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The Magic That Sets a Literary Festival Apart

A report on the recent Washington DC South Asian Lit- Fest

by Shirish Néné

A good literary festival requires a great lineup of speakers, authors, poets, playwrights, script writers, and journalists across a wide spectrum of genres and must present a diverse set of voices that spark thought-provoking conversations. There are a number of literary festivals that do this very well, and for the past four years, the DC South Asian Literary Festival (DCSALF) has certainly been one of them. The magic that sets DCSALF apart is the very personal ambience that permeates every session.

Let's pull aside the curtain for a peek at an illustrative scene from this year's festival.

"Then Kojo Nnamdi asks me what I think of Eshaan, the protagonist of *Karma and the Art of Butter Chicken*. I pause a little too long. At the very instant that I finally reply that he is a bumbling idiot, Kojo breaks the silence with 'He really reminds me of you'". The main hall of the Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland, bursts out in laughter at Monica Bhide's recollection of her National Public Radio. The ice is broken, and the crowd at the DC South Asian Literary Festival is bubbling over with questions for this very expressive, and down-to-earth author. The crowd queries her about her inspiration and what her next book is going to be about. "What did you draw upon to create a character with a background that is so different from your own?"

Personally, I was acquainted with her work as a cookbook author and am discovering

just how enchanting her other works are. I hesitantly invite her to our book club for a reading of one of her books, with the caveat: she will have to sample my cooking. Monica graciously accepts!

Well known authors have busy schedules and are too often mobbed by their fans and even by those unfamiliar with their work but looking for a Facebook or Instagram picture. Too often we see polite, strained

First:

- South Asian festival organizers must keep in mind that South Asians aren't a monolithic bloc. They reside in or originate from different countries, speak many different languages, and are increasingly an integral part of whichever part of the world they now call their home.

- They hold widely varying socio-political beliefs.

- Remember that festival audiences and even artists are not all of South Asian descent.

Mindful curating requires compiling a wide enough representation that welcomes all voices in a respectful atmosphere that nurtures meaningful and stimulating conversations. I found DCSALF a refreshing getaway from the echo chambers that surround us.

People of Indian and Pakistani

origin alike, listened fascinated as author and translator Surinder Deol

moderated a discussion where Dr Ali Hashmi shared excerpts from his biography of his grandfather Faiz Ahmed Faiz's quest for independent self-expression. Seema Sirohi and her very timely and insightful book *Friends with Benefits: The India-US Story* drew intrigued questions from both South Asian and non-South-Asian audience members. Editor, author, painter and educator Meenakshi Mohan along with poets Gopal Lahiri, Lopa Banerjee, and Manju Gupta challenged status-quo

(Continues on P3)



Shashi Tharoor, Maryland Lt. Governor Aruna Miller, along with DC South Asian Arts Council founders Geeta and Manoj Singh open DCSALF 2023.

faces posing for selfies and that can't wait to get back to the sanctuary of their hotel rooms. The DCSALF audiences I saw were genuinely interested in what the speakers had to say, and the artists responded in-kind. The camaraderie continued into dinner sessions with spontaneous poetry readings. The sessions felt like a meeting of friends, old and new. To borrow from the title of James Cullen's book; this is what elevates a literary festival from good to great. What is the secret sauce that goes into effecting this transformation?

It is a two-part answer.

Editorially Speaking

Hello, our readers and writers,

Thanks for your long wait for our May/June 2023 issue.

Each issue is a special issue for us, and we try to make improvements to every issue. Even though we work with minimal publishing resources, we focus on the quality of each work submitted for publication. Fortunately, most of our writers are experienced, versatile, and always willing to listen, reducing our editorial workload. As the editor of this magazine this means a lot to me. However, I am always looking for views and suggestions from our writers and readers so that we find new ways to improve this magazine further.

Our readers and writers know that Confluence has a broader readership across the globe. However, many of them are not entirely familiar with the copyright laws governing publishing or republishing any form of creative work in publications with global reach. In this issue, we are publishing a special article by Sharon Rundle titled 'Understanding copyright for authors and writers'. Sharon has many years of experience publishing various forms of literary work and has worked with authors from many different countries and cultures, making her the best person to write this informative article. I hope this article will raise further awareness of copyright laws among authors and editors who contribute to Confluence.

The main highlight of this issue is the recent literary festival held in the Washington DC area. Also, as usual, we have put together a variety of genres from our talented writers and introduced some new writers too. I am sure our readers will welcome them and form new collaborations in future.

Creativity provokes debates and discussions within society to solve some of the crucial problems affecting us. In our last issue, I mentioned that modern literature should reflect everyday issues. I also said that through articles, stories, poems, and paintings, we should openly discuss these issues and bring more awareness among our readers and the public. I am delighted that some of our contributors have reflected this in their recent work.

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

Vijay Anand

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Camaraderie came easily; Scenes from the festival: Clockwise from top left: 1. Dr. Meenakshi Mohan, Lopa Banerjee, Manju Gupta, and Gopal Lahiri; 2. Dr. Hashmi and Surender Deol; 3. Neema Néné, Monica Bhide, Neerja Tripathi and Geeta Singh; 4. Arundhati Subramanyam in an impromptu poetry recital over dinner; 5. Manoj Tiwari, Arindam Ghosh, Astha Naval, and Sushil Rattan.

perspectives with her anthology “A Tapestry of Women in Indian Mythology”. Manoj Tiwari in a discussion with thespians Arindam Ghosh, Sushil Rattan and Astha Naval explored the role of scripts and the evolving juxtaposition of Hindi and Bengal theatre. This was just a sample of the smorgasbord of variety the festival offered.

