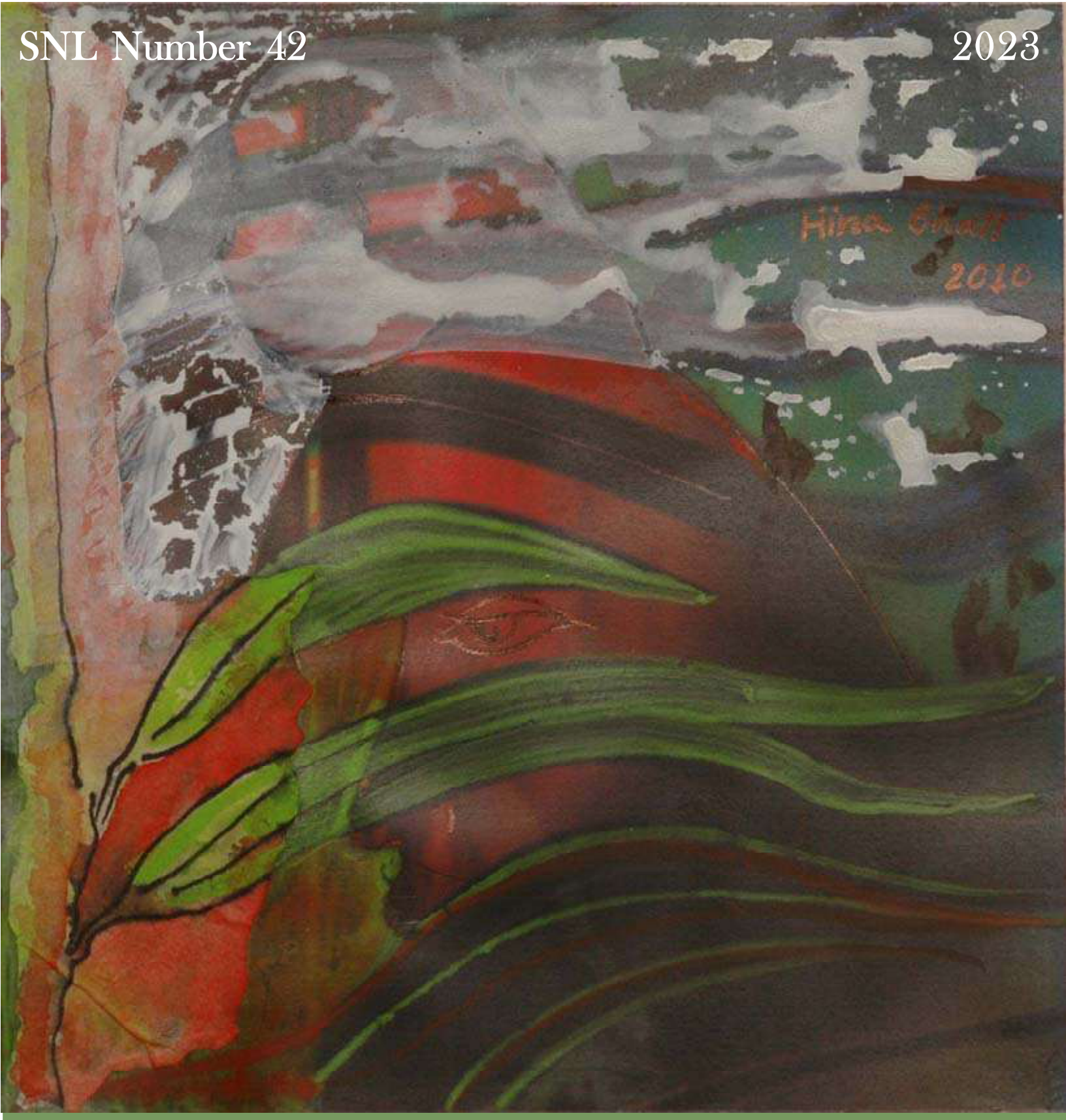
SNL Number 42 2023



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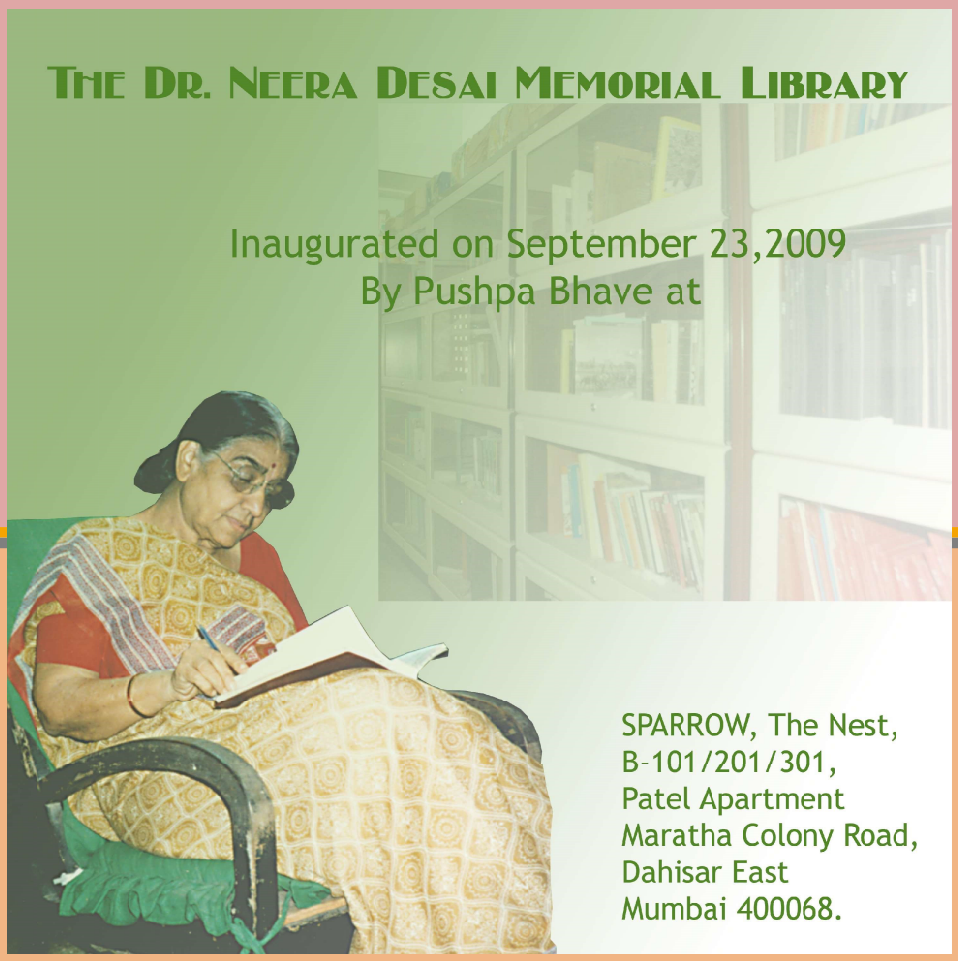

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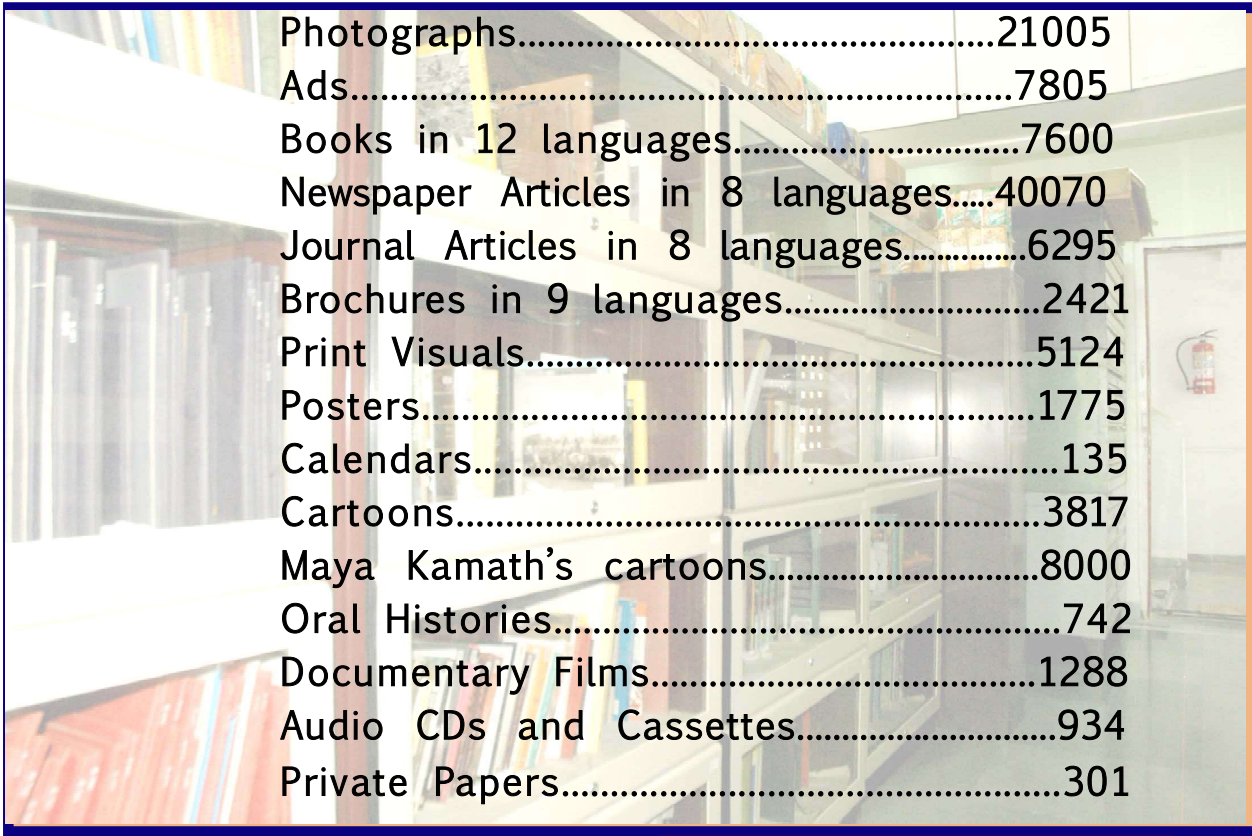

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Happy New year! Bringing out SNL on time has become a difficult task because from an 8-page newsletter our SNL has now become more like a journal. When we brought out SNL 41 which was also like a journal, we thought that in future we would bring it out with lesser number of pages and make it the regular quarterly it was planned to be. But this SNL too has taken the shape of a journal. Our apologies for this SNL coming out a year late. The reasons are basically that a lot of catching up had to be done with projects that had got postponed due to COVID and before we knew a year had passed. Hope the content of this SNL would be worth a year's wait. We promise the next one will be on time. And hopefully it will be out in April.

Beginning with this SNL, we have decided that in the main section we would use as a regular feature, articles from the column "Different Registers" that C S Lakshmi used to write for *The Hindu*, some of which are still relevant. We have an interesting report on a science conference that Dr Shubashree Desikan attended. Nishi Pulugurtha is an academic and a writer based in Kolkata. Her thought-provoking conversation with Jhilam Chattaraj is reprinted in this newsletter. Same-sex marriage has become a matter of big debate. This SNL has an article from *Kabhar Lahariya* and an important interview with Ruth Vanita by Ketaki Desai reprinted, on this subject. We have also included poems by Sunayna Pal, Iamon M Syiem and Geetha Ravichandran along with a very interesting story of a woman forgetting her name, by Telugu writer P Satyavathi.

