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CONFLUENCE

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

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CROYDON – BOROUGH OF CULTURE 2023

by Lata Desai

Croydon is a unique part of South London. It is one of the largest commercial districts in Greater London, with a long history of ethnic and cultural diversity which is not only one of its greatest strengths and assets, but valued by those who live and work there. India's relationship with Croydon dates back many many years when Croydon was one of few places where the East India Company's Military School in Addiscombe trained soldiers in Croydon first and who were then sent to India during British Raj.

About 54% of the population belong to BAME communities and numerous south asian communities like Tamils, Malayalees, Gujaratis, Sikhs, Punjabis, Marathis, Bengalis have settled in Croydon who not only make a thriving community but a hotbed of creativity. They contribute immensely to the rich cultural fabric of the Borough. These communities are part of a long history of migration from a region that has been shaped by early economic relations in trade, colonialism, and educational and professional exchange.

Subrang Arts (www.subrangarts.co.uk) is one such organisation dedicated to the promotion and development of south asian arts. It profiles and programme new and culturally exciting diverse arts by creating and developing high quality dance productions, visual arts exhibitions, heritage projects, music concerts, arts festivals, workshops and commissions with artists across all south asian art forms. One of Subrang's objectives is to make diverse arts accessible to all, explore cross cultural art forms, give opportunities to people to learn new skills and cultivate their ambitions. It actively

engages people of all age groups in its activities, gives them a supportive environment in which transformative experiences and exciting intercultural exchanges take place. This is how it got involved in the Borough of Culture celebrations when Croydon won this award for 2023.

'This is Croydon' will be a big, bold and cross-cultural celebration of the borough's unique identity, heritage and character – elevating Croydon to its rightful place as London's most innovative and exciting

As part of the Borough of Culture 2023 celebration, Subrang Arts is programming few amazing projects throughout the year. Its first involvement is with the London Mozart Players where they will be the main south asian group performing for the 'Oratorio of Hope' concert - a brand-new commission which puts the Croydon community at the heart of the music. This double-bill concert on 1st and 2nd April showcases the very best of Croydon's young talent through music, spoken word, song, dance, film and visual art.



Photo credit Simon Richardson



borough. From flagship events with international headliners and emerging home-grown talent, to hundreds of grassroots activities led by organisations in every corner of the borough, the programme will showcase the very best of Croydon – London's best-kept secret.

www.culturecroydon.com

Croydon's poet laureate Shaniqua Benjamin will take a lead on the poetry and spoken word to share stories of hope for the future, while Grammy-nominated, Croydon-educated Tarik O'Regan will lead on the composition of the music alongside composers Sarah Freestone, Fiona Brice and Jeff Moore, working with local musicians and arts groups. The choreography will be led by Agudo Dance Company, alongside Subrang Arts and Indian classical musicians like Debipriya Sircar on Sitar/Vocals, Saleel Tambe on Tabla and Praveen Prathapan on flute. A host of schools in Croydon will be involved in the creation and performance of the piece, including hundreds of singers and instrumentalists from Croydon Music and Arts (continued on page 3) and a mass finale celebrating the very best talent Croydon has to offer.

Following this, Subrang Arts will undertake a unique visual arts project called 'Kalasetu' with internationally known company, Kinetika who specialises in creating large-scale hand-painted silks.

www.kinetika.co.uk (continued on P3)

Editorially Speaking

Dear readers,

I am delighted to bring out our first issue of Confluence for this year. In December last year we published our twentieth year anniversary issue as an expanded issue. I am very grateful to those readers who have greeted me personally and through social media on the publication of this milestone issue. As usual, in this issue we have put together a variety of genres from some talented writers. Also we are introducing some new writers in this issue and I am sure our readers will welcome them.

Some readers have suggested that Confluence should carry more writings on the topics of issues affecting us. I believe any modern literature should reflect the issues that affect us on a day to day basis. Through articles, stories, poems and paintings we should discuss these issues with an open mind and bring more awareness among our readers and wider public. Many of our writers have done this in the past but I would like to ask others too to consider writing on these topics whenever they are able to do so. I am sure creativity can be used to provoke debates and discussions within the society to find solutions to some of the important problems affecting us.

Many of us have been thrilled to hear and experience what the AI (Artificial Intelligent) could do to us in finding answers to many questions we face on a daily basis. However, the recent launch of some AI based virtual products has created a serious debate among the intellectuals and policy makers about the threat they could pose to society in general. Can AI be a threat to us as the most intelligent creatures on earth? Can this be used for malicious purposes too, as evidenced since the invention of computer chips? Many serious questions remain to be answered.

I am very pleased to say that some of our writers have expressed their desire to get involved in the production of Confluence and assist us in various ways. I wholeheartedly welcome their suggestions and will certainly utilise their talents wherever we could use for our future issues. I am sure it will speed up the production of our issues and help us to release each issue on time while enhancing the quality of the magazine too. We are greatly indebted to Prof. Subhash Chandra, one of our longstanding writers for sharing his expertise with us on certain matters and volunteering to proof read the magazine, in the capacity of an editorial advisor. Dr. Meenakshi Mohan too has been advising us on various editorial matters recently and I thank her very well.

I hope our readers will find the entire issue an interesting read and I look forward to hearing their feedback soon.

Vijay Anand

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CROYDON – BOROUGH OF CULTURE...

‘Kala’ means ‘Art’; ‘Setu’ means Bridge – building cultural bridges with communities through arts. The term ‘Indian art’ refers to a wide range of artistic practices, including painting, sculpture, ceramics and woven silk, among other examples of textile arts. Culture plays an important role in the development of any nation. It represents a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices. Culture and creativity manifest themselves in almost all economic, social and other activities. Communities are a vital part of the cultural, creative and social narrative. The rich heritage of South Asians in Croydon includes songs, music, dance, theatre, folk traditions, performing arts, rites and rituals, paintings and writings that are known, as the ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ (ICH).

<https://www.fairfield.co.uk/events/lbc-lmp-april-23>



Photo credit Simon Richardson

exported by the French and subsequently the British East India Company. However, in recent times, there has been very little demand for producing this silk. Kinetika has been using this silk since 2017 when they discovered it for its Silk River project. They were very keen to work with this exquisite

while in India they support the 14 families of weavers who make it by hand.

Community groups will prepare a giant costume of an Indian Queen ‘Mother India’ which will be visually arresting spectacle and dancers specially trained by Anusha Subramanyam of Beeja (www.beeja.com)



Photo credit Simon Richardson

Students of Norbury Manor Girls School will research cultural expressions like arts, crafts, music, dance, festivals, places / maps of the Indian diaspora in the borough. The research will inspire the design and content for the silks which will be designed, batiked and hand-painted by Kinetika’s team of artists and members of Subrang Arts. The silk used for this project will be Murshidabad Silk, a heritage quality hand-woven silk from West Bengal, which Kinetika uses for the majority of its projects and imports it for others to utilise. In the 18th century, Murshidabad was world-famous for the heavy, durable but amazingly supple silk hat was worn by the Moghul nobility and exported across the world by local merchants and traders to the South East Asian markets. The silk, known as dotari/teentari travelled to Europe,

silk and through the Crafts Council of West Bengal (CCWB) were able to connect directly with the local weavers who still had the old looms and the required level of skill. Now, in the UK, proceeds of Murshidabad silk sales support Kinetika’s charitable work,

will dance around this Queen at the Croydon Mela, Croydon Carnival and other venues throughout the year. This will be a visually stunning community arts project at its best which will engage schools and community groups.



Another project undertaken by Subrang Arts is a unique collaboration with the Indian choir ‘Bharatiya Vrund Gaan’ called ‘Rang Dhvani - The Sounds of Colour’. Under the artistic director of Choir Master Rakesh Joshi and

Subrang's choreographer Harsha Amin, the concert will go on a journey of 'Rasas' ranging from songs rooted in the philosophical bhakti bhaav to ecstatic sargam and tarana sung by the choir and brought to life by dancers. The Raas Lila of Radha and Krishna will paint a picture of Srīngara, the romantic rasa, while there will be fun filled joy during the festival of Holi. A synergy will be created on stage where the performers will bring to life a landscape of emotion through Indian music and dance. Music and dance are powerful; they allow our body to explore emotion and spirituality. Dance translates soul stirring sentiments of musicians into a visual form where both work together to connect artist and audience to an elevated, spiritual realm of enjoyment. The lyrics of a song alone can evoke so many emotions, but when interpreted through dance, the impact can last a lifetime.

In Hinduism, music and dance are used to evoke the presence of God, to serve as a channel that connects one with something divine and beyond through that which is tangible and can be experienced. Through 'Rang Dhvani', Subrang aims to explore all the colours, or 'Rang', of emotion, that can be experienced in the



sweet sound, or 'Dhvani', of music. The creation of this project takes place in Croydon and will be showcased at Epsom Playhouse.
<https://www.epsomplayhouse.co.uk/shows/rang-dhvani-sounds-colourand-tour-to-north-london-to-watersmeet-theatre-rickmansworth>.

<https://www.watersmeet.co.uk/sounds-of-colour>

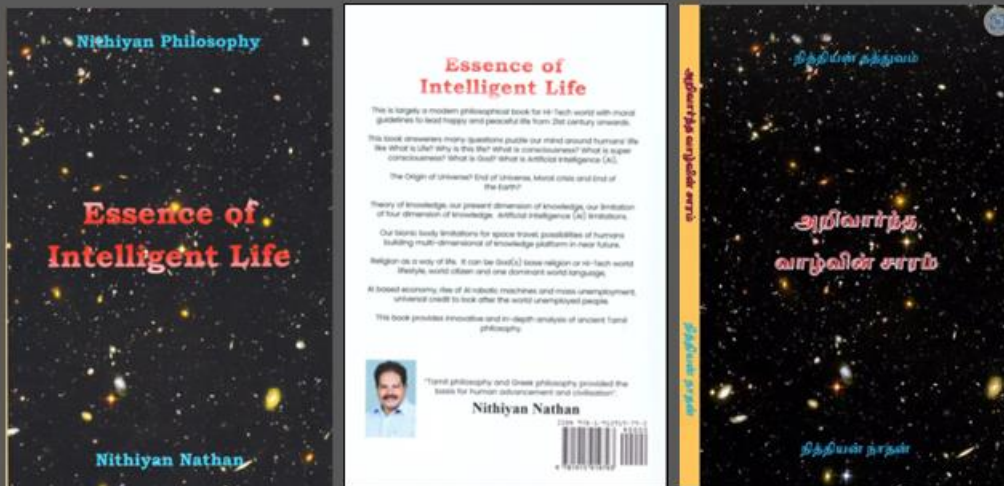
Subrang's main aim of above projects is to develop a programme of artistic

exchange and collaboration between artists and arts organisations, create new work, build sustainable networks and partnerships which will strengthen cultural relations based on the exchange of ideas, knowledge, work and artistic practice. It will certainly help plug a huge cultural gap in Croydon and promote it as a cultural hub in South London.



