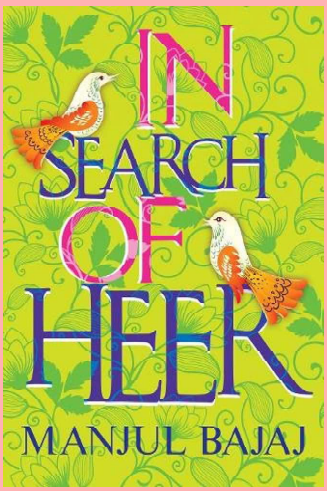
BOOK REVIEWS

SPARROW Supplement

SOUND & PICTURE ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

"One of So Many Originals"

—*Charanjeet Kaur*



Title: I*n Search of Heer*
Author: Manjul Bajaj
Publisher: Tranquebar, an imprint of Westland Publications Ltd, Chennai
Year of Publication: 2019
Pages: 300
Price: Rs.359/-

"Heer and Ranjha live on a continuum in our collective imagination. My rendering is one of many originals, no more, no less" (Author's Note)

It is always tempting but futile to search for original sources when one comes across a culturally embedded narrative like Heer, which is part of the collective sub consciousness of linguistic communities which embrace three religions—Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. Hence, Damodar Das/ Gulati, Waris Shah, the 100+ versions across Panjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Sindhi and Persian and, of course, Amrita Pritam's invocation of Waris Shah in the light of the trauma of the partition of India. So, Manjul Bajaj's novel, with its overt feminist stance and its rich environmental ambience may well be considered in its own codes, focussing on concerns which are perennial while being contemporary.

In its bare outlines, the story of Heer-Ranjha is as follows: Ranjha, son of Mauju Chaudhary of Takht Hazara, who has heard of the famed beauty of Heer Syal the beautiful, courageous and iconoclastic daughter of the Jhang landlord, Mir Chuchak, vows to woo her and marry her. When they meet, they fall in love and consummate their relationship. But if they marry, they would break societal norms and the Jhang community refuses to permit this to happen, especially since Heer has been betrothed to Seida Khera of Rampur at birth. Even though her father is willing to consider some ways in which this engagement can be terminated so that Heer can marry Ranjha, the machinations of her uncle (chacha) Kaido Langra, and to a lesser extent her brother Sultan and her mother Malki, is forced into this marriage in spite of the fact that she does not consent to it during the nuptials. At Rampur, she refuses to consummate her marriage, and keeps Seida Khera at bay. Meanwhile Ranjha becomes a jogi and wanders in search of peace. But both are unable to forget their passion for each other and when Ranjha comes to Rampur in the guise of a jogi, they elope. They are arrested and brought before the court of Adali Raja. Heer passionately defends her decision in his court by stating that she had not given her consent to the marriage with Seida Khera. The lovers win the day and a talaq is granted to Heer. In many versions, Heer and Ranjha do get married with great pomp and ceremony, but the wicked Kaido poisons her and she dies before she reaches Ranjha's home in Takht Hazara. Obviously, Ranjha, too, kills himself and the love of Heer and Ranjha becomes of stuff which creates folklore.

In Manjul's novel. The two decisive characters are Heer and Kaido Langra—the protagonist and the antagonist, who are a match for each other. It is significant that Heer is known by her own name while Ranjha is known by his community name—his first name being Deedho. This sets Heer off immediately as an individualist who knows her own mind and who knows how to fight for her rights—sexual, marital, material, and above all her right to express her thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions. She and the other belles of Jhang, under her influence, are horse

riders, combatants, and protectors of the weak. Heer is wilful, and used to getting her way in her household. Much of the novel is in the form of debates which the characters have with one another and among the strongest rhetorical passages are those in which Heer fights to save her relationship with Ranjha, her resistance to her marriage with Seida and her defence of her elopement in the court of Adali Raja. Her strongest characteristic is that she is **vocal,** whereas women are traditionally conditioned to be subservient and obedient. She is the only one who understands the extent of the evil that lies in Kaido.

Ranjha is the virile lover-boy who is under the protection of Heer. It is she who convinces her father to employ him as a cowherd in Jhang and also about their love. Things happen to Ranjha, but Heer is the initiator of the action most of the time. He escapes from his family and house in Takht Hazara in search of Heer and once he finds her, the relationship flourishes because of her ingenuity. When Heer is married off, he escapes into a spiritual quest and he returns to her only when he learns that her marriage is a farce. He is the poet, the philosopher, the sensitive soul who brings beauty into her life, but he is not a man of action. One of the issues that this novel touches upon is this very criticism of Ranjha as a passive man: is it really important to act/work/earn a livelihood? —is a question that Ranjha's way of life poses and makes one think about it.

But it is Kaido Langra, the quintessential EVIL in the novel, who becomes symptomatic of all that is wrong in society. A seemingly pious man, who is actually scheming and manipulative, he is used by Manjul to depict all kinds of societal evil—greed, malice, envy, manifest in the manipulations of his brother and his eventual murder, usurpation of the parents' right to their daughter by forcing her betrothal in infancy as also her own right to determine path of her life. But the most damaging of his pursuits is that he is shown to be a pedophile and a sex-maniac. His exploitation of and cruelty to the deaf-and-mute nine-year-old child who succumbs to his lust and pays with her life has contemporary and modern overtones. What is more important, he posits a closed society, which renders women invisible and mute, by crying foul: he cites the defiance of Heer to press home the point that women must be kept in purdah and that they are to have no rights whatsoever. He also raises the bogey of the attack on religion and community by using the murder of the nine-year-old girl to serve as an example of how mothers do not take proper care of their daughters leading them to such disastrous ends. He gets away with it all because of his smooth tongue and because he has learnt to play upon the fears of the community.

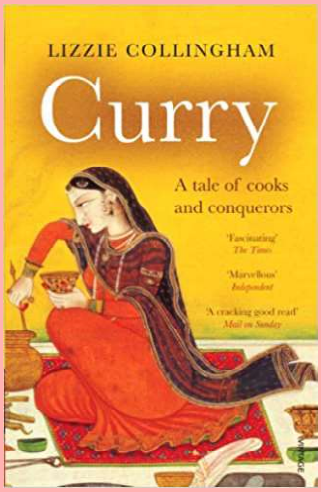
By making Heer's husband, Seida, impotent, Manjul raised another significant contemporary theme—of alternative sexuality and homosexuality. We learn that his young lovers were killed by his father when their relationship was discovered. Knowing well that his son is impotent, he heaps ridicule and cruelty on him, the ultimate cruelty being that he forces marriage with Heer on him. Seida is a man ruined by the callousness and cruelty of his landlord-father.

This is a harsh narrative. Yet, it is the language, the nature descriptions, the sense of the oneness of creation evident in the interactions between the animal/bird world and the human world bring in poetry and delicacy to the narration. The whole of nature is not just witness and participant, but also the voice of the story of Heer-Ranjha. The narrations of the crow, the goat, the pigeons along with those of the human characters add a philosophic and spiritual dimension to the novel, more so because it views the love of Heer and Ranjha as something cosmic and pure. The softness is also found in some of the relationships which Heer forges: particularly, the loyalty of her friends in Jhang, who become her strong support system, her gradual understanding of Seida's mother and his sister, both of whom have faced the tortures of the patriarch. The overwhelming lyricism of the novel is what makes it extra special.

"After such knowledge, what forgiveness?", asks T S Eliot in his poem "Gerontion". But there is grace in Manjul Bajaj's novel. The different narrators tell us that Heer and Ranjha escape to Balouch and probably live life to the fullest. Not the story as we know it conventionally, but well, who knows? And why not?

Cooks and Conquerors

—Pankhuri Agrawal



Title: *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*
Author: Lizzie Collingham
Publisher: RHUK, Kolkata
Year of Publication: 6 July, 2006.
Pages: 352
Price: Rs. 497. 89/-

This is not really a review of Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* but about how the book came into my life and the thoughts that the book provoked. I plan a longer article on food to take these thoughts further but here are my random thoughts

As an undergrad at Haverford College, I was only one of two Indian students on campus. 'Indian' as defined by political citizenship—only two of us held Indian passports in a population of 1200 students. The college, for its 'diversity' marketing, clubbed us along with other students whose parents were from the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka), under the broad umbrella of "South Asian" students on campus.

Every time I sat down for a meal in our common dining hall, I would be asked questions about India. Overnight I was expected simultaneously to be both a 'cultural ambassador' and an 'exotic specimen'.

I distinctly remember one student asking me if I rode an elephant home from the airport. Others admired my proficiency in English, and were surprised that I had not attended an 'international' school. Another wanted me to educate him on the great Indian caste system, as though just by virtue of being born in India, made me a PhD on the subject. Initially, I felt insecure, under-read, and ashamed of my lack of knowledge. But by the end of five years, I frankly became irritable and angry.

Two questions in particular would throw me into a fit of uncontrollable fury:

1. "Could you please cook chicken tikka masala for us?"
2. "How do you make curry powder?"

I didn't even know how to cook at that age. I had grown up vegetarian and never tasted chicken at that point. And thirdly there was nothing like curry powder in India!

Now after a distance of 20 years, ironically, I am devouring a book entitled *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* by Lizzie Collingham. She organises her research around 10 famous "Indian" dishes.

The chapter headings are the names of dishes such as Chicken Tikka Masala, Vindaloo, Korma and Madras Curry that were either 'invented' or 'discovered' by colonisers of the Indian subcontinent. The chapter structure inventively borrows from recipe books. She traces the culinary roots of these 10 iconic dishes, and documents how they travelled back to Britain and around the world.

When I studied history in school, I used to hate blindly memorising world events. At that age, I did not grasp how military policy and wars fought on other continents could ever influence what we eat on a daily basis. The world of politics, commerce, and international trade were a far cry from pav bhaji, hot chips, and aloo bondas. I could not fathom that the tomatoes in my mother's butter-soaked pav bhaji were once called "bilti begun"—English/foreign aubergines by the Bengalis (p. 166). I would not have believed my school teacher if she had said that masala dosas or hot chips would not have been possible in India in the 1700s, since our country did not cultivate any potatoes at that time.

Only after reading historian Lizzie Collingham's chapter titled "Cold Meat Cutlets: British Food in India" in her seminal work, have the connections between military powers and food come to the fore. For instance, she illustrates how the invention of tin cans for food (in 1810), the abolition of the East India Company (in 1858) and the opening of the Suez Canal in Egypt (in 1869) entirely changed what food was served at Anglo-Indian tables in the 19th century, and eventually what we continue to cook in our kitchens today.

First tinned foods imported from England made available "bottled peas, tough roasts and slightly metallic pate de foie gras" to British civil servants and their families (p. 168). They could use these foods to demonstrate their Britishness, and most importantly their "distance" from all things "native".

When I look at the Del Monte bottled olives in my fridge today, I wonder if I too am partaking in a kind of gastronomic cultural capital? When I was a student in Manipal, I did not have access to artisanal cheeses and Borges pasta packets. I had to become inventive and either use generic brands such as Amul and Maggi, or learn how to cook dishes with "local" ingredients such as Malabar spinach. Did the British in India hold on to tinned foods for comfort, familiarity, or as a way to show their superiority? To what lengths do we cling onto "food fashions"?

The Suez Canal made it possible for British women to travel to India to seek husbands—see Anne De Courcy's *The Fishing Fleet: Husband-Hunting in the Raj* (2013). With the entrance of the "memsahib", the dynamics within the Anglo-Indian kitchen changed drastically. Just think of how a kitchen changes from "hostel living" to "family meals"—how instant Maggi noodles make way for idli and chutney.

Furthermore, with the abolition of the East India Company, the type of men coming to India morphed from commercial adventurists—"the Nabobs" to "black coated bureaucrats" (p. 159). British men had less say in how they dressed, who they married, and what kind of food was served at their dinners. An imperial project backed by "racial theories" chose clothing, education, architecture, food, language, and dinnerware as its instruments of warfare and colonisation.

In the chapter titled "Madras Curry: the British invention of curry", historian Lizzie Collingham demonstrates how the dinner table in the 1800s, became a means to display the wealth and status of the East India Company civil servants on the Indian subcontinent. There were distinctions made between "high status" (Mughlai pilau, rabbits) and "low status" foods (hare, small local "whitebait-like fish") (p. 114), a trend which continues to this day.

The tables were not only loaded with turkeys, roast pigs, curry, rice, "beef steaks, pigeon pies, chicken drumsticks…fruits and nuts" during the "burra khana (big dinner), but each officer also employed between 8 to 15 (!) servants who played different roles to attend to the kitchen and serve food (pp. 112-113).

These specific roles around the kitchen and dining table included:

- Cook
- Assistant Cook
- Masalchi: spice grinder and dishwasher
- Khansaman - Butler
- Second Butler
- Aub-dar: water cooler who ensured that water, champagne and pale ale were all chilled
- Khidmutgar: waiter
- Hookah Burdar: to change the tobacco
- Table fan operator who beat away flies with a "chowrie"—small peacock feather fan (p. 107) due to the profusion of flies and cockroaches
- Large fan operator who controlled the 30-foot-long cloth ceiling fan with a rope and pulley (p. 108).

These kitchen and table employees were in addition to coachman, groomsmen for horses, palanquin bearers, maids, masseuse, washermen, and gardeners.