One of the most heartfelt accolades I heard during the event came from the Barbadian and Trinidadian husband and wife camera crew who gushed about how much they had learned about South Asia and how eager they were to read some of these books.

Second:

- Festivals must be true to their mission. Under the leadership of founders Manoj and Geeta Singh, DCSALF and its parent organization the DC South Asian Arts Council Inc., (DCSAACI) mission is to be the leading ambassador for South Asian culture in this part of the world to provide a platform for all artists, established and aspiring.

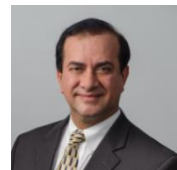
- We all recognize the role that big names have in drawing the audiences and ticket sales that are the lifeblood that sustain festivals. The other sustaining element is a steady source of new and emerging talent.

The erudite Dr. Shashi Tharoor with his wit and charm drew a packed auditorium on the opening night of DCSALF 2023. Within the first few minutes of her session, it was very apparent why The Hindu described author and poet Arundhati Subramaniam as “one of the finest poets writing in India today”. Her direct, personable interaction with the audience during her own and subsequent session was what every curator dreams of. Equally gratifying was how audiences appreciated the warmth of scriptwriter turned budding author, Soma Bose’s human-centric stories. The rich diversity and congeniality of three days of in-person sessions were not to be outdone by the seven days of virtual ones. Journalist turned author Sunanda Mehta’s English translation of her great-grandfather’s

Punjabi anthology Badshaian unlocked this treasure trove for new generations and for people who don’t read Gurmukhi. The enthusiastic responses from online viewers proved that a really great festival can surmount enormous distance and time zone differences to attract and connect with their audiences.

On that note, I remind ourselves that we refer to the Atlantic as “The Pond” and that DCSALF makes a delightful bridge to span this pond, physically and virtually. I hope to welcome Confluence readers as artists and audience at DCSALF 2024.

Shirish Néné sits on the board of the DC South Asian Arts Council. An engineer by training, and a professional technologist, and real estate investor, he believes that where a STEM and Finance education provides mind and body to a society, Art completes the picture with a heart.



Understanding copyright for authors and writers

by Sharon Rundle

Copyright, permissions and rights holders

The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of copyright law for authors, creators, and editors, not to provide legal advice.*

As editor of several collections of stories, journals, and magazines, I am aware of the requirement to clear permissions for previously published work. This takes up an inordinate amount of my time when preparing for publication. For the latest anthology I edited, *Relatively True, Stories of Truth, Deception and Post-Truth*, for example, it took almost twelve months to obtain the necessary permissions to republish the stories.

It concerns me that authors are not always cognisant of the status of copyright of their work. Authors may sign over their work to publishers who may then on-sell the rights to other publishers. Please note that I am not a lawyer and all advice here is general. For specific enquiries please contact the relevant copyright law authority in your country or a copyright lawyer.

What is copyright?

In most countries, copyright is automatic, it applies to published and unpublished work. First copyright belongs to the author, creator, or maker. When an author formally signs over copyright to a publisher in a contract or permissions form, the publisher then usually owns copyright in some form. The publisher may have full copyright (world rights and subsidiary rights) transferred to them, or they may obtain permission or licence to publish in a particular publication and country with the original copyright remaining with the author. The licensee has copyright of the version published in

the form that they have published. It is important for an author to check which rights they are assigning to a third party, and to keep a record of copyright assigned. Copyright passes onto the author's estate in the event of death.

Published works created for an employer are usually owned by that employer, commissioned work is similarly owned by the commissioner of the work, for example a journalist writing for a newspaper, or a researcher at a university publishing in academic journals. For the copyright status of work published online, check the website's terms of use.

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 in books, anthologies, magazines, websites, and broadcast on radio. Sharon encourages international people-to-people literary links.



Why does it matter?

Copyright protects the author's work from unauthorised use. To publish an author's work requires permission from the author and often payment for that use. Exceptions are 'fair use' exemptions for research and education, for example. Fair use permits researchers, students, and educational institutions to reproduce a percentage of the copyright work under 'statutory licence'. Even fair use has its limits, though, which should be investigated before assuming that the work can be reproduced. Sharing on social media may also breach copyright, it is safer to share a link to the published work.

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obligation for the author to be given credit for their work. To check where their work has been published authors can use search engines and check the links below.

Legal advice should be sought if copyright of your work has been infringed. This is a complex legal issue with, for example, time limits for a letter of demand, and the risk of issuing a groundless threat, a legal term for unfounded claims.

How to obtain the permission or licence to republish a copyright work

In many cases, it becomes a form of detective work to trace all rights holders of the writing or the work that an author has given permission to publish. I begin with the authors, their literary agent, and publishers, I ask them to let me know of the rights holders. I check the work itself for the title, date of publication, publisher, ISBN (or ISSN), and copyright notice, for example: © Sharon Rundle 2023. I use search engines to find out whether the work been published elsewhere, in addition to the copy I have the author's permission to use.

After gaining information from these sources, I check the records of institutions in Australia such as the National Library of Australia catalogue, and Copyright Agency Limited (CAL). For Rights Holders in the USA, I check the Library of Congress catalogue and Copyright Office USA, please visit (<https://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ22.pdf>) for guidance. Authors and editors can search this database or request the Copyright Office to conduct searches for them. The Copyright Alliance in Washington DC has information under Resources on US copyright law, copyright act and copyright regulations, how to find a copyright owner or creator, and how to obtain a licence to reproduce literary and creative works. You can also check with

Writers Artists and Their Copyright Holders (WATCH). For UK copyright, I have found PLS Clear an excellent resource for permissions clearances, they have a useful help desk at <https://plsclear.zendesk.com/hc/en-us?> For works published in India, go to the copyright law website provided by the government of India at <https://www.copyright.gov.in/> Advice and

useful links to the current copyright act in India are available at <https://www.indialawoffices.com/legal-articles/laws-on-copyright-registration-in-india>. The Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) assists with copyright permissions world-wide.