Lata Desai is the Chairperson of Subrang Arts. A Biomedical scientist by profession, she has also developed her passion in the arts and it is this

career span as a practitioner that has given her a range of experience which she brings to bear in her role as a passionate Community Arts Leader. For more of her work visit www.subrangarts.co.uk www.rootsandchangesgujaratiinfluences.com, www.gujaratiyatra.com Email : lataarajdesai@yahoo.co.uk



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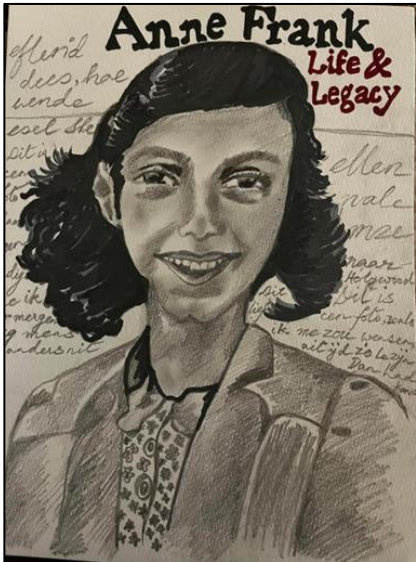
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Poem & Musing

Anne Frank: A Tribute by Lopa Banerjee



Sketch of Anne Frank, by Lopa Banerjee

The Diary of a Young Girl, Anne Frank

Hope fluttered, hopped and jumped
In the scribbling of words,
Creating an architecture of a body
Tucked away in an attic space
A topography of the mind and spirit
And the memoirs of a newly blossoming bud
Creating symphonies with shadows and light
Dreams coming alive, daring to breathe
A curious concoction of imagined realities
In an anxious, threatened life in the loft.

Hope fluttered, hopped and jumped
A seething paradox
Of the fleeting metaphors of life and
The imminent grasp of a forced death.
Anne, in you, the beacon of hope shines on still—
The war cries in the confined camp,
The endless hunger to eulogize memories
In a botched-up, slaughtered life.

"I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support."

Dear Anne,
I couldn't do justice to the nimble, beautiful contours of your face, the pristine smile garlanding the innards of your mouth, the rivers of a freedom song that danced in the curves of your nose. Your hair dangles in the remembered wind in the front page of Life Magazine where the obituary of your indomitable soul growing up in a turbulent Germany and the Netherlands adorns the pages, and many a time my hands have trembled while attempting to trace the supple letters, syllables that have formed the ethereal alphabet of your blooming feminine face.

I know, I'm no artist that can draw your fire and earth, giving life to your laughter and bonhomie, giving life to the looming threat that has touched, and later, ravaged your body and being, torn you apart in brutal, merciless strokes. Trust me when I say this, I didn't even think it worthwhile to have titled this piece of failed art in your name; it sounded like a treacherous act, just like the day you left your unfinished diary and was dragged, to the brutal kingdom of death and destruction. However, I've still titled this piece in your name as I leave this, dangling in the annals of time as a tribute to young, fortuitous girls who were your soul sisters, girl friends, your true comrades in mind, body and spirit.

The pages of your diary that I've read and absorbed within my being umpteen times have given me hope and succor during many a personal turmoil, though the word 'turmoil' seems to smile sarcastically at me even as I utter it, thinking that you embraced it so stoically in your last days, tethered to the last few slices of your life with so much gumption and the valor of a crown princess.

In your wild contours, the lyrics of your freedom songs, vandalized by the Nazi fascist ideologies, breathe in newfound bubbles of a life force. In you, the personal and the political intermingle...in you, the study of history of a tattered past weds the nurturing of literature of resistance. Though the fascist gatekeepers have looted, plundered houses, dream nests, synagogues, plazas, shops, though in their tyrannical anarchy, your Jewish friends, brethren, your kith and kin, and you, termed once as 'destroyers of culture', have endured the crushing, gagging force and impulse of death, in you, and in the remnants of the memories of your comrades, we live, breath in the manifesto of a freedom song. A song that mighty forces have tried to throttle, nip in the bud, yet a song which reverberates from the dark dungeons and finally makes its way to light

A forever fan,

Lopa Banerjee.

Obituary

Professor Sandrasegarampillai Balakumar - A Devoted Academic and Social Servant



I never thought that one day I would write a tribute to my friend and former batch mate Professor Balakumar. My friendship with him began about four decades ago when we were both enrolled in an Advanced level revision course in Chundikuli, Jaffna. We used to sit close to each other and Bala would always occupy one of the front-row seats wearing a simple but elegant outfit. Unlike many other fellow students who were quite garrulous, he was a quiet and very attentive student, who would never skip lessons. Naturally, his personality attracted me towards him and soon we became very good classmates and friends.

Soon after our A-level exams, we lost touch, but it was a pleasant surprise to meet him again just over a year later, when I got a place in the Science Faculty at the University of Jaffna to study a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences. Six or seven students who had studied with us at Chundikuli joined our batch in the same year. The next three-year period of our time at the university was immensely enjoyable even though we had to study under extremely difficult circumstances. Balakumar had always been a very good student, liked by many of our batch mates. He was a teetotaler and a devoted Hindu throughout.

In 1985, while I was working for a Developmental organisation called Ootru in

Thirunelveli, I used to visit the Biochemistry department within the Faculty of Medicine and meet some of my former batch mates including Balakumar who was doing postgraduate research work under the supervision of late Prof. Balasubramaniam and Dr. Vasanthi Arasaratnam. He was one of the few research scholars who chose to stay back in Jaffna and continue their research while many others deserted their positions and left for greener pastures due to the onset of militancy in the North. It was a commendable achievement that in a short span, Balakumar completed his postgraduate research work and obtained his doctoral degree in Biochemistry.

Recently, I came across some of the research articles he authored with others and found them to be of a very high standard. It is often perceived that only Western publications are the best but I was really impressed with the quality of some of the work that had been done at the University of Jaffna Medical Faculty, despite lack of funding. It was in 2016, I last met Balakumar when I was visiting Jaffna with my family. He invited us to the university and gave us a tour around the Biochemistry department and took us to meet some of my former batch mates and the university friends in the Science Faculty. He also took us to Keerimalai and the adjoining Tamil heritage museum, and spent some time with us despite his punishing workload. At

that time he explained to me about the President funded major research work he was leading on kidney diseases which have been on the increase, not only in Jaffna but all over Sri Lanka. I felt very proud of his work and thought that I should collaborate with him one day on some research projects that are important and beneficial to our people and society in general. But, it is quite unfortunate that his life was cut short before he fulfil his ambition of serving the society he deeply loved. The number of tributes that poured into our message boards from various corners of the world constitute a testimonial to his personal qualities and to the services he rendered to the university and society.

On hearing about the sudden demise of our dear friend, Prof. Balakumar, several of our batch mates from various parts of the globe have collectively created a memorial fund in his name. The aim of the fund is to support some postgraduate students in Science Faculty who are experiencing financial difficulties in completing their courses. I strongly believe that Prof. Balakumar's name will last forever in the history of the University of Jaffna through the continuation of the work he has been doing.

Dr. Vijay S Anandavijayan

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Book Review

Towards a Poetic Legacy of its Own: 'Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2021'

(Editors: Sukrita Paul Kumar & Vinita Agrawal)

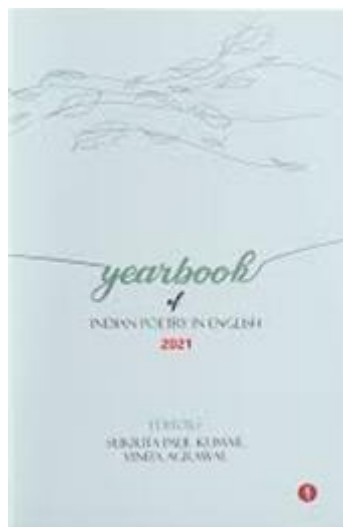
Reviewed by Amrita Sharma

As the second edition of the series, *The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2021* reached the readers in June of 2022. Edited by the founding editors of the series Sukrita Paul Kumar and Vinita Agarwal, the anthology compiles poems written by Indian poets and Indian diaspora between November 2020 and December 2021. As the blurb records: "The aim of the series is to present quality poems in English published in India and abroad. It is hoped that the exercise of bringing out such anthologies will eventually prove to be a fertile ground for establishing the aesthetics of Indian poetry in English."

With a wide array of names and contributions gracing the pages of this collection, the poems resonate across distinct styles and forms. The very first poem titled "Exile" by Abhay K. reads: "I measure my days / weeks, months, and years / A year is one third / of exile from the motherhood." Setting a depth at its very opening, one poem after another takes us deeper into a world of pain, love, anguish, retreat, escape, confession and more. As Basudhara Roy's "Light" claims: "The seat of desire is everywhere" on a poetic stage, Debarshi Mitra in "the flick of a light" writes "in the ocean blue of half lit rooms/ our shadows gather to sharpen their blades." While Ranu Niyaal's "My Brownness and Me" powerfully claims an indigenous identity as she writes: "Forgive me, I am brown/ and I speak Garhwali – a dialect/ from the hills", we also find a glimpse of an intermingling of identity and locale in Kiriti Sengupta's "Line of Control."