For the Book Reviews section, with this SNL, we have started as a regular feature, Autobiographies and Biographies as a theme, where old and new biographies, autobiographies and memoirs from several languages would be written about. The book review section in this SNL, includes reviews of a wide range of books which we hope you would enjoy reading.

The Homages section is normally a section we work on with diligence, care, love, respect and pain. When we write some homages, we realise what we have missed archiving and some other homages bring back memories of a person we have spoken to, laughing and joking, just recently. There is also the pain when death happen in ways it should not. The women we have paid tributes to are all women who are part of women's history. There may be women whose passing away we may have inadvertently missed. Tributes will be written for them in our forthcoming Newsletter SNL 43.

We have used one of the paintings of Hina Bhatt painted in 2010, which is part of SPARROW Collection, for our cover. It depicts what seems to be a pensive woman but there are those green leaves that run across her face symbolising hope and life that goes on despite everything. We hope 2024 would be filled with more of those green leaves of hope and cheer for everyone in India and the world.

Happy Reading!

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ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: SPARROW ARCHIVES
EDITOR: Dr C S Lakshmi
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E-mail: sparrow1988@gmail.com
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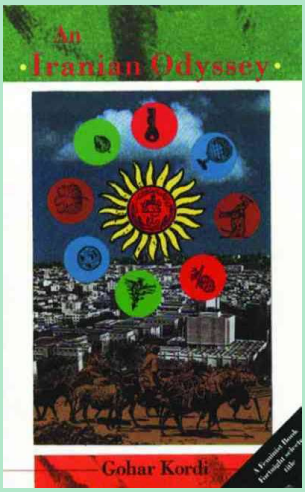
Dealing with Truth

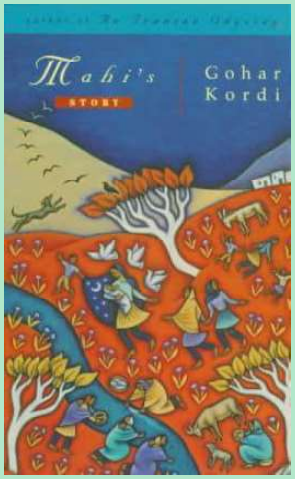
—C S Lakshmi

At the South Asian Writers' Meet held at London in February, I met Gohar Kordi. As she is blind, she had requested someone to bring her to me for she wanted to share something with me. In the course of our conversation, I had mentioned that since my early education was in Tamil, I could count and curse only in Tamil and also do my creative writing only in Tamil. Gohar was from Iran; her father was Turkish. She writes in English and has settled down in England. She told me that as she is growing older, whenever she gets emotional, the words come out in Turkish. She said that this Turkish language being deep within her came to her as a surprise. A very interesting conversation on language and writing ensued.

I found out later that her first book, an autobiographical novel entitled *An Iranian Odyssey*, had received very good notices. It was widely reviewed in England, Germany and later, in the United States. It was short-listed for the Elizabeth Frink award and the Fawcett Society Book Prize and was adapted for radio and TV. While she was overwhelmed by the response, Gohar felt that while writing about her early life, she had certain anger towards her mother and the treatment she meted out to her as a child. So, the mother had come out as a particularly cruel person and the reviewers had responded to this particular aspect and called her mother brutal and cruel. Her friends and acquaintances judged her mother harshly. Gohar began to feel that this was not right and that her intense anger towards her mother had expressed itself in this manner. In the novel her image was that of a villain, a monster, someone entirely evil. Gohar felt that this image was unjust, unreal and distorted.



An Iranian Odyssey



Mahi's Story

She felt that she had not done justice to her mother as a person. And she wanted to set things right. Now that the anger stored for so long was expressed, it would be possible to see her mother in a different light. She remembered that as a child she had witnessed her mother being beaten by her husband, her younger brother and later by her son. She had been terrorised and exploited by the landlord. She had been married off at the age of 12 against her will and later divorced for not allowing her marriage to be consummated. Her mother was a brave, strong and determined woman, a fighter. She had died at the age of 45 from exhaustion, burnt out by the hardships of life. Gohar wanted to recreate this image of her mother. And that is how she wrote her second novel, *Mahi's Story*, in 1995, which is about her mother and her struggles. And it is this novel that Gohar gave me as a present.

In the novel, Mahi emerges as a person who is constantly battling for some degree of independence in a patriarchal system that gave husbands and rich landlords the right to treat women the way they wanted. Gohar tells the story of Mahi, creating a world where women support one another and stand by those facing injustice. Women work hard and are sexually tormented by their husbands. Beating a wife is a most common thing. And the landlord of a village demanding the right to sleep with any woman of his choice has to be tolerated. The women weave carpets of their dreams only to be paid a low price by the landlords. But the women form friendships that mean more to them than their husbands. They meet and cook for one another. They take care of a friend's household if she is ill, and care for her children. They help friends through pregnancies and deliveries. They get together and invite old men and women to tell them stories. They

celebrate festivals together. They tease one another about their sexual life.

Mahi enjoys teasing young women about their sex life and takes great pleasure in joking about it. But she has one special friend with whom she discusses everything including matters of love and desire. Her friend Khoshghadam is a gypsy who has had a runaway marriage. She teaches Mahi to look at life differently. Together they gather firewood, chop logs, go mountain walking and rock climbing. They go for long walks in the fields and hills to gather herbs, roots and plants and Khoshghadam teaches Mahi all about their healing properties. She often tells Mahi that she must learn to survive during difficult times like the gypsies do. One evening when they are together, Khoshghodam tells Mahi, "Life is not only about men, you know. There is a lot more to life than just having a man to stand by you. We see so little of them, and when we do, it is mainly in the night. It is then that we have to perform our little wifely duty. Let them have it, give them what they need; it will only take a few moments! Then go and enjoy it properly with the person of your own choice." Such sessions they have with each other always end with a lot of laughter.

Mahi needs such laughter in her life, for her life has not been an easy one. The experience of her sister Khadijeh is something that has remained with her. Khadijeh had been a tall and slender girl in love with a man who had gone to fight for the Kurdish people asking her to wait for him. Her own friend Hamideh, who was also in love, had hung herself in protest, when she was forcibly married off to another man. Khadijeh had refused many offers but finally she was also forced to marry against her will. On her wedding night she was brutally beaten and raped and she had let out a cry from her stomach that had shaken the whole house and the cry had been heard in the whole village. After this her husband had divorced her and Khadijeh had gone into a depression and had later become a recluse. The details of this she tells Mahi much later in life but Mahi has heard about her sister in bits and pieces from others. Mahi herself is married off at the age of 12 but she refuses to have her marriage consummated. After this her husband divorces her. And later Mahi is forced to marry Reza, a Turk from a far away village, against her will because "she had brought shame to the family." Although Reza demands his rights as a husband, he is gentle with her and does not force himself on her immediately. But Mahi treats him with disdain and refuses to do the kind of things that wives normally do, like mending his trousers and other odd things. But Reza never loses his temper and he comments jokingly to his friends, pointing to the holes in his trousers, "It is as though I don't have a wife."

There is that constant yearning in Mahi to be free, to be her own self. She has three children who she tries to bring up in the best possible way. But when there is small pox raging in the village her baby girl also gets afflicted. With the best of intentions, Mahi nurses her and to protect her eyes ties the child's eyes with a handkerchief. The child is ill for three months. Three long, grey, hard, winter months. When Mahi takes the bandages off her eyes, she discovers that her child has gone blind. Mahi feels devastated but other women help her to face this crisis.

After a while, Mahi feels more and more the need to leave the village and go to a city to live a different kind of life and make a different life possible for her children. She goes to Teheran where her brother and mother are. She is uneducated but she washes clothes in people's houses to provide for her family. In her determination to live in Teheran and realise her dreams, she separates from Reza but soon after, Reza dies. As a single mother she takes a separate place for herself despite her brother's protests and feels that she is finally independent and in control of her life. It is then that she receives a marriage proposal from an educated person whom she also likes. Mahi feels that she can't be thinking of only herself. She had to be sure that the person would be nice to her children. Also, she feels that she cannot lose the independence she has gained with such difficulty. Maybe she could talk to the gentleman concerned, suggests the person who has brought the offer. Mahi feels that, that maybe in future. At that point her answer is no. The greatest joy she feels, however, is when there is a family wedding and her mother is happy and she hugs and tells Mahi that all this happiness is because of Mahi for she has done so well for herself.

At the end of the novel one's heart goes out to Mahi. One wonders if she finally married that educated gentleman or did she value her freedom and her children so much that she remained single till her death. One also realises that the little baby girl who went blind with small pox is Gohar herself. Gohar writes in the preface that many people had asked her how she had managed to carry on despite all odds and she began to think that there must have been something positive in her life. And she realised that the positive factor in her life was how she had been valued as a child even after her blindness. Being valued unconditionally by her mother and the whole community must have been the source of her strength, she writes. And she wonders if the source of her mother's strength was the same. Mahi was lucky to have a daughter who decided to write about her mother in spite of the fact that a novel that had portrayed her mother as some kind of a monster had won so much acclaim. For, in the final analysis, writing does not have to do with acclamation but to do with dealing with what one thinks are the truths of one's own life.

This article is one of the articles published for the column " Different Registers" that C S Lakshmi used to write for *The Hindu*. It was published on 4 June 2003. Some of the articles from the column will be republished in the forthcoming SPARROW Newsletters.

Re-entering A Familiar World: Of Women, Science and Scientists

—Dr. Shubashree Desikan

The relief and feeling of liberation that you experience when you leave a place of work is unparalleled—this is true in a small way when you leave work everyday to go home, but I am referring to the larger impact of quitting a job, even one that you may love dearly, for whatever reason. I found myself with this feeling in November 2022 as I resigned my job as a science journalist with *The Hindu*. I had a month before taking up my next assignment and it was in this time that I was invited to attend the three-day-long annual meeting of the fellowship of the Bangalore-based Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc) which was to be held from November 4-6, 2022, at the SRM University (SRMU) campus at Amaravathi, in Andhra Pradesh. I went eagerly, since I thought I would meet a friend, Jayasree Subramanian, who is a professor of Mathematics at SRMU. Jayasree, like myself, has travelled a long and winding road to reach where she is today. We met as postdocs in Harishchandra Research Institute in 1998, and since has worked in math education with Ekalavya, tackled a project on women in science, taught at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad and is now at SRMU.

My own trajectory left behind academia in 2011, after a series of false starts, and I moved into the world of science communication. It was fortunate that I landed a job with The Hindu in 2012, where I was to pursue a decade of science journalism—practice and teaching.

So I was looking forward to the meeting not just because I would get an opportunity to meet and stay with my fiery feminist friend , but also because there were many good friends in the world of science whom I expected to meet. Senior physicists like Sumathi Rao and Rohini Godbole whom I'd befriended during my earliest years in research and computer scientist Meena Mahajan, who had recently been elected as a Fellow of IASc.

