedom is an illusion. There are expectations and responsibilities that she has to take care of. How the honour and the happiness of families lie in her hands. How she feels that that is how women are conned into doing things that they might not want to do at all. Questions are raised on the different lifestyles that are meted out to women who become widows, while for men, life moves along at more or less the same pace.This uneasy relationship with the world outside finds its way into her writings and how as a writer, she has had to explain her reasoning for taking up a life of a writer. The constant juggling between the responsibilities that she had to take care of and the attention that was required for a writing

life to breathe and survive as well as to respond to her critics, one of whom dismissed her novel as being written by *ladies of leisure*.

"If only they knew! I'd worked on my novel for six years, struggling to find time, coping with children's needs, with parents' problems, with major changes in our lives…I'd shopped, cleaned and ironed. How dared they belittle my work!"

The book opens up a world of writings that have seen the best and the worst of times. How one's identity as an Indian writer makes it difficult to become a part of the mainstream in another country. How there are certain requirements and expectations by the publishers for the kind of work that would appeal to the readers abroad. Which makes one think as well as question to what extent have things even changed in the world of publishing? There are certain thematic concerns as well as certain ways of writings that are expected and encouraged in order to have a readership; to what extent does that curtail a writer? How a novel written by a woman is easily labelled as a 'woman's novel'. These are some of the questions that a reader is left with to search answers for. There is a constant rejection of the labels that over the years Shashi has accrued and she poses a question for the people who are quick to label works:

"Do you ask a male writer why his protagonists are almost always male? And why, when he writes about women, is he lauded for that fact?"

What comes out after reading this work is how the mechanisms of oppression that are applied in varied ways are revealed through the act of writing. Reading life narratives makes one look at the 'I'. There is a need to create a space for oneself to be heard and an identity that resists the identities already prescribed for women.

"To know we have the choice is to change our whole idea of ourselves and our lives."

Seemen Ali is currently a PhD scholar at the Department of English, University of Delhi. She is also involved as Muse India's Editor for Poetry.

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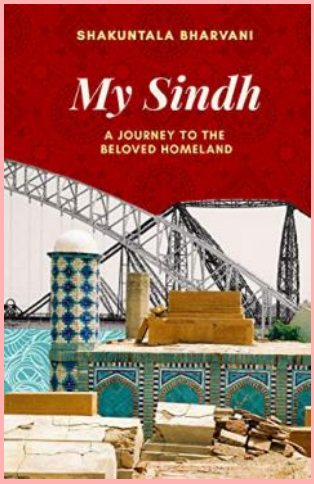
Home Is Where the Heart Is

- Saroj Merani



Title: *My Sindh: A Journey to the Beloved Homeland*
Author: Shakuntala Bharvani
Publisher: Black-and-White Fountain, Pune
Year: April 2021
No. of Pages: 231 pages
Price: Rs. 400.00

When Shakuntala Bharvani mentioned to me some time ago that she was writing a book on Sindh, I was very pleased because the compelling story of Sindh, so much of it still untold, needs to be told. At the centre of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization that flourished along the banks of the mighty Indus River, and later the site of an inclusive, syncretic Sufi culture, Sindh was an intriguing confluence of several cultures that it had absorbed over the millennia. Shakuntala's book, *My Sindh: A Journey to the Beloved Homeland* is as much about trying to understand who she is and where she comes from as it is a personal tribute to an ancestral homeland. A homeland that her family, like thousands of other Sindhi Hindu families, had to leave behind at the time of Partition, and to which she can journey back, now only in memory and imagination.

As suggested by the book's title, what the writer reveals to us is *her* Sindh, a land and heritage that she has an emotional connect with, stakes a personal claim to, and proceeds to retrieve, to re-own. And we find that her journey to "the beloved homeland" actualised in the act of writing this book, is inevitably intertwined with other kinds of journeys in the past such as her Pashto-speaking father's tea-trading journeys to Chaman, Quetta, Kabul, Kandahar; countless Partition journeys; journeys of her family members settled in other parts of the world, and so on. The personal nature of this narrative is reinforced by an appropriately non-formal, conversational tone and voice.

An informal blend of known history, popular legends, folk tales, family anecdotes and memories laced with charm and humour, *My Sindh* moves easily between collective history and personal story, and between the past and the present.

An example, typical of this kind of free-flow story telling in the book, is its section on salt. Moving from the political significance of salt in British India and the "villainous, inhuman" Salt Tax imposed by the colonial rulers to fill their own coffers… to Mahatma Gandhi's historic Salt March… to the ritualistic use of salt in Sindhi marriage ceremonies, Shakuntala makes these narrative transitions quite seamlessly. The traditional loon mouan ritual that she describes involves the new bride exchanging handfuls of salt with her husband and in-laws. To some extent, reminiscent of the ancient salt covenants, this ritual represents the bride's commitment to blend in with her new family, and what's more, to make things better and more flavourful, pretty much like salt does!

Since the Sufi tradition is so central to the cultural ethos of Sindh, the book has stories of Sufi mystics whose dargahs to this day attract thousands of Hindus and Muslims in a spirit of inclusion and equality. One of the most revered of Sufi Masters is Lal Shahbaz Qalandar of Sehwan Sharif, with the word Shahbaz, royal falcon, implying the great spiritual heights that the Sufi mystic attained during his lifetime.

Equally central to the Sindhi belief system is the figure of Jhulelal, patron deity of the Sindhi Hindus. Associated in myth and legend with the life-giving waters of the Indus River,

Jhulelal, also revered as Khwaja Khizr by Sindhi Muslims, ensures the fertility of a land that is largely desert area, and the well-being of his people.

Both Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Jhulelal are so embedded in popular consciousness that they have served as integrating forces in Sindh over the centuries. Embodiments of a shared spiritual heritage, the two 'lals' are often invoked together, as in the hugely popular Sufi song *Dama Dam Mast Qalandar*, enabling devotees to experience a wonderful sense of double belonging.

Here too, the personal is not far behind. For instance, when Shakuntala talks of the Sindhi *akho*, a rice-sugar-flour ritual offering made by her family members to water bodies, to Jhulelal who represents water in all its forms, or when she translates *Dama Dam Mast Qalandar* into English for Tina, her niece visiting from Canada, the personal is again interwoven into the larger non-material culture of Sindh.

Other stories that run through the narrative are vignettes of a number of Sindhis who have made a difference to people's lives. Notable among the ones she talks about is Dr Manohar Keswani, the brilliant reconstructive surgeon whose pioneering work in his field is legendary.

Especially engaging is the author's gallery of family portraits. For instance, there is her affectionate, humorous account of her husband Indru's loving old nani, the "beautiful begum" who, when her grandson would urge her to switch to a lighter diet at her age, would protest that all she was going to have for her evening meal that day was "two tikkis or sambosas, a plate of bhajiyas with a little chattani, a small roti, and a bowl of curd and rice." To be rounded off by the obligatory 'chukri', a swig, in her "little silver glass," and finally a few puffs on her chillum or beedi. And during thadri, which falls in the month of August, when only cold things were to be eaten, she would reassure her anxious grandson that she would confine herself to having only "lolas and koki and dahivadas and mithais, all prepared the previous day." How can one not warm to this old-world epicure?!

There are other people too we warm to, like her hospitable chikni chachi who was "outgoing, extremely friendly, and used to doing just as she pleased." Then there is Shakuntala's own father who, when moving to India after Partition, had concealed his gold guineas and cash inside a belt that he covered with inner wear, trousers, and a strategically loose bush shirt. And in all the travelling he did after that, he would carry his money and valuables in a secret pocket stitched onto his inner wear. And best of all, he saw to it that the clothes his children wore had secret pockets too!

Towards the end of the book, Shakuntala includes the voices of four family members who recall, in their own words, their harrowing Partition journeys across the newly-mapped borders. What is, however, remarkable in these brief, almost terse, accounts is the absence of bitterness and self-pity. The lost ancestral homeland is, of course, remembered and mourned for, but not in an incapacitating way because these matter-of-fact one-page, two-page accounts also talk of sending down new, life-affirming roots, making good, and of finding a place under the sun.

The book's narrative is further enriched by a number of old b/w photographs, printed plates, sketches, posters, postcards etc that give the book a vintage appeal, and offer additional glimpses of Sindhi culture. The book cover itself features three iconic structures of Sindh: the turquoise blue-tiled Satiyun jo Asthan, known for its healing and wish-fulfilling powers; the arched Ayub Bridge built in the 1960s; and the cantilevered Landsdowne Bridge, an engineering marvel built by the British in the 19th century to further their own trade systems and interests.

Shakuntala Bharvani's *My Sindh* is a most interesting read, enabling readers to see how the Sindhi community, like every other community without exception, helps shape the rich cultural mosaic of India. It is a most welcome addition to the other recent books on Sindh that include, among others, the splendid *Sindhnamah* by Nandita Bhavnani and Gita Simoes, and Saaz Aggarwal's *Sindh: Stories from a Vanished Homeland*, and *Sindhi Tapestry: An Anthology of Reflections on Sindhi Identity*. Every culture has its own stories, and these have to be told because, to quote Nigerian writer Ben Okri, "one way or another, we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way." We are the stories we tell.

Saroj Merani is on the faculty, Xavier Institute of Communications, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, and was former Cultural Advisor, American Center, Mumbai.

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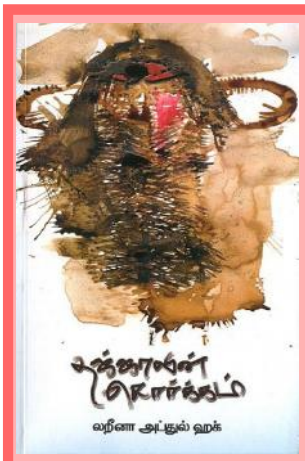
Lareena's Heaven, Lareena's Hell

-C S Lakshmi



Title: *Dajjalin Sorgam* (Dajjal's Heaven)
Author: Lareena Abdul Haq
Publisher: S Godage & Brothers,
Colombo, Sri Lanka
Year: 2016
Pages: xxiii + 89
Price: S L Rs.450

Before reviewing Lareena Abdul Haq's short story collection *Dajjalin Sorgam* (Dajjal's Paradise) it is necessary to give a short introduction to her life, her work and her writing. Lareena is an acclaimed writer, essayist and also singer. The life of this multi-talented woman itself reads like a story. Lareena is from Matale and she studied in the University of Peradeniya and after teaching in the same university as an assistant lecturer, she is currently a lecturer at Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka in Balangoda, Sri Lanka. This introduction is based on the interview she gave the Thamizh Nenjam Blog on February 2, 2016 and our chats.

Lareena's mother's name is Fauzul Hinaya who has written more than 30 serial stories in the pen name Mathalai Farveen. She used to take part in the Sri Lanka Radio musical programme called *Pattukkup Paattu* (Song for a song) and always managed to win the first prize. She had a very sweet voice. Lareena has the pleasant memory of following her footsteps and taking part at the age of 9 in the same programme produced by B H Abdul Hameed and winning the second prize. When she was in the 5th Standard she wrote the Tamil language scholarship exam and one of her answers was a story. That was her first story. She wrote a poem on a bus when she was 12 and that was published in *Veerakesari* and one can say that it was her first published work. And the competitions that were arranged on Tamil Language Day and Sinhala and English Language days, Id Milad Festival competitions prepared the ground for her creative urge to flourish.

Although her father Galakedara M M Abdul Haq was a trained English teacher and Principal; of a college he was also a famous music director in the Sinhala film industry. He composed the music for Sinhala films like *Sujeeva* (1972), *Sunethra* (1973) and *Sukiri Kella* (Sweet Girl, 1975) and *Obai Mamai* (You and I, 1975). Her maternal grandfather was an Indian from Tirunelveli. He was a Siddha medicine practitioner and well trained in Carnatic music. Listening to him singing Bharathiyar's song *Chinnanj chiru kiliye* (Tiny little parrot) song in his resonant voice was a great experience. This family background and the encouragement given by the teachers and Principal of Ameena Girls' College that she studied in, one can say, were instrumental in her entering the field of creative writing and arts.

Lareena has several publications to her credit. A short story collection, a poetry collection, two novels, translated poems and research articles form the body of her work. She translates from Tamil to Sinhala and from Sinhala to Tamil. A poetry collection, a book of poems translated from Sinhala and English and a collection of essays on voices of women have been held up due to the pandemic and will hopefully be published soon.

Her fictional works, poetry, music and research works have received several prestigious awards and prizes. It has not been easy for her to function as a writer and academic with works centering on women's issues and women's life. She was referred to as a feminist who had been brainwashed by western ideas and sidelined many times. They even said that in all her stories there was a woman sitting right in the centre.

The stories and other works that she published after 2015 were written while she was suffering severe mental torture and physical assault by her husband. She chose writing continuously to escape from the thought of committing suicide, which she attempted twice because of mental torture. Lareena took a *Faskh-e-Nikah* from her husband which is the dissolution of a marriage by an Islamic Court (in a Muslim country) or a Shariah Council (in any other country) when the wife wants to proceed with divorce but the husband unreasonably refuses to grant the *Talaq*. In India we are more familiar with a woman seeking separation through *Khula* which is a separation by way of consent between the parties. In Islamic law the right of terminating the marriage through a *Talaq* has been given to the husband. Islam has also taken into consideration the fact that a husband may sometimes

abuse the power given to him and cause his wife undue distress by refusing to release her from marriage, despite the objectives of the marriage not being achieved. In these circumstances Islam has given the wife an opportunity to seek relief from such oppression through *Faskh-e-Nikah*. It is not easy for a Muslim woman to seek divorce for severe warnings are directed to a wife who unduly seeks a divorce. A Hadith has mentioned that the fragrance of *Jannah* (paradise) is *haram* for a woman who seeks a divorce without a valid reason (Musnad Ahmad). Importantly a woman must exhaust all possible avenues of reconciliation prior to considering *Faskh*. *Faskh* is resorted to as an absolute last resort when all other mechanisms have failed.