The *Yearbook 2021* also includes contributions like "Flamingo Dance" by Babitha Marina Justin, "Srirangam" by Namratha Vardharajan, and "Song 58" by PriyaSarukkai Chabria that play upon the innovative forms and patterns, lending greater diversity to the collection. Also, the poetic contributions by the two editors, namely "Dialogues with Ganga" by Sukrita Paul Kumar and "Splendid Poison Frog" by

Vinita Agarwal add an extra touch of poetic wanderings across space and time. The anthology concludes with a section titled "Beacon Lights" with works by Adil Jussawalla, Keki N. Daruwalla, and Jayanta Mahapatra that provide an enriching charm to the overall compilation.



With a graceful cover design by Bitan Chakraborty, this Hawakal publication feels elegant and voluminous in hand. Beautifully compiling the poetic sketches between grey and white covers on both ends, the overall design tastefully blends with the theme of the anthology. While going on a reading journey with this book, the design, publishing and editing certainly add to the reading experience.

Presenting a compilation of poems written during the fourteen months that bear the strong imprints of a post-pandemic sensibility, the collection carries diverse impressions from distinct poetic pens. As the book itself records: "In the context of instabilities and uncertainties experienced acutely in contemporary life, it is not surprising that many poems in the *Yearbook* emerge creatively from a special focus on home, house, identity, roots and indeed the question of language which

is also deeply linked with the idea of homing. This edition of the *Yearbook* is also embedded with concerted poems on imperialism, gender (as always!), mental health, childhood traumas, upbringing, Earth, climate change, birds, mining, prostitutes, racism, sensuality and spirituality." Richly infused with musings on such issues, the anthology compiles and presents a poetic canvas with many overlapping shades of perceptions and conflicts, taking the reader on a thoughtful crusade.

As we simultaneously decolonise and embrace the English language in an Indian poetic ethos, *The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2021* stands as an important second edition towards building a poetic legacy of its own. Thus, while Indian Poetry in English continues to claim a unique and expanding territory, the *Yearbook* series remains a remarkable effort to chronicle the journey of its aesthetics year by year. Giving space to established and new poets, this second edition of the series continues to uphold the idea established by its preceding inaugural edition published in 2020. The anthology is strongly recommended to readers seeking a panoramic reading through the artful flavours of contemporary Indian poetry in English, and an absolute gem to add to your anthology bookshelf.

Amrita Sharma is a Lucknow based poet and writer. She has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Lucknow and is presently working as a Guest Faculty at Dr. Shakuntala Mishra National Rehabilitation University, Uttar Pradesh. She has worked as a Fulbright Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Languages and Cultures, University of Notre Dame, USA from August 2021 to May 2022. Her works have previously been published in several national and international journals.



Report

The world Book Fair-2023: Hat Trick by Divya Mathur

The world Book Fair-Delhi2 ,7 February : Divya Mathur's third novel 'Tilism' was launched by Vani Publishers .She has dedicated it to her close associates and friends, Anil Joshi and Dr Padmesh Gupta for their immense support, affection and inspiration, without which her writings and continuation of Vatayan-UK for 20 years was impossible. She appreciated the help of Rajesh Kumar, the first reader of 'Tilism' ,who had to read such a lengthy novel a few times, giving suggestions and correcting proofs. She also thanked her younger brother Ram Srivastava, who specially painted the beautiful cover picture for this novel; everybody just falls in love with it.

Divya did an extensively research for this novel as the subject is unique in many ways, it's a story of a boy brought up in sheer poverty, harassed by a paedophile teacher and beaten up by his father. . Fortunately, he is adopted by a decent couple. Inspite of his two lavender marriages, he is unable to find a loving companion. Divya also thanked Virender Sharma MP, who gave her a lot of information about the Southall in the 60s, and historian Edward Crask lot of information on UK laws and gender discrimination. Well known authors Tejinder Sharma and Alka Sinha offered information about Air-India flights in the 70s which was not even available on Google.

The distinguished speakers, who spoke highly of the novel at the launch included: Anil Sharma 'Joshi', Vice Chairman of the Central Institute of Hindi-Agra, Dr Rekha Sethi, Vice Principal of Indraprastha College, Delhi University, the eminent author and journalist Geetashree, well known poetess Dr

Madhu Chaturvedi, the upcoming popular storywriter Anuj and Dr Rajesh Kumar, educationist and author, who also presented the programme.. The audience included Saroj Sharma, Dr. Manoj Mokshendra, Dr Niraj Sudhanshu, Dr Aalok Gupta, Vinay, Shashi and Swati Mathur, research scholars Suambada ,

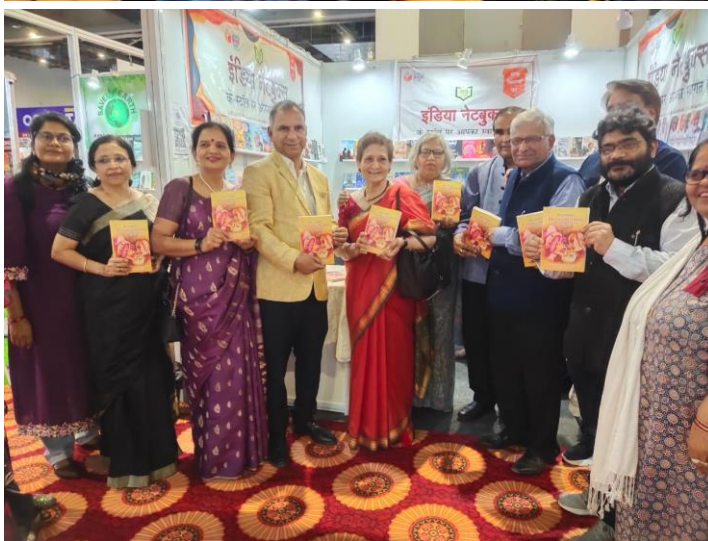
Goyal of Calcutta University, a multi-language translator; Jutta Austin, the John Gilchrist Award winning German and Hindi teacher; Shelley Williams, fine arts collector, travel & cookery writer and kathak dancer; Dr. Manoj Mokendraj, Joint Director in the Parliament of India,

award winning author, who has also painted the beautiful and meaningful picture on the cover of the book. The Game of Pretence is edited by Dr Diana Mavroleon, the award winning filmmaker, Garden & Landscape designer, presenter for Resonance Radio, and the Foreword is written by Dr Vayu Naidu, Visiting Fellow of RADA and an eminent author. Present at the informal launch were

distinguished publishers and writers including Anil Joshi, Arun Maheshwari, Dr. Madhu Chaturvedi, Aparna Sant-Singh, Dr Laxmi Shankar Bajpai, Prem Janmejy, Dr. Rajesh Kumar, Niraj Sudhanshu, Dr. Manoj Mokshendra and some research scholars including Suambada , Apurva ,Shalu Babbar , Vinay, Shashi and

Swati Mathur, besides many friends and family members .Heartfelt thanks to India-Net and its publisher Dr Sanjeev Kumar for the informal launch of Divya's third book at the Fair.

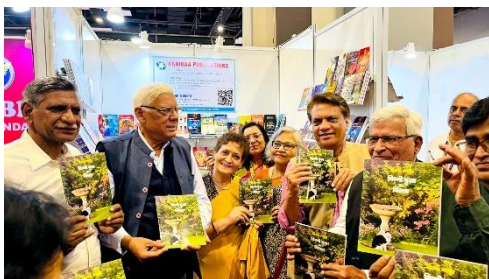
Published by Vanika Prakashan, Divya Mathur's children's novella 'Binni Bua Ka Billa' is dedicated to her granddaughters. It was based on her daughter Shelly's cat, Phosphor.



Apurva ,Shalu Babbar ,and of course Publishers Arun Maheshwari and Aditi Maheshwari Goyal, amongst many friends and family members.

The World Book Fair-2023: The Game of Pretence : Divya Mathur

The world Book Fair2 ,7 February :The Game of Pretence: Divya Mathur's Stories in English, was launched. The stories are translated by Dr. Anuradha



World Book Fair2 ,6 February :Children's novella - Binni Bua Ka Billa

It so happened that Divya had written a short story for children and sent it to the

eminent Indian author Nasera Sharma, who liked it so much that she suggested that it's meant to be a novel for the kids. Divya also had the inkling of its potential novella so it didn't take long to finish it. The well known award winning author Dr. Divik Ramesh immediately sent the preface to it. The cover photo and the photos inside the novella are provided by Shelley, who's a fine arts collector, travel and cookery writer. The eminent speakers at the launch included Dr Madhu Chaturvedi, Divik Ramesh, Aparna

Sant-Singh, Dr. Rajesh Kumar, Dr Aalok Gupta, Dr Neeraj Sudhanshu and Dr. Manoj Mokshendra. Distinguished guests included Dr Prem Janamejaya, Dr Lakshmi Shankar Bajpai, Arun Maheshwari, Vinay, Shashi and Swati Mathur and many other researchers including Suambada ,Aparva , Shalu Babbar . Divya was overwhelmed at the outpouring of love and affection of the audience. 'The hat-trick would not have been possible without the collective energy, love and inspiration of friends and family', says the eminent UK based Indian author Divya Mathur.

In India for the first time

An excerpt from My Silk Road*

Chapter 4: Homesick

As I walked from the ramp onto solid ground, it was as if my feet were standing on a lifetime of stories: my heritage, the soil in which my family tree had taken root and grown.

It was 1964, three years before our move to London, and I had just made a very different journey; stepping off a ship into another world. Back then, Mumbai was still Bombay, a bustling port full of noise and energy. I gazed wide-eyed at the magnificent Gateway of India near the famous Taj Hotel, places I had only heard of or seen in photos. But the thing which made me audibly gasp was greater than the splendour of any bricks and mortar.

The people. The people all looked like me.

The feeling of belonging was overwhelming. So this is how it feels to fit in! I'd had no idea. It is still difficult to put it into words, the intense emotion of those first steps, entering my country of origin, the sense of coming home. No longer did I feel different. Instead, I felt I could walk freely without fear. To this day, every visit to India makes the same unique and dramatic impression on me.

However, for my 14-year-old self it was something completely new and, ironically, the difference was in the

similarity. The difference was, I was the same as everyone else. In this place - so unlike any other I'd known - I felt a deep recognition. Any one of these people could be passed off as my brother, my sister, my uncle. It was the first time in my life that I didn't stand out. I was flooded with relief and confidence, as if I'd found a lost piece of myself I had not even known was missing.

