

CONFLUENCE

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

www.confluence.mobi

February 2020

CURRENT AFFAIRS

Brexit Done by Malathy Sitaram

And so, it came to pass. At 11pm U.K. time and midnight European time, on January 31st, 2020, Britain left the European Union (EU) with the last 30 seconds of EU membership counted down by thousands of people gathered outside the Palace of Westminster, cheering and singing the national anthem. Elsewhere, people held candlelight vigils to mourn the end of an era.

The nation is split over this. A great many people had voted to remain but not as many who voted to leave. The Brexiters had won the right to leave after the referendum called for in 2016 by Prime Minister, David Cameron, in response to demand from right wing members of his own party as well as the far-right UK Independent Party (UKIP).

Much earlier on 5th June 1975, the electorate had been asked to vote yes or no on the question: "Do you think the UK should stay in the European Union (Common Market)?" With a turnout of just under 65%, the outcome of the vote was: 67.2% in favour of staying in and the UK remained a member of the European Union. European Union is a group of 28 countries that operates as a cohesive economic and political block'.

Britain had joined the European Community on 1st January, 1973, under the leadership of Edward Heath, then the British Prime Minister. Membership of the European Union meant that there would be free movement of citizens of member states. This had led to the arrival in Britain of around

172,000 migrants from EU states. Academics would agree that membership of the EU had brought about a 10% increase in prosperity. However, such numbers ushered in the arrival of Nigel Farage, a right-wing politician, who has served as a member of the European Parliament for South East England since 1999.



With the electoral success of the UKIP party in 2014, support for the Leave campaign began to gain strength and this was reflected in the 2016 referendum that the Prime minister, David Cameron was compelled to call to decide finally whether to Stay or Leave the EU. This time the Leave voters won by a wide margin (52%). UKIP had placed emphasis on reducing immigration, rejecting multiculturalism and opposing what it calls the "Islamification" of Britain. This Party capitalised on the concern felt among the white British working class about rising immigration.

UKIP moved into far-right territory by emphasising an anti-Islam message. As a result, many longstanding members, including Farage, left and formed the new Brexit Party, whose aim was to leave the EU. Parties in favour of Remain include Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru (Wales) and the Green Party. The ruling Conservative party remains neutral.

Having left the EU, the message to the public from the government is that it will now look to trade with America and secret talks have already started between the US and the UK. A trade deal with Trump could undermine food and environmental standards, further open the NHS to US corporations, see medicine prices massively increased and block climate action. President Trump does not believe in climate change.

The Irish PM Leo Varadkar who is half Indian (his father came from India as a medical doctor), has indicated that there will be difficulties in the trading relationship between UK and Ireland. The British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson seems confident that he can proceed with trade negotiations with EU until the end of the year and seek to trade with World Trade Organisation (WTO) countries as well as countries such as India whilst continuing to permit Indian students to gain work experience here. The National Health Service (NHS) too is in need of doctors from Asian countries. We can only hope that Brexit will not be too damaging.



Editorially Speaking

Dear readers,

I am pleased to release this first issue of 2020. I am sure many of you have been long waiting for the arrival of this issue. As usual it is packed with a variety of interesting articles, short fictions and poems written by our talented bunch of writers. I hope our readers will enjoy reading the current issue.

There have been many events from the beginning of this year that have attracted our attention. Apart from political developments, matters such as climate change, Australian forest fires and diseases like Corona virus have been making headlines on a daily basis. Even though these matters don't seem to affect every one of us directly, perhaps our writers will consider highlighting the seriousness of these issues, in their writings.

For some of us in Britain, country's exit from the European Union has been a major disappointment, but it is hoped that the current government's policy of attracting skilled workers from countries like India would bring back prosperity in the long term

It would help us if writers can send us their work for the May issue from next month. In the meantime, as always, we welcome your feedback through letters to the editor.

Vijay Anand

www.confluence.mobi or www.confluence.org.uk

ISSN: 2633-4704

Published by
CONFLUENCE PUBLISHING Ltd
23 Cray Avenue, Orpington BR5 4AA

United Kingdom
Telephone: 01689 836 394 / 07801 569 640

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TRAVELOGUE

Where Ganga came to our Land

By Hema Nair

It all started with a river.

Not any river, but - Ma Ganga - Mother, Goddess and the nurturer of a whole civilization.

I had witnessed her grace, on a Makar Sankranti dawn, as she slipped quietly into the sea, ending her journey on this earth. This was at Gangasagar in West Bengal.

Now, I wanted to see where she began.

She takes birth from Gangotri, a glacier spanning over 60 square kilometers, and nestled in the lap of the Garhwal range of the Himalayas.

Trekking in the Himalayas is a heady and addictive adventure and mine is facilitated by Vyshakh, a dear friend who runs a travel company.

Preparations start with a fitness regime that is daunting, but essential. The terrain up there is tough, weather is harsh and the journey can demand every last reserve of your energy. In the untrained, injury and altitude sickness can even jeopardize the trip.

Our journey began where the roads ended - in the town of Gangotri - a seasonal town that serves pilgrims coming to Ganga temple as part of the Char Dhaam Yatra, in the summer and autumn months. The town remains closed for the rest of the year and inhabitants move down to the town of Uttarkashi.

We started off early one morning, with day packs of food and water. Our larger bags, along with kitchen and camping equipment were offloaded, to be carried by porters or on mules. The porters are young men from

nearby villages who work for tour companies during the season - cheerful and helpful, they skip along on those treacherous slopes with their huge backpacks on feet nimble as goats.

We took three days to climb to Tapovan to allow for acclimatisation

progressively more hostile. In Chirbasa, protected by a copse of trees on the banks of a light green Bhagirathi we slept well, tired from our walk and warm in our sleeping bags. Every night after that, sleep was an elusive bird as we struggled to keep warm. On the third morning, we

woke up to a crisp sunshine in Bhojbasa and after a hot nourishing breakfast made at the campsite, set off for Tapovan.

We trekked 4 kilometers over rocky terrain and boulders to get to Gaumukh. Although the gradient was gentle, altitude made it difficult. The landscape was dominated by the grey and russet shades of rocks and mountains, with not even a blade of grass for some green relief but its beauty was no less amazing for it. In this valley, a tempestuous Bhagirathi gurgled and flowed while the cool, pure air soothed our senses. In a few hours, we reached Gaumukh - an icy cave shaped like the snout of a cow - from where Bhagirathi emerges into the sunshine.

I washed my face in the icy water, and then turned to look up at the path to

Tapovan. Before starting out, I knew this would be a tough journey and that it would test the limits of my body and resolve, but nothing prepared me for the sight ahead. Looking at the formidable slope ahead of us, with no discernible path - only loose boulders liable to fall on us, I was struck with a deep dread. We were to climb a mountain more than a kilometer long at a 70-degree incline.



because at 14640 ft above mean sea level, acute mountain sickness is more likely with quick ascents. We walked on paths cut a few feet wide on the mountainside, slowly gaining altitude and climbing to rarified air.

We camped at Chirbasa and Bhojbasa enroute and made our final bid for Tapovan on the third day. Nights spent in the tents were becoming



Every step had to be carefully considered so as not to dislodge a loose rock and cause serious injury to those on the slope below me. A climb this steep at sea level is difficult enough, but at 14000 feet with scant oxygen, it's the next level of tribulation. Also weighing heavily on my mind, was that a motorable road and access to medical help was 18 kilometers away on foot. Three of our teammates did have a close brush with falling rocks but came through unscathed. We reached Tapovan at 3 pm just as the first few snowflakes were falling. We took shelter in our tents while Tapovan covered itself in a white blanket of snow. It was freezing cold for the rest of the night and even our water bottles had icicles inside.

Tapovan is a high-altitude meadow surrounded by giant Himalayan peaks like the Shivling, Bhagirathi I & II, Meru, and Thalay Sagar. Legend has it that King Bhagirath brought Ganga down to Earth from the Heavens with intense penance at this very place.

Next morning, I stayed back in Tapovan while the rest of my team went on a day trip to explore the foothills of mount Meru. I packed a daypack, dressed warmly and set off towards Mouni Baba's hermitage. Baba is an ascetic who stays there in total isolation for most of the year.

During the spring and fall seasons, when Tapovan is open for tourists and pilgrims, he sometimes has people staying with him in his stone cottage. He gives them food and accepts whatever they offer him in gratitude.

He stays silent most of the time, but his eloquent face with sparkling eyes can speak volumes, if you cared to listen. When he spoke few halting words in a hoarse whisper, I realized with a sense of wonder, that he had lost his voice and vocabulary from disuse. He gropes around for words he has forgotten, and his voice is barely able to give shape to his thoughts. He thinks he has stayed there for 12 years now, but confesses he is not quite sure. Time stands still in a place like Tapovan.

I gratefully drank the hot tea he brewed for me, then walked on looking for a shrine he told me to visit. I walked a while on rocks and snow before I saw it. Just a raised stone platform with a Shivling, a Trident and a few threads of decoration flapping in the breeze. As offering, there was a terracotta lamp with melted snow in it, and nothing else. Looking up, I could see the majestic Shivling rising into the sky behind it.

It seemed to me, that I was the only person in the world in that place at

that time. Surrounded on all sides by silence, mountains and a profound peace, I dropped down to my knees and felt something inexplicable and overwhelming as I gave in to the tears that streamed down my face.

The next day, we started our descent, and the long walk back to civilization. Two days later, in Gangotri, the bars on our cell phones lit up and I called my family to tell them that I was safe and on my way home. For more than 5 days, I was cut off from the outside world, and left free and unfettered on that desolate meadow up in the mountains.

For those looking to have similar experiences, search - <https://www.facebook.com/oneintheorangejacket/>



Hema Nair is a cardiac anaesthetist working in Narayana Hrudayalaya, the world's largest heart hospital, well known for its philanthropy. In addition to medical writing, she enjoys writing prose and poetry on anything that catches her fancy. She's also a movie buff, avid reader and enjoys cycling.

POETRY CORNER

**Our own world
by Leonard Dabydeen**

Our own world
was rich in silver and gold,
or so the story was told
when the morning light
filtered through our hopes
and dreams from yesterday;
and Time did not wilt away
our echoing hearts,
as we buttressed our minds
like steel welded on steel,
and when the cold wind and snow
made mockery
of our tropical attachment;
we smirked in exiled derision
holstered in a Brampton basement,
looking for a night cap;
uncertain or unwavering
like roses and thorns,
not knowing how to differentiate
night from day;
candle light vigil
and cream-colored walls
shadowed our existence,
spanning cities
from Toronto to Ottawa,
a Canadian out-cry
and a brother's strength
molding us
with rock-like firmness
in our own world.



Leonard Dabydeen, Guyanese-Canadian poet and member of The Society of Classical Poets (USA), Life Member of MetVerse Muse (India); member of Muse India Journal; member of Muse-Pie Press (Shot Glass Journal and Fib Review); contributor to Gandhi Way Newsletter (UK); Triveni Journal (India); Our Poetry Archive (<https://ourpoetryarchive.blogspot.com>) ; Pratilipi; Galaktika Poetike "ATUNIS" (<http://atunispoetry.com>); Setu Bilingual Literary Journal (USA); blog: <https://ldabydeen.wordpress.com> (Poems Jogging in the Mind).
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SHORT FICTION

Good Night

By Subhash Chandra

Bhavika and Mayank came into my family in strange and unfortunate circumstances!

One evening I reached the park around 8:30 PM -- rather late -- for my walk. It was a park only in name with patches of dried up brown grass, no flowers, or hedges, or trees or even proper lighting. Therefore few visited it. But it suited me fine, as I could walk here briskly unhindered. So late in the winter chill, there was not a soul around ... but wait I espied an old man a little ahead of me talking on the mobile which was on speaker.

"What good night?" he bawled. "No night is good for me, nor any day."

"Papa, please don't get angry. Not good for your high blood pressure."

The old man remained silent for long.

"You there, Papa?"

"Yes. I'm still alive."

What a churlish fellow, I thought!

"Papa, Mayank can't wait to meet you."

"Don't give me that bullshit again. You've been parroting that line for years."

"Please believe me."

No response again.

"How did you spend the day?" The son seemed keen to prolong the conversation.

"Mukul, are you familiar with the anguish of loneliness? No chance. You're happy with your wife and son in the U.S. All you do is to ring up every day and your duty is over."

The old man was being mean.

Our son, Devansh living in Bangalore with his wife and two children rang up once in six months and that, too, to pressure me to sell off the sprawling Haveli in Indore, now worth more than two crores.

"After your mother died, I've become more prone to feeling dejected. I have always been a weak and vulnerable man. She was my sheet anchor. Now I'm left to fend for myself!"

"No Papa, you're basically tough. You never lacked spunk. Remember how you saved me when a crazy bull attacked me in our lane? You put your life on line. You're a Superman, Papa!"

In my whole life I had never received a compliment from Devansh. On the contrary, he called me foolish for keeping the dilapidated Haveli which was of no use to us.