In a way, this long explanation of *Faskh* was important for me to understand Lareena's book *Dajjalin Sorgam* (Dajjal's Paradise) for the title story of the book reflected her own life. Her husband's name is Firdous which also means a great paradise. Lareena plays with these words and what has emerged is a book of stories that speak of women in many different situations coping and succumbing and women who stand by other women. The book is about hell in a marital situation and in a family and in a given society and it is also about heaven when women find their ways of liberation. It is also about what is depicted as paradise actually becoming hell.

Reading *Dajjalin Sorgam* revealed a new world to me of Muslim women in Sri Lanka. The stories were stark and filled with metaphors and allegories that were deeply disturbing and revealing. They also had clarity and conviction. This is the reason why it is important to review a book written five years ago. The letter I wrote to Lareena after reading the stories is a review of the stories, and I reproduce the letter below with a bit of editing. Since I was planning a review article covering her as a writer, which I have done here, the letter was a short review of her stories. I have also translated two of her stories which are elsewhere in this Newsletter. Before I reproduce the letter here *Dajjal*'s paradise has to be explained.

The *Dajjâl* is an evil figure in Islamic eschatology. He is the Great Deceiver who will impersonate the true Messiah and call himself the Messiah. Many will be deceived by him for he would perform miracles and be able to bring prosperity. He will not be pleasant to behold. He will bring with him something which will resemble Paradise and Hell; but what he calls Paradise will in fact, be Hell, and what he calls Hell will in fact, be Paradise. It is this deceptive quality that Lareena constantly touches upon in her stories where women see through the deception at times and at times overcome them and at times knowingly accept it as their fate.

And now for the review letter:

I read your stories over the weekend. It is not easy to rebel against a particular community and its oppressions staying within it. You do it with great courage. I congratulate you for that.

What I am reviewing here is not your stand as much as your stories. I got the feeling that Seynambu Niza who comes in the first story comes in many different forms in other stories. It appeared to me that Seynambu Niza took the form of many women oppressed by the society and by religion. In fact, Seynambu Niza becomes the symbol of all women who want to express themselves and the misery they undergo. That is why one gets the feeling that one is reading extensions of the same story again and again. There is nothing wrong in that. It is true that many women face the same kind of sorrow in many different ways. But strangely these stories seemed to me like many stories of one woman. The story that rises above all stories, like a crescendo, is *Dajjalin Sorgam*. The woman who wants to write poetry and the oppression she faces was another dimension of Sainambu Niza's unbearable pain. The story and the metaphor of *Dajjal* in the story gave a final shape and completion to all the other stories that were being told.

The women in the stories that spoke about women in different situations attracted me a great deal. In the story "*Pombala*" (Woman) Sidhimma who decides to drive a van after the *iddah*, the waiting period of the widow, the correct justifications she gives for taking that decision and her courage have been written very beautifully and with perfection with minimum use of words. The deep yearnings and pain of the small girl in "*Karuppi*" (The Dark One) being told from that girl's perspective is very effective. Women like Seynambu Nachi who liberates Naleera, taking part in the politics of the family and trying to bring justice into it, shows that in the family as an institution there were many kinds of women who functioned in many different ways; it will be difficult and also simplistic to categorise them and fit them into specific relationships and stereotype them. Similarly, the Aatha who comes in the story "*Aatha*" (Grandmother) and the way she functions is a very interesting portrayal of women who are not educated and their ways of dealing with things. Similarly, the story "*Puliyamarathu Paeykal*" (The Ghouls on the Tamarind Tree) tells the story of a young girl and sexual harassment within the family in a totally different way.

Your way of telling a story is direct. Even though poems are a part of the stories the stories have characters who speak directly about their agony and pain to the readers. Two stories that move away from this manner of telling stories are "*Dajjalin Sorgam*" and "*Puliyamarathu Paeykal*". The

tamarind tree as a metaphor and the tree with its ghouls hugging the little girl and giving her protection and solace takes a totally different route from your direct way of telling stories and takes the story to an entirely different plane. Similarly, when the terrifying one-eyed figure that comes at the end of the universe turns into the husband of the woman in "*Dajjalin Sorgam*" it is as if it is trying to say that all that a Muslim woman can aspire for is this *Dajjal*'s hell that is "paradise".

You say that some religious fundamentalists oppose your stories. These men appear in your stories as fathers, husbands and Chachas. Some good men (like the one who allows Sidhimma to drive the van, the uncle who encourages a divorced girl to educate herself and take up a job and so on) appearing in the stories reveals that you are not alone and that there are those who support you and encourage you. In the stories, although there is a group of women which tries to control and abuse women who think differently there are also women who stand by them and speak for them. Many women in the stories are those who have suppressed their aches and pains for ages but who get the opportunity to find their voices to speak about their grievances when young girls speak out.

A kind of depression gets hold of the mind when the stories become unrelieved sorrow. But the stories that one wants to tell have to be told, isn't it? I see these stories as the canvas waiting for many different experiences of women to be sketched on it. I hope the stories that will be drawn on this canvas will be in many different hues and shapes.

Dajjalin Sorgam was seen as a book going against Islam and a book stall run by an Islamic movement has banned the sale of the book for the last two years. Lareena went to them and asked them if she did not seem like a Muslim to them. A strange irony is that the book is dedicated to Firdaus, her husband. Not many know that Lareena has divorced her husband although she lives separately with her two adorable children. When I asked her why she dedicated the book to him she told me that in Sri Lanka there is a Tamil phrase that means "beating up after soaking". She says her husband would have understood what she was soaking him in and would have caught on to the sarcasm. She also said that the dedication shut up some gossipping mouths. And thus Lareena writes, sings, laughs and cooks seven course meals for her two loving angels. Not only that; she posts her songs on the Facebook and also photographs of her elaborate meals!

The One Who Survived to Tell the Story

-C S Lakshmi

Title: *Mogana: Oru Irumbup Pennmaniyin Kadhai* (Mohana: The Story of An Iron Woman)
Author: S Mohana
Publisher: Bharathi Puthakalayam,
Chennai, Year: 2021
No. of pages: 144 including photo pages
Price: Rs.120/-

Professor Mohana is a cancer survivor. But this book is not about how she survived cancer but about how apart from cancer she survived many prejudices, ill-treatments and oppressions as a woman in her life. Hence the sobriquet Iron Woman has become a part of her name. Her life story which was being serialised in *Puthagam Pesudhu* magazine has now come out as a book and it is interesting to see it as a book. Left movement activist S A Perumal who writes the foreword for the book says that not everyone who has self-respect is worthy of writing an autobiography. He says only social activists whose lives have been exemplary have the right and are worthy of writing about their lives. How accurate this statement is when it comes to women's history where every woman's life counts, will not be discussed here. This review is about what Mohana herself thinks of her life. Mohana herself says in her preface that Engels believed in action and not words and that she was convinced to write about her work in the society by many friends who told her that like many others who had worked for the society who have been forgotten, her work too would be forgotten if she did not document it. During the pandemic she put together whatever she had written and completed it with the hope that if her life could inspire someone to take up social activities the book would have served its purpose.

Mohana was born in 1948 in a beautiful village Sholampettai in the Mayiladuthurai tehsil, Nagappatinam district. She was born five years after her mother had lost a male child in the womb. She was brought up as a pampered child. There was a pond behind her house and the river Cauvery flowed nearby. It was a small river and was known as the river that was not crossed by a goat.

When she was four years old she was put in a small school that had three rooms and two pials. She was a chatter box and studied well. She was often caught by the teachers chatting but was never punished severely because she was a good student. She says she first came to know about untouchability when a fifty-year old grave digger came and asked for water and when asked to give him water she gave a tumbler of water in his hand. Everyone at home was shocked including the person to whom she had given the water.

Her father ran a cycle shop in her name and he taught her to repair cycles and the two of them were the only ones who could read and write in the family. A memory she often recalls now is about how when she was a school girl Periyar E V Ramasamy Naicker came to her school to hoist the flag and she and her classmate sang a Bharati song and Periyar smiled at them. At this time her family had to face economic difficulties. She used to get up at five in the morning and do house work and then go and get milk and then work in the cycle shop. The time at the cycle shop she would utilise to read the newspaper and books. She also worked with her father in the field watering, weeding and digging the field planted with mango, tamarind, lemon and other trees and grains and vegetables. She also used to go and sell the vegetables in the market and buy things for the house. She used to feed cotton seed to the cows and even milk them at times although a bit afraid to do it. She knew how to make cow dung cakes for fuel and took the cattle for grazing too. She would let the cattle graze and sit under a tree and read. Once a cow got lost and she got beaten up but the cow returned after four days on its own.

When she was in Fifth Class her father was cheated by someone and lost everything. Someone helped her to continue her studies. Her father put her under a person who was giving tuitions to children. She was the only girl there and a good student. Once when the teacher asked who all would go for further studies only four students put up their hands. Mohana was not one among them. When her teacher asked her why, she said she was not sure her father would allow her to study further. But when she passed her Fifth,

the teacher came and persuaded her father to send her for further studies. Her father gave in to him. The new school was across the river and thus Mohana became the first girl to cross the river that was not even crossed by a goat, to go to school.

Since she had to do all the regular house work also she used to run to the school through short cuts she had discovered. But school life held many other experiences also. One was the marriage of a classmate to a 70-year old man for the sake of property and her losing her husband within six months. Something similar happened to her in her Eighth Class—her family forced her to marry her maternal uncle but she cried and created a ruckus and stopped it. When she was in the 11th she was down with small pox but her kind headmaster allowed her to appear for the final exams without appearing for the preliminary exams. Her family was hoping that she would fail in the exams because of the time lost due to small pox and thought that would put an end to her studies. There were also plans to get her married to another uncle's son. She was holding out against an entire family.

When the results came out she had come out in flying colours and within the first ten ranks too. Then started a struggle for higher studies. She had to go on hunger strike but no one really cared. It was her grandmother who took pity on her and told her father to allow her to study further. She applied to Kumbakonam Government College and got admission to study Mathematics but there was no money to pay the fees. Her paternal aunt helped out. She loved being in the hostel and her studies. Later she got admission for studying medicine but again money was the problem and she joined the BSc Zoology course in Annamalai University. The University opened many doors to her including love for Tamil. She was part of the anti-Hindi struggle and in 1968 became a graduate.

Little did Mohana know what it was to be an educated person in a family that was not educated. A letter came from a male friend from the university asking her about further studies. She was not at home when the letter came. He was with her in the university and she had known him from school days and he used to live in her paternal aunt's village. It was in English. Her paternal uncle, who had studied only up to the Fifth, read the letter and thought it was a love letter. The entire family decided that instead of letting her marry a person of a lower caste it would be better to kill her. They decided to poison her with the poison hidden in the halwa sweet that she loved a lot. Fortunately for her the same uncle decided to ask her why she had let them down. She read the letter and told them it was only about further studies. Not believing her they gave it to an educated person in the village and he told them it was only a routine letter and told them to educate her further. Her life was saved but the family began to ostracise her.

The family was in poor circumstances and there was no way she could study further. But help came from three of her seniors in college and she went for further studies but only after promising her father that she would not fall in love with anyone. In 1971 she had her Master's degree in hand. And she had passed with a first class. Now she was in the job market and had to face the society as a woman and she got the taste of it in her very first interview. When she went for an interview with her father and a neighbour who knew the interviewer who was head of a department, the interview went very well till the two of them were with her. When they went to have a cup of tea the interviewer's attitude changed and she had to tell him she would scream and expose him. When the other two came back her excitement about facing an interview for a job had gone. She was trembling and upset. But she got the job in the Zoology Department of that university. It was a one-year job where she had to teach only boys but she managed and she also managed to ignore another lecturer who wanted to marry her. For the next job her family hid the appointment letter but somehow she found it on time and joined the job. Then marriage talks began.

They had found a groom for her. He was ten years older than her and was not as educated but the family insisted. And one of her lecturer friends who had got married also told her that it was a good alliance and she should agree. She felt that she could please the family by agreeing to marry. On the wedding night her husband placed 75 paise in her hand and told her that that was all his salary was as he had taken a lot of loans and her heart sank. It sank further when he asked a few days later to promise him that she would never go astray. She started her married life as the usual daughter-in-law and discovered that her husband did not care for or respect anyone in the house including his parents. Her in-laws were very nice people and her job and their nature kept her going. Her husband continued to be irresponsible and once even beat her which her father-in-law objected to. She became busy with the teachers' association in college. Much to her dismay she discovered that she was pregnant. When it was time for delivery her husband was making plans to go out with friends and when she told him to stay back he kicked her and told her he was not her servant. A few days later when she delivered her child in the hospital her mother-in-law and another friend were with her and her husband was nowhere to be seen. Mohana says that when her child cried she forgot all her pain and sorrow and she was filled with a happiness hitherto not experienced. (p. 44)

She came back home to take over the kitchen, mind the child and run the house because her husband did not want his mother or sister to cook or run the house. It was hell. One night she made bold and at 12:30 in the night left home with the child on her shoulder determined to fall in front of the Boat Mail, the last train to Rameswaram that left at 1:10 a.m. She decided to walk the one kilometre distance. What stopped her was the thought that if anything were to happen to her what would be the plight of the child. She came back home. But her torture continued.

There was regular battering and then her husband would threaten to leave home and she would beg him not to go. He did not like her being active in the teachers' association either. He would complain to all her friends about her. If the child fell sick it would be her friends who would stand by her. She attempted suicide twice taking sleeping pills but survived but in 1982, the third time, she took enough pills to go to the edge of death and return. Beatings and abuses continued at home. She lied to doctors who treated her that she had fallen down but everyone knew the truth.

She went home but as usual her parents told her she should adjust and her father brought her back and apologised to the son-in-law. Why did she put up with all this and not get out of the situation when she was a working woman? Mohana says: "…I was afraid of the society. Those were times when even women going out to work was viewed as something wrong. I thought it would be difficult to live alone without male support. Also the thought that my family also will not support me if I came to them alone [as an independent woman] stopped me." (pp. 47-48) She adds that had she been in the left movement then as she is now maybe she may not have put up with this abusive life. Her friends in the teachers' association always stood by her whenever she needed help. Even for her hysterectomy she went to the hospital on her own and her friends came later to take care of her.

