



BOOK REVIEWS

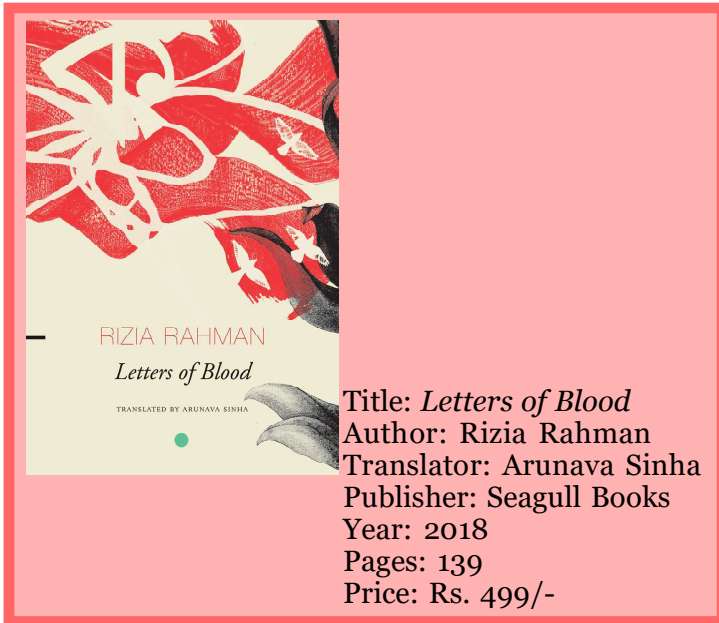
SPARROW
Supplement



SOUND & PICTURE ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

Stories Not to be Forgotten

—*Semeen Ali*



“Everyone has a name, isn’t that so, Mashi?”

“Of course. An address too. And then they are swept away somewhere else...”

The slim novel contains one of the most heart wrenching accounts: an insight into the world of prostitution. Set in Bangladesh during the 1970s to 1980s, Rizia Rahman’s novel *Rokter Okkhor* (1978) translated into English by Arunava Sinha in 2016, is centred around the fictional place Golapipatti. However, the novel includes narratives of women that cannot be categorised as fictional accounts. The pain and the violence inflicted not just on women’s bodies but also on their minds are deeply unsettling for anyone who reads this book. Rizia in her author’s note recounts her first encounter with a “whore” —a term she later comes to understand as a derogatory epithet for women in general shaped by circumstance—in this case it is in a cinema hall. The word earns her a slap from her mother when Rizia uses it to refer to a woman on the road.

As a woman, for Rizia, writing about this subject has been fraught with challenges—from being discouraged to visit the brothels first hand lest she “disappears”, to encountering discouragement and ridicule by male writers with regards to the topic on which she wanted to write.

There comes a point, she reminisces, where she goes into a sort of depression and it is her husband who encourages her to resume her writing and not be bothered by what the world thinks or will think of her work. Once the novel is published, along with the praises she has to face her share of brickbats and abuses. Writing about certain topics, as a woman, is not an easy task as it often invites offensive reactions and ideas.

“Tsk!Tsk! How could a woman from a respectable family write such a story?’ I became unwell again.”

To raise your voice is to be prepared to be dragged down into the darkness of psychological abuse. The concept of respectability as deeply ingrained in the minds of women by patriarchal constructs, still exerts a powerful influence. Regardless of one’s status in the society, we are all to a certain extent constrained by this notion in our manner of conduct to others as well as towards ourselves. It is this very idea that gets unhinged through this novel. The house where these women reside serves as a reflection of the condition of these women. The crumbling walls and the dilapidated state in which the house is, surrounded by stench and unhygienic conditions coalesces the stories and the histories of the women it shelters.

“The aroma of *telebhaja* and fried spices from Moyna’s road side shop across the lane is mingling with the stench of garbage rotting in the drain, the vapid odour of putrid water in the well and the acidic tang of the hooch. The neighbourhood is now a world of sounds and smells. A world of hoodlums, pimps, screams, tears, quarrels, coarse laughter, and bestiality.”

Rizia has not held back from showing the bestiality that men are capable of when she brings in the youngest of the lot that has been forced into prostitution—Kusum, Piru and Parul. For getting food, they struggle to find customers as old as their father’s age. The merciless beatings and torture on these young bodies shows the lack of agency that these girls have over their bodies. It is a world for men to dominate and they are simply toys to be played with or destroyed at their whims and fancies, “which most of the girls here have fallen victim to and ended up, willingly or unwillingly, as nothing but bodies in the decrepit rooms in this lane where no sunlight or air gets in, eaten away by commercial deals every day...”

The novel secures a space for the aging prostitutes who look back at their days when they wielded power but now find themselves deformed and reduced to begging or languishing in the gutters, barely surviving. They have nowhere to call home, nowhere to turn to. They are on their own. The illusionary power they once held has been snatched away either by ravages of age or by inexplicable diseases that they contracted from their customers. The horrifying moments that continuously punctuate this novel are the pills that these women have to take constantly thereby gradually destroying their bodies.

“Meanwhile. Old Golapjaan’s constant coughing can be heard. The hag starts coughing before sunrise, she dumps herself just about anywhere these days... Everyone knows Golapjaan used to ply her trade here once upon a time, Later she became a madam. Now she has nothing to call her own besides ribs and crippled body.”

It is a world of darkness that Rizia has brought forth for her readers and which Arunava skilfully translates, retaining the horrors as much as possible in the translated language. The pain and the indescribable suffering comes alive in this translated text and conjures up faces of all the protagonists of this novel. Each one of them with a history and a home they were taken away from. A family to which they can no longer return to. The scars of their past endures until their last breath. Some continue to question their existence while others have made peace with their fate.

“Yasmin looks at Huree. ‘Why can’t you and I and all of us live the way everyone else does, in regular homes with regular work?’

Shanti rolls with laughter. ‘Whores and homes. All those books you read have affected your brain, Yasmin Bu. Once you’re branded, it never comes off.’

Huree sneers. ‘To hell with living in a regular home. I’m fine as I am. I’ll tell you the truth, the thought of spending the entire night with the same person makes me want to vomit. You get different pleasures from different men.’”

The duplicity of those running the brothels is starkly illustrated through their differential treatment of their own daughters compared to women of similar age. The dreams of freedom and to lead peaceful lives harboured by these women are short lived as none of the men that come to exploit them are heroes. Despite the harsh reality the women find themselves losing in the technicolour dreams that momentarily transport them away from the horrible reality that they have to live with. This is not the romanticised world as depicted in novels and movies, adorned with a harmonium and tabla and liquor bottles in

a room lined with almirahs, as one of the prostitutes in the novel points out, nor are these women resembling any Rajlakshmis or Chandramukhis of literary fame.

“Now Bokul bursts into tears. ‘Oh *bu!* What do these sons of pigs think we are? Don’t we have the bodies of human beings? Hasn’t Allah sent us to earth as humans?’

Putting the glass down, Yasmin levels a steady gaze at Bokul. She says, ‘Not humans. Women.’”

In a realistic portrayal of the condition in which these women survive and possibly try to fight back at times, the novel opens up a series of discussions regarding the extent to which women are able to exert control over their own bodies. It also delves into how class plays a role in the amount of agency they can possess. An excerpt from the novel highlights this angle:

‘Delwar smiles too. ‘Feminism is a wave all over the world now. Our women are adding their voices to the chorus of slogans to become modern.’

Yasmin crumples the magazine and throws it in a corner. ‘Do those who are participating in this revolution know how many women are living like prisoners, victims of perverted male desire? In the olden days, not even the maids in the harems lived in such misery.’

Delwar smiles again. ‘They don’t keep track of all this. Rich housewives are seeking freedom for women through meetings and conferences and seminars. They are busy with equal rights for women when it comes to jobs, education, offices, even the home.’

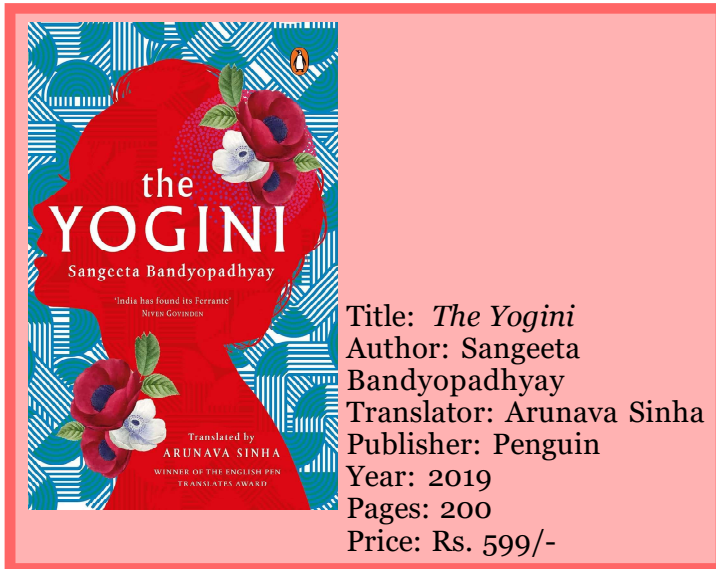
Yasmin scolds him. ‘Don’t laugh. Tell them about Kusum, tell them about Piru and Mamata and Parul, tell them about the women in thousands of brothels like this one. If you can, ask them whether they have the courage to snatch genuine freedom for women from the clutches of men.’”

Catherine A. MacKinnon, in *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989) observes: “Women’s sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others. Women never own or possess it and men never treat, in law or in life, with the solicitude with which they treat property.” The novel fearlessly unveils the reality of the world; no details are spared. There are no saviours or tales of rescue and certainly no happy endings. The language is terse and captivating. There is a flow in the narration that is not stopped or jarred due to the dialogues. The several characters that dot the landscape of this novel individually call out to the readers—to listen to them; perhaps to sit with them and hear their stories.



The Labyrinth of Life

—*Semeen Ali*



Title: *The Yogini*
Author: Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay
Translator: Arunava Sinha
Publisher: Penguin
Year: 2019
Pages: 200
Price: Rs. 599/-

“There is no such thing as free will here. No fundamental independence. I have long accepted that I have a natural fate in this world, a human being’s fate. I am no one, fate is everything. You are everything. This way, I can be closer to you too, can’t I?”

These thoughts ran through her head, but she wished, too, to escape, to be free.”

At what juncture in life does the loneliness that lies within transform into a companion that accompanies you wherever you go and in whatever you do? To what extent does this presence threaten to devour one’s outwardly existence so that the demons within can capture the light of the day in which one lives; and begin to create an alternate reality that seems more liveable?

“Will I never escape my fate, Mr. Vaid?
‘You are your own fate.’”

Sangeeta’s novel explores the recesses of the mind that remain hidden deep within each of us. Our minds once unified are now torn and separated; they have turned into entities that are no longer dependent on the community to thrive. That man is a social animal is challenged in this novel when the unending loneliness turns up in the form

of fate in Homi’s life.

“When she picked up the menu she felt as though they were about to have the identical meal to before, that most events in her life were nothing but repetition. There was nothing truly original in existence besides birth and death. It was as though...”

Set in contemporary Kolkata, the story introduces us to Homi with a complicated family history. Her mother who is whimsical and perpetually discontented, belittles her daughter and exhibits a self-centred demeanour; one is not surprised to see the strain that the relationship has on the daughter, Homi. There are moments when one does think of the mother as also a victim of circumstances and therefore the bitterness that spews out in indirect ways on her daughter and her second husband may stem from her own hardships and struggles.

“Each sister was a witch as far as Oli’s mother was concerned; they had made her suffer immensely when she had been Mr. Banerjee’s wife. Now they were intent on depriving Oli of her inheritance so they could seize it for themselves.”

The portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship evokes parallels with the characters in Jane Austen’s novels. Much like Austen’s works, the mother in this story is always worried about finding good matches for her daughters and weighs the importance of a match in terms of the wealth that it brings with it.

“Both of you are lucky that way— your mother doesn’t turn to you for help. But what really surprises me, Khuku, is that you chose to get a job, to earn a living. Just look at Oli. You could have had a life like hers. Instead, you fell head over heels in love with an ordinary boy, and went and got married. And now that job has squeezed the life out of you. You could have led a life of luxury, Khuku, if you’d married into Gora Sengupta’s family...”

A pervasive sense of fate permeating everyone’s lives seems to flow through the novel. There is no escaping the clutches as it were an inexorable force guiding their destinies. While Khuku (Homi) navigates through life, she finds herself pausing at every crossroad to consider whether her actions stem from her own volition or whether fate is

directing her actions and she is but a pawn in the hands of fate.

“I know you’re unpredictable, Khuku, I know you talk before you think, you do as you please up—but I’m slowly discovering you’re cruel too.’

He slammed the bathroom door behind him.

It took Homi only a second or two to realise she had committed a blunder. What she had done was unacceptable. She had said something she had never wanted to say.

Was doing something against one’s will, saying what one didn’t want to, also a matter of fate?”

There is a slow disintegration of marriage that seems to occur as the novel proceeds—it seems like a chipping away of a block in a slow yet steady manner. The gradual erosion of the bond is shown remarkably well, capturing the rootlessness that accompanies this, in the novel. What is interesting to note is how Homi is not addressed anywhere with her surname except towards the last few pages of the novel; an interesting take on how surnames are binding on women and the extent to which they exert control over the lives of women—the idea that a woman needs to bound by at least some semblance of a patriarchal structure no matter how liberal and free she is has been dealt with deftly through this angle. The control extends to even the bodies of women and this has been shown in the novel when a news piece has to aired with regards to an abortion, turning it into a sensational story.

“What rights does a human being actually have over themselves? At what point is my body or mind taken over by the state? When does the state or society get to decide what should be done with my body or my mind, and therefore decree what I can or cannot do?”

There is an element of magic realism that seeps through into the novel—in the form of a sadhu that Homi (Khuku) seems to be running into but what is interesting to note is that this figure turns up at specific moments in her life—when she is questioning her sense of self or in the moments that are indirectly contributing to the stresses that she feels but cannot give a voice to.

“Then at one point, Homi saw her hermit, distinct beneath the bright white ceiling lights—her fourth vision. The look in his eyes, his expression, his jaw, his build—all added up to an inexplicable presence. Homi shrank back in fear, feeling the urge to scream, to have people gather around...”

There is a fluidity that one finds in this book and the translator has beautifully captured this element in the translated text. The reality is right in front of the readers and for Homi who is trying to navigate through these unsure waters, but there is another reality that seems to be seething beneath the surface. That is finally cracking through the lines of the earth and attempting to colonise the mind permanently. It is this flow that has been captured powerfully in this novel.

“A red beam intermittently illuminated Homi’s bed. Gazing at its source, she was filled with delight at the thought that no one knew she was aware of her new address. She felt that now, she really did belong nowhere, a condition that had gained material existence in the world, beyond its origin in the faint lines on her palms.”

Sangeeta through this novel has brought her readers into the inner life of Homi. Everything is in front of us but then there is an element of concern that arises for Homi. What if she is lost permanently? What is in store for her in a world that has no space left for those who wander aimlessly? These are several questions that continue to riddle the mind of a reader when they delve inside the mind of Homi. Sangeeta has made sure that the narrative voice does not keep the reader at a distance from the protagonist, rather the reader is slowly drawn into the world that Homi is falling into; much like Alice in her wonderland – You keep falling down a long dark hole with no ground beneath your feet to stabilise you.

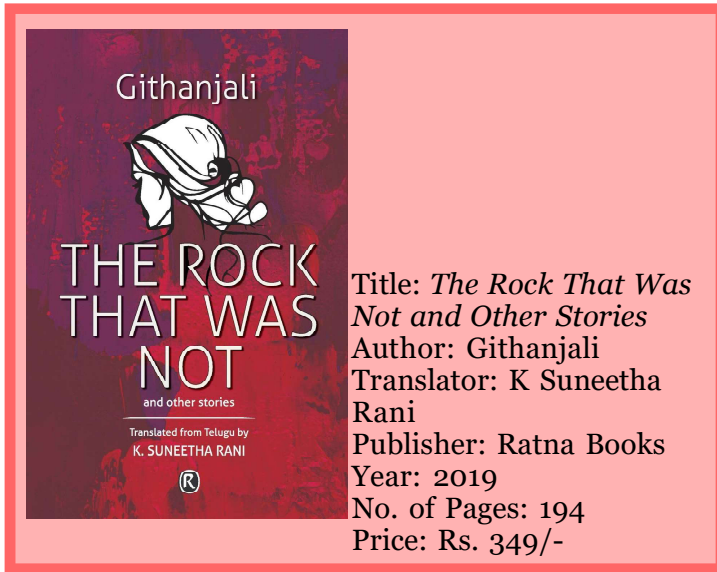
“She kept walking, a succession of thoughts flashing through her mind. From one lane to another, and then another, all of them filthy, ugly, haunted. As dirty as hell. She realized gradually that she was wandering aimlessly, unable to get out of the lanes. Nor could she locate Bibirani’s mansion. She was trapped in a labyrinth of lanes, returning to the same spot repeatedly. Now she began to run madly, trying to distinguish one lane from another, but without success. It began to feel like a black hole where she would choke to death.”