The old man did not respond.

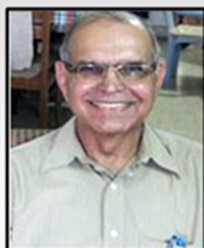
"How's your health?"

"My arthritis has worsened. So has bronchitis. The back aches all day. Now it's time to travel up."

"You sure not imagining things?" said Mukul in a light tone, but hastily added, "Sorry Papa, please don't get me wrong. I'm just joking."

But the old man had got into a terrible rage, "Yes, you can afford to joke about my afflictions... add insult to injury! You're the most unfeeling and ungrateful ... son in the world!" the old man spluttered.

Then suddenly, he wobbled and



Subhash Chandra retired as Professor of English from Delhi University. He has published two collections of short stories, Not Just Another Story, and Beyond the Canopy of Idles and about fifty five short stories in foreign and Indian journals. Also published four books of criticism and several research articles.

collapsed. The phone struck the ground and its back cover came off. Mukul kept asking, "Papa you okay ... Papa what happened?"

I picked up the phone, told Mukul about it and got the old man admitted to a nearby hospital. Massive cardiac arrest! An angioplasty was performed on him.

I went to see Kalka Das every day. I always found him morose and reflective. One day, he looked at me with contrite eyes.

"You know I've been vile to Mukul. As a child he tried his best to do well in studies, but couldn't. I'd beat him up black and blue when he couldn't solve a sum repeatedly."

On the fifth day, a young man, his wife and child about eight-year-old walked up to the bed. Kalka Das looked baffled. But when Mukul touched his feet, followed by his wife and the kid, he understood and his face lit up.

"Why did you spend such huge money?"

Then all of them touched my feet as well. I was overwhelmed. Never had Devansh or his wife done that.

#

In a week's time, Kalka Das was discharged. I kept visiting them

regularly. Bhavika devoted herself to the care of her father-in-law body and soul.

One day Mukul visited me looking haggard.

"Uncle, in the U.S., I worked as an electrician on call. The earnings were irregular and meagre. Still, Bhavika pinched pennies for visiting Papa. I've been making rounds of the market here, but every electrical shop has their own electrician."

Incidentally, our Housing Society needed a part time electrician and engaged him. He was an expert in repairing all kinds of gadgets, such as, ACs, fridges, grinder-mixers etc. and slowly started getting calls from the neighbourhood.

But then tragedy struck! One day, he was working on the fridge in somebody's house where he got electrocuted and died on the spot. He had asked the owner to switch off the MCB (Mechanical Current Breaker) mains, but the man forgot. The shock was too much for Kalka Das's fragile heart and he soon followed his son.

Bhavika was left with Mayank and no means to live by.

"Bitiya, can you trust me?"

"You're like my Papa."

I had wished for a daughter when Devansh was born.

#

After six months, Devansh came to Delhi on an official assignment for a month. He was surprised to see strangers living with me. But instead of resenting, he lauded me for doing a great thing. He was nice to Bhavika and brought toys and games for Mayank.

Then I had to go to Chandigarh for my nephew's wedding for two days.

I asked Devansh, "You'd take care of them. No?"

"Sure."

Devansh left the very next day after my coming back. Bhavika looked sad most of the time. One day I asked her, "Are you missing Devansh Bhaiyya?"

She burst into streaming tears and between uncontrollable sobs what she told me crashed the sky over my head.

"Bhaiyya ... forced ... himself on me ... when you were away."

It took me a lot of effort to stop her gushing tears and quieten her. I sundered all contact with Devansh and shut the doors on him and his family for ever. I redrew my will, leaving everything to Bhavika and Mayank.

I got the daughter I had wished for and a sweet grandson. Who says blood is thicker than water!?

THE SUBTEXT

A Peoples' Festival

24th International Film Festival of Kerala

by LALIT MOHAN JOSHI

I caught up with the 24th International Film Festival of Kerala this year (6 – 13 December 2019) after almost a decade but the festival has always been my favourite right from its inception in 1996. I still remember I first met the Indian film icons like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and M.T.Vasudevan Nair in this very festival in the 1990s. I also recall meeting a young talented film editor from Film and Television Institute, Bina Paul Venugopal during its

filmmaker from Turkey at the packed open-air venue Nishagandhi.

The prime focus was on Argentine filmmaker Fernando Solanas. Known for his use of the language of film as a weapon of protest and a way of voicing opinion, Solanas was conferred the Lifetime Achievement Award for 2019.

In its 'Indian Cinema Now' strand Seema Pahwa's debut film *The Funeral* or *Ram Prasad Ki Tehrvi* (2019) won popular

Presumably coming from ordinary middle-class backgrounds, they get connected when Sraboni suffers an accidental fall, injuring her hand badly. Kajal helps her get up and escorts her to the doctor. On the way, they narrate two engrossing tales from their lives, depicting human dilemma. The stories proceed through the time they spend together. But the ending leads to a bitter altercation.



Deep Well



Nava Maryam ayesha



Jalli Kattu



Without strings



Ramprasad Kitehvi



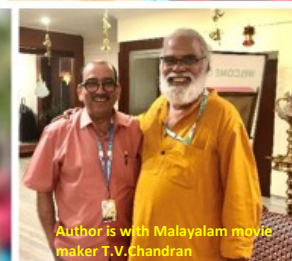
Chaire Baire Aaj



Artistic Director Bina Paul Venugopal in conversation with Malayalam actor



INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL OF KERALA



Author is with Malayalam movie maker T.V.Chandran

early years. Her commitment to the festival eventually raised her to a position of being its Artistic Director now. The festival has come a long way. This year, in its 24th edition it celebrated human life and its people through films from all over the world. Nearly 186 films from 73 countries were screened at 14 theatres of Thiruvananthapuram.

Out of all international film festivals in India (including Goa's International Film Festival of India called IFFI, the biggest hosted by the Government of India), IFFK has become the most popular and sought after by both film buffs and industry professionals. "The real power of this festival comes from the peoples' participation", quips veteran filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan to me while he drives me in his car to the party after the inaugural screening of 'Passed by Censor' a film by Serhat Karaasian a

acclaim as a biting satire on the hypocrisy of relatives and family members when the head of the family dies.

Ramprasad Bhargava's (*Naseeruddin Shah*) sudden demise brings his family back into their old bungalow where his wife (*Supriya Pathak Kapur*) lives alone. Their six children arrive soon with their families to complete the patriarch's last rites. As the entire Bhargava family gathers, differences begin to crop up. Old arguments are brought into the limelight and the family struggles to make it through the 13 days of mourning. To make things worse, it is revealed that Ramprasad owes his bank a huge debt and now his kids must bear the brunt of paying it back.

Another touching feature was Atanu Ghosh's *Binisutoy* (*Without Strings*, 2019). Kajal and Sraboni, both in their mid-thirties, meet as strangers at the audition of a reality game show.

Atanu Ghosh's films have been widely shown in most prominent film festivals across the world. Winner of numerous national and international awards, his works reflect an urge for exploring unique complexities of human behaviour pitted against the backdrop of rapidly changing society.

A total of 92 films were shown in the "World Cinema" category. In the "International Competition" category, 15 films competed. This included two Malayalam films: Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Jallikattu* and Krishand R.K's *A Minor Inconvenience*.

Jallikattu is a 2019 Indian Malayalam-language action film directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery with a screenplay by S. Hareesh and R. Jayakumar, based on the short story *Maoist* by Hareesh. The film stars Antony Varghese, Chemban Vinod Jose, Sabumon Abdusamad and Santhy Balachandran. The plot follows a bull that escapes from a slaughterhouse in a hilly remote village and the entire

village men gathering to hunt down the animal.

Lijo Jose Pellissery's Jallikattu premiered recently at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival and received widespread critical acclaim. Lijo Jose Pellissery received Best Director trophy at the 50th International Film Festival of India at Goa.

Sahraa Karimi's Hava Maryam Ayesha (Afghanistan) is about three Afghan women from different social backgrounds, living in Kabul and facing a big challenge in their lives. Hava, a traditional pregnant woman whom no one cares about, is living with her father and mother in law. Her only joy is talking to the baby in her belly. Maryam, an educated TV news reporter, is about to get a divorce from her unfaithful

husband, but finds out she is pregnant. Ayesha, an 18-year old girl accepts to marry her cousin because she is pregnant from her boyfriend who disappears after hearing the news. Each of them has to solve her problem by herself for the first time.

Japanese film, 'They Say Nothing Stays the Same', directed by Joe Odagiri, has won the prestigious Suvarna Chakoram award 2019 (Golden Crow Pheasant) for the best film screened in the competition section. It award carries a cash prize Rs 20,00,000 (approximately \$28,000) for the best feature film to be shared equally between the director and the producer.

The memories and images of 24th IFFK linger. The informal conversations I had with acclaimed filmmakers like Gautam

Ghosh (Bengali), Prasanna Vithanage (Sri Lanka) and T.V. Chandran (Malayalam) resound. I want to write a book on T.V. Chandran. "Do it. Watch my films again and see if you can make any sense out of them", were his parting words.

Lalit Mohan Joshi is former BBC broadcast journalist, film historian, documentary filmmaker and director/editor South Asian Cinema Foundation, London.



REGINALD MASSEY'S BOOK PAGE

Ishika Bansal's My Diary and Other Poems

It is ironic but none the less a fact that decades after the British Raj left South Asia the English language flourishes there as never before. English is not only an essential link language but also the language of higher education. Many millions of South Asians speak, write and think in English and those who can afford it send their children to English medium schools. Universities in Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand are packed with academics and students from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Creative writing in English (poetry, fiction and non-fiction) of the highest class has been produced by South Asians since the time of Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) and Toru Dutt (1856-1877). Now however there are scores of writers such as the recently deceased Nobel Prize winner V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy who are internationally recognised.

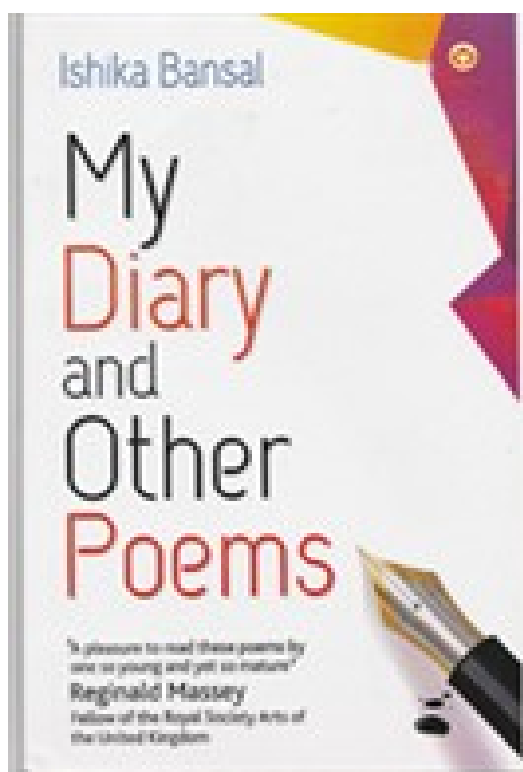
Lord Macaulay is often accused for having imposed English on the subcontinent. It is conveniently forgotten that the fight for independence was conducted largely in English. Gandhi (Inner Temple), Jinnah (Lincoln's Inn) and Nehru (Inner

Temple) were London trained barristers. Jinnah, the leader who created Pakistan, delivered his speeches in English and Nehru's celebrated 'midnight hour' radio broadcast was in English. Nehru's

English language. He has become a super celebrity thanks to his command of English. English is no longer an imposition; it has attained an important position and become an integral part of the Indian landscape. India's Sahitya Akademi (Academy of Letters) has accepted this fact and will soon be publishing an anthology of contemporary Indian poetry written in English.

I am happy to introduce Ishika Bansal who is a teenage student living in Agra. Her collection My Diary and Other Poems (Diamond Pocket Books, New Delhi) has been sent to me by Rajiv Khandelwal who is a well known English language poet. It is a pleasure to read these poems by one so young and yet so mature. Lack of space prevents me from quoting dozens of her poems. They are magnificent gems.

The Islamabad poet Ejaz Rahim is amazingly prolific and I look forward to his next collection. Poets tell the truth; politicians lie. Shelley declared that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. He was right.



Discovery of India is perhaps the best introduction to the culture and history of the subcontinent and today Shashi Tharoor's lectures and television programmes brilliantly convey the magic of the

TRAVELOGUE

Russia Revisited by Rehana Hyder

In November 2019 we flew over the Caspian and Black Sea to alight at ultra-modern Vnukovo airport - as impressive as once prevalent Sheremetyevo - and on par with the mega airports of anywhere.

Driving through the yet unsnowy expanses of silver birch interspersed with townships and complexes like IKEA, we arrived in Moscow itself - 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même' - even after seeing it in 2006: a metropolis that has mesmerised us since we lived there in the 1970s.