When her son was in the Sixth Class her father-in-law made a touching gesture. He wrote a will giving the entire property to her son and made her the guardian. When she objected he told her, "Don't object. Don't live with that oppressor, even if he is my son. Go and live on your own. But don't forget us. Whether you live with him or not, you are our dear daughter-in-law." (p.48) Her eyes filled with tears. Soon she lost both her in-laws. Her sister-in-law's husband also died and she began to take care of her and her two children. But soon things reached unbearable limits when the son was also beaten up and the husband often began to leave home and then come back. At one point she also left home and stayed with friends. Threats to kill her and kill him began to happen and that was when she decided to file for divorce. The house owner and the college attender came forward to give evidence against her husband. But when the son himself came forward to be evidence against the father, he agreed to the divorce. The case went on for five years. And finally in 1992 she got her divorce.

Her son told her she could remarry but she had no mind to fall into the pit of marriage again. She told her son about the grandfather's will. She also told him that they did not need the property as she could educate him. They decided to give the property back to the husband and his sister. Her husband remarried within six months. His second wife once came to her saying she was being abused. Soon he left her also and disappeared for a long time.

She continued to live her life and support her sister-in-law and her own family. After many years news came that her husband was somewhere and he needed money. She sent the money through someone. In the year 2014 she got news that he had committed suicide. She spoke to her son in the US. He told her to bear the expenses for the final rites. She bore the expenses for his final rites too. Mohana ends this phase of her life with the words: "Panneerselvam who had made a battlefield of my life for 15 years left after giving me a lifetime worth of bad experiences. The wounds he inflicted have not yet healed. Even now when I think of them I feel deeply disturbed. I lose my sleep." (p.51)

If there is one thing she is proud of it is her son who has stood by her and who gave her the courage to divorce his father. Her son now lives and works in America after marrying a girl of his choice. She says that they are not the usual mother and son and that now she longs to talk to her grandchildren. Mohana writes in detail about how she got involved in the *Ariviyal Iyakkam*, the Science Forum programme of the left movement, and her activities in the teachers' struggles and about her close friends in the movement. She does not even forget an engine driver in Kolkata who bought her tea in a khullar. She writes with great warmth and love about Arunandhi who was her mentor and inspiration in many ways in the movement and about his wife and about his death when he was struck with brain cancer. His wife stayed with Mohana for two years after his death. She also writes about MUTA (Madras University Techers' Association) and its history of activities and struggles and how they were often arrested and jailed and let out on bail. Mohana was the person chosen always to collect women for MUTA struggles and protests. In 1988 all the teachers' organisations and government employees' organisations came together as a large organisation called The Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers Organisations and Government Employees Organisations (JACTO-GEO) and organised a mammoth 25-day struggle for higher salary and other benefits like maternity benefits and medical leave. Mohana was also jailed along with

many others. She describes the mosquito-infested jails with dirty stinking toilets and says that when the well-known educationist Vasanthi Devi who was then a professor at the Queen Mary's College and was leading the teachers' strike, used to sing "*Thozhargale… thozhargale…*" ("Comrades… comrades… sleep is not for us; Come…") it used to be thrilling. When they came out of the jail they were welcomed by a joyful crowd and all their demands were met. It was their struggles then that have given the benefits that teachers enjoy today, she says. (Vasanthi Devi was appointed as the principal of the Government College for Women, Kumbakonam, between 1988 and 1990. Between 1992 and 1998, she was appointed as the Vice-chancellor of the Manonmaniam Sundaranar University and later made the chairperson of the State Commission for Women in Tamil Nadu between 2002 and 2005.)

Mohana has been with the Science Forum Movement of Tamil Nadu, known as the Second Independence Movement of India, for the past 34 years. She says this movement has shaped her personality and made her the person she is. She says in a way it was a women's movement because the teachers were mostly women. Mohana's work for the sanitation workers began after her retirement. She joined the CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions) and began to work for the benefit of the sanitation workers. She says this trade union work has given her much fulfilment.

Mohana does not hold back her punches either when she talks about the left movement that has been her source of inspiration and strength. While she says the left movement through its Science Forum programme and its trade union activities involved many women in its various activities she also says that the movement suffers from two drawbacks. The first one is that even now in districts it is not easy for women to be presidents, secretaries or treasurers at the state level in the organisation. She says she was Vice-President 25 years ago in the Science Forum and that it took her 25 years to become President of the Science Forum in 2015. The second drawback, she says, is character assassination of women. While it is true that everyone carries the prejudices that exist generally in society, Mohana says, those in the movement must be different from common people. She says the character assassination she was subjected to shook her up despite the fact that she was considered bold and assertive. She says not all women can face character assassination. She also clearly states that even in the movement when a woman has to be restrained the weapon used is character assassination. She argues that women are a big force in bringing about change in the society and that without women's participation one cannot change the world and a movement has the responsibility to not compromise in the matter of supporting women.

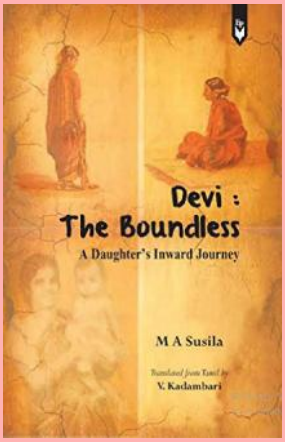
In 2010 Mohana took up the most important battle of her life—breast cancer. She fought against it just like the way she had fought against all other odds in her life and after five years of fight is now a cancer survivor and she says that overcoming cancer made her work even harder for the causes that were close to her heart. She says that she has many sons although she gave birth to only one. And she gives a quote of writer Mary Shelley in one of her chapters which says,"I am fearless and therefore powerful" (p.100) when she talks about herself and her writing and reading.

After years of travelling all over India as part of Science Forum programme and very often alone, and doing meaningful and useful work with the sanitation workers, Mohana is a full time researcher in the University of Madras from 2019 doing research on "Socio-economic Status and Impact of Cancer Patients in Tamil Nadu." Overcoming many strict rules regarding age Mohana has taken up research on an important subject at the age of 70. Like everything else in life, Mohana has got into it full of spirit and says that time is short but that she is hoping to finish her research by 2022. Knowing the fights she has won in her life one is sure that time would wait for her to finish her work. One also wishes she would write a book on her indomitable mother Alamelu about whom she posts often on Face Book and who lived a long life with her daughter and died only recently, for knowing about women like her with all their good qualities and their faults would add to the understanding of the lives women lead.

The book she has written is not just the story of her life but also the story of small-town girls and their families and education, of women who stand by other women, of men who are able to forge meaningful friendships with women and of sons who are friends of their mothers and of a movement that has brought many women together through its activities.

A Life Unbound

- Semeen Ali



Title: Devi : The Boundless
Author: M A Susila
Translator: V Kadambari
Publisher: Emerald Publishers
Year: 2020
Pages: 210
Price: Rs. 280/-

"For many women, access to autobiography means access to the identity it constructs. Therefore, the distinction between self-representation as a political discourse and self-representation as an artistic practice is less important than their simultaneity of function in a particular culture and for specific audiences."

This extract from Leigh Gilmore's seminal book *Autobiographics* sets the tone for the book that is here in the spotlight. M A Susila's *Devi: The Boundless* uses the genre of autobiographical fiction to tell *her* story. *History* and its varied ideas about how an individual/society/country came into being have been, mostly, written from the perspective of a male. The idea of what constitutes as relevant and what remains at the periphery to be narrated has largely been in the hands of men. For women the act of writing brings with it a set of assumptions and stereotypes that are already applied to a book if it has been written by a woman, thereby pigeonholing them that do not do justice to these works. The construction of one's identity is also predetermined by various factors and amongst them, especially for women, is their role within their home and their engagement with the world outside. But the idea of home remains tied up with the focus on women as the bearers of honour and tradition that define a home and at large a society. Crossing the threshold entails not only giving up on a predefined identity conferred upon a woman by a patriarchal system but it also requires an individual to also redefine herself. Writing one's own story in one's own voice provides that outlet for a woman to search and rediscover herself in the way that she wants to be heard and seen. By re-writing their own story, there is a resistance by women to not be placed in restrictive roles that limit not only their movement but also how they think and respond to the environment that surrounds them. Poet Bahinbai is considered as one of the earliest Indian women who wrote their autobiographies but if one traces the history of autobiographies or narratives written by women then what keeps turning up is the theme of claustrophobia and a need to be educated to be able to be free.

Susila's book in this context is an important one as it traces the journey of a Tamil Brahmin woman from her childhood to her last days. The original title is *Yadumagi* and is a book dedicated from a daughter to her mother—both of them defying the constrictions imposed upon them by the society. The timelines intersperse throughout the book as the two generations and their accounts are interwoven in alternate chapters of the book. The book opens with the daughter Charu plucking out a memory from the late 1960s when she was a child and the relationship with her mother, Devi. The image of her mother that is created for the reader at the beginning of the book is of someone who is confident, established in her field of work and a strict mother. These are the first impressions one gets on reading the opening chapter of the book. It is from the second chapter onwards that the unravelling of that image and a tracing of the development of character and personality of a young Devi begins. The dates that have been provided at the beginning of each chapter turn into a conversation between Charu and her mother. The growing up of both the individuals as the book proceeds is an interesting technique that has been used to look at the journeys of both the women simultaneously. At times one can compare and contrast the difficulties or the ease of transition from one phase to another, that both of them undergoes to become in the end the people they are.

The language used in the book is very simple and so is the narrating of events in the book. The simplicity lends power to the creation/rediscovering of one's voice. There are examples strewn across the book that I as a reader wish to understand in the original language of the book. As there are times when certain phrases or sentences feel as if they would read powerfully in the original text. The book highlights how

education in the early 1940s is focused more on boys and men receiving it than women. The idea behind this being that women are not supposed to be educated or more qualified than men. The fear of not finding a match for an accomplished woman looms large. Devi is married off at the age of eight to an eighteen-year-old boy who shortly post marriage passes away. Child marriage that is still practised in some parts of India finds a place in this book. The book provides a glance at the feelings of a child who is married off at such a young age when the concepts of marriage/love are still in their very nascent stage. It is difficult to understand what Devi must have felt or gone through when she gets married at such a tender age. Education is closed to her for a while and revived by her guilt-ridden father who feels that the only way he can possibly forgive himself for the plight of his child is by resuming her education. What follows is a quiet resilience of a girl to womanhood using education as a means to free herself from the confines of a closed space. Another thread of argument that rises later on in favour of education of women comes from within those patriarchal structures, where with the changing times; men want wives who were educated. That is used as an argument by Devi later on to push for the education of one of the girls. The practice of not sending girls to school once they attained puberty has been addressed and Devi finds a way of breaking through this belief by working from within the system that hold women down. What also turns up in this discussion on rights of a woman is the role of men in this book. If there are men that are a part of the social order that looks down upon women who are educated or feel that it is unnecessary to empower women; then on the other hand are men who are supporting the education of women as well as trying to help them gain a voice. The irony lies in the fact that it is in the end with the help of men that the women in this story are able to rise above the prescribed norms and regulations that try to bind them down.

The book is filled with photographs of the people that appear in the book. The black and white photographs are at times blurred but the haunting images retain a power of the past that they present to the reader. While reading, one can't help but try to identify the various faces with the people that feature in this book. It reminds one of Susan Sontag's quote from her book *On Photography* were she says: "Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one—and can help build a nascent one." The subjects in most of the photographs in this book are women and one learns a lot by looking at the way they have been presented. A silence that hangs above them is quite apparent and comes out powerfully in these photographs. Words have a way of helping imagine a world especially if one is writing about one's life. With the help of images, that world comes alive and one can hope to get a glimpse of how it was really like—trying to break through those invisible barriers that surrounded women in those times. There are women who also uphold the dictates of the society and do not want women to be educated like the grandmother in the story who feels that people look down upon women who are educated and are not respected. The contrast from women wanting to get educated is a stark one and the book tries to show the thought process and history of women who decide to accept the traditions willingly. There is also a detailed discussion on the widows and the segregation that they observe from others. Since Devi is widowed at a very young age, she escapes the lives that otherwise widows are ordained to abide by. This sets up the question of how it is not even at the level of the mind that women are supposed to be monitored but even when it comes to their bodies, monitoring is not spared. Their agencies in their own choices and way of life have already been decided for them by others. The way Paatti washes her clothes and dries them using a bamboo stick to spread them out to dry—that depiction brings up so many questions and at the same time one turns into a witness to lives that are still being led without questioning anything or raising their voices against it. It is towards the end of the book, when one of the photographs, on looking at it closely, is of women all dressed in white and posing for a photograph but the photograph overall is too dark for one to be able to see the faces that adorn this particular photograph. One can't help but associate this photograph with the history of the woman Devi that this book has attempted to capture and the moments that stood out in her life that threatened to darken her future. One is forced to think of the lives of women in those times especially when education for a woman was in its early stages and frowned upon. An invisibility that is conferred on women who are marginalised in a culture that gets stagnated in colonial times and gets dominated by men preventing many past deviations that were possible for women; to be able to reach a stage in one's life on one's own terms and to be able to hear one's own voice in a multitude of domineering voices is something that one becomes a witness to in this piece of work.

Life and Forests, Rivers and Hoopoe Birds

- C S Lakshmi

Title: *Koodu & Pira Kadhaigal* (Nest & Other Stories)
Author: Kalaiselvi
Publisher: Yaavarum Publishers, Chennai
Year: 2021
No. of Pages: 160
Price: Rs.190

This is the fifth short story collection of Kalaiselvi whose stories delve deep into the inner minds of people to bring out the complex lives they live through spoken words and through silences. Taking the stories on non-linear paths often through forests which become a metaphor in her stories to depict the unpredictability and complexity of human relationships, Kalaiselvi has arrived at a unique style of storytelling. Many of her stories end with hidden doors for the readers to go through and see beyond the stories. This fifth collection of stories is no exception.

In her very short preface for this collection, Kalaiselvi talks about how stories happen to her. She says, "When you read something, somewhere or do something, like a small stroke of lightning one's heart softens and such softenings become stories. The forests without much human crowding melt the heart more." And she says that water also fascinates her as something that represents the impermanence of life and the endless nature of life. The stories in this collection very clearly reveal her fascination with both forests and water, especially the Ganges.