It is important to respect the work of authors and publishers and to ensure that copyright is not breached inadvertently or

deliberately. While an author does not need to register copyright, it is best practice to keep a personal record of all published versions of their work for reference should the need arise.

*Advice in this article is meant as a general guideline. For specific enquiries contact the relevant copyright law authority in your country or engage a copyright lawyer.

Flash Fiction

VIPASSANA* Lakshmi Kannan

'He is the best guru for Vipassana meditation one can find in South Delhi,' averred Uday Parekh. 'Let me share his phone and email address. Save both and contact him at the soonest,' said his devout disciple. 'Tell him that I referred you to him so that he takes special care of you,' he added.

I saved the number and email ID under Shyam Sundar Sharma.

'Where does he live?' I asked.

'In R.K.Puram, Sector 12.'

I noted that with the other details.

'Can I speak to Guru ji, Shri Shyam Sundar Sharma?'

'Speaking.'

'Sir, Namashkar.'

'Namashkar.'

'Sir, I am Rukmini, a friend of Uday Parekh. He referred me to you. I would like to learn Vipassana meditation, if you can kindly enroll me in your class. I would be very grateful.'

'Sure. Welcome to my class. But first, I need to note some preliminary details about your background. I do that for all my disciples. Why don't you come over?'

'Certainly Gururji. I will come over.'

'Where do you live?'

'Sir, in Motibagh.'

'That's not far from my place. I stay in R.K.Puram, Sector 12.'

'I know Sir. Uday gave me your address.'

'Fine then. Come at 6 pm today. I'm free.'

'Sure, Guru ji. Thank you.'

'Hello. Is that Rukmini?'

'Namashkar Sir. I will be coming at 6 pm today.'

'That's why I called. Can you come at 5 pm instead?'

'Ah...I suppose I can.'

'You see Rukmini, my help has gone out. He just phoned to say he is held up on some work and will come late. I gave him a good scolding because I wanted him to be back by 5 pm so that he can make us our tea.'

'Oh Sir, it doesn't really matter. I don't need any tea. It's all right.'

'No. Come at 5 pm and you can make the tea for both of us,' he said, laughing.

'What?'

'Yes.'

'Guru ji, like I said I don't need any tea.'

'But I do! I must have my tea every day at 5 pm.'

He had signed off.

*Vipassana means to see things as they really are. Vipassana is one of the most ancient techniques of meditation. It was taught in India more than 2500 years ago as a universal cure for illnesses and was also taught as an Art of Living.



Dr. Lakshmi Kannan is a poet, novelist, short story writer and critic. She has published twenty-seven books till date. She was a Resident Writer for

the International Writing Program, Iowa, USA; Charles Wallace Writer with the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK; delegate to the Feminist Book Fairs at Montreal and Amsterdam; Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. In her Tamil pen-name "Kaaveri", she has published a novel and collections of short stories. She taught English on the faculty of colleges, and in IIT - Delhi before she joined a multinational as a Senior Writer & Language Coordinator. www.lakshmikannan.i

Book Review

Tapestry of Women in Indian Mythology -Anthology Edited by Meenakshi Mohan

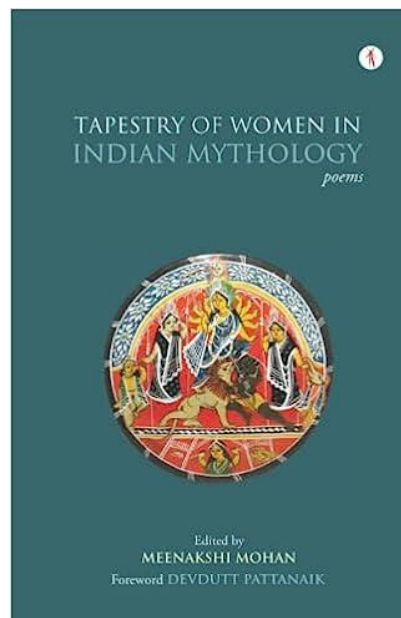
By Laksmisree Banerjee

Dr. Meenakshi Mohan, a Poet-Artist and Educator, has edited and curated this Anthology titled *Tapestry of Women in Indian Mythology* with great acumen. This book has a Foreword by Devdutt Pattanaik, who explains the relevance of these stories which foreground our cultural heritage. Dr. Meenakshi's book is brilliantly conceived and compiled with Poems by authors across the globe. It is a scintillating Celebration of Womanhood across vast temporal spaces, re-enlivened and re-awakened through a series of magnificent poetic Story-Telling. This is an adroit culling, through poetry, of centralized as well as marginalized Women Characters from our Indian scriptural, primeval, cultural and folk-lore texts/traditions, all embroidered with fascinating multi-hues and layers of Women's Stories. This Anthology projects the Aesthetic and Moral Vision of the Editor and the Contributing Poets, drawing richly from the renewing allegories, fading histories and mythological messages of Female Characters and Cultures of our ancient Indian Civilization through the ages.