The 'Seven Sisters' in Stalinesque Gothic still stood as sentinels for the city; St Basil's in Red Square seemed to bless all Russia and enchant onlookers anew; the Kremlin with its ruby stars soared into the autumn sky. Like the little boy in Tchaikovsky's 'Nutcracker' one could close one's eyes to imagine all Moscow iced with sparkling snow: the fairytale effect of this most captivating of capitals.

We were driven through the rush hour traffic by the Pakistan Embassy personnel kindly deputed to receive us. At our Ambassador's Residence on central Sadova Kudrinskaya we revelled in revisiting our former home in the warm welcome of our gracious host and hostess, and their dedicated staff: Chef Latif and from Uzbekistan Nilofer and Zuviya, reminding us of their predecessors Rita and Aniya. I hoped to reconnect with long retired Embassy Chauffeur Mr Vladimir ('Volodya') and

Times. Distinguished Russians - from General Secretary Brezhnev himself to Cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova to academics such as Prof Olga Akhmanova - were encountered at glittering receptions or glimpsed (as we once imagined seeing the (in)famous Kim Philby) in that 'golden moment' when the lights dimmed in the rich red interior of the Bolshoi.

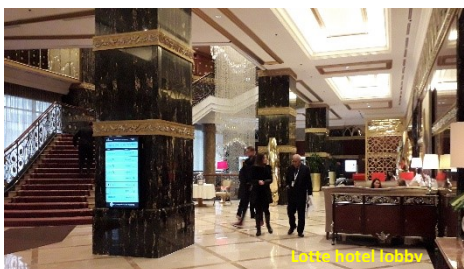
My elder brother Tariq, himself a diplomat specialising in Disarmament, was invited to the 2019 Moscow Nonproliferation Conference, a newer enterprise brainstormed by young Russian strategists, yet comparable to the more established Brussels conference in optics and organisation. Whatever the irony of countries and superpowers involved in occupation and oppression abroad now propagating global peace and harmony, the event itself was impressive. The opening or (aptly for Moscow!) icebreaking session was in the Foreign Office's classic prewar premises used on special occasions. The Conference itself took part in the stunning Lotte Hotel - all

brought back our 'Memories of Moscow', as my mother called her book on Russia.

We spent the next day re-exploring the city and buying gifts for family and friends back home. Starting with the pilgrimage to Red Square, we discovered a transformed 'GUM' department store perhaps rivalled in style and substance only by Harrods. 'Autumn Greetings!' proclaimed bunting and banners, fairy lights and 'Matrushkas', across the city centre.

Climate change has alas affected even Russia. Earlier the centralised heating switched on 'avtomaticheski' on 15 September, and one could attend a snow-covered 1 May Parade. Now Muscovites are nostalgic: 'This is not our winter!' they recently exclaimed.

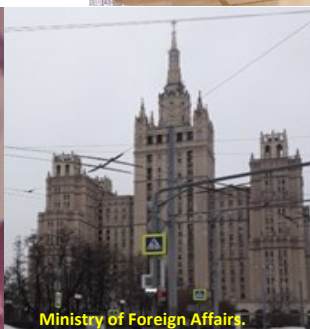
Although Russia like China, has joined the consumer-oriented universe while retaining its totalitarian construct, one missed the 'good old days' 'Back in the USSR' when utilities, goods and services, and education were free or affordable for all, plus amenities - eg. a month's paid holiday in resorts in the Crimea etc. These were remarkable achievements for countries the size of continents with populations to match. They were lost on the generally spoilt visitors from the West who - with the exception of the Americans, whose position was adversarial - came from easier managed smaller countries with small populations. These development-oriented successes of the Soviet era should have been emulated by ourselves in South Asia, where with the



Lotte Hotel lobby



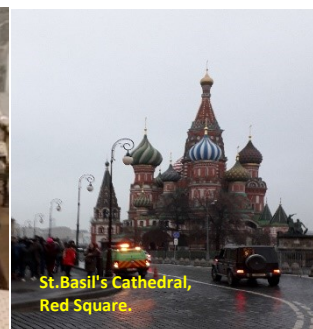
Rehana and Saad,
Moscow 1970s



Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Rehana, Ambassador Qazi &
Tariq at Pakistan Residence.



St. Basil's Cathedral,
Red Square.

family, last talked to telephonically over a decade ago from Islamabad.

The house, like most Embassies in Moscow, is over a century old with reception rooms panelled in marble. The Austrian Residence saw the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; the Italian abode - previously the German Mission - suffered an opening shot heralding WW2; the Tunisian Embassy housed Secret Police Chief Beria's dreaded dungeons. Our Residence less dramatically if more romantically was built by a businessman for his beloved.

Many were the magical evenings there experienced: including in the 1970s concluding the Cold War and commencing detente, when Moscow was studied with professionals of the highest calibre from the diplomatic and press corps of the world - my father's ambassadorial colleagues included future Indian PM IK Gujral; Jack Matlock and Bill Brown, USA; Mikhail Kapitsa, USSR; amongst his journalist friends were the Bureau Chiefs of AP, AFP, UPI, ZDF, NYT, US News, Washington Post, and The

granite, crystal, and comfort - the prolific Korean chain's international showpiece. The conference facilities were state of the art and the secretariat staff professionals who had researched their invitees thoroughly: when Tariq got up to ask Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov a question at the inaugural session, the FM was informed by the organisers that 'Ambassador Hyder's father was himself Ambassador here 40 years ago!' It was also a chance to reconnect with Tariq's Russian colleague from Seoul Ambassador Shubin; and his old Moscow friend & Harvard classmate Dr Vasily Vlasihin from the prestigious Institute of US & Canadian Studies and wife Tatyana, favourites also with our parents and younger brother Saad, then a student at Harrow.

At the concluding dinner - another elegant do arranged by conference organisers Anton and Dimitri - the buffet included the irresistible Russian 'zakuski' (starters) viz. caviare, 'smetana' (sour cream) and 'blini' (pancakes); sturgeon and walnut chicken; and of course the marvellous 'maroghna' (ice cream) that again

notable exceptions of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh education is anything but universal and population growth exponential.

To return to Russia, we attended a fabulous farewell dinner at our Residence by Ambassador K Qazi, like his wife Farzana and Moscow-born son Umar a fluent Russian speaker, who returned to Moscow in classical fashion as Head of Mission. Among his staff were young officers Ansar and Warda, who hopefully may follow in his footsteps. Qazi Sahib was Tariq's Deputy in Ashgabat in the 1990s when the TAPI - Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, & India - gas pipeline project was initiated. But that's another story, so 'Dosvidanya' for now!



Rehana Hyder who was born in London and educated at Oxford hails from a diplomatic family and has lived in many countries. She now resides in Islamabad, Pakistan.

POETRY CORNER

Every Time

by Ananya S Guha

Every time the mornings
return to a past in these
silouhettred way faring hills;
I cup my palms to gather rain
and mists of love,
I know everyday will be different
but a return bites memories and
a prayer wakes from slumber,
what are these voices?
who speaks as the sun mellows?
and a dash of mother earth
weeps at fallen skies;
tresses of blue skies weep
on mounds of earth
One more way of becoming what is
amidst ruminating hills and splintered
grey skies,
Dew drops are tears and the morning
shutters open, I retreat into open spaces
of habitat of living and walking cluttered
streets of signs , the limping dog
and a beggar who pleads for small
very small mercies, as once again
the hills open to uncluttered expanse
of overarching horizons.

Ananya S Guha has been born and brought up in Shillong, Meghalaya INDIA. His poems have been published in various journals, magazines, ezines in India and abroad such as: Gloom Cupboard, Asia Writes, Glasgow Review, New Asian Writing, Up The Staircase, othervoicespoetry.org, Indian Literature, Five Poetry Journal, Decades Review, Malaysian Poetic Chronicles. Currently he is Regional Director Indira Gandhi National Open University.



SHORT FICTION

The restless mourner

By Anita Nahal

As she turned to look back, someone was picking up the jasmine buds from where Priya had kept them and was placing them on top of the coffin, just where the closed section ended. Her friend's mom looked regal and a hushed calm had settled. She hurried out as she could feel wetness on her face.

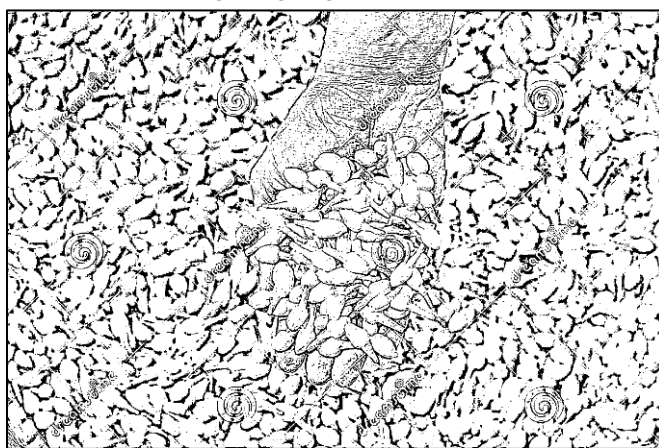
Almost two hours ago she'd arrived early, found parking, and awkwardly walked into the solemn ceremony. It was tough for Priya to attend a Christian funeral service. It was uncomfortable to attend most western ceremonies, period. She did not know the customs...what to do or not, though she googled a lot to get it right. And, then, it wasn't often that she thought of her single status, but in gatherings ... solemn or joyful, she felt invisible by herself...alone. She would watch couples holding hands, comforting each other, loving each other. In over a billion people in this world, "God isn't there one for me, who'd love me truly...not like in a game," she would mumble to herself. At other times she felt a certain strength that she and her son had done it...managed and thrived. The layers of immigrant adjustment...sieving, separating, accepting, rejecting, integrating, assimilating... and remembering the goals, the reasons for leaving, and the pressures of remaining good. She swung between the extremes and often let out a smile as if she was cool...cool with it all...no worries. "Chill, mom..." Avijeet would say.

Priya sat at one of the back rows, intermittently looking at the door for her friend to walk in, to console him. A mother's passing is not easy. She had lost her mom thousands of miles away. She went quietly...no complaints about the pain from cancer spreading like gangrene in her frail body.

Priya had brought a large handful of her mom's favorite flowers, jasmine buds. No buds of flowers can be as pretty as those of jasmynes. Found in abundance in her mom's garden in New Delhi, those that did not open, her mother would carefully pick up from the ground, and keep near her pillow in the night...the fragrance was soothing. Those that bloomed, she would employ as earrings. The stem is short but not too thick, and her mom could easily push them through her earring holes. Priya had to contact a

local Indian store to get her some as jasmine is rare to find in America.

But how was she to place the flowers in the Church? Where? At what point? When she went forward to view the body? In Indian Hindu cremations or funeral ceremonies afterwards, flowers were generally not taken. But an American friend said it would be fine to take flowers to the Church. To her surprise no one else had brought them, though many beautiful bouquets framed the casket. Organ music was playing in the background. Priya felt sad... "perhaps, I shouldn't have come..." she thought fidgeting with the tasseled ends



of her pashmina shawl.

As more and more people filtered into the Church, she felt increasingly claustrophobic. The ushers were saying in a loud and clear voice, "Family to the left and friends to the right, please." Why hadn't they said that when she had walked in? Arriving early is not always best, she thought. She had chosen to sit on the left as it was closer to the restroom. Priya tapped her feet, almost getting up a couple of times to move to the right.

Many folks in the church were looking at her, or that's what she thought. Perhaps wondering who she was? Or just wondering at all who were not family? Maybe she looked different? She had chosen to wear a cream color jacket with a black skirt, and cream and black blouse. She had seen on television that folks didn't necessarily wear black at Christian funerals.

She saw her friend walk in, quiet and distinguished in all black, even his tie was black. His eyes were facing downwards, and her heart cried for him. He was handsome...deep eyes...and broad shoulders that she wanted now to hug. In the few steps between him and Priya, she debated whether she should give the jasmine buds to him when she

hugged him? At the last moment, however, she forgot.

"I am so sorry, my dear," Priya whispered as she rose. "I know the emptiness is deep and will never go away, but your mom is at peace now. And she's here, right here with you, in your heart...she will always be." Priya placed her right hand on his heart. He held it briefly and smiled sadly.

"Call me, please anytime...I'm here for you." He nodded, "Thank you, thank you so much for coming today."

As he walked away, she remembered the jasmine buds. Priya had no choice now except to leave them on the bench where she was sitting or walk ahead and leave them near the casket. With her head down, not looking at anyone, her heart beating nervously, she got up and walked straight to the front. From the corner of her eyes she noticed a piano standing quite close to the casket. She rested the jasmine buds in a tissue paper on top of it. Seemed non-intrusive. Bowing over the open casket with a namaste in the Indian style, she prayed for her friend's mom...and her own. And then hurriedly walked out of the Church...couldn't

stay no more. Someone at the door asked, "Hey, are you okay?" She nodded and looked back once more. Her friend was surrounded by the warmth of his family. And she could feel the jasmine fragrance on her skin. As she reached out to wipe a sudden wetness, she couldn't make out if these were her tears or rain now spraying over the city in a steady drizzle. "God, in over seven billion people in this world, isn't there one for me, who'd love me truly...not like in a game?" she would mumble to herself.