This first story called "*Koodu*" (Nest) sets the tone and the pace of the other stories some of which revolve around the forest and others around water bodies. The forest dwellers being thrown out of the forests that belong to them along with the animals that become targets of greedy officials who while claiming to care and protect the forests exploit the forests, is the theme of the first story. Those who really want to save the forests become extremists who have to be imprisoned. Kaliselvi weaves this story beautifully taking it through visuals of pregnant Sambar deers saved by the forest dwellers, female hoopoe birds on the terminalia trees building nests around themselves to lay eggs being fed by the male hoopoe birds, and animals that live in the forests in harmony with the human dwellers. The story ends with the father of the person considered an extremist in prison being given the death penalty thinking of the female hoopoe bird that would break its nest and come out to more chirping and love. His own son he thinks would become part of the forest mingling with the fragrance of its flowers, chatting with the black birds in the crevices of the rocks or get dissolved in the sawdust arising when trees are cut.

There are also forest dwellers who in exchange for exotic food like parathas and similar food get dragged into creating agricultural fields out of forests and cutting forest trees led by a person who lures them into it. ("*Kumki*", Trained Elephant). The forest also figures in other ways in stories. It is a place where a person who is a much-loved postman who distributes letters in the forest villages can hide his secret relationship. It is also a place where his son wanders to find his father to inform him of the death of the mother only to realise inadvertently that the father always spent a longer time distributing the letters in the forest area than at home. ("*Pattuvada*", Distribution). The forest provides a mental refuge to many. A woman caught in family politics is able to think that the metaphorical forest that is limitless will always be there for her as her refuge. ("*Annai*", Mother). Along with exploitation of the wealth of the forest there is also the exploitation of the forest women which is indicated in the stories but in the story "*Muthubommu*" it climaxes into a goddess myth. A minor girl whose spirit is appeased by the parents secretly, is the one who is sexually exploited and killed by a rich old man who has occupied the forest land to build a guest house. She appears as a spirit to kill him and later his son who comes to the same area to shoot a film.

The Ganges and its surroundings provide the space and the opportunity for self-reflection and relief for both women and men who are able to understand the complexities of familial politics and relationships on the banks of the Ganges. ("*Neerosai*", The Sound of Water), "*Mayakkannan*", The Magical Krishna). Even a much decried destitute woman on the shore of a river is able to retain her sensitivity and move

away from violence and cruelty holding on to her pet dog (*Vaarppukal* , Moulds). A story that is set in the times of the freedom movement in Bengal that is about a relationship between a young widow and a south Indian man who has come there with no plans but has made himself one among them and about how men who talk great politics are also exploiters of women is also set in the marshy lands of a village by the lake. The widow lies dead in the depths of the marshy land with the incriminating evidence of a wooden slipper of a person he respects caught in the slippery sand nearby, both not easily visible. ("*Thanganodigal*", Golden Moments).The story of a wife thrown out of her home by a wayward husband does not happen by a water body but is literally drenched in water for throughout the story there is incessant rain like the rain in which she stood outside her home when she was thrown out by the husband, mother-in-law and his second wife. ("*Minnal*", Lightning).

Then there are meetings of two acquaintances that happen by the steps of a dry water body. Its dryness is akin to the dryness of their lives. There are things about their lives that connect them but their meetings are accidents, their conversation even when personal details are exchanged, hang loose and finally like the dried up water body where final rites are performed by the man, their relationship too is a dried up river with no direction to flow. When the woman finally gets into the bus after an accidental meeting, the noise around muffles her voice when she tells him where she is headed to after her mother's death. (*Padithurai*, Steps Leading to the Pond)

There are some unusual stories where stereotypes of the sacrificing, brimming-with-love mothers are broken and they feel like cold sharp knives entering one's body. In the "*Annai*" story, for example, a girl who has rejected an alliance with a diabetic person, not because he is diabetic but because she is involved with someone else, is treated as an outcaste by the family abandoned to live her life on her own because the love she depended on turned out to be as rootless as a water bubble. Her mother is no support to her in this emotional abandonment because her own security lies with her sons. The mother dies. The daughter's wailing for the dead mother who in her final days had been bedridden with paralysis, fills her mind with a relief and joy that only she can understand. In the "*Pattampoochi*", Butterfly) story this disconnect with the mother is like a deep gorge between the mother and daughter and she can overcome it only by developing wings like a butterfly and become light and fly away. The daughter lives with her parents. The family has faced the traumatic death of an elder daughter who has burnt herself to death. Her complaints to her parents about a cruel mother-in-law only bring advice to adjust and manage. Now the elder sister's husband is asking for the hand of the younger one. It is not that the younger daughter does not have dreams about marriage and physical desires. But she has also seen a sister die. Her parents are discussing how to raise the topic with her. The mother suddenly starts talking about how it was not entirely the fault of the son-in-aw and how her own daughter was a bit impatient and intolerant and how she brought the violent death upon herself. It is a moment of great shock when a mother reveals her true nature as someone who is willing to offer her younger daughter to a person who had instigated her elder daughter's violent death. The daughter can feel the wings of the butterfly she used to become during school days. And she wills to resist her parents.

Then there is the young mother whose husband is constantly going in and out of prison probably for his political activities in the story ("*Mudivili*", Endless) Her school-going son disappears during one of those times when the husband is in prison and she is on night duty as she is forced to work to eke out a living. In the process she is also attracted to someone else. There is no news of her son, the husband in prison is blaming her of being careless and her new friend calls her while she is at the bus stop. She is young; she needs a man in her life; she loves her son; but he is also the spit image of the father in prison and the father in prison is not a particularly loving husband. He does not assure her of anything, not even love even though theirs was a marriage of their choice. Caught up in all this is the young woman who is the mother.

Apart from forests and water bodies, exotic birds also appear in Kalaiselvi's stories in urban areas. One such bird is the cockatiel bird that is the loving pet of a woman who is caught in the pandemic times. No Tamil reader would have heard of this bird. Nor have I. I had to look it up and check if people have them as pets inTamil Nadu and found out that they do! The story is about a woman on her own whose husband is stranded in Bangalore due to the lockdown. Her sexual relationship with him is like a teasing tug of war where each one is trying to pull in different directions with her not giving in easily. Alone in the house, the female cockatiel bird strangely named Sanju is her only companion. She arranges for her husband to stay with a schoolmate of hers in Bangalore whose husband is stranded abroad. The story ends with the usual twist: the husband is happy with the friend and not too eager to come back and she is left with the cockatiel bird which calls out to her. ("*Poochendu*", Bouquet)

Kalaiselvi has also constructed an interesting story around the great train robbery of RBI boxes that happened in the train from Salem to Chennai. It is about a young man who dreams of living a different life with riches who joins others

to do the robbery. The twist is that the five hundred and thousand rupee notes worth lakhs stolen are declared invalid the day after the robbery due to demonetisation. The actual robbery happened in August 2016 but Kalaiselvi has taken the liberty to make it happen a day before in November 2016 when the demonetisation and the invalidity of the currency notes of these denominations was announced. ("*Kanavu*", Dream).

The women in Kaliselvi's s stories are vulnerable and they assert themselves in different ways and also succumb in different ways. The men in her stories are not always absolute villains but very often they are incapable of being good husbands and good lovers—not even good brothers. They are weak-willed and directionless but also manipulators and exploiters in general terms. She does not paint them in clear black strokes but black is a colour she keeps close to her when it comes to men. The women, despite being in very different circumstances and very different contexts, many of them unenviable and gloomy, come out with personalities that are throbbing with life. They are constantly confronting and dealing with life in ways known to them. The stories don't tell us that they win always but they are there even if they appear as a stroke of lighting like Meenal in the "Minnal" story. Set against some breathtaking descriptions of the forests and the Ganges these stories stand firm like mountains and run deep like the Ganges.

Congratulations!
AWARDS 2020-21

In January 2021, **Priyanca Radhakrishnan** was conferred a *Pravasi Bharatiya Samman* Award for public service, by the Indian President in a virtual ceremony. **In 2020, Priyanca Radhakrishnan** was appointed as Minister for the Community and Voluntary Sector, Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities, Minister for Youth and Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment, making her New Zealand's first Minister of Indian origin.

Savita Damle: Translator and Editor, received *Yashwant Rao Chavan Pratishthan and Mahila Vyaspeeth Gaurav* Award 2020.

Arundhathi Subramaniam has been awarded the *Sahitya Akademi* Award for English Book, *When God is a Traveller (2020)*.

Neetu Singh, an assistant professor at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi has been awarded the *Janaki Ammal-National Women Bioscientist* Award 2020-21 under the 'Young Category.

Dr. Anindita Bhadra has been awarded the prestigious *Janaki Ammal- National Women Bioscientist* Award, 2020-2021.

Prof. Nina Sabnani (IDC, School of Design) has been selected to receive *The Legend of Indian Animation* Award for the year 2021

Sakthi Arulanandam is the pen name of Arulmozhi, Ecofeminist poet, author and artist from the state of Tamil Nadu who has been the recipient of the *Tanjai Prakash* Award, the *Sikaram* Award and the *Tiruppur Arima Sakthi* Award for her poetry.

Aranga Mallika, Associate Professor at Ethiraj College for Women and a poet honoured by the Rotaract Club of East Coast,Chennai, with *Quintessence of Change* Award 2021 for the contribution of Education and Empowerment of women.

Tamil writer **Sukirtha Rani,** received the 2020 *Vilakku* Award (announced in October 2021) given in memory of legendary writer Pudumaipithan, by the Vilakku Literary group in the US.

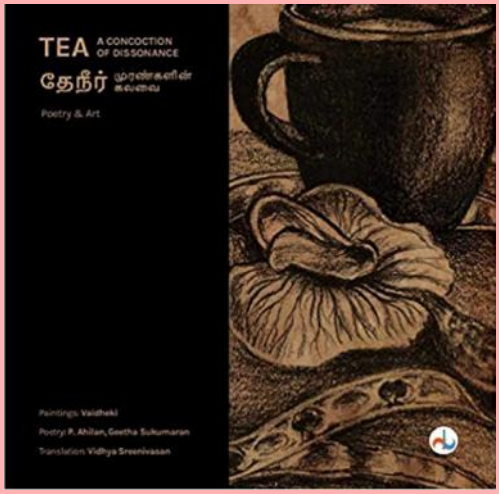
Tamil writer **A Vennila,** received the *Mu. Karunanidhi Porkizhi Virudhu* Award 2022.

Theatre director **Prasanna Ramaswamy**, received the *Karunanidhi Porkizhi Virudhu* Award 2022.

SPARROW Congratulates all the winners!

Tea and Dissonance

- C S Lakshmi



Title: Tea: A Concoction of Dissonance
Authors: Paintings: Vaidheki
Poetry: P Ahilan, Geetha Sukumaran
Translation: Vidhya Sreenivasan
Publisher: Dhauli Books, Odisha
No. of pages: 108
Price: Rs. 690/-

A bilingual book that combines poetry, paintings and translation that one can enjoy as much as one enjoys hot cups of tea made in a variety of styles in a variety of moods, is a rare treat. Two poets, P Ahilan and Geetha Sukumaran, have contributed poems which capture an entire universe in a cup of tea. In his foreword, Riyaz Latif rightly calls these poems "poetic meditations spriralling in the ineffable stirrings of tea…" Ahilan says that his poems emerged when a world of tea opened up for him when he realised how this every day gesture of making and having tea and conversing over a cup of tea "takes shape as a language of the body, as the structure of a tradition and the way it is intricately woven into social positionalities…" For Geetha Sukumaran, the taste of tea changes according to the historical and other memories it evokes while tasting it—memories that transcend geographical borders and bring to mind myriad thoughts about colonial plantation slavery, class and gender divisions, multinational corporates, consumerism and even Zen Buddhism, as if all of these have been boiled together in a cup of tea. And there are those "tea moments" which are deeply personal. Her poems are about these different ways of tasting and experiencing tea.

The paintings by Vaidheki are like painted poems and Vidhya Sreenivasan's translation of the original Tamil poems is a beautiful way of combining two different languages where the original and the translation sit next to each other in their own identities and also in the shadow of the other. Dhauli Books from Odisha has designed the book in a way that is a joyful poem in its own way. The combined experience of the paintings, the Tamil poems and the translation is an exhilarating one and when one's hand reaches out for a cup of tea after the book, suddenly the tea does not remain just a hot beverage.

Just for taste, given below are two short poems of P Ahilan and Geetha Sukumaran.

Tea
In between each drop, the breath rests
Time breaks off…

—By P Ahilan

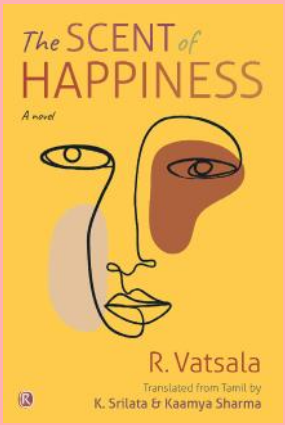
That tea
is not sky or sea
but a blue utterance
uncontained by a voice

—By Geetha Sukumaran

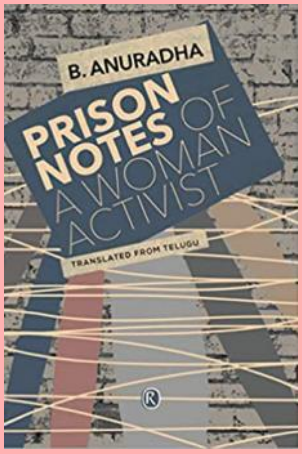
Seeking Happiness, Seeking Freedom: Some Gems from Ratna Books

- Semeen Ali

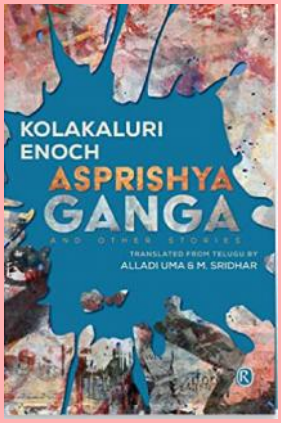
Title: *The Scent of Happiness*
Author: R. Vatsala
Translator: K Srilata and Kaamya Sharma
Publisher: Ratna Books, New Delhi
Year: English Translation in 2021
Pages: 326, Price: Rs. 499/-



Title- *Prison Notes of a Woman Activist*
Author: Bellapu Anuradha
Editor-: Gita Ramaswamy
Publisher: Ratna Books, New Delhi
Year: English translation in 2021
Pages- 191, Price:Rs. 399/-



Title: *Asprishya Ganga and Other Stories*
Author: Kolakaluri Enoch
Translator: Alladi Uma and M Sridhar
Publisher: Ratna Books, New Delhi
Year: English translation in 2021
Pages: 244, Price: Rs. 499/-



"Whoever said that prisoners are found only in jail?"