My family had of course told me countless tales of Mother India, waxing lyrical and oozing idealism. Now I was here and, within that one moment, every word they had told me was true. Stories and histories seemed to float on the breeze along with a good helping of second-hand nostalgia. All I could think was 'India, India. This is my country.'

The whole adventure had begun some months previously, with a simple conversation:

"If you really want the best for Ram, you need to send him to boarding school. And I know just the one."

Mr Cameron, my teacher, was talking Daddy round, dropping into the conversation irresistible morsels about Bishop Cottons boarding school in Bangalore: the perfect place apparently, for me to fulfil both my senior education

and my potential. It was his alma mater and, with his recommendation, the Headmaster would be certain to accept me. There was an element of persuasion, but to be honest, not much was needed. Daddy always wanted the best for me and was quickly convinced.

They would not send me alone however. My older brothers, Bharat, Lachu and Kanu were to travel with me in the hope that we would all get a place at the school together.

We left the family nest and set sail on the SS Safina ul Hujaj, proud to be on the then fastest ship from Mombasa to Bombay, crossing the seas in a mere ten days as opposed to the usual two weeks. And thank goodness, because confined to bunk beds in third class with military style food, I'm not sure we could have handled much longer. I looked up to my savvier big brothers for survival, especially the eldest who somehow managed to smuggle food from the first-class section of the ship to keep us all going. Now finally we were coming into dock, watching sharks gliding territorially through the harbour waters; the Gateway of India in the distance, calling us home. We disembarked and within seconds seemed to be surrounded by coolies all fighting for the chance to take our luggage to Customs.

Admittedly, my dreamy idealism took a sharp knock with the fearful immigration and customs experience at Bombay Port. Our bags were crammed full of presents and foodstuffs that family and friends in India had requested: tins upon tins of South African Kraft Cheese: a common request for anyone making this voyage. Finally, however, we made it through in one piece and were free to explore our motherland.

On landing, we were met by the driver of Rai Bahadur Lalchand Watanmal Bulchand who took us straight to Rai Bahadur's office where we formally shook hands, although first all four of us had to touch his feet as a sign of respect

to him – a senior friend of the family. He had a very imperious presence and seemed almost more British than the British in his mannerisms and attitudes. The first thing he did was take us to the photographer who had a studio in the same building. "Dear boys," he said, "The photographs will follow in due course. Now follow me and let's go to my flat".

With that he swept us off to his home, opposite the Cricket Club of India (CCI) premises, housing the prestigious Brabourne Stadium where Test Matches are played. As we gazed up at his beautiful ceilings, painted with scenes from Mogul times, he entertained us by recounting our family history. Even his servant remembered our grandfather,

Baba Dayaram, and joined in, telling eloquent tales of his achievements and escapades and describing the family palace, Moti Mahal in Hyderabad Sindh.

(The passage above is an extract from Chapter 4 of *My Silk Road: The adventures and struggles of a British Asian refugee* (just published by Pippa Rann Books, U.K., and is included here by permission of the author.)

Two Poems

Something big and/or Something Small by Anjana Sen

The African Sky

Endless, relentless, brutal yellow
showering dry wrath on parched soil
Unyielding Sun, that arrogant fellow
Watering holes begin to boil.

She comes to life, as a hussy errant wife
when her sun travels to the other side
Twinkling shimmering, the milky way
her blue-black saree, a canopy wide.

Your Fist

A pimple on a dimple
on the left side of the right bum
of an ant.
Now I know better.
What could possibly be smaller?
Or more perfect?
than your little hand?
The one that I held all night.
The day I brought you home.
Smallest, most perfect little fist
that held my heart.
My large, fit-to-burst heart.
In your tiny, tiny hand.

Flash fiction

TERMINAL MAN *

by Cyril Dabydeen

Africa it is, as he looks at me with a cursory if only a sideways glance, then a quick turnaround; and yes, he's thinking about a lost continent. The computer screen locked before him as his eyes move sideways, but focussing, yes. "Now who first came to America?" he asks in a droll way. A murmur, whisper. "Who?" I reply with my own pause, or unease. He's bent on finding out about races of people and where they came from.

Not just about DNA it must be, in his own commonplace manner, - as he quickly casts a glare at me. I become more conscious of him, this bedraggled-looking man I'd seen before, tense in his demeanour. Nothing predictable, you see.

Now about the Chinese he wants to know about--the screen almost wavering before him.

"Who...or what?" I hum to myself, in silence.

History's changing circumstances, with our being and non-being in this one spot, like our common ground.

"The Indians with their Vedas?" he hisses back to me, his dare. Not er...Native peoples?

He shakes his bushy head of hair. His skin, looking like mushroom. And what will he download next? I casually, or surreptitiously, peer at his screen. And I'd seen him swaggering down Somerset Street talking to himself, being in his own mind-game, ah, then suddenly bawling out--like a primal scream. *All the world's a common place, I know.*

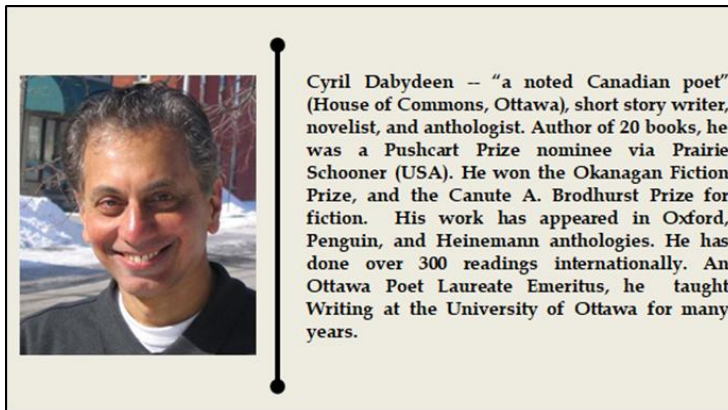
Here now he sits lumpen, his gaze riveted as if to a far ocean. Ships crossing latitudes with astrolabe and quadrant. Let the world come closer, indeed the New World. He keeps on reading, and

one or two bystanders around him and haw, in this public space.

They loiter, then disappear. But this man keeps blinking at the screen, almost like oceans before him. Us. His crumpled jacket and a red scarf round his neck, a cravat--an image of Rasputin I conjure.

What else do I know?

Spaces in his celluloid world arresting: as Africa and Asia are with different races in his mind's eye, almost with predictability.



He turns once more to have a good look...at me. What race...or creed? Stereotypes...images, like from a past life I'm forced to come to grips with, more than serendipity.

Now it's about someone called Ivan van Sertima he dredges up--a black historian-professor from Rutgers University, whose face rivets the screen before us.

"I once knew him," I attempt, almost mutely.

"Did you?"

"A Black poet."

--Who's a poet anyway?

Not one like activist-writer Imamu Baraka I'd also met?

No poetry now, please. An echo, somewhere, without rhyme or rhythm, cadence or verbal accent. But Google. Chrome...Wikipedia--worlds at his

fingertips. Indeed oceans crossed. Homer's Ithaca somewhere. Africa he

reads more about--the Nubians who first built the pyramids and were authentic Pharaohs. *Do I really know?*

Were Africans the bravest people in the world? Like what the Rutgers professor Ivan van Sertima believed in and write about in his obsession with history. Spaces with new perimeter, you see--

right there on the screen. Ah, a race of people that genuinely sailed across the ocean and came to America before Columbus did. Yes, long before the Vikings did!

This man talks in a guttural tone. About the Vedas next...because he interprets the Indian in me with his foreknowledge, it seem.

The Ganges and the Brahmaputra, and other sacred waters flowing in his mind's eye. *Does he really know?*

He reverts to the Dravidians, no longer to Africans. Whole tribes appear and disappear. The Chinese also come closer. Ming dynasties, and the Mongols all in the mix. Where... Genghis Khan? And who was European Marco Polo on the Silk Road?

He makes a face, this bohemian-looking man rivetted to the computer screen. Now not just at me? *Oh, never.* He swivels on his chair because of a torrid time in history...he becomes more aware of. Now he wants my approval, because of what he surmises with his "research"--being now more than a passing hobby. No conspiracy theory, see. Now I must accept him for who he is.

I obliquely keep appraising him.

Then in a laboured breath he asks, "D'you have any change?"

Like what he planned on asking all along.

"Change?" I demur.

"For coffee."

I nod, but meaning to say no.

"You, a...poet, yes?" he asks, taking the full measure of me.

I am not the one named Ivan van Sertima I tell him forthrightly, in my own beguiling way. Whose real or personal story are we talking about? *Coffee...please.*

Slowly I begin to take my leave, but I look back at him thinking of one man's sense of history and his peripatetic journeying, with the discovery of new worlds in the air. And I will envisage a new race or new people coming to the Americas—if only people from Asia and Africa. And yes, new discoveries being made, if adjusting to my own sense of history with place and time. And latitude and longitude, like what some ancient scribe compels me to know.

He furrows his forehead. Google. Chrome. Wikipedia.

Geography being destiny with sailing ships coming from everywhere. Columbus's totemic fleet--the *Pinta*, *Nina*, and *Santa Maria*. Waves rise higher. Behemoths: ocean creatures, bigger than gigantic whales in my view. A further flash on the screen. What this man compels me to want to know and believe: about being a maker of worlds. *Metaphors only, please.*

***A long-listed finalist in the Strands**

International Flash Fiction/Contest #16.



**Submissions Deadline
For
May-June 2023 Issue**

**Please send your
submissions by
30th April 2023**

**Email:
confluenceuk@yahoo.com**

Extract from 'The Village Maestro & 100 Other Stories'

by Dr. Varghese Mathai,

(published by Pippa Rann Books, U.K.)