How I met Sumathi and Rohini was quite wonderful—Those days (1990s) they used to have month-long "Schools" where a particular topic was taken and different aspects of it taught by the experts in the field. Research scholars from various institutes and Universities could attend these. I attended the so-called SERC school on quantum field theory held at Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, in 1992-93, December-January. We were given short primers on everything from particle physics (Standard Model) to Conformal Field Theory and rudiments of string theory. Taken together with the tutorials, the lecture schedule was gruelling, but the fun of learning something new, the friendships we made and the camaraderie with our mentors all together really snowballed into something formidable. That was where I met Rohini, Sumathi and Kajori Mazumder—who were all already well established in their fields, but made themselves so approachable and friendly.

To my disappointment, the people I knew and asked said they were not coming for the meeting. I was pleasantly surprised on the second day to see that Rohini had come. Sumathi and I would have to catch up elsewhere!

Rohini Godbole, a few years ago, was awarded the Padma Shri for her science. Her work in particle physics is phenomenal. A role model for most of us, she is easy to talk to and wears her laurels lightly. She is a vice-president of the IASc, and currently works with Indian Institute of Science. In a country where women's work in the sciences often goes undocumented, She has co-edited a volume of biographies of 100 women scientists (*Lilavati's Daughters*, editors Rohini Godbole and Ram Ramaswamy).

Even as I speak of such fabulous women who form a part of the fellowship of the academy, it must be mentioned, and it is a well-known fact that the number of women fellows of the academy is only 10% of the total which runs into over a thousand. In a conversation with the present editor of IASc, Umesh Waghmare, Physicist, Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, Bangalore, it came across that the academy is indeed trying to raise this proportion, but that the process will be slow.

The academy's meeting had lectures by both Fellows and Associates. Associates are like fellows but they have a tenure of three years. The Associateship is usually given to young researchers, while fellowship is bestowed on senior faculty usually. There were in all about 30 talks by Fellows and Associates and two invited public talks (By P Sainath and Ananya Vajpeyi). Of these five talks were by women scientists, and one public talk.

IASC-ANANYA

IASC-MEENA

IASC-SNEHA

IASC-SUCHANA

MEETING FRIENDS

The symposium on "Floods in the Anthropocene" featured two of these talks by researchers—J Indu and Arpita Mondal, both from IIT Bombay.

There is some belief that human-induced climate change can cause flooding events, but it is not known how and to what extent individual flooding events are influenced by climate change. Arpita Mondal's talk dealt with methods and state of the art for attributing flooding events to anthropogenic climate change. She showcased an application of the study to the Kerala floods of 2018.

J Indu's talk focussed on the fact that Radar images are used in flood mapping and inundation studies, yet, the question remains of whether our ability to ingest radar data has increased with data availability. She examined ongoing efforts to enhance our understanding of extreme events such as floods using radar data.

Following the symposium on floods, was a bouquet of three talks by Fellows, and among them, the one by Meena Mahajan, theoretical computer scientist and professor at The Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, who had been elected Fellow just this year. Meena and I had an overlap when I was a PhD student in the same Institute. We did manage to catch up during the lunch breaks, but our conversation remained incomplete. Meena's talk was on her work on formal proofs. Carrying the deceptively simple title of "What is hard to prove, and why?", her talk was about why we care about formal proofs; how we can design formal proof systems, and how to demonstrate their limitations.

After Meena's talk came a public lecture by Ananya Vajpeyi, who holds the position of Fellow and Associate Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, (CSDS). Her talk was titled " The Modern Life of an Ancient Language," and she spoke on how Sanskrit finds new life and meaning in a world shaped by nationalism, science and struggles over identity.

The two other talks by Sneha Sagarkar and Suchana Taral, both young associates of the Academy, were interesting, too. While Sneha from Savitribai Phule Pune University, spoke on the role of glutamatergic neurotransmission in the dentate gyrusin reward memory recall; Suchana Taral, from Pondicherry University, spoke about the way the Himalaya had risen from being ground level once and presented "new evidence from the Eastern Himalayan foreland". It was indeed a pleasure to see Suchana and Sneha expounding on their work to the audience, which had many, many experienced scientists.

Watching these scientists talk about their work, I was filled with a sense of happiness and hope. As I returned, my thoughts were brimming with ideas for stories, and this time around, there would be many women featured in them, I realised.

Shubashree Desikan is a science writer and joined IIT Madras Shaastra magazine in December 2022.

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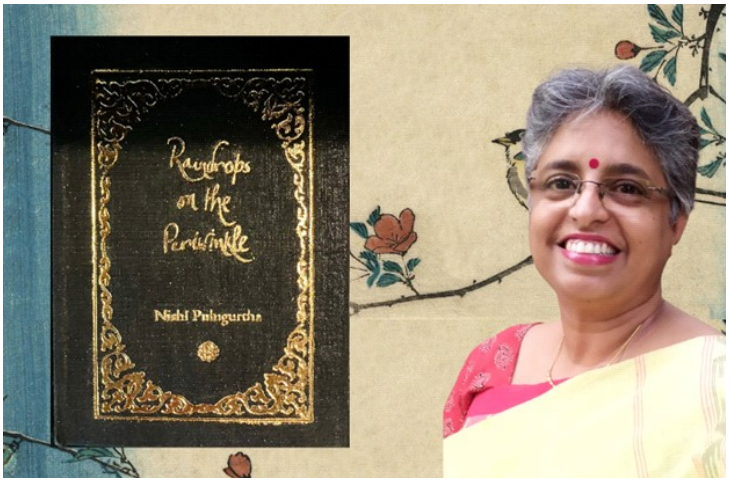
My Poems Speak of a Scene or a Thing

—*Nishi Pulugurtha in Conversation with Jhilam Chattaraj*



'the brown leaf between
barbed wires that draw borders stuck
held up and hanging'
— Nishi Pulugurtha

Raindrops on the Periwinkle (Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2022) is a volume of form poems—haiku, senryu, haibun, tanka—written during the second phase of the pandemic in 2020. The poems are delicate and alive, like pink periwinkles in the rain. Pulugurtha's world is ordinary, detailed and sprinkled with beauty. Each of the poems, in their own way, responds to the pain and despair of the pandemic. The volume, rich with sixty poems, captures the growth and flourishing of nature within the surroundings of her home. Each sapling, each flower offers hope to the poet who was also the primary caregiver to her mother, suffering from Alzheimer's Disease.

Nishi Pulugurtha is an academic and poet. She is based in Kolkata and loves to share her travel diaries with the world. Her publications include a collection of essays on travel, *Out in the Open;* an edited volume of essays on travel, *Across and Beyond*; a two-volume of poems, *The Real and the Unreal and Other Poems*, *Raindrops on the Periwinkle*; a co-edited volume of poems *Voices and Vision: The First IPPL Anthology* and a collection of short stories *The Window Sill*. Her recent book is an edited volume of critical essays, *Literary Representations of Pandemics, Epidemics and Pestilence* (Routledge, 2023). A volume of essays written during the pandemic is forthcoming.

Jhilam Chattaraj: Congratulations on your book, Raindrops on the Periwinkle! The book is a collection of haiku, tanka, and haibun. How was your experience writing in forms?

Nishi Pulugurtha: It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience. I have always found form poems very interesting. It makes one work with words and with the structure, allows one to explore so much more in spite of the restrictions of form. During the lockdown, I wrote a considerable number of form poems, maybe it was a way of dealing with the times and all the restrictions.

Jhilam Chattaraj: *Raindrops on the Periwinkle* is a layered book. Your own experiences of the pandemic; finding joy in your micro natural habitat; and your mother's medical condition. Tell us how you brought them together within the aesthetic vessel of poetry?

Nishi Pulugurtha: The lockdown brought me face to face with a different world—a restricted one. It was something that each of us have experienced in various ways. My mother was in an advanced state of Alzheimer's and I had to be even more careful. Amma had forgotten to talk

and was completely dependent on help. The two caregivers at home had to be kept safe too. Those were extremely stressful times for me. Taking care of a loved one with Alzheimer's and seeing the immense changes coming in them is very painful.

The only contact I had with others was through the virtual medium. The little bit of green, just outside my apartment, a few of my plants, the sky above as I walked on the terrace in the evening, the gazes out the window and what I saw of people through them became my world. The news that came in through newspapers and television channels, the happenings around in those times affected me. They were terribly troubling times. These became the subjects of my writings throughout the period, both poetry and prose.

Jhilam Chattaraj: You live in Kolkata. Ethnically, you are a Telugu. Could you share with us your favourite cultural memories?

Nishi Pulugurtha: There are several. I have written about a few of them as well. The trips to Kakinada and Hyderabad were something that I looked forward to. The Sunday morning Telugu film shows that were screened in one movie hall in Calcutta was something we looked forward to as kids. This was something that we did once a month when a Telugu film would be screened; that would be followed by a meal at a South Indian restaurant in the Esplanade area in Calcutta. The summer month of May was pickle season and while we were miles away from Andhra Pradesh (then undivided) we recreated that in our homes. The choicest and best mangoes would be selected after great scrutiny and the laborious process would begin. It was a family activity with my father, sister and me joining in.

I grew up in a very cosmopolitan atmosphere. Growing up and living in North Calcutta for several years made me speak Bengali fluently. When I am asked where I am from, I always say Calcutta. I have never lived in Kakinada or Hyderabad. However, these two places are very dear to my heart. I was born in Kakinada and there is a deep sense of nostalgia and fond memories that I have of the place and of Hyderabad too. They are places I went to spend my vacation, places where I had great fun with my aunts, uncles and cousins. My Ammamma's home was a comfort zone for us, as it was for several of my extended family as well.

Jhilam Chattaraj: You love to travel and we love your photographs. Does travel inform your creative spirit?

Nishi Pulugurtha: I love to travel. I inherited this from my mother. We travelled every year to meet family and then to visit various places down south. For some years, I could not travel the way I would have loved to. As the primary caregiver to my mother, I couldn't. Most of my travels during that period were work-related. That is also when I began to rediscover my city, Kolkata, by doing the walking tours. As someone greatly interested in history, this was a new world opened out to me.

Photography is something that I love. My father was an avid photographer. Even during the pandemic, I would keep clicking on any little thing that caught my eye in that restricted world that I was in. The mobile phone makes clicking easy these days. The autumn sky as I travel to work catches my eye, or that palatial building that tells a story of a bygone time, the tree whose roots wind and bind into bricks and mortar – these are things that catch my eye as I commute to work. Many of my poems speak of a scene or a thing that I have clicked, that moment captured — I listen to stories that it tells, or some resonance somewhere that connects.

Yes, travel does inform my creative world. I actually began my writing career by writing about travel. Several of my poems too reveal my interest in and fascination for travel.

Jhilam Chattaraj: You are sincerely dedicated to the life of the mind; share with us a few tips to seek sweet rhythms in life.

Nishi Pulugurtha: If there is something that caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's has taught me, it is to make the best of every moment in life, of living in the present. It has also taught me an immense amount of patience.

I believe the poet and academic's life is not different from any other person's life. Reading, writing, observations, photographs — a delight in small things, working in (at times) difficult schedules, trying to balance the two (and failing most of the time) is what it is about.

Jhilam Chattaraj: Thank you, Nishi-di! It was lovely speaking to you!

—Reprinted with permission from FemAsia, Asian Women's Journal, 25 April 2023.

Jhilam Chattaraj is an academic and poet based in Hyderabad. She is an Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, RBVRR Women's College, Hyderabad. She has authored the books, *Noise Cancellation,* (2021) *Corporate Fiction: Popular Culture and the New Writers* (2018) and the poetry collection *When Lovers Leave and Poetry Stays* (2018).