Anita Nahal,
currently serving
as **Adjunct**
Professor, UDC,
Washington DC,
ia a poet,
children's
author, flash
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consultant, and former Assistant
Provost for International Programs,
Howard University, DC, and Associate
Professor of History, Sri
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India. Website:

anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal

SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSLETTER

Reading is the key

By Devi Rajab



There are some memories that linger long after the event. I once recall walking along the Thames river in the U.K. as it meandered along the edge of some beautiful homes. The voice of an adult teaching a young child to recite *The Daffodils* by William Wordsworth instantly made connections across continents." I wandered lonely as a cloud" wafted through the breeze and brought memories of my elocution lessons which my father arranged privately for all his children. He believed that proper speech opened doors and opportunities to minority children.. What struck me was the dedication of the educator and the eagerness of the child to learn. For it was not only the words of the poem that the child was being taught but the correct pronunciation and intonation which captured the beauty of the language as well. Indeed new research in the *Journal of Psychological Science* shows that students who consistently receive individualised reading instructions from the first through the third grades become better readers than those who don't. President Ramaphosa in his speech to the nation recently placed huge emphasis on reading. He said "The main thrust of our plan is to ensure reading for meaning across the curriculum, in all grades, and in all schools throughout the country. Our plan is to ensure that we teach all our learners to read well."

He also said: "Society needs to play its part so that all learners and young people become lifelong readers."

Today, we say to all South Africans that reading is not a portion of education, it

is education. We cannot succeed on our own as government to get the nation reading. That is because the first real teacher of any child is the parent. What is taught at home must be reinforced at school. Similarly, what is taught at school must be reinforced at home.

In keeping with the national drive this month to inculcate a reading and learning culture among all South Africans, various businesses distributed hundred of books to impoverished and deserving children. Reading promotion is not a new idea. Several long established organisations like READ, Project Literacy and ERA in both the public and private sectors have been promoting reading for years.

Despite the fact that reading is one of the fundamental building blocks of learning, many South African children cannot afford books which unlike countries like India cost much too much. In fact the books are so well priced in that country that street vendors knock on your car windows to sell the latest novels on the market. Now this is an example of reading nation. So the question arises as to why we still levy a tax on books when we know very well that becoming a skilled and adaptable reader enhances the chances of success at school and beyond. Reading is not just for school, it is for life. Reading, in all its variety, is vital to our becoming better informed and having a better understanding of ourselves and others. For these many reasons I have often stopped to advise the security guards who spend countless hours sitting and watching the clock tick away on night shifts in jobs that harm the mind, to read something everyday.

I recall as a high school student many years ago I won the Hofmeyer speech contest on account of a story told to me by my mother who had had only a standard 4 education 104 years ago. When she married my father, the constant refrain that accompanied her domestic duties was the injunction from my father for her to read. "Get out of the kitchen he would say and come and read a book". Or "What have you read today Amatha"? he would ask. Accordingly she would always carry a *Readers' Digest* in her handbag. From her humble readings she told me the story of Lord Byron which came in handy for my impromptu speech which challenged me with the task to speak on a most unusual topic: Are you more of a fool than you look or do you look more of a

fool than you are? I cited the incident involving the famous Lord Byron who was totally dumbstruck as a young student when he was faced with an examination. He presented a blank page with nothing written on it. And yet what an amazing brain lurked under the false impression of stupidity.

The absence of a culture of reading is a major concern in South Africa today. As things stand, South Africa has at least three million adults who are completely illiterate - unable to read the instructions on a medicine bottle or to complete a job application form without assistance. There are millions more people (estimates range from 5 to 8 million) who are functionally illiterate - unable to function adequately in the modern world due to under-developed reading and writing skills. Less well known is that there are tens of millions of South Africans who are literate able to read but who don't read! This a major consequence of not having a culture of reading.

Why do so many South Africans shy away from reading books and thus deny themselves a chance to gain a true education? And if indeed we suffer from lack of a reading culture, whose responsibility is it to develop such a culture? What are schools doing to inculcate the value of reading in their students? How do we go about changing peoples' attitudes towards reading? Schools do not teach us to read beyond examinations. For many who have completed school, the sight of a book conjures up ugly memories of being forced to cram and memorize stuff they never understood but which they needed to reproduce if they hoped to pass their exams. In other words, the very schools that are supposed to teach students the art and value of reading, only succeed in teaching them to hate the business of reading books. If they did not learn the value of books in school, and they did not learn that value from their parents, why would we expect them to develop a reading culture?

In their anxiety to teach students how to pass exams, teachers have only given them a day's supply of fish instead of teaching them how to do their own fishing for life.

Dr. Devi Rajab is a well-respected South African journalist and former Dean of Student Development at UKZN and the author of several books.

POETRY CORNER

Forecast

Debjani Chatterjee

*Amid incessant acid rain,
scattered showers of drones will fly.
Within a downpour of missiles,
a hailstorm of bullets will lie.*

I am no sphinx posing riddles,
no Sybil mouthing enigmas.
So, I say what is straightforward;
Shelley's grand tongue faded in myth;
Cassandra's daughter, doomed to preach
a wilderness of prophecies,
unheard in the urban wasteland, silenced
where a tornado of poets
raise their torrential voices.
The populace predictably
hunkers down, blankets over heads,
like bunkered monkeys unseeing,
unhearing, unspeaking, until
the killing frost has passed away.
Headless ostrich, tail in the air,
wasted History will repeat:

*Amid incessant acid rain,
scattered showers of drones will fly.
Within a downpour of missiles,
a hailstorm of bullets will lie.*



Debjani Chatterjee MBE FRSL has been called a 'national treasure' (Barry Tebb). She grew up in India, Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Egypt and Morocco, before settling in England. She has worked in industry, teaching, community relations and arts psychotherapy. An acclaimed poet, children's writer, translator, Olympic torchbearer and storyteller; her awards include an MBE, Sheffield Hallam University's honorary doctorate, and Word Masala's Lifetime Achievement in Poetry Award. Her 65+ books include: *Animal Antics* and *Do You Hear the Storm Sing?* More at www.dchatterjeewriter.simplesite.com

DANCE REVIEW

Never too late to shine By Girija Shettar

Subhash Viman Gorania was 23 years old and working in a supermarket when he spotted a flyer for hip-hop dance classes and decided to give them a go. Leap forward fifteen years and Subhash is a leader in his field of contemporary western and classical Indian dance.

In 2018, Subhash's profile became mainstream as the protagonist in *The Troth*, a groundbreaking, Edinburgh Fringe recognized dance drama portraying the lives of a group of Indian soldiers during World War I. Performed throughout the UK and in India, it received a standing ovation when performed before the Indian president Ram Nath Kovind at his official residence in Delhi.

to echo his unorthodox journey into dance.

Growing up, Subhash's ambitions lay far from the stage. Pursuing his desire to be a graphic design artist for Disney, one fateful day at university a fight broke out. Subhash intervened but sustained a head injury. When he eventually emerged from hospital, his ambitions had died.

Subhash's next move echoes through the fearless, truthful quality of his dance. He dropped out of university.

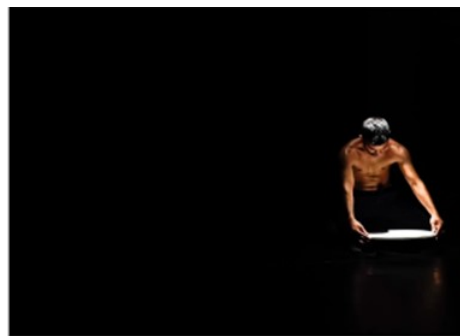
Inspired by the popular American street-dance film *You Got Served*, Subhash overcame his shyness and attended hip-hop classes but avoided looking in the full length mirror. What hooked him was how

Complete immersion in the dance is what gives a performance its emotional power, said Subhash.

He calls it surrender: "Once you surrender, the audiences start to go

on that emotional journey with you," he said.

After hip-hop, Subhash learned Bollywood dancing. He then joined a dance group, performed shows and started to teach. It was only two years later, when he was already 25 years old, that classical dance entered his life. First, the Flamenco-like north Indian style of Kathak, followed by the statuesque southern form of Bharatanatyam. A profound experience while watching a Bharatanatyam performance in Liverpool initially



The New York Times once described him as an "uncommon shape-shifter, never less than lucid".

Subhash's skills and free spirit are demonstrated with youthful aplomb in his early dance film *Immersion*. There's a charismatic Billy Elliot quality to his movement, a white-flame wildness of two worlds colliding that seem

dance allowed him to speak without talking.

"I am able to say what I feel purely by movement," said Subhash. "At times where there are no words, your mind goes into a form of trance and you learn to give in and let go. At this point you reach internal nirvana," he said.

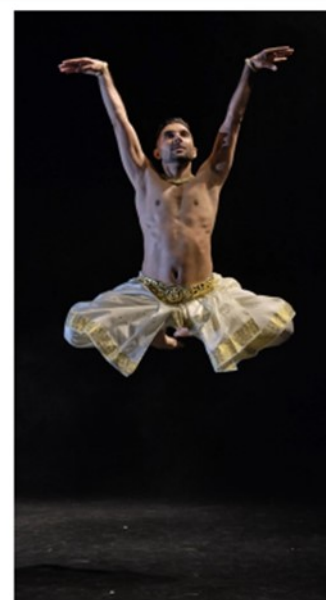
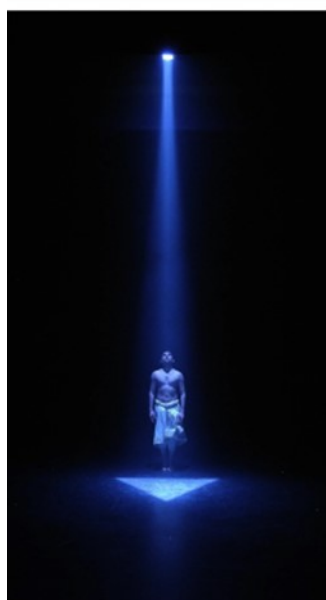
sparked his interest in Indian classical dance.

"I saw Priyadarsini Govind perform an abhinaya item and the expression she portrayed was so spectacular you felt as if Krishna was standing in that very room with her," he said.

Continued on page 15

Yogesh Patel honoured by Queen

In the Queen's New Year Honours List 2020, distinguished poet and our regular columnist Yogesh Patel received **'The Most Excellence Order of the British Empire' (MBE)**, for literature. He writes 'Through Poetic Lens', a regular column for Confluence. Yogesh, a recipient of many awards runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote South Asian diaspora literature. Previously, he received the 'Freedom of the City of London' award for his literary contributions. Last year, he was honoured at the New York University as a poet-of-Honour. We congratulate Yogesh on his latest achievement.



From p 14

Subhash is currently engaged in a deeper exploration of the Tanjavore style of Bharatanatyam while he continues to mix western and Indian forms to create his "own dance language".

Recipient of the prestigious New York Bessie award for his choreography of New York Apollo Theater's Ecstasy, Subhash regularly collaborates with top dancers and choreographers from around the world, such as Aakash Odedra, Gary Clarke, Sonia Sabri and Rukmini Vijayakumar.

FOOTNOTE:

Abhinaya - the expressive rather than the percussive parts of an Indian classical dance performance.

Link for Subhash's YouTube film Immersion: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_9e89w-TUo

Subhash established Morph Dance Company in 2015 and you can find out more about his work at his website: <https://www.morphdc.com> or follow him on Twitter @SubhashViman

Direction/editing/performance: @SubhashViman. Videography:

Abbi Neon. Music: @DeVsoMusic. Poetry: Vandana Mukesh Sharma. Spoken words: Karen Khanna.

A longer version of this article can be found on the author's website: <https://scientificethicalrevolution.wordpress.com/2020/01/07/no-mean-feat/>



Girija Shettar is a freelance writer based in London.

Short fiction

The angel in your life

By Sunil Sharma

Uncle Rai once told Rajiv that there were angels in the nearby space and they often took pity on the humans in need of comfort or guidance.

A crying Rajiv looked up but could see no creatures with white wings or cherubic faces.

"Sorry! I do not find anybody up there, except the sky, bare and dull."

"Patience, dear child. You will sure see them, if you want to see them." The all-knowing Uncle declared to Rajiv.

The latter nodded, forgetting the pain of the recent loss of grandmother---the only woman who loved the cripple in the joint family living in a small village, 150 km away from Patna.

"How do I know the angel is around? Any sign of his presence in my vicinity?" Rajiv asked the old man with grey beard and long hair and a hooked nose.

Uncle Rai smiled, patted the shaved head of Rajiv and whispered in his right ear: "Keep it as a secret, child. If an angel visits you, he leaves a feather or a bird's white plume on the floor of the room where you sleep."

"Have you seen them, the feathers?"