A Pair of Legs

The poet John Donne lived dangerously at least for the first half of his life and was slowed down only by extreme outcomes. He studied at Oxford, Cambridge, and Lincoln's Inn, and did well at all of them, yet his Catholic identity deprived him of a college degree. While yet a child, he lost his father who had left him a millionaire's estate by modern terms but, as soon as the son laid hands on it, he blew it all, and lived impoverished for years afterwards. He sailed to the Spanish world as a pirate and returned with nothing. He secured a starter job as the secretary to a state official with whose niece Anne he eloped, only to be caught and thrown into prison, and for the couple to live at the mercy of others for years afterwards. Things did change, however. A royal favorite commended Donne to King James as someone worthy of patronage. The King was fully aware of his great merits and firmly stated that divinity was Donne's best fit. Let us not forget that, before this, the man was reputed in London as "Jack Donne the Rake." King James must have seen in Donne something that the rest of the world did not. Donne indeed became a great Anglican divine, filling England's most visible pulpits as the Royal Chaplain and the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

As a public figure, Donne was once asked to join a diplomatic mission to France and to Germany while his pregnant wife was within days of delivery. All care was promised for her, but understandably, the timing troubled him and Anne alike. To comfort the tearful Anne, Donne wrote "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," a farewell speech in verse, in which he entreated her not to make the grief between them obvious to others. After all, "our two souls are one," unaffected by separation, he reasoned. However, he went on:

If they be two, they are two so

As stiff twin compasses are two:

Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show

To move, but doth, if the other do;

..... Such wilt thou be to me, who must

Like the other foot obliquely run;

Thy firmness makes my circle just

And make me end where I begun.

Donne did leave, as planned. Left alone in dire sorrow, ten days later, Anne delivered a baby in stillbirth. Her husband, alone in his room in France, had a vision of the grievous scene. Nonetheless, we may rightly thank Anne who inspired her husband's unforgettable imagery of the compass.

He saw himself as the roaming leg of the compass, which needed the steady strength from the firm leg that Anne was – and that firm leg was what made his motion possible.

But perhaps there is more to what he said to Anne. Is their story not the figurative journey of Everyman? Do we not run the race of life on paired legs, one visible and the other invisible? Does every expression of life not have an invisible enablement along with it? We run no more on our own than does the compass leg, which can move only if the other stays firm in the center. A Quiet Power runs obliquely with our feeble limbs, until life's course is run and done. Somehow, we are important enough in the eye of heaven for such remarkable care.

Extract from The Village Maestro & 100 Other Stories by Dr. Varghese Mathai, published by Pippa Rann Books, U.K., and included in Confluence by permission.

Book Review

Daisy and Woolf by Michelle Cahill Reviewed by Sharon Rundle

Michelle Cahill's book *Daisy and Woolf* draws readers into a fascinating aspect of Virginia Woolf's work. The premise is brilliant, the execution remarkable and aspects of the characters in Mrs Dalloway are explored in a unique and innovative way.

After re-reading Mrs Dalloway, which I hadn't read for a few years and loved as much as ever, I began reading *Daisy and Woolf*. Cahill's layered and captivating post-modern novel is gripping from the first paragraph. Cahill's writing has a pleasing rhythm, the narrative sweeps up the reader and transports them to other times and places, such as England, India, and Europe in the 1920s, and a long tragic voyage between Calcutta and London. Letters play an important part in the narrative. Cahill's novel opens with the narrator Mina receiving a letter from her recently deceased mother. The relationship between Daisy Simmons and Peter Walsh is revealed through their personal correspondence.

The structure of intertwined narratives reveals the stories of two Anglo-Indian women – Mina is an author who is travelling while researching and writing a post-colonial novel to satisfy her curiosity about Woolf's minor character Daisy Simmons, who is described by Woolf as "dark and charming" and in Mina's opinion "cuts a lonely figure in the novel".

The character of Peter Walsh in Mrs Dalloway has always seemed faintly repulsive to me, though I am fascinated by him and his strange ways. He is an intriguing character and his unusual and scandalous relationship with the elusive Daisy Simmons adds to his quirkiness. We know from Woolf's novel that Daisy has left her husband and son in India to meet Peter in England and seek a divorce in order to be with him. We

soon realise Peter is still infatuated and obsessed by Clarissa Dalloway who once rejected his proposal of marriage. His idea of marriage to Daisy seems idealised, based on his imagination rather than reality.

In the contemporary strand of Cahill's narrative author Mina, who is grieving her mother's death, is the mother of a teenaged son. She thinks deeply about her family, her research, of the despair she feels as she tries to capture elusive and reluctant characters. This literary device allows a glimpse into the mind of Mina as she researches the characters of Woolf's novel while writing her own narrative. The reader is privy to the author Mina's inner

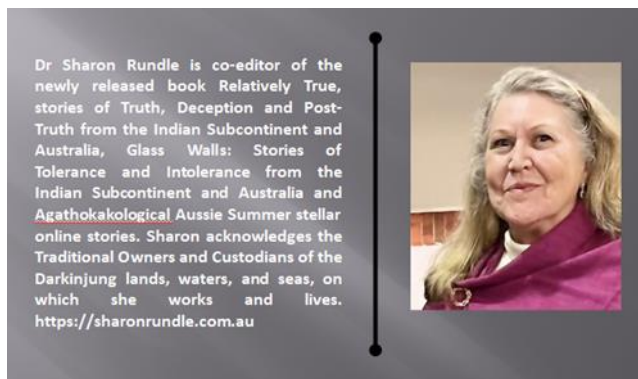
space. Daisy's perspective of Peter Walsh gives an alternative portrayal from that of Clarissa. He behaves differently in Daisy's company, seeming less agitated. In a letter to Daisy, Peter writes that he has: "No reason to hide among the vegetables, like a rough, bronze statue in the moonlight. No need to feel clenched to break down and weep. No ridiculous scenes, no melodramas! The tears we shed after parting in Calcutta were tears of joy."

In addition to a great read, this is a rigorously researched literary work, enhanced by Cahill's intuitive development of the characters and the depth of her knowledge and

understanding of Woolf's writing. Cahill's re-imagining of Daisy Simmons reveals an underlying racism in Woolf's novel. She brings into focus how this racism made women of colour invisible and insignificant, their needs sublimated to serve the British ruling

class. "In Virginia Woolf's London Clarissa's Englishness dominates, and others like Daisy Simmons are marked, a shadow devoured in the Imperial closet" From a barely delineated character, a fantasy in the mind of Peter Walsh's memories of his time in India, Daisy emerges in Cahill's novel as a substantial complex character with desires, aims and emotions every bit as strong as those of English women.

I don't want to give away any spoilers, I will simply say that in the end Daisy's situation is inevitable despite the reader wishing her a more favourable outcome as Cahill's novel concludes. Daisy is a woman of her time, class, and position. Nonetheless in her own way, Daisy has made peace with herself. With limited choices, she has chosen to be her own mistress.



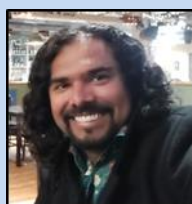
thoughts through stream of consciousness, a style for which Woolf is famous. As Mina's ideas percolate, the character of Daisy Simmons emerges and becomes much more substantial. Her life, her struggles, her opinions, her feelings and her fondest hopes and dreams are now the focus of Mina's narrative. We see how these elements are transformed by tragedy, reality, and that singular English obsession with a brutally delineating class system – who belongs and who doesn't.

Cahill's novel works on several levels. The contemporary voice of Mina and the letters written by Woolf's character Daisy draw readers into disparate and diverse narratives about relationships that may or may not exist in the interstices of time and

A poem- Third Culture Prospects by Abraham Thomas

When I look around the world I see
Lives lived chock-full of monotony
Where governments can get away with so much lust
There's shares to be bought in guns we trust
The corporate machine even in university
No more learning life through adversity
The degrees we gleam from our web-filled dreams
In spite of ignorance; ingenious pyramid schemes
The lives that are taken for money or land
Blood spilled for oil, Blood diamonds in demand
When will we break free of this hypocrisy
Power held by scare-crow democracies
The fittest will thrive, while the weak always suffer
For the rich, the word of the law tends to stutter
Different rules for the mighty and the blatant somebody
While the world steps past the subtle Fogarty
The skin of rare creatures we hang on the mantle
While species die out, in sweatshop battles
The price that we pay for the designer label
Is measured in kid's blood that puts food on tables
We exploit the third world with their undercut prices
The drain from the east of brains and spices
Has always been the way, the Holy Grail was haunted
There was always ignorance and trust to be exploited
They came with their paleness and promises of civility
To show the one god, no religious culpability.
At what point did the good realize the corrupt?
Much structure in place, practically Promethean to disrupt
It was up to the indigenous to realize the price
Of forced industrial revolution, too much is sacrificed
And they all rose in revolt, stood at different times
The empire was lost, they won back their paradigm
Still now their lands lie drained and raped
The jewel in the crown had been forsaken
These days they come with stocks, free market arrangements
You play their game; they have no time for patience
There's not much trust when dog eats dog
Capitalistic wheels in the almighty cog
The red tape that shrouds our every decision
Helping strangers being no-one specific's mission?
Who are the ones to go above the call
To sort out a brother, make him stand tall...
We struggle to mobilize through magnets of tar
Not strength in numbers, we lower the bar
Of human decency and the love for a stranger
We all think about how they could endanger
But why can't we be people who answer the cry
From a stranger; 'we're late' we say to justify
But still we see random acts of kindness
That warms the cockles, darkness to brightness
And maybe that's enough to spread the word
We're probably all the same, let's stop being absurd!

Dr. Abraham Thomas grew up in Saudi Arabia, being born to Indian and Malaysian parents before moving to the UK. He enjoys prioritising art over his job, particularly indulging in rock music, debating, cooking, scuba diving and photography. He remains on an eternal quest to enjoy life.



It is not necessary to read Woolf's novel to enjoy Daisy and Woolf though those who have may view Woolf's work in another light. I am full of admiration for Cahill's novel.

Michelle Cahill is an Australian novelist and poet of Indian heritage who lives in Sydney. Her debut collection of stories, *Letter to Pessoa* (Giramondo) was awarded the NSW Premier's Literary Award for New Writing. She has been awarded grants from the Australia Council, the Copyright Agency Limited, her prizes include the KWS Hilary Mantel International Short Story Prize, shortlisting in the ABR Elizabeth Jolley Prize and the ABR Peter Porter Poetry Prize.