The Editor validates wonderfully the title of this Anthology by stating the connotations of the word Tapestry as an interweaving or close-knitting of various threads to complete a beautiful picture, fabric or tale. Most Indians are well fed in this Ethos of our indigenous, imaginative and edifying legacy of Story-Telling which constitutes fables with messages that are foundational to our culture. It is this fountainhead of India which has been poeticized and brought to life and to the fore through the aesthetic conception of Meenakshi Mohan with great success. Mythology, I believe, is the Connecting Link from a distant pre-mordial or pre-historical past to the present times, which is enriched by its leavening lessons and allegorical substratum. These Women's Stories have been

etched in the Poetic Form which enhances with lyrical fluidity the essence of Women's Lives through time immemorial. Dr. Meenakshi introduces, with great elan, her *Tapestry of Indian Mythological Women*

with an apt poem of hers, beginning "I am a Woman of many layers", thereby establishing successfully the matrix of kaleidoscopic diversity of Women Protagonists relating antiquity with contemporaneity. This is an Anthology which poetically reconstructs female stories from the past, after having disentangled them from the mesh of Patriarchy, which had overclouded the quintessential features of Womanhood, portrayed invariably by formidable Male Writers. Hence, this awakening and poetic re-interpretation of the stoicism of women characters from the past, is an incredible feat of the Editor along with that of the perceptive, Contributing Poets.



This book is an excellent projection of Stories of both marginalized and principal Women protagonists from the Indian Epics viz. the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the

scriptural texts like the Puranas, the Upanishads and also from the Oral traditions of Folklore. Yet the significance and architectural virtuosity of Meenakshi's Anthology is affixed to the brilliant intermixture of the multidimensional facets of each and every female character birthing from

timelessness, Indian geo-spaces and the widely different takes or portrayals by the contributing poets. A few examples like the delineation of Ahalya not only as a cursed woman raped by the philanderer-god Indra but also as "the touchstone of divinity" who also has the indisputable chastity to purify Rama, the god of the Ramayana or of Manthara Dasi, the hunch-back servile woman looked upon as an evil manipulator for sending Rama to exile, is extolled for her motherly affection towards queen Kaikeyi and for wanting the very best for her. Ganga, a captive in Shiva's hair, is also the "thundering river of rebirth with mighty torrents" with the strength of holding together the terrestrial and extra-terrestrial, a cosmic flow of life and death. Draupadi or Yagnaseni, despite bearing the infamy of being disrobed in the royal court, is still the Queen, born with the rage and transcendence of Fire, causing the great war of Mahabharata to happen for the ultimate victory of her five husbands, the Pandavas full of the blessings of Lord Krishna, her Divine Lover. These poetic stories are palimpsestic and full of astonishing verisimilitude, evoking more and more human interest as we continue to read on.

This Anthology binds inextricably our contemporary Feminist Historiography with the glitter and foundational elements of ageless Female Iconography and Mythography, successfully integrating the paradoxical as well as the varied and different shades of womanhood. Women's

personas narrated by powerful men, have always been either marginalized or demonized or dehumanized or as a last resort, deified. Hence, Durga ceases to be a Woman with her symbolical ten hands for Female Multi-tasking, while being reduced to a surreal deity shorn of her motherhood, love or fortitude to fight the evil elements of destruction. This vacuous Absence of the Wholeness/Completeness of Womanhood is fabulously nullified through all the dexterous amalgamation of the multiple features of Femaleness brought alive in this wonderful Anthology. We are made to understand, through these rainbows of poetic stories, that Women have always been an integral part of the Genesis, Creation and Annihilation. These women, in their multifarious aspects, are a totality of courage and softness. They are at once nurturers and warriors of justice, mentors, care-givers, rebels and epitomes of truth, beauty, strength and righteousness in which there is no faltering. All the characters featured in these poems subscribe to this completeness of portrayal,

minus the misogynist bias of the original male writers of such mind-boggling stories, which were reduced intentionally to those of women with flat rather than round characters.

The Editor, in her preface, marks the significance of this Anthology as one of "An Awakening and Understanding of Women in Indian Mythology", which heightens, both realistically and allegorically, the Supremacy and Multi-dimensionality of Womanhood across the millennia. So here we have a range and assortment of women characters with a stunning assortment of traits, which leave us spellbound. From Sita, Draupadi, Lakshmi, Kali, Saraswati, Durga, Kunti, Radha to Bhanumati, Arundhati, Shakuntala, Damayanti, Savitri, Tara, Mandodari, Menaka, Sunaina, Hidimba, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Gandhari and the list goes on and on. This book is cradled in the interstices of both Mythology and Pre-History, of imaginative re-creation and realism, of the alluring haze of antiquity with the

invincible truth of modernity. One is held spellbound with this rapturous display of Female Protagonists playing out their roles with the ardour of the elements. This array of Women blossoming in the poetic resplendence of this Anthology is undoubtedly material for further research, reading, re-reading and introspection as transformative instruments for creating a better World. Congratulations Dr. Meenakshi Mohan!



Prof. Dr. Laksmisree Banerjee is an Award-Winning Poet, Litterateur, Sr. Academic, Vocalist, International Scholar and University Professor of English & Cultural Studies. She is widely published and anthologized with Nine Books of Poetry and several Academic Publications. She believes in the transformative power of her Pen and Voice. Email: laksmisree@hotmail.com



DC South Asian Arts Council Inc. May 2023

Tapestry of Women in Indian Mythology - In conversation with Dr. Meenakshi Mohan

The Saga of ancient women – their joy, pride, humility, struggle, tenacity, and persistence was re-enlivened and re-awakened through the stimulating virtual panel discussion of poets from around the world on May 10th, 2023. The discussion revealed multilayers and hues of forgotten characters relating antiquity to contemporary significance.

Panel: Ms. Sunita Pant Bansal, Dr. Laksmisree Banerjee, Ms. Chaitali Sengupta, Ms. Deepa Agarwal, Dr. Sanjukta Das Gupta, Gopal Lahiri, Dr. Malashri Lal, Dr. Sukrita Paul Kumar, Dr. Lakshmi Kannan, Dr. K. Satchidanandan, Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, Sir Yogesh Patel.