"Yes. Plenty of them."

"Where?"

"In my own room. Early mornings I find them, whenever I am in distress. A mysterious visit of a hovering angel, confirmed by a feather, on the bed or floor."

And Uncle Rai smiled at the wide-eyed Rajiv.

"Will an angel visit me?" Rajiv asked.

"Yes. Good angels always visit good souls. We must read the signs."

"Are there bad angels also?"

"Yes. Plenty. They entice you. Make you do bad things."

"And good angels?"

"Well, they make you do good things only."

"I want good angels."

"Sure. Any good angel passing by would hear your silent prayers---and answer them promptly."

.

Next morning, waking up early, Rajiv got the promised evidence---a bird- feather.

He could not believe his eyes.

A tiny feather near his creaky charpoy in the corner corridor, near the cattle shed.

He rushed to the Uncle's room and showed him the evidence. Uncle Rai shrieked with delight. "I told you good angels visit good souls. One of them heard your prayers and visited you during the night."

Rajiv was enchanted.

Subsequently for many months, early mornings, Rajiv would find feathers near his bed and therefore feel uplifted in an indifferent household. In fact, he was thought as a burden by the joint family but the good angel showed the way for the child who got interested in math and found his way ahead in life by topping the university and later on finding a job of a professor in the same department there. Remarkable journey for a boy whose father had walked out on his family of three children and an illiterate wife! There were persistent rumors that the man had married another woman and got a big house and family in some far-off city.

Rajiv had always felt humiliated and betrayed by such reports.

Being the eldest, he felt small before the taunting relatives.

Gradually, he got the sisters married off. Got married to a fellow professor. Looked after his mother till her last breath. Working hard, the couple earned enough to own a large apartment and car and could send their only daughter to a reputed school.

One evening, seven years ago, he rushed back to the village and found Uncle Rai dying. Uncle wanted to meet his favorite nephew. They talked about the angels and many other things late into the night. Next morning, the bachelor uncle died peacefully in Rajiv's grieving arms. Like a dutiful son, he performed all the rites.

Before leaving, he disposed off his uncle's large collection of books on various subjects and in that process of de-linking with a painful past in that house, in bad shape now, Rajiv discovered a tattered notebook left by the dead man, written in a neat hand---and a secret that again altered his life.

It was a one-liner, at the end of the random jottings on philosophy and science by a talent unrecognized by the same system that denied subjectivity, decent job and dignity to many talents like Uncle Rai.

It said: I wish there were real angels in my life!

And few faded feathers in an old bag that revealed another side of the divine encounters.

This left Rajiv totally shattered.

And a question, unanswered: Why did he play games with a trusting nephew?

The answer came years later. In an almost identical re-play of his own life!

"Uncle Rajiv?"

"Yes."

"You once told me about angels in our lives and the way you moved forward under their silent watch."

"Right."

"I tried but saw no angels."

Rajiv smiled and patted the curly head of his nephew.

"Try harder."

The teenager smiled. Trusting---as Rajiv once was.

Rajiv was visiting his sister's family---brother-in-law got fired a year ago due to a disability caused by a road accident. Sister gave tuitions. The struggle was grim. The eldest Rohit was brilliant but could not afford college fees. Rajiv helped them out financially. In Rohit, he saw the early Rajiv.

The next morning, a beaming Rohit said, "You were right Uncle Rajiv! There are angels out there, trying to help humans!"

"How?" asked Rajiv, eyes wide.

"See this feather. The sign from the heavens, as you had said."

The teen showed the white feather, eyes gleaming---happy after so many months of doubt and struggle.

"Oh! Yes. Right."

"And a dream I saw."

"What was that, dear? Tell me, dear."

"An angel urging me to work hard. To never give up. In a voice that sounds like you."

"Oh!" the Uncle glowed. "You promise to me you will never despair and work out dreams, despite the odds."

"Right. I will never give up on life."

And they both smiled.

For a second, Rajiv thought he saw Uncle Rai smiling from behind the clouds.



Sunil Sharma, an academic administrator and author-critic-poet--freelance journalist, is from suburban Mumbai, India.

He has published 21 books so far, some solo and some joint, on prose, poetry and criticism. He edits the monthly, bilingual Setu: <http://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>

<http://www.dr.sunilsharma.blogspot.in/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Minotaur-Sunil-Sharma/dp/8181522826>

Rabindranath Tagore's The Post Office: a missive of hope? Bashabi Fraser

Rabindranath Tagore's life (1861-1941) covered eight decades, of which one can say seven were extremely productive as a writer, artist and pragmatist. But his long life also meant that he suffered from several bereavements, losing many of his loved ones. The greatest blow came when his youngest son, Samindranath (b. 1896) contracted cholera on a school trip to Monghyr, and all efforts to save him failed. x His little Sami died in 1907. The poet found it difficult to accept the fact that he, the father was still alive, while his little children (his daughter, Renuka died in 1903) had been robbed of the opportunity to realise their full potential. Rabindranath spent many sleepless nights, trying to make sense of his loss. It was on one such sleepless night that he had a revelation as he looked at the stars. For the first time in years, he felt he understood what freedom meant. Could death be an end to life, or could death be the beginning of a metaphysical truth? Did a person who died leave this world forever, or did s/he leave something of her/himself behind, having touched so many lives? So was death a release that was almost spiritual? Do those we love remain with us always? These probing thoughts which attempted to unpack the meaning of life and death led to the writing of his play, *Dak Ghar* (The Post Office) in 1912, a year before he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The play is ostensibly about a young boy who is seriously ill, who wants to go and play outside with all the other boys, but who is confined by the prescription of an orthodox physician, a traditionalist, to his room. The poignancy of death and the meaning of loss take on metaphysical meaning for Tagore, seeking the meaning of life itself as he had to cope with personal loss.

Is Amal's imminent death more important than the few years of his lived life, in which he meets people, makes friends of strangers and instils a sense of the love and a joy in one's work, of life itself and the wonder of this world in others? Rabindranath does not make the play a tragedy, as it is not clear whether at the end Amal has died, is on the verge of death or is sleeping the deep sleep of an ailing boy. What is important is that Amal in his lifetime meets and makes friends with humble people like the *doi wala* (the itinerant curd seller), the watchman, the postman, the flower girl, Sudha and the neighbourhood boys, and manages to win over everyone, young and old, including the village headman who is the acknowledged universal bully. Amal's universal appeal comes from his unspoilt innocence, his romantic idealism, his curiosity of what lies beyond the mountain and the adventures life offers, which he cannot experience firsthand as he is confined because of his unexplained illness.

He makes all the people he meets see the romance of their lives, discover the joy in their work, and he makes each individual feel unique. In Amal, human sympathy, imagination, the restlessness of the adventurer and the discoverer are evident. He is poetic in his appreciation of people, life and nature. He has the rare quality of touching and transforming all those who come into contact with him. His is the spirit of freedom that the conservative physician fails to understand and which he prevents from thriving. Amal doesn't want to be bound by books, if that means he has to stay confined at home as Madhab, his adoptive father tells him he should aspire to do.

In this unhappening place, a plush new Post Office is built, waving its lively yellow flag in front of Amal's house. It becomes significant for Amal as it is the King's Post Office, the place where thousands of letters come, are sorted and then go out like birds, flying beyond the horizon. These missives are symbols of communication between people separated by time and space. Amal wishes he could be a postman and carry letters to far off places and bring messages back again. And there is a letter, Amal is told, that will come to him from the King. Amal waits for this significant letter which becomes the symbol of hope. Gaffer/Fakir's dual role takes on the deliberate indulgence in roleplay, flouting the physician's literal interpretation of the scriptures in a message that the Fakir brings of liberation as crucial to the realization of dreams, and of the human right to be allowed to dream. Even the village headman finally comprehends this and concedes to the royal postman's message to Amal, fulfilling a dream wish for a sensitive boy.

The play has been translated into several languages and staged across the world. But perhaps the most significant production was in wartime Poland under German occupation. The play's poignancy held a crucial message of hope and dignity in the face of imminent death in 1942 Warsaw during the Second World War. The Nazi occupation of Poland had seen the banning of Rabindranath's work as the product on a 'non-Aryan'. However, The Post Office's message of universal humanism was significant for Dr Janusz Korczak, a Polish doctor, educator and writer who headed a Jewish orphanage for children in the Jewish ghetto of Warsaw. Korczak was a prolific writer and his work covers 16 volumes written in Polish. Flouting the German ban, Dr Korczak had the Jewish orphans stage The Post Office at the orphanage to a select audience on 18 July 1942, four days before the Jewish inhabitants of the Ghetto were to be taken to the concentration camp. The audience was deeply moved by the performance and the metaphoric meaning of

the play resonated with them in the grimness of their existence. As Shlomi Doron says, 'By constructing a public event around a ... play Korczak sought to convey clear messages to the people around him ... he demanded the right of the children to honour and to life, but also the right to die with dignity' and 'accept the angel of death with composure'.

In 2011, during the 150th anniversary celebrations of Rabindranath's birthday, Valerie Doulton staged *The Post Office* in London. In her Introduction to the production, Doulton says, "Imagine this is India in London in 2011. I'm here to tell a Bed Time story to a child. That Bed Time story is 'The Post Office' by one of India's greatest writers, Rabindranath Tagore. You will hear our story and see its imaginative embodiment as our child experiences it. Our setting is an ordinary child's bedroom anywhere in London in 2011.... And somewhere in this great City ... a child is listening to and experiencing 'The Post Office' ... and entering into imaginative conversation with the characters' The stage play was a success, having the appeal of a bedtime story as it hovers between dream and waking.

In 2011 Doron said 'today' both Rabindranath and Korczak's work 'is studied in schools and universities in India, Israel, Japan and England'. As we consider *The Post Office* in 2020, it remains to be seen if Rabindranath's ideas on education are still respected and adopted in the coming decades in his home country, incorporating Amal's message of hope and dignity.

Doron, Shlomi, "Learning to Accept the Angel of Death with Equanimity", Korczak and Tagore in Warsaw Ghetto" in Biswas, Amalendu, Christine, Marsh, Kalyan, Kundu (Eds.). Rabindranth Tagore: A Timeless Mind. (The Tagore Centre, UK and Delhi, ICCR. 2011), pp. 74-83.

Valerie Doulton, 'Introduction' to the production of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*, London, 2011.



Bashabi Fraser (Ph.D) is an award winning poet and academic with several publications. She is Professor Emerita and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies, Edinburgh Napier University. Bashabidi is the Chief Editor Gitanjali and Beyond. Her recent publications include a biography: Rabindranath Tagore, (2019)

Malathy's Musings

Learning and Culture

By Malathy Sitaram

When my sister and I were young girls attending a convent school in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), we had tests in a particular subject every week and examinations at the end of each term. Studying for these wasn't very painful. Our parents - in particular my mother- would ensure that we were fed and watered and not disturbed. Our education was of paramount importance and received a huge commitment from her. Her efforts were endorsed every year when my sister and I carried off many prizes on Speech Day.

At meal times, our father would tell us about his student days in Madras when he had to study till late into the night by the light of a candle or paraffin lamp. As the eldest in a large family, a great deal was expected of him. He qualified as an accountant and got a job as a civil servant, sending a large part of his earnings to his birth family to pay for the education of his younger brothers as his father had passed away. This practice continued even after his marriage. Years later his brothers were well settled and prudent marriages had been arranged for his two sisters. At last my mother could stop complaining about the drain on the family finances. This was a common scenario in many households. Family obligations were sacred and for the most part, observed religiously.

A huge portrait of the goddess, Saraswati hung in the small prayer room in our house. She was depicted in the traditional way as a white, Hellenic beauty, wearing an exquisite pale green silk sari with gold paint on its border, luminous in pearly jewellery,

plucking the strings of the graceful 'tambura'.

Saraswati is the goddess of Learning and the Arts, the patron of students,

on whose feast day, we were excused from school. In the morning at home, we children carried our books, our writing cases and even our satchels and placed them on the floor under the benign gaze of Saraswati. My mother would bring her sewing machine from the verandah to join the books and musical instruments - the tambura and the harmonium, she would spend most of the morning reading Sanskrit verse from a book dedicated to the goddess. I felt distant from this ceremony due to my Anglicisation in our English medium



Catholic convent school as well as my prolific reading of English novels. When all the lengthy prayers had been recited, we could have our festive lunch complete with a special dessert.

We moved on from school to university - the done thing.

Although we were bright, our family's relatively modest means meant marriage, not M.A.s. Bitterly we remarked that our B.A.s were mere passports to marriage. Our

mother urged us to carry on with studies after marriage as so many other women were doing. Her duty was to find us husbands who had the means to indulge our academic cravings. As for careers, there weren't any women of our class who had any! My elder sister married an engineer and moved to Calcutta (now Kolkata), and a few years later I too left my parental home for Burma after marriage.