This sentence from *The Scent of Happiness* underlines the theme that runs across this book. The novel is a bildungsroman and chronicles the life of Prema, the protagonist of the story. The novel does not jump through phases nor gives a surface level reading of the development of the character of the protagonist, but returns time and again to the key moments in Prema's life that have created or pulled down the bricks that went into building her the way she is. The original Tamil title of the novel, *Kannukkul Satru Payanithu*, as mentioned right at the beginning literally translates as 'Journeying into the Eyes' and has been changed to the current title. And that brings up the question of the decisions that as a translator one has to take to ease an original text into the language that it is cast into. It is not an easy task. The words that are untranslatable are culture specific and this interaction of original language with the host culture is a daunting task that a translator has to take care of. As Octavio Paz has claimed, it is through translation that one can get an understanding of the world that we live in. K Srilata and Kaamya Sharma as translators of this novel have tried to bring out the essence of this work for the non-Tamil literate audience. The attempt is to open up a world for people, who would hardly be able to access the literary world that the original text presents. The translated text acts as a window to the vast world of vernacular literature.

One's identity is tied up with the place one comes from, and one of the markers of identity is the language one speaks in. The language politics plays out in a soft manner when Prema, who is used to speaking and hearing Tamil and English,

has to go to a Gujarati speaking school and face the dilemma of ascribing gender to various non-living things. It is not limited to only her studies but converts into a demarcation between communities when her friend's mother calls her a 'dakshini'. It is a sweeping statement of including Maharashtrians as daskhinis (people who hailed from South India). "Isn't she a dakshini? Wasn't it their people who drove us out of Bombay? Why should you help her? …At that time Maharashtrians were forcing Gujaratis out of Bombay." A need to be in one's familiar surroundings and people emerges as a parallel theme in the novel. The social tension and the conflict of cultures play out in the story. If language, when it becomes a marker of one's identity begets a sense of belonging, then on narrowing down the concept of identity to womanhood, becoming a mother plays out as an important landmark in the life of a woman.

From the first few pages of the novel, it becomes evident that the mother-daughter relationship (between Prema and her mother) is not the sort that one expects nor is Amma, Prema's mother, a loving, doting mother to her. The jarring relationship between the mother and daughter is brought forward in the first few pages of the novel. Prema continues to remain attached to her mother for years to come, not complaining, or questioning the tasks and the emotional abuse she is subjected to by her mother. What stands out in this novel is the treatment of the mother and the daughter relationship. Amma continues to live in her past, glory days and repents the downfall that she has had to witness—firstly by getting married to a mere clerk and then to have a daughter like Prema. She tells her daughter how during her pregnancy she saved the money to get home renovations done instead of spending it on having proper nutrition that was necessary for an expecting mother. This is her first introduction as a mother to the readers. But Vatsala has not created an evil character. Time and again, the reader is reminded/made aware of the struggles that Amma has had to go through and what led to the formation of her character as the way she was in the present.

Amma continues to berate her daughter for things that Prema does not deserve to be rebuked for, from making fun of her to continually pulling her down to the extent that Prema loses confidence in herself and in her ability to even study well. This spills over to even the parents' neglect towards her education. Amma believes that as a girl child, the focus should be on her upbringing in the domestic sphere and studies take a backseat. But not for long—"Brahmin women who knew English were of great value in the marriage market!" This idea behind educating Prema re-introduces her to a world that had been reserved only for the elder brother. Anna is loved and respected in the family even as a child but no such love is reserved for Prema by her mother. One is aware of the 'mother's love', considering it to be a natural trait but not once is this questioned as being a product of social conditioning and expectations from a society regarding how a woman, a mother, is supposed to conduct herself. As long as a woman adheres to the normative scriptures laid out for her, there is no threat to the social fabric. But as soon as a deviation occurs, there is an attempt either to stifle that voice or to eliminate it.

There are two characters in this novel—Prema's amma and Prema's mother-in- law Pankajavalli. Both of them are strong and have a mind of their own. Casting them in the roles of maternal figures does not stifle their need to be seen and heard. In the Indian context, the need to tie up the identity of a woman with a family still holds water. She is expected to be devoted to the wellbeing of her family, accommodating towards the needs of others while sacrificing her own needs and wishes. The idea of choice when it comes to motherhood as well as to carve an independent identity as a woman is intricately tied up with the culture. The all-pervasive need to control women and their bodies seeps throughout the book in the form of men who continue to threaten the lives of women in varied ways.

Set in the sixties and moving through the following decades, the novel sheds light on the unequal power dynamics that leave women with less to almost nothing when it comes to asserting their own independence or voice. Of course, a few progressive ideas and solutions are offered to women by the society (education, jobs and the freedom of movement) but they are all firmly rooted in the patriarchal structure that refuses to even budge. The indirect ways in which it tests the resilience of a woman has been depicted powerfully through this novel. The female characters are the victims in a vicious cycle that is determined to keep them in its clutches. Even as readers, the discomfort that arises as one finds the mother figures (Prema's amma and Pankajavalli) is due to the fact that we have been indoctrinated with the gender roles that have been laid out and entrenched in our minds deeply. What Vatsala does here is to show how the roots of this tree are slowly being gnawed away—the roots of a poisonous tree. She uncovers the subjective experiences of women who become mothers thereby going beyond the confining definitions of what or who is a mother.

As a mother, even Pankajavalli does not live up to the glorification that defines motherhood. She demands love and respect from her sons without giving them much. For her, her identity before and beyond that of a mother is an important one. She learns how to speak English, learns how to create situations that help her make a space for herself in the upper class world that she yearns to be a part of. Unlike

Amma, she is determined to not let go of her power that she wields over everyone in the family including her daughters-in-law. Having a mind of her own would cast her as a scheming woman. But Vatsala makes sure that a balanced view is provided that does not pander to the stereotypes of women that deviate from the expected views of the society.

Prema turns into a punching bag for both these women. The mother lashes out at her with the latent anger that she has carried over the years—of being denied what she thinks is rightfully hers. Pangs of jealousy torture her when she looks at her daughter— "I am so smart but I was not fortunate enough to get such good in-laws. My daughter is far inferior to me both in terms of beauty and in terms of intelligence. Such good in-laws for her?" The bitterness that she creates inside herself and the refusal to let go of the past, mars her future relations with those around her. She continues to conceal her sorrows till the end of her life. It is less out of pride and more out of her inability to understand how her behaviour is affecting those around her that she faces its consequences. It is through the eyes of Prema that one traces the history behind what caused Amma to become the way she had. Amma emerges as the shadow protagonist of this novel.

On the other hand, Prema embodies the ideals of a virtuous, submissive woman. The juxtaposition that emerges through positing her against the other two women is inescapable. Prema has blind faith in her mother and never questions the treatment that her mother metes out to her. "The things that evoked an emotional response in her tended to register in her mind far more strongly than other things." It is towards the latter half of the novel that Prema realises, or rather accepts, the reality of the dynamics that she shares with her mother. Her mother does not love her and has always made sure to create obstacles in her path right from the beginning. "Often, we refuse to see the truth because we do not wish to jeopardise our deeply held beliefs. We live within the confines of a false comfort."

This false comfort extends to the way she idolises her husband in the beginning, even though she is mentally and emotionally abused by him. She blames her mother-in-law for influencing her son but does not question the son even once terming him as innocent and easily swayed. The novel brings up this idea of idolising the husband as beyond reproach, and how the fall from that pedestal changes the way Prema now looks at him. " …No, the entire body of the man whom she had worshipped was made of clay. It had dissolved with a mere drizzle."

The idea of divorce /separation has been discussed in the novel and brings to the fore how this idea is perceived by different characters. It opens up a discussion on to what extent even if women have the freedom to take decisions for themselves, are they bound by these rules of the society. Are these boundaries never to be crossed or if one does, what consequences do they bring with them? The hardships that Prema faces—from questioning her decision of leaving her husband to the way the world sees her makes this novel a timeless story. "Like many Indian women, Prema viewed the failure of her marriage as her personal failure." She questions the need to be a submissive woman and the pitfalls it brings with it. The diametrically opposite woman (Prema) also fails to be happy and content in a patriarchal set up. Thereby bringing up again the question of to what extent are women given the agency of free will and choices in their *manoranjitham* flower whose memory Prema carries with herself since childhood, one needs to keep in mind that the flower may bring with it the desired scent but with time, the fragrance fades away.

A construction of ideas/ideals around what comes under the definition of a "woman" brings in a need to begin a conversation at the grass root level. There is a need to situate oneself in a particular time and space in order to understand our own selves and this is where nostalgia turns up as a coloured version of memory. But it is through this baggage of memories that one writes one's own cultural and personal identity.

While *The Scent of Happiness* explores the concept of freedom from a more psychological point of view, B Anuradha's book takes on the literal meaning of freedom and tries to deconstruct its meaning through several narratives of lives in prison.

"Freedom can be lost in several contexts."

B Anuradha's powerful account of the Hazaribagh jail gives an insight into the condition of the women prisoners and their children in her book—*Prison Notes of a Woman Activist* translated from Telugu. The Telugu title, *Edi Neram? Hazaribagh Jail Gathalu,* literally translates as 'What is a Crime?! Hazaribagh Jail Stories'. Through a series of vignettes in this slim volume, Anuradha brings her readers to the closest possible contact point with the inmates of the jail that she had been a part of as a political prisoner. These stories were published individually in *Andhra Jyoti*. Her story is right towards the end of the book, where she mentions how it would not have been possible for her to write about prison life as an outsider. According to her, only when one has lived through such an experience can one write about it. The book does not give an account of the prison but throws light on the stories of the various women prisoners and their lives. It is not just cold facts or the circumstances that create stories but a distillation of it through the prism of one's memory.

The first few pages of the book are on children who are living with their mothers in the prison. Being victims of circumstances, the children try to get the attention of the elders as much as possible. They are imprisoned for no crime of theirs and are unaware that their childhood is getting lost in jail. They yearn to be free, to play in the open spaces, and to not be locked up. For them, freedom is just a concept, as is the idea of a moon for a girl child who has been named Chandini by her mother in this book. Chandini has never seen a moon and Anuradha captures the moment in a heart wrenching account when the child finally sees the moon in the sky from inside the high prison walls. "They get locked up behind the high walls of the stone edifice without ever getting a chance to see the beautiful moon. There are windows in the wards but they cannot see the moon through them."

The children are hungry for love, for them even the idea of a country is a vague one and has nothing to do with the condition that they have to live in. The concept of borders, of nationalities, and to examine/question one's relation with these concepts is beyond the understanding of these children who yearn to be listened to. For them, Gandhi is actor Sanjay Dutt's Bapu (a reference to Dutt's film *Munnabhai MBBS*). Anuradha shares with her readers how Sunday becomes a day when these children are taken out for an excursion. Finding shiny plastic wrappers, they want to bring it back with them to the jail but are not allowed to. It is a very simple account of a day but hits hard. As the day ends, the children are back in the prison and hoping that the following day would also be a 'Sunday'.

The stories that follow in the book are around women prisoners and some of the reasons that have been given for their imprisonment borders on unbelievable charges that have been brought up against them. From Phoolmuni, a goatherd in a forest,who has been jailed as a Maoist to an Adivasi woman who has been jailed as a goat's head got stuck in a pot. The stories, as Anuradha points out in her account, do not focus solely on the difficulties that these women have faced in the prison but also on the lighter moments that these women as a collective have shared.

Writing for many women remains a solitary activity and is often not valued as much as would be the case for their male counterparts. Writing has been looked at as one of the ways of giving a definition to the world as one sees it but time and again, women have not been considered as reliable sources when it comes to defining the self. And therefore women were considered incapable of writing an 'authentic' story about themselves. The need for privacy and the lack of it comes up repeatedly in the book—in various ways. The idea of having a private space for a woman has continued to be the case cutting across the idea of class and the location of the self. Here in the book, the very act of writing becomes revolutionary for women prisoners when Anuradha receives a letter in prison. It results in women now actively engaged in either learning how to read and write or sending across letters to their families. The act of writing becomes a way of breaking one's silence.

This book is not just an account of how life inside a prison has been but is also an attempt to decipher one's own experiences. Thematically the book explores the concept of freedom as one of the strands to understand human nature. Birds that fly in and out of the prison turn into reminders of the captivity of these women. "If only we could fly away like these birds!" And in another reminder of how trapped and suffocated one feels—"Prisoners get locked up before dusk, which is when birds begin to return to their nests". As Anuradha observes, when birds are outside of the prison they turn into symbols of freedom but as long as they are inside the walls of the prison, they turn into symbols of lost freedom. The women inside the prison find their own ways of asserting their freedom thereby creating a hierarchy amongst themselves. From formation of groups to standing up for the rights of the marginalised amongst them, the women prisoners come across as a brave lot in this book.

The several accounts that Anuradha collects over the years she has stayed in the prison bring out one interesting point as given by one of the prisoners who came from a conservative background and had to keep herself hidden behind a ghoonghat. "When I came here, people used to laugh at me for keeping my head covered. Now I realise that there is more freedom inside the jail! No one to worry about, no one to answer to." The power structures that imprison a woman in the outside world strangely seem to be less inside a prison. From gaining freedom to wearing the clothes they can inside a jail, to not be under the watchful eyes of their in-laws and their expectations; the book observes how it is through small acts of rebellion inside the prison walls by women that make them feel freer than what they experience outside. "Women get beaten for not lighting the stove at home, and here we get beaten if we do."