Moderator: Dr. Basudhara Roy.

Book review

Prisoner #1056: A Life in Creating Meaning

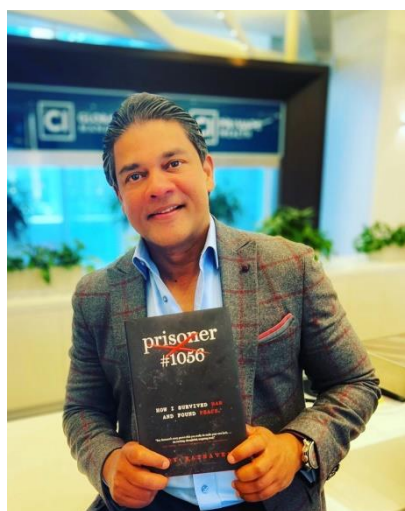
by Parthiban Manoharan

It is April 18th, 1988. An eighteen year old Roy bids farewell to his parents at the Sri lankan airport, to establish a new life in Canada. An eighteen year old who had already endured the worst of human wrath and is about to realise that the dark days are far from over. As a farewell gift, Appa, his dear father presents him with a beautiful blue striped tie which is followed by a request to his son "I ask that you live". It is rather poignant for Appa to utter those parting words as three days later, he is shot dead by the Indian Peace Keeping Force. A teenager, a newly landed immigrant in Canada and a whole lot of unanswered questions. Teenage dreams that were once snatched unjustifiably by a regime that looked at nothing but his Tamil race as a crime, were now uncertain once again at the start of his Canadian story. The tie now stands for more than a gift from Appa, but Appa himself in spirit, the life and the dreams that he had envisioned for Roy.

Prisoner #1056 begins with these dramatic events that jolts you. The brutality, injustice and loss of hope that one is familiar with by reading works set in the Holocaust era, is reflected here, in the backdrop of this tiny tear shaped island of Sri Lanka from the 1980s all the way till 2009, barely known or even acknowledged by the rest of the world. Roy represents, both individually and collectively, the symbol through which we see the story of a survivor emerging through the rubbles of injustice. The doubts that overcasts one's future, the past demons that continue to haunt even as years pass by, is contrasted with resilience and tenacity that shape up this story which is ultimately a celebration

of the human spirit.

It is fascinating that Roy quotes Viktor Franklin in one of the later chapters in the book where he mentions "the greatest human need is meaning". Roy might have not been aware of Franklin's work till much later in life, yet Roy's life stands testament to the wisdom that Franklin tries to impart



in his work "Man's Search for Meaning". Finding purpose even when life takes you through its darkest of dungeons. Roy finds this purpose in honouring the legacy of his late dear father that ultimately guides him through all roles that he chooses to play, be it a husband, father, son, a successful executive in one of the top firms in Canada, to the best expression of himself, not being a victim but a victor.

Prisoner #1056 stands out as a memoir in that it is unabashedly candid. Roy is vulnerable and bears his soul. And so does he proudly wear his successes on his sleeve. He's reflective of lessons learned.

He warns of the fragile nature of the current world that we live in which freedom and democracy are threatened; signs reminding him of a world that he used to live in, in Sri Lanka. And ultimately the need for humanity to protect a free and equal world for all of us to benefit from. This is what makes Prisoner #1056 a voice to be heard and lauded.

Roy at the launch of Prisoner #1056 wearing the tie given by his late father

On April 18th 2023, in an event hall in Scarborough, Canada, surrounded by people who shaped Roy's life, including the officer from the Canadian embassy in Colombo who granted his visa, Prisoner #1056 was released to the world. A significant day 35 years later since Roy left Sri Lanka, but most importantly the day when he saw his dear Appa the very last time. The day when Roy not only felt the courage but also worthy of wearing the precious blue striped tie that Appa had gifted at the airport. An achievement surpassing the dreams that Appa or Roy in fact would have foreseen. Roy lived and so did his dear Appa. Their life's wisdom and lessons will continue to live in the lives of many who chose to read this journey. In creating meaning in his life, Roy inspires us to do the same. The Prisoner is finally free.

Parthiban Manoharan is a tech professional interested in Film, Music, Photography and Culture. He lives in Toronto, Canada.



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Prose poem

Uncanny: The Revolutionary's Narrative

Lopamudra Banerjee

[Written in response to a poetry prompt during the #NaPoWriMo or National Poetry Writing Month in April, hosted by The Significant League literary group on Facebook.]

The sharp stings of the winter breeze pierce through my crust and core. I lie down and ponder, as if on a bed of winter-killed grass, caressing the carcasses of the wounds, bullet marks of my past days. What an uncanny life did the almighty gift us who had it all and lost it all, the invincible revolutionaries who threw away our fistful of lives in the earthen pot where rice boiled, in the fire of the family hearth?

Did life shine with its own twists, as did death, presenting its clarion call with our uncanny surrender? 'Inquilaab' was the voice of our damned, half-torn maps which still float, uncannily, in the damp recesses of our consciousness! Revolution, floating like ghostly voices in our bloodstream, and yet, there were times when I, my sisters and brothers, my two young uncles and one young aunt, my true comrades in my previous birth had sung full-throated songs, swinging and swaying by the river on full-moon nights. But then, what they had wished me to dream, to nurture and weave with the thread of my life, was a misnomer to me. What I nurtured in my battle-torn mind, looking intently at the ominous, grey clouds hovering from the west to the east, was a blasphemy to saner souls. The fight for freedom, for a liberal, egalitarian nation, the fight for my language, my mother-tongue, was an uncanny, ghastly act.