Daisy and Woolf is published by Hachette Australia (2002) and Hachette UK. It is available at Hachette Australia and UK, selected book shops and at Amazon Au and UK.



Dr Sharon Rundle is a professional member of the Institute of Professional

Editors, and Chair of the University of Technology Sydney Alumni Writers' Network. She has co-edited several anthologies of short fiction and edited books, literary magazines, and journals. Her stories, essays and articles have been published world-wide in books, anthologies, magazines, websites, and broadcast on radio. Sharon encourages international people-to-people literary links.



**Submissions Deadline
For
May-June 2023 Issue**

**Please send your
submissions by
30th April 2023**

**Email:
confluenceuk@yahoo.com**

History Moments

The Mhow Fort and It's Connection with 1857

by Deepa Vanjani

At just around 25 km from India's six times cleanest city Indore, lies Mhow, where, nestled in the Cantonment, inconspicuous, is situated a vital piece of history- the Mhow Fort with its incredible story of connection the 1857 First War of Indian Independence.



Sketch of Mhow Fort

positions for cannons. The bastions still have in place the pulleys and hooks that were used to pull up the ammunition from the ground floor.

As one walks a little, one reaches the Malcolm Bastion that has a plaque which reads:

"Near this spot we're buried the bodies of Col. John Platt, Captain. James Fagan, both from the 23rd Bengal Native Infantry and Major Alfred Harris 1st Bengal Light Cavalry who were killed doing their duty on the night of 1st July 1857 on the outbreak of the mutiny of Mhow."

In January 1818 was signed the Treaty of Mandsaur between the British and Maharaja Malhar Rao Holkar after the latter's defeat in the Battle of Mahidpur during the Third Anglo- Maratha War, fought close to Indore, the seat of Maratha power. In accordance with the treaty, the British were responsible for maintaining inner tranquility in the Maratha territories. The British had to be stationed at a suitable place and thus Sir John Malcolm founded the Cantonment at Mhow, owing to its strategic position.



Dr. Deepa Vanjani is presently heading the English Department of PMBG Science College, Indore. She has a 26 years teaching experience at college level and is also a registered DAVV, Indore PhD guide.

On the night of 1st July 1857, the First War of Independence broke out in Mhow. When Col. John Platt was killed in the line of duty, the command of the station went into the hands of Captain Townsend Hungerford commanding The Horse Battery at Mhow.

The planning of the Fort Mhow started the same year as the Treaty was signed, the purpose being maintaining the internal tranquility of the Holkar territories for which was needed a secure and strategic place to be used as Magazine for storing ammunition. It was known as Fortified Square'.¹

"It is believed that the Fortified Square was initially made to also repel the Pindaris (dreaded criminals in the region)."²

With the passage of time the square gained prominence as the Malwa Field Force stationed at Mhow was joined by "the Mewar Field Force at Nasirabad to form a separate Division called the 'Western Division' with its headquarters at Mhow."³

The Fort was used as a Magazine to store ammunition. Its gateway was guarded by sepoys.

I decided to visit the Fort, for just books wouldn't suffice until I had the feel of the place. With prior permission I reached

the Fort and was told photography was prohibited.



Outside the Mhow Fort 5

Built in 1821, in an area of about 10 acres, one steps into silence on entering the premises that harbours in its lap old trees and surrounded by a moat and the artificial glacis, also built at the same time. It has four bastions-Malcolm, Durand, Phyre and Hardings, and gun

1st of July was an eventful day for both Indore and Mhow for from Indore, the firing reached Mhow at night. Women and children had been moved into the fort. The sepoys of both 23rd Regiment Bengal Native Infantry and the Right Wing of the 1st Light Cavalry had joined the Mutiny. Several officers lost their lives defending the Fort. Many bungalows on the Mall Road were burnt down.

Mr. Lobo gives an interesting account in his book of the entire month, from the 2nd of July to August 2nd when help arrived for the garrison from Aurangabad. He describes of how light guns were placed on the four corner bastions on July 2nd and officers who had lost their lives were buried. Next day Martial Law was proclaimed in Mhow, heavy battery was mounted in front of

the north gate of the fort and every attempt was made to strengthen the fort. As days passed sepoys were put under court martial and hanged in front of the fort. Meanwhile the Maharaja Holkar had sent the remaining of his treasury to Mhow Fort to safeguard it from his own troops. It was placed under the charge of Captain Amyand Elliot.

On 13th July a telegraph line was brought into the fort and communications with Bombay were opened. The officers continued to work hard and did everything possible to defend the fort. The relief (Bombay) column continued to March from and finally it arrived on August 2nd.

The small garrison defended the fort till 2 August 1857 when finally the column of Brigadier General Stuart arrived from Aurangabad, welcomed by a 21 gun salute. The column marched through Mhow but the coming months were crucial due to fear of another rising. A new bastion with a big gun mounted on it was built in the fort. " From November, this Cantonment acted as a base to quell the Mutiny in Malwa, with two small columns the British set out from Mhow Fort...They re-entered Indore first. The next operation was to capture

Dhar...Marching from Mandsaur, Sitamau, Ujjain and other places the column reached Indore on 15th December...Many officers and troops " were received in grand durbar by the Holkar. This ended the Malwa campaign."



The Fort underwent many alterations to strengthen it. The role of the Mhow Fort was praised in the British Parliament in 1859.

Later the Fort served as a base for operations and a first class arsenal under the Ordinance department.

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(My gratitude to Mrs. Neetu Srivas for making my visit to the Mhow Fort possible and Mr. Denzel Lobo for sharing with me a copy of his book which provided valuable information for this article.)

Poem

Sorrow! What are you like By Abraham Thomas

Sorrow! What are you like, who are you?
Your grip delegates my feelings to the back of the queue
How do I understand and learn to live with
That I never met you, seems like an urban myth
It hurts to lose but no pain, no gain
Aspiring to happiness seems a lifelong campaign
But perhaps the perspective I've taken is wrong
Being content with life should be my Siren's song
How can I feel sorrow if I've never felt joy
Is this real life, is this a ploy?
My sunny disposition, it seems to destroy
Although it hurts, can it be the real McCoy?

If I learn to live with my sorrows and pain
Avoid the drain to sustain, a normal person I remain...

Short Story

Loving Children

by Subhash Chandra

"Stop this madness."

"Is loving children madness? You could not give me a child in fifteen years. I want to be a mother ... I want to feel the joy of creating a life."

"It might get you into big trouble one day," he said.

"You need not bother in that case."

But the next moment she felt bad. She knew he would go out on a limb for her. Therefore she added, "God has deprived us of a child ... for no fault of ours. He is not unjust. Nothing untoward will happen to me. Now stop worrying." He let out a deep, rueful sigh.

The small cluster of kids returning from school in uniform with their heavy bags slung at their backs stirred the mother in her and her desire to press one to her yearning breasts turned painfully intense ... almost uncontrollable. She would buy chocolates twice or thrice a week and give one each to them.

One day, Hem Raj said, "Meena, you know we can't afford this expense. I break my back by driving the auto-rickshaw for ten hours so we can save up and buy a small house of our own. But you squander money thoughtlessly."

"Okay, I will start working as a maid. I will not dig into your hard-earned money."

Hem Raj got worked up. "You don't know what happens to many young maids. The sex-deprived rich husbands of overbearing women seduce them with expensive gifts and money and destroy their lives. For a pretty woman like you, anyone of the scoundrels would part with a fortune."

She felt thrilled at the compliment.

"Okay, I will restrict it to twice a month. You know, it gives me immense joy to look at the beaming faces of the kids."

But she could never restrain herself.

#

She had decided to meet the kids today, but Hem Raj left late, around 12: 30 p.m., as he was not feeling well. So, soon after he left, she picked up the

chocolates and sprinted towards the lane to not miss the kids. One of them espied her and squealed with delight, "Chocolatewali aunty," and they ran towards her.

In a hurry, she had miscalculated and the youngest of them was left out.

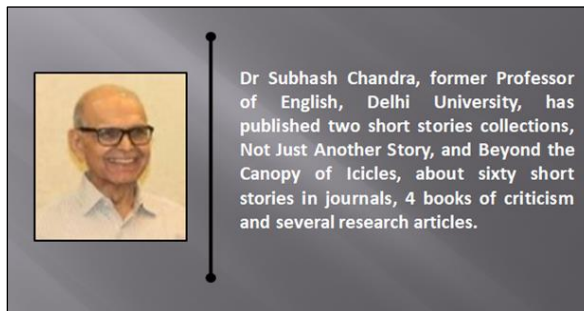
"My chocolate, Aunty?" he asked in a doleful tone.

"Sorry, Beta," she said and asked a child to share his with the kid, but he shook his head vehemently.

Translucent pearls started sliding down the chubby cheeks of the deprived child.

"Okay, I will get you one. You stay here," she told all of them.

But the others kept moving on, munching



their chocolates.

"I will come with you," the child said holding her hand.

She started walking towards the main road with the child.

A lady sitting on the veranda asked her, "Is he your son?"

"No... Actually, I am taking him to ..."

"You wait here," the lady cut her short authoritatively and went inside.

In five minutes, a police van was hooting down the lane.

#

"Hmm ... you were trying to kidnap the child," said the SI (Sub-Inspector) on duty at the Complaints Desk.

"Nahin, Saab, believe me," she said and told him the truth.

"So, that is how you waylay kids."

"She was trembling. No Saab ... you ask the child where I was taking him."

"Wait there," he said, indicating a bench. After a couple of hours, the SHO (Station House Officer) breezed in.

"Anything serious?" he asked the SI.

"Yes Sir," the SI said and pointed to Meena.

"He cast a lingering look at her. Bring her to my office."

Meena stood mute and petrified with folded hands.

"Answer me truthfully.

"Yes, Saab."

"Was he your child?"

"No, Saab."

"Where were you taking him?"

"To the market."

"Why?"

She repeated the story.

"Who is the chief of your gang?"

"Saab, I don't belong to any gang, Bhagwan Kasam."

"We will investigate," the SHO said. "You wait outside."

"I believe she's telling the truth. So no entry in Daily Diary register."

"Okay, Sir," said the SI.