The book questions the need for a woman to explain her marital status through her name and why a man is not subjected to it. "Why do people feel the need to know these things about women?" There are several other references scattered across the book that throw light on the deep-seated traditions and rules applicable to women— from calling a woman not by her name but through her relation to her child or her husband, to marrying her off to her brother-in-law if her husband passes away so as to retain the deceased son's property within the family.

The exploitation and oppression of women have taken up new forms and faces and continue in insidious ways. Regarded as keepers of culture and carriers of age old traditions, it is through the medium of writing that women have tried to dismantle these tropes that bind them down and confine them to roles of a woman, a wife or a mother and carve for themselves a more autonomous space where they can explore their individuality as can be seen in the two books that have been discussed.

As Gilbert and Gubar state: "…the woman artist enters the cavern of her own mind and finds there scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition that might have generated that power. The body of her precursor's art, and thus the body of her own art, lies in pieces around her, dismembered, dis-remembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it, and become a member of it, join it and rejoin it, integrate it and in doing so achieve her own integrity?" What the book tries to show is not just stories about women but after listening to the stories of these women, the writer of this book questions the very concept of what constitutes as a crime. Who is the law protecting? And are the laws capable of providing justice to the oppressed strata of the society? Anuradha does not shun away the idea of women as not being capable of committing crimes but she poses a relevant question—"But what of the society that creates the conditions that lead to such crimes being committed?"

From questioning the base from which emerges a need to rebel in varied ways, Kolakaluri Enoch's *Asprishya Ganga* translated from Telugu falls outside the lines that have been drawn by those who consider themselves to be the rightful upholders of rules and regulations that govern a society and believe in chalking up a hierarchical system to preserve their interests.

"As the sun goes down the lake, Vinayak stands at the edge of the well that is being dug and peeps into it. Even as he is looking down, the darkness is increasing. As the sun keeps going down, the darkness is thickening. Nothing inside is visible." This darkness pervades through this collection of short stories and brings up the challenges that one faces as a Dalit. From the question of one's identity as tied up with the place one comes from, the language one speaks, as witnessed in the previous two books, one's attention is now turned towards the community and the caste that one comes from.The deep fissures that have been created between people emerge from a mindset that refuses to let go of the power structures that protect the upper caste and class. "Once reverence enters one's head, there are no games that it does not play, there are no songs it does not make one sing, no bhajans that it does not make one organise."

The book opens with a short story titled "*Victory*"and traces a day in the life of Sannobulu who played the *daravu* skilfully. Through the eyes of his teacher, Sannobulu seems to be wasting away his life playing on the tappeta when he could study hard and come up in life, not remaining inside the barriers created around for people from his caste. But from Sannobulu's eyes, that barrier has already been drawn right from the time he enters his classroom. The infiltration is so deep that when a teacher asks him to pick up the chalk, he begins to question if he should touch the chalk and defile it—"If he picked it up, he would have had to touch it. His touch would be on it. It would have been a sin committed on the master." But later on, when he performs on the tappeta for the Reddy household and the elder mistress throws money for him to pick it up, he does not. This time the reason is a different one. The questioning of the self as well as the need to break through the confines of an invisible stronghold begins so early that this story sets the tone for what is to come.

On a similar note, are other characters from the stories in this book who question their ability to come up in life and do well. The lack of self-confidence and the fear is apparent when a protagonist of one of the stories is afraid of his peers at the university, afraid that he has no books or connections like those from the upper caste. That fear seeps into his ability to even practise as a doctor. A discussion with his teacher highlights this fear—

"They'll look at me only as an untouchable!"

"A doctor is not untouchable. Even those patients who cannot be touched due to infectious diseases may come to you! You're a doctor. Don't say you are someone who cannot be touched. You're not one who cannot be touched."

The fear is not an unwarranted one. The fear that he cannot get a better future forces him to change his surname so that he can be accepted and is able to lead a life that one can only dream of. The work that is laid out for people coming from a particular caste and the requirement to keep one's expectations low has been depicted in a very strong manner. The need to earn in order to stay afloat even if that requires one to compromise/let go of one's own self-respect has been observed and written in these pages—"A hungry stomach was a field without rain. A stomach unable to digest was a flooded stream. When would that stream and this field become friends?" The harsh reality that in the Indian context there was always ready labour available even if one did not like the working conditions, forces people to work if that means not leaving a vacancy for anyone else to fill in their place.

The story from which the book takes its title leaves the reader questioning so many prevalent ideas. The story talks

about a well that needs to be dug in the compound of a house for water and how that brings with it questions related to one's identity and how one fights back to retain one's self-respect. The protagonist of the story manages to buy a house that he can call his own in a locality that has people from other castes residing in it. The house turns into a metaphor for one's own sense of self and one's right to protect it from outside influences. There is also a conscious attempt to stay away from people from his own caste and to marry someone who is not from amongst 'his people' setting down a discussion on how attempts are made to cast away the identity and its markers with which one is born in exchange for a life that is not judged based on where one comes from. It is not easy. The agitation and the struggle to break away is a difficult one. "You don't seem to have recognised the importance of caste….It's only after people find out about the caste do they start a conversation. Relationships, kinships. Affection, friendship, and finally enmity, all are dependent on caste. Without caste, people are cipher. "His lone venture along with his family into this strictly drawn circle brings up uncomfortable moments: the helpers stop coming to the house for fear of losing work at other homes; he has to make sure that his children do not grow up questioning their identity. A lot of questions are thrown up for the readers to take in and to understand—that these divisions have been created by humans and not Nature; that water does not distinguish between who drinks it but it is the humans who set down the divisions and have come with terms like pure and impure attributed even to gifts of Nature.

Enoch continues to remind his readers that the actual conflict is caused by not earning enough to satisfy one's needs. For one set of people to believe that they were born to dominate, while others were born to serve has been the root cause of this divide that refuses to close. One of the most powerful stories in this collection—'Liberation'—is a black comedy where two powerful, wealthy men place bets on the lives of farmers—one claiming that not a week can pass without farmers dying due to hunger or debt or commit suicide while the other claiming the opposite. What follows is a desperate attempt to save/kill the farmers simply to win the bet and the money at stake. "They have no affection for human beings. Not scared of god. Money alone is important. They are bothered about money alone. So, what's for that one, he'll jump asking us to kill! What's for this one, he'll talk big asking us to live!" The dissatisfaction is not only at the level of these local powerful men but also at the level of the political figures who remain distanced from the ground realities that plague the existence of the people. As a rickshaw puller in a story observes, the politicians should set it down as criteria that only those who can pedal a rickshaw can become ministers. Enoch has not left out those who have risen to places of power from these classes and shows through examples how they use these positions to help others or are asked to misuse their positions in order to retain the newly found power:

"'I, a Dalit, who ought to help Dalits, instead of helping them, must cause them harm.'

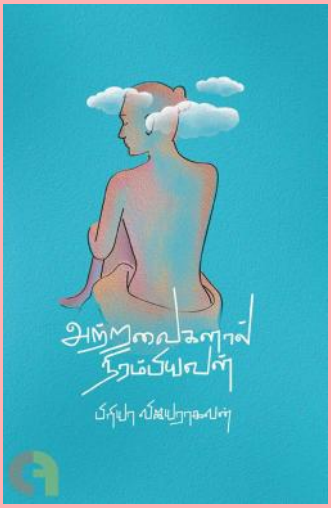
'Cause them harm. Do that and come up. Let the party show you off as an example of a Dalit who has come up so much.'"

It is however, the last story of this collection that gives a befitting reply to those who think they can get away by standing on the corpses of the downtrodden. A woman takes the centre stage and questions not just patriarchy but also those very structures that bind her down in the name of her caste. In love with an upper caste man, she is rejected for a better match that suits the status and caste of the man in question. Riddled by thoughts of taking her own life, she breaks down those very limiting options that the society confers on women and hits back saying that it is not she who is an untouchable but people like her lover who need to be shunned and removed from the spotlight conferred upon them merely based on their background.

The writings that have been looked at in this review are not only representing lives of individuals but are also bringing up the collective consciousness of a community, a gender and a tribe. In all of these translations, the vernacular languages have tended to mould the English language to suit them. Writing is a means of staying visible and also a means of representation. From R Vatsala's novel on representing the varied facets of womanhood to B Anuradha's representation of the plight of the women prisoners and their children to Kolakaluri Enoch's representation of the backward classes and the deep rooted caste system, all the three books are about representing what the authors consider certain truths about life.There is a sense of empowerment that one observes in these writings and a need to speak out. English turns into a carrier to bring across texts from various languages to overturn the structures that can be set up even amongst regional languages. Of course, given the history of the language that one uses to translate in, one can hardly ignore the burdens that the translating language itself carries. However, at the same time, it opens up a portal of literatures for readers who are not familiar with these works or the thematic concerns that they deal with thereby crumbling down the walls that stand between a writer and a reader due to language.

Void as Voice

- C S Lakshmi



Title of the Book: *Atravaikalaal Nirambiyaval*
(Woman Filled with Void)
Author: Priya Vijayaraghavan
Publisher: Kombu, Nagappattinam
No. of Pages: 712
Price: Rs.430/-

Priya Vijayaraghavan is a medical doctor whose parents are also doctors. She lives and works in London. This novel, according to her, is a nonlinear, geopolitical, autofiction whose protagonist is Anjana who could be her and also not be her. The novel is filled with elements and details of her life experiences and yet these details may really be nothing. Like the phantom Isla de Muerte (The Island of the Dead) on the Carribbean Island filled with the treasures of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador, who brought down the Aztec empire, which finally got swallowed into the sea and is marked in no map, so much in life, becomes nothing. And yet life's journey goes on. She says in the introduction that it is a journey which despite deep sorrow, great failure, love that melts the heart and loss that shatters your life, makes you look at the next day with the same undiminished love. It is a love that purifies the mind. She says that at this point in her life she feels that what the revered Saivite Saint Thirunavukarasar spoke about in *Thevaram*, of his duty being to keep serving, meant love. And it is a love that she shares generously with so many in the novel. And it is also this love that she tries to seek, lose and seek again in this novel. The act of writing this novel is also in a way, an act of sharing the love that keeps getting filled in her and flow out of her, filling her with void.

This novel which took eight years to write was initially serialised in a website "Kaatchi" (View) of her friends who encouraged her to share her work. She says that she wrote it at a time when her life was at an edge. Her life was filled with many long periods of utter loneliness. There was aloneness and also the quietness that it brought which weighed heavy. She tried to break it because she felt that if she did not do something about it she may lose her mind. At times nothing was enough. The inevitable question of 'Was everything for this?' drew long, deep and heavy. In order not to be caught in it and be broken and destroyed by it she needed to write; the feeling that if she did not bring out what was within it may swallow her, made her write. She says, "I started writing my madness." And what has come out of this madness is an unusual novel of thoughts, often scattered but also with a strange continuity running through the life of Anjana, the protagonist.

Choosing the non-linear, cyclical form of an epic, with several sub-stories has given her a vast canvas to draw the portraits of people of her family, people she met, she knew and loved. And this story-telling structure suits the narration of the experience of studying medicine being the daughter of parents who are doctors who belong to the scheduled community constantly being aware of caste even though she did not have to suffer poverty, growing up with a strict grandmother who had an experience-filled past herself, the feelings of love and deprivation that keep getting intertwined in her life as a child and the relationships that happen and

wither away.

Having lived abroad, a lot of her thought processes and reading have been in English. So the book is filled with quotations and long passages in English and since the locale of her novel is Seychelles in the beginning and the last part happens in London, a lot of the conversation would have happened in English naturally, so the dialogues also have English phrases and idioms. It is a unique style of writing *Tiruvasakam* to English texts with great ease. The range of lands she covers in this novel is amazing and what is also amazing is the way she takes you along whether it is the autopsy room in the medical college or the little secluded, secret stone hill where waves lash or the drug-filled atmosphere in parties in Seychelles or the mujra hall of a corner in London East Ham or the funeral parlour where dead bodies are made to "come alive." Apart from English she is able to handle other languages like Malayalam, Sri Lankan Tamil and English filled with Middle-Eastern, Russian and African slangs and also Telugu.

Anjana is a very complicated and interesting character. Many men come and go in her life. Men who are so totally different from her want to make her their partner. One is a political rebel, another is a drug addict and a drug peddler who has grown rich selling drugs who was sodomised as a child and has from his childhood known only the atmosphere of sexual exploitation and the fumes of drugs and the third one is an Indian she meets in London who is an engineer by profession looking for a decent job in London while working as an errand boy in the mujra hall and also a grave digger for Muslims in that area. All of them feel that she could be their anchor not knowing that she herself is floating in a way not able to lay anchor and still trying to know what love, desire, sex and passion mean. All of them get attracted by her eyes and want to drown in her eyes. All of them stand by her in many times of need, she depends on them and at times one feels she is using them but in reality, like them she is also looking for meaning in life. But in the novel while she indulges in long philosophical dialogues elaborating on love, life and seeking, they can only tell her that they need her to make their life whole. At times these long discourses become a bit tiring.

When the novel remains in Seychelles the entire region comes alive with its sea, its breathtaking beauty and its sunsets and dawns. It is a region not so far covered in any Tamil fiction and the novel is able to tell in slow detail, its history and its way of life and the intricate details of everyday life, the depraved men who can haunt a single woman and the complicated relationships with its share of curious neighbourhood women, as if everything is happening in slow motion so we can see things clearly for what they are.

When the novel shifts to London, the entire style changes and everything becomes an effort to condense many different details. Anjana stays in a dilapidated boarding house before being placed in a job and there is a cross section of women from different parts of the world, like Pakistan, Somalia, Iran, Russia, Latvia and Sri Lanka, in that boarding house. Their poignant and moving stories about female genital mutilation, abduction, forced prostitution, political upheavals and violent rapes by the army seem, however, a bit forced and can be got from the web easily. Even though they may have been real people the novel is not able to infuse life into them fully. They seem like stereotypical characters from each country. The London phase is the weaker section of the novel.