'He is possessed by the devil! Doesn't want to save his own family, for God's sake!' They hurled at me when I knocked at their door to ask for meals, to sleep at a clandestine, dark corner at the wee hours of the night, dog-tired, yet sharpening our ears, our instincts to run away through the back entrance of the house at the slightest hint of a police intrusion.

Wilderness was my greatest gift as my comrades sought me one day, swimming against the tides in the ever-swelling river, and in me, they found their volatile home where pent-up rebellions brewed. Rebellions that were uncannily housed within secret

dens in the midst of a law-abiding civilization, rebellions that were beautiful, dangerous, abundant, mysterious, camouflaged with the human facade of propriety, of following orders to keep us alive.

They have gang-raped and killed two of my sisters, my one young aunt, they have killed and maimed the corpses of the brothers and one uncle of mine who could swim against the tide in the river Brahmaputra even with better grace and agility than me. The 'rebel' and his family, severed from the rest of the town, was beyond the human freehold, after all. My quest for a long, arduous route to revolution, to 'inquilab' brought me to the crossroads, and for a brief spell of time, I wondered if I had to hold on to the tentacles of my wilderness.

The uncanny wind blew across the folds of my native country and its tropical jungle where I had to hide for days, along with two more comrades, still holding onto our last fragile scraps of wilderness. 'Fire, fire, fire!' Three bullets broke through my being at the onset of the slow, cold dawn. I lie down in a pool of blood and ponder over the incongruities, the brittleness and the blasphemy of a life gone by, a life that strived to birth a thwarted revolution. Somewhere in the horizon, by the creek that has merged with the river, a bird sings, a shrill, high-pitched dirge. Will its uncanny voice reach my ravaged, plundered home, carrying the gash and wounds of my last moments? Will it let me rest in peace in the woods?

Lopamudra Banerjee is an author, poet, translator, editor based in Texas, USA, with eight books and six anthologies in fiction, nonfiction/memoir and poetry.

She has been a recipient of the Journey Awards (First Place category winner) for her memoir 'Thwarted Escape: An Immigrant's Wayward Journey,' the International Reuel Prize for Poetry (2017) and International Reuel Prize for her English translation of Nobel Laureate Tagore's selected works of fiction (2016). She has been a Featured Poet at Rice University, Houston in November 2019.



Two Poems by Laksmisree Banerjee

SHE

Married off on her eighth birthday
She hardly knew what
That dark red orb
Staining her forehead like blood
Meant.

She heard the bells ringing
Within a few years,
Jingling with her jewels
And knew that it was springtime,
That it was the happiest
Season of blossoming
In her life.

But suddenly the cruel
High tide ebbed,
The efflorescence waned off
Into extinction,
Into the agony of white.

As she was told that
She was a widow
For life.

TIMELESS SIN

My grandmother
Was chained in darkness in the cowshed
Barred from sunlight
Four days a month ---

It was a crime for her to bleed
Like it was for her to be a girl.

The fifth day, when she
Came out of the cold stench
She was purified,
Cleansed of Nature with cow dung and
Cascades of chilly Ganga water
Poured out of the bucket
On her trembling head and body
Strangling her every month
With pneumonia ---.

Prof. Dr. Laksmisree Banerjee is an Award-Winning Poet, Litterateur, Sr. Academic, Vocalist, International Scholar and University Professor of English & Cultural Studies. She is widely published and anthologized with Nine Books of Poetry and several Academic Publications. She believes in the transformative power of her Pen and Voice.



Micro-fiction

The butterfly man by Cyril Dabydeen

Butterflies: beautifully arrayed like moving pictures on his backsides. Tattoo-marks really. Images layered along the upper thighs and waist, also. "It's who I am," he says with a smirk as the butterflies seem to flutter back and forth. "I'm an entomologist," he declares. *Trained...er, scientist?*

"An amateur, but I've been around the world collecting beetles and butterflies." Languidly he points to his lower chest.

"They're on my body for keeps," he boasts. Like a mural, I must know. *What...for?*

See, he'd been to East Africa, going to places where famous explorer David Livingstone had been, this tallish man in his sixties of Scottish-Irish stock--tells me. *Real Canadian, do you know?*

I'd watched him swimming in the pool vaunting colours and shapes...with wings fluttering, the insects ready to take off in an instant. "Where else have you been?" I prompt.

"I've been to the Far East, Indonesia...collecting." Pause. "You...from India?" he asks, taking stock of me.

I tell him about my forebears. *What...more?*

"I've been to Trinidad, also," he informs me, as if instinctually knowing my background. "Now this one here"--he points to his left side, at an iridescent-looking monarch butterfly. *Really special.* And Bob, I must call him.

Trinidad, not India, he wants to talk about; and indeed, about a new insect species inhabiting exotic parts of the world. Perplexing, if riveting.

My curiosity is more aroused about this "butterfly man," my imprint of him; a meme. I imagine insects coming out in the rainy season, my also being an entomologist. *Now believe me!*

Water cascades down his body, as he braces himself against the wall in the shower area. Sure, insects are about to take off from his body again. "It's who I am," he declares.

Really who? Now where does he store them...his specimens?

"Not in my basement, but in my bedroom, for the insects to be close to me at night when they come alive again." Pause. "They're close friends, beetles and butterflies." His face lights up again. "Now this one time when I went after a particular beetle, and I got bitten." *Ouch!* "Bitten by a wasp that I mistook for a

beetle in Uganda during the time of General Idi Amin. It's why I left Africa.