Lizzie Collingham often draws from manuscripts by civil servants of the East India Company, as well as those written by their wives, sisters, aunts, and cousins in her book. These memoirs, letters, diaries and travelogues such as the one by Fanny Parks—*Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, during Four-and-Twenty Years in the East; with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* (1850) bring out details about the food, diners and attendants which would be impossible to find in conventional books on Indian

history. These accounts reveal precise particulars such as the "smell of coconut oil which the servants rubbed on their skin" (p. 108), or the fact that the servants approved the fine porcelain "Wedgwood" dinner set of an English judge's wife (p. 114).

What did the civil and military British officials eat in the colonial India of the 1800s when they travelled? In the third section of the fifth chapter of "Curry", Collingham writes about this food cooked and consumed on the move. When the officials travelled upriver on a budgerow—a "cumbersome flat-bottomed boat" (p. 122), they were supplied with "hot rolls…and meat curries" by a cook boat that pulled up alongside the main boat (p.123).

When they chose to travel overnight by a palanquin "carried by six or eight bearers" along the "dak" or postal routes, they were invariably served a "country captain" chicken curry "flavoured with turmeric and chillies" made by the resident cook at the Dak Bungalow (p.124). These dak bungalows are now used by forest officials and the Public Works Department across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The third type of travel was luxurious camps during the colder months in the countryside where tents "were fitted out with glass doors and a stove" (p. 125). The British officials and their guests heavily indulged in hunting and killed quail, wild duck, rabbits, boars and deer, which were then made into "shikari (hunting) curries" (p. 123, 125). Alongside these curries and rice, there was an extensive spread of jams, tinned fish, omelettes, cold meats, fruit, cakes and wine, supplied by their kitchen retinue.

Talking of curry itself, Lizzie Collingham notes that the "idea of a curry is, in fact, a concept that the Europeans imposed on India's food culture" (p. 115). Diverse dishes with varying regional ingredients and spices, and disparate cooking methods were all grouped under a monolithic category which was then exported back to Britain. From the centre of the Raj, it travelled the world to the colonies of Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, South Africa and Fiji through indentured labourers and British officials (p. 242).

The word "karil" in the South Indian languages of Kannada and Malayalam (both of which have their roots in Sanskrit), as well as the word "kari" in Tamil "was used to describe spices for seasonings as well as dishes of sauteed vegetables or meat" (p. 115). These words were corrupted by the colonial Portuguese and British rulers in India, until the word curry stood for "any spicy dish with a thick sauce or gravy in every part of India" (ibid). When I contacted the author Lizzie Collingham for a clarification regarding the words 'kari' and 'karil', she said that since she unfortunately did not speak any Indian languages, she had to rely on other speakers to reach a compromise in the text.

Madras (Chennai) in the south, Bombay (Mumbai) on the west coast, and Calcutta (Kolkata) in the east, were the three epicentres of British Raj in India. Lizzie Collingham writes how "Mulligatawny" soup evolved from the Tamil "mologu tunny" or pepper water (rasam), and how the Anglo Indians in Madras were referred to as "Mulls" due to their fondness for this dish (p. 120). The British in Bombay were called "Ducks" since they loved to sprinkle the flaky, salty, sun dried and fried Bomelon fish ("Bombay Duck") (p. 26). The British in Calcutta admitted that the "Bengal artist is greatest in fish and vegetable curries" (p. 116).

If we apply what Collingham has written about colonial India to the present, what could be some of the "caricature" dishes (thanks to Rushina for this term) available throughout the country today—generic dishes which lack regional variation and subtlety? Momos served on Bangalore street corners? Dosas served in Delhi hotels? Pav Bhaji made on the footpaths of Bombay? Do we as Indians have a fascination with a particular cuisine at the moment from outside the geographic borders of our country? How did "peri peri" masala become ubiquitous all over the country? How did Domino's pizza come to represent "American food"? And how does sushi even begin to encompass the diversity and expanse of "Japanese" cuisine?

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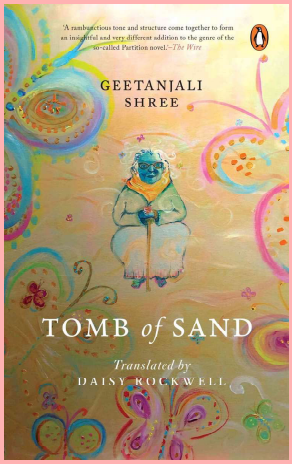
Pankhuri Agrawal is an independent writer and researcher based in Bangalore. The covid lockdowns spurred her to write short essays on spices and nostalgia. She recently completed a research project on street vendors for Prof. Krishnendu Ray, NYU. She runs the Yayavr Food Book Club which discusses the 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.

Zigzagging Borders

—Roshan G Shahani



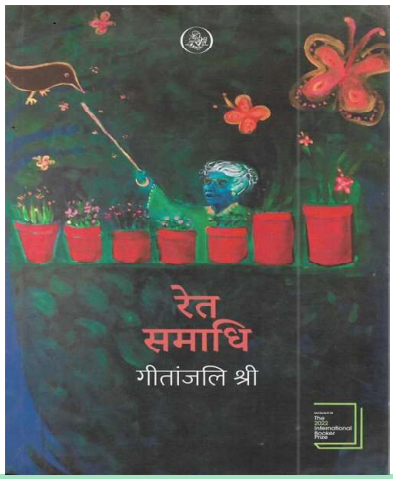
Title: *Tomb of Sand*
Author: Geetanjali Shree
Translated by Daisy Rockwell
Publisher: Penguin Random House
India, Gurugram
Year of Publication: 2022.
Pages: 696
Price: Rs.329/-

A peepal tree, we are told, spreads its foliage on either side of the Indo-Pak border, along with the numbered posts dividing the two nations. The scampering squirrels, the chirping mynahs, the gentle breeze around this tree know no boundaries. The author of this piece, "The Territory of Shade" (published significantly in the Express's Freedom Issue) suggests that the tree seems to unite rather than divide the two warring neighbours." The symbol of the peepal tree must have so struck the writer — just as reading about it struck me—that he quotes from yet another piece which poignantly conveys our close connection. "During sunrise in the mornings, the tree gives its shade in Pakistan and in the afternoons on the Indian side of the border." (1)

Both Geetanjali Shree and her novel *Ret Samadhi* (translated *Tomb of Sand*), have crossed innumerable borders. Primarily, (though it might seem a misleading word for a novel that claims to have no beginning middle or end), it is about an eighty year old woman, Ma, who crosses the border without a visa into 'enemy' territory . It had been her homeland where, she insists on searching for her Muslim husband lost decades ago during Partition. That's where she decides she must die, "with her face turned upwards towards the boundless skies."

Like her protagonist, Shree has crossed borders and boundaries, unhampered by nationalistic prejudices, by western ignorance (some hadn't heard of Partition, others couldn't distinguish between Hindi and Indian). She transcends cultures, nations, geographies, recorded histories, even languages. The writer's free-floating use of colloquial English in what is 'essentially' a Hindi novel, (nothing is essential in her novel), corresponds with the translator Daisy Rockwell's retention of the original Hindi words, phrases, quotations, discomfiting many readers. But then they must remember that today we have long since crossed the Macaulian boundary of what constituted unadulterated English. If the non-Hindi speaking reader is compelled to do a google search, then so be it.

While acknowledging her indebtedness to the earlier Hindi writers as well as to the urban centered social realism of the *Nayi Kahani* movement, Shree crosses here a literary threshold wherein she moves from the novel of social realism to enter the disruptive anarchic world of magic realism without abrogating the former altogether. Her "guru", as she calls her, is Krishna Sobti, a writer who has revolutionised the concept of both the Hindi language and its literature. As Sobti remarks, "The romance of life is not in a straight line.



Things would go stale if that were to happen." (2)

Tomb of Sand dispenses with linearity, with "straight lines" and that makes for fascinating reading. But its very 'zigzaggedness', made it impossible for me to explain to friends what the book was all about. It was as futile as explaining a brilliant joke. And now, while writing about it…..where does one begin, where does one end? Theme Plot Character, all the traditional trappings of critical analyses are thrown out of the window, hurled to the winds.

The novel could well be a librarian's nightmare, for it defies and is meant to defy all categories. Is it a Family Saga in capitals, with Ma the matriarch , Bade the eldest son, Beti the younger daughter, Bahu, and the grandsons Sid and "overseas Son", all crossing one another's paths and getting into one another's hair? Does it centre on the Mother/Daughter relationship? At a certain point, Ma has physically and metaphorically crossed the threshold of the family home, and is now in the home of the independent Beti. For a time the mother/daughter roles are reversed as so often happens between octogenarian mothers and middle-aged daughters. Soon however, to Beti's perplexity and discomfiture, Ma asserts her own independence and is more at home in Beti's home than Beti is herself.

And then comes another crossing. Ma decides to take a giant leap forward, accompanied by her reluctant daughter across the Indo Pak border. So in many ways it's a feminist novel but is it Beti who's the feminist with her live in lover? Or is it Ma who is the more progressive person, who doesn't bat an eyelid about KK being in and out of the house and welcomes him with open arms, while Beti is embarrassed to have him around? Again, is Ma the Protagonist? Or is that an impossibility with family, friends, domestics, narrators, writers, both living and dead, humans and non-humans, crowding the already overcrowded canvas? Is it devoted to the cause of the LGBTQ with the tragi-comic androgynous character of Rosie-Raza? A piece of irony here, as elsewhere; while Beti the self-proclaimed feminist, is uneasy about this hijra's presence, eighty-year-old Ma accepts and embraces Rosie-Raza as her own. So then is it a Paean to Old Age? Shree mentions somewhere how she has seen so many old women turn their faces to the wall, backing away from family, careworn by responsibilities. Ma does just that. But then she seems to break through the wall and live the remainder of her life on her own terms.

The novel is all this and much more. I would venture to say that it is akin to an intricate, even intriguing jigsaw puzzle but not quite. The intricate pieces of a puzzle will finally fit together into a complete, well-defined picture. Not so here. It just simply teases us out of thought. There are contemporary allusions, political satire, lawn parties (The Last Lunch she calls it since it's Bade's retirement party), the Wagah Border, at which are lined up partition writers, Manto, Khushwant Singh, Krishna Sobti and characters like Toba Tek Singh. There are references to post-modernist writers from the early GV Desani to Salman Rushdie. Actors old and young , Bollywood movies, Sufi music, popular hits all join the chorus of voices. Myths, legend, folk tales jostle for attention along with the narrator's philosophical comments, simultaneously tongue in cheek and serious, from "Confusion to Confucius" as Shree mentions in another context. Likewise, the absurdist and the lyrical are conjoined, creating a literary pandemonium.

Best to leave it to the *Kathanayak*, the storyteller, to tell her tale; it might simplify matters but conversely, delightfully, it might complicate things still further. Here are the opening words of the story we are about to hear:

A tale tells itself. It can be complete but also incomplete, the way all tales are. This particular tale and women come and go as they please. Once you've got a woman and a border, a story can write itself…. Women are stories themselves, full of stirrings and whispering that float in the wind, that bend with each blade of grass….The story's path unfurls, not knowing where it will stop, tacking to the right and left, twisting and turning, allowing anything and everything to join in the narration….

Now, whose words are these? The (un)authorial author's? Everyone is invited "to join the narration"…. "How nicely we'll get on, us and them, once we all sit down together" we're told at the very beginning. The opening of the story also contains the end in a circular

fashion but yet again every word we use becomes a contradiction because circularity implies completion. Ma's ending is in death or so a conventional reading would seem but convention is constantly being punctured. "Puncture a border and slip right through" we are told, just as Ma has always done. "Her death" the whimsical narrator tells us, "was no ending;" [she] "knew she'd simply crossed another border."

The novel has no fixity; timeframes are constantly shifting; we are listening to a polyphony of voices, including the fanciful self-reflexive one of the author, whose digressions meander their way through the narrative. A Postmodernist Novel, the academic would nod wisely. True; yet, if we too cross borders, moving back in time to the long ago oral tradition, we're listening to the inclusive voice of the *Kathanayak*. Shree has merged the traditional with the contemporary, zigzagging her way through the meandering tale.

Trust the tale not the teller of the tale, DH Lawrence had remarked long ago. But when there is a throng of tellers, a cacophony of voices, including our own, can we trust either the tale or the tellers?

As in folk tales of yore, animals 'people' the story. They have their own tales to tell and warnings to give to humans, if only the humans would listen. Crow has come to Bade to warn him of Ma's fall. But the modern-day narrator is heard interrupting; the days of Jatayu warning Ram are long gone. Today's humans would believe that a crow comes only to steal food or leave droppings. Other delightful digressions within digressions—will Bade know that Crow was an important messenger or will he believe all crows look alike "the way Americans think all Sardars do…and white people think all black people do…and lechers think all women do?"

Ma's voice or more likely a reverie is heard as the story of the exodus unfolds itself. Stories, poems, oral histories, visual representations have, over the years, expressed the horror of the enforced crossing. In this narrative, Ma is seen seated in the midst of the Thar desert on a moonlit night, the magic wand-like cane in hand. Butterflies emerge and flutter about from the cane "so lightly, like a dream or fancy." It's in this half real half dreamlike atmosphere that Ma relives or rather reconjures that long ago crossing. The butterfly listens because to listen, "one does not need a ear but a soul."