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



Women Destroyed

—Uma Shankar



Title: *The Rock That Was Not and Other Stories*
 Author: Githanjali
 Translator: K Suneetha Rani
 Publisher: Ratna Books
 Year: 2019
 No. of Pages: 194
 Price: Rs. 349/-

The book is originally written in Telugu on women-centric issues of sexual relationships, highlighting her woes, wounds, despairs and distress. It is not an easy book to read as we are familiar with such pain, agony and aches amidst family and neighbourhood. Women seen as objects of pleasure by men whether fathers, husbands or any other adult continue to disturb the readers even today. Women are treated as possessions, toys of pleasure to play with and seen in a subservient manner. The authoritative power of men continues to threaten the lives of millions of women whether they are qualified and occupying high positions or managing the household and bringing up children wholeheartedly. Is a woman free? Does she have a desire of her own to dream and laugh? Can she freely walk keeping her head high? Will it be possible to view her with care and concern and not for body and physical pleasures? Many questions come to our mind. If sexual pleasure is to be considered as mutual, then why is it violently forced on a woman when she is not inclined towards it for some reason? This anguish and torment are too painful to bear. Biologically she has many more issues to manage with her body when she gets married, gets pregnant and becomes a mother. The reader can visualise

the surging emotions and feelings of women portrayed in every story by Githanjali in the original. The translator Suneetha Rani has brilliantly captured the throbbing aches and anguish of women in all the stories and has managed to retain the original tone of the stories. The translation is smooth, lucid and poetic; one is unable to keep the book down.

There are twelve stories narrated; each with peculiar yet not unfamiliar suffering that girls and women undergo inflicted by fathers or husbands or other adult men. The situations recounted will certainly ring a bell with many women. The authority of society and family consistently seem to support the atrocities of men in the name of satiating their pleasures and sexual desires. Don't women need to satiate their pleasures as per their terms? Father raping the daughter in front of helpless mother, husband raping wife within four walls, or men ogling at woman in the name of appreciation of beauty... Often women survivors find it difficult to raise their voice or be able to physically overpower such men. The pathetic, painful and pitiable condition of women in these stories is heart wrenching. One begins to wonder if there is a place for anything called love, care, romance in marriage other than gross lustful sex between couples.

The first story "The Rock that Was Not", which is also the title of the book, is a deeply disturbing one. In the story, Pratima's cancer is not deducted due to silicone implants. Breasts become mere playful objects to the unquenchable desire of husbands in the story. Pratima fights for her life in this story. Is the husband a guardian or a life sucker? The implants are like painful stones, a burden on the body. When she wants to remove the implants due to excruciating pain, the husband Ashok does not permit as he has spent money to make her look beautiful with implants. It is the height of insensitivity to the pain of one's wife.

In the name of getting a male child—*mard baccha*—Malanbi in the story "Offering" undergoes unbelievable trauma and pain caused by her taunting husband and mother-in-law. Forceful sexual interactions lead to excessive

bleeding and there comes a situation when her uterus may have to be removed. Malanbi pleads with the doctor to remove the tumour but not the uterus. She eventually passes away putting an end to the frequent visits to the hospital. Her uterus is intact in her body, safe and secure. This is indeed a very painful story.

In the story “OCN” (Obsessive Compulsive Neurosis) the world of kitchen day in day out is so frustrating to an aspiring, insightful activist like Aruna. Another story, “Nymphomania” is one where the wife is accused of being a nymphomaniac. Her husband Nagesh and daughter Neha believe that she is one and force her to take pills that make her drowsy and dazed. Rudra, the protagonist, knew her husband as an artist and painter who enjoyed making nude portraits and getting models home with minimum clothing. This is normal for any artist. He was also a sex maniac but it seemed normal to him as a man. When Rudra is continuously chased by family to consume medicines and is accused of suffering from nymphomania, she turns furious, depressed and helpless. During her normal life as wife and mother she is busy with household chores, ignoring the sexual acts of Nagesh, managing to do errands and watering plants while listening to Rafi songs. Once from the balcony she sees a man passing by at the same time each day and sharing a loving glance. She gets so addicted to seeing Madhu (the name which she comes to know later) and misses him if she has to go out at the same time. One day he knocks on the door and Rudra is dumbstruck when she sees Madhu standing at the door with a smile, ready to offer a kiss and a caring hand to hold. The gentle feeling of love gives her a great deal of joy, which she cherishes the whole day. This love which she could experience was without any expectations or commitments. One fateful evening as Madhu puts his head on Rudra’s lap and both are engrossed in Rafi’s romantic song, the father and children enter unexpectedly. The sight of them arouses anger and shock that gives her the name of a nymphomaniac seeking sexual pleasure. Her explanation of this relationship reaches deaf ears and she does not meet Madhu after that fateful day. Having told this story to the Counsellor she proves that it is not her but Nagesh who is suffering from the disease she is being accused of having. Madhus who fill the gap of romance and love which is lacking in a wedded relationship, are rare. Not all woman-man friendships lead to bed but that is rarely understood. As the story ends, we see Rudra

spending the rest of her life on her balcony, watching her garden, listening to Rafi and cherishing the touch of Madhu.

Each and every woman in the stories, has been a victim of some kind or the other in the hands of men in all roles. The mothers who manage the monsters are no longer ready to repeat the history for their daughters. “Stone” is a very touching story of Asra who is repeatedly raped by her biological father. The lust and desire in his eyes every time he comes near makes her tremble and feel terrified. Her mother is a battered woman who has never complained to the police. Is incest a sin? How does one define? To Asra, talking about her demonic father to the doctor seems like committing a sin while the father thinks it is fine to have such a violent relationship with his own daughter and that it is not a sin.

Stories like “The Husband Stitch” and ‘Frigid’ narrate the insatiable desires and lust of men for their own personal pleasures and the lifelong agony of women who succumb in order to satisfy and be in the proximity of husbands. “The Swish of Sword” is a story narrated by the foetus who is also tormented, witnessing all the atrocities of the father on her mother. The foetus narrates how her mother is burnt with cigarettes and bitten in the cheeks, lips, breasts and waist. It is sadism in the guise of marital relations. To top it all he wants only a boy and not a girl child. The day he knows it is a girl after the scan, the mother goes through hell again. An interesting twist to the story is brought by the author through the foetus. She astonishes everyone at the time of delivery. She is born with no genitals, instead has a sharp horn-like structure. The sparkling eyes of the baby indicates having conquered the world!

Yet another story “Murder” is on the theme of acceptance of male children and rejection of girl children. Irrespective of doctor’s advice not to conceive after a daughter was born, continuous efforts are made by the husband to impregnate with a hope of a son. Manjeera suffers through the pregnancy despite knowing it is a male child and does not live to enjoy motherhood. The story sees such husbands as murderers who don’t even have the kindness and love of a veterinary doctor who saves the mother animal and lets go of the calf.

“My Husband Raped Me” is pitiable story narrated by a doctor who sees many cases of women suffering due to marital rape. Ramdevi is suffering from venereal herpes undergoing severe pain. Yet her husband tortures her even after having two children. And there is another case of a

young teenage girl married to a man double her age and within ten days she is raped and battered. The whole family subtly advises the young girl to cooperate and support. The doctor is in a state of shock when he sees the broken wrist and the bruises all over body. The family asks the doctor how it could be construed as rape if it is an act done by the husband. The story brings to mind that marital rape is still not a legally accepted term in our country.

“The Fall of Man” is based on the proverbial story of Adam and Eve through a drama directed by a school teacher. In the name of taking vitamin tablets the man takes Viagra to keep up the sexual desire and blames the wife for her midlife crisis. Mandakini, the woman in the story, fights like a tigress one night to prove his dysfunction and gives him a lifetime lesson. The last story “Kiss” is about the mental agony of Tapasvi whose husband Mahesh is never tired of fantasising about other young girls and women and recalling their names while sleeping with her. She realises Mahesh is incapable of gentle love and loving caresses. The only way she can save her family with two daughters, is to dream of such things herself.

Reading such stories and reflecting on them can be upsetting. But times are changing and while the stories speak of what can be termed real situations with all their gruesome details, one hopes that with rising awareness, woman-man relationships would acquire new meanings and be rid of violence. Will marriage remain just an institution or will it bring fulfilment? Time will tell.



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We thank all our trustess and advisors who reposed immense faith in our efforts which has made it possible for us to spread our wings. They continue to stand by us. We also thank our funders, donors, supporters, well-wishers, friends and many more who have supported us in many ways.



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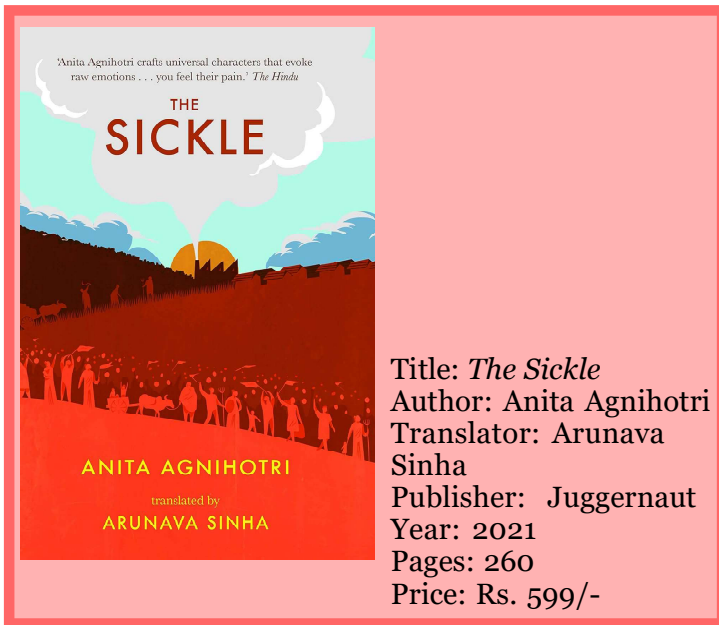
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Living as a Woman

—*Semeen Ali*



“Humans were ‘sickles’ here, they had no names but numbers. Families were the units for counting sickles, husband and wife adding up to one...A sickle is released only after enough sugarcane has been harvested to recover the advance payment.”

The book extensively discusses the plight of the farmers and the oppression they are subjected to. The focus on the nomadic tribes as well as the state of the sugarcane farmers offering an insight into how the powerful have historically evaded accountability and have continued to manipulate the legal system in their favour. They are the law of the land and that extends to even sexually abusing the women folk of those working under them.

“The sugar mill owners had in fact opened up a toddy shop right there inside the toli. There may not have been taps or toilets, water for bathing, or a dependable roof over one’s head, but the men still dropped in to drink on their way back to their shanties, it was the only way to get rid of their aches and pains.”

The novel is a story that weaves in not just the stories of women from different strata of the society as well as their plight but also underscoring the parallel suffering

endured by Nature. The inextricable relationship between women and nature has been brought out beautifully through this novel. The pain and the suffering extends to the roots of both—the interconnectedness runs throughout the book and is hard to miss.

“Terna didn’t take off her work clothes even after dinner, which meant gasping in the sultry heat inside the airless hut. Still she didn’t undo a single button, and not just because it might mean taking longer to respond when the call to work came. These clothes were her armour for self-defence too. No one could take them off just by tugging at them...”

The novel looks at the pervasive male gaze that continues to haunt the lives of women. And the novel embarks in detail on the list of things that women should and should not do in order to avoid being the recipient of that gaze. Through its narrative, the commodification of women is highlighted in this novel and how treated like an object she is passed on from one to another with hardly any regard for their agency and voice.

“When accompanied by a male, whether it’s her father or brother or husband, she is his property, he is her malik. But since it isn’t possible to have your malik by your side wherever you go, even a ten-year-old girl learns how to conceal her incipient womanhood behind an urni. Should an older woman spill water on her sari from the pitcher balanced on her head, the covetous glances of gambling men are bound to settle on her body, without exception.”

As the upholders of family honour, the situation of the women does not improve, since they also carry the burden of being a property; this has been addressed in detail and realistically in the novel. The horrifying killing of girls at child birth, to how the foetuses are disposed of, to the way women have to protect themselves, the struggle continues. There are no heroes to save them and those who do step up are at the brink of getting erased eventually by those in power. A detailed excerpt but significant detail serves as a stark reminder of how women are denied the autonomy to choose their own identities.

“The teacher hadn’t bothered to consult her father, and probably hadn’t even considered checking with her mother.

The little girl was delighted to be transformed from Kalindi to Terna...”

Anita’s writing style brings in a refreshing perspective by intricately describing the animate and inanimate elements. The historical and the political side of a particular place and its people is discussed in detail and there is no rush in the way the book unfolds. The detailing brings in a well-rounded approach to understanding the context in which the novel has been set and Anita provides her readers with comprehensive knowledge about the place in which the novel is set that one might not be aware of otherwise. The novel serves as a reminder of the rot that is within the society in which one lives and there is no escaping from this societal decay, as it transcends social strata.

“When the papers publish news of rape, the parents assume it’s other people’s daughters who are the victims. There must be something wrong with the woman’s behaviour, or with the company she keeps. The farmer who dies of suicide must have lost the courage to continue living after losing everything else, but the head of our family will never do that, he will fight till the end.”

The interesting part is how certain words have been left untranslated and at times the meaning of those words have been provided along with the word in original. The translator’s ability to seamlessly blend the two worlds—the world in which the original takes birth to the one where it finally nestles is a transition that has been done effortlessly by Arunava. What it brings in is the creativity of the translator who does not hesitate to walk between the two worlds and bring them to the reader, bringing forth an important idea that the translated text need not be given over entirely to the host language but retains its sense of self as it transitions to the other side. The book serves as a reality check confronting its readers with the realities of the world, even as they feel sheltered from its harsher truths.



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Family History (Tamil Edition)

Author: V.S. Visalakshiammal

Translated by: C S Lakshmi and Malathi
Ramanathan

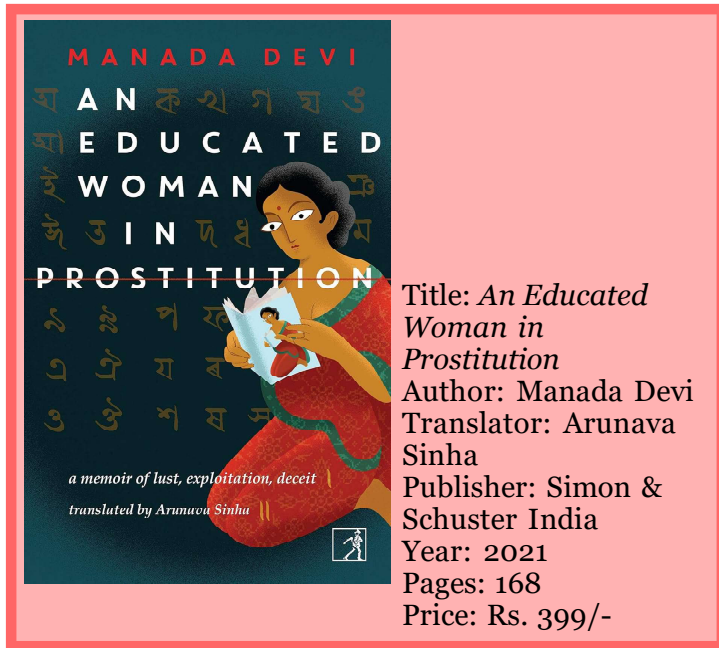
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Choices of Survival

—*Semeen Ali*



“As soon as women move about freely, people in our country try to sully their reputation with falsehoods. Women’s independence is not yet accepted in our land.”

In autobiographies, one attempts to reconstruct their past based on their memories of those circumstances and events. However it is essential to acknowledge that the construction of one’s identity according to the version that one remembers might not entirely be true. Of course one cannot overlook the facts that are bound with the narrative but one needs to recognise the personal subjectivity that is involved in recollecting and recreating life’s events. It reminds me of T.S Eliot’s line from *Four Quartets*: “you are the music while the music lasts” highlighting the transient and subjective nature of personal narratives.

Why do we tell stories of our lives? Who are we addressing and to what extent does that serve the purpose of disseminating what we have in mind? It is keeping these questions in mind that one approaches Manada Devi’s autobiographical account. Writing under the pen name Manada Devi, the autobiography provides a glimpse of Calcutta in 1920s, and through the lens of the city one

can move slowly through the political and cultural changes that were unfolding during those times in which the autobiography has been written. The work was published in 1929 and translated by Arunava Sinha, this work offers a valuable perspective on the era and the author’s own life experiences.

One cannot overlook the agency Manada Devi possesses as a woman and how she utilises it for her own survival. She has a strong voice and does not hesitate in using it. She recalls her childhood as a relatively free one, she reminisces about being allowed to go by herself to the shop around the corner to buy lozenges or biscuits. Accompanied by an elder she also had the opportunity to visit museums, zoos, temples that brings to light a certain kind of class that she belonged to that could afford her with such carefree experiences. However this freedom comes to an abrupt halt and she finds herself fighting for the agency and the freedom that she had once enjoyed. An extract from the novel sheds light on this perspective—

“Since your father considers you dead, since he will not accept you at home, and you aren’t seeking shelter from him either, why should you fear even your father?” I said, “Still, would a father not be saddened if he saw his daughter in a shameful profession?”

Rani Mashi said, ‘He could easily save himself from this sadness by taking his daughter home. Since you have chosen this path, ma, you will see many new things. You *will* see a daughter plying her trade as a woman in prostitution in full view of her father. You *will* see a mother dressing up a girl born of her own womb every night to take in customers. You *will* see a prostituted woman’s family supporting themselves on her earnings. It is not just we women who have fallen—all of society has gone the same way.’”

From eloping to ultimately deciding to enter the world of prostitution, Manada Devi’s journey is marked by difficult decisions; in her case the decision to enter this world is driven by the fact that her family refuses to take her back. The novel explores the several circumstances and reasons that lead women to take such decisions and the writer does not hold back when she talks about the

duplicious face of society that often forces people to make desperate choices for survival.