"But one day I will return." He looks curiously at me--my being, well, *Asian*, see.

Bob's determined to collect more specimens, oh. Six new species of beetles in Africa he discovered. I see African kids following him around with a gauze-like net in his hand, skinny boys and girls heckling, calling him an *antelope*. More obscure-looking beetles and butterflies looking like dragonflies...as he points to his body. The kids hoot an' holler, "*Yeah, antelope!*"

"Now about Trinidad...?" I ask.

"I will go there again--to the Land of the Hummingbird."

But not to India?

"India with peacocks, yes."

I think of the painstaking care he has taken to have insects tattooed on his body. And the kids now chasing after beetles that have antennae looking like binoculars. Butterflies are everyone's main interest the world over, I must know.

Did the Canadian government tell him what to do with his specimens? "Not at all," he says. But at the local Carleton University they'd asked him where he keeps his specimens--his *distinct* species. "In my bedroom, his favourite ones, sure," he answered. Pause. "See I dream of butterflies."

But...where does he actually keep them?

"They want to put the specimens in their Biology Lab, you see," meaning at the university. Bob's special rhythm now with more exotic places appearing and disappearing in his mind's eye. A kaleidoscope of colours. Butterflies are yet taking off with water pouring down his body. India, Trinidad, Africa come closer. Uganda's Idi Amin...greeting him again!

The African children with their gauze-like nets follow him like a Pied Piper. "Yeah, let's follow the Butterfly-Man," they heckle. Interchanging places with cadence, new rhythms.

Now I will dwell on monarch butterflies that float around in the city's parks--here where the Rideau and Ottawa rivers meet. My entomologist's dream, and seeing beetles everywhere. Borneo, Malaysia, Australia come closer. I climb over boulders, jagged rocks. Red-winged blackbirds flit by.

Butterflies and moths are now at the Annual Biology Butterfly Show at the local university's greenhouse you see.

The Butterfly-Man nods to me. "They're like little gems flying through the air," I hear a young female voice proclaim. "You'll actually see them coming out of their cocoons, and then the chrysalis...unfolding their wings and ready for that first flight. It's really beautiful!"

The biology-student's voice keeps telling visitors about the owl butterfly lifting its wings when it's threatened, then exposing owl-like eyes to scare off predators. "It's a distinct insect world, here like nowhere else," she adds.

"Visitors are encouraged to wear bright colours to attract butterflies to land on them," she goes on, "or even to bring a tempting snack such as orange and pineapple pieces. See, butterflies dance with each other; and sometimes the female will sit on a leaf and the male will come and try to impress her with his wing-displays."

I imagine the Butterfly Man being in Patagonia with famed Charles Darwin...as I wander along the Rideau River close to the Strathcona Park here in Ottawa as I yet hear the biology student's voice: about how butterflies and moths "can tap into wavelengths to which we're oblivious of...because they have ears even on their wings."

Bob's now in a deep sleep somewhere, still dreaming about the kids following him. "Antelope is here!" a voice calls out.

Water splashing, cascading...the more I think about it.

Canadian, duh.

Cyril Dabydeen has adjudicated for Canada's Governor General's Award (Poetry) and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (UOklahoma). Recent books include My Undiscovered Country (Mosaic Press, Toronto), God's Spider (Peepal Tree Press, UK), My Multi-Ethnic Friends and Other Stories (Guernica Editions, Toronto), and My Brahmin Days (Mawenzie House, Toronto). He novels include Drums of My Flesh (Mawenzie House).



Book Review

A Review of Sharmila Ray's 'Varanasi within Varanasi'
Poems on Varanasi - A Sensual Delight
by Gopal Lahiri

Jorge Luis Borges feels emotive poetry as, 'Beyond its rhythm, the typographical layout of free verse is there to inform the reader that what awaits him is not facts or reasoning, but poetic emotion.' In her latest collection of poems, 'Varanasi Within Varanasi' Sharmila Ray illumines the poetic landscape of Varanasi and its transformation, its revealing context and reference with ease and fluency. She is a consummate poet all too assured in carrying poetic emotion to the fullest.

Varanasi may be holy city for Hindus but the city serves and continue to serve as an evocative muse to the poets and artists all over the globe. In this stirring and emotive collection, there are eighty-three short poems (four to six lines) that stitches the different pulses of the city. The poet uses intense poetic language to bring this intimacy alive and unites a historical broadness of scope with a honed emotional intensity, articulated in a direct understated use of florid language.

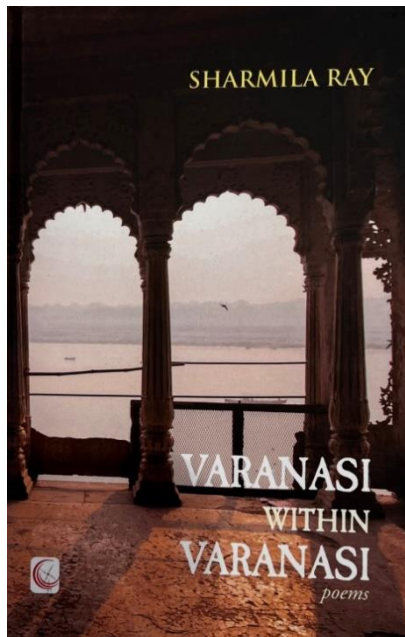
Her poetry is always on the side of life even in this 'City of Death'. There is always a keen spiritual understanding in her poems. No matter how much we continue to call on and question this, though we never get back the answer. I still have the sense that the station to which her poems are tuned, however low, is gaiety and happiness.