Surrealistic images, broken thoughts, sense impressions, recreate the nightmare. Trivial details, often impressed on the sub conscious during times of crises, puncture Ma's thoughts… the young girl's broken toe nail, a whimpering dog, her stove left burning in the now abandoned home ; all this confused with the thoughts of her young husband, lost in time, lost in space, confused further with the desert wind, the desert sand and the darkness which engulf the mind, body and soul, as ghost-like figures plunge into an unknown abyss, the living indistinguishable from the dead. Recalled and relived through the blurred consciousness of an eighty-year-old woman, here is one of the most memorable ways in which the mass exodus of 1947 has been evoked.

A necessary counterpoint to Ma's voice is the matter-of-fact voice of Beti, often heard in the form of an interior monologue or through letters written to KK from Kabul. Juxtaposed against her mother's assertion to the bemused Pakistani official—"I am from here…I didn't come here I left here…" is Beti's down to earth view point: "I came along because I thought okay, let's give elderly Ma some small shred of happiness in this final stage of life. But is this her final stage or mine?" From the author's point of view these divergent viewpoints are essential. Ma's insistence on staying put in the god forsaken wilderness is dangerous. It's sheer madness. But we are made to see, as Beti cannot, that Ma's need is crucial. "It's the last place we need to visit, this last person I need to meet." There is sanity in the old woman's madness, a passion that practical people like Beti cannot understand.

Textually interwoven into the narrative, is another teller, another time another place. We're suddenly in Sri Lanka during a test match and one of the players has been the Kalashnikov-wielding former Pakistani guard, narrating to a fellow hiccupping player and others, of Ma's hiccupping tactics , the kicks she would want from her guards cum companions so that when the time came, no matter when and how it came , "Badiammi", as the guards affectionately called her,

would lie down "elegantly" on the earth, gazing at the open sky.

Weaving in and out of the tale, is the no-name narrator, giving his take on Ma and on the squabbling family; he is, in turn, amused, annoyed, distant, involved. An older, paunchier version reappears in the Epilogue, wherein his voice appears to morph into the voice of Shree, the lyrical, imaginative voice of the story teller. As he jumps out of the window, it becomes, not a window, but "the corner of a canvas, filled with a plethora of new stories."

We wonder....is that a promise Shree makes for the plethora of stories in the years to come?

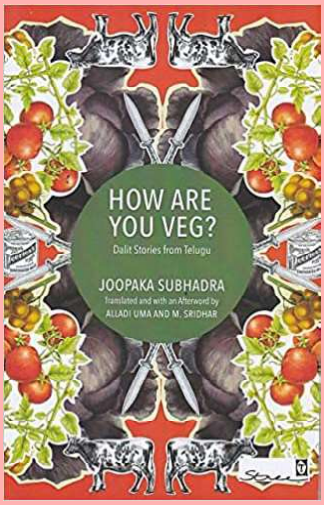
End notes

1. Article by Peeyush Sekhsaria: "The Territory of Shade" *EYE, Sunday Express Magazine Freedom Issue* August 14, 2022 P12. He adds a quote at the end from a 2021 article, carried in *The Statesman*.

2 Quoted by Reviewer Mini Chandran. "In Their Tongues" *EYE,Sunday Express Magazine.*December 4 , 2022. P15 Review of book: *Krishna Sobti: A Counter Archive.*Ed Sukrita Paul and Rekha Sethi

Internal Monologues

—*Jerry Pinto*



Title: How Are You Veg?: Dalit Stories from Telugu
Author: Joopaka Subhadra
Translated by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar
Publisher: Stree, an imprint of Bhatkal and Sen
Year of Publication: 2021
Pages: 240
Price: Rs 500/-

At one point in 'Friends Only at School, Not in the Village', a story about two girls, one of an upper caste and the other a Dalit, we are told that they were 'innocent like garlic.' This was a phrase that startled me and stopped me. Garlic has a pretty bad rap among orthodox savarnas; it is held to be rajasic and K T Achaya in his indispensable *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food* (OUP) says that the Aryans despised it as food of the milechhas and the Yavanas. Thus, to hear it described as innocent was rather charming. Fortunately, the translators Alladi Uma and M Sridhar had provided a footnote which explained the allusion: "The expression indicates that they appear to be innocent like garlic, which is outwardly smooth and pure white but has a pungent taste, that it refers to being deceptive."

There are many reasons why one might want to read *How are you veg?* The title for instance is a brilliant one, immediately bringing into focus the wars over food that are playing out savagely all over the country. But one of the major reasons why we read is because it is here that our humanity is deepened and widened. It is not enough to live the examined life; it is important for us to give witness to the way in which other lives are lived as well, specially since we have the stewardship of such a wealth of cultural riches.

Joopaka Subhadra's stories make us witnesses to huge struggles and small but passionate ones as well. For if Dalits are subjected to the inequities and injustices and atrocities of the caste system, Dalit women bear a double yoke: they must deal with the operations of the patriarchy as well, at home and outside.

Many of these fine stories are presented as internal monologues. It is all very well to be elected to an office as Saambalakshmi is in 'Adapt to Mainstream Culture' but should one tie one's sari as a kosi (tucked between the legs) or in the more upper-class way? It is all very well to have a job in an office but with whom will one eat if one's colleagues are willing to dole out food from their tiffin boxes to you but make a number of excuses to avoid eating your string bean curry?

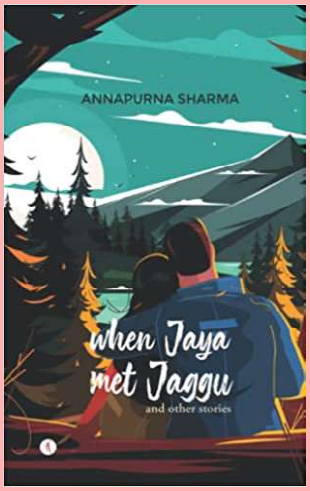
And then there are the stories where Dalit women contend with the third of the great evils of our society: ableism. There is a story about a blind woman 'The Full Moon with New Moon Eyes' and a story about a physically challenged woman as well, 'The Legs that Fell into the Bramble.' Subhadra's stories are not easy to read and they often require you to put them down and sigh and gasp and think.

The translation by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar if often inspired. There is a line here: "She would smile widely like moonlight" which immediately struck a chord. Others left me intrigued: "May the furore rot!" someone thinks. I could have done with some more footnotes. I should have liked to know the meaning and significance of the phrase "born from the thighs."

But on balance this is a magnificent book and a worthy addition to our storehouse of feminist Dalit literature.

Rooted in the Soil

—Charanjeet Kaur



Title: *When Jaya Met Jaggu and Other Stories*
Author: Annapurna Sharma
Publisher: Hawakal Publishers, New Delhi, Kolkata
Year of Publication: 2022
Pages: 187
Price: Rs. 400/-

I had the pleasure of reading a couple of the stories featured in "When Jaya Met Jaggu" when Annapurna Sharma had written, probably, the first or the second drafts. In an interview with kitaab.org she states: 'All writing is rewriting, more or less like a penance. I crash at every juncture yet I tug along with a conviction. Several drafts through and still it's not 'the end'. As the story evolves, I discover new shades…' Not surprising, since the stories show the careful planning and pruning they have gone through to make them so taut and so full of possibilities.

In the nine stories of the volume, Annapurna explores various facets of love, living, dying, exploitation, relationships and nostalgia; but what is striking is that each of the stories is rooted in the soil in which it has grown, and there is the constant yearning to go back to the roots. Moving across cities and villages from Boston to Lanka (a village) and classes, from affluence to poverty, the stories are meditations on the irrevocability of the human condition in each of the circumstances in which the characters are caught. Men and women in love, fighting to keep their loves going, losing out often, compromising at other times, "When Jaya Met Jaggu"… seems to be the overall binding theme of the collection, nuanced by the other themes it knits into the narratives.

There is exploitation to begin with: in the opening story, a child-maid, forced to work in place of her mother who has fallen ill, is at the receiving end of the barbs of her 'Madam,' who continues to harp on the illegality of child labour, while employing the nine-year-old Malli. Worse still, the adolescent son of Madam assaults her brutally, tempts her with 'coffee chocolates' (which becomes the symbol for sexual pleasure), threatens her till she gets used to and then starts enjoying the 'coffee chocolates' and is distraught when she learns that the boy is going away to another city for higher studies. Clearly, the corruption he has set in motion is complete and one rues the loss of innocence and the co-option of Malli into the ranks.

In the last story of the volume, "Lone Jungle Crow" exploitation takes on even more sinister dimensions when it expands into the compulsions of selling the agricultural lands to land grabbers and the relentless pursuit of the land sharks to force the farmers to move to cities with the promise of better jobs and better life styles. Rajanna's standing up to these forces and his wife's constant hankering that he give up the land, becomes almost archetypal of the fight to preserve the dignity of the land. The lone jungle crow in this case, in spite of the vagaries of the rains and the unpredictability of the crops is able to sustain the hope.

Annapurna's sensitivity of nature—to jasmine flowers, guava trees, langra mango tree, petrichor, rain, birds—comes across strongly in all the stories but more so in stories like the two discussed above. Nature takes on a divine avatar sometimes as when Malli's jasmine flowers are her gift for her Lord Krishna and she feels the sacrilege when Madam tucks them into her hair. At other times the focus is on its sheer physicality and its connect with the body of the human being: "…he grabbed a spade and sprinted back to the

fields. … The field was thirsty and as if he understood, he allowed the drops of salt from his body to mingle with the rainwater."

Apart from "Lone Jungle Crow," the most compelling of the stories is the title story "When Jaya Met Jaggu." A fifty-five-year-old woman suffering from amnesia after a fall, is unable to recognise her son when he visits her dutifully and with love at the hospital. The only name that rings a bell in her mind is her grandson's—Jayan. Comfortable in the hospital and with the doctors and nurses, but violently hostile to her son, she is enchanted by an old man she sees near the pond in the garden of the hospital and with whom she strikes up a friendship, without consciously knowing that it is the lover of her girlhood days whom she could not marry. But Jaggu knows her and when she refuses to go back to her son's house, and wishes to move in with Jaggu, he convinces the family to let her do so. The story sounds bland enough when told in this fashion: it is the power of Annapurna's narrative which makes it meaningful and layered. Thus, the idea of broken homes is expressed through the sand castles which Jaya builds on the shore when her father goes fishing, and further, it is linked with the fear of death and fascination with it: "She sat on the shore and dug through the wet sand to build a castle. It cracked. Since birth she spent most of her time crawling, walking and babbling on the sand. She gathered more sand and built another castle. It crumbled. She started a third, only to find it break open from the centre. She had watched the sand castles been washed away by the tides but never had she felt devastated. She scrambled in the sand and gathered more sand. She cupped it in her hands, securing it tightly lest it slip from the gaps in her fingers. Then, she opened her palms slowly and felt relieved at the round ball of sand." It is the poetic and symbolic which imbue such stories of hers with a rich aesthetic.

The other stories in the volume are: "Coffee Pleasure," "Pariah in my Backyard," which have strong traces of irony, "Lunchtime" with its pathos, the almost mythic "God's Without Inquest" and "Temple under the Tamarind Tree." "Coffee Pleasure" and "Temple Under the Tamarind Tree" are about migration, nostalgia and homecoming. The homecoming is an actual reality in the latter story in which Partho returns with his mother and wife to his ancestral village on the outskirts of Kolkata to reclaim his heritage and wealth after three decades and to convert Mitra Baari to Mitra School. The fragrance of the Shuili and the aroma of maacher jhol add to the poignancy of this tale which is narrated by the great granddaughter of Partho, Puchki, who identifies herself as 'a mix of Indo-German-Italian.' "Coffee Pleasure" is a series of unposted letters which the immigrant Revathi writes to her mother, Satyavathi, between 15th August 1990 and 19th February 1991, and just one letter of Satyavathi herself written on 19th February 1991. A kind of reconciliation between the mother and daughter, because the daughter has broken family traditions and gone her own way to become a professional in America. The mother acknowledges, "You had always wanted to be unique. Never did you want to follow the route that was laid out before you. You have often chosen whatever your heart yearned for, I know… I doubted your ability… because I didn't want my little daughter to suffer the pain of working hard. You had proved me wrong each time and I could see happiness on your face." The final reconciliation is in her acceptance of Revathi's partner, Harry, Harriet.

"When Jaya Met Jaggu" is a catchy title and the nine stories are engaging both their thematic concurrences and in their diversities; in their rich cultural resonances and in their robust engagement with the world of nature and its intersection with the human. This lends a poetic aspect to the narrative and makes you feel that there is much more in them than what is gauged at a couple of readings only.