After a year in Burma which was my husband's home, he passed the British Chartered Accountancy

examination, having lived in London for a few years. He applied for a job with a British oil company in Assam where we spent five years after which he got a job in London with the same company. Here, I enrolled in a college in London and worked for a degree in Education after receiving which, I began my school teaching career. I became conscious of cultural differences in British and Indian attitudes to education and learning. In India the competition for places in higher education is high. In Britain in the sixties and seventies, it was mainly middle to upper class children who sought a University education. Not so now which is progress! In N. America and Canada, report after report proclaims the superior achievement of the children of South and South East Asian origin who seek to obtain Ph.Ds.

Speaking for Indians, I am not surprised.



Malathy Sitaram was the first Asian to teach English in Wiltshire Schools and simultaneously, the first Asian to be appointed to the Swindon Bench of Justices of the Peace. Now retired, she is just as busy.

Whole Kahani

Galvanise Gloss By Kavita A Jindal

What if there has been no turning point in your life for twenty-two years? You wait for something to spur you into a change. There have been fluctuations, and movement, but no critical moments. Never have you thought: *My Life Starts Now*. Not even when you decided to live alone after having spent ten years in different flats with a variety of flat-mates. That decision was easy; not pivotal. It was what you preferred and you are content on your own. But where is the big plot of your life?

You've believed in letting life unfold. Not for you frenetic stabs at this or that. Life has ribboned out, but rather distractedly. When you look up from the steering wheel of your imaginary buttercup convertible as it rolls along a green and pleasant land you don't see any huge signs marking junctions or routes you could take instead. The highway glides over vale and hill, then loops to you don't-know-where.

The real bus you're sitting in this afternoon wheezes on as you take in the cityscape from the top deck. The bus is hibiscus red, the roads and pavements are grey but it is summer and this year it is hot, people are a riot of colour. Those ditsy floral dresses, those linen shirts, those wide pastel culottes, those man-sandals. The bus inches along the jammed road. They will pedestrianise this thoroughfare one day, the city mayor's office has a plan, because see how the street is rammed with shoppers. You gaze down at the glitzy store windows. It's then the slogan catches your eye. **THIS LIPSTICK WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE.**

Who allowed that? The Advertising Standards Authority let that pass? Can a lipstick change your life? Heck, can it change anything?? Can it change your summer a teeny-weeny bit??? You lean forward, press the button so the 'Bus stopping' sign lights up with a ting. You run into the department store and prowling the cosmetics counters until you find the brand emblazoned under the slogan. Brand L. The heat is making you crazy, 30 degrees in London, yes, it's making you pathetic, and making the pavements sigh, but never mind. You stand by the counter and say to the girl with triple-mascaraed lashes: 'I want to change my life.'

and eye up the round smudges of colour. Your finger hovers over a vivid pink. Let me guess, you think, Watermelon Squeeze? Candy Too Sweet? Profound Rose? You have form here, you know about these things.

'This?' The sales assistant doubtfully dabs the rosy stickiness on your lips.

'Oh,' her voice rises in surprise, 'This bright colour does suit you.' Who is she convincing?

'I'll take it. It will change my life. Lipstick can do that.'

She looks at you sharply; are you mocking the brand or cosmetics in general? You ask: 'What's the name of this colour?'

She hands you a shiny packaged tube. You peer at it. *Judicious Use*. You give up, your shoulders heave and rock.

'Are you alright, darling?' A light touch on your hand. She's not sure if you're crying or laughing. At this point you're not sure either.

'What kind of name is that?' You give a little hiccup. 'That's a stupid name for a lipstick.'

She holds out her hand for the offending item.

'Two years back I created names for lipsticks,' you tell her as you return it. 'It took hours, no, days, for one season's line. For brand Y.'

'That's such a good brand,' she responds.

'Pink Bluff, Poppy Chase, Catalina Nudie, now those are names for lipsticks. The brand founder loved the list I came up with.'

'Do you want to try another shade?'

'No!'

She retreats behind the counter but you can't stop telling her.

'And then I did the next season. Jaisalmer Bride, Sahara Sky, Balinese Sunset. But I never felt like buying any of those lipsticks, you know. I just stuck to my usual.'

'Are you buying this? Is there anything else you'd like?'

'Daring Rosie, Bolder Goldie, Cheekier Mauve. I must've named forty lipsticks and glosses.'

She takes this as acquiescence that I'm a hooked consumer. 'That'll be sixteen pounds, please. Do you have a store card?'

'Plum Perfection, Flawless Coral, Immaculate Sex.'

'Very nice indeed. Tap your credit card here please.'

'Then the founder-lady wanted something new. She liked to travel she said. So I came up with places with Y. To flatter her and her eponymous brand. Yakeshi, Yangan, Yamuna.'

'Do you need directions to anywhere else in the store? There's tea and cake in the café.'

What does she think? You're not an old lady who needs tea! You're only forty. Alright, plus two. 'York, Yaroslavl, Yazd.'

'The exit is that way,' she points. She hands you a cute little silver bag with your cute little lipstick in it.

When you go out the next Saturday, just for a wander in your zone, you wear your perky 'Use Judiciously'. Who named this? How did they get away with it? Droll but if it's part of a *This Lipstick Will Change Your Life* campaign this name doesn't cut it. You wonder if you should've bought another shade, one with a better name! 'Slay Dragons.' Did somebody do that already?

You ask for your turmeric latte at the local café and you grin pinkly, 'Hi Naomi, am I stuck in a rut?'

'Hi.' The young woman at the till is drooping in the heat, but her smile stays cheery. 'I don't know you well enough to know.' Oh my. A considered answer.

'Same order every time,' you point to your drink and your almond croissant.

'You're not the only one.' It's too hot in the café. This never happens, but it's happening this July. You sit out on the bench under a tree, sipping, nibbling, perhaps nipping at life. Life is using you judiciously. It's not wearing you out or treating you bad. In your case it's just trundling along, not doing much. Leaving life to unfold may not have been the right move. But you trusted in life. And prayers. And now look.

An elderly couple seat themselves on the bench on the opposite side of the road. The lady's skirt flares, her varicose veins are out to catch the summer air. His short-brimmed straw hat barely keeps the sun off the red tip of his nose. They munch into their sandwiches. You smile across at them, you feel indulgent. You might want a sweet man by your side were you ever to turn into a scented old lady, but you don't want to be them. Not him, not her. You want to be you. Changing your life, or not, one judicious lipstick at a time.



Kavita A. Jindal is a prize-winning writer whose work has appeared in anthologies and journals worldwide and been broadcast on BBC Radio, Zee TV and European radio stations. Her work has been described as "witty and wry, with a steely heart". She is the author of two poetry books: *Patina* and *Raincheck Renewed*. She won the *Foyles/Vintage 'Haruki Murakami' Prize* in 2012 and the *Brighthorse Prize for the Novel* in 2018. She is the co-founder of The Whole Kahani writers' collective.
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Book review

Chandani Lokuge's 'My Van Gogh' reviewed by Sharon Rundle

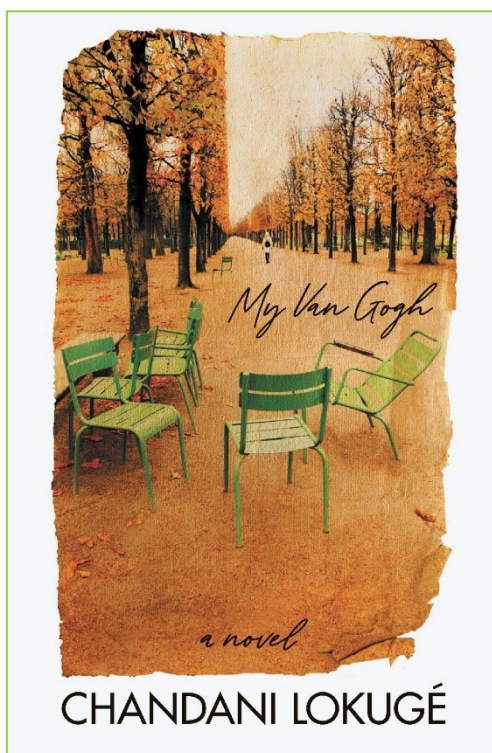
'My Van Gogh', the latest novel from Chandani Lokugé, hits the ground running from the start. The sound of a kick drum and stamping feet, 'Thud, thud, thud ... They were coming for him, charging down the stairs'. Shannon cowering in his apartment, seeks an escape. We soon discover that Shannon has difficulty distinguishing dreams and nightmares from reality. In this sense he is an unreliable narrator. As a counterpoint, other characters tell parts of the story revealing their inner lives and alternative perspectives.

The central character, Shannon begins the narrative in stream of consciousness style. As his thoughts and dreams are revealed, it becomes clear that he is tormented by memories of the disappearance of his beloved Maman, when he was a boy. In Shannon's mind, Maman's disappearance is connected to the shattering of glass and an injured bird. She had cornflower blue eyes and came from Alsace in France. He yearns to see her, while at the same time catching sight of her everywhere. He has become a lost soul whose visual and aural disturbances cause the solidity of his present world to dissolve.

Shannon's inability to face life is compounded when he fails to submit his university assignment on Van Gogh. He returns to his family farm outside of Melbourne. His reunion with his taciturn father, combined with the resurfacing of troubling and mysterious memories of his missing mother, threaten to send Shannon into deep depression. He is reminded of Maman's tales of her great grandfather Grand-Pierre and his bravery in battle. Shannon leaves the farm to join his brother Guy, in Paris. He takes with him copies of Van Gogh's letters and Grand-Pierre's war memorabilia,

The following chapters, set in France, are narrated by Guy and Julie. Guy has separated from Julie, and we learn of more loss, grief and absence. Guy and Julie are left behind when Shannon travels to Alsace to search for the resting place of his revered Grand-Pierre and to discover whether he was real, or a figment of Maman's imagination.

When Shannon reaches Alsace, he joins a tour group, Nelly the appointed guide interrupts the narrative adding her telling observations: 'Shannon, looked like a lurking presence that might at any moment melt into the forest ... She noticed his sensitive fingers and the damaged nails. His slight stoop, as if he spent sleepless nights ... Nelly couldn't find it in her heart to ask him what had happened to the child he'd been'. Liliane/Lilou is part of the tour group. 'Nelly felt intangible vibes between them'. As Lilou seeps into Shannon's consciousness, her voice surfaces as narrator and we learn her story and response to him.



Shannon leaves for Alsace alone but along the way reunites with Lilou at Saint-Hippolyte, where they spend time together before going their separate ways. Lilou, whose parents have 'strayed away and abandoned her', for which she feels responsible, has her own ghosts to lay.

In Arles, Shannon can't forget Lilou. Soon, he realises it is Lilou's voice that he hears, and Lilou's scent, not that of his mother, which lingers, while memories of Maman recede. In this regard, the novel is an intriguing study of the effects of grief and

abandonment. Many readers will have experienced the phenomenon of thinking they hear, see, catch the scent or feel the presence of someone they have recently lost. Shannon has harboured these memories for so long that losing them is disorienting and alarming.

As he sits opposite the yellow café that Van Gogh painted, his spirits are lifted by the light and colour. He feels spiritually close to the artist. Later, at Place Lamartine, Shannon is transported by Van Gogh motifs and feels that he is 'living and breathing a Van Gogh dream'. In the grounds of the hospice Saint-Paul, Shannon experiences a strange epiphany 'as though the painter pulled at his soul'.

Lokugé leaves readers to come to their own conclusions about what is real and what is not. She creates an illuminating backdrop of Van Gogh's Expressionist art and motifs, a dreamscape in which Shannon connects with the sublime and begins to heal. Instead of drawing all the threads together into a neat resolution, this intriguing and highly original novel offers possibilities. The final chapter, which is narrated by Julie, hints at a pleasing development in her relationship with Guy. As with Lokugé's previous novels, 'My Van Gogh' concludes with imagery that offers a consoling sense of hope.

My Van Gogh by Chandani Lokugé, published Arden, Australian Scholarly Publishing, November 2019. ISBN 9781925984170

<https://scholarly.info/book/my-van-gogh/>



Dr Sharon Rundle has co-edited four Indo-Australian anthologies of short fiction published in Australia and India. Her short stories, essays, articles and reviews have been widely published. She is a registered professional member of the Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd) and served on the Board of Directors NSW Writers' Centre.