✦✦✦✦✦

Gender, Sexuality and Culture

—*Ruth Vanita in Conversation with Ketaki Desai*

There is a general misconception that same sex marriage demand is "fancy wokeism" (See Aravindan Neelakandan, "Sexual Fluidity and Same Sex Marriage: Legal Philosophy Cannot Change Biological Truth, *Swarajya,* 19 April 2023) and that it is trying to appropriate the institution of marriage which is a "social institution that has evolved in human society mainly adapted for sexual dimorphism of the human species" and that it is being demanded by urban elite women. That it is not really "fancy wokeism" is something that scholars and activists like Ruth Vanita have always asserted. In a recent post (April 18, 2023) on Facebook Ruth Vanita referred to this:

> "The Centre's latest argument against marriage equality is that it is an urban elitist idea (presumably because the couples in the high-profile weddings reported by the media and also most of the petitioners in the Supreme Court case now being heard, are middle-class and English-speaking). Apart from the interesting implication that the English-speaking urban middle class, which runs into many millions, has no right to equality, this also ignores the hundreds of same-sex couples, mostly women, all non-English-speaking and low-income, and unconnected to any movement, who have been getting married or committing joint suicide or both, since at least 1980, all over the country, as reported in my book, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriages in Modern India*. After the book was published in 2005, I continued to collect cases, and here is one from 2019. (the 2021 and 2023 editions have a list of couples at the end). I would like the Centre's lawyers to look at and hear Deepshikha and Abhilasha from Hamirpur, UP, who asked the Registrar of Marriages to marry them. Are these women urban and elitist?"

The Deepshika and Abhilasha story that Ruth Vanita is referring to, was reported by *Kabhar Lahariya* on 8 February 2019 with the title **Ek Ladki ko Dekha Toh…** The article was written by Pooja Pande and based on the report of *Kabhar Lahariya* reporters Suneeta Prajapati & Nazni Rizwi is reproduced below:

"She's *kotar*, I'm *darzi*. That, in itself, is too much of an aberration."

Soft-spoken Deepshikha says this by way of explanation as she recounts to us her story, laying bare the very gritty realities of where she's been born and brought up, indeed of the social fabric of large parts of India, where caste continues to play a pivotal role in your life-path—often determining all your choices and possibilities, from the kind of work you can and cannot do, and of course, who you can and cannot marry.

22-year-old Deepshikha is a Hamirpur local, a district of Uttar Pradesh, which lies in Bundelkhand, who recently went in for a 'court marriage' with her girlfriend of over six years, the very outspoken Abhilasha, also 22. "You have one life and why should it be spent compromising?", she'd told us over the phone, when we were fixing on logistics of the interview, prepping us almost for the couple we would meet, complementing each other in personality.

Hamirpur was last on the mainstream news cycle when the local MLA, created a furore by stepping into a temple meant only for men. The resident priest, who had been away at the time of the visit, sanctioned an immediate

'Ganga *jal shuddhi kriya*' (purification ritual using the water of the Ganga River), upon his return. The MLA even apologised for hurting public sentiment, which she clarified, had been unintentional. Ah yes, gender—the other determinant of one's life in a socio-cultural landscape set up for privileging the man, and discriminating the woman.

It is here, in this space that serves as a microcosm of double prejudices that Abhilasha and Deepshikha decided to make their love for each other, official. On December 28, 2018, the pair met up at the local district court and signed on the dotted lines at the registrar, confirming their union legal. Although the paperwork is awaited, Abhilasha tells us. "The registrar told us he'd never seen this ever in his life, and he wasn't certain about the procedure. But he couldn't refuse it, since I knew about the law, so he did go ahead with it. Now *the legal document is yet to arrive**."

The law that Abhilasha alludes to is, of course, the recently revoked Section 377, which deemed any and all intercourse that wasn't penal-vaginal as illegal, rendering the practice of homosexuality, a crime. A closely-watched Supreme Court event, which was the focus of much celebration across the nation and even globally—but one that has left geographies such as Hamirpur untouched, where 'coming out' isn't a decision made at a crossroads, and means nothing but social censure, leading not only to isolation from your own family, but even the threat of violence, or actual violence. It's what makes Abhilasha rare, arguably the only one aware of these "*shehron ki baatein*" (urban chatter) in her parts. She tells us she'd kept abreast of it for a year ever since she'd come across it happenstance through some What's App joke—the one about keeping your man satisfied lest he leaves you for another man. We laugh together, at the disruption of presumptions therein, when two women from rural U.P. cite the revoking of a draconian law as the spark that urged them to finally take the leap. "When homosexuality is mentioned also, it's only about men. The imagining of a same-sex relationship is between two men," says Abhilasha. It's like here too, the men hijack the narrative, we say, and they both nod.

"She told me about this law", says Deepshikha, "and was very sure that this meant we could also go ahead and declare our feelings for each other openly. That we could now be together." "I knew that nobody could stop us from having our union registered," adds Abhilasha.

Abhilasha dons the default spokeswoman stance naturally, as we prod further, with a shyly smiling Deepshikha lounging around on the charpai next to her. She narrates their love story, as improbable as it is true, which began six years ago, when they were both teenagers, "sweet sixteen", Abhilasha smiles, "I'd been with girls before and knew that I liked girls. *Par jab inko dekha na toh…* (But when I set my eyes upon her…)." Deepshikha admits to heart-stirrings in the moment too, but also of being unsure of so much, "Will we be able to meet each other? And how long will we be able to keep it up?"

Deepshikha would visit Abhilasha's village in Raath tehsil of Hamirpur often enough, jumping onto pretexts of family trips made to Raath whenever she could. "Our parents knew we were very fond of each other, and would always be together when we could," says Abhilasha, and elaborates, "But they assumed it would wear off, that it was just childhood fun, maybe some teenage fun, that's all." Abhilasha would fix up with a mutual friend in Raath, she says, so that she and Deepshikha had a place to meet, their very own love nest. Besides this, she would invite her over to her own place, when her parents were away—opportunities that Deepshikha made sure they could avail of, as and when possible.

The trips became infrequent and the love story moved to the other obvious space—mobile phones. Abhilasha and Deepshikha spent hours together chatting on the phone, almost always into the wee hours of the night, night after night. "This is when, I think, out parents became a little agitated. And of course, they thought it must stop. So, they decided it was a good time to find us men i.e. husbands."

In 2016, spaced apart by a few months, both Abhilasha and Deepshikha were married off, and this marked the beginning of a miserable chapter in the love saga of Abhilasha and Deepshikha. Abhilasha, we learn, refused to stay with her husband and would plan and execute virtual prison breaks from her marital home. She ran away five times, and was sent back five times, she tells us, "It was torture. And one day, I said no more." Deepshikha stayed with her in-laws for most of that period, but with a husband mostly away, and never consummated the marriage, she shares. Ditto for Abhilasha, who explains, "We've never liked boys, never been attracted to them, so why would we?" Neither of

them likes to speak much about their husbands; they say it is too hurtful to dwell on.

It was in 2014 or so that the big proposal happened. Amidst a fair amount of giggling and blushing, Abhilasha recounts, "I just asked her point black, 'How long do you want to go on like this?' Let's be honest about our feelings towards each other, at least to one another! Only then can we even dream of going further. I told her, 'I love you', now you say it back. So I demanded an 'I Love You', from her!" Deepshikha adds, beaming, "She had caught hold of me, very tight, and got it out of me!" "*Ab pakadna hi pada na, kya karte* (I had to make a tight grip, what else could I have done)?", says Abhilasha rhetorically.

On December 28, 2018, Abhilasha and Deepshikha came home to Abhilasha's house in the evening, together and holding hands. "My mother asked me where I had been, before she saw Deepshikha, or noticed us holding hands. I told her we went and got married and we'd like to stay here, until we figure out where we can go."

Deepshikha, Abhilasha says belongs to the 'better-off' family—a fact she repeats often—courtesy a father with a 'safe' government job, as opposed to Abhilasha's father, who works as a daily wage labourer, which means the household often goes without proper meals. "I feel very bad that she used to stay so comfortably in her home, and now she has to adjust with me, because we can't afford many things," says Abhilasha, "Some days she goes without chai all day. We sometimes have to skip meals."Deepshikha objects—the first time through the day we've spent with them that we notice a slight octave rise in her voice — "You don't need to say all this. I've told you, I'm comfortable."

Deepshikha's family, though outwardly civil, has refused to acknowledge the relationship, while Abhilasha's has been resigned to it. Abhilasha's father is only keen that the two find employment and move out of his house— but until that time, he has agreed to have them stay. This is more to keep the media away than anything else, we learn—"He's quite bugged by some of the attention we've been getting", explains Abhilasha. "We also want to get away", she says, "I know that we can't keep hanging around here. We will find jobs and we will move out. Even if it means *mazdoori* (working as labourers), we are ready for it. As long we are together."

As we check on our transport back to Mahoba, district neighbouring Hamirpur, we think of rattling our parents with deviant desires too—it's tempting for the 22-year-old reporter in us, being pressured to toe the line and get married because 'it's high time, *beta*'. "Let's tell them to stop bugging us, else we'll elope with our girlfriends, what do you think?", we ask each other. Because even though there is now even a mainstream movie on the topic, we know that acceptance is far away. Abhilasha, who speaks of adopting children in the future along with Deepshikha as her legitimate partner, has the last word, "It is just un-imaginable for people, right? That how is it possible, how is it possible, for two girls to be together, to be happy together. They're missing out on something. But they should come meet us."

**At the district court, when the couple realised that same sex marriage is still not legally recognised in India, they went ahead and registered their 'live-in' status, that they were living together consensually.*

In this context the interview of Ruth Vanita under the title "**Social havoc? Has society collapsed in the 31 countries where gay marriage is legal?: Ruth Vanita"** that appeared in the *Times of India* is very important as it raises the right questions.

Ketaki Desai in Conversation with Ruth Vanita

Ketaki Desai (KD): The Centre's response to the same sex marriage petition invokes the "sanctity" of marriage between a man and woman. What do you make of this response?

Ruth Vanita (RV): Answer: A loving relationship between a man and woman has sanctity and so does a loving relationship between two women.

KD: Could you tell me a little bit about the history of queerness in the context of Indian families?

RV: My book, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriages in Modern India* (Penguin 2005; 2021) lists scores of young, non-English-speaking women from low-income groups, who have married each other by Hindu rites all over India, at least since 1987. Many families accepted these weddings. Leela Namdeo and Urmila Srivastava, two policewomen in Madhya Pradesh, got married in 1987, when same-sex marriage was not legal anywhere in the world, and there was no LGBT movement in India. Urmila's family accepted the marriage. Tanuja Chouhan and Jaya Verma got married in 2001 at the

Mahamaya Mandir in Bihar. This wedding was attended by 100 people and Jaya's entire family. Wetka Polang, and Melka Nilsa, Kandha tribals in Orissa, got married in 2012. Initially, villagers opposed the marriage but later they accepted it. Also, scores of young couples, male and female, since 1980, have committed joint suicide as a form of marriage when their families tried to separate them. In their suicide notes, they often said that they would be married in the next life.

KD: Has same sex marriage existed in India in the past?