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

On Living and Dying and Turning into Blue Birds

-*C S Lakshmi*

Title: *Iru Puramum Suzhalum Kadikaaram* (A Clock that Rotates Both Ways)
Author: Malathy Sivaramakrishnan
Publisher: Thadam, Chennai
Year of Publication: December 2021
Pages: 270
Price: Rs. 250/-

Anandavalli who writes in the name of Malathy Sivaramakrishnan and signs as Malathy Siva, belongs to Madurai. She has a post-graduate degree in physics. She has taught physics in colleges. She currently lives in Bengaluru. She also has a YouTube channel Malathy Siva YouTube Channel where she makes audio presentations of short stories. It is with some amazement that I realised that this is her first short story collection because I had enjoyed reading her stories in online magazines like *Solvanam*, *Padagai*, *Puduthinnai* and in *Tamil Hindu* newspaper. Reading all her stories in one collection was a very satisfying experience. She has a unique way of handling meta fiction and science fiction. With no explanations or rambling they work at several levels smoothly and effortlessly slipping across borders. The astonishment of anyone changing into anything happens naturally, as if it is something that happens in everyday life. The stories raise the questions of what is life, what is a game, what is death and what is living, what is past, what is present, what makes a person and who is the person who has thus been formed, with ease and in passing. However, there are also stories like "Poarvai" (Blanket) which talk about the miseries of life as it is lived, and the wonderful moments of facing them with grace and compassion. These stories come like rain-bearing clouds every now and then.

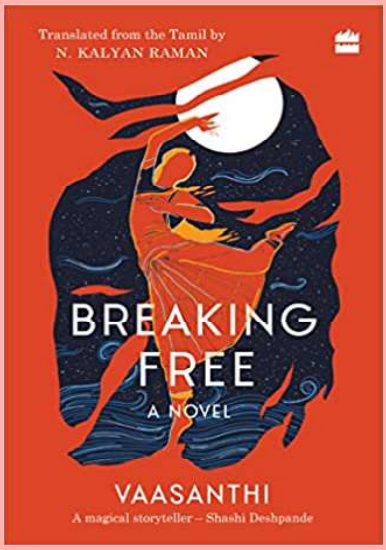
It is very difficult to retain one's sense of humour. But Malathy never loses it. I laughed aloud reading the story of someone who time travels to the Sangam period when verses with bouncing rhythm like *Kalippaa* were written, and cannot recall anything except a ridiculous song from a popular Tamil movie, in the process of a conversation in that period. There are some other stories which are more like expert line drawings portraying the complexities in the life of those into pollical activism at one point and later coming out of it.

The collection begins with the story of a woman who, caught in a game all of a sudden, desperately wants out and towards the end there is the story of a man who struggles to know who he is, if he is alive or dead, what his name is and where he is and finds out to his shock through the remarks of two passers-by that he has turned into a blue bird. And throughout there are stories that are part of this world and out of this world in wonderous ways and the last story tells the story of the unknown faces of many women.

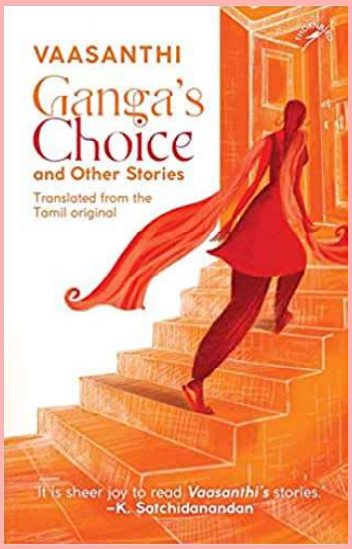
The stories are written in a way that they are all tightly woven with not one extra, unnecessary word in the narration. The conversation is crisp and so are the sentences. I was reading some of the stories a second time but still they held my interest. There are some avoidable proof-reading errors but hopefully they will be taken care of in the second edition. I am sure many readers, including this reviewer, await a second collection of stories from Malathy Sivaramakrishnan.

Lives on the Palimpsest

-V Bharathi Harishankar



Title: Breaking Free: A Novel
Author: Vaasanthi
Translator: N Kalyan Raman
Publisher: Harper Perenial, Gurugram
Year of Publication: 2022
No. of Pages: 352
Price: Rs..356/-



Title: Ganga's Choice and Other Stories
Author: Vaasanthi
Publisher: Niyogi Books Pvt.Ltd. (Under the Imprint: Thornbird) New Delhi
Year of Publication: 2021
No. of Pages: 256
Price: Rs.. 369/-

The word palimpsest can be defined in different ways. On the one hand, it refers to the act of writing, erasing and re-writing on a piece of parchment or any other writing material. On the other, it implies the presence of multiple layers underlying the readily apparent substratum. Vaasanthi's narratives often give the impression that there are layers of information and meaning waiting to be unearthed. It is particularly true of the two books under review.

The novel, *Breaking Free,* foregrounds the debate on the ambiguous position of devadasis in Tamil society and culture. On the one hand, they were venerated as handmaidens of God and accomplished artists with access to education, property and exclusive privileges. On the other, they were considered to be blots on society indulging in cheap prostitution camouflaged as a sacred and religious custom. The narrative covers three generations of devadasis—Kanagu Paati, Sengamalam and Kasturi as one strand and Thulasi, Lakshmi and Dharini as another. While the former adheres to the tradition and justifies the practice of dedication, the latter breaks free from the practice that binds them into ritual slavery. Kasturi and Lakshmi are juxtaposed in such a way that they act as foils to each other and to the arguments and counter arguments that persist about the devadasi system throughout the narrative. The descriptions of the life trajectory of these two characters bring to mind the ideas put forth by Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy for passing the act prohibiting the dedication of girls as devadasis, the persistent efforts of Moovaloor Ramamirtham Ammaiyar as well as the pleas against the abolition of devadasi system spearheaded by Bangalore Nagaratnammal in the early decades of the 20th century. Uniting the two strands is the character of Maya, trying to unravel the truth behind her mother's 'suicide.' The overarching framework of the text is that of a mystery novel—a whodunit complete with the red herring.

Vaasanthi presents this plotline through the eyes of Maya, who is unable to accept her mother's death as suicide. In attempting to unravel the mystery, she presents the paradox embedded in the predominant social perceptions of devadasis till date. [A few years back (2015-2016), when Dr M Priyamvadha and I undertook a project funded by the National Commission for Women to examine the Devadasi

system and its associated evils, it was surprising and disheartening to find that the same paradox is used even today to justify the practice of dedication of young girls, who are then forced into the commercial sex market.] It is a sad fact of history that the same socio-cultural milieu, which initiated and nurtured the Devadasi system and its related arts also bound them as sex slaves in a class, caste and gender based hierarchy.

The highlight of Vaasanthi's narrative is that she has comprehensively captured the entire socio-cultural spectrum through finely etched characters and events. For instance, characters like Sabapathy and Nattuvanar Muthulingam foreground the concept of *chinna melam*. The scattered references to various lyrics and songs bring to mind the entire gamut of specialised musical compositions (javalis amd thillanas). This universe is ruptured by the larger social context of the Independence movement as well as the resistance to the practice of dedication from within the Devadasi community. All attempts to break free from the yoke that binds them—for instance, the growing affection between Kasturi and Singaram and the loveless marriage between Thilakam and Kalyanaraman—are short lived. In contrast, Lakshmi's life is a success story both in terms of her departure from the Devadasi system and in terms of her career and choice in marriage. Lakshmi's interrogation of the Devadasi system (modelled on Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy's life and contributions) not only helps the generations after her from the burden of dedication and subsequent prostitution (enslaved by the local landlords, the British officers and the like) but also other women marginalised and oppressed by the caste-gender nexus, like Yogambal, the young Brahmin widow.

It is to the credit of both the writer (Vaasanthi) and the translator (N Kalyan Raman) that the novel is not presented or translated with an aim to homogenise and normalise the narrative elements but the 'lumps' in the text add depth and meaning to the debate surrounding the Devadasi debate till date. This, in my opinion, is the strength of the text and its translation.

Ganga's Choice and Other Stories is a collection of fifteen stories and encompasses a world, which is spatially and temporally diverse. "The Symbol" has an intertextual connect with the novel, *Breaking Free* through the character of Sabapathy, the brother of Soundari Ammal, the aged devadasi. It captures the near paranoid attempts by the family of Sabapathy to erase and hide their Devadasi ancestry. It is a tragic paradox that Soundari Ammal's memory only recaptures the music and dance that filled her life, while the younger generation—Sabapathy, Karpagam and Senthil—value the complete erasure of that memory in order to establish the dignity of the community.

Such a paradox raises questions regarding voice and agency of individuals, especially when they confront socially dominant and majoritarian tendencies that threaten to silence and subsume them. The opening story, "The Testimony," presents the unnamed narrator, whose voice is stifled by the neighbours who 'preach,' 'warn' and 'blame' her for daring to report to the police the gruesome incident of the deaths of her father, elder brother and twelve others.

"Dance of the Gods" presents Panchali, who is ill at ease when forced into the role of her mythological namesake. Panchali can assert herself only by embracing death by immolation, when she cannot reconcile the sanctioned polyandry within the tribe and her husband's accusation of her infidelity.

The son preference, which perpetrates infanticide of countless baby girls in the story "Murder" reminds us of the "cradle baby scheme" launched to prevent "missing girls" in the population. The patriarch who perpetrates the tradition is Somaiya Thatha. By naming it in its real sense as *murder*, the narrator and author, not only prevent any orchestrated justification of the issue but also build in a mystery in the death of Somaiya Thatha. The story "Poison" recalls the heinous instances of using *Kalli Paal* and paddy grains to cause female infants to choke and die. There is an indication of change towards the end of the story when the joyous calls for distribution of sweets is juxtaposed with the killing of the male infant.

Unlike the stories discussed above, "Mousetrap," "Voice" and the title story "Ganga's Choice" present

the limited yet compelling assertion by women facing multiple social disadvantages like Sheelu, Valli and Ganga. Vaasanthi's perceptions as a social commentator and journalist are so overt and clear that the small steps taken by the protagonists reveal a major change in their long cherished beliefs. The climax in all the three stories present extraordinary moments demanding decision and conviction in their otherwise ordinary lives. By taking the decisions out of their own volition, the protagonists assert their agency and rights.

The stories "Gap," "He Came" and "The Line of Control" capture the plight of men from disadvantaged groups caught in the whirl of social and historical forces beyond their control, such as the long journey home of the migrant workers during the pandemic, the tragic loss of lives of civilians in the country's border regions and the release from prison of a wrongly convicted person. What catches our attention in these stories is that the author pitches the vulnerable individuals in a battle against the mighty and powerful forces only to project the victory of humanity over the divisive forces.

"The Untold Story" captures the strong bond between a father and a daughter. While the daughter in the story is unable to identify the enemy who has brutally killed her father, we, as readers, are offered glimpses of the true face of the man beneath the veneer of a loving father and a doting grandfather. This technique of letting the readers know and perceive more than the other characters enables the writer to present the text in multiple layers. This aspect demands that the text is read and translated in a nuanced manner and both Sukanya Venkataraman and Gomathi Narayanan have brought in a lot of sensitivity to the translation.

In both the texts under review, the author has consciously created and inscribed a palimpsest in order to represent kaleidoscopic views of a gallery of characters, whose lives intersect the larger socio-cultural events at tandem. While the normal expectation is to find them subsumed and overwhelmed by the larger forces, the characters and events presented in both the texts not only survive but survive with dignity. Also, it seems as if the ordinary lives are etched indelibly so that the erasures are recorded as well. As a reader and a translator, both *Breaking Free* and *Ganga's Choice and Other Stories,* have forced my attention to perceive the world of the vulnerable and disadvantaged group on their own terms.

V Bharathi Harishankar is Vice Chancellor, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women (Deemed University)

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES & BIOGRPAHIES

Women Shaping Their Own Destiny

-*Maithreyi Krishnaraj*

Title: *Touch the Sky*
Author: Rashmi Bansal
Publisher: Westland Publication Private Ltd. Chennai
Year of Publication: 2018
Pages: 83
Price: 199/-

This is a collection of inspiring stories from across India of women shaping their own destiny. The author's message: *Apne andarki shakti ko jaaniye, pehchaniye, aajse likhiye apna ek sunehra kal".* [Be that passionate, positive person you were born to be]

This review is not just an appreciation of the stories about women who faced difficult problems in their lives but surmounted them, but this review is also an attempt to bring attention to the fact that everything is possible once women make up their minds.

I give a brief account of each woman's story in this collection by Rashmi Bansal. The first collection is under the title *Ziddi* (stubborn)

1. Yuwa, Jharkhand: A group of girls wanted to learn to play football—a masculine sport not undertaken under the gender roles prescribed by society. An American Franz was training boys for football. A young girl from the group met him and told him that a group of girls wanted to learn to play foot ball. He agreed and under his guidance, the girls under the group name Yuwa began practising. He helped them participate in tournaments and soon they partook not only locally, but nationally. Despite snide remarks from many men, they persisted and won in many contests. Yuwa has grown from 10 full time to 27 part time girls. These girls upturned prohibitive gender roles. Their slogan: "*mujhe bhi jeeney do, aasmein udne do; Sapna dekhi rahoon usey such karneki himmat hai"* (Let me live, let me fly in the sky; I will keep dreaming, give me the strength to realise them.)

2. Usha Chodhury. She devoted her life to help women choose their lives. When she was growing up, she witnessed her mother beaten by her alcoholic father. Her mother often left home and Usha had to take care of her siblings. When she was in her XI her family tried to get her married but she refused the proposal. She took up a job to teach nursery classes. After her MA, she wanted to open a school for girls. She worked with an NGO Vikalp for 5 years. This Centre had books and she convinced parents to send girls and the centre had 50 girls prepared for the states' board exam. As a result many girls who continued with Vikalp finished their BA or even MA. Usha's rule was: *"agar meri zindagi badli hai to meri zimmedari hai ki main doosron k zindagi badloon."* (If my life has changed it is my responsibility to change the life of others.)