Varanasi unfolds through these short poems and each poem has its own poignancy without hitting a high pitch. All of them link subjects as well as sounds, almost telling a story in themselves. An intricate web of sound operates throughout these poems that serves as a dramatic monologue. And there is also a grandeur to the rhythm. The poet in her introductory note, 'Varanasi and I.' mentions, 'Novelty, surprise, and the unreal, all contribute to the making of the city. Wretched at one point and tantalizing, seductive at the other. I wonder if enigmas are meant to be like this; Varanasi is an enigma.'

The true voice of feeling serves as a sharp transition point between inside and outside. And the city lights up truth and reveals reality where eternal light intersects our minds. The poems are alluring and insightful, sometimes quiet in its utterance but bold inside. Reading them is a sensual delight.

Sharmila Ray is a poet and academic of trusty

precision. She has a command of classical tradition and a demanding sense of form. The depth and humanity of the poet's understanding are increasingly clear in most of



her poems. She skilfully draws the reader into her poetic scene, with granular detail, returning to a state of allure.



The poet poses the difference between sleeping and waking as an opposition between clarity and dreaming, consciousness and forgetfulness, living in the present moment. Take this haunted four liner which marks the divergence between the past and the present.

Moon-eyed I sit on a wayside bench, a builder tramples dry leaves, a paper kite flies, my morning tea steaming... deep-past gushes out of an ancient slab stone. (Page-16)

Varanasi is older than history, older than

tradition, older even than legend & looks twice as old as all of them put together.' observes Mark Twain. And Sharmila's poetry is always motivated by a search of origins. Her poems, are so smoothly and cannily made that it's possible to overlook their undercurrents, the way they find a seam in experience and plunge into unknown, the magical. The poet enters the past to remember and reimagine the city with a light and personable touch.

I sense stories of primeval Varanasi, they spin, fall in the gap between my room and the uninhabited byways of sleep. (page-43)

In her poetic vision, Varanasi becomes a solitary, helpless figure in an unforgiving, uncaring world. The poet refines her words to find rhythms that are dynamic and emotionally evocative. The rhythm here does not just strengthen the meaning; it enacts a movement from one form of speech to another. In Sharmila's poems, intimacy and tenderness provide something that resembles hope and respite. She wants to convey in four lines the information, piece by piece, dramatically in time.

Varanasi is a city of fragments and unfinished stories yellow street lamps and unsealed dreams. You rummage through ephemeral tales and find yourself coated with words. (page-88).

The poet manages to build a subtle critique of urbanisation and its demanding force through a series of rapid associations. The lines are telling and troubling.

'Soon Varanasi will be stories and pictures archived/ the flyovers and multiplexes will make it modern no doubt. The poem is quietly accusatory about how humans interact with the surrounds, how we fail to protect our heritage but the following lines make it a soulful a poem not just of brokenness but also of healing. Something can still be seen; something is left standing. Her mastery in capturing the texture of small moments is second to none. Perhaps there will be ears that by some miracle will pick up an ancient echo. Perhaps, there will be eyes that will decipher Varanasi from this avant-garde avalanche. (page-90)

One cannot miss the fluent linkage between 'hypnotize' and 'Enigma'. Even after a

desperate emotional urgency, the poem unfolds a panoramic composition and concludes with the metaphorical line, 'Enigma, that you are Varanasi.'

Just when my thoughts end you hypnotize me, Enigma that you are, Varanasi... (page - 91)

Sharmila Ray's poetry collection 'Varanasi Within Varanasi.' conveys a rich tenderness with a profound historical sensibility of Varanasi.

Each exquisitely refined poem here is a meditative poem- historical or personal. This book is a collection of succinct poems with narrative values, lyrical perceptions, and spiritual motives. It has a quiet, insistent

drumbeat that brings back the spirit of the ancient city.

The cover page design is captivating. 'Varanasi Within Varanasi.' is a haunting collection of poems that speaks to the nuanced complexities of Varanasi and surely, the poetry lovers want to keep this important book in their shelves at the earliest.

Short fiction

The Book Thief by Anjana Sen

'I think I may have stolen some books,' I said to myself in horror.

Aborting the unpacking, I went looking for my husband, and found him in the kitchen where he was trying to rustle up a quick dinner from the contents of our almost empty 'fridge. Neither of us had the energy or the wherewithal to go to the shops. The take-away fish supper we had planned earlier was unimaginable in this blistering heat.

'We have sunk to a new low,' I said, thrusting the two beautifully bound editions of the criminal goods at him. 'We seem to have stolen books from the hotel'.

His expression was a comical mirror of my own, angst and mirth vying with each other, as we struggled to understand what had happened.

We had just returned from a week away at the Cotswolds. A well-deserved vacation after almost two years. And we seemed to have timed it with the one week of Indian summer that the United Kingdom had been blessed with. Scorching summer. Wall-to wall sunshine with temperatures in the thirties. Driving down from Scotland, we had not been prepared for the blast of heat that welcomed us as we stepped out of our airconditioned Mini.

The beauty and the elegance of the English countryside, the magnificent opulence of the hotel, the friendly personalised greeting from the red-faced receptionist, everything had been diminished by this feeling of being wrapped up in a damp heated duvet. It was like being back in Calcutta, except this hotel was definitely not airconditioned.

I had gasped as we entered the large room we had been given, the four-poster bed and windows overlooking immaculate gardens on either side. But all I could think of was the damned sunshine gate-crashing into the room through said windows, leaving everything hot to touch. Abandoning our

cases, we left the inferno and went in search of somewhere cooler.

This hotel, the Karma Salford Hall, was a luxurious, state of the art, establishment. As members of the Karma Group, we had used a bulk of our accumulated RCI points for this much anticipated holiday. It had been converted into a hotel from a heritage Tudor