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Through the Poetic Lens

By Yogesh Patel

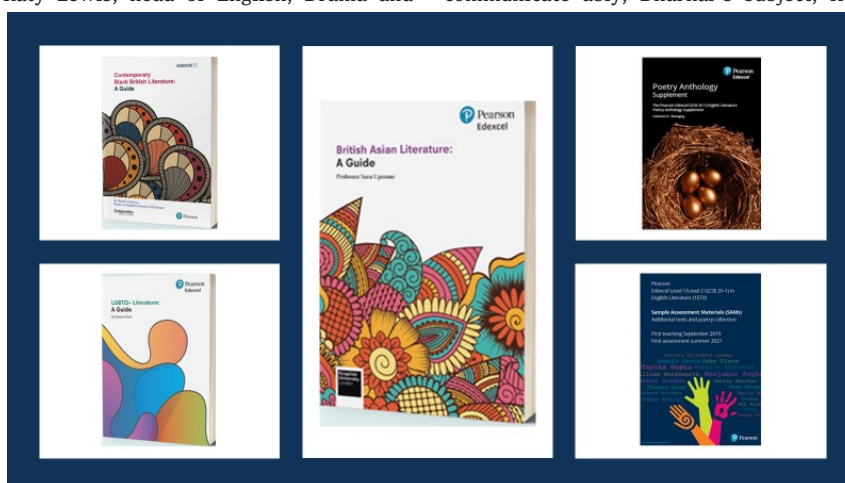


Belonging

Download the selection from this link:

<https://tinyurl.com/rhbaqg3>

When any well-disposed literary platform declares that it is focusing on diversity, I feel troubled with these questions: About what kind of diversity are they talking? Who are the decision-makers? What special knowledge and wider reading these decision-makers have in this area? From the experience of serving at the regional level in big businesses, I am always reticent about the gap large organisations create between a receptive intention and the public announcements of already predetermined plans as intentions. In the first case, the consultation exists, in the other, only the marketing of an idea survives. Still, to understand the ongoing debate, it was great to be invited by Katy Lewis, head of English, Drama and Languages, and her team to a launch of Edexcel's latest excursion in the selection of the diverse poetry offered through their Poetry Anthology subtitled Collection D – Belonging. In the UK, teachers choose what to teach from the list provided by one of the five examination boards. Edexcel is one of five examination boards in the UK.



The conference turned out to be dynamic and surprising. Afar what I had envisaged, it was about encouraging students and teachers to read more diverse texts themed around belonging. The national curriculum has to steer away from the politics of culture, cast, colours, religions, etc. The selection can be challenging but not controversial. However, it may have a controversial background. It can be silently prescriptive with the carefully prepared classroom support. Belonging, the latest selection of poems, is thus a wider selection taking in the popular poets only. This is where it can open up a bit more. This was my first interaction with the national curriculum platform. The hall was packed with keen students and teachers. Different from the literary conference, the primary address, therefore, was to this group. Their new serving of three guides was the focus: British Asian Literature, Contemporary British Literature and the LGBT literature.

While **Jamila Gavin**, a children's author, talked about her duality of cultures inherited from Indian father and English mother, she highlighted difficulties faced as an Asian writer. Inspirational poet Raymond Antrobus, who has won many major awards last year rose above his handicap as a deaf poet, displayed the confidence of his background in teaching and spoken-word-performance. He talked about how even poets like Ted Hughes can make a mistake in understanding deaf people. As he read his poem, *Jamaican British*, he too, with his dual cultural heritage of Jamaican father and English mother, expressed the crisis of belonging precisely. 'Some... would deny I am Jamaican British//They think I am black when I say Jamaican British//...English boys... made me choose: Jamaican, British?' See the wordplay and meaning of the expressed ethnicity changing through contexts. In a struggle to decipher the 'belonging', he skates into denial as well: '...told Dad, I hate dem, all dem Jamaicans – I'm British.' The

last lines of the poem find refuge in creating own meaning of the identity he struggles to comprehend: '...how do I serve/Jamaican British?//When knowing how to war is Jamaican British.'

Imtiaz Dharkar, a winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2014, has just begun her appointment as the Chancellor of Newcastle University from this January. She was not present, but the collection includes her intriguing poem '*In Wales, wanting to be Italian*'. She takes the boiling pot of 'Belonging' further. 'What is it called, living in Glasgow,/dying to be French, dying to shrug and pout/and make yourself understood/without saying a word?' If according to Antrobus Ted Hughes could not understand that a deaf child can communicate ably, Dharkar's subject, from the other side

expresses how difficult it is to communicate an identity! Dharkar also has an Indian background to offer: 'Have you ever felt like that being /in Bombay, wanting to declare,/like Freddy Mercury, that you are/from somewhere like Zanzibar?' The monoculture literary pursuit in the

classroom can never be a fully interesting space if it fails to include colourful aspects of history and life that all students make up in any classroom. For me, these two poems alone make a strong point about diversity.

Benjamin Zephaniah is always vocal and jabs engaging questions students should always ask in their study of diverse literature. In his *We Refugees* he declares 'We all can be refugees/We all can be told to go,/We can be hated by someone/For being someone.' It takes only a mad leader, according to him to make refugees out of us.

Belonging - as Dharkar and Antrobus show us - is not an ostensive expression. It has facets that imply more meaning in different contexts. Diversity literature needs to go there. This collection is successful in getting it right. However, I do worry about two things: Selection based on the popularity of poets and the advice taken from the Poetry Society, which is random in its work, with no expertise in any particular aspects. I mean it is not even a research centre. Therefore, Edexcel would have done a better job by looking elsewhere. In that spirit, I am in a constructive and supportive dialogue with them and the other examination boards. With the wider international awareness of the diaspora poetry at Word Masala Foundation, we are better equipped to advise in this specific area. Hence, I am also working on publishing a sweeping fresh anthology for students to allow them to tap into a greater range of diverse poems and poets. I am lucky to have some keen and listening ears at the text-selection level.

In the Queen's New Year Honours List 2020, **Yogesh Patel** received The Most Excellence Order of the British Empire, MBE, for literature. He runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote SA diaspora literature. Widely published, he has received the Freedom of the City of London.

MEMOIR

GOTTA BE JEWISH

by Cyril Dabydeen

Scraggly-looking with a brazen manner he is here at the Miami Book Fair International in wide-open, sprawling space. Books galore. Whoa! Authors, publishers, booksellers, publicists: I call them aficionados. The images come to me, or at me, in my wayward look-around. Thinking, imagining--indeed at the Miami-Dade Community College campus venue with ubiquitous eateries in this lunch-hour breakaway-time. Not giveaway-time, d' you know? This man comes close to me and scoffs. Really at me?

Fritters and other eatables, the array of tables, food stalls with delectable aromas around. Time to eat--not to read. Gastronomy, ah! His demeanour is almost arresting, he has me thinking with immediacy: Latin-Mexican immigrant, yeah. A wannabe author?

Let him write about another refugee-boat escaping from Havana, Castro's Cuba. Not from, well...Haiti? Who's the real outsider in Miami anyway, America's most diverse city?

See, I'm from Canada with my own outsider instinct. An artist in stride, I'm here as a guest-writer. But who's he? Now whose homing ground are we talking about?

This man in terra incognita, I surmise. I bite into my sandwich.

He mumbles, entreating me. "Can I have some change?"

"Change?"

"To buy lunch."

Not saying por favor? Importuning a poor sucker like me.

Food and drink--the many stalls before us. Hot dogs, wieners, meats hanging on rafters. Onion and garlic smells are enticing. Banana fritters, fried plantains. Delicious pastries.

Really beseeching me this man is. "Why me?" I hurl at him.

"Because you are, er..."

What?

"You look..." He glares.

I wait.

"Jewish," he says.

Really Jewish?

Stereotypes flood into me. Shakespeare's Shylock and Charles Dickens' Fagin. Physiognomy, my proboscis, sort of.

He feigns pain, hunger. Not a genuine book-reader, this man. No consanguinity, see.

Yes, why me? Because I've come from Canada? Topography mixed in with identity.

I am yet in my outsider's guise. Swarthy-complexioned I am, sure. Sephardic...?

People moving around, a motley crowd, in a genuine Hispanic atmosphere. Groupies,

mostly women mixing with writers, artists. Aficionados, I call them. Novelists, poets, those of other literary genres. Memoir-writers posturing with literary non-fiction. Here everyone's trying to make "connection" with publishers, agents, publicists. Christ!

This man's lips curl in, askew. Demanding of me--my being Jewish, sure.

I think about the best literary genre for him, that suits him, with my own unpredictability--believe me. A creative soul, without pretension, he is.

Who's really hungry now?

US Poet Laureate Robert Collins maunders around. Crime-and science-fiction writers like Scott Turow also saunter. I keep up my own outsider status while taking in more culinary smells. Not book-smells. Not what this man's asking, or acknowledging, as he too sniffs the onion and garlic aromas. I bite into my hamburger, thinking: Where does inspiration come from? Write-write--until you drop dead, a guest speaker had said, like his impromptu words aimed at me--but not at this strange man?

Yes, he believes that I'm rich because of race, and my presumed identity.

But impecunious I am. He keeps importuning me with his arresting glare.

Really hungry he is?

More fried bananas, French fries, with "all sorts of other goodness," as TV's Anthony Bourdain had described it. A bun-and-wiener with a hefty touch of hot-sauce, the whole works. Mouth-watering. But really...why me?

He keeps up his surly glare. His furrowed face, lips, the freckle on his nose.

Character-sketch, yes. His thick arms, like someone used to paddling through heavy waves on a makeshift boat--a refugee desperately trying to get to Miami. His sleeves rolled up. "You really look, er..." I attempt.

Go on, tell him.

See, I've never worn a yarmulke skull-cap; but northern Jewish friends had teased me about it. Imagining, remembering. My indeed being here in Dade County with districts like Coral Gables and adjacent towns: Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton, with gated communities. Miami Beach with stucco edifices. How much more Jewish do I want to be?

Snowbirds--Canadians with their hockey sticks vicariously shooting pucks.

Sephardim or Mizrahi Jew--who do I really want to be?

Instinctively this man fidgets. Nothing apocryphal about him. Not his mistaken identity.

His surly glare being all. And I am about to move away; but I contemplate being Moses

parting the waters--my wannabe Biblical status. Fantasy, sure. I make a snarly noise.

Writing him off, see.

Other writers I continue to meet at this Miami Book Fair International--like the largest book fair in the world. I flaunt my new-found identity, in my self-styled imagineering. Do I really call it that? Verisimilitude, yes. Naomi, a Miami resident-writer of genuine Jewish stock, greets me with a smile. Tall, elegant she is. Our poetic lives meshed, sort of.

I tell her about the man importuning me. Do I really look Jewish?

"What did you say to him?" Naomi rebukes, this lookalike Barbra Streisand.

I shrug.

"What did you say...?"

"Nothing."

Wanting money?

"You should've told him not all Jews are rich."

I turn around, looking for the man once more, maybe importuning others.

Ah, a Jewish wannabe I yet am. I see him munching on a banana fritter. Eat he must. Write...I must, too. Burgers, wieners, fries with ample hot sauce--the whole works. My new ethnic pride as I unconsciously carry on with a trumped-up Latin air, but being from the north, even as the south lingers. Outsider-insider. Go on, tell everyone!

Book-lovers must be everywhere--but nowhere--Naomi tells me, like her throwaway point. I wait to hear about a book deal she has made and royalties she will soon garner.

Deliberately she moves towards an exit point, and I follow her. A bargain made, see.

More entry points-- as I suspend disbelief with distance between us.

Then I again see the scraggly-looking man, appearing-disappearing--like my own fortuitous act. Sheer empathy, believe me--in my genuine or authentic way with narrative ongoing. Oh, write-write, until you drop dead!

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Mrs A's Indian Gentlemen: An Extract

By Neil Mcallum

It's 1943, and war rages across Europe. In Britain, the Great Western Railway Works' labour force is comprised of a few men too valuable, old or infirm for active service and thousands of recently recruited women. With critical skills in short supply, the British government looks to the Empire to provide vital expertise in the run-up to the D Day invasion.

And that is how railway engineer Imtiaz 'Billy' Khan, logistics supremo Vincent Rosario and maths prodigy Akaash Ray find themselves in Swindon, lodging with the well-intentioned Mrs A, navigating bland food, faulty toilet cisterns, secret assignments and a mutual distrust of one another.

Dawood Ali McCallum's fifth novel, this tale about what happens when cultures collide has just been published by Hachette India. Here is a taster: Our three heroes have just spent their first night in Swindon and prepare to embark upon their various assignments. We join them at breakfast.

To say Billy Khan made an entrance would be an understatement. He burst into the kitchen just as Sally was putting a replenished pot of tea on the table, resplendent in lustrously polished, knee high boots, white jodhpurs and a hip length woollen jacket with a wrap over front, mandarin collar, and silver buttons bearing the Scindia crest. In his left hand he carried the hat box that had accompanied them from Southampton.

"Oh! Doesn't he look wonderful?" Sally sighed and promptly looked out an old bedsheet to offer him as a giant napkin.

"No. He looks like an idiot," Vincent said.

"Wait till I put my pagri on," said Billy, waving away the sheet and opening the hat box. Carefully, as though he was handling a sacred relic, he lifted out a pre-tied, heavily starched, deep blue turban. "Then you'll get the full effect."

Akaash finally looked up. "I am not walking into the Works with him dressed like that. He looks like a..."

"I've already said that," said Vincent.

"Up to you. I'm presenting a letter from His Highness and my credentials from the Durbar so I'm wearing uniform."

"You have a uniform?"

"For formal occasions, of course. This is it."

"I thought you were an engineer."