3. Meena Lahre, Chattisgarh. She grew up in a small town which had tribals where men oppressed women and women bore this[1]. She was married to a man who was a drunkard and also gambled. He took no responsibility for his wife and two daughters. Her in laws were supportive and told her she should leave and find her own support. After 3 years of being away, a Zilla Prishad Adhyaksh persuaded her to stand for election on a vacant seat reserved for women. She got selected. Thanks to her position of political power and her creditable service, and respect for her in her community, the husband cowed down and he reformed. Meena brought her mother to stay with her.

4. Chhaya Solanki. She was getting married In the marriage ritual, the mother of the bride greets the "baraat " applying haldi on the groom's face.[2] As Chhaya 's mother was a widow, the groom's family did not want the widowed mother of the bride to participate in the tradional ritual. Chhaya insisted that if her mother is not permitted, she will not marry and the baraat can go back. Afraid of social censure, the

mother was permitted to do the ritual. She won her case.

5. Kabriya Khan lived in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. She was born blind. She attended a school for the blind till 6th standard when her father put her in a regular school for normal. As she could not see the black board, she would borrow her classmates note books, her friends by turn would read it to he and she would take down in Braille. After Xth with help from an exam writer, she joined a higher secondary school. She joined Computer classes held for the blind; mastered 'Jawa' software which converts texts to speech. She became competent with computers. She joined a 5-year Law course. Her parents never made her wear the burkha. When the family wanted to go a pilgrimage to Meecca, they were not allowed to take their daughter. Kabriya launced a public interest litigation and won her case. She opened a school for the blind. She completed the Quran in 30 days in Arabic-Braille. Her motto:*"apni problem mein na phaso usey lado'* (Don't get caught in your problems; fight them.)

6. Shital Bhatkar, Mumbai. She had a two-year-son who was diagnosed with a deadly disease. His body was not capable of breaking down liquids like fat and cholestrol, so they built up on other essential organs. In the long run, this was likely to lead to complete organ failure. She learnt about a new drug but it would cost 5 lakhs of rupees. She had to find the money. She opened a salon which picked up business. She also volunteered in an organisation which involved visiting hospitals interacting with families, arranging food packets for families of patients.

7. Sushma Bhadu, Haryana. She became a sarpanch in Dhani Miyan Khan, Haryana. She challenged the custom of keeping women behind the veil. For the first time in 63 years a woman had stepped out of her traditional role. In her own family, she was free, with a forward looking father. She decided to remove her *ghungat* (the veil). She passed a resolution in the mahapanchayat. She gave a speech, in a loud, clear voice. Local newspapers gave a good coverage. Since then the village is free of the veil. She fought for many changes including improving teaching in government schools. She received Jijibhai women achievers award.

Ek aurat ki soch se ek gaon ki soch badal gayi. Socho ek aurat ki soch se gaon badli jaye to desh badal sakti hai (A village can change with a woman's thinking. If a village can change with a woman's thinking how the country can change with a woman's thinking. Think about it.)

8. Aditi Gupta, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. There are many myths and prohibitions on women during menstruation. They cannot visit temples; enter the kitchen, have to sit separately, sleep separately. After 3 days, they have to have bath, wash all the bed clothes they had used for sleeping. Sanitary napkins were not known then, young women used cloth. The schools did not give proper information. it is only when Aditi went to a hostel she was free from shame. She decided to launch an education programme after she passed her training in the National institute of Design. She got crowd funding through the internet. She and her male friend brought out comic books on the subject, and in June 2004 more than 1000 copies were sold in several languages. She with her friend launched a web site that gave proper information about scientific understanding of women's physiology. Her web site 'menstrupedia' is still running. *Aghar ek ladka aur ladki sath mein hath ek doosri ki hath sath sangarsh kare kya kuch ho sakthaa?* (When a girl and a boy join hands what cannot happen?)

9. Hafiza Khan, Srinagar, Kashmir. She was fascinated by the school opposite her house. Her parents admitted her in a Govt. Urdu medium school. At age 21, she married Mohammed with whom she was in love. Her family was large. Her in laws house was in an area called Dal Gate— which was connected to the city only through a mud path. She took up embroidery and sold it. She began teaching evening classes in the evening She would stand in the street played a drum to attract attention, sing songs and was able to attract girls to school. She ignored insulting posters. She managed to get girls to school. She settled family disputes and counselled husbands and wives about the importance of girls schooling.

10. Swati, Nagpur. When cracks appeared in her marriage, she refused to put up with it and chose to lead a new life for herself. Her husband was starting a new business but had no income. She had married

Rajesh as a love marriage. In the first year of her marriage in Pune, Swati tried to be a perfect wife. She lost her father; she was working as a primary school teacher. Her husband was having an affair with another woman. The mother in law too supported him. She decided not stay with her in laws and left for Nagpur, leaving her daughter and son with the in laws. She filed a domestic violence suit against her husband. She won the case, got her children with her and lived in her own apartment.

11. Jyoti Dawle, Mumbai. She was the daughter of an Air Force officer and had a safe childhood in the military cantonment. When she grew up, her mother ill treated her. Her friends thought she was perhaps a step mother. She decided to run away. Landed in Mumbai, got a job as a teacher in a school for deaf children. When she got married to a man she met and fell in love with him, he refused to wear a condom. She went through repeated abortions. She was diagnosed with HIV infection. (human immune virus) Her husband refused to pay for treatment. She signed divorce papers. She met Vivek Survey on an on line chat. She got correct information about HIV internet- that it is not passed on by saliva or touch but only through sexual intercourse. She had got infected in the hospital. She married Vivek and they both became activists to spread knowledge about HIV. She now lives a normal life after her treatment.

12. Sanam Karunakar, Mumbai. On 17th April in 1995. She and her family met with an accident. For 6 days she fought for her life. She was paralysed from head down, underwent corrective surgery. She learnt many skills to use her hands. She married Suraj in a court marriage. They brought a case against the bus company and won, got a compensation package. They got a trained dog to help her. Through Surrogacy got a child. They are planning to get a farm house to accommodate children and dogs. She ran a kennel for stray dogs.

13. Padma Srinivas, Bengaluru She got a new goal after her 60th birthday. She was married at 18. Her husband worked in the public sector company Indian telephone Industries. Her husband died in a fatal accident and his company gave her a job. She worked as a clerk in their accounts dept. Her elder sister looked after her children. She learnt higher mathematics from a friend who was the head of the maths dept in the military school. He taught her without any fee and she passed all the exams in five years and became a Chartered Accountant.(CA). She was moved by the plight of widows who were illiterate. She suggested that the item manufactured and sold by big companies could be made at home by these widows. She opened Shakti Bakery by collecting funds. They began in a garage and made pizzas. The women were called Pizza Grannies. She wanted a proper place and wanted to acquire a place but the land she located was an agricultural land. She contacted a Mr Krishnappa who was a machine operator in her former office. He helped her to get its conversion to non agriculture use through a govt. order. There she built a home for seniors "Vishranti" and got funds through NRIs and NGOs.

14. Apeksha Shah, Mumbai. Apeksha developed obesity. Her family had financial problems and could not afford the surgical treatment.She enrolled in early childhood care course at SNDT college. She did dress designing to make some money. Then she through Google learnt about proper diet and exercise. She began running and changed her diet. In due course she completed 18 km marathon in a record breaking- 2 hours and 30 minutes.

15. Bhavana Issar, Mumbai. She took up motor biking—a sport treated as a masculine talent. She took to motor biking when doing MBA in Jamshedpur. She got married at 28 and moved to Bangalore. She became pregnant and struggled to get maternity leave. Her friend Sumeda was running a workshop "Learning Theatre." Bhavna wanted to do bike riding and bought a bullet. On her 39th birthday discovered a female bikers' organisation "bikerni." She joined the group of 600 female bikers set out on a 1200 km ride across the Himalayas. Braving sub zero weather they undertook the journey and completed at Mana pass. To them it was a spiritual experience.

All these stories tell us that the Adarsh Indian Nari does not have to just wear a big bindi and sit at home. She can wear a helmet and ride a bike.

These stories tell us not only about individual achievements but about sharing and helping others.

Blue Water Lily Story

-C S Lakshmi

Title: *Neela Ramgopal: A Musical Journey*
Author: Harini Raghavan
Publisher: Nadasurabhi Cultural Association, Bangalore
Year of Publication: 2015
Pages: 83
Price: Not priced

This review should have been written when Neela Ramgopal was alive to read it and comment on the review in her own humorous way. She did send a WhatsApp message and ask if I had read it and liked it. I had written back to her saying, "The book is good Mami; but you are more interesting than the book..." But the book released on 8th November 2015, coinciding with the award of Sangeetha Surabhi to Neela Ramgopal by Nadasurabhi, Bangalore, is a book full of very interesting information and insight into Neela Ramgopal's life. In 83 pages it captures her life and her love for music succinctly.

The book talks about her father T P Krishnaswamy Iyer who was a violinist who played the instrument as his hobby since he was a landlord by profession. Great musicians of the time often gathered in his house and musical discussions were part of the household. But he never thought of teaching his children music except in the usual middle-class Brahmanical manner of teaching his daughters music so they will be able to sing a song or two when the prospective groom and his family came to see them in the "bride viewing" event common in arranged marriages.

The book also talks about gender bias in school where drill, NCC, sports and taking part in essay writing competition were meant only for boys. Neela, even at that age, was not one to give in. She probably convinced her teachers and secretly took part in essay writing competitions and even won prizes. This never-say-die spirit remained with her throughout her life when she made herself a space for learning music after marriage. Fortunately for her, her marital family appreciated music and her husband did not mind her pursuing her music career and she found her gurus and her own way of exploring music.

There were times when she could have given up but she relentlessly pursued her music. For a period, she decided to imitate the music of her music idol M L Vasanthakumari and she was so good that the news reached M L Vasanthakumari herself. She called her and told her that she had heard that she sings like her, will she accompany her in a concert? Neela could have fainted with joy. She did accompany her and appreciated how MLV sang in a way that her accompanying artistes would find it easy to sing with her. But this state of being enamoured by MLV did not last long. She slowly came out of it and evolved her own style of singing. She gave many concerts and taught many students and won many awards apart forming her own group of musicians called Saptha Swara.

Her own family stood by her and appreciated her and she never failed to acknowledge that. Nothing was an obstacle for her. Modern technology came easy to her. She held her classes on skype, communicated through emails and WhatsApp, was active on all internet music forums and was on Facebook too. Neela was her shortened name. Her real name was Neelothapalambal, the presiding deity of Thiruvarur. Neelothpalam, the flower, is blue water lily, considered a sacred flower for worship. It is a psychoactive plant, which has been used in traditional medicine for thousands of years as a natural aphrodisiac, sleep aid, and anxiety reliever. It also exists in Egypt where it is a symbol of life, immortality and resurrection. Neela Ramgopal's personality and her music were as dazzling, as soothing and as life-giving as the blue water lily. The book traces this extraordinary life in a language filled with warmth and exuding the joy that Neela Ramgopal's life and music stood for.

Remembering One's Wife: 1957 and 2021

—*C S Lakshmi*

Title: *Aval Piriwu* (Her Departure)
Author: V Saminadha Sarma
Publisher: Sandhya Publications, Chennai
Yearof Publication: 2016
Pages: 128
Price: Rs.100/-

Title: *En Rukmini Enkira Radha* (My Rukmini Known as Radha)
Author: Neyveli Balu
Pubisher: Pullankuzhal, Chennai
Year of Publication: 2021
Pages: 136
Price: Rs.100/-

Autobiographies and biographies in many Indian languages form a considerable part of SPARROW's book collection. A couple of months ago, Tamil poet, writer and translator Krishangini, mentioned on her timeline Neyveli Balu's book on his wife Radha, brought out in 2021. I was reminded of a book by Ve. Saminadha Sarma on his wife Mangalam, brought out in 1957 and reprinted in 2016. I thought it may be a good idea to compare the two books. V Saminadha Sarma was a writer and a scholar and his books were being brought out by Prapancha Jothi Prasuralayam (Prapancha Jothi Publications) by his friend and admirer Aru. Chokkalingam. Saminadha Sarma had walked all the way from Burma (he has written a book about it) during the Second World War. He and his wife worked together in many ways in whatever he took up. When his wife passed away in 1956, Saminadha Sarma wrote a series of 10 letters to his friend Chokkalingam to share his grief. They were not meant for publication but later brought out as a book. The ten letters describe what an inspiration for his work his wife was and how she was a scholar in her own way. He talks about how he was by nature emotional and dependent on love from his family and how after the death of his mother it was his wife who took over running the family and directing his life in the path of meaningful activities. He talks of her family members who were all artistic. Along with the details of her life there is so much of social history of the period and region that he provides.