RV: India has a long history of same-sex unions. The fourth-century *Kamasutra* describes casual sex between men but also says that two men who are friends and who trust each other can enter into a union. Urdu writer Sa'adat Yar Khan Rangin (1755-1835) described a ritual performed by two women who ate cardamom together to get "married among their female companions." In the eleventh-century Sanskrit *Kathasaritsagara*, a bandit chief, Pulindaka, falls in love at first sight with Vasudatta, a merchant's son. The text explains this: *Vakti janmaantarapritim manah snihyadakaaranam*. "Affection [that arises] in the heart without a cause speaks of love [persisting] from a former birth." Both of them live together; Vasudatta marries a woman, Pulindaka does not. When Vasudatta dies, both his wife and Pulindaka commit suicide. Several Hindu gurus and priests have commented that any strong attachment, including same-sex attachment, is a sign of connection in a former birth. In 2002, a Tamil Shaiva priest who performed the marriage of Vegavahini Subramaniam and Vaijayanthimala Nagarajan in Seattle, told me, "Marriage is a union of spirits, and the spirit is not male or female."

KD: What do you think it would take for same sex marriage to be legalised in India?

RV: Recognising that in a democracy, all citizens have equal rights. Today, a same-sex couple married by religious rites may have been together for 40 years, but they cannot make medical or funeral decisions for their spouses, they cannot inherit the spouse's property, they cannot get an Indian visa for a foreign spouse. A man and a woman who get married obtain all these rights that very day. Isn't this unjust?

KD: You've argued that the gender-neutral language in the Hindu Marriage Act and Special Marriage Act can lay the groundwork for same sex marriage in India. Could you explain?

RV: The Hindu Marriage Act states, "A marriage may be solemnised between any two Hindus." The Act does not use the words "man" and "woman"; it uses "bride" and "groom." Most of the young couples mentioned above have stated that one is the bride and the other the groom. In 1998, Shweta and Simmi signed an affidavit stating that they had got married at the temple of Lord Mahavir, "according to Hindu rites … They have been living and enjoying conjugal life together as husband and wife and will maintain their relationship till their death." (*TOI* report)

KD: While the LGBTQ movement has become part of the mainstream discourse, this has long not been the case. Prior to the language around queerness becoming more accessible, did queer couples conceptualise their relationships differently?

RV: Same-sex couples have different types of relationships. Some see each other as lovers or friends; others see themselves as married. The couples I discussed in *Love's Rite* had no contact with any movement. They did not know words like "gay" or "queer." The idea of marriage did not come to them from a movement or the West. It came from their feeling that their love was a marital type of love.

KD: Some argue that the focus on marriage equality is itself a heteronormative preoccupation. What do you make of that kind of argument?

RV: In ancient India, Japan, China, Greece, Rome, and in medieval Europe, there was an ideal of friendship. Aristotle said that two male friends share everything, and that male-female marriage is a type of friendship. In the Vedic wedding ceremony, the spouses address each other as *sakha*, friend. Friendship is the ideal for both cross-sex and same-sex spouses. Friendship is not heteronormative. Second, institutions are dynamic. Marriage used to be polygamous and women had few rights. That has changed. Take the example of the modern university. It descends from the European monastery. Jews were not allowed to join Oxford or Cambridge neither were women. Universities have changed because women (and non-Christian men) joined them.

KD: Are there certain lessons we can learn from the struggle for marriage equality in other countries, in terms of the process that underlies this kind of societal change?

RV: When Indian opponents of same-sex marriage say that in Indian society and culture, marriage is between a man and a woman, and this is sacred, it makes me smile because they do not realise that there is nothing uniquely "Indian" about this argument, which they have borrowed from the West.

Exactly the same argument was made in every country. All the opponents said that marriage is only between a man and a woman, and same-sex marriage will destroy their culture. But has society collapsed in the 31 countries that recognise same-sex marriage? No. People have realised that same-sex marriage does not create "social havoc." In fact, it strengthens social bonds. In 1996, only 27% of Americans were in favour of same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage was legally recognised in 2015. Today, 71% of Americans are in favour of it.

As more same-sex individuals and couples become visible, and many of them marry, often with the support of parents, families and friends, both in India (and among Indians abroad), Indians are getting used to it and are realising that same-sex marriage is not going to harm them in any way.

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A shorter form of this interview appeared in Times of India, 19 March 2023.

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/social-havoc-has-society-collapsed-in-the-31-countries-where-gay-marriage-is-legal-ruth-vanita/articleshow/98760723.cms?fbclid=IwAR1IP79MuwR0j4VWqv73pjqrduxg-0WF8tPXnCCC-cRANBvl8ke0z0ddrYs&from=mdr

Ruth Vanita is an Indian academic, activist and author who specialises in British and Indian literary history with a focus on gender and sexuality studies. She also teaches and writes on Hindu philosophy. Ketaki Desai is Senior Correspondent, *Times of India.*

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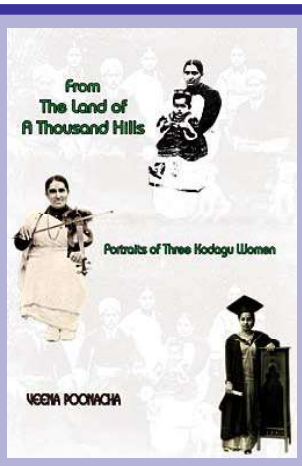


From The Land Of A Thousand Hills: Portraits Of Three Kodagu Women
By Dr Veena Poonacha

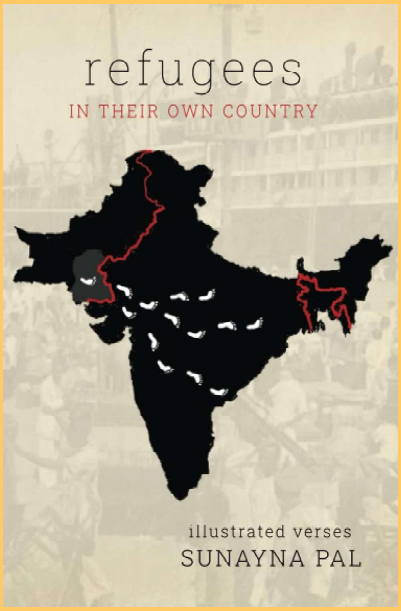
SPARROW PUBLICATION

Solvanam - Tamil Arts and Literature

Solvanam - Tamil Arts and Literature has republished some of the SPARROW booklets translation from Tamil volumes published in July 2001 in Solvanam YouTube channel.

https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCEk2q9JZIE7Y6ACZGy87ieQ
Voice, Video: Saraswathi Thiagarajan

Standing on her own feet: Kala Shahani November, 1997.
The World As My Laboratory :Shantoo Gurnani's Tryst With Science April, 1998.
Amhihi Itihas Ghadawala: Urmila Pawar And The Making Of History July, 1998.
Sakhubai:Talking In The Transplanting Season October, 1998.
Jameela Nishat: A Poem Slumbers In My Heart January, 1999.
Speaking from the Guts: Memories Of Communal Riots December, 1999.



POEMS FROM *refugees IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY*

Born and raised in Mumbai, India, Sunayna Pal moved to the US after her marriage. A double Post-graduate from XLRI and Annamalai University, she worked in the corporate world for five odd years before opting out to embark on her heart's pursuits—decided to raise funds for NGOs by selling quilled art and became a certified handwriting analyst. Now, a new mother, she devotes all her free time to writing and heartfulness. Dozens of her articles and poems have been published and she is a proud contributor of many international anthologies, including *The Hindu*, *Subterranean Blue Poetry*, *Poetry nation*. She is part of an anthology that is about to break the Guinness world of records. See sunaynapal.com

Sindh mein aisa hota tha

Sindh mein aisa hota tha
became a statement of pain
and then cohesion

*tha: That's how it was in Sindh

✦✦✦✦✦

Karachi

For Ram Chacha

He told me,
he wants to go there.
I told him,
I want to go there too.

He told me,
about the big kothi
I told him,
I want to see it, really.
He told me,
He would never forget the trees.
I told him,
I wish I could see it sooner.

He told me,
About the sand and the hills
I told him,
I was glad he knew the landmarks.

*Ram Chacha: Father's brother.

* Kothi: Mansion

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incomplete

Along with bedtime stories my grandma told me
she shared memories of living and leaving
the only home she ever knew.

While feeding me the bitter sai bhaji
she told me to eat well to be healthy
for one never knows life.

She shared memories
that only left her eyes
but never crossed her obedient tongue.

With rice and bhaji in her hand
her mind on the pain of Partition
which I never understood.

*bhaji: a Sindhi dish made with lentils and a range of greens and vegetables

Hide and Seek

Favourite pastime of young kids
became a way for all
to save their lives.

✦✦✦✦✦

Don't edit the INDIAN anthem

We can no longer live
on the soil we were born

or drink the sweet water
that nourished us

because of a line
that divided INDIA.

Let the name
remain in the anthem

for we have come
leaving our footprints
in the sands of time.

✦✦✦✦✦

Identities

I've had many

Daughter
Student
Teacher
Wife
Mother

Never did I realize,
I am also a granddaughter
of a refugee.

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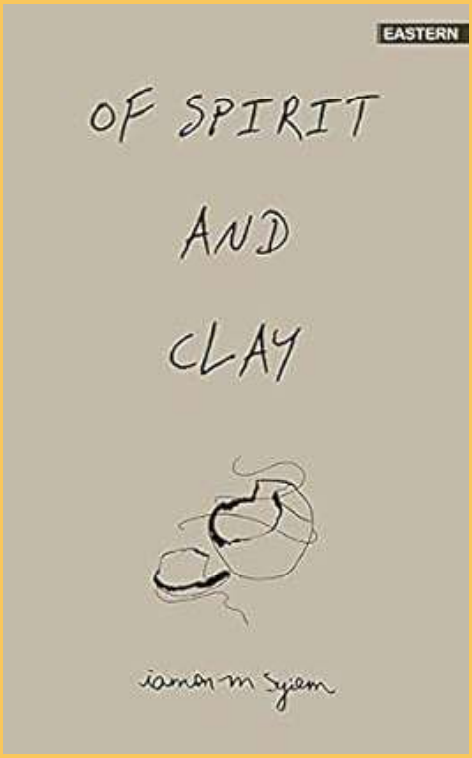


POEMS FROM
OF SPRIT AND CLAY

Iamon M Syiem lives in Shillong, Meghalaya. She has been scribbling words since her childhood, has published a number of poems including a couple in a Sahitya Akademi journal. She has also contributed a number of articles on social issues which have been published in edited books. She is actively involved in social work with a number of social organisations. She is also an Associate Professor and former Head of Sociology Department in St. Edmund's College, Shillong.

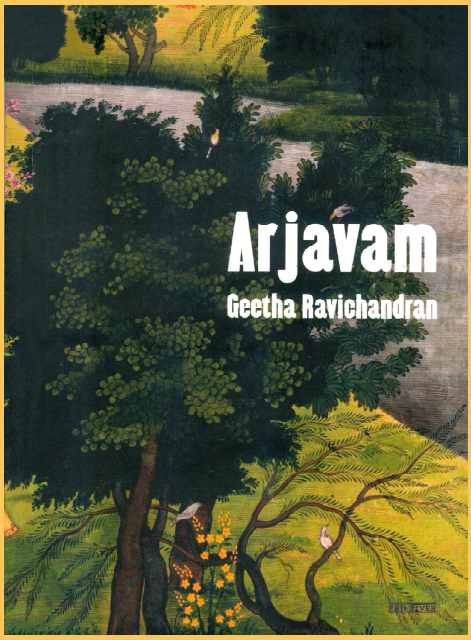
IN SEARCH

She had been thirsting
for centuries
this was one more cistern
She knew would not satisfy her
for when she'd slaked
one generation of thirst
the cisterns always dry up
This water spilled
wasted
on dry ground
she had no vessel to store it all
soon
everything will dry up as before
not enough for more
she's made it into a common well

Inside the walls, they look at her
how dare she ask for more
how dare she venture all alone
the unmarked desert land
she looked at them
asked herself in tears
how could they
be satisfied with water
from the same wells?
so like a woman tormented
by her need
she became an alien to all
but herself
maybe even to herself.