“Had Ramesh-dada married me according to Hindu rites, he would never have been able to abandon me. Even if he was not concerned with personal embarrassment or social norms, he would at least have been afraid of the law. An illicit affair provides as much freedom for separation as it does for union. So Ramesh-dada found it easy to leave me. Society will extol his virtues while I face condemnation.”

The book is an indirect satire on poets and writers who exploit the plight of these women to create works inspired, as they call it, by them. While they may extoll upon their readers the hardships and the plight of these women, the novel suggests that there is hardly any constructive action taken to actually help the “fallen woman”. Instead there is seen a tendency to romanticize the suffering faced by these women without offering any tangible support or solutions to improve their situation.

“Just as the police get their way with us by virtue of the powers they hold, so too do many of these khadi-clad volunteers. They say, we have dedicated ourselves to working for the nation, how do you expect us to have any money? A number of poets and novelists also visit us in search of realistic art and speak in cultured voices, seeking to understand the true nature of art free of cost.”

Manada Devi’s observations on morality need to be understood within the context of the time in which it was written and it provides us with a useful insight into what most of the women were ingrained with when it came to the concept of morality. By understanding these moral conjunctions, one is able to get a better idea about the societal norms and behaviours that women of these times were being shaped into.

“The new litterateurs have identified this depiction of the prostituted woman’s life as part of realistic art. Such art has become the pretext to spread destructive poison in society...The reason I must state these things is that the outcome of the lack of restraint and caution seen in the lives of immoral women like ourselves has percolated into almost every layer of society.”

The rules of morality are bent again and again as well as the definitions are altered to suit the requirements per se. The making and the remaking as well as the unmaking of what is considered right and what is wrong has been questioned and put forth for the readers to decide what can be construed as the right way of life. Through this

examination the novel invites its readers to contemplate on the fluidity and subjectivity of the moral standards. There is a page in the novel on the idea of untouchability that was practised in the society but one forgets to observe it at the homes of the prostitutes where, “men who frequent the homes of women in prostitution furtively accept every kind of food and drink they are offered—in fact to use the word ‘accept’ is to leave the story incomplete; they feel grateful at the opportunity.”

Amidst a myriad of political events that slowly shape the face of the nation; there is a silent yet a poignant story that flows silently through all these events acting as a witness and a participant. To what extent does one’s identity prevent or enter such an arena is something one has to delve into through this book.

“The daily lies, the constant deception, the continuous pursuit of money—all of these had turned my soul into a forest infested by wild beasts. Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw my beauty and grace were gone, an image from hell was reflected in it.”

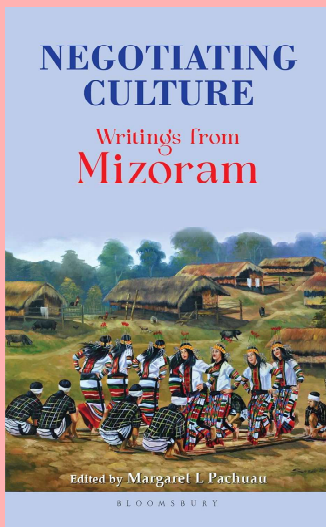
In the afterword of the book, it has been mentioned that Manada Devi might possibly be a figure created for the purpose of the book, serving as a vessel to record the harrowing experiences that women have gone through. Alternatively, it has been suggested that she has concealed her identity really well behind the pseudonym to prevent the real person from being identified. This ambiguity adds an intriguing layer and invites the readers to contemplate the authenticity of Manada Devi’s story as well as to consider the implications of anonymity in recounting personal experiences.

“I am told a group of people are concerned about whether my memoir is my own composition or that of a man. It is because of the low opinion that men hold of women that women have no choice but to demand equal rights today. If they wonder whether a prostituted woman is capable of writing a book, the answer is that if immoral men can write books or edit newspapers, why cannot immoral women do the same?”

The book turns into a valuable historical perspective that sheds light at the times when numerous political events shaped the nation, alongside the often-overlooked voices that silently coursed through the veins of the nation in that era.



CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS

—*Malsawmi Jacob*

Title: NEGOTIATING
CULTURE: Writings from
Mizoram
Edited by Margaret L Pachuau
Publisher: BLOOMSBURY
Year: 2021
Pages: 285
Price: Rs. 1299/-

Mizoram is a small state tucked away in a corner of Northeast India, bordered by Bangladesh in the south and Myanmar in the west. Until a couple of decades ago, it felt quite far and remote from the mainland. Now that there is air connection to the state capital Aizawl from Kolkata, the place has become more accessible. At the same time, it's also beginning to get some mainstream media attention, after having been mostly neglected for many years. Yet even now, Mizo people and culture are still little known or understood by the rest of India.

Hence, bringing out a volume like *NEGOTIATING CULTURE: Writings from Mizoram* is both essential and timely. The book, edited by Margaret L Pachuau, Professor at the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University, is a collection of essays by academicians. The

writers analyse the different aspects of Mizo culture. They make an in-depth examination of the history, identity and attitudes of the people. The studies are based on Mizo literature, both oral and written. In the foreword, G.J.V Prasad has written, "This is an important book, one that looks at a specific state of India's Northeast and gives us nuanced readings of its cultural history through readings of its literature, both oral and written."

The book is divided into four parts: 1. Boundaries and Narratives 2. Systems, Ethos and Perspective 3. Lores and Culture 4. Home and Identity. Each section contains either three or four chapters. The first chapter of the first part deals with one of the most traumatic periods in Mizoram's history—the struggle for independence during the years 1966 to 1986, as portrayed by two books, one non-fiction and one novel. The next chapters of the section examine the concept of territoriality in the Mizo worldview and the impact of colonial experiences and conversion to Christianity on their literature.

Folktales and folklore have always been an integral part of Mizo social life. They were orally handed down from generation to generation in the pre-literate times. Some of the essays in this book explore the role of folktales and folklore in connection with subjects like tribal justice system, as an educational device and as grotesque aesthetics, proving their pervasive relevance.

One topic of special interest discussed in the book is the status of women in the Mizo society. Z.D Lalmangaihzauva opens the chapter titled 'Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Mizo Society' with the sentence: *A study of Mizo literature from the oral tradition to contemporary literary works reflects a patriarchal society that is vividly marked by gender inequality* (italics mine). The writer goes on to state that though the advent of Christianity among the people of Mizoram in 1894 brought drastic changes by introducing new value systems and ways of life, it did not have much impact on the issue of gender inequality. This fact is reflected in literature. One good example is a short story titled 'Lali' written by Biakliana, first published in 1962. The story exposes the toxic patriarchal principles that have continued even after the people became Christians.

During the early stage of the introduction of modern education among the Mizos, two first generation educated men are said to have raised concern for women's education and emancipation. Ironically, what these 'progressive' men advocated only reinforced patriarchal values. One of them proposed to limit women's work to the household, and the other advised wives to improve their domestic skills to avoid being abused by their husbands.

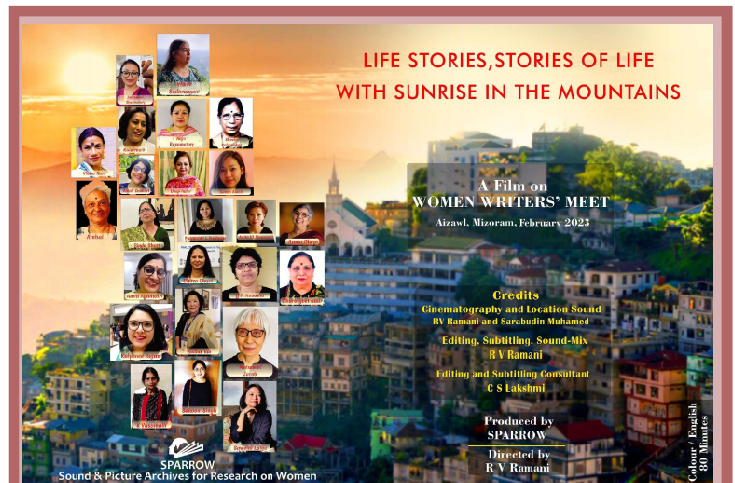
This exploration of women's position in the society is continued in the last chapter of the book titled 'Writing the Self: Voices of Young Mizo Women' by Lalsangliani Ralte. She writes: *Even when modern education was introduced among the Mizos in 1894 by Christian missionaries from the west, most parents initially refused to send their daughters to school, because they believed that education was useless for women, who they believed belonged in the kitchen and were destined for household chores* (italics mine). The writer also refers to Pi Hmuaki from ancient time, the first Mizo woman composer-singer known by name, who was buried alive. This 'illustrates the extent to which men could go to silence such women' who were 'perceived as threats' she writes.

However, the scenario is gradually changing today. Young Mizo women writers are becoming quite vocal about their experiences and views. They address issues relating to identity, gender bias, sexual harassment and subordination as members of society, using different platforms to express themselves, very often through poetry. Lalsangliani states: ... *Mizo women of today are no longer the passive and subservient women that their grandmothers were a few decades ago* (italics mine).

Interestingly, the contributors of the essays in this book are twelve women and two men.

This collection of essays by fourteen scholars offers insights from history, literature, memory studies and cultural studies. This is a vital book to help in understanding the dynamics of Mizo culture.

Malsawmi Jacob writes fiction, poetry and other materials in Mizo language and English. She has published 10 books in different genres and contributed to several anthologies, magazines and journals, and has co-edited two anthologies, the latter published by Sahitya Akademi in 2021. Her first novel and seventh book, *Zorami A Redemption Song* was published in 2015. Her other published books are a collection of poems in Mizo and English, a collection of short stories, two books of children's stories and two narrative non-fiction.



<https://youtu.be/UtAmwFsMzV8>

SPARROW

(Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women)

PRESENTS

LIFE STORIES, STORIES OF LIFE
WITH SUNRISE IN THE
MOUNTAINS

A Film on

Women Writers' Meet

Aizawl, Mizoram, February 2023

Credits:

Cinematography and Location Sound:

RV Ramani and Sarabudin Muhamed

Editing, Subtitling, Sound-Mix: R V Ramani

Editing and Subtitling Consultant: CS Lakshmi

Produced by: SPARROW

Direction: R V Ramani

Beyond Belief

—*K B Veio Pou*



EASTERINE KIRE

*The Rain-Maiden
and the Bear-Man*

Title: *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*

Author: Easterine Kire

Publisher: Seagull books

Year: 2021

Pages: 82

Price: Rs.699/-

Growing up in a corner of the country where the gentle clouds sway along the low hills, like cotton balls loosely strung on tree boughs, every place has stories attached to it. We grew up with stories of natural and supernatural worlds, interspersed between everyday life. And the enchantment of listening to them makes us feel like we were part of the story. Or, perhaps, Ben Okri was right in saying, “We are part human, part stories” (*A Way of Being Free*, 2014).

But years later, being away from a typically oral culture for so long in the pursuit of ‘modern’ education, finding a book that brings back memories is quite heartwarming. More interestingly, I find a new medium—the written—to

access what was partly lost. *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* is a collection of short stories from the award-winning author Easterine Kire that largely explores the lifeworld of the Nagas, especially the spirit realm. In the title story, we read of the Bear-Man, a man “who had wandered into the woods and there been turned into a bear”, falling in love with the Rain-Maiden who was “a vision of infinite loveliness, diamond raindrops in a shower of sunlight”. But he couldn’t gain the courage to admit his love— “How can someone like her ever love someone like me?” In self-doubt, he scared her away. And he still lives in the forest, “afraid to step out of his bear-skin and become his true self.”

That stories of human metamorphosis into animal aren’t unusual is revealed as the author tells us more in “The Man Who Became a Bear” and “The Weretigerman”. Interestingly, stories of human carrying the spirit of tiger was considered hereditary and they are deemed to possess special powers. Though mostly of pre-Christian narratives, such beliefs linger on, and the tigerman stories are quite common among other people groups from the Northeast region.

The other stories are spirit tales. In the Naga cosmology, there is a belief that the worlds of animal, spirit and human intersect quite effortlessly. Based on the mythical story that traces their common genealogy, we often read of the man addressing the tiger as ‘elder brother’ to protect himself. Likewise, people are often warned not to venture alone or wander into areas that are spirit infested. That’s the plotline of “The New Road” where we read of “malicious and mean” spirits following people home. In “Forest Song”, Easterine tells of the “inexplicable phenomenon of people missing” or being lost in the forest because they were lured away by sweet music—“into the heart of dark woods”. Strange as it may sound to those unfamiliar to Naga belief, such kind of stories are often heard of. Similar to that is also the story of “The Man Who Lost His Spirit”. Thankfully for him, the clansmen understood his situation and called back his spirit after consulting the village seer.

And because the Naga universe is also quite intricately woven together, there are times when conflicts between

human and non-human worlds, especially the spirits', become quite common. Often, it also results in direct confrontation, like the one we read in "The Silver Dziili". But the fact that the encounters with the supernatural isn't local is exemplified by stories like "River and Earth" and "The Man Who Went to Heaven". In "River and Earth", interestingly, connects the shared belief in the existence of river spirits between the Igbos of Nigeria and Nagas. And there exists similar narratives in other cultures too, of the heavenly beings who were tricked to marry humans and have children by them as told in "The Man Who Went to Heaven". And finally, there's the origin story of how God gifted Konyak Nagas the "firestick" —the muzzle loader gun—which they were already in possession even before the arrival of the Westerners in the region.

Reading through these stories, one may be tempted to wish them away as mere mystical tales created by a genius of a mind. While one cannot deny the creativity of the author in discussion, these are also actually a display of the cultural experiences of a people's lifeworld that demands the attention of the readers to look beyond what meets the eye. It shouldn't come as a surprise that the overlapping worlds of humans and non-humans have fascinated and even intrigued many minds across cultures. The pervasiveness of the belief in the existence of the supernatural world alongside or overlapping the world of humans is reflected here in the collection of stories by Easterine Kire. These are not necessarily stories of the by-gone days. These are experiences of today too. And so, this is a subject of keen interest for the author who initiated a project called "Peoplestories" where she tries to gather stories of encounters with the spirit world but are not to be categorized as mythical tales. In a compilation of such stories titled *Forest Song* (2011), she reiterated that "the stories are of real people".

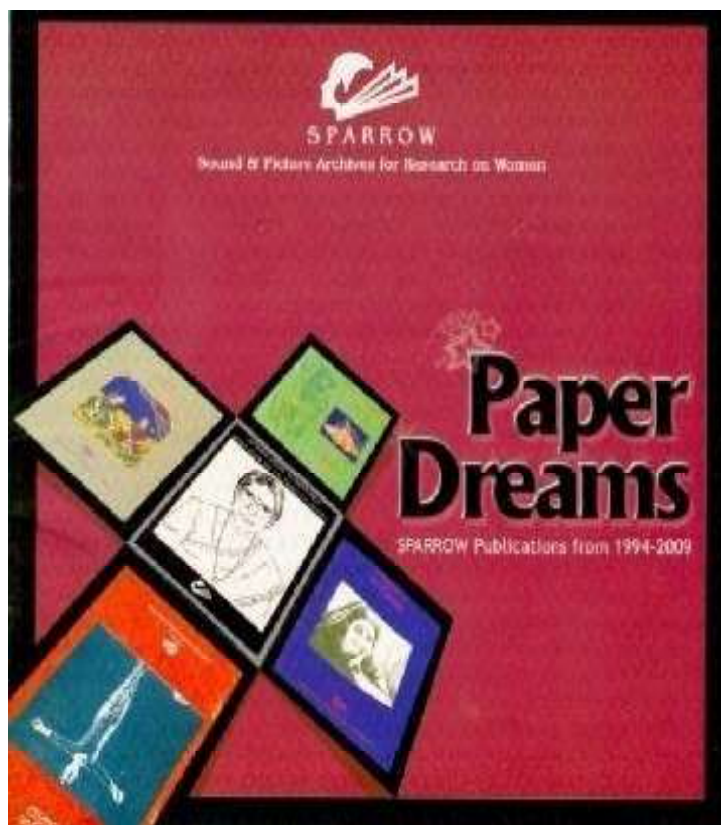
As an ardent believer in the need to rekindle interest in folk narratives, she has beautifully written novels with plotlines borrowed from popular folktales. Mention may be made of *Son of the Thundercloud* (2018) which went on to win the Bal Sahitya Puraskar award. It tells of a widowed woman who was impregnated by a raindrop and the son born to her avenged the tiger that had robbed her of her husband and sons. When she was awarded The Hindu Prize in 2015 for *When the River Sleeps* (2014), the novel was described as a "tender philosophical novel" and "as sample of how the mythopoeic imagination can work in our times".

Anyone who has read the novel can testify to the fact that the work is quite magical and yet culturally specific.

Perhaps, there is an innate quest for the magical that is central to human beings. And works like *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* makes us crave for more palatable stories to make us believe. These stories not only keep our spirits alive but also revives cultural narratives.