His wife was born in 1900. In Kanchipuram then there was a well-known school for girls called Kanchipuram Somasundara Padasalai. Many who came from abroad had praised this school and the Indraprastha Girls' Senior Secondary School founded by a few philanthropists of Delhi Theosophical Society in 1904 whose offshoot was Indraprastha College for Women, Delhi, founded in 1924. The school was founded by Somasundara Sastri, who was immensely interested in girls' education and was managed by one Ramanadha Sarma. Its headmistress was Parvathammal who had become a widow at a young age. She belonged to a community who were known as accountants and the school itself had many Brahmin girls whose parents wanted their daughters properly educated. Saminadha Sarma particularly mentions this to make the point that in those days there was no

caste discrimination and no one in school ever spoke of high caste or low caste. The students loved and admired Parvathammal and would insist that their parents must follow whatever she had told the girls to follow as a habit. Apart from Tamil, English and Sanskrit, the school also taught physical exercise and music. Of course, it had sewing, drawing, cooking and rangoli classes also as was the curriculum those days for girls. They also encouraged girls to take part in plays in the annual functions and Mangalam eagerly took part in all the annual dramas. Mangalam always stood first in her subjects and often won prizes. The prizes were books. The books were not just books for entertainment but books to gain knowledge about the culture of the country and books to expand one's knowledge of the world. The school had only up to the 7th Class but the standard was very high. Mangalam was so popular that even after she got married at the age of 14 to Saminadha Sarma who was then 19, she would often visit her school and at one point Ramanadha Sarma who was getting old, told her to take over the management of the school. Unfortunately, due to many reasons, she could not take that responsibility although she was eager to do so. Saminadha Sarma says girls who studied in that school knew how to conduct their lives and how to guide others and Mangalam, who was trained in that school became the light of his life.

After marriage she did not immediately go to her husband's place but there were many occasions on which both of them could meet and finally, she came to live with him as his wife in 1916 and the much-loved daughter-in-law of his mother. There were many taunts they had to hear about the daughter-in-law being an educated girl and how she would spend time reading the newspaper and chatting with her husband not doing any household work. But Mangalam proved them all wrong. She could sing, recite Sanskrit slokas to please her father-in-law and advise her mother-in-law on household matters. She was loved so much that once when she had to cook when she was not so used to cooking, she had prepared brinjal vegetable with too much salt. Saminadha Sarma began to yell at her in English and Tamil. When he came back from office his father had left a long note for him saying that what he did was wrong and that she was like their daughter and that only if he treated her properly, he could be their son. Saminadha Sarma says that taught him how to be a good human being and how to treat one's partner in life.

Both Saminadha Sarma and Mangalam wore only khadi clothes. The khadi sari used to be particularly rough and heavy and Mangalam wore the nine yards sari that married Brahmin women wore those days, but she wore the sari happily not only to make her husband happy but also for her own sake. In 1926-27 they were living in Mysore and both of them decided to learn Kannada and Hindi. His mother used to sit afar and watch with pride both of them learning together from the teacher who came to teach them. She came with them to the examination hall to see what examination halls look like. When the results came Saminadha Sarma had come first in the princely state of Mysore and Mangalam had come a close second. She was behind him by just one mark. His mother told him it was not fair that he had come first; her daughter-in-law should have been the topper!

Saminadha Sarma writes about her courage and resilience. He says she was never one who got overwhelmed with joy or got shattered with misfortunes. She always used to stand like a pillar in a storm and sing the lines of Bharathiyar, "Even if the sky falls on the head, no fear, no fear, no fear." Even if he broke down at times she used to talk encouragingly and bring him out of his low moods. When he was working in *Navasakthi* newspaper he used to come home only by 11 at night. T Nagar in Chennai, was a godforsaken place then and that is where they lived surrounded by marshy land and Babul trees and wolves howling after sunset. Mangalam had no fear staying alone and when he used to ask her if she did not get scared, she used to tell him, "What is there to fear? The stars are twinkling in the sky. And near Mount Road in the east there are lights. One can hear the sound of the trains. Those who work in the gardens chatting and singing to overcome their tiredness, have just left." And when they sat down after dinner, she would speak about things which revealed her deep knowledge. This courage she showed even when they walked from Burma and had to face innumerable

obstacles, and when she was afflicted with disease and given six months to live. She quoted one of Sundarar's *Thevaram* which began with the lines, "Life is an illusion, surely to the dust it will go…"

Saminadha Sarma does talk about how she cared for him, looked after him and helped him to write and copied his handwritten scripts and got them ready for print. But he says he did not think that he should not do the same for her and that they functioned as equals in the house. She never once felt bad about not having children. When someone would ask about children, she would point out to his books and say they were their children. She was a great admirer and devotee of Gandhi and believed in simple life. Although he was known as a writer, she was no less a scholar than him. She could deliver public lectures without any nervousness and she was even part of plays as music composer.

When Saminadha Sarma talks about his loneliness after his wife's death, he says he did not fear loneliness per se but feared that it would make him self-indulgent and unnecessarily make him egoistic which his wife was able to stop all these days with her wise and critical counsel.

Saminadha Sarma's book about his wife is not just about her it is also about him and how she chiselled him into a good and worthwhile human being.

Neyveli Balu's book is also about his wife Radha who ran his house efficiently and stood by him when he was busy with his Communist Party activities. Unlike Saminadha Sarma, Balu takes seven years to write about his life with his wife which lasted some 43 years. His wife Radha passes away in 2013 but he is able to put his thoughts into a book only in 2021. The book also has other relatives and friends writing about Radha. All of them talk about how she was careful about not countering her husband's communist ideologies, how she never objected or found fault with her husband's trade union activities and often stood by him when he needed support. As a person who had an open mind, she kept her house an open house to everyone. She did take up jobs. In fact, once two months after delivering her first child she became a teacher, because her husband insisted that a job would be good for her. She did not like cycling back home to feed her child during lunch time but she did enjoy her job. Later she took up several temporary jobs although she had done her B.Ed and also done her typewriting course. A permanent job was never possible. At one point when she says that she does not want to work anymore, he does feel a sense of relief. Finally, they settle down in Chennai after his retirement and what she enjoyed most was becoming the secretary of the cooperative housing society they lived in. The day after her first delivery her husband is put in jail for trade union activities. Once she breaks an arm when he is working elsewhere but never informs him. When he is travelling abroad, she faints in the train but does not inform him thinking he may be affected. Balu writes about all this but the book is more about him and his trade union activities. He also says that she was the lamp that shed light on the path she travelled in and that she would live in his memories for ever. But somehow one gets the impression that his book on his wife lacks the emotional depth of Saminadha Sarma. His children are well-settled in the US (where else?!) and just when he needs her, she is not there, he says. He also says she began her life with him without knowing much and with ignorance and apprehensions, she became like a lamp on a hill at the end of it. One wonders if he is giving himself the credit for it or giving her the credit for making her life that way. Radha whose real name Rukmini was changed for the sake of marriage, was an educated woman and one wonders what he means when he says, ignorance. Maybe he means ignorance about communism as an ideology. One of the relatives is right when he says that Radha's constant refrain when something was suggested was, "He may not like it."

Writing about the book on her timeline on 8th March 2023, Krishangini wonders if this book has been written as some kind of an atonement for the various events of his life concerning his wife. In the last part of her review, she talks about how men understand so little about their wives and women at home while they are alive. She ends with an anecdote from the life of her paternal uncle:

"My father had an elder brother, our Periappa. He died when he was 75 in our house in Kaniyur. He was a great fiddle player. Those days people

referred to violin mostly as fiddle. His playing the fiddle would be seamless and in one flow. There would be no acrobatics in his playing. And no needless embellishments. It was a deeply felt playing. Many musicians like Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Pazhani Subramania Pillai used to come to our house. And there would be discussions about music.

"During the Navarathri season, one day my uncle was sitting on the pial of somebody's house. Inside the house a woman with a very sweet voice was singing. She seemed to have very good knowledge of music. Periappa was enthralled by the music and asked someone nearby. That gentleman had a good laugh and told him, "It is your wife singing." He was surprised and felt ashamed that he had not known it all these days. Within a short period of time Periamma died during delivery. Periappa was only 25. But he never married again. One of his daughters remained in our house as our father was her paternal uncle. Even her marriage took place in our house. Periappa refused to go out for concerts after his wife's death. He remained with the memories of his wife. He used to practise every day. The house used to be filled with music then. All of us remained quiet then not to disturb him. Music used to flow out of our house like a river. It was through his fiddle that I became familiar with ragams like Bhairavi, Todi, Mohanam, Kalyani and similar ragams. One should understand the wife and other women at home while they are alive. Whatever one does later, it will not make up for what was left undone."

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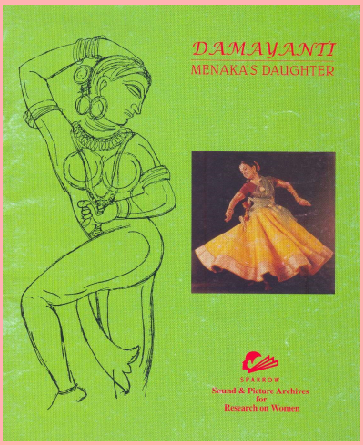

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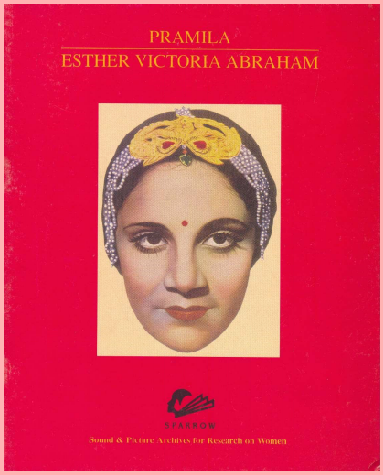

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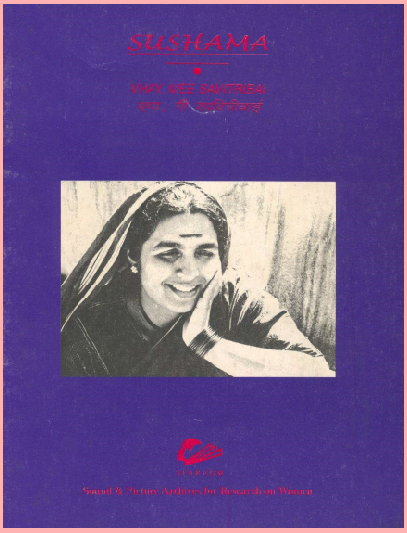

Sushama *Vhay, Mee Savitribai*
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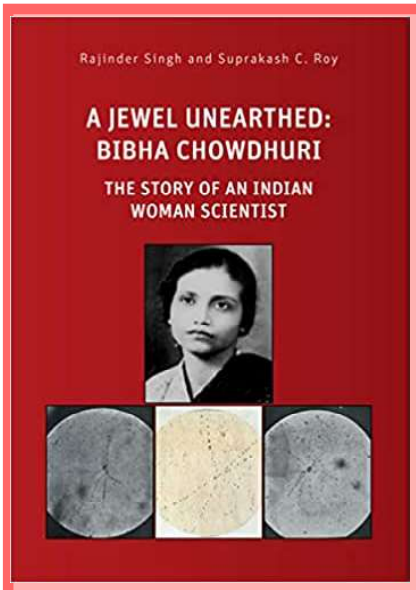
Bibha, A Bright Beam of Light

—*C S Lakshmi*



Title: *A Jewel Unearthed: Bibha Chowdhuri -The Story of An Indian Woman Scientist*
Authors: Rajinder Singh and Suprakash C Roy
Publisher: Shaker Verlag, Aachen, Germany
Year of Publication: 2018
No. of Pages: 158
Price:

It was quite by accident that I came to know about Bibha Chowdhuri. In December 2019 the star HD-86081, located at a distance of 340 light-years from the earth in the constellation of Sextans, was named Bibha (a bright beam of light in Bengali) while its exoplanet HD-86081b was to be called Santamasa (meaning clouded in Sanskrit, signifying the atmosphere of the planet). The initiative for this naming was taken by The International Astronomical Union. Different countries around the world got to name more than 110 exoplanets and their host stars. It was interesting to know that two students were responsible for the names. Ananyo Bhattacharya, a 20-year-old student, from the Sardar Vallabhbhai National Institute of Technology, Surat, picked up Bibha and Santamasa was the choice of Vidyasagar Daud, 13, of Singhad Spring Dale Public School, Pune. But why Bibha one wondered not having been a student of science. It was then that one found out that the star's name refers to the pioneering Indian scientist Bibha Chowdhuri (1913-1991). From experiments done in Darjeeling with her mentor D M Bose (nephew of the legendary scientist JC Bose) Bibha Chowdhuri had discovered a new subatomic particle, the pi-meson. Her results had been published in *Nature*, but she had not got due recognition.

A little bit of excavation in the internet and one got to know that a biography had been written on Bibha Chowdhury but that it was published in Germany. SPARROW'S friend Katharina Hoffman, Retired Professor, Carl von Ossietzky Universität, Oldenburg, came to our rescue and got the book and sent it to us. The book unfolded Bibha's life and work for those interested in science and in the gendered aspects of science in India and the world.