"But keep her in the lock-up tonight. For her own good. She should not repeat this foolishness."

"Yes, Sir."

All by herself in the lock-up, Meena was terrified. She called out to a woman constable, just to allay her loneliness, but the stolid woman did not respond. She sat shrunk, and huddled in a corner.

#

Hem Raj came home and the neighbours told him about what had happened.

"Saab, my wife is innocent. Please let her go."

"She is not here," said the SI gruffly.

"Please, Saab ... She has not committed any crime. Please let me take her home."

"She must have gone to enjoy with her yaar. Tomorrow she will get back home. Now get lost."

But Hem Raj shivered through the chilly night outside the police station gate.

Meena came out in the morning, distracted and dishevelled with all the tell-tale signs. He drove her home in his auto.

She withdrew into her shell. Though she did all the household chores, she did not

utter a word. Often she'd lie on the cot, blankly staring at the ceiling. One day Hem Raj gently said to her, "It was not your fault. What happened is in the past. Forget about it and let us move on."

One evening, when he came home, she wrapped herself around him and snuggled against his chest.

After dinner, she served him halwa as dessert.

"I'm so happy, Meena."

Their life was a rainbow again!

After about four months, she told Hem Raj, she wanted to spend some time with her cousin sister in Bulandshahar.

He happily agreed.

"Drop me at the bus stop next Monday."

After three months he phoned her.

"I'll come in a couple of months," she said.

One morning he opened the door to a knock. Meena stood with an infant held tenderly in her arms.

Hem Raj felt disturbed and did not sleep a wink that night.

The next day, he asked her, "Is he theirs?"

"Look, he is smiling."

"Answer me."

But she only smiled enigmatically.

He left home in the morning like before...

But never came back.

Short story

A Small Piece of Bliss

by Anjana Sen

She looked out miserably at the storm gathering force. It had come out of nowhere, a day too soon. Positioning herself at the window upstairs, she stared out, willing them to appear on the horizon which was closing in fast. She could see other people scurrying past, rushing to get home. But not her lot.

'Yet,' she whispered to herself superstitiously.

Today was to have been the last nice day before the Beast from the East returned. Again. He was getting to be quite a regular uninvited guest, this wretched beast. They had both groaned last night when the late-night weather had forecast more snow for Monday.

Allan swore aloud thinking of all the plans they had made.

'Don't worry,' she said to him, 'it's still to be lovely sunshine tomorrow. And with Evie coming, let us make the most of our sunny Sunday.'

They had not seen their daughter for months. Living as she did in Bearsden, the other side of town, she couldn't visit through the lockdown, and they had had to celebrate their only grandson's third birthday on the computer. On this Zoom thing.

Restrictions were lifted now, both Allan and she had received their vaccines. Evie had been jabbed months ago, being a doctor.

It was going to be the best Mother's Day ever.

True to their words, Evie, Steve, and Charlie arrived early, exploding back into

their home with colourful laughter, long joyous embraces, and sticky kisses from the wee one. He was quite the chatterbox like his mummy and followed Allan everywhere looking for ducks.

'Ducks?' the flummoxed granddad asked.

'Yes, ducks dad. He remembers the last time we visited; you had taken him to feed the ducks at Rouken Glen. And ever since I told him yesterday that we were coming to you for lunch, he's talked about nothing else.'

The decision was then made for the three of them to take Charlie down to the park, whilst Rita sorted lunch.

Anjana Sen is a member of Eastwood Writers, and has been writing with them since 2018. Her prize winning short stories and poems have appeared in various magazines and anthologies, and she hopes to finish her novel someday soon.



'No ice cream though,' she admonished, 'and take the pushchair.' 'Oh mum, we'll be stuck pushing an empty stroller,' Evie laughed, 'he loves walking and he's got sturdy new wellies. Look?'

That was over two hours ago, and Rita had busied herself in the kitchen. She had not cooked for Evie and Steve for so long, she had more than overdone it today. The kids would need to take the leftovers home in Tupperware containers, she thought happily, as she looked out. And realised that the snow

was coming down thick and furious. Judging by the way her apple tree was swaying, the wind was fierce too.

Her first instinct was to drive out and pick them up. But there was Steve's Volvo in the driveway. Blocking her Mini. After gazing outside helplessly for some more time, she went downstairs and lit the fire. Then she went and fetched their little space heater from the loft and plugged it into the emergency socket in the porch.

'We'll never need that here,' she had said to Allan twenty years ago when they had refurbished this house.

'You never know,' he replied. 'Might have an emergency someday.'

This was that emergency, she thought now, blessing him for his foresight as she switched on the heater and placed four large towels on the chair there.

'At least they'll be warm as they get their shoes and jackets off,' she thought.

Before returning to take up her watch by the window, she placed four pairs of woollen socks on the radiator by the door.

After a fretful few minutes, she could make out three straggly figures lumbering up the road. The skies had gone quite dark by now, and she could hear the wind despite the double glazing. One of the shapes looming up was much larger than the other two. Peering as they got closer, she saw it was little Charlie, perched on his dad's shoulders.

Thanking God they were safe, she ran down to put the kettle on, and heated some milk to make hot chocolate for the little man. Lunch could be delayed, and she would insist they stay over.

Half an hour later, they were all together, around the fire, thawed out of their misery. Her precious grandson had squealed in delight as she rubbed him dry and wrapped him in his mummy's old blanket. She would go and see to lunch soon, but for now she wanted to breathe in this moment of having all her beloved ones safe and warm within touching distance.

Evie stretched out to place her head on her knee, just as she used to when she was a little girl, 'Oh mum,' she said, 'nobody can make life as comfortable as you.'

Rita sighed in quiet pleasure and stroked her daughter's still damp hair. Going back in her mind to another time, another afternoon. When she had spoken those words herself almost forty years ago.

Cycling back from school, in the blistering heat of the afternoon sun in northern India. It had taken the very last of her fourteen-year-old energy to drag

herself into the cool shade of her mother's front room. A glass of ice-cold raw mango juice was thrust into her hands even as her eyes adjusted to the darkened room from the bright white heat of the outdoors. And gentle hands wiped her sweat-soaked hair with the folds of her saree.

Glowing in that memory, she went into her kitchen smiling to herself.

Mothers! They added comfort to every home.

Short fiction

Training with Jack

By Debjani Chatterjee

Spring-heeled Jack is a ghostly character from Sheffield's folklore. He wore a black cloak and had fiery eyes. He seemed to have the ability to jump tremendous heights and lengths. There were many sightings in the 1800s, in Sheffield and elsewhere in Britain, and sightings were also reported in newspaper clippings in the early 1900s. Victorian mothers would frighten their children into good behaviour by threatening them with Spring-heeled Jack.

"Congratulations, Aarav! What impressive jumps – consistently over 1.8 metres. Unbelievable improvement! Where've you been training?"

"Oh just the park near home, Coach."

Coach Bernie looked incredulous.

Sheffield Stadium had been shut for months, and, like everyone else, he had been isolating during the Covid Pandemic. Now that the stadium had reopened, there was a lot of catching up to do. But here was an amazing story from a youngster

whose jumps had been less than mediocre when he had joined his coaching class last year. With the stadium shut and no coaching in all this time, he had fully expected the little progress that the teenager had made in training with him to vanish. But, instead, here was the lad clocking unbelievable heights, in their very first week back at the reopened

stadium! His technique was unorthodox but his jumps could make him a contender for a British juniors' title.

Coach Bernie's imagination was running away with him; for a moment he allowed himself to bask in the glory of being a celebrity coach to a protégé who would

confidence; he took a fast running jump and then appeared to sail over the bar with inches to spare!

"Jumping jellybeans!" said Bernie, his mouth open in astonishment. "But Monument Gardens Park has no equipment! What on earth were you jumping over?"

"Oh, there were bushes and a few benches, Coach." Aarav shrugged his skinny shoulders. "Boundary walls too. Even a gate."

"Hmph!" Coach Bernie's eyebrows stayed raised and his voice was sceptical.

"And you say you just trained in the Monument Gardens by yourself!"

"Er, not quite. I ..."

"You had another coach? In Lockdown! Anyone I know?"

"Dunno. I don't think Jack's a pro like you, Coach, but he sure was a pal; he helped me a lot."

Debjani Chatterjee MBE FRSL is a Sheffield-based writer and editor whose books for children and adults have been published in three continents and translated into a number of languages. Her anthology of short stories by British South Asian writers, *Mango Shake* was selected as the Birmingham Literary Festival's Book of the Year. She chaired the National Association of Writers in Education and Survivors' Poetry for some years, was a Literature Advisor to the Arts Council and is currently an RLF Associate Fellow.



hold: a regional title, then a national, the European and Commonwealth....

With mounting excitement, and bushy eyebrows permanently raised, Bernie had lifted the bar another inch. None of his athletes could clear this height – and most had trained with him for quite some time. But, Aarav, the latest and rawest recruit, seemed to exude a new-found

Aarav was ambitious and had a competitive streak that his Indian middleclass parents had nurtured. He told his coach about how claustrophobic he had felt at home – he and his widowed mother were forever getting in each other's way. Early one evening he had left home disgruntled, and walked to the park for fresh air.

"I'd gone there to do the core exercises you told us all to do in the garden. I really felt I needed fresh air. Lockdown was claustrophobic - you know Ma and I live high in the Park Hill flats."

"Yes – yes...." Bernie was sympathetic but also impatient. "So, who is this super coach, and how did you meet?"

Aarav told Bernie that he had been sitting on a park bench for an hour or so, feeling sorry for himself. The dusk was deepening and a light mist descended, when suddenly he realised he didn't have the park to himself anymore. Amazed, he observed a tall figure leap over the half-open steel gate and run around the park. The speed was unbelievable; he caught glimpses of a dark cloak flash past him, lifted only by the wind generated by the run. But what really struck him was the fact that the gate was really high – the stranger's casual high jump was the coolest thing that Aarav had ever seen. He witnessed another couple of leaps – one taking the man over a boundary wall onto Norfolk Road and another from the private Belmonte Gardens estate and back into the park. And then, incredibly, the cloaked man seemed to leap over the tall

Cholera Monument – neither his feet nor his cloak touched the cross that topped the stone monument! Aarav had rubbed his eyes, sure that it was some trick of



the lamplight that had just switched on. But then the stranger repeated his performance.