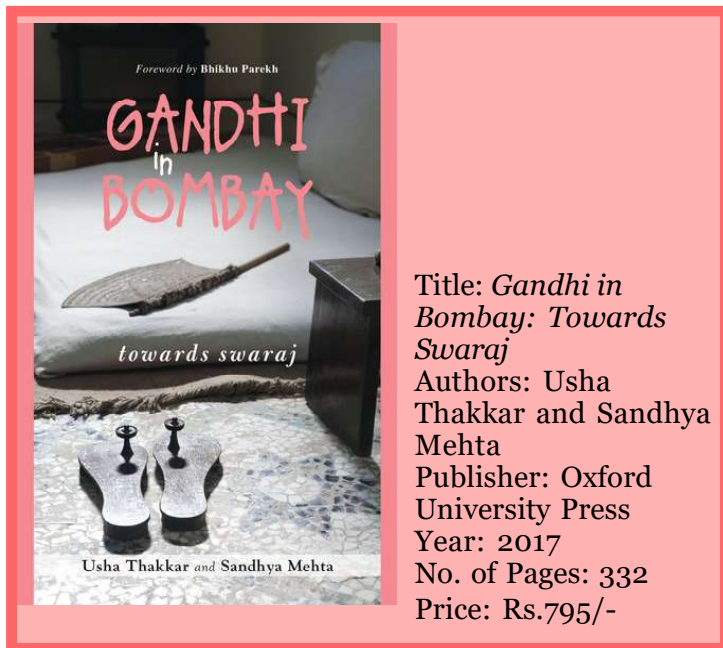
Dr K B Veio Pou is the author of *Waiting for the Dust to Settle*, *Literary Cultures of India's Northeast: Naga Writings in English* and *Keeper of Stories: Critical Readings of Easterine Kire's Novels*. He currently teaches in the Department of English, University of Delhi.)



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The Father of the Nation and a City That Loved Him

—Uma Shankar



Title: *Gandhi in Bombay: Towards Swaraj*
 Authors: Usha Thakkar and Sandhya Mehta
 Publisher: Oxford University Press
 Year: 2017
 No. of Pages: 332
 Price: Rs.795/-

Mumbai and Gandhi are both fascinating and intriguing subjects to any reader as it brings back a host of memories and recollections from the past. Today's Mumbai has evolved from Bombay over the years and of course, it is still evolving as financial, commercial, and entertainment capital of India. Mumbai has a rich history dating back to ancient times when it was a collection of fishing villages. It was ruled by various dynasties before being ceded to the Portuguese in the 16th century and later to the British East India Company. Under British rule, it developed into a major urban centre and port. The book is an attempt to explore a unique relationship between an extraordinary person and an extraordinary city. The relationship between Bombay and Mahatma Gandhi is deeply intertwined with the history of India's struggle for independence. Gandhi's presence in Bombay catalysed political activism and shaped the city's role in the fight against British colonial rule, leaving a lasting legacy on both the city and the nation as a whole.

Gandhi had a personal connection to Bombay as well. He lived in the city for extended periods during his numerous visits, and it was in Bombay that he interacted

with a diverse cross-section of Indian society, including industrialists, mill workers, intellectuals, and activists. His experiences in Bombay shaped his understanding of the complexities of Indian society and influenced his strategies for achieving independence. Bombay played a crucial role in Mahatma Gandhi's early activism. He arrived in the city in 1915 after spending several years in South Africa, where he honed his skills as a political leader and developed his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. In Bombay, Gandhi began to mobilise Indians in the struggle for independence from British rule. This book is blessed with an impressive forward by Biku Parekh, a well-known Gandhian who has written and analysed Gandhi. He comments that to Gandhi Bombay was a political Karma Bhoomi which eventually made him one of its own; yet he remained relatively an outsider. The book chronologically moves the events in Gandhi's life in and through Bombay. When he landed on the busy bustling Bombay back on a chilly morning in 1918, little did he know that his journey back from South Africa would mark a significant turning point in his life and thereby the destiny of this land. His work in South Africa was to make history. One can trace back his associations with Bombay as early as 1915 in his autobiography. When he returned to Bombay from South Africa after his first visit he was accorded a warm welcome. He made this city as a nerve centre for all political activities and decisions. The city and people responded very enthusiastically for all protests and gatherings. The authors have very meticulously gathered a host of detailed incidents and anecdotes featuring Gandhi in Bombay. Most of the political strategies were planned in 1920 in this city.

The first Khadi Bandar was opened and thereby he could promote Khadi and swadesi goods in this lively port. His Swadesi Movement was well reciprocated by elite women of Bombay with their act of discarding foreign clothes. He initiated the Harijan fund from here and collected a good amount of donations. He found trusted colleagues here who could support his cause. One finds that this city showered generous affection and respect on him as their leader. The book has nine chapters and a huge list of photographs. From the time he reached Bombay many

political meetings were arranged which consisted of low-key and small gatherings, and a few elite, formal and elegant ones. He was indeed a man of the masses which included all types of people. Many times he was not comfortable with honours showered on him. After every meeting at different places in Bombay he felt almost suffocated with such reception. One such big reception was arranged at J B Petit's residence at Peddar Road for Gandhi and Kasturiba. Prominent citizens like Pherozshah Mehta who presided, Sir Claude Hill, Jinnah and others were present. He detested the pomp and glitter. He did praise the real Indian heroes who stood with him to serve the motherland. The book lists many such meetings of Gandhi with Tilak, Jinnah, K M Munshi, Sir Dinshaw Wacha, Sir Dorabji Tata, G K Devdhar, Hansraj Prגיע and many more. Gandhi's experience in South Africa had prepared him to take a bigger role in India. His noble qualities, commitment and love for motherland were recognised and appreciated by Indians much before he returned. After sowing the seeds of Satyagraha by 1918, he was confident of support across the country. Protest against Rowlatt act, propagation of Swadesi, call for Peaceful Satyagraha—all happened at different places in Bombay. He held meetings at Chowpathy sands, Mosque, grounds and so on. Bombay set an example by observing a peaceful hartal on 11th May 1919. To him Bombay was an example for Swaraj and liberty which India adopted eventually.

The clarion call of Non-cooperation from Gandhi made him an undisputed leader of the nation. Khilafat committee meeting with him was also held in Bombay and Gandhi inspired all with his agenda of nonviolence. Gandhi carried many memories about Bombay, be it the attended funeral of Tilak in 1920, convention with students or motivating the women to be proactive and be aware of political issues. In the chapter on 'The Citadel of Nation Movement: 1930', we find those powerful protests in this city. Bombay's response to the Salt Satyagraha indeed created history. The events small and big are meticulously gathered and presented in the book. One feels as though one is traveling through the various places of Bombay along with the Father of the Nation. Bombay served as an important centre for the Indian National Congress (INC), the political party at the forefront of the Indian independence movement. Gandhi was closely associated with the INC and attended many of its sessions and meetings in Bombay. The party's headquarters were often located in Bombay during crucial

phases of the freedom struggle. Gandhi launched several significant campaigns in Bombay, including the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, which aimed to challenge British authority through nonviolent resistance.

The Salt Satyagraha, a key component of the movement, saw thousands of Indians, including Gandhi himself, marching to the Arabian Sea coast to make salt in defiance of British salt laws. The meeting of Gandhi and Jinnah in 1938 at Mount Pleasant Road, Bombay, was to solve communal problems. Many such crucial meetings, discussions and debates were held in this city. Each time he visited Bombay, he came closer to co-workers. The historic meeting of AICC in August 1942 was at Bombay and it gave impetus to the epoch making Quit India Movement towards freedom. This city saw momentous meetings of Gandhi with national and international leaders during his life time. Significant and path breaking events like The Rowlett Satyagraha, boycott of the Prince of Wales, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement in Bombay exhibit the courage, determination, perseverance, persistence and tenacity of the people. Bombay people adored him, celebrated his presence, and supported him wholeheartedly. In Bombay he was supported by politicians, big and small, elites, workers, students, merchants, shopkeepers and most of all, women. Bombay was indeed special to Bapu. Even today Mani Bhavan resonates with fond memories of Gandhi, along with his fasts, meetings, writings and arrests. Today it stands as his memorial for people to pay homage for posterity. And who else could have written this book incorporating all the little details, with such dedication, precision, love and respect, except Usha Thakkar, President, Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya, Mumbai along with her colleague, Sandhya Mehta. This book is a much needed one for the present generation to know who Gandhi was and what role the Bombay city played in the freedom struggle.

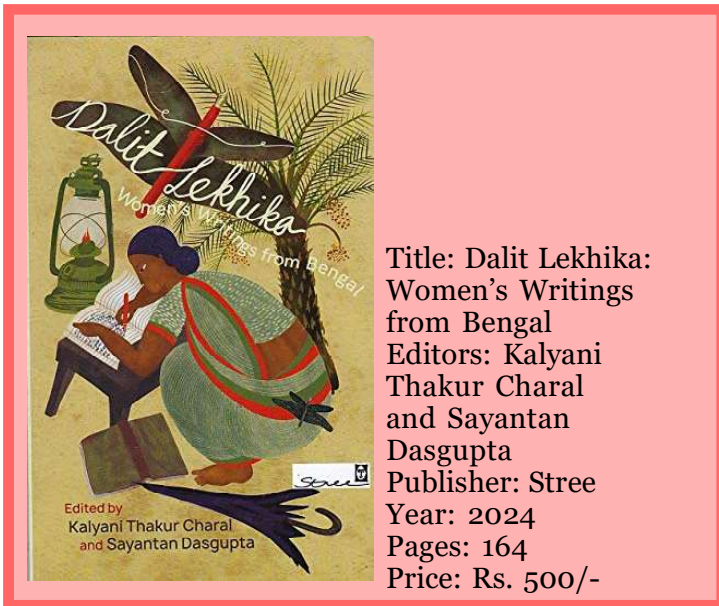
Dr. Uma Maheswari Shankar did her PG in Arts-Philosophy and has a PhD in Philosophy. She is currently the Principal of SIES College, Mumbai and has been serving in the college for more than 23 years.



You can e-mail us at
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The True Creators of Literature

—*Semeen Ali*



“All individuals inherit five sensory organs at birth. Each of these possesses certain powers. But all the sense organs of the individuals across all communities are not equally capable in their respective areas.”

The book stands as a seminal collection of stories and poetry originating from Bengal that offer a unique insight into a topic that remains to a large extent unexplored. From the place of its origin to the ideas that this book explores, the writings delve into the complexities of identity politics focusing on experiences of being a woman and a Dalit. By splintering the politics of identity, there is an examination of the intersections between caste and gender and therefore sheds light on perspective that are either overlooked or marginalized.

“Boiling with rage, she started looking for a way out. But her brain failed to find any, transcending the tough coating of the skull. But where there is a will, there is a way. So, the grey matter inside Panchi's brain manifested itself through sporadic outbursts. But the tough coating of the illiterate Panchi's skull stopped it and bottled it up. In trying to do so, her skull developed two horns at the places from where her brains were threatening to burst out.”

It is not easy to separate the two if the dispossession

and the sense of self has been dictated by others over times immemorial. The stories are the backbone of this book that range from the level of despair one feels at never having enough to provide for their family stemming from a pervasive sense lack of self-assurance. This sense of inadequacy emerges from what the world around us constantly feeds us with—that where you are born into and who you are matters the most.

The country is changing so fast all around
 Still I feel hunger and thirst with the break of dawn,
 I get the smell of food everywhere.
 Wherever I see a crowd, I want to run towards it
 In the hope that I shall find food there.
 Alas! I run, and in despair I see
 There is nothing, nothing for me.

The poems resonate with the sense of selfhood using a simplistic style to convey what it means to be marginalized. Using straightforward yet profound language they talk about what it feels to be standing at the margins of the society. All the writings that are a part of this book have an individual voice and are free from the constraints of stereotypes. The voices are not transient and bring to their readers a world that one is familiar with but is not willing to engage deeply with. The voices emerge from within the depths of human psyche to not just embed themselves into the imagination but to hold up a mirror to the realities of human existence. It is important to recognise that the voices have to be authentic and originate from within, rather than being represented by others. When individuals from lower castes express themselves in their own authentic voices, they offer genuine insights that comes from the lived experience and therefore is a space that needs to be explored and encouraged more.

“‘Have you taken the pens?’ the old woman asked softly.
 ‘Why no!’

‘You didn't ask why I told you to get them.’

‘Why did you?’

‘Hand one each to every child. For thousands of years our people haven't been able to write—they're blind even

though they have eyes. What others have written are taken to be true. To erase these thousand years of writing, everyone has to take a pen and write, dear...”

The fight extends beyond visibility but it encompasses the demand for equal recognition and acknowledgment. It is a struggle to not just be heard but to be treated as equals. The continuous repression of the self, imposed by those in power and authority, who often use religious texts as well as sermons to perpetuate discrimination—extending to the cultural domain of music and dance where marginalized voices are sidelined or silenced.

Flames of repression rise.
Blood flows in the veins of the gentle creeper,
In unspoken sadness all life-long.
Cries of pain from the arrowed bird
Fall drop by drop upon this beautiful earth.
Yet black words line those sheets all white.
Blurring the history of our modern times.

There are no avenues where this discrimination has not seeped into. And this is where these writings come in; not to dismantle but to shed light in how it affects one’s psyche.

“...What did this Schedule mean? How did one belong to it? What was I, which caste of the Schedule did I belong to— I answered I was a Namashudra. Chhanda said there were many Namashudra women in their garden. They worked in the tea factories. They must be from some other Namashudra group. You don’t look like a Namashudra girl at all, said Jaya. Everyone else in your family also looks quite good – how did this happen!”

It is not easy to navigate in the waters that have been made murky by the societal rules and with the ideas of who deserves what. The seeking of a voice for the self is a difficult path and not an easy one. Even if one successfully wades through; the damage that it causes to one’s mind is not an easy one to live with. The scars run so deep that it is impossible for even time to heal them. They remain as markers and as witnesses to what one has been through; what the generations have endured.

“ As I was cooking, Mashima said, “There is so much common between the way you do things and we do— what caste are you? Vaishnav, I replied. I became a Vaishnav in my mind from then on. I asked for forgiveness from God for lying to a respectable elderly woman. I consoled myself saying that I did not lie willingly, and that from the very

beginning all I had wanted was to be a human being.”

Women in these writings find themselves doubly marginalized: Twice removed from experiencing freedom in its simplest sense; the characters that abound in these writings grapple with how to negotiate for the most the basic thing—one’s right to live with dignity. The constant trampling upon of the self by age old customs and beliefs, snarls in the face when fighting against it.

“She was just about to start singing when a harsh voice rang in her ears. ‘Stop right there, will you? You low-born girl, no singing here! It is not the tradition of the Kanjilal family to have its women break into song like that! You have to maintain a certain decorum here.’ Throwing these words at Banani, her mother-in-law, Renuka Devi, stormed off....In attempt to ease the tension, Kalyan said, ‘Do you want to continue your singing lessons Banani? But since Mother doesn’t approve of it, it’s better you give up singing, you know. And you really don’t need to continue your M.A, either, do you?’ He then softened his voice and added, ‘You have studied quite a lot. Why don’t you concentrate on the household from now on? You don’t have to take up a job.’”

But voices have to be raised and will continued to be raised. The image of the cowering figure resigned to subservience, needs to be dismantled. It is not a utopian idea to say that all humans are equal; it is a fundamental truth. It is the societal norms and expectations that have created these fissures and it is time to begin filling up those gaps that have been left and are considered normal.

Let us create a rebellious isle
From the atoms of conscience.
Let us all summon
Clouds of thunderstorms
And fierce cyclones.
We, the ones without names,
Of the universe’s vast realm,
Are made refugees at birth,
Imprisoned behind bars
By the powerful, high-by-birth.

Writing emerges as a powerful tool to overcome obstacles and an attempt to assert one’s identity and independence. One of the editors of the book, Sayantan Dasgupta in his very detailed introduction to this book talks about the publication politics that surrounds Bangla Dalit literature and how a very large portion of the material included in

the anthology had been published either in very small magazines or the niche ones; highlighting the dirty politics that prevails to an extent in the field of arts and culture. The idea of visibility as well as the idea of representation has been covered really well in his introduction. The book leaves us with a compelling idea that the marginalized voices need to be recorded, whether through oral tradition or the written word, there is a need to preserve these voices for posterity.

“The women who lay the skins of cattle to dry, and sit next to them, inhaling the stench, and write by the light of a small oil lamp, or those who clean the excrement of others, or those who cook tasty meals by substituting inexpensive seeds and other ingredients in place of costly vegetables and then sit down to write of their experiences, are the true creators of Dalit literature of the future.”

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



SPARROW Virtual Archives
SPREADING THE WORD
TAKING THE DIGITAL
ROUTE

SPARROW VIRTUAL WALK

<https://www.sparrowonline.org/virtual-archives/>

<https://youtube.com/vZn6asj7Zzo>



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

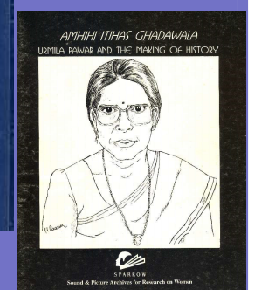
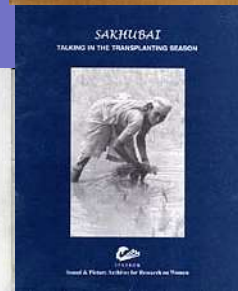
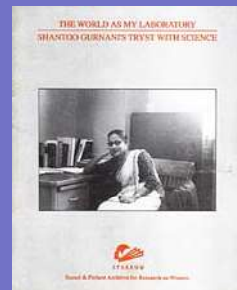
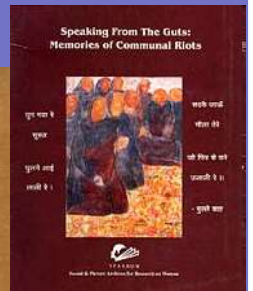
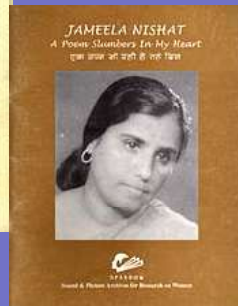
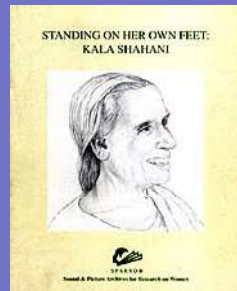
Standing on her own feet: Kala Shahani November, 1997.
The World As My Laboratory :Shantoo Gurnani's Tryst With Science April, 1998.