SEED WITHIN SEED

My grandmother lay in bed
ninety odd summers
waiting for another sun to rise
just waiting
body weakened by time and sickness
paps dry
the memory of seven children
in her womb
she is spent, eyes almost shut
grey and dim with cataract
but she listens for familiar voices
she listens with her heart
for the cries of her children
children's children
her grandchildren
three now
heavy with seed
did she ever dream
the future will meet her this way
in the great grandchildren
resting on her frail wrinkled arms?
Is that smile the enjoyment of the present
or is that a secret smile
she can still see her seed, nestled in the womb
of these seeds in her hands?
she can sleep happy now
because she has loved
and she is loved
that she lives
even as she dies.



POEMS FROM *Arjavam*

Geetha Ravichandran is a bureaucrat originally from Chennai. Whils she has been writing consistently for several years, she has only published intermittently. The pandemic revived her interest in poetry. This collection of poems is her first book.

Father's Funeral

As the pot was struck
and the ashes strewn,
the waves frolicked
and the frothing ocean welcomed
the end of another earth-born,
bone-weary being.
The sun shone
unconcerned, and the burning sand
scalded our bare soles.
The horizon rolled away, sunk
into the blue beyond.

It wrenched the heart to say goodbye,
but it seemed that morning,
mourning was banished on the beach.
As waves lapped our feet
and the wind blew our faces dry
right there besides us,
fluttering on fragile wings,
was a startling, golden butterfly.

Grandmother

Towards the end,
she was forlorn
like a weathered canvas,
delicate lines fading,
face propped up
against a musty wall
blurring, times out.

All space had been erased,
elasticity, corded.
The tank where she would
bathe,
stands colonised by
hyacinth.

✦✦✦✦✦

What Is My Name?

—P Satyavathi

Have you noticed how your father calls your mother? Does he use her name or not? How do the neighbours address her? Does anyone address her by name? What about your grandmother? In this story, P. Sathyavathi describes how a woman forgets her own name since no one addresses her by name. How does a woman gain her identity by name, by marriage, by motherhood, by education, by profession or by anything else? Read the story keeping these questions in mind.

A young woman, before being a housewife. A woman, educated and cultured, and intelligent, and capable, quick-witted, with a sense of humour and elegance.

Falling for her beauty and intelligence, as also the dowry which her father offered, a young man tied the three sacred knots around her neck, made her the housewife to a household and said to her, 'Look, ammadu, this is your home.' Then the housewife immediately pulled the end of her sari and tucked it in at the waist and swabbed the entire house and decorated the floor with muggulu designs. The young man promptly praised her work. 'You are dexterous at swabbing the floor—even more dexterous in drawing the muggulu. Sabash, keep it up.' He said it in English, giving her a pat on the shoulder in appreciation. Overjoyed, the housewife began living with swabbing as the chief mission in her life. She scrubbed the house spotlessly clean at all times and beautifully decorated it with multi-coloured designs. That's how her life went on, with a sumptuous and ceaseless supply of swabbing cloths and muggu baskets.

But one day while scrubbing the floor, the housewife suddenly asked herself, 'What is my name?' The query shook her up. Leaving the mopping cloth and the muggu basket there itself, she stood near the window scratching her head, lost in thoughts. 'What is my name—what is my name?' The house across the road carried a name-board, Mrs M Suhasini, M.A., Ph.D., Principal, 'X' College. Yes, she too had a name as her neighbour did—'How could I forget like that? In my scrubbing zeal I have forgotten my name—what shall I do now?' The housewife was perturbed. Her mind became totally restless. Somehow she finished her daubing for the day.

Meanwhile, the maidservant arrived. Hoping at least she would remember, the housewife asked her, 'Look, ammayi, do you know my name?'

'What is it, amma?' said the girl. 'What do we have to do with names of mistresses? You are only a mistress to us—the mistress of such and such a white-storeyed house, ground floor means you.' '

'Yes, true, of course, how can you know, poor thing?' thought the housewife.

The children came home from school for lunch in the afternoon. 'At least the children might remember my name'—the housewife hoped.

'Look here, children, do you know my name?' she asked.

They were taken aback.

'You are amma—your name is only amma—ever since we were born we have known only this, the letters that come are only in father's name—because everyone calls him by his name we know his name—you never told us your name—you don't even get letters addressed to your name,' the children said plainly. 'Yes, who will write letters to me? Father and mother are there but they only make phone calls once

in a month or two. Even my sisters are immersed with swabbing their houses. Even if they met me in some marriage or kumkum ceremony, they chatted away their time talking about new muggulu or new dishes to cook, but no letters!' The housewife was disappointed and grew more restless—the urge to know her own name somehow or the other grew stronger in her.

Now a neighbour came to invite her to a kumkum ceremony. The housewife asked her neighbour hoping she at least would remember her name. Giggling, the lady said, 'Somehow or other I haven't asked your name nor have you told me. Right-hand side, white storeyed house or there she is, that pharmaceutical company manager's wife, if not that, that fair and tall lady, that's how we refer to you, that's all.' That's all that the other housewife could say.

It's no use. What can even my children's friends say—they know me only as Kamala's mother or some aunty, now my respected husband is the only hope—if anyone remembers it, it is only he.

During the night meal, she asked him, 'Look here, I have forgotten my name—if you remember it, will you please tell me?'

The respected husband burst out laughing and said, 'What is it, dear, never has it happened before, you are talking about your name today. Ever since we were married I have got used to calling you only as *yemoi*. You too never told me not to address you that way because you have a name of your own—what's happened now—Everyone calls you Mrs. Murthy, don't they?''

Not Mrs. Murthy, I want my own name—what shall I do now?' she said in anguish

'What's there, you choose a new name, some name or other,' the husband advised.

Very nice—your name is Satyanarayana Murthy; will you keep quiet if I ask you to change your name to Siva Rao or Sundara Rao? I want only my name,' she said.

'It's all right, you are an educated woman—your name must be on the certificates—don't you have that much commonsense—go and find out,' he advised her.

The housewife searched frantically for her certificates in the almirah—pattu saris, chiffon saris, handloom saris, voile saris, matching blouses, petticoats, bangles, beads, pearls, pins, kumkum barinas, silver plates, silver containers to keep sandalwood paste, ornaments—all things arranged in an orderly fashion. Nowhere could she find her certificates. Yes—after marriage she had never bothered to carry those certificates here.

'Yes—I haven't brought them here—I shall go to my place, search for my certificates and enquire about my name, and return in a couple of days.' She asked for her husband's permission. 'Very nice! Must you go just for your name or what? If you go who will scrub the house these two days?' said her lord. Yes, that was true—because she scrubbed better than the others, she had not allowed anyone else to do that job all these days. Everyone was busy with their own respective duties. He had his office—poor things, the children had their studies to take care of. Why should they bother about this chore, and she had been doing it all along—they just didn't know how to do it, of course.

But still, how to live without knowing one's name? It was all right all these days since the question had not occurred to her; now it was really hard to live without a name.

'Just for two days you manage somehow or other—until and unless I go and get my name I shall find it difficult to live,' she pleaded with her husband and managed to get out of the house.

'Why, dear daughter, have you come so suddenly? Are your children and husband all right? Why have you come alone?'

Behind affectionate enquiries of the father and the mother there was a strain of suspicion. Recollecting immediately the purpose of her visit, the housewife asked her mother most pitifully, 'Amma, tell me, what is my name?'

'What is it amma, you are our elder daughter. We gave you education up to B.A. and got you married with fifty thousand rupees as dowry. We took care of your two deliveries—each time we alone bore the expenses of the maternity home. You have two children—your husband has a good job—a very nice person, too—your children are well-mannered.'

'It's not my history, amma—it's my name I want. At

least tell me where my certificates are.'

'I don't know, child. Recently we cleaned out the almirah of old papers and files and arranged some glassware in their place. Some important files we kept in the attic—we shall search for them tomorrow. Now what is the hurry, don't worry about them—take a good bath and have your meal, child,' said the housewife's mother.

The housewife took a good bath and ate her meal, but she could not sleep. While scrubbing the house, humming happily, joyously, and making muggulu, she had never thought that she would have to face so many difficulties like this by forgetting her own name.

Dawn broke, but the search for the certificates among the files in the attic had not ended.

Now the wife asked everyone she met—she asked the trees—the anthills—the pond—the school where she had studied—the college. After all the shouting and the wailing, she met a friend—and succeeded in recovering her name.

That friend was also like her—married, and a housewife like her, but she had not made swabbing the sole purpose of her life; scrubbing was only part of her life; she remembered her name and the names of her friends. This particular friend recognised our housewife.

'Sarada! My dear Sarada!' she shouted and embraced her. The housewife felt like a person—totally parched and dried up, about to die of thirst—getting a drink of cool water from the new earthen kooja, poured into her mouth with a spoon and given thus a new life. The friend did indeed give her a new life—'You are Sarada. You came first in our school in the tenth class. You came first in the music competition conducted by the college. You used to paint good pictures too. We were ten friends altogether—I meet all of them some time or other. We write letters to each other. Only you have gone out of our reach! Tell me why are you living incognito?' her friend confronted her.

'Yes, Pramila—what you say is true. Of course I'm Sarada—until you said it I could not remember it—all the shelves of my mind were taken up with only one thing—how well I can scrub the floors. I remembered nothing else. Had I not met with you I would have gone mad,' said the housewife named Sarada.

Sarada returned home, climbed the attic and fished out her certificates, the pictures she had drawn—old albums, everything she succeeded in getting out. She also searched further and managed to find the prizes she had received in school and college.

Overjoyed, she returned home.

'You have not been here—look at the state of the house—it's like a choultry. Oh what a relief you are here, now it is like a festival for us,' said Sarada's husband.

'Just scrubbing the floor does not make a festival! By the way, from now onwards don't call me *yemoi geemoi*. My name is Sarada—call me Sarada, understood?

Having said that she went inside, humming, joyously.

Sarada who had always cared so much for discipline, keeping an eye on every corner, checking if there was dust, making sure things were properly arranged each in its correct and respective order, now sat on the sofa which had not been dusted for the last two days. She sat there showing the children an album of her paintings that she had brought for them.

—*Translated by Vadrewu Vijayalaxmi and Ranga Rao* Published in NRK Academy page, March 24, 2020.