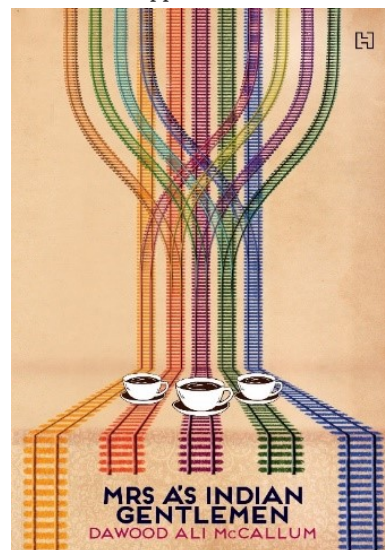
"I am."

"You look like a doorman at some posh brothel."

"You'd know, would you?"

"Look," said Vincent, "Much as I hate to agree with Comrade Stalin over there, I think he might have a point."

"Why?" asked Billy, huffily. "Whatever happened to all that stuff



about respecting our culture?"

Akaash shook his head and with an eloquent sigh returned to his reading.

"Well, think about it," said Vincent. "Today's not likely to be an easy one for any of us, is it? There's bound to be some, I don't know, resentment? Three foreigners marching in and telling these people how to do their jobs? Who likes that?"

Akaash gave a mirthless chuckle.

"I'm sorry, but I just don't see it," said Billy, stubbornly. "They invited us to come here to help them. We're all in this together. Standing shoulder to shoulder against a common foe and all that. Why should there be any...difficulties?"

"You really don't get it, do you?" said Akaash.

"No, I don't. Anyway, even if there is, putting on a bit of a show will help."

"Impress the natives, you mean?"

"If you want to put it that way, yes."

"You sure you're not British?"

Billy frowned. "You two are the British. I'm from Gwalior."

Akaash closed his book and opened his mouth to speak but Vincent threw up a hand. "Don't! Don't even start!" He turned to Billy. "I just think we don't want to draw too much attention to ourselves."

"Three, well, two and a half, Indians walking through a town which hasn't seen a foreigner since they hanged a monkey a hundred and fifty years ago thinking it was Napoleon? I think attention is going to be drawn no matter what."

"Did that really happen?" asked Akaash, fascinated. "Here in Swindon?"

"I don't know. It happened somewhere. Probably. I'm trying to make a point here."

"You're determined to go dressed like that?" asked Vincent.

"Absolutely," said Billy. "And actually, if we're talking about who wears what, I think *he's* the one who needs to change," he added, jerking his head towards Akaash.

"These are the English clothes I was issued with in Bombay. And I'm not spending good money on any more."

"All finished?" asked Sally, coming in from the scullery, drying her hands on her apron. "Lovely to hear the three of you sounding so much at home. Chattering away in your own lingo."

The three of them looked at each other, confused.

"We were speaking English."

"Oh."

Dawood Ali McCallum is the author of a series of novels published in India and the UK. Learn more at www.dawoodalimccallum.com



Reshma Ruia's

'A Dinner Party in The Home Counties'

Reviewed by Mona Dash

Reshma Ruia's debut poetry volume is a collection of forty-two poems, neatly divided into three sections: Beginnings, The Space Between and Endings. Whether by design or not, the number of poems in each section increases as they go on, and fittingly Endings has the maximum number. An unostentatious white cover belies the vast canvas of themes in this collection.

Several of the poems in Beginnings are about, identity, belonging, and connected with the diaspora. The title poem says it well, I have earned my right to claim this slice of sky as my own, a defiant voice in the face of being peripheral, and not being able to offer opinions on climate change.

Ruia portrays this peripheral identity, this acceptance of a forced name, like in the poem In Which Mrs XU Becomes a Sally, with humour, a wry acceptance, and a quiet anger. Mrs Basu, even while leaving town, and being deported, remembers to shout, I have a name. Ruia lays bare the duality subtly and without judgement. We as readers can't look away anymore and are drawn into the microcosm she is describing. The fragility of humans, of all our lives is brought out well. In Biography, one of my favourites: We are bottles of blood walking down the street. One gentle push. We spill. This section ends with a poignant poem for an unborn child, a promise of a beginning, you won't fell me down, my unborn child with your love or your blows.

The Space in Between continues with the widening canvas; lives of unfinished accountants, Brexit blues, a new role of a mother. Being a woman can be fun at times, starts the poem Pomology, another of my favourites and then goes to show a harsh truth in a very matter of fact tone. How the beauty of a woman is often seen on the exterior and is linked inextricably with

youth, and how like rotting fruit, one day its over: You still have your fruit. But its no longer the season.

There are several gentle touches, for example in the elegantly titled El Kapitano, Ruia urges, Don't speak of falling in love, speak instead of climbing into love, and in This could only be Lennon's Doing, Imagine a day like no other. The sky- a blue-skinned Krishna's belly.

But it is the last section, Endings, where the voice changes to an

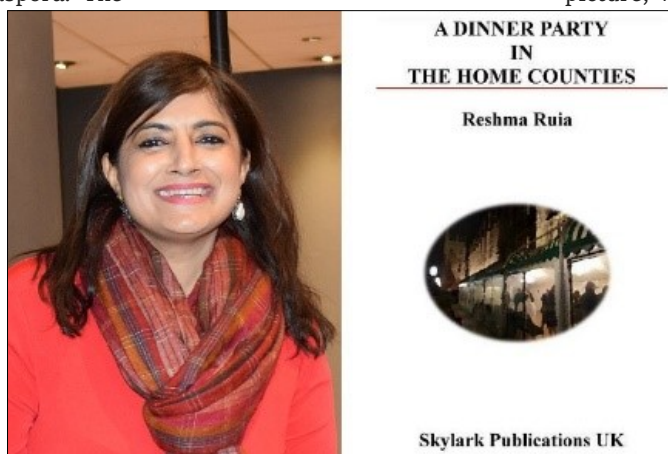
speak soon. Finally, the answer: the trick she tells me, is to balance while falling. To stand still while burning quick.

Being Old is a full-time job, the grandmother winks in Tell Me About Age. And as we read more, we see loneliness, emptiness, and a starkness laid bare. Where is our redemption? In Portrait of a family, we see the father, his face a foreign map. My mother is different. Her worries stalk our sleep. In this picture, we see our own parents,

our own selves, all of us entwined in a slow descent of mortality. The final poem, Chesapeake Bay was so reminiscent of my own father's passing and immersion, and I could resonate with I learnt something new today. Ash is not ash. It is pulverized bones ground to dust. It is in the lines of this poem, there is a final send-off. This is it, here in this world with all the

beautiful places we can travel to, whether Chesapeake Bay or the temple strewn Hardwar, here in this life with the small pleasures of food and drink, here in a lifetime all the emotions we face whether love, anticipation grief, death or motherhood; we leave the book realising its all here, and then we turn right to the start and start reading again.

An interesting collection from Skylark Publications!



unbearable poignancy. With a rare empathy into the world of the ageing, Ruia slowly lays bare the loneliness, the vulnerability and the strength of the human spirit as it descends into the later stages of life. A nostalgic, If only she could run, back to her ten-year old self chasing butterflies on the village green, In A Mrs Dalloway Kind of Day. And in An Empty Milk Bottle, the unnamed protagonists' wonders how and why a life crammed so full of living and loving became so stripped. Being a writer of fiction, Ruia brings in the efficient precision of observation of prose, while not losing the rhythm of poetry. Without undue sentimentality, the poetic voice remains true and due to this minimality of expression, the effect is of sheer heartache as we read on, there are loves, and lives circling out of reach.....One day its over. One of my favourites in this section is A Conversation with Sylvia Plath. The poet waits at the grave of Sylvia Plath, waiting for her to



Mona Dash is the author of *Untamed Heart* (Tara India Research Press, 2016), two collections of poetry *Dawn-Drops* (Writer's Workshop, 2001) *A certain way*, and very recently, her memoir *A Roll of the Dice: a story of loss, love and genetics* (Linen Press, UK). She has a Masters in Creative Writing (with distinction) from the London Metropolitan University. Mona was awarded a 'Poet of excellence' award in the House of Lords in 2016. www.monadash.net

Market analysis

Effect of coronavirus and McDonald's future

- A Chartist's viewpoint

By Raguraj Dharmaratnam

The 35th biggest company in U.S, McDonald's Corporation took a dive in October after missing third quarter profit and revenue estimates, posting a seven-month low in the upper \$180s. The stock has crept higher into 2020 and is now trading around \$211 mark just \$11 below the all time high price of \$222 reached in August 2019.

The effect of coronavirus:

McDonald has closed nearly three hundred restaurants in China and added its name to the other list of global companies which are going to be affected. They first opened a restaurant in China in the 1990, but currently it has about 3,300 restaurants and another 1,500 more planned by 2022. Coronavirus may not affect McDonald's financial performance compare to some of the other companies as although China represent 9% of the global restaurant count but in operating profit terms it is only 3%.

Past history share price levels:

As you can see from the 10 year history chart below, the stock topped out in the first quarter of 2012 around \$102 and stayed at that level for almost 45 months yielding heavy resistance (shown by the horizontal purple line) at that denied multiple breakout attempts into October 2015. Between the period October 2016 to January 2018, share price jumped nearly 60% from \$110 to \$177, and finally the all time high price of \$222 was reached last summer

The following could be the positive fundamental factors for more upward price move for McDonald's corporation:

It is recession-resistant

We're not forecasting a recession in the US in 2020, but we believe it's reasonable to expect a deceleration in industry growth trends amid difficult comparisons and the potential for asset market volatility. McDonald's tends to outperform in periods of slower

economic growth, and we believe that will be the case again in 2020.

It's unknown, yet underappreciated leader Chris Kempczinski is a more than capable leader who will continue (and build upon) many of the technology initiatives put in place while embracing new menu innovations that alleviate current franchisee concerns.

It is growing its delivery business

It is reasonable to forecast that McDelivery as a percentage of sales will more than double over the next 10 years, from 4 per cent in 2019 to almost 9 per cent in 2028. As delivery becomes a more meaningful contributor, we expect a positive impact on comparable traffic and ticket trends while potentially allowing McDonald's to explore its own

fried chicken sandwiches. While we don't anticipate the same level of comp benefit that Burger King and Popeyes enjoyed from new product launches in 2019, we believe McDonald's will see contribution from new product launches in these categories in 2020.

It is investing in itself

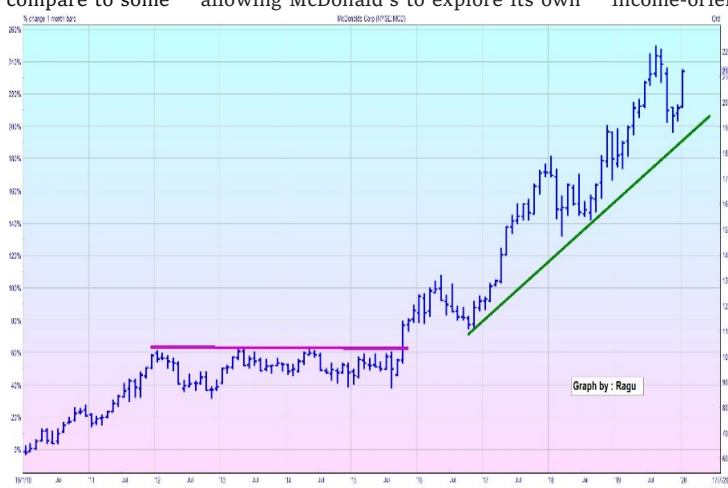
As it successfully wraps up its 2017-19 cash return goals of US\$22 billion-US\$24 billion, the markets believe McDonald's management will unveil new capital allocation plans in early 2020. While investors don't expect the company to quite reach the same level of cash return over the next three years, one can expect an acceleration in dividend per share growth to the low double digits over the next few years, which should satisfy income-oriented investors.

What does the technical analysis methods telling us about the future price move?

Technical analysis means looking at the share price graph of a company and making judgemental decision as to where the next price move is heading to.

First sign of higher breakout price was expected when the monthly blue price bars moved above the long term resistance purple line in October 2016.

McDonalds is currently trading at \$211, and as soon as the price breaks out of the previous high price of \$222, we expect more high prices as long as the green up trending support line is not broken to the downside.



in-house delivery service (and reducing its dependence on third-party aggregators).

It is unlocking new restaurant formats New technologies should enable McDonald's to refine its future real estate strategy and unlock the potential for smaller-format mobile pickup or delivery hub locations. We see several benefits from such a strategy, including more consistent transaction growth and deploying McDonald's own delivery capabilities while reducing its dependence on third-party services (such as Just Eat).

It is changing its menu

McDonald's largely missed out on the two most significant US menu trends in 2019: plant-based burgers and premium



Raguraj Dharmaratnam ACMA, CGMA writes regular market commentary for various magazines such as "Investors

Chronicle" and "Asian voice". He is also head of finance for a UK group of highly successful international specialist food retailer with the group turnover of €350 million and a director & treasurer of a charity for Children with special need