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.

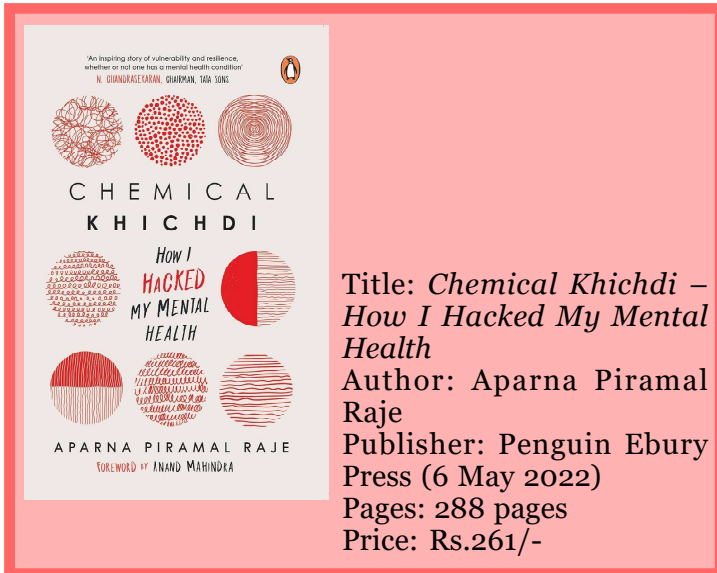




AUTOBIOGRAPHIES & BIOGRAPHIES

The Mind Becomes the Minefield

—*Rohini Rajagopal*



Title: *Chemical Khichdi – How I Hacked My Mental Health*

Author: Aparna Piramal Rajee

Publisher: Penguin Ebury Press (6 May 2022)

Pages: 288 pages

Price: Rs.261/-

The word ‘bipolar’ first entered my active awareness during the tragic death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput in 2020. It was widely reported in the media that psychiatrists who had treated him diagnosed the actor as suffering from severe depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. The word ‘bipolar’ soon became the central currency in media debates and discussions. It was treated with undue dread and aversion, pronounced with the finality of a prison sentence. News anchors wondered how someone who seemed to be merry and jolly in videos and pictures released a little before his death could suffer from *this* disorder. The ignorance of the mental illness, of what it entailed and how it could be diagnosed was on full display.

The last decade has seen greater awareness of mental health, but this coexists with misinformation and bias. In such a scenario, the importance of Aparna Piramal Rajee’s groundbreaking memoir which tells the story of her own bipolarity cannot be overstated. She brings to the subject the intimacy of personal experience, the matter-of-fact clarity of scientific information and the critical thinking and context-setting skills of a journalist. She not only demystifies bipolarity but also holds out hope and the possibility of living a rich and full life while in possession of a mind that ‘became a minefield’ in her own words.

The book begins at a pivotal moment. She is at the Bihar School of Yoga ashram, in the throes of a manic episode. She feels troubled, excited, angry and victorious - all at the same time. She is sleepless at night with dreams of sexual violence playing out in her head. The Nirbhaya case occurred only a few weeks ago. She can’t stop talking, or dancing, hears voices and is unable to manage even the most basic functions such as bathing or finding her way back to the room from the ashram. Eventually her husband, Amit, flies down to Kolkata, catches an overnight train to Patna to escort her back home. This is the moment when they as a family realise that something needs to be done, that serious medical attention needs to be directed towards the condition.

With what she calls ‘radical transparency’ Aparna goes on to recount the highs and lows of her illness, from the years of ‘un-diagnosis’ to seeking multiple therapies to finding and maintaining her equilibrium for a sustained period of time. This section is deeply moving because I can’t imagine what courage it must have taken to relive and recount these experiences for the book. It is also illuminating in a way facts and figures aren’t. We have a first-hand account of the everyday reality of existence, ‘the prison of pendulums’ that one seems condemned to, while living with bipolarity. The text is interspersed with journal entries, letters, and poems which communicate her confusions, fears and insights with a certain immediacy and urgency.

Aparna is not apologetic about her affluent background though she acknowledges the privilege and admits that it insulated her from the stigma of mental health. But even with all that privilege, she points out that it took thirteen years to receive a diagnosis. Her background, however, ensures that she is able to access quality psychiatric and psychotherapy interventions, utilise an extensive network of social capital in the form of mentors, friends and allies or just simply getaway for extended periods of time to another city or home to recover.

The second part of the book shifts gear and focuses on resources to treat and manage the condition. She organises this section into seven therapies covering offerings from

medicine to lifestyle to spirituality. Even though these aids have been presented from a bipolar lens, they are relevant and applicable to anyone struggling with mental health challenges. She also discusses future therapies such as genetics and psychiatry, the links between metabolic dysfunction and psychiatric disorders and the need for community action to make mental health more accessible to the marginalized. By combining memoir with self-help, she offers both - a subjective view of the experience as well as an objective grounding in contemporary circumstances. Her centring of caregivers and their burden is admirable. Even if she is the protagonist of the story, there are others who have shared the load by offering care and concern, or a neutral presence to absorb her heightened moods and excess energy.

Aparna is at her most vulnerable when discussing her professional ambition, ideas of 'success' and the mismatch between expectation and reality. At 24 after an episode of mania, she realises that business may not be her cup of tea. In the universe that she belongs to, 'success' is running a company with a formidable balance sheet. But she must move to writing and journalism which is seen as a step down in the ladder, however, intellectually demanding or impactful her work might be. She recognises that the excitement, fear and stress of a big project that must be delivered within a strict timeline has acted as a trigger for mania in the past. Whatever might be her line of work, she must balance her desire for glory, for creative fulfilment and a compelling life-purpose with the truth of her mental health. This means she must undo her own conflation of self-worth with career milestones. She proposes the idea of playing "opposite-handed"—playing a sport with the natural disadvantages of the non-dominant hand. This means curbing her natural instinct for speed, intensity and achievement and focusing on being slower, more mindful, and savouring the act of creation as much as the result. She does many things—teaching, writing, consulting—but in smaller doses and broken up over longer periods of time. I couldn't help the feeling that this is wisdom gained after rigorous self-examination and profound heartbreak.

All of us at some point or the other must confront the social construction of ideas like 'accomplishment', 'productivity' and 'identity' and carve our own versions of meaning from it. I feel that I have not done 'enough' almost every day. The too-few words I have written, the even fewer that have been published and the seeming lack

of will to reverse that is a continuous torment. But the cost of my own mental and emotional equilibrium and being available to my family in a wholesome manner is doing 'less', at least for now. I realise that it is an ongoing process, negotiating the exchange between self and the world.

Aparna speaks from a place of honesty, candour and confidence. Her tone carries no traces of self-victimisation or self-aggrandisement. In many ways *Chemical Khichdi* reminded me of Shaheen Bhatt's book—*I've Never Been (Un) Happier* which zooms into the head of someone grappling with a mental health illness while at the same time zooming out to the larger picture of mental health. *Chemical Khichdi* is similarly, educative as well as emotionally resonant.

In an age where there is a tendency to pathologize traits, emotions and behaviours, use labels like 'disease' loosely, or be quick to judge someone as 'abnormal', it might be useful to see that everyone occupies a point on the continuum of mental health. No one is exempt from the contradictions of their mind, even if the degree and complexity vary. My main takeaway from the book, therefore, is the need for compassion, openness and acceptance in a volatile world.

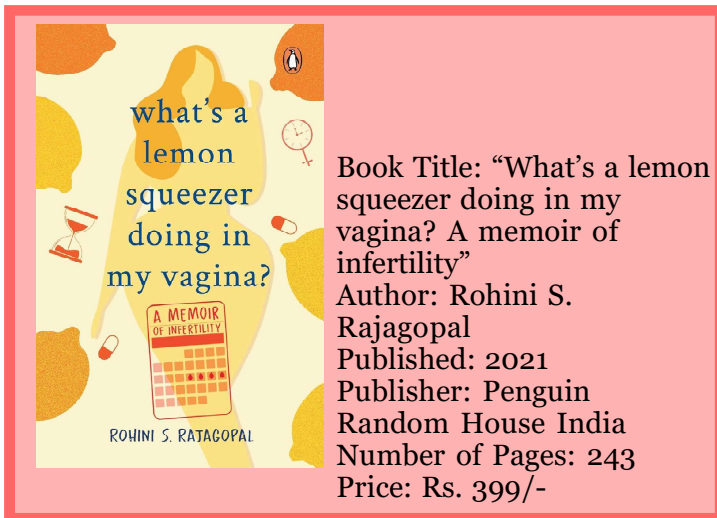


Rohini Rajagopal is a Bangalore-based writer and editor. She started as a Feature Writer for a national daily, spent two years in a publishing firm as Asst Publishing Manager and then moved to Knowledge Management (KM). Was part of a large KM team in a multinational for nearly five years before moving to a similar role in a not-for-profit organization. Took a break in 2018 to write a memoir, *What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in my Vagina? A Memoir of Infertility* (Penguin Random House India, 2021). She is recognized for strong understanding of content management strategies, processes and tools, excellent project management and communication (oral and written) skills and high sense of ownership.

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Lemon Squeezers and Vaginas

—*Pankhuri Agrawal*



Bengaluru based writer Rohini Rajagopal's 2021 non-fiction memoir "What's a lemon squeezer doing in my vagina?" takes the reader into the "womb" of fertility clinics. Through her courageous and lucid prose, we enter spaces that are often shrouded in shame, anxiety, guilt and secrecy.

Her writing takes you to the couch in her Bengaluru apartment where she recovers, into the bathroom where she pees onto the home pregnancy test sticks, and onto the steel examination table at the clinic where gloved fingers, steel instruments, and probes are repeatedly inserted into her. Her narration has both a clinical precision and a capacity to evoke shudders and empathy in the reader. You ride the waves of euphoria and desperation with her while she makes visible her 5 year long battle with infertility.

The action in the book is not confined to only the clinics and hospitals, but is interspersed with events from her life during, before and after her medical encounters. These include episodes from her childhood, meeting her husband, her father's illness, her work projects and her negotiations with her relatives and in-laws. This alternation of events illustrates that "life" continues to unravel, and that a person cannot be reduced to solely a "patient" who is struggling with conception.

Through the book Rajagopal grapples with the very concept of infertility. In my favourite passage from the book she writes, "Infertility was not an affliction. It was

not cancer or typhoid or arthritis with painful symptoms which had to be 'cured' by medicine to return the body to its normal state of being. Infertility had no palpable presence inside my body, it could only be defined by absence, the absence of conception. In fact, academics have posited that infertility, unlike many other medical conditions, is a social construct. It presupposes the aspiration for children. Without this aspiration there is no infertility (p. 184)" The words showcase a yearning for a "presence" for a life inside that is fed both by Rajagopal and her husband's personal desire to have a child, as well as the enormous social pressure they are put under by close and distant relatives.

In another passage she correlates the sense of shame and disgrace she feels as a thirty year old who is unable to conceive, with the feelings of utter failure she felt as

a fifteen year old who was unable to "score well" in her class ten board examinations. She writes "I came to believe that the sum total of my worth rested on what marks I could score in a particular examination, on my numerical position in relation to a measurable goal. This gave birth to my lifelong obsession with numbers, with performance, with success" (p. 45). Her journey through infertility teaches her that there is something beyond numbers and performance, there are things beyond her control, and that even medical science has its limits. And that often life unfolds in "squiggles and wiggles, waves and curls, all things that subvert the efficiency and boredom of straight lines" (p. 226).

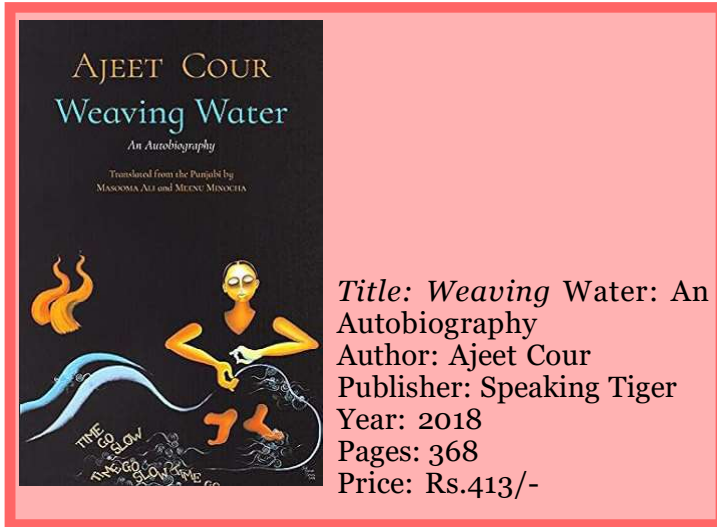
Any person who has gone through failed or successful pregnancies, or is still trying to conceive will find a treasure trove in this book. Rajagopal paints a nuanced, detailed picture of a woman who struggles with her own aspirations as well as negotiates family and societal constructs and pressures. The book is a frank, brave, and clear telling of the horrors and joys of infertility in modern, urban India.



Pankhuri Agrawal is an independent writer and researcher based in Bangalore. The covid lockdowns spurred her to write short essays on spices and nostalgia. She recently completed a research project on street vendors for Prof. Krishnendu Ray, NYU. She runs the Yayavr Food Book Club which discusses the history, sociology and literature of food in India. In what seems like another life, she studied architecture and philosophy, and performed classical Manipuri dance across the U.S. and India. Her two children love to bake banana bread and slurp nalli soup with her.

Life! A Multi-patched Quilt

—*Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry*



Title: *Weaving Water: An Autobiography*
Author: Ajeet Cour
Publisher: Speaking Tiger
Year: 2018
Pages: 368
Price: Rs.413/-

Ajeet Cour's book *Weaving Water: An Autobiography*, is a tale of the early feminists of India, who pioneered for the women rights. She may not have participated in policy making but her writings paved way for innumerable women in India to break free from the suffocating atmosphere of the Indian familial system mostly driven by patriarchal control. A saga of loneliness and isolation, combatting innumerable challenges of life with utmost resilience. Originally written as *Koora Kabara* in Panjabi in 1977 and a version of part two was written in Panjabi as *Khanabadosh* in 1983. *Weaving Water: An Autobiography* published by Speaking Tiger in 2018, is a compilation of the translations of these two books translated by Masooma Ali and Meenu Minocha. Born in a conventional Panjabi Sikh household, she depicts how her life was determined by the choices of her father before her marriage and her husband after her marriage. She challenges the societal norms of her times in her autobiography courageously and boldly, something which is rarely visible in the writings of Indian women writers or the Panjabi women writers.

Interestingly, Ajeet Cour remained free spirited right from her childhood. She was inquisitive and resilient. Even though her father, a homeopathic doctor by profession, decided the course of her education without addressing

her interest or involvement, no one could deter her from reading whatever she liked, even books in Urdu, that was completely forbidden for girls. She would be allowed education, home tutored or going to college only at the directions of her father. In case there was something her father disliked he would control her movement and stop her education. Despite all difficulties Ajeet Cour continued learning in various, though limited ways, that were available to her. In this uneven journey she was fortunate enough to have learnt from several learned and prominent figures who had a great influence on her. Some of these people were Giani Kartar Singh Hitkariji, Amrita Pritam's father; Amrita Pritam, herself, had greatly influenced her childhood. She read works of Kartar Singh Duggal. She writes that when she read Duggal's *Saver Saar*, she asked herself why couldn't she write such stories? Her brother had also contributed to her learning, he taught her Urdu. Hell broke loose when her father came to know that she read Urdu. Moreso, the journey of her education was also impacted by the violence around Partition of India. The family had migrated to Shimla from Lahore and her exam papers were burnt; her result was awaited with several other student's results.

She spent her childhood days in Lahore and Shimla, moving to Jalandhar and finally Delhi as a result of forced migration during partition. She provides details of how the family was thoroughly disturbed by the violence in those days. Both her maternal and paternal grandparents were left behind in Pakistan and she provides details of how her father courageously returned to rescue them and brought them safely to Amritsar who later shifted to Jalandhar with them. Everything around her changed, she emotes "Pakistan had been created, we had become homeless, and suddenly also poor." (p. 61)

It was in Jalandhar that she gives vent to her talent of writing short stories. She wrote them secretly and got them published. Once her family discovered that she had been writing stories and publishing them, her movement is curtailed as writing stories was considered disgraceful for girls of, the so-called, respectful families. While in Jalandhar she fell in love with her teacher Baldev. She got engaged with him but the marriage never took place. Later, she married Raj, a doctor, who was already in love with some other woman and failed to respect or love Ajeet Cour. She

had an extremely difficult relationship with Raj. He was insensitive and indifferent to the needs of Ajeet Cour. It is during this difficult period, that Ajeet Cour's father supports her innumerable times, whenever she was thrown out of her husband's house. But after her mother's demise, her father is unable to support her any further. This forces her to move into a working women's hostel. Later, she sends her daughters to study in a residential school at Shimla.

Her daughters were extremely considerate towards her and empathised with their mother's struggle. In a way, the mother and the daughters were together in this struggle, it was their struggle too. They became a pillar of strength for each other. It is only after her husband's death and after her daughter's move with her to Delhi that she finds some solace temporarily. Later, her younger daughter Candy also experienced a bad marriage and separated from her husband. Unfortunately, she met a very tragic death. Ajeet Cour emotes her experience of losing her daughter intensely. This chilling experience doesn't fail to move the heart of the readers. One wonders how difficult would it have been for Ajeet Cour and her daughter Aparna Caur to move on in life after this experience.