"I knew straight off that I had to learn from the guy. I called him over and begged him to teach me. Coach, Jack's one ugly dude – never did learn his second name, kinda bony and with shiny eyes that pierce right through you. He agreed straight off! I couldn't believe my luck! I guess he was kinda lonely in Lockdown – as I was. We met every evening for practice. He gave me so much confidence. He made me think I could jump any height! We'd run around the park, me following and holding on to the end of his cloak. I felt so light. I guess it was always in me – I'd no fear of crashing or falling any more. I jumped for hours every day. Higher than the bars today. I still can't leap over the Monument, of course, but the park walls are easy enough now. Even the gate's no big Hey, what's up, Coach? Why are you looking at me so strangely?"

"Aarav, didn't you ever notice the pictures etched on one side of the park's steel gate?"

"Of course I have! There's Sheffield pictures like the Turret House where Mary Queen of Scots was prisoner. Oh, and a deer with antlers 'cause of all the animals she hunted in the parks! There's also a guy working with steel. Then at the bottom there's Spring-heeled Jack..."

Aarav's voice trailed off and he stared at Bernie. His coach nodded. "Aye, lad. It's well known that Spring-heeled Jack has haunted the park and neighbouring Clay Woods for centuries now!"



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Book review

**Livia Manera Sambuy's
In Search of Amrit Kaur
An Indian Princess in Wartime Paris**

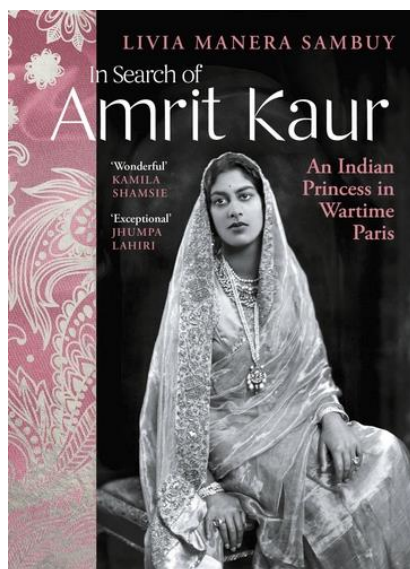
By Anjana Basu

On a humid day in Mumbai, Livia Manera Sambuy takes shelter from the sun in the Prince of Wales Museum and is stopped in her tracks by the elegant photograph of an Indian princess. Amrit Kaur, the Rani of Mandi and the only daughter of the Maharaja Jagatjit Singh Bahadur of Kapurthala, set Sambuy off on a search to find out more about the intriguing princess. Information was scarce but the little snippets Sambuy picked up along the way gave her a story of imprisonment by the Gestapo in World War 2 Paris, apparently for selling her jewels to save various Jewish friends, and death soon after. Sambuy started tracking Amrit Kaur's story, fuelled by her own move to Paris.

While the story Sambuy sets out to tell is fascinating, it is hampered by lack of actual knowledge about Amrit Kaur's life in Paris and her associations with Jewish friends. Like the diehard journalist that she is, Sambuy tracks down telephone numbers - that of Amrit Kaur's daughter Bubbles of Bilkha who sets her off on a flight to Pune, only to discover that the 80 year old Bubbles apparently resents her mother for abandoning her and her brother and appears to know nothing at all about Amrit Kaur.

Sambuy persists in her quest, eking out her narrative with stories of the Maharajah of Kapurthala's many marriages, including the nubile Spanish dancer Anita Delgado and tales of Cartier, the fantastic jewels that Indian royalty flaunted and the meaning behind the stones. In between, Sambuy tracks down relatives of relative is snubbed at dinners and in all given a difficult time by suspicious royal who took her for yet another European out to make money by writing an inaccurate tell all book.

Occasionally, her own quest seems slightly exhausting, especially since she has so little information to go on barring Amrit Kaur's very Anglicised education, her time in a school jazz band and her marriage to a man who was far less sophisticated.



She writes about the significance and the importance of jewellery and how the most French of Indian princes made friends with the 'most Indian of French jewellers', names the relationship between the Maharajah of Kapurthala and Jaques Cartier. She also details British colonial high-handedness, Lord Curzon's disgust for what he felt was the worthlessness of Indian princes while at the same time striving to preserve the legacy of Indian history and wildlife. There are contradictions in politics and the confusion arising as the result of being part of a large family rooted in the aristocratic bloodlines of India. Sambuy traces all these with painstaking care while admitting that her source material on Amrit Kaur is slim, Barring an

interview in Mandi with a journalist and various photo albums, she actually has very little to support her theory of Jewish sympathy though there are records of a sapphire sale and some black pearls that powered into dust.

Nonetheless, Sambuy pursues the story of Amrit Kaur to America on the trail of another unexpected lead, where she discovers an American millionairess friend who was with the princess in Paris and also arrested. She has narratives of what it felt like to be arrested by the Gestapo, accounts of the last parties that jetsetters like Elsie de Wolfe threw before flying out of France with the Nazis snapping at their heels. She captures a world of illusions, wealth and grandeur that F Scott Fitzgerald would have envied.

Into the narrative she winds her own life, very subtly. It is not till the book reaches its end that she confesses that reuniting Bubbles of Bilkha with her mother's memories helped Sambuy get over the depression that had filled her life after she had lost her own mother. This actually accounts for why she pursued the thread of Amrit Kaur's life till the bitter end, bringing closure to two very different daughters united by a princess.

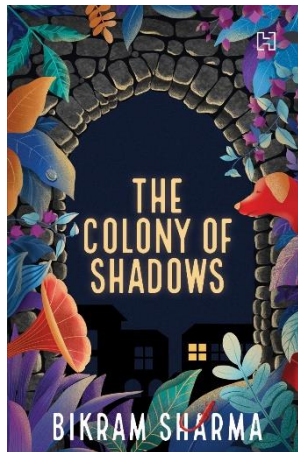
The book does require a once over by an editor familiar with the scenario of Indian royalty and their festivals. However, glitches notwithstanding Sambuy paints a fascinating picture of the lives of the latter erstwhile Indian royals deprived of their privy purses by Indira Gandhi and with very little to fall back on but stories of past glory, in many cases.

Published by Penguin INR 799

Book review

The Colony of Shadows by Bikram Sharma

Reviewed by Sharon Rundle



The Colony of Shadows by Bikram Sharma is a compelling read that takes us into other dimensions in this well-paced novel about grief and loss.

The novel opens with a scene of the central character nine-year-old Varun, who is waiting at home in Delhi for his parents to return. "He glanced at the window, half expecting headlights to flash past ... there was no sign of them. The darkness of the colony remained undisturbed. The clock in the hallway ticked on". Varun's parents do not return, and he is sent to his disagreeable grandmother Usha and his mother's sister, aunt Jyoti who live in Bangalore.

The novel is set partly in the present in Bangalore India and partly in an afterlife that is a semblance of the colony where Varun lived in Delhi. The alternating voices of the characters allow for multiple viewpoints which broaden the narrative. The perspective and voice of Poppy a dog is an ingenious device. The passages from Poppy's point of view put me in mind of Virginia Woolf's novel *Flush* narrated by a dog "who not only played an active part in human life, and inspired poetry [by Elizabeth Barratt Browning], but was himself a dog of worth and character well deserving celebration". Poppy, too, plays an active role with her awareness of Varun's vulnerability and cognizance of the

preternatural forces in play. "She sniffed her way forward. By now she should've passed under the crackling vertical line, but dimensions fluttered in front of her like curtains in a breeze and she'd lost all sense of direction ..."

Sharma's writing is rhythmic and flowing, and the reader is carried along in its wake. The transitions between our mortal realm and the nether world are brilliant. I very much enjoyed the originality, the premise, the engaging characters, and the way in which other dimensions are portrayed. Time and space are ephemeral in this novel, the concept of life, death, afterlife, and the arrow of time are questioned by Varun who, in his profound grief and confusion, is caught up in a malleable dynamical space where past and present collide. As the narrative progresses, undercurrents, secrets, and the characters' ulterior motives are revealed. The tension is palpable. At the centre of the narrative is a mystery that draws Varun further and further into danger as he tries to make sense of his paranormal experience in another realm of existence. "Across the road was a colony of crumbling houses. Some of the houses had collapsed, spilling rubble everywhere. Those houses that were still standing were bleached of colour, water-stained, their windows so scratched and dusty that they looked like cloudy eyes. He shivered at the thought of stepping inside their unlit rooms."

These paranormal passages in the *Colony of Shadows* are skilfully written so the reader can easily suspend disbelief and entertain the possibility of the transient afterlife of shadows and sorrow that Sharma portrays. In my mind, I saw the present of the story in colour but the colony of shadows in monochrome.

The central theme though is a sensitive and profound study of the impact of grief on a child whose acute loss and sorrow is all consuming. Varun's

immediate reaction is disbelief and denial, followed by a longing to be reunited with his parents in his home in Delhi. He is emotionally disturbed and feels misunderstood in his new surroundings. His surreal experience of finding his parents in the colony of shadows is a manifestation of his longing for their return. For Varun this preternatural reunion and altered state seem all too real and he comes to realise that he must decide whether to remain with his dead parents there or return to be with the living and face his future as an orphan. "It was Munirka but it wasn't. I went back home and saw Ma and Pa. I thought they'd be happy to see me and I could stay with them in the old house ... But I can't. Everything's changed and they're gone now." The deep love that his aunt Jyoti feels for Varun plays a crucial role in the outcome. Sharma shows great insight into childhood grief and trauma as Varun goes through an intense transformation in this remarkable and gripping novel.



Bikram Sharma is from Bangalore. He completed an MA in Creative Writing at the

University of East Anglia, and in 2016 he was awarded the Charles Wallace India Trust writing fellowship at the University of Kent. His short stories have been published by various literary magazines including *Shenandoah*, *The Masters Review*, and *Litro*. In 2017 he won the DNA - Out of Print short fiction contest. *The Colony of Shadows* is his debut novel.

The Colony of Shadows is available in bookstores across India, as well as online via Amazon.

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