P Satyavathi is considered one of the eminent writers of Telugu. She has published four anthologies of short stories, five novels and a collection of essays. She has won a number of prestigious awards including the Kendriya Sahitya Akademi award in 2020 for translating A Revathi's autobiography *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. "What Is My Name" was originally published as "Illalakagaane Pandagouna" in Telugu in 1990 and has been translated into almost all the south Indian languages and Hindi. P Sathyavathi became well known with her prize-winning story "Glasu Pagilindi" (The Glass Got Broken) in 1977. *Illalakagaane* (Quest for Identity), a volume of stories, won her the Chaso award and established her as a leading feminist writer in Telugu. Later, she received the Rangavalli award and Telugu University award, among many other prestigious awards. With four novels, five anthologies of short stories and a volume of essays to her credit, she ran a regular column on the early women writers in *Bhumika*. She has translated into Telugu, to much acclaim, Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Ismat Chugtai's stories, A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* and Y.B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Baliah*; and is now translating Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas* into Telugu. She has co-edited along with C L L Jayaprada, and V Pratima an anthology of contemporary Telugu women writers' stories translated into English published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2019. She is particularly proud of the Kuvempu National Award bestowed on her in 2021.

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SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN LITERARY AWARD 2022

The genre chosen for this year's SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN Literary Award 2022 was poetry. The SPARROW Literary Awards are normally given to a woman and a man writing in Tamil and either a woman or a man for the non-Tamil language category. The SPARROW panel of judges this year were D I Aravindan, T Parameswari and Ambai for Tamil and our consultant as always, was poet and writer, Sukumaran. This year SPARROW decided to choose two languages in the other language category. The languages chosen were Khasi and Bodo. The final award decisions were taken by D I Aravindan, T Parameswari and Ambai on the panel of judges.

The awardees this year are Tamil poets Pon Mugali and V N Surya. In the other language category, SPARROW literary award this year will be given to Khasi poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Bodo poet Anju Basumatary.

All the writers have honoured SPARROW and the panel of judges by accepting the awards.

The award citation for PON MUGALI:

Pon Mugali is a contemporary continuation of the voices of poetry of the new millennium. Her poems paint life with sensitivity and remove the perfidious veils covering women's existence. In appreciation and recognition of her poems which eradicate the burden of tradition and imagined sanctities with sharpness and intensity couched in simple words, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on Pon Mugali the SPARROW Literary Award 2022.

The award citation for V N SURYA:

V N Surya's poems illustrate the rare moments contained in nature and human efforts founded on nature. His poetry is unique in revealing the unexpressed world lying beneath what is expressed in the poem through the weight of simple lines. In appreciation and recognition of his poems that hold both compassion of the intellect and the insight gained from sensitivity, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on V N Surya the SPARROW Literary Award 2022.

The award citation for KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH:

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is one of the most important contemporary poets of India. He writes in Khasi and English. His Khasi poems explore the agony and ecstasy of the Khasi identity, of things and people who have become obsolete, and abandoned ancient rocks which still mean home. His poems are based on the experiences of his land and its people but embrace the whole world in the moods and emotions they evoke. His language is acerbic, exuberant and lyrical. In appreciation and recognition of his creative vision in his Khasi poems that capture moments of life and transform them into extraordinary stories, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih the SPARROW Literary Award 2022.

The award citation for ANJU:

Anju Basumatary, whose pen name is Anju, is among the writers who have contributed to raise to great heights the Bodo language whose written literature is barely 90 years old. Anju's poems have been extolled as the finest the Bodo language can boast of. She is considered the most gifted modernist Bodo poet. Anju's poems use unusual imagery and symbols. Her poems can see the moon in a noose and can link a snake bite with Behula's story from the epics.

She keeps a tight rein on her words and creates graphic images of everyday life with a minimum of words. In appreciation and recognition of her outstanding poetry and her contribution to Bodo literature, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on Anju the SPARROW Literary Award 2022.

SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN LITERARY AWARD 2022

Pon Mugali was born on 18 November 1983, and has two poetry collections to her credit. *Thazamboo* (Screw Pine) (Chennai, Thamizhini, 2019) and *Oruthi Kavithaigalukkum Iravugalukkum Thirumbumbothu* (When A Women Returns to Poems and Nights) (Nagercoil, Kalachuvadu, 2021). Her first book received the Kavingnar Thakkai Ve. Babu Memorial Award. Pon Mugali is the pseudonym of Deepa. She lives in Chennai.

PON MUGALI

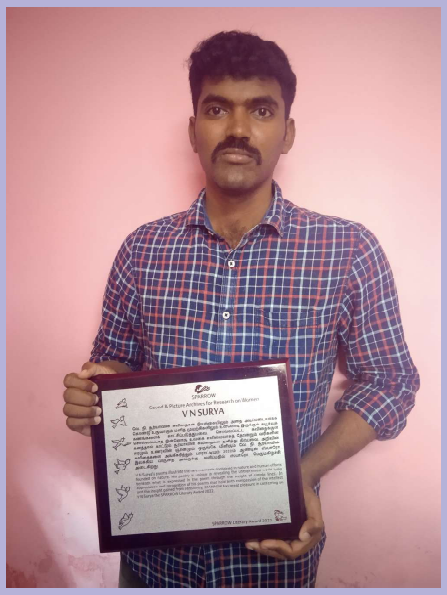
ANJU

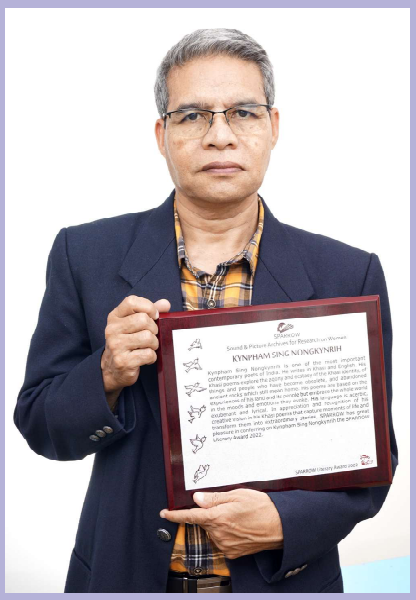
Anju is the pen name of Anjalee Basumatary who was born on 15 July 1963, at Tengpara in Kokrajhar, the headquarters of Bodoland Territorial Council in Assam. She writes poetry in Bodo language. Her other genres of writing are short stories, essays and literary criticism. She has six collections of poems and one collection of prose. Her poetry collections in Bodo include, *Nwngni Jiu: Angni Bibungthi* (Your Life: My Opinion) (Kokrajhar, Dayaram Narzary, November, 1982); *Phasini Doulengao Okhafwr* (The Moon In A Noose) (Kokrajhar, Benudhar Basumatary, October, 1995); *Gwrbwni Radab* (The Message of Heart) (Benudhar Basumatary, Kokrajhar, November, 2002); *Gwrbwni Khonthaini* (Of Heart Of Poetry) (Kokrajhar, Benudhar Basumatary, February 2005); *Ang Mabwrwi Dong Daswng* (Ask Me Not How I Am) (Kokrajhar, Benudhar Basumatary, January, 2014) and *Nwng Nwng Nwng... Jwng* (You You You ... We) (Barama, Thunlai Publication, April, 2022). The first book brought out in 1982, was the first book in Bodo language published by a Bodo woman writer in creative writing. It was brought out by Anju's father Dayaram Narzary when she was 19 years old and still in college. From 1995 to 2014 Anju's books were brought out by her husband Benudhar Basumatary. Some of her poems have been translated into English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali and Telugu and have been published in various journals, magazine and anthologies. She has edited many souvenirs and magazines and has also edited a poetry anthology of Bodo poets of modern period of Bodo literature, titled *Khonthaini Ikebana* (The Ikebana of Poetry).

Anju Basumatary has received several awards for her works. Her awards include Rangsar Award for poetry collection *Phasini Doulengao Okhafwr* (The Moon in A Noose), the highest award of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the foremost literary organisation of the Bodos, in 2002; Sahitya Akademi Award of Govt of India in 2016 for poetry collection titled *Ang Mabwrwi Dong Daswng* (Ask Me Not How I Am), in 2016 and Pramod Chandra Literary Award of Bodoland Territorial Council for literary contributions, in 2017. She teaches Physics at Kokrajhar Govt College in Kokrajhar in Assam. She is currently the president of Bodo Women Writers' Association.

SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN LITERARY AWARD 2022

V N Surya belongs to Parakkai near Nagercoil where he was born on 3 October, 1996, and has published two poetry collections so far. *Karappaaniyam* (Cockroachism) (Chennai, Salt Publishers, 2020) and *Andhiyil Thigazhvathu* (Abiding in Twilight) (Nagercoil, Kalachuvadu, 2022). His first book received the Kavingnar Thakkai Ve. Babu Memorial Award. He has a graduate degree in Mechanical Engineering. He is currently doing an online graduation course in Tamil and lives in Nagercoil.





Born on 4 April, 1964 in Sohra (Cherrapunjee), Meghalaya, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a poet, writer, and translator. He belongs to the Khasi tribe and writes in both Khasi and English. Nongkynrih is among the first Khasi writers to be published by Penguin, HarperCollins and Oxford University Press. He has a total of ten books in Khasi and twelve in English besides edited volumes and translations of poetry and short stories in both Khasi and English. Some of his poems have been translated into Welsh, Swedish, Irish, German, Gaelic, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and many Indian languages including Hindi, Gujrati, Tamil, Kannada, Marathi and Bangla. His Khasi poetry collections include *Ka Samoi jong ka Lyer* (The Season of the Wind) (Shillong, Government-financed, 2007); *Ki Mawsiang ka Sohra* (The Ancient Rocks of Cherra) (Shillong, Government-financed, 2007); *Ki Jingkynmaw* (Remembrances) (Shillong, Lanong Brothers, 2002); *Ka Jingïapeiñ jong ka Por: Ki Haiku bad Senryu* (Time's Barter: Haiku and Senryu) (Shillong, Pine Cones Publications, 2009); and *Ka Jingshai ha ka Miet (*Light in the Night) forthcoming).

He was awarded a 'Fellowship for Outstanding Artists 2000' by the Government of India. He has also received the first North-East Poetry Award in 2004 from the North-East India Poetry Council, Tripura; The Veer Shankar Shah-Raghunath Shah National Award for Tribal Literature established by the Government of Madhya Pradesh in 2008; the prestigious Tagore Fellowship from IIAS, Shimla, in 2018 and 'The Bangalore Review June Jazz Award' in 2021. He used to edit the university newsletter, NEHU News, and the first poetry journal in Khasi, *Rilum* (Land of the Mountain People) besides being the associate editor of the university's official journal, The NEHU Journal. He works as a Professor in the Department of English at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, where he lives.

ACCEPTANCE NOTE
PON MUGALI

I am very happy that my poems have been chosen for the SPARROW Award 2022. I have asked myself several times why I write. Although there is no definite answer to that, I think that it is only through writing that I am able to express myself completely. I am unable to express myself with such confidence and clarity in any mode of communication other than writing. This is how I make sense of my writing. I am searching for something incessantly through my poems. Every time I write hope sprouts; a small part of an immense void gets filled up. I see this as the essential quality of writing. It is this that gives me the urge to continue to function seriously.

Being conferred with the SPARROW award at this point will provide me great inspiration to continue working with more enthusiasm and confidence. My heartfelt thanks to those who nominated my name for the award and to the SPARROW organisation.

ACCEPTANCE NOTE
V N SURYA

I am so thrilled! Let me first express my thanks, love and happiness to SPAROW organisation and the panel that has awarded my poems. At this moment, I also remember with gratitude friends who have always stood by me.