It is after this experience that Ajeet Cour's life takes a different trajectory. Evolving from the pain of this personal loss she began contributing to social causes and lent great support to her daughter Aparna Caur who also evolved as a renowned painter. Both engaged in fights for social justice, worked in habitation camps with the survivors of 1984 anti-Sikh carnage and established centres for the promotion of art and literature.

Towards the last part of the autobiography, she explores her relationship with a publisher and opens up the chapter of her love-life with Oma. This chapter seems to be hanging loose, separate and disconnected. At the same time, a sense of fulfilment in love is complimented with the separation of pain. One can't miss the point that this relationship was of crucial importance to Ajeet Cour. She says,

I could write a whole book on the part of my life that I lived with Oma.

It was a life which included the balmy sun of love, the freezing frost of loneliness, violent, running arguments, drunken happiness and an indolent tranquillity, all in one. (p. 319)

Interestingly, autobiography as a genre, is highly experimental. Even the term autobiography has been contested and an umbrella term, 'life narrative', comes to

the rescue of the complications involved with defining all self-writings.

Self-writings or life-narratives, for that matter, have been attempted in various forms and narrative styles. This autobiography or the life narrative offers streaks of the stream of consciousness techniques at times, but not in its completeness. At times, the writer jumps from one incidence to another and then, returns to it after a pause or after narrating something else in between. The reader jostles to make a coherent sense of time. Perhaps, the main reason for this lapse is that the writer chooses to address various events like her journey for education, her experiences of love and later the bad marriage, the migration with respect to partition, her work-life and love life etc, rather than writing about her life in a chronological order of time. Sometimes in talking about her education, the time period overlaps with her love-life or even marriage. Even the last part of the book, where she discusses about her love-life with Oma seems to be an after-thought and it becomes difficult for the reader to connect it with the different time-periods of her life. The reader gets a sense of its beginning but is lost about the time as to when did Oma move out of her life. Moreso, she engages with beautiful metaphors lending a poetic overtone to her autobiography.

Since this book is a translation, despite the fact the several emotions have been captured in the translations but much is lost, the rhythm and the metaphoric opulence in Panjabi fails to resonate in the translated text, in English.

All the more, *Weaving Water: An Autobiography* offers an honest and a bold attempt at unravelling the condition of women, how they are forced to live an in-between life divided between the religious households under the control of disciplinarian parents and the freedom to live normally without patriarchal conditioning. This aspect of Ajeet Cour's life is common with Amrita Pritam's life as well. The originality of this work is the way Ajeet Cour has addressed these concerns from a feminist lens and highlighted the struggle of women who come a long way to contribute towards liberation of younger generations of women in India and Panjab particularly. All the more, Ajeet Cour has a deep understanding of the Sikh prayers and verses from the scripture, at the same time her commitment towards emancipation of women clashes constantly with both, the institutional religion, and the strict social order on which her paternal house functioned. This is representative of several women of the Sikh Panjabi community. She ponders over some very important questions regarding women and liberation, she asks:

I have often pondered about what we regard as women's liberation, the idea of her freedom, where does it start, and where does it end? What are its boundaries and limitations? Could a woman actually achieve complete liberation in true-sense of the word? What way should she adopt to gain this so-called liberation? All the old meanings of liberation were becoming meaningless in front of me. ... But is economic independence, self-dependency, the first criteria for liberation? Nonsense!

I had been earning my own bread for years, and yet all the time I was consumed by an unknown terror." (p. 203)

These questions remain relevant for all times and these are questions of all those people whether women or people of other genders and identities struggling to have their legitimate place in society. More than economic independence, perhaps respect, acceptance, inclusion and equity are what lead to liberation. Ajeet Cour being also much ahead of her times, sets a practical example of this. It is now that we have a law regarding the transgenders, but Ajeet Cour had practically supported and housed a transgender with them for a few years in the times when hardly anyone spoke for them. The person who came to live Ajeet Cour and her daughters had the freedom to dress as they wished and behave as they wished without any restrictions.

To sum up, the book offers varied colours, experiences and struggles at different stages of her life. The book though personal is not free from the political examination of the patriarchal system, the legal order (her court case with her landlord) and socio-cultural norms on which the society seems to function. It would be appropriate to end with a quote from the book where she describes her life as "a multi-patched quilt", she says:

Life! Bits and pieces of old, useless, discarded scraps of cloth, shabbily sewn together to form a rag. To form a multi-coloured, multi-patched quilt to wrap oneself in. (p. 276)

Dr. Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry, is an educationist, author and poet and teaches at the Centre for English Studies at Central University of Gujarat.



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

The conversations can be viewed on the following links

Conversation with Kalyanee Mulay

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwKbERIPDZZpic6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Vimmi Sadarangani & Puthiyamaadhavai

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwKbERIPDZZpic6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Jhelum Paranjape

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwKbERIPDZZpic6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Purvadhanashree & Ranjana Dave

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI557hsBEdaH0znnf8q0zc>

Conversation with Sumathi Murthy

https://www.youtube.com/_playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySEiqqDvyKdruGkVUNqoqXIW

Conversation Sudha Arora

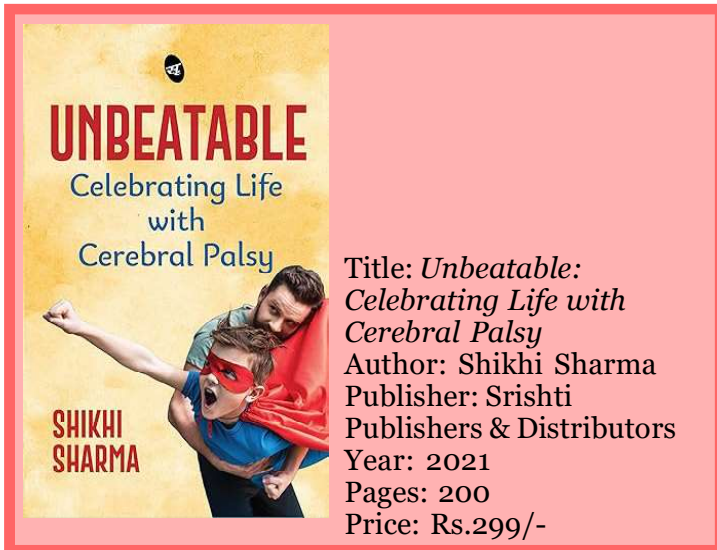
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4dB7gdoMgc>

YOU CAN ALSO VISIT SPARROW WEBSITE FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT THE CONVERSATIONS

<http://www.sparrowonline.org/silver-jubilee.html>

How Far Will You Go?

—*Rohini Rajagopal*



Almost a decade ago, when I was pregnant with my son, one of the prenatal screening tests showed an elevated risk for Trisomy 21. Trisomy 21 is associated with Down's syndrome. My gynaecologist suggested an amniocentesis to get a confirmed diagnosis. Amniocentesis is an invasive procedure done under anaesthesia that involves drawing amniotic fluid from the uterus and testing it for genetic abnormalities. I refused the procedure. For one, it carried the risk of losing the foetus. I had become pregnant after five years of failed fertility treatments and miscarriages and I did not want to entertain the prospect of losing it to an advanced prenatal test. I also believed at that time that even if the test came positive, I would not want to reverse the course of this pregnancy. For a few weeks, despite a display of external confidence, I lived with a fear in the remote corners of my mind wondering how life would be if the baby was born with Down's syndrome and what kind of devotion it would require from me as a mother. We waited until the fifth month for the anomaly scan which to our enormous relief did not report any irregularities.

In Shikhi Sharma's *Unbeatable*, Ajay Sharma and Manju Sharma, government employees living in Jaipur, have to confront a reality they had no reason to anticipate. The family is overjoyed when Manju gives birth to twin boys—

Tapasvi and Manasvi. Almost immediately after birth it becomes clear that Tapasvi is different from his twin and other children. He did not cry soon after birth and spent an extra week in the hospital before being discharged. At home, he lags behind his brother Manasvi in all day-to-day functions. Initially, the parents put it down to the fact that the babies were born prematurely. Until their concern escalates and they consult a doctor. Their son is diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a neurological ailment affecting body movement and muscle coordination. It is a permanent condition that cannot be cured, only managed. The only silver lining is that it does not worsen with time. Ajay and Manju must now begin the long and arduous journey of educating themselves, of seeking therapies and treatments, and adjusting routines and priorities to accommodate the single-minded care required to raise a child with cerebral palsy.

The book details their desperation and devotion, trying everything at hand from major surgery and excruciating physiotherapy to quacks selling instant transformation. Ajay, in particular, goes to war determined to execute a regime of exercise and therapy with methodical discipline to help his son become mobile and attain a certain degree of independence. He realises that it is not enough for Tapasvi to become ambulant, he must also be allowed to fulfil his potential as a human being. The only way to do that is by focussing on education. Tapasvi is dyslexic, thus adding one more layer of complexity to his condition. But Ajay recognises his innate intelligence, strong memory and curiosity and finds institutions that support differently-abled children. Tapasvi's clearing of the National Eligibility Test (NET) is a euphoric moment that bookends the narrative. Qualifying NET allows him the possibility of a career in higher education and more importantly a life of dignity and purpose.

Ajay's dedication as a father draws gasps of admiration. He takes his son everywhere, to museums, forts, parks, even a discotheque so that he may not miss out on anything life has to offer. Ajay spends every waking minute with his son (except while at work), almost becoming Tapasvi's alter ego.

However, the book is reflective enough to point out that Ajay may have taken his obsession a little too far. Not only does he demand absolute adherence to a demanding schedule from his son, but also neglects all other aspects of his life, including his other son. He misses out on building a close bond with Manasvi, who at various points in the book seems to have been treated unfairly by the father. There is some regret but also the acceptance that it may be too late to change anything now. Manasvi is the 'glass child', the sibling of a child with a chronic illness or disability who has been ignored by his parents because of the all-consuming nature of care required for the sick child.

The story of Tapasvi's life is interspersed with general information on cerebral palsy, treatment options, and reflections from doctors, educators, therapists, friends and family who were closely associated with his journey. These sections act as a good resource on cerebral palsy, offering expert and reliable information. These parts also raise awareness about institutional failings in India when it comes to any kind of disability. The lack of physical facilities such as ramps, the limited number of educational institutions (especially outside metros) geared towards addressing the needs of differently-abled children, and the absence of even healthcare facilities to provide the range of therapies needed for cerebral palsy.

There are many emotional moments in the book when you realise that despite everything his family does for him, there are still gaps that cannot be closed. One of those occasions is his grandfather's death. When the other menfolk in the family proceed to the cremation ground, Tapasvi must stay behind because of the logistical difficulty in taking him along. His father who is in the throes of a deep loss himself, is unable to make the arrangements to bring his son. After everyone leaves, Tapasvi locks himself in his bedroom and wails. His cry echoes throughout the house.

The story is told mostly from the perspective of Ajay. There is no denying the fact that he is an extraordinary parent and Tapasvi owes a great deal to his father for what he has been able to accomplish. Yet, the hero of the book is Tapasvi. In the epilogue, we hear Tapasvi's voice, but it leaves you wanting for more. Disability is crushing not just because of the physical hardships and limitations but also because it weakens the agency and autonomy of those living with it. Therefore, it is all the more important to centre the perspectives and first-hand experiences of someone who must put in exceptional effort even for the

most mundane activities, who cannot take anything for granted.

Cerebral palsy affects approximately three children per 1000 live births. In India, nearly, early 15-20% of physically disabled children are affected by cerebral palsy according to the BMJ, making it the most common motor disability in children. Yet awareness is low and stigma is high. It is a widely-held belief that disability is the result of bad karma, the punishment for misdeeds committed in a previous birth. *Unbeatable* by Shikhi Sharma (a banker by profession and related to the Sharmas, parents of Tapasvi) is an important book, therefore, because it tries to combat prejudice with facts, advocates for systemic changes, and brings into view intimate details of a family struggling with disability, a sight that society often pretends not to see.

This book is no doubt a story of great courage, of perseverance, of meticulous and relentless effort with no immediate reward in sight. But at its heart, it is a story of love. All parents ask themselves the question—how far will I go for my child? Rarely is their intention and resolve tested to this degree.

Rohini Rajagopal is a Bangalore-based writer and editor. She started as a Feature Writer for a national daily, spent two years in a publishing firm as Asst Publishing Manager and then moved to Knowledge Management (KM). Was part of a large KM team in a multinational for nearly five years before moving to a similar role in a not-for-profit organization. Took a break in 2018 to write a memoir, *What's a Lemon Squeezer Doing in my Vagina? A Memoir of Infertility* (Penguin Random House India, 2021). She is recognized for strong understanding of content management strategies, processes and tools, excellent project management and communication (oral and written) skills and high sense of ownership.



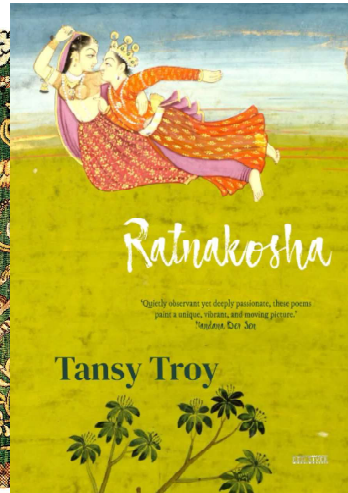
Positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.

Red River Sediments: Part 1

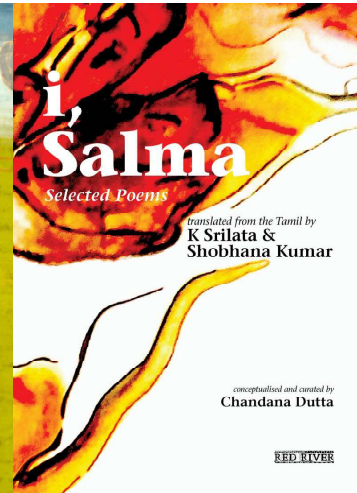
—Kabir Deb



Shikhandin
After Grief



Tansy Troy

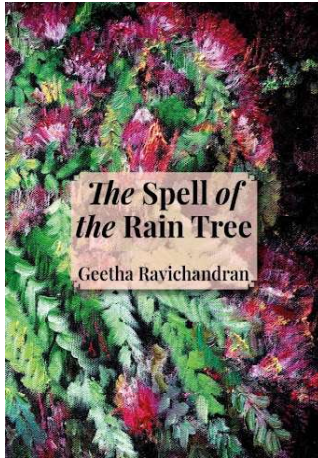


i,
Salma
Selected Poems

translated from the Tamil by
K Srilata &
Shobhana Kumar

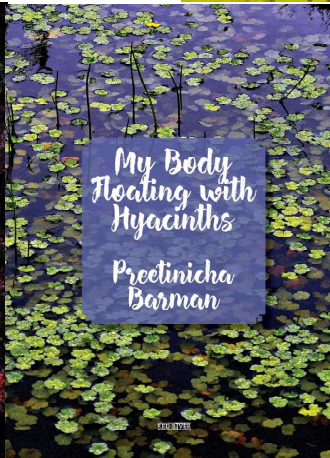
conceptualised and curated by
Chandana Dutta

RED RIVER

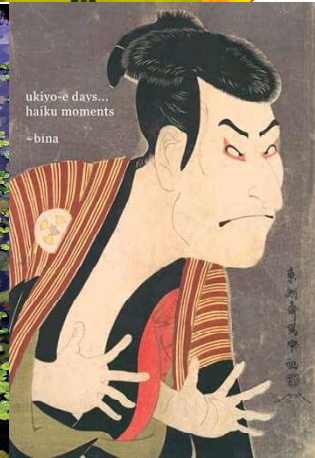


The Spell of
the Rain Tree

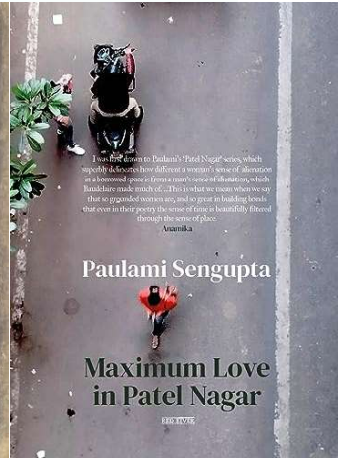
Geetha Ravichandran



My Body
Floating with
Hyacinths
Preetinicha
Berman

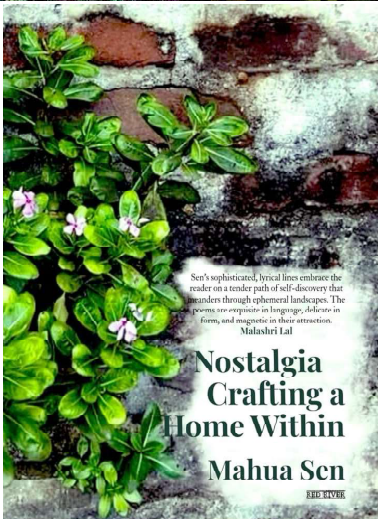


ukiyo-e days...
haiku moments
—bina

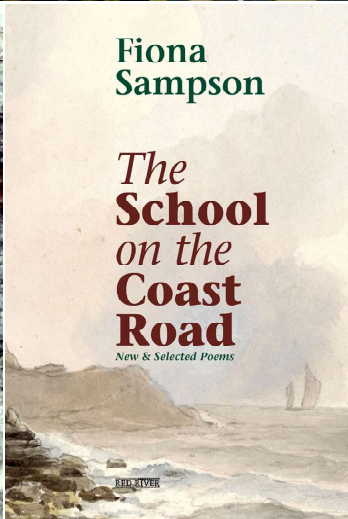


Paulami Sengupta

Maximum Love
in Patel Nagar

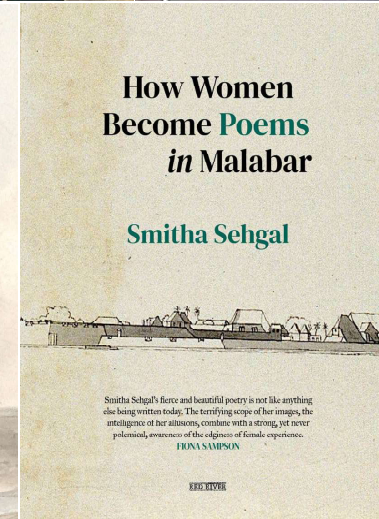


Nostalgia
Crafting a
Home Within
Mahua Sen



Fiona
Sampson

The
School
on the
Coast
Road
New & Selected Poems



How Women
Become Poems
in Malabar

Smitha Sehgal

Smitha Sehgal's fierce and beautiful poetry is not like anything
else being written today. The terrifying scope of her images, the
enthrallment of her situations, combine with a strong, yet never
polemical, awareness of the odyssey of female experience.
FIONA SAMPSON

In the *Devi Bhagavatam*, nature or *prakriti* has been perceived as a non-physical entity having feminine characteristics. It observes bits and pieces of human existence the way women do by closely making an association with it. Poetry has the same objective. To strip the bits and pieces of life and keep it for those who deliberately choose to stay unaware of these intricacies. Human biology says that a woman's brain is wired to do multiple tasks at a single time whereas even in a patriarchal society, a man can do one simple task to stay satiated. So, if seen from the lens of an observer, the variety of literature women explore is a reflection of the power dynamics a sound person hopes to see in the real world. A book by a woman writer always works to fill the void which has been created by the elements of patriarchy, its proponents and hardcore supporters.