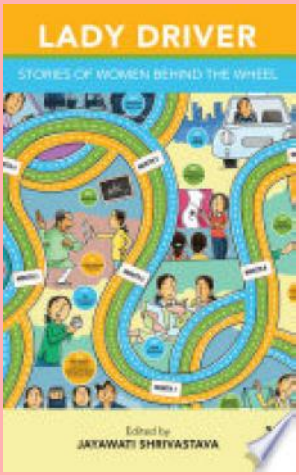
The novel is filled with different women and men all of them etched to perfection with such minute details.But the character I love most is the father of Anjana. His quotes from *Tiruvachakam* are so moving and heartrending. Priya slips only in one place where she quotes a beautiful line from *Tiruvachakam* on Shiva and mentions it as *Tevaram*.(p.420).

The novel comes a full circle when Anjana on her way to India meets in the airport a friendly Telugu lady who asks her all about her life and is eager to find her a match and who asks her the inevitable question: what is your caste? Anjana thinks: I may travel all around the world, I may be highly educated, I may have achieved a lot, I may pontificate on many things, but beyond my name and education, my identity in some way is also that of a Paraya woman.

The book needs a second proof reading for there are many grammatical errors in Tamil but when you put down this long novel one is filled with a kind of elation mixed with exhaustion that comes after a long journey all over the world when one wants to sit down and ruminate on what one has gone through.

Wheels of Life

- Mythri Prasad-Aleyamma



Title: *Lady Driver: Stories of Women behind the Wheel*
Editor: Jayawati Shrivastava
Publisher: Zubaan, New Delhi
Year: 2017
No. of Pages: 186
Price: 250/-

Lady Driver is an indispensable read for people interested in researching and practising gender politics. Stories of 12 women who became professional drivers are strung together in intensely biographical set of narratives. These stories elicit as much shared understanding as they give. These women were part of a project to train them to become drivers initiated by Azad Foundation, an NGO based in Delhi. They are from four cities—Kolkata, Indore, Delhi and Jaipur. Each is a story of struggle in the face of hardships—violent husbands and fathers (and brothers), dire material circumstances or the stigma of being a woman seeking her livelihood in a public space. The writers, feminist activists who "wrote" these stories, have minimised their own voices and tuned into the worlds of these women as much as possible in the voices of the women.

The book opens with the story of a mother-daughter duo, Savitri and Poonam, who join Azad in Delhi to train as drivers. Savitri's husband, Dayaram, is a supportive man who confesses to Deepti Priya Mehrotra, the writer, that he is scared of driving. Dayaram is the only man who has a voice in the book. The violent men that we see throughout the book who rape, maim and insult women do not have voices. The book recognises that women have different ways of dealing with domestic violence. Runu Chakraborty's telling of Sakshi's story brings to the fore the continuous use of sexual violence that women are acclimatised to and the protracted legal and institutional battles they fight for justice. Suman, from Ara in Bihar, had burned down the doors of her husband's house as revenge for his violence and harassment before joining Azad in Delhi. Geeta, a driver based in Delhi, is more forgiving of her father and brother who have been abusive and prefers to raise their consciousness by continuous engagement and conflict resolution. Her story is narrated by Sunita Thakur who weaves in Geeta's long association with Jagori into the story. A collective history of survival emerges that can force the reader to put the book down to recover from its refracted melancholy. Some of these stories could trigger memories of violence and aggression in the reader as it did in me but readers can and must not be protected from their histories.

Learning to drive changed the lives of these women and empowered them by providing them a stable income and an alternative community. Hemlata, from Jaipur, is the first woman auto driver in her city; she faced hostility from male auto drivers who refused her permission to park her auto alongside theirs. She persevered and finally managed to make a space for herself. Shanno, a driver from Delhi, remembers a rude driver at a traffic intersection and how she gave it back to him: "He started talking rudely. I got angry and said, "Tell me who am I to you, your mother or your sister?" He again came back with "you are taking advantage of being a woman". Then I said, "Now I will take advantage of being a woman." I slapped him hard on his ear saying, "Now tell me how did you like my rudeness?" I hit someone for the first time on the road. I did it because things were unbearable." Here the book becomes a commentary on how women have to struggle every day for dignity and safety.

There are two distinct themes that emerge from the book. First, the question of livelihoods for women who are poor and how interventions can be designed to create an atmosphere of sustained support. The second is regarding domesticity and public space and the gendered practices surrounding both. In her editor's introduction, Jayawati Srivastava, points out that both mobility and technical knowledge, integral to driving, have been the domain of men. Control over women's bodies and movements is crucial to patriarchy's survival. Restricting women from technical knowledge is a corollary to this ideology of control. To be mobile, thus, becomes an important mode of resisting patriarchy. In the afterword, Meenu Vadera writes "Driving,

we thought, was ideal. It did not just provide a remunerative income but it attacked the very core of patriarchy by providing mobility to women." This claim contains an enlightenment narrative of modernity that celebrates mobility as emancipatory in itself. This would have been harmless had it not been for its implications for understanding women's work.

The idea of empowerment deployed in the book, as elsewhere in development policy-making, implicitly devalues and erases subaltern women's contributions to the productive labour force. Gajjala (2017) points out that this erasure of their contribution allows us to view the inclusion of "women" into a modern, global workforce as in and of itself as empowering. Needless to say, this devaluation is dependent on a problematic division between the domestic space and public space and home work and outside work.

In the book, women's labour outside the home is defined as disruptive but without specifying the terms of these labours. For example, we rarely hear about how much these drivers are paid or the number of hours they have to clock in the jobs that they have taken up after the training. In the afterword, Meenu Vadera estimates the average salary of a driver trained at Azad at 10,000 rupees a month. This is 3,300 rupees lower than the minimum wages set by the Delhi government for unskilled workers in 2017. How then has the core of patriarchal capitalism been attacked? What sort of remuneration is this? What sorts of mobility does it afford? An ethical question this book raises is of a different nature: shouldn't the feminist writers who heard, transcribed and translated these stories have called themselves just that: translators and transcribers? Giving voice, however minimalistically practised, leads to the devaluation of labour. Can not the speech acts by these drivers/women stand on their own? A feminist practice that does not ask this question runs the risk of being irrelevant and worse, being subsumed by another question, that is, who counts as a "writer".

Reference:
Gajjala, Radhika (2017). The problem of value for "women's work". http://www.genderit.org/editorial/editorial-problem-value-women-s-work

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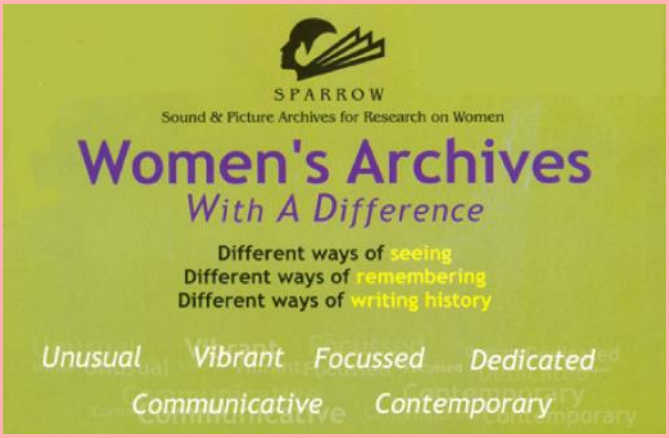


SPARROW ENTERED ITS **SILVER JUBILEE YEAR IN DECEMBER 2013**. IN ORDER TO CELEBRATE THIS WE HAD TAKEN A FEW INITIATIVES, ONE OF WHICH WAS TO ORGANISE **CONVERSATIONS** WITH WOMEN FROM VARIOUS WALKS OF LIFE.

The conversations can be viewed on the following links

Conversation with Kalyanee Mulay
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwjKbERlPDZZpjc6UzqVPzvZV

Conversation with Vimmi Sadarangani & Puthiyamaadhavai
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwjKbERlPDZZpjc6UzqVPzvZV

Conversation with Jhelum Paranjape
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwjKbERlPDZZpjc6UzqVPzvZV

Conversation with Purvadhanashree & Ranjana Dave
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnnf8q0zc

Conversation with Sumathi Murthy
https://www.youtube.com/ playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySEiqqDvyKdruGkVUNqoqXIW

Conversation Sudha Arora
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4dB7gdoMgc

YOU CAN ALSO VISIT SPARROW WEBSITE FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT THE CONVERSATIONS
http://www.sparrowonline.org/silver-jubilee.html

The Pain of Becoming a Woman

- C S Lakshmi

Title: *Tanuja: An Autobiography*
Author: TanujaSingam
Editor: Shobasakthi
Publisher: KaruppuPradhigal, Chennai
Year: 2020
No.of pages: 352
Price: Rs. 330

Many people say that their life is an open book and that they have nothing to hide. But it is difficult to open up one's life warts and all the way Tanuja has done. She does not hold back anything; not even her own shortcomings and deceptions she indulged in to live her life the way she had chosen to. That calls for a lot of courage. While she talks of exploitation and victimhood she also talks of some hard decisions she had to take to survive with some dignity. On the cover of the book is a beautiful woman in a silk sari and a gold necklace, dangling gold earrings and thick gold bangles looking straight at you with a quiet smile. That is a photograph of Tanuja taken when she attended her elder sister's wedding and there is nothing unusual about it since anybody would dress similarly for an elders sister's wedding. But in the case of Tanuja, this dress and ornaments are to convey the message and assert that she is a woman and very much a woman. This is so because Tanuja is a transgender who has traversed the difficult path of becoming a woman. The journey has not been an easy one and this book is about that journey and her need to write about this journey the way it happened. She says in her preface: "The words glowing in my heart, I want to place before you hiding nothing, in their naked form. The eyes of some of you may get dazzled by the glare of these words. I believe that more than the light of the sun and the moon or the forest fire, the light that comes from a heart that speaks the truth is capable of spreading more light. It is with that belief that I begin to write this book."(p.12)

Tanuja was born Tanujan in Sri Lanka. She says that just as she got rid of the male organ in her body she removed the 'n' from her name and became Tanuja to the world. She says she did not choose her gender, she was naturally blessed with it. Unlike other transgender women who say that they felt they were women trapped in man's body Tanuja feels that her gender was a natural given which she recognised. She quotes the famous words of Ivan E Coyote in the epigraph page to make her own stand clear: "I am not trapped in the wrong body; I am trapped in a world that makes very little space for bodies like mine."

At the time of writing her autobiography Tanuja was 29. She had come to Germany at the age of 12 and is currently living in Germany. At one time she was practising prostitution in elite clubs for a payment of 1000 Euros per night; today she is a student studying oral health under a programme of the Healthcare Department in Germany. She says this choice of a career was definitely hers. She says she asked herself if it was right to write an autobiography at the age of 29. But decided that at this age itself she had lived the lives of four or five births; she had touched the limits of joy and reached the edges of sorrow; she had tasted blood, tears and seminal fluid until she had had enough. She had gone around the world, met many different people and she was the only one from the transgender women from Sri Lanka who had got the opportunity and the environment to write such an autobiography for the first time. Maybe there was something to learn from her life too, she says. There may be thousands of strange things and thousand different fish in the sea, but there is also salt in the sea. Tanuja thinks of her life as the salt from the sea which also has its uses. (p.12)

Born during the war times in Sri Lanka Tanujan, the boy-child, is only three months old when he comes with his parents to India as a refugee. The father gets an opportunity to go to Germany and leaves assuring them that he would call them to Germany once he is settled. Tanujan's mother with three children begins to live in Madurai. Tanuja says that from the age of three she enjoyed dressing up as a girl and others laughed about it and did not mind it. But when in school her son continued to wear girl's clothes at home the mother begins to mind it.

As a boy Tanuja is sodomised by a person but the boy likes that person and even considers he is in love with him

and hopes to marry him. But for a couple of instances when he felt harassed the little boy enjoys the physical relationships and Tanuja says that the little boy she was, even invited men he liked to desire him by way of drawing attention to his femininity. Once in Germany his school boys tease him and call him gay. The family also does not quite understand the little boy and the father is a drunkard and beater who beats both his wife and the son. The elder brother is a tease who keeps using abusive slangs to refer to his feminine looks. His elder sister who is unable to come to Germany but finally manages to come to Switzerland is the only person who is sympathetic to his plight.

Through the web Tanujan finds out more about people like him and as a teenager, also has relationships with many posing as a girl. This leads to many relationships with Tamil men with whom as Tanuja she feels she is in love but all of them are physical escapades where they merely use her and abandon her. Through her teacher Clara she goes to a psychiatrist because in Germany the advice and recommendations of a psychiatrist was needed to acquire hormone pills and later to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS). The psychiatrist proves useless and at one time she attempts suicide but is saved. Later through a German transgender she gets to know a better psychiatrist who finally prescribes hormone pills. At this phase Tanuja starts referring to her childhood experiences as sexual attacks which have pushed her to this state. Later she gets to know many Indian transgender women and transgender women in Malaysia and Singapore and Sri Lankan transgender women in Europe itself. One of the Indian transgender women tells her that femininity is her natural state and Tanuja seems to agree with that but throughout the book she contradicts herself as being naturally a woman with a woman's needs and also as someone who has been sexually exploited as a boy who is pushed into this emotionally precarious position.

The contradictions arise, one feels, because knowing the other transgender women, makes her realise the need to be in a Jamat, a community of transgender women, like Indian and other transgender women, and use their language and rituals and worship of Bahuchar Matha and also have a "mother" from among them, in order to belong. Most of them are uneducated and have an exploitative past as young boys or men. They are the ones who are talking of being trapped in a man's body but Tanuja, although one among them, is different. It is possible that this feeling of being like them but unlike them is what makes Tanuja talk of herself as being naturally a woman and also as someone who has been pushed into being a woman. What she thinks is a woman's nature also lacks clarity.

She is given a mother by a senior transgender woman and her transgender mother Priyalives in Switzerland with a lover and practises prostitution. Tanuja is told that when she meets a senior transgender woman and her own "mother" she has to say "*Pampuduthi*" and they would respond with a "Jio"; that was the transgender language. It must actually be a corrupted version of "*Pao Padti*" that young women say to elders in North India while touching their feet. It is interesting to know how the transgender language evolves and even reaches Europe. Priya herself has silicon breasts and her waist has been injected with silicon and she has done plastic surgery to her face which has made her bodily functions difficult although she looks beautiful. Priya teaches her the tricks of looking and behaving like a woman. Later another transgender woman Mona also teaches her the tricks of luring men. Tanuja tries the "tricks" while with Mona in a bar in Switzerland and quite succeeds in catching the attention of a man. Tanuja seems to think that that is how a woman would naturally behave.