I also would like to make this acceptance note an opportunity to bring up certain other matters.

Friends,

"We are living in times of extraordinary indifference. Today only extremists take ideas seriously" are the lines from an essay by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski. Although it seems like too strong a statement, I tend to agree with it. Lack of compassion towards the other; incapacity to listen because of selfishness; the sad plight of continuous self-destructive consumption to consume happiness. The obsession to hark back to the past because of inability to face the present. Alienation from truth and beauty. These are what can be termed the qualities of the present times.

It is in these times that my mother comes across a twelve-year-old boy using the word "depression". I have been an observer of children living in apartments where games are not played, of children who talk tough like my father, of childhood sucked by technology.

On the other hand, there are the comforts that we have got… One must say modernisation has crowned us all as monarchs of this earth. With science for knowledge, technology to change the world the way one wants, medicine to postpone death, instant contact through information and communication system we have attained comfort at all levels. One must also mention that the history of this comfort is not all that palatable. If one has to talk of it figuratively one could say there is blood spilt everywhere. There was a generation that mentally and physically faced poverty and desolation with no tools. On the path made easy by them, forsaking their intensity and commitment, we have reached here with a handful of dreams and the notion that we are the masters of this earth. We must be proud indeed.

I sit thus and write now sitting in the room. In the background is the sound of Schubert's Piano Sonata No. 20 in A Major, D. 959 - II. Andantino, from his last sonatas. First, a mild sadness envelops you. Then the sweetness. A feeling that time is taking leave. Then a weak effort to gather that experience. It is a musical piece of just eight and a half minutes or so. It is about hundred and ninety years old. But even now when I listen to it, it gives me a feeling that is ineffable. When the whole world is screaming here in one place is this one thing that cannot be expressed. This that is part of nature, poetry, prayers and love.

I think it is this one thing that has become a rarity. We don't have that "one thing" but we have many other things. There are smart phones. There are plans. There are receipts. And along with all these, a lot of distrust. We have driven away that "one thing" because it reminds us of justice, guilt, compassion, calmness, peace and values. We have done this successfully, aided by the tyranny of knowledge. It is the lack of that "one thing" that we are witnessing as

the storm of emptiness and the desert of meaninglessness.

Friends, I think I must tell you about the world's oldest religion that I have reached in recent times. (It is also the oldest solution). In that religion truth and wonderment are the divinities. In fact, even a leaf, with no plans, innocently falling in an unpeopled quiet space can become divine. Keenly observing it with concern can become worship and prayer. A piece of music that helps us to go past ourselves, a painting frozen in time, ten lines written on paper with love and with no one around, anything can become divine. There will be no violence or discrimination in the name of this religion. What remains is the unquenchable thirst for beauty and truth. It is also something much needed now.
The dead are observing us. The unborn have reposed their trust in us friends...

ACCEPTANCE NOTE
ANJU

I am pleased, honoured and humbled to receive this award and join its eminent past recipients.

I extend very special thanks to the SPARROW Board for selecting me.

My salutes to all other nominees of this year, each of whom has made incredible contributions to the poetry genre of the literary world in their respective languages.

Thank you to those who nominated me and supported my nomination.

And, of course, thank you to my extended family and friends for always supporting me.

Just to give you a little perspective on my life in the poetic literary world, I will take you way back to my school days.

In my extended family, my maternal grandfather, Anandaram Brahma, a famous writer and essayist of Alongbar period (1938-1951) of Bodo literature, was the only member having the skill of creative writing. Maybe I was fortunate to have a share of that quality from him prompting me to start writing poems in Bodo, my mother tongue, from when I was 12 years of age. Although I was not that serious at the beginning, the habit not only continued but also made my poetic instinct more and more responsive. I have been deeply influenced by eminent Assamese and Bengali poets in addition to Garcia Lorca.

I have so far six collections of poetry and one collection of essays *Raithai Thubur* (Prose Collection, 2020**)** apart from edited works and anthologies. I am also the founder and Chairperson of Editorial Board of *Gambari,* a monthly magazine published by Bodo Women Writers' Association where we publish the works of only women writers. I have been fortunate to receive prestigious awards.

I never target anything specific beforehand as subject for my creations. I am always overwhelmed by the varieties and profundity of the gifts of nature. My fondness for the natural phenomenon is deep-rooted in my heart and I am deeply enthralled by it and the same is reflected in my creations.

I feel that day-to-day life also influences poets and I am no exception. The desire, expectations, dreams, success and failure in life, complexity and conflict in thoughts all this work in conjunction in the creation of poetry. I am equally concerned with stark and dark realities of life, especially women's life, and try to give a positive spin with the focus on women empowerment.

I get encouraged to create poetry urged by my soul that is a witness to nature and life around. Poetry leads me to a different world. I pass through my difficult journey of life with the help of poetry. It is poetry that has made it possible to have this privileged opportunity to address all of you.

It is heartening to note that SPARROW came into its existence way back in 1988 with great ideas of setting up a Women's Archives with a difference. You have so far travelled long active years adding many feathers to your cap. SPARROW deserves a big applause for their unique contributions towards growth and empowerment of Women.

Once again, I heartily thank Team SPARROW for the award which means a lot to me.

ACCEPTANCE NOTE

KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

On the fourth of November 2022 SPARROW announced its literary awards on Facebook. Among the awardees was my name—for Khasi poetry! I began thinking about my art.

In the early part of my career as a writer, in a poem about the rain of Sohra or Cherrapunjee—those days the wettest place on earth, and my beloved birthplace—I wrote the following lines:

Dear rain that comes from the hills
like the gods,
share with my songs a little of your force
and let them be heard and be talked
as your thunderous storm.
Carry them into the four winds
and let them overflow the world
as your water in the Bangla Plains—
all I ask from life is a little of your name.

These lines had seemed to me, for a long time, as wishful thinking. In our world, today, could a poet be taken as seriously as other writers? Could he be as well received and win instant fame, for instance, as a novelist could? If publishers are to be believed, there is no taker for poetry; there is no market; people do not read poetry. This is the publishers' constant excuse for refusing to publish poetry, even good quality. In this state of affairs, how can a poet, let alone name and fame, 'be heard and be talked'?

Is this the reason why, friends ask me, I have diversified into prose writing? A writer, of course, does not think in such material terms. He writes, in prose or poetry, because he has the talent and the urge to write. As I wrote about my first poem, it was a deep-seated and spontaneous stirring that began it all:

Poetry came like an illness: a young woman, abandoned
and alone with a girl child had seemed to me,
in her loneliness, like a flambeau in the dark lanes
of those nights. Something stirred inside me.
I was racked by a sudden desolate yearning,
something fierce and restless, a gnawing, tormenting
desire to reach out, to touch—
and I scrawled my first few lines, ...

And if a poet is, as Shelley says, 'a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude,' then what agenda can a writer have?

But the fact remains that my prose works, started much later than poetry, have received immediate attention, with my stories published in anthologies by Penguin India, Oxford University Press, Tranquebar Press, Katha, the Sahitya Akademi and various foreign journals. This recognition has culminated in the recent publication of my debut novel, *Funeral Nights*, by Westland Books, which a novelist-critic has described as 'One of the greatest modern epics by a writer from India'.

With this kind of appreciation, should I then give up writing poetry altogether? Should I devote myself entirely to fiction writing? These questions vex me whenever I frustratedly think of how hard it is to get poetry published by big and renowned publishers. Of course, Harper Collins did publish *The Yearning of Seeds* and *Time's Barter*, my fifth and sixth poetry collections, some years ago, but usually, it is very hard.

Today, however, the invocation I had raised years ago seems to have been answered most marvellously. Today what had appeared like wishful thinking in those early days has become wish fulfilment as I receive, with gratefulness, the prestigious SPARROW Literary Award for poetry.

There is a strong sense of destiny in my getting this award. Certain government organisations here are yearly collecting the bio-data of all those who have published books in Khasi for whatever purpose they may have. But these organisations have routinely ignored my name despite having written twelve to thirteen books in Khasi not to speak of translations from Khasi into English and vice versa. I say this without rancour or bitterness—for I am not overly enthusiastic about government endorsements—but merely to highlight the sense of wonderment when

faraway SPARROW decided to award me for my poetry in Khasi.

Locally, I feel that some forces were trying to bury my name as a writer under the earth, but like a seed, it sprouted and became a tree, blooming with flowers, heavy with fruits:

> What can I do but learn from the cherry tree?
> Though I lose my leaves in the fall,
> I will quickly recover;
> I will flower;
> I will bear fruit
> in the dead of winter.

I also remember the words of Neruda. It does not matter, he says, if one's poems have sunken their roots deep into one's native soil; it does not matter if they are born of indigenous wind and rain or have emerged from a local landscape. If they are worth their salt, they must 'come out of that landscape ... to roam, to go singing through the world ...'

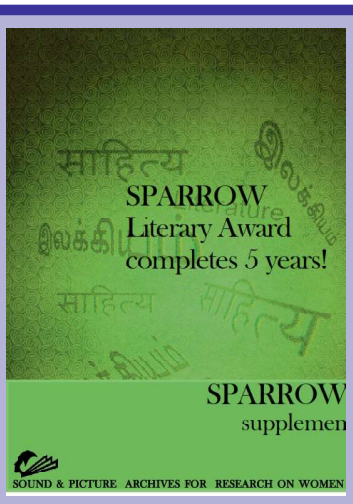
You may ask me how my poems have emerged from the dark confines of Khasi literature. Because I write in both Khasi and English. But do I translate them from one to the other? This is more complex than it seems. Perhaps the answer is in what I had written in an earlier article:

> The desire to be read and understood by my people makes me wish to write in Khasi. But how can one write in a language whose writings are, without being read, frowned upon as *biblia abiblia* by the educated elite? Therefore, though most of my poems begin in Khasi, my immediate ambition is to exhume them, as it were, from the crypt of Khasi literature and get them tested through English journal publications. That is how the scribbled pieces in Khasi are simultaneously translated into English, and the Khasi thoughts are often directly transformed into English compositions. And so, driven by circumstances and supported by literary ambidexterity, the creation of every one of my poems becomes essentially the birth of twins.

I encourage my compatriots to be ambidextrous. But even if that is not possible, I encourage them to persevere in what they do. Martin Luther King Jr. says, 'If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."' Quality is the key to everything.

Perhaps because I have always believed in quality, some literary organisations around the country have acknowledged my creative aptitude and conferred prestigious awards on me from time to time. And now, even SPARROW has recognised my contribution to Khasi poetry.

Because of the sense that there is here a genuine appreciation of talent, I feel privileged and honoured to be among those offered the 2022 SPARROW Literary Award. I accept it with my deepest gratitude and express my heartfelt and profound thanks to SPARROW, its able Director, C S Lakshmi, and all members of the jury.



SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award programme began in 2014. In SNL 38 supplement we have given all the acceptance speeches of the writers who got the awards from 2014 to 2019 for the acceptance speeches were not just formal speeches but stories the authors told us about themselves, their life and their writing which we felt, must be documented.

Giving below the link
https://www.sparrowonline.org/newsletter/

SPARROW WILL BE RELEASING THE FILM BASED ON THE WRITERS' MEET HELD IN AIZAWL IN FEBRUARY 2023 CALLED

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Maratha Colony Road, Dahisar (E),
Mumbai-400068
Phone: 022-28965019

E-mail: sparrow1988@gmail.com
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