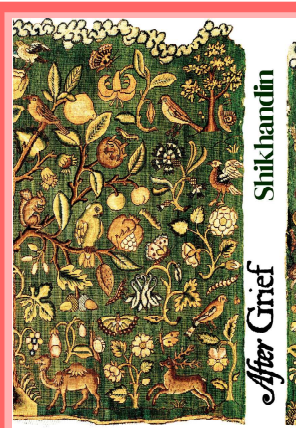
In the present time, with a fortunate flow of women writers, publishers have started to accept their manuscripts for two reasons:

- 1) to have a better selling scale or margin;
- 2) to have a space for those who can document thoughts that have never been uttered.

Red River is a small Indie press that has been publishing women poets from different parts of the world without making the selling margin a criterion. The quarantine phase of this decade has been deeply saddening for almost everyone. Yet it has a brighter side too. Writers found time and space to nurture and storm their minds to then document the result in the form of books. I have chosen for review 21 titles published by the press in the post-quarantine period. All of them walk on different roads to reach that one point where having a voice is the sole necessity and objective. This article contains 11 of the reviews and I hope these reviews will keep the readers eager to read the reviews of the remaining 10.

***After Grief* by Shikhandin**

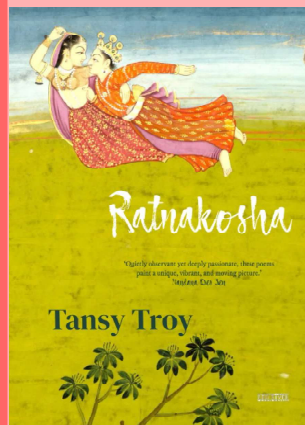
Grief, in literature, can be approached in different ways. It can be projected by standing on different pedestals. What matters is to keep grief alive for those who are in need to read about by living under various situations. Shikhandin's collection of poems, *After Grief*, explores the emotion without measuring the social quotients like morality, the glorified form of kindness and an



Title: *After Grief*
Author: Shikhandin 80 pages,
Paperback
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: August 1, 2021
No of pages: 80
Price: Rs.270/-

unnatural usage of wisdom. Rather the poems spill personal pigments for people clawing at the various sources of grief in the society we are living in. From the act of remembrance to the everyday occurrences, the poet addresses the emotion by peeling the onion of every situation without leaving it injured, for the readers to consume. The collection could be used as a means of liberation from the constant nibbling of grief. *After Grief* is divided into six parts to segregate each kind of grief from another. The book documents the emotion like a monk witnessing existence.

***Ratnakosha* by Tansy Troy**

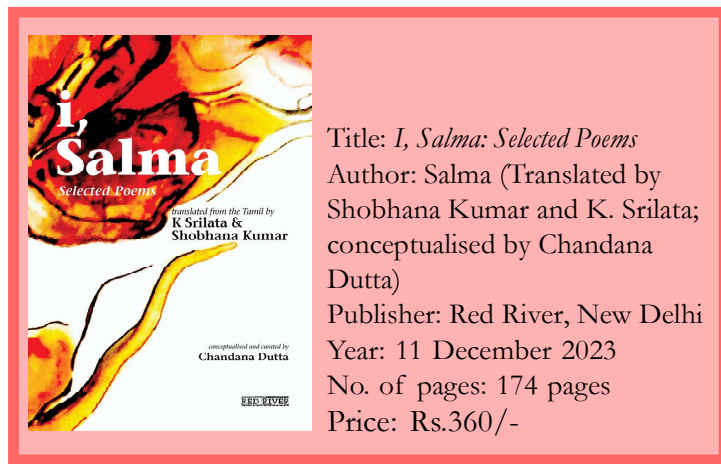


Title: *Ratnakosha*
Author: Tansy Troy
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2023
No. of pages: 124
Price: Rs. 349/-

Tansy Troy's collection of poems can be considered as a book which documents the various tributaries of human life using geographical locations, artforms, mysticism and human conscience. The book is divided into eight segments namely: *Landscapes and Portraits*, *Earthed Poems and Prose*, *Early Poems*, *While the Tree Mouth Speaks*,

Song of Roses, Rasa tree verse, Kabul Falling and Total Darkness, Total Light. These portions are like vehicles. By riding them, we figure out the history of human existence like we savour our own town/city. Sometimes all we need is a reference to have clarity for the rest of the time we are going to invest in this world. *Ratnakosha* works as that reference.

***I, Salma: Selected Poems* by Salma translated by Shobhana Kumar and K. Srilata; conceptualised by Chandana Dutta**

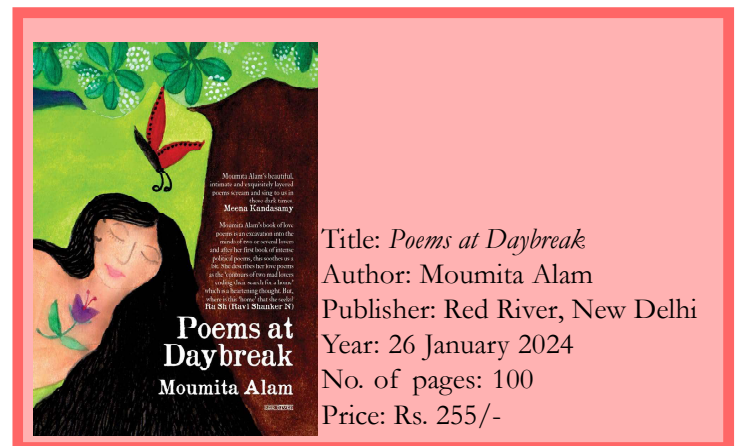


There's a reason why Frida Kahlo's self-portraits have a seductive effect on those who seek the bare skin and absolute honesty on the linings of the painting. The paintings never pretend to attract people. They finely represent the moments of Frida quietly. Tamil poet and novelist Salma's poetry goes to do justice to the same idea or thought when she writes about women using herself as the pedestal. *I, Salma: Selected Poems*, conceptualised by Chandana Dutta and translated from Tamil by K Srilata and Shobhana Kumar, is where for the first time, we get to find a collection of Salma's poems in English. The book also holds an exhaustive conversation between Chandana Dutta and Rajathi Salma where the curator tries to unravel the mind writing such poetry.

The curator of the book Chandana Dutta conceived the idea of compiling Salma's most prominent poems during a literature festival. At the very end of the book, in an interview with Dutta, Salma opens-up about her life, poetry, religion, the way she perceives her community, the country, its politics and many other significant topics. It is important since it is coming from a woman who has strong opinions, and the courage to spill them out without being

hesitant about her choice of words. Even after living under an oppressive marriage, with stringent in-laws, her hunger to have an identity of her own sets an important example for those who believe that any kind of obligation is the end of the line. It is important to find a way to a place where freedom is not a namesake, but a body with a silhouette and a shadow of its own. It is as real as anything can be. The essays of Perumal Murugan, Kannan Sundaram, and Meena Kandasamy enunciate the works of Salma and her life.

***Poems at Daybreak* by Moumita Alam**



A few days back, I received Moumita Alam's collection of poems, *Poems at Daybreak*, published by Red River. It isn't the best time to stay silent (other people would say the very opposite statement). So, for me, this project is more important than the poet and all the glories that we get to see, personally or through her introduction. The collection consists of poems which speak about love, sex/body and the politics of hatred. The poems are naked, and unabashed to hit the nail on the head without worrying about the sound it is going to generate with time and force!

This book is going to disappear, trust me. It is a fact we do not want to believe in. Yes, the poet will be invited to read her poems from this book or many other places. She'll be translated and everyone is going to shower their reactions, since the readers too want the attention of the one who writes, especially when it is a woman who believes in freedom. I still believe what men preach on social media deserves much less space, since everything they utter comes from the root of privilege and a monstrous morality. So, a

woman's voice is going to give men the required dopamine, but the talk of the town will adhere to morality only. Thus, amidst all those toxic men busy manipulating the country's narrative, Moumita Alam's poetry has flesh and bones.

We are not habituated to hearing a woman spill poetry like her truest kind of orgasm. Both of them give the required solace when times are good and bad. Thus, we attach the tag of "bold poet", "notorious writer" or maybe "queer poet" to make her identity absolutely exclusive. I have a problem with it because only the most hard-hitting pieces can place a mirror before our society. There is nothing like "bold" when it comes to art. Anything that resonates without harming or offering unneeded kindness is nature's warm offering.

Being a Libertine and an erotic poet myself, the mystically sensuous journey of her poem, "The Last Smooch" touched me since it is what the entire world needs to listen to. Around men who consciously crave to be a creep by developing an abusive kind of non-consensual sex, virtually or in reality, we get to find people who know the art of sexting and love-making. Men fornicate, but they hardly get to know the art behind it. To be in the cup of love, in a verse the poet says:

*Two tongues dig deep
into each other
to cross the only hurdle before
the earth's collapse
into a black manhole.*

It should not be tough for us to say that we are still believers of the wrong kind of masculinity. Those who watch porn (everyone) should know better that men are driven by testosterone, not ferocity or a toxic kind of masculinity. So, even after the introduction of sadism, the Marquis de Sade involved politics and bedrooms, where men should not be the only dominating section. He says that a woman should embrace her body identity and desires to then subsequently consider them as her primary focus. Moumita Alam writes about abusive marriages in her poem, "We are at Peace", which, ironically, is the biggest cover-up, especially for Indian families. She writes:

*At 9
her husband salivates
at the smell of the delicious mutton curry.*

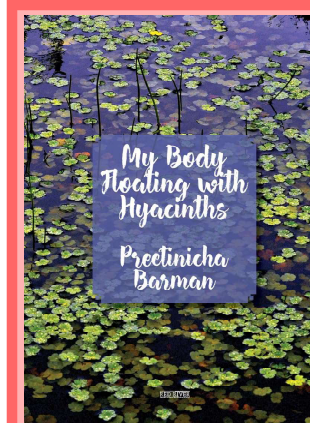
*She is cooking.
Today he is extra hungry
We share our bed with predators
and call it peace.*

This particular collection is an important one to get a pixelated image of our nefarious reality. It holds more than sixty poems divided into four sections:

• Him • Her • Home • Selling my Anatomy

It is certainly going to speak about women who still have not found their voice. It is also going to trigger every male reader, since we deserve much more than just an array of triggers. Some may consider the poems as bad. Some may appreciate them a lot more to please the poet. Others may come out of nowhere as they found their soulmate in the book. The last ones are readers!

***My Body Floating with Hyacinths* by Preetinicha Barman**



Title: *My Body Floating with Hyacinths*

Author: Preetinicha Barman

Publisher: Red River, New Delhi

Year: 26 January 2024

No. of pages: 98

Price: Rs. 255/-

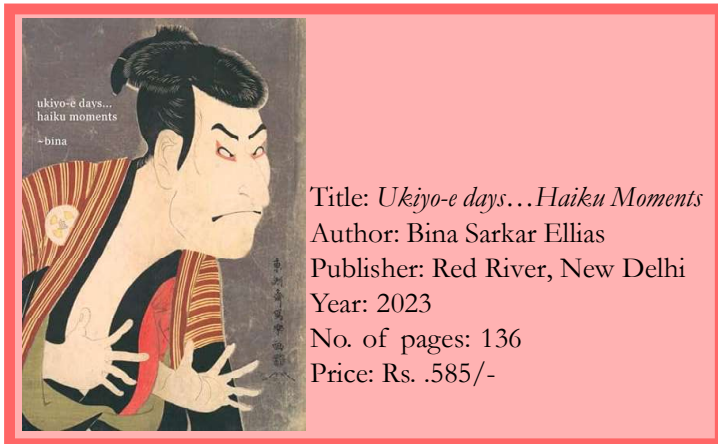
The ultimate objective of a book of poetry is to either leave the reader with a lot of pure hope or to persuade her/him towards seeking the debris of the book. Preetinicha Barman's latest collection of poems, *My Body Floating with Hyacinths*, published by Red River, made me subscribe to the thought of 'staying positive' about Indian poetry where the act of floating examines the spirit of survival inside an individual. It proves that the form of art is still being nurtured by good minds with clarity and warmth for those who have been bombed in different ways.

The book is divided into four parts and each one of them illuminates the philosophy of existentialism from a different

perspective. I have always loved books which speak about the human body and its birth, without losing the sense of what the theme asks for. It also amazes me how our bodies have a thousand eyes to carefully stitch the other influencing entities like the trees around us and how life is a part of its bigger world. Some choose to work on them. Others just stay benign. Preetinicha's book is capable of making the reader think about the instances which take place around us without giving any early warning. They do strike a mindful mind, but by maintaining silence, many choose to disturb the inner monotony.

The poet writes about her individuality, love, desire, lust and things beyond them. I do not remember reading anything like the book offers, especially in the form of poetry. The editing is absolutely bang on. I absolutely loved the unabashed approach of the poet. Like hyacinths, these poems float on the surface, the roots reach the depth and the visibility leaves the rest with food to savour.

***Ukiyo-e Days...Haiku Moments* by Bina Sarkar Ellias**



Title: *Ukiyo-e days...Haiku Moments*
Author: Bina Sarkar Ellias
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2023
No. of pages: 136
Price: Rs. 585/-

The prime necessity of a book is to make us visualise the world that lives inside us. The writer is just a medium to magnify the cupcakes, closets and corners. Wole Soyinka's prose poem named 'Chimes of Silence' is a rendition of the power of small things. He writes, "At first there is a peep-hole in the living. It sneaks into the yard of lunatics, lifers, violent and violated nerves, cripples, tuberculars, victims of power sadism safely hidden from questions". Bina Sarkar Ellias' collection of haiku *Ukiyo-e days...Haiku Moments* works as a peep hole to figure out our refractive wisdom.

Ukiyo simplifies the study of human existence—it literally means to be in the moment, shedding the distractions of life. The monastery of Tawang solidified a lesson in my head: to be in the moment one does not have to go for a reboot. One can simply function by being mindful of everything—it is the best kind of robustness. Bina says the same, through a haiku, using the skill of house cleaning as a metaphor. Buddhist monks are trained to clean the area surrounding their monasteries with a broom to develop the habit of thinking in the presence of a 'mobile singularity.'

Bina writes:

*"Clean the dusty world
Dust away the grime of hate
Wash your dusty heart."*

The whore (appropriations nullify grief) named Ros of King's Landing in the show Game of Thrones sets a perfect example of the life where a woman's body is a component. Little Finger, on the other hand, sells pleasure through their private possession. Ros's helplessness to quieten her companion's pain—the way she is pushed away from being in love, sets a contrast from the pride she portrays for being the queen of whores. The courtesan in Bina's haiku is a poet, and as we know, the write-ups of a brothel either lives longer than anything or dies without being a sound.

The poet writes:

*"within the prose
Of her pleasure-house living
She breathes poetry."*

In Jack Kerouac's book, *The Dharma Bums*, he writes about a journey where the wine tasted better than any advice—steps fermented better than wine—the road led to a place better than the steps—and the lessons were better than the roads of urban civility. Dharma, according to Buddha, is learnt through four noble truths of life: suffering, cause of suffering, end of suffering, and the path that leads to the end. In the philosophy of Sanatana, Dharma is expressed as Sat-Chit-Ananda (truth or Satya, consciousness or Chitta, and bliss or Sukha/Ananda). The *Haiku Moments* poet beautifully expresses the same using the ultimate happiness (bliss) of a treasure boat, and writes:

"life's a brief journey"

*With beauty and learning
Let's travel with grace."*

We do not write books to quench our ego. We do not even do it to make an impact on our career. Even a trash writer does it to be with people, to find a companion, or to just be. The famous Irish philosopher George Berkeley writes: "the taste of the apple is neither in the apple itself—the apple cannot taste itself—nor in the mouth of the eater. It requires contact between them." Words come out of our mind to get to a receptor in someone else's mind. Bina's haiku traverses the heights of Goliath and the depths of devouring oceans with the objective of finding a good friend.