Bibha Chowdhuri was an Indian scientist born more than a hundred years ago, who chose a career in physics and did research in the field of cosmic rays. She was the first woman scientist in the field of cosmic rays, and she did her PhD in the University of Manchester, UK, in the laboratory of the Nobel Laureate P M S Blackett, and worked in two prime science institutes of India, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai, and Physical Research Laboratory (PRL) in Ahmedabad. She had worked with Dr D M Bose at Bose Institute, Kolkata, in connection with the discovery of muons (a muon, pronounced "myoo-on," is a type of subatomic particle) and their work had missed the Nobel Prize by a whisker. The present authors actually came across her name several times while they were doing a biography of D M Bose and decided that she should be given her due recognition in the field of science as she had not received the recognition she deserved. Despite her splendid contributions to science she had not even been elected a Fellow of any of the Science Academies in India.

In her introduction, Indrani Bose, Retired Senior Professor, Physics Department, Bose institute, says that Bibha Chowdhuri took up research at a time when the number of women in India involved in active scientific research and that too in experimental physics

was very small. She mentions that when Bibha approached D M Bose requesting him to allow her to join his research group, she met with initial reluctance. The reason he gave was that he did not have suitable research projects to assign to women. Indrani Bose says the incident is reminiscent, "in a more extreme form of C V Raman's refusal of permission to Kamala Sohoney to join the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, as a research student." (p.v) Ultimately C V Raman, who was the director of the Institute, had to relent because Kamala undertook a satyagraha outside Raman's office in protest. She says one does not know how D M Bose overcame his initial bias but that his family relationship with her may have been a contributing factor.

Mesons, "which act as the mediators of the strong interaction responsible for confining protons and neutrons to the nucleus", had been predicted but not yet detected at that time. D M Bose and Bibha, Indrani Bose explains, "undertook the significant challenge of experimentally detecting the hypothetical mesons. They carried out a series of studies during the years, 1939-42, at the high altitudes of Darjeeling, Sandakphu and Pharijong using the photographic emulsion technique." (p.vi) They could obtain evidence for two different types of particle and their findings were published in the prestigious journal *Nature.* But the halftone variety of "Ilford plates" they used as photographic emulsion were not sensitive enough to provide clear evidence that the two different types of meson were discovered. Since they did not have high quality emulsion, they had to abandon their research. After the Second World War, Cecil F. Powell University of Bristol, U K) using fulltone plates with better resolution could obtain clear evidence of the existence of two different types of meson. Meanwhile Bibha had gone to UK to pursue her doctoral studies. After she came back, she did work in prime science institutes but not much is known of her work.

Indrani Bose draws a parallel of Bibha's life as a scientist with another scientist associated with cosmic ray research, Marietta Blau from Austria. In fact, it was her technique of photographic emulsions for the detection of particles that had formed the core of the studies carried out by D M Bose and Bibha as well as Powell. The story of Marietta Blau that Indrani Bose writes is heartrending. She says that Marietta has been described as "the most tragic figure in the history around cosmic rays." (p.vii) Despite a brilliant scientific career, she had to flee Austria as a Jew when Hitler came to power and emigrate to Mexico with the help of Einstein. She came to USA and pursued her research and after the war returned to her country but did not find a suitable job. She died in relative obscurity in Vienna, writes Indrani Bose. The Japanese theoretical physicist H Yukawa who had predicted the existence of mesons won the Nobel Prize in 1949 and Powell got the prize in 1950 which shows how important research on fundamental particles like mesons was. Marietta Blau, the pioneer who developed the photographic emulsion technique, did not get the Nobel Prize even though Erwin Schrödinger and Walter Thirring had nominated her. Powell acknowledged D M Bose and Bibha Chowdhuri in his book, says Indrani Bose but the Nobel Prize had eluded them too.

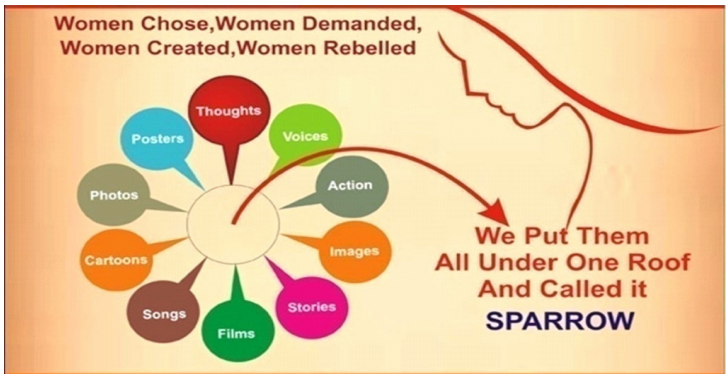
It is the life of this brilliant scientist, Bibha Chowdhuri, that the authors have chosen to tell although they were stymied at every point to get details about her family and her work throughout her life. In the introduction itself they make it clear, lest people jump to conclusions, that a woman scientist like Bibha Chowdhuri not getting due recognition or opportunities was nothing peculiar to Indian culture alone and that western women were doing no better. They give the example of astrophysicist Cecilia H Payne who was a student under the renowned physicist Ernest Rutherford. Recalling her student days, she had said that the regulations then required women to be segregated in the front row. As she was the only woman, she was rather conspicuous. And to add to her discomfiture, Rutherford ritually humiliated her at the start of each lecture much to the amusement of the rest of the class. The authors say compared to some of the scientists in British circles, C V Raman's bias against women would seem harmless. Nobel Laureate Henry H Dale, who was the Director of National Institute of Medical Research, Hampstead, did not allow women to use the Staff Coffee Room! The authors also give the example of crystallographer

Kathlyn Lonsdale. Her application to the 1851 Exhibition Fellowship was turned down by commissioners with an argument that they "would be breaking the spirit of the regulations in awarding an exhibition to a married woman." (p.1-2)

Bibha Chowdhuri was born in 1913. The Science College, to do postgraduate studies in physics and chemistry, was started just a year after her birth in 1914. Higher education for women was still not the norm and so it is not surprising that in 1934-36 when Bibha did her MSc physics, she was the only girl student in her class. It was not easy for the authors to acquire details about Bibha's family. What little they got was mainly due to Rita Sarkar, the wife of one of the authors, whose family knew Bibha's family well as they lived in adjacent houses. Bibha's father Banku Behari Bose was a doctor. His wife Urmila Devi was the daughter of a Brahmo missionary. Urmila Devi's elder sister was married to another famous doctor and their daughter was married to DM Bose who was the nephew of Jagadish Chandra Bose. Banku Behari had become a Brahmo to marry Urmila Devi. They had five daughters and one son. Bibha was the third. One daughter died early and all the other daughters were highly educated. Bibha and all her siblings remained unmarried. It may be because it was difficult to find a match for such highly educated girls as the Brahmo community was a small one, the authors say. They also add that the proportion of women scientists who never married was 14% and that of male scientists only 2.5%.

When Bibha went to UK she was featured in the *Manchester Herald* as a young talented Indian scientist. And when asked why she chose to specialise in physics, she says, she just followed her inclination. And she came back to join TIFR and later PRL. Those who have known her have spoken of her as an excellent teacher and researcher. Bibha could have gone places had she published her high-quality research papers in international journals. But for some reason she chose to publish them only in Indian Academy Journal. She left PRL when, after the death of Vikaram A Sarabhai, the course of research changed and she could not pursue the research she had discussed with Vikram Sarabhai. She came back to Kolkata to pursue research in high energy physics and that remained the passion of her life. She participated in several conferences and seminars all her life and died a quiet death.

From page 31 onwards the book discusses in detail the nature of the scientific research pursued by Bibha Chowdhuri which would be fascinating for any student of science. As the authors are scientists themselves the details meticulously chosen and elaborated, are written in a language that would reach any student of science interested in high energy physics. Through this book the authors have truly unearthed a jewel of a woman called Bibha Chowdhuri. One only wishes this book could have been brought out by the Government of India or one of the Science Academies in recognition of the work done by scientists like Bibha Chowdhuri.



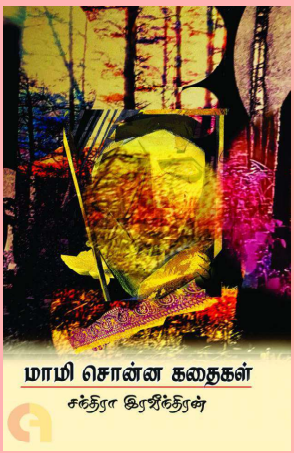
We thank all our trustess and advisors who reposed immense faith in our efforts which has made it possible for us to spread our wings. They continue to stand by us.

We also thank our funders, donors, supporters, well wishers, friends and many more who have supported us in many ways.

Tales of A Soil Left Behind

—*C S Lakshmi*

Title: *Maami Sonna Kathiakal*
(The Tales Told by Mother-in-Law)
Author: Chandra Ravindran
Publisher: Kalachuvadu, Nagercoil
Year of Publication: 2022
Pages: 120
Price: 150/-



It will not be an exaggeration to say that this book is not only a biography of a woman detailing her life story along with the history of her times but also a loving tribute to Manonmani, mother-in-law of Chandra, the author. As she had become hard of hearing not many had the time to talk to Manonmani; but she had a lot to talk about herself and the times she grew up in; her parents, the women and men around them, about her school, her neighbourhood and her won family. Chandra, her daughter-in-law, had the patience and love to get these stories from her and the result is a book that captures the events, emotions and history of a time in history and a woman who lived through those times. Chandra says in her foreword that the stories contain "not just words of experience of a woman, a girl, a wife and a mother. But I believe it is a world of their dreams, desires, their wanderings, needs, disappointments and sorrow, which cannot be got back…"

Chandra's marriage takes place during the turbulent times of 1988. It is a register marriage arranged in her house. She sees her mother-in-law sitting near where the registration is to take place but she does not talk to anyone. Even while eating she eats alone. Dark and small made, her eyes keep wandering and she reminds Chandra of a statue of a goddess. There seems to be an untold sadness on her face but since the groom is leaving for Abu Dhabi the very next day, Chandra does not get a chance to sit next to her and talk to her. When they take leave, her mother-in-law comes to her hesitantly and presses her hand and shakes her head and takes leave. She does not say anything. After they leave Chandra hears her parents say, "Looks like the groom's mother is stone-deaf…."

The traditional marriage with the usual rituals was to take place the following year. Chandra was working in the Jaffna Secretariat at that time. Every week-end she would cycle her way to meet her mother-in-law and talk to her and establish a relationship with her. Her mother-in-law would speak to her about her life on different occasions for different reasons and that was how she could picture her entire life and the people in her life. As soon as she would reach the gate on her cycle, her mother-in-law would come to the verandah and hold her hand and say, "Come" and invite her in. Manonmani had lost her hearing probably during the delivery of one of her children. She would tell Chandra all about her children and show her around the garden with coconut trees, drumstick trees and mango trees. Pointing out to each she would say what they could be used for and say how tasty drumstick would be with puttu if cooked properly.

Once as soon as Chandra entered, she ran to the garden with a stick and brought mangoes and cut them and gave her telling her she had already identified them for plucking to give her.

These week-end visits became the occasions to listen to Manonmani tell the story of her life. Later, Chandra also persuades her to write some notes on her life. Manonmani's childhood days were spent in Irupalai village in Jaffna. In her narration the happiest days seem to be the time she spent in school. She loved studying and always stood first in all her classes. After her Fifth, she wrote an exam for scholarship and passed the exam with flying colours. But the school she had to go to for studying with scholarship was a boarding school. Her parents were not keen on sending her because just a year ago her father had gone blind and needed her help to take him out whenever he had to go out for something. Her mother could not go out and do the shopping etc. But her school headmaster came home and persuaded her parents. She was all packed to go when one of her mother's cousins came home and told her parents not to send her to the boarding school for girls went wayward when sent out of the house. Her parents listened to him despite all her pleading. She continued to go to another school in her own area. But almost immediately her father passed away. But she continued to study. As usual she was considered one of the brightest students. But the kind of interruptions to her education happened because she was a girl. When her elder brother and his wife who were staying far away have a baby, she and her mother had to go and help out. Manonamani was doing her Tenth then. The headmaster told her she could not sit for the public exam as she had no attendance. Manonmani was heartbroken and did not go to school for two years. The two years were spent working in fields and learning from a neighbour to sow and embroider and knit. They were not unhappy times but Manonmani did not forget her incomplete studies. Fortunately, at 18, since her brother had also come to stay nearby, she got permission to study and she completed her SSLC exams. She did have dreams of going to college but she had fallen in love meanwhile with her sister-in-law's brother who was in the police service. And he told her there was no need to study further.

Manonmani's life is full of what others did to her and made her do. While in school her mother does not even want her to go for an excursion and her neighbours pay the money for it and secretly send her. Once they want to take her to the circus and tell her to come with her skirt and blouse and not to wear the half sari. She is happy not to wear the sari. Her mother gets so upset that she takes all her half saris and pours kerosene on them and is ready to burn them when the neighbour sees it and comes running to stop her from doing it. Next day she looks for her half sari while going to school and can't find a single one. She asks her mother who tells her they are near the well. She finds them there smelling of kerosene. She goes to her neighbour and begs for a half sari. The neighbour gives her one and then in the evening she comes back and washes all her half saris smelling of kerosene. Another time her mother tells her that she has to go and offer condolences at somebody's house and asks her to cook rice and keep. Manonmani has no idea how to cook rice and overcooks the rice and it becomes lumpy. On her return her mother is hungry and when she sees the lumpy rice, she is furious and just takes a rope and tries to hang herself! The neighbours come running and stop her. Despite such incidents Manonmani talks of the fruit trees around her house the various seasons of fruits and how wonderful those days were when she and her friends enjoyed the fruits.