Tanuja realises that almost all the transgender women she meets are into prostitution as the only legitimate profession they could get into. Tanuja desists this for a long time since she wants to study and have a career but she continues her various fruitless relationships as a woman, even "marries' some of them but they end up in failures. In all these relationships the physical part of the relationships does not exactly repel her. She indulges in them to please her partner and also please herself. But the urge to become a woman through surgery to reach the "Nirvana" stage other transgender women had gone through meant money. She gives up her studies and works in shops and factories but the money is not enough. This is when Tanuja resorts to take help from a Tamil gentleman in Canada whom as usual she meets online, who promises her the money for the surgery and also sends her tickets to Canada. She does not love him but he wants to marry her although he does not force himself on her. He is also older than what he had told her. He is about sixty years old and is a driver of heavy vehicles who has to go away on long trips every now and then. When he is away Tanuja indulges in other relationships and even falls in love with another Tamil man. When the old man comes back he feels let down and buys her the ticket to go back to Germany but also gives her three hundred dollars apart from the money he has already given her for the surgery. Tanuja feels no qualms about cutting the journey short to be with her new lover in Canada and then come back to Germany and look for a proper surgeon. Meanwhile "love relationships" happen and break.

By now her family has become supportive and her sister accompanies her to the chosen clinic. Tanuja gives graphic descriptions about the surgery and the aftermath. She is able to bring out in words the pain and agony of becoming a

woman. The most painful part of cleaning the vagina regularly and inserting a rubber penis inside the vagina as a regular exercise so that it does not get constricted, has been described in a way that is chilling. And how much Tanuja sees this pain as part of being a woman is both amazing and tragic. The blood that comes out while cleaning the vagina she feels is menstrual blood. After the surgery the first sexual relationship she has is with a man she does not really love but decides to have a physical relationship with. This is also an old online relationship that she renews. When she sleeps with him and he finally enters her with force it feels like a sharp knife entering her. And she almost faints but feels that she had finally won. The pain is unbearable but she is telling herself with joy: "This is femininity; this pain is pleasure; this is what I yearned for; now I am a complete woman." (p.209) The next morning she is not able to walk straight. Her genitals have swollen to the size of a small balloon. But she rings up her transgender mother and grandmother and tells them happily about her first sexual experience after surgery.

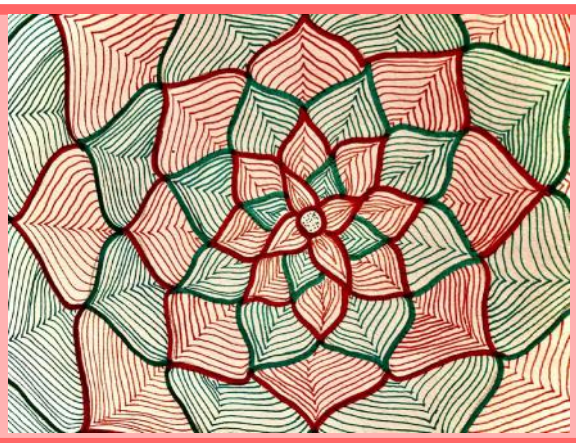
Once becoming a woman, with all the efforts to get official documents as a woman, Tanuja strays into prostitution quite consciously after another disastrous break up and decides to go only to rich white men and has no qualms about two timing them and using them. In fact, another transgender woman Mona whom she had met earlier tells her that she is naturally endowed with feminine qualities and that being so beautiful she should not stand on the street for 50 and 100 Euros and must seek white men. (p.217) Tanuja considers Mona her guru in this matter. Now she justifies it as a kind of revenge for having been exploited by others. She travels and meets other transgender women in Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and later accompanies one of them to Thailand for a SRS where she herself has a breast enhancement surgery. In this trip, while in Sri Lanka she meets an old relative who used to beat her up for being feminine when she was a little boy. The man wants to have sex with her. She gives him what he asks for but says that it was to prove to him that although he had beaten her as a little boy, she had achieved her heart's desire to be a woman. In this trip she also goes to the annual Koovagam festival in Tamil Nadu where all the transgender women meet and while in Malaysia also undergoes the ritual Nirvana ceremony and is happy to have a transgender family of her own around the world.

All Tanuja's documents come through after much effort. Tanuja writes that by then she had seen the world as a kid and a young man who feels like a woman and as a person who has turned into a woman. She had reflected about herself and her life while in Malaysia. She had decided that no man was really worth it and that she was no more willing to give up her self-respect for the 'love' a man offered. She had seen how pathetic and treacherous the transgender world was. In Malyasia she had seen transgender women who in their younger days had been much sought after as prostitutes but in their old age were abandoned on the roads. In Europe she had seen an old Sri Lankan transgender woman past her prostitution days who was a mental patient. There were transgender women who had to live secret lives in Sri Lanka. She had also seen older transgender women who became exploiters of younger ones who were their "daughters" asking for a share in their earning from prostitution and how autocratic their ways were. She had to decide to be different and have deeper roots that would hold her firm and not sway her.

Tanuja had earlier met an academic Selina Prüfberg who had advised her to pursue her studies and take a different path. Tanuja decides to take her advice and study and that is how she is currently pursuing a course in oral health. She also feels that there is a need to fight for equal rights for transgender women and for respect and dignity for them. She attends many conferences where she speaks for them and has won the international Born to Win award.

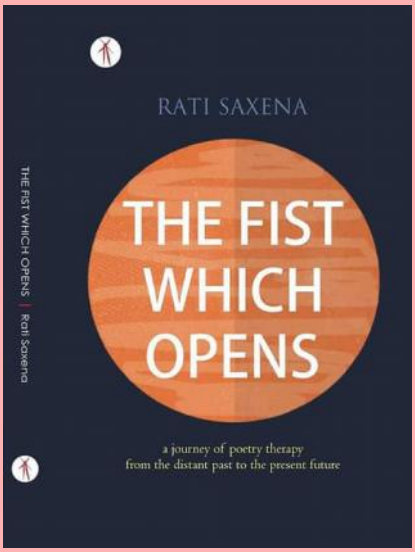
Tanuja's book with its no-holds-barred style of writing may raise some eyebrows but what I found touching was the way her own family came to accept and support her, especially her mother. Her mother cleaning her vagina for her after the SRS and helping her to insert the rubber penis in her vagina while Tanuja is screaming in pain is an image that will stay with the reader. Her mother advising her at one point to get out of an abusive relationship saying she did not want her to end up with a drunkard husband like her were the two most moving parts where a transgender woman is not only accepted by her mother but also seen as a woman like her own self.

Tanuja's story is certainly, as she says, a story of someone who has lived many lives in one life.



Can Poetry Heal?

- Aravindan Neelakandan



Title: *The Fist Which Opens*
Author: Rati Saxena.
Publisher: Hawakal Publishers.
Pages 277,
Price: Rs 500/-

In 2020, a concocted controversy erupted in Tamil Nadu. A Youtuber group of self-styled rationalists attacked Sri Kantha Sashti Kavcham—a highly popular late-medieval devotional hymn to Skanda-Muruga.

The poem asks the sacred spear of the Deity, that symbolises the most profound spiritual wisdom, to protect each and every physical organ of the body including the genitals and excretory organs. The poem, sung by millions of devotees, is literally called the armour from Skanda and hence the name.

This very popular component of day-to-day devotional culture in Tamil Nadu is actually in tune with the most profound Upanishadic wisdom—that with *avidya* one removes the life-killing miseries and with *vidya* one attains immortality (The author of the book under review points out this aspect of *vidya* and *avidya* in the Upanishad)

However, the pseudo-rationalism of Tamil Nadu, which is an imitation of Protestant puritanism in its caricatured form, sees obscenity in invoking a God to protect one's organs. When I received the book *The Fist Which Opens* by renowned bilingual poet Rati Saxena this January, I could not but think of the Sri Kantha Sashti Kavacham controversy.

Rati Saxena is not only a poet but also a translator of 15 books of Malayalam to Hindi. She is also the director of Kritya Poetry Festival. She received the Sahitya Akademi award in 2000.

In this book, she introduces in detail and through lived experience what she calls poetry therapy. Her vision of poetry therapy is rooted in Vedic wisdom and moves seamlessly into modern poetry. For her, true poetry expands the sense of self.

She calls it *Vishvabandhutva*. To her, this spirit manifests in Vedic poetry and is the basis of all good poetry—transcending narrow cultural, spatial and temporal divisions. Good poetry has its roots and heart in the interconnectedness of all and hence expands vastly into the universal. This expansive expression, because of the inner realisation of interconnectedness that permeates all levels of reality, when realised through the lines of poetry, brings in a great healing.

That is then poetry therapy.

Rishis use this; Shamans use this; Bhaktas use this and Saints use this. It is capturing the sacredness of, perhaps, what Maslow calls the peak experience in apt words.

Irrespective of which culture one belongs to, the realisation and expression of the sacred interconnectedness at any level of reality becomes healing poetry.

And the music.

It is not mere poetry, but the musical quality of the poetry that is also important. So, for *Sama Veda*, the musical quality becomes important. But art is not created merely for the craft but importantly for healing. It is for healing the individual and like in the case of *Subashitas* and *Thirukural*, it is also for healing society.

It is quite interesting that the most classical of Hindu poetry from Valmiki to Thiruvalluvar to Kabir came not from great Pandits but from people of so-called non-scholarly occupations.

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An ordinary Hindu farmer or a wood-cutter could relate to the poetic beauty of a Kamban or a Kalidasa without having to go to a great conventional educational institution—he or she imbibes the ability from the culture.

Unfortunately, we are fast losing that culture and we need to reconnect.

The book moves through the native American and the African spiritual traditions and explores how each of these traditions contain rich spiritual poetry that has healing ability. The author points out that this quality exists in Christian and Sufi traditions as well, albeit in a marginalised manner.

The author's own grounding is in the Vedic universe. And thus anchored, she gets the ability to move across multiple . . . . . *Vishwabandhutva* in the poetry.

She also presents the rural and tribal healing traditions of India—which were thriving till the advent of colonial modernity and its perpetuation in post-independent India — but is now becoming more and more endangered.

Unfortunately, the efforts to 'save' these endangered village and tribal traditions have been also colonial in the sense that the academics and activists want to 'rescue' and 'save' them like they are wild species which should be preserved like exotic pieces—perhaps to be learnt in some anthropological or culture departments of universities or institutions.

In reality, the preservation should be honest to the original cause and the sacred context of these art forms. The author brings this out by her emphasis of the healing dimension of these spiritual art forms.

But what she goes on to do is amazing. She looks deeply for the same sacred dimension in modern poetry. Can not modern poetry too contain the same sacred core, if poetry is the expression of the interconnectedness in the inner chambers of the poet?

If so, then, can it also not be used for healing?

Here, she transforms the secular into the sacred.

Equally importantly, in the 12 case studies she provides, she has chosen poets who overcame not only personal inner demons, but also the most challengingly cruel environments created by human depravity of those in power.

From the survivor of Argentinian concentration camp (Alicia Mabel Partnoy) to Tibetan freedom fighting poets (Tenzin Tsundue and others) what we see is how poetry infuses one with the ability to heal so that their fight for justice and *Dharma* is untainted by the pathos of hatred that could be effectively and easily rationalised.

Thus poetry therapy is not for the visibly afflicted. It is for us all. Poetry therapy is writing poetry, realising the poetic moments which come as an insight in the darkest of times, chanting a *mantra*, and through a verse, moving into a meditative moment.

In part two, she points out her own inner journey. It was while studying *Atharva Veda* that the poet pondered over the question why the seers always associated medicine with poetry.

She writes:

Later on, I started experimenting by communicating with my diseases in my poetry. I always talked to those diseases in a positive manner as if they were part and soul of my body. This attitude, I might have acquired from Atharva Veda seers where they always communicated with the diseases. I also felt that.

The book is pregnant with therapeutic possibilities and insights. It is also a validation of and a reminding of the value of a healing phenomenon in our culture we have not only taken for granted but even denigrated in the name of fake-rationality.

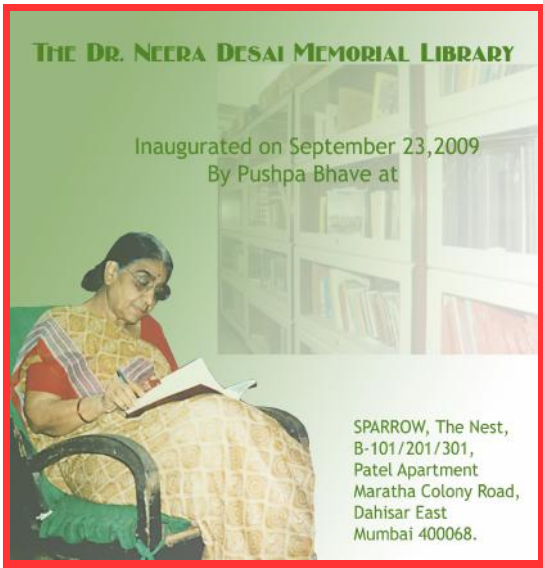
Not all of us are born poets. But all of us can relate through *Bhakti* to poetic healing. I seriously wish quite a few thinking doctors read this book.

Once I heard a lecture by the famous Ayurveda physician of Kanyakumari district—Dr. Mahadevan. After listing the different medicines prescribed for a particular illness in Ayurveda, he finally added—'the medical treatise recommends reciting the *Vishnu Sahasranama*'.

However, Dr Mahadevan added that it was up to the doctor whether to follow this last suggestion or not. Now, after reading this book, one understands that, perhaps, reciting the *Sahasranama* is indeed an important contributor to healing.

And a non-intrusive playing of *Sri Kantha Sashti Kavacham* in the waiting halls of doctors may also be a good tool.

Aravindan Neelakandan is a contributing editor at *Swarajya* magazine. Reprinted with permission of the author, from *Swarajya*, Feb 8, 2022



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