She writes:

*"winds fly with our words
Across mountains and oceans
Freight of kinship."*

Amidst violent upbringings and treacherous social understandings, we have become fond of loss. It affects us only when it gets really personal. The complexity of this scenario is alarming, but the simplicity of its nature is horrifying. It is quite surprising that the shift from our innate innocence to what we consciously turn into never becomes a topic of deep introspection. Thus, modern influencers have positioned themselves as justifiers of rage and flattery. The poet's appeal to realise the worth of self, and to not fake ourselves before our own existence is quite sharply warm.

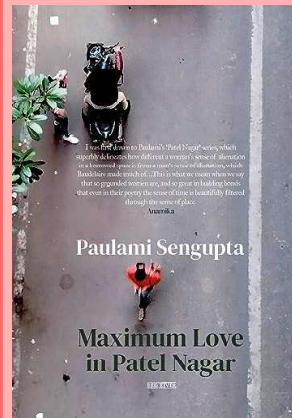
Bina writes:

*"realisation
We were not born violent
Let's repair ourselves."*

'Ukiyo-e days...Haiku Moments is, for certain, a collection of compassionate haikus which complement the old and the new world, its order and chaos. But its element of gorgeousness grows with the period paintings, selected by Bina Sarkar Ellias, by various Japanese painters of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Each one of them never fails to coalesce with the write-ups. Its glory emanates from the progressive expressionism of these very underrated painters. Sometimes nature itself likes to keep something hidden,

so that it germinates, develops, and dies on its lap—in the most wholesome manner—without any hunger.

Maximum Love in Patel Nagar by Paulami Sengupta



Title: *Maximum Love in Patel Nagar*

Author: Paulami Sengupta

Publisher: Red River, New

Delhi

Year: 2023

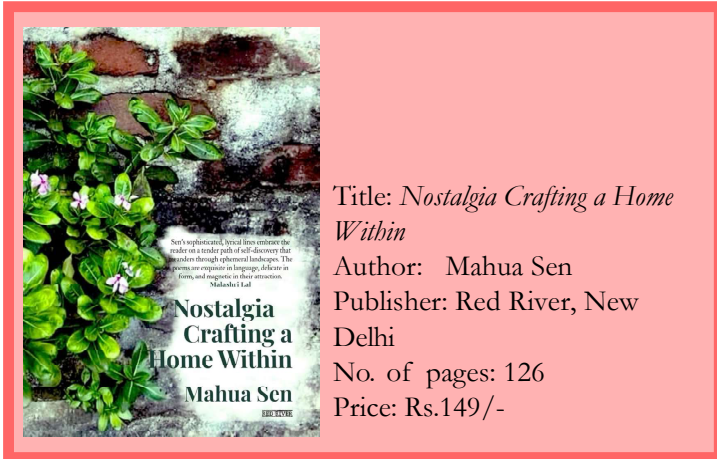
No. of pages: 66

Price: Rs.150/-

There is a reason why the perspective and erotic notes of Anais Nin surpass the absurd erotic description of Henry Miller. The former makes sex and desire a personal emotion and helps readers feel it from the very core. The latter, on the other hand, makes the same emotion a matter of public display to quench his masculine ego. The place we live in can only be described with compassion by a woman or by utilising the lens that's basically feminine. Paulami Sengupta's collection of poems, *Maximum Love in Patel Nagar* weaves a new city with its nouns, pronouns and adjectives letting the readers penetrate the dynamics of a thousand possibilities in the geographical location.

We get the chance to represent ourselves in our own unique way for the physical entities squared around us. In isolation, we cannot frame a story which is relatable and beautiful, at the same time. In this collection, the poet observes and introspects various instances associated with Patel Nagar using its tombstones, shops, incense, stink, people and their professions. From her inner and outer solitude, as readers, we get to decode the personal and public peripheries of her reality and imagination. The bondage women create with their home, town and even a new atmosphere is fertile, unabashed and most importantly, sacred. Paulami adheres to various locations and moments of the place to give us a collection that can be referred to as a piece of nourished memory.

***Nostalgia Crafting a Home Within* by Mahua Sen**



Title: *Nostalgia Crafting a Home Within*
 Author: Mahua Sen
 Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
 No. of pages: 126
 Price: Rs.149/-

The longing for a memory which is stitched to a home or a geographical location is the way a person understands nostalgia. This kind of nostalgia gets married to everything we do, if we are living far away from what is our truest kind of home. Mahua Sen's collection of poems, *Nostalgia Crafting a Home Within*, speaks about the yearning of the poet. Absurdity is not something which is meant for ridiculous stuffs. In case of art, the sense of clothing the core emotions are a way to enter certain minds. They understand the importance of scratching the gubbins of memory.

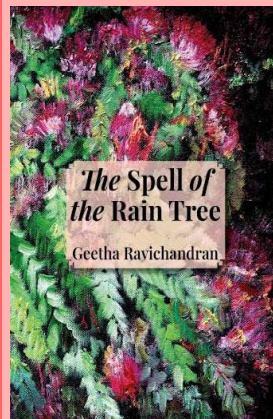
Poems on identity attached with a place should do justice to the thoughts of those who have been abandoned or live in places different from the rest. Mahua's poems circle the locations many might have or have not visited, but surely, they want to be a part of the lyrical journey. The poems have their own world which may fall hard for those who are not into poetry. These poems ask for our time and should be read with patience. To pare the layers of Mahua's thoughts, one has to sweat as a reader. Denuding the thoughts though is a better idea to understand the sensitive elements of nostalgia.

With time, readers of poetry, get to know the pleasure of simplicity. The poet thinks like a simple woman does, and has the same perspective. Yet the poet majorly likes to keep on flowing through good and bad times. It works for those who have the intensity poetry demands. So, the editing raises a few eyebrows since many of her piece's land softly, when the impact should have been harder. It is

where the editor's job should blend in unison with the poet. A knife works better than a sword in a crowded place. India is full of poets and a rise of readers is vivid on social media. A sharp editing would have made a better appeal since the poems deserve a wholesome acceptance. From a reviewer's perspective, the thrust of the poet's art is hopeful and grows slowly like autumn.

Nostalgia Crafting a Home Within is a string which has beads of identity, memory and nostalgia. The fertile poems sophisticate the daily matters of human condition. From the cityscapes to the land where ideas are born, the volatile poetry feeds the imagination. The collection is going to stay in the mainstream for the intricate matters they speak about leaving us a lot of ideas to caress.

***The Spell of the Rain Tree* by Geetha Ravichandran**



Title: *The Spell of the Rain Tree*
 Author: Geetha Ravichandran
 Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
 Year: 2023
 Pages: 72
 Price: Rs. 269/-

The value of a spell lies in the one who is the spell caster. If a spell caster is traversing the world through a hymn, wisdom and simplicity find release. In a completely different circle, a complex affair starts to pileup for a spell that brings chaos and turmoil. Geetha Ravichandran's poetry works like the former one—wherein a wise woman believes she has a lot to learn—which persuades her heart to be a coincidental being. Her recent book *The Spell of the Rain Tree*, is a breath of fresh air. An amalgamate of integrated ideas, it has a substantial amount of patience to decode her reader's life.

Memories have weird lives (to simply say, bipolar). They are either glorified or criticised. Pretentious writers fabricate ruins and manipulate the constructs. When Geetha writes:

*Now we chatter
to the waltz
of walking sticks
speaking without listening.*

It honestly reveals a large mass of realisation that's not a burden on her shoulders. Something we do not see in the mainstream, especially around magnified livelihood. Practising the remembrance of a moment is essential to brighten it even under a shadow. "Sepia" acts as an abode for our mind where we deliberately nourish the fading. Sometimes the formula of fading is something that works in our favour—but not always. The line where the poet says: "All that unfelt joy/has been pixelated", comes from a place where burying is not a trend or tradition. But taking something out surely is.

Silence is overrated. We come across quotes or teachings about its importance. But when Begum Akhtar sings: "*Mere Hamnafas, Mere Hamnavaa/Mujhe Dost Banke Daga Na De*" (Oh you, with whom I share my voice and breath/Do not deceive me now that you are my friend) a warm voice and molten conversation arrive with finesse. The absence of a presence, and the presence of an absence is not something we like to feel. Geetha's poem "Listen In" crawls through the edges of the heart where the desire to feel someone's presence has taken birth. The poem strikes a blow, quite effectively, and at the same time, makes an attempt to skin our soul. It demands absolute baring.

The poet writes:

*If only there had been
someone who had locked
eyes with her, and did not yank her
off her rocking horse she may have healed.*

Life is not certain or perfect. It has blurry sides, and devious territories. But like Oscar Wilde says, "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about", one must reveal the vision that does not live on the surface. The poet has a very witty and churning way to let her readers experience her paradise—we call it home. Although her perspective has a sense of sewing the fragmented pieces (which is general), but the telling of this generalised idea is not popular. She does not bereave the presence of some pretty significant beings. Rather she is kind to keep them in her fertile mind.

So, Geetha writes:

*There is nothing else to do as the Wi-Fi is dead
So, I watch the plants, succulents, and creepers
filling out broken teacups and decouped jars,
grow and exhale oxygen in an inconspicuous corner,
surrounding a painted, wine bottle.*

We often forget to practise what we preach, and vice-versa. Therefore, we have an identity that is chewed to our very bones. Quartered between hatred and love, we have become conditioned to choose the former one. The dementia of being hateful is more lethal than its idea. So, the squeezing space around us should not surprise us. Brewing business on the spine of religion, priests who have distanced themselves from Gyana and Guidance, and a room with no choice, elevates wildly through the poem "The Forgotten Temple". A poem of immense importance to know the knower.

Geetha writes:

*"In a quiet corner
sits a desultory priest
tending an oil lamp.
He does not seek to impress
scattered worshippers
about favours granted,
or prayers answered."*

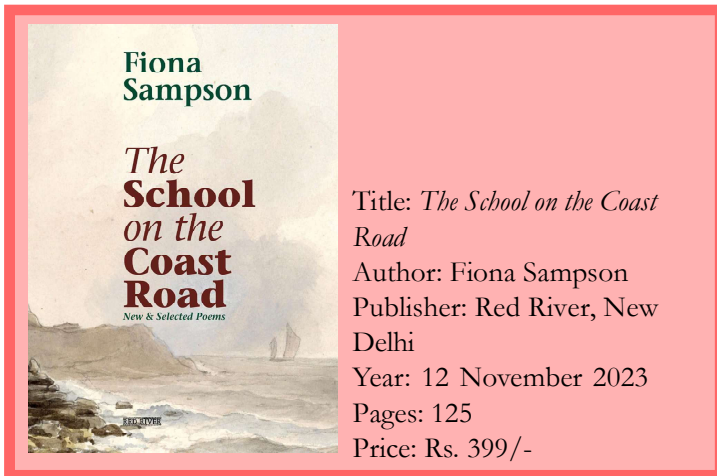
The person who cooks knows about the pavements of our dreams, desires and differences. It becomes true when the masalas blend with the thought of love. All that matters is how we sprinkle both of these entities to process our rationality. When Kirtana Kumar writes about her mother's food preparation, she says: "It is far more than food we are talking about here. It is the post-Independence zeitgeist, yes, but it's also about a food culture that dares to break the shackles of caste conservatism and its hegemonic purity and pollution theories." Something that flows through the poem, "When Less is More." Although the personal references formulate a different smell. But the soup of the item penetrates to dissolve the divisions, on both our public and personal levels.

*a plate halved
by sharing,*

*windows sans curtains,
the smile on wrinkled skin.*

The Spell of the Rain Tree makes a deeply private corner on its own. It does not require cleansing or curation—it has the ability to adhere to our core emotions. Geetha Ravichandran's poetry is an imaginative spectacle wherein the colours we love grow on our body, the people we love stroll through our head, and the consecutive moments stay alive. Finding solace in a book is the utmost desire of a reader. To keep its existence enlightened within it, leaves no room for corrosion. The write-ups keep on helping or haunting us, and this book does justice to writing.

***The School on the Coast Road* by Fiona Sampson**



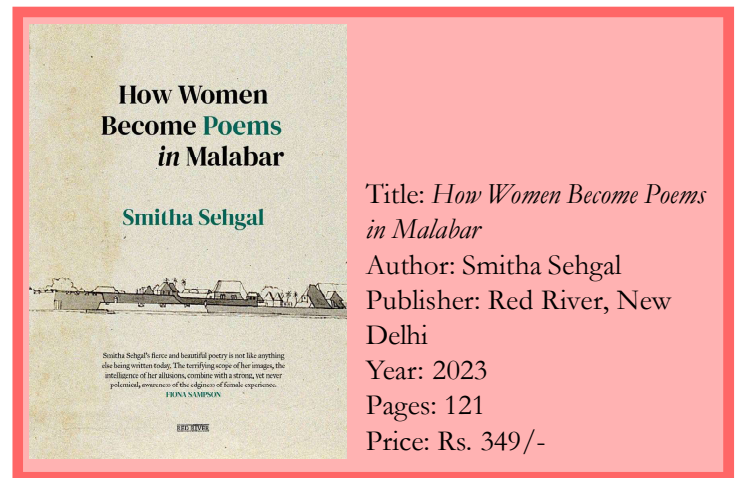
Title: *The School on the Coast Road*
Author: Fiona Sampson
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 12 November 2023
Pages: 125
Price: Rs. 399/-

Fiona Sampson's collection of poetry runs like a river having a hundred tributaries to reach the places and moments unseen or ignored by many in reality. A poet can only write on sleep-walking if she has felt it on her own or if she has been with someone with this trait. To make the readers visualise the thoughts which run through the internal chambers of human body, one has to really know the conscious and sub-conscious. Fiona's knowing explores the atmosphere of the dark tunnels, smeared tongues, falling walls and the constant changes.

The poet operates on the quiet and soft skin of metaphor. The images evolve conjuring the monotonous circumstances and by dissolving the silence when hunger is so comprehensively painted over us. The curtains of her

poetry are not meant to veil her thoughts but to not let the bright light of power and hegemony blind her perspectives. We are prone to the thought of having male prophets in places of worship. Fiona, on the other hand, writes about visuals which are large and tiny using her prophetic expression. It keeps the readers adhered to what the poet has to say.

***How Women Become Poems in Malabar* by Smitha Sehgal**



Title: *How Women Become Poems in Malabar*
Author: Smitha Sehgal
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2023
Pages: 121
Price: Rs. 349/-

The metamorphosis of a woman's mind is something we do not like to have a particular study on, but perhaps the most stunning and extreme chemical reactions take place when a woman thinks. Smitha Sehgal's *How Women Become Poems in Malabar* mindfully opens up about the various transformations a woman goes through and the struggle that comes with it. The cultural oppression of a woman's choice and creation is certainly the hardcore blockage women hit on the road to the elevation of society, as a whole. Change is constant, but Smitha carefully mentions about the various changes which remain unaccepted since they begin to decimate the walls of patriarchy.

The poet addresses all these problems from various locations/addresses of Malabar. It is quite clear that even if we speak about women of a small town, we gradually start to make sense for all the women out there beyond a small geographical location. Smitha's poems reside to comment on the situation of a particular place, but her comments eventually start to decipher problems which are similar to what Smitha's Malabar is holding tightly.

Feminism is a thin wall. One has to stand firmly on it to keep the statements like the edge of a blade. Or else the conditioned patriarchy might haunt the ideology. Smitha's poems are for those goblins which live to strengthen those suffering.

Kabir Deb was born in Haflong and completed his schooling from Kendriya Vidyalaya, Karimganj. After that completed his Graduation and Masters from Assam University, Assam. Poetry has been his passion and a hobby from childhood. He looks forward to change the society with the power of poetry. His work has been published in 'To be my Valentine' edition of Hall of Poets, *Reviews Magazine*, *Bhor Foundation*, *Different Truths Magazine*. He has recently received The Social Journalism Award from the *Different Truths Magazine*. He works in a bank from Karimganj.

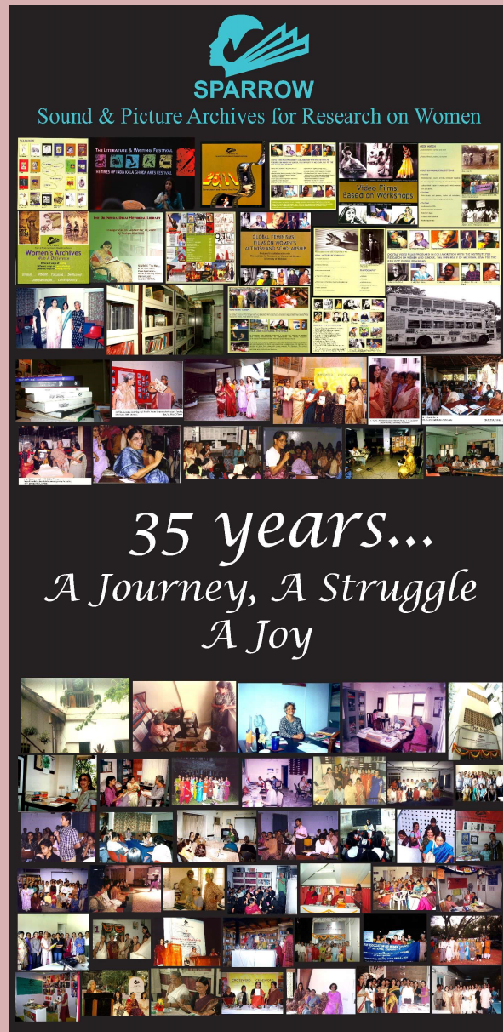


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