Her married life was not an unhappy one but her husband gives up his job because he was not able to do all the work in Sinhala language according to the new rules. Then he takes to wrong ways and gets paralysed at one point. Manonmani is pregnant with her ninth child (tenth actually because she loses her second child when she is eleven months old) when he passes away leaving her with nine children to bring up. Manonmani is only 35. She begins to do all kinds of work to keep her family going. Later two of her sons go to Middle East and Italy and the family slowly picks up its life. The worst times she speaks of are when the Indian army comes to Sri Lanka ostensibly to give people security from the war times when LTTE and the government were at war. But the unspeakable

violence and torture the Indian army imposed on the small towners are unimaginable. At one time, when the villagers are told to go to the temples and schools nearby for shelter and curfew is declared, they return after the curfew to see people shot at sight by the Indian army, left to die on the roads, and crows and dogs eating their bodies. On another occasion, all the men are taken by the Indian army and some LTTE prisoners who had come masked, to nod their heads when the army pointed out at random men and asked if they were LTTE supporters. Manonmani's two sons, one of them who had just got married a day before, are also taken. Fortunately, they come back.

Slowly the entire family immigrates abroad. Manonmani also decides to go to Canada. In one of her notes she writes,

"All comforts are here. Food, car, house... it is a luxurious life. There is nothing lacking. But in my heart, there is a whining saying something is lacking, something is lacking.

"And that is our own soil in which I was born and grew up in."

Chandra has added family photographs in the book and reading her mother-in-law Manonmani's life and seeing the photographs leave one's heart very heavy. For here is a life that was caught up in so many different historical circumstances and yet had preserved some good memories to share with her daughter-in-law along with the sad ones.

Do write to us if you get to know about a life, a book, a visual, a film or a song which you think must be DOCUMENTED in SPARROW.

For REVIEWS please send two copies of the book.

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

The conversations can be viewed on the following links

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

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

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

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

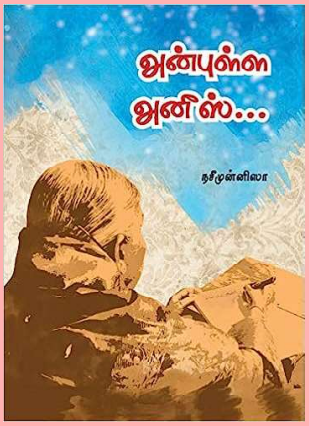
Conversation with Sumathi Murthy
https://www.youtube.com/ playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySEiqqDvyKdruGkVUNqoqXIW

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

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

A Son Buried Under A Golden Rain Tree

—*C S Lakshmi*



Title: *Anbulla Anees*… (Dear Anees)
Author: Naseemunnisa
Publisher: Kothai Pathippagam, Trichy
Year of Publication: 2019
Pages: 144
Price: Rs.110/-

Naseemunnisa's book is not an autobiograhy or a biogrpahy but it is both. It is more of a family history told to a young person to keep memories of the family alive in him as he has lost his father and is growing up with his mother and maternal grandparents. The book is being written by his grandmother to him so he can remember everyone in his father's family. It is a very unusual reason for writing a book. But more than a family history, the book is a history of the Madathukkulam village and the Udumalaipetttai region, in Tiruppur district, Tamil Nadu, and how people lived there.

Naseemunnisa is not a writer but when she was over 70, she felt the need to write these notes to her grandson and wrote them down in an 80-page note book. Later she was persuaded by her family and friends to turn it into a book. She begins it saying, "Dear Anees Ahmed, Dadi's dua to you. Anees, I began to write about our lifestyle, society and culture for you to know about your family, so that you never forget your ancestors under any circumstances and also for you to tell your children." She also says that she also wants to tell a younger generation person like him about Islam and its ways and its teachings in the way she has understood them and also to make him aware of the character traits of his ancestors.

What follows is not just the story of a family but the social history of a village and its people told with love and deep understanding of life. She tells him just as it is important to know history of the kings it is important to know the history of one's family to make one's future. It is important to know one's roots. She says grandmothers so far have entertained their grandchildren with the story of a grandma making vadais in the moon (a story all of us as children had heard which was told pointing to a full moon saying one could see in the full moon a grandma with her one leg stretched out making vadais and strangely we could see the grandma!) but she was going to tell him a different story. She mentions the granddaughter of her paternal aunt who bought an acre of land and divided it among 25 descendants from her mother-in-law's side and all of them except two, built houses there and are even now living there as a large family. She says she also wanted to do that but since that was not possible, she is writing this book of memoirs.

She tells about songs that she used to sing when he was a child. The song sung to a child while pretending to hit the child's forehead with one's own head is sung in many families in different ways. The song Nasimunnisa writes is in the kind of Urdu or Hindustani that Muslim families in Tamil Nadu speak.

Dee…dee…dicha
Magar ka bachcha
Magar gayi pani koo
Pakad le iske Nani koo
Magar gayi nadhi koo
Pakad le iske Dadi koo

(Dee...dee...dicha
Baby of a crocodile
Crocodile went into the water
Catch hold of its maternal grandma
Crocodile went to the river
Catch hold of its paternal grandma)

She tells him about his grandfather who was a wise man and full of patience and how he always bought her a sari for all occasions but never bothered to buy anything for himself. Ever since their marriage he had stitched all the blouses for her and stitched the ends of her saris for her. A few days before his death he took out the four blouse pieces he had not stitched and cut them and stitched them for her. Then she goes on to talk about how his grandfather was one among ten children and talks about his family. She tells him about how he and her son Naseer, Anees's father, worked in the Asher Mill in Tiruppur. She tells him the history of the mill and its owner P D Asher and his wife Padmavathi who were from Gujarat and were freedom fighters. She also tells him about what it is to work in mills.

To give an example of love in the family she talks about her own family. Her father was a much-loved teacher. The family had a key-wound clock that had to be winded every day. It was placed a little high on the wall and with her brother and sister holding the stool she used to climb the stool and wind the clock every day. After her marriage rituals and all the formalities got over and she was sent off to her marital family her father came into the house and saw that the clock had stopped. He began to cry thinking of his daughter and the entire family cried with him. Such was their love for one another, she says.

She tells him that there were only four or five Urdu speaking Muslims and the rest of them known as Labbai Muslims, spoke only Tamil. The lectures in the mosques were mostly in Tamil. Her father held the prayers and the bayans (lectures explaining the Quran) in the mosque very often and without any mikes or speakers his voice could be heard clearly. She writes interesting details about how the first Usha sewing machine came into the family and how later when there was a strike in the mill her father brought the sewing machine to her house changing two buses, thinking it would be useful in making a living.

The family did many things to make ends meet as her father's income was not enough. They had a bit of land but it was given on contract for farming and they always got cheated by the contractors. They kept a soda factory, then a bakery and then a timber shop. All these businesses had to close down for one reason or the other. But there was one thing her father never stopped doing and that was spinning in the charkha. Her mother also did it along with him. The children also could spin in the charkha. On a Saturday they would go and give the spindles at the Khadi shop and money would be paid for it. It helped in buying vegetables in the Saturday market. They had to go all the way to Udumalaipettai where there was a ration shop, to buy ration and walk with bags to the bus stop and bring the grocery home. She tells Anees that their house had an easy chair for her father, two cane chairs but no tube light or a fan. There was no radio or transistor either. They cooked on a firewood stove. All they had was love, love and only love.

She also narrates a touching incident of how when her father died her younger brother Shahjahan was 22 years old and how he controlled himself and did not cry. But after the fortieth day Chehlum ritual (remembrance and prayer service on or about the fortieth day after death) his mother came in a white sari and Shahjahan broke down and wept bitterly. And he insisted on going to the river and washing her sari every day. Shahjahan was adamant about bringing the washed sari rinsed, twisted and hung on his shoulder. He used to say other men in the locality may also do this to their women seeing him wash saris. Their father had brought them up in a way where there was no distinction between a girl and a boy. Although Naseemunnisa herself was stopped, much to the regret

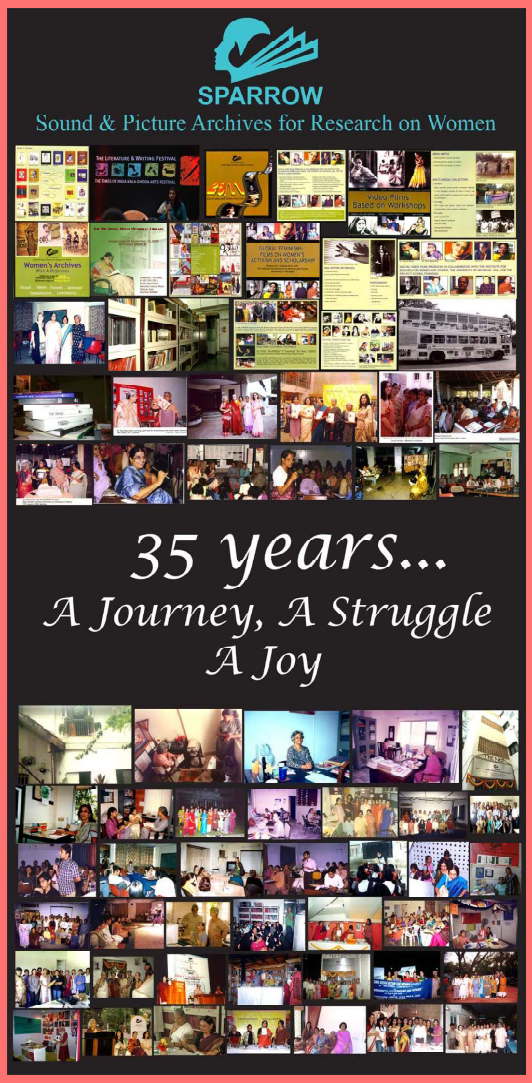
of her own mother, from going to school after the 8th Class because she had come of age, she studied Hindi and wrote six exams ad came first. She also went to sewing classes but her mother saw to it that the other girls continued their education. And there was no dearth of books and magazines in the house. All of them were avid readers.

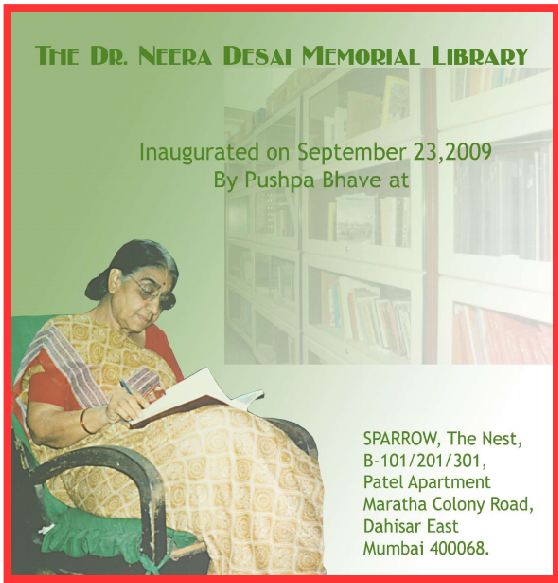
Naseemunnisa tells her grandson about losing her first daughter and later her son (the father of Anees) to cancer. But through the story she also tells him, "Darling Anees, never have any doubts about the rituals and prayers performed in temples, churches or mosques reaching the same place. Let everyone follow properly the religions assigned to them. Although the paths are different let the destination be the same. Dear Anees, whatever the situation you should never hurt anyone. Especially with those of other religions you should behave very decently. She tells him her family had always done this and that is why they were loved. She narrates an incident when the Mariamman temple festival took place and her father had been invited. He went with little Shahjahan. Some more Muslim friends were also invited. They were giving a mutton feast. They sprinkled turmeric water on the lamb as per Hindu custom and then called a Muslim to say Bismillah and only then cut the lamb and cooked the mutton dish. She says such harmony must always be appreciated. "Caste wars and hatred of a religion are all for politics. Let it never be within us, Anees," she advises him.

After the son's death Nasimunnisa and her husband stayed with their daughter in Udumalai. Their son-in-law was like their son. In fact, her husband, passed away there. She says saying that one must not stay with the daughter is not acceptable. What would parents with only daughters do then?

She ends the book with a moving incident. Women are not allowed in the kabrastan. Maybe because they feel women will not be able to bear to see the last rituals, Nasimunnisa says. But she kept feeling the urge to see the burial spot of her son Naseer, the father of Anees. She went with her daughter Nagina and asked the watchman of the kabrastan where her son was buried, if they could stand outside and if he could point out the grave for them to see. The watchman agreed and showed them. They stood on a higher ground and saw it. His grave was under a golden rain tree. It was a green tree showering yellow flowers on the grave. "I stood there with no thoughts in my mind as if I were a tree myself. Then we did our dua and came back with tears."

Naseemunnisa is not a writer but she has written a beautiful book where she is able to clearly write about her family history, the society around them, the life they led and her own world view. Naseemunnisa does not write a chronological narrative. She goes back and forth and weaves a rich tapestry of a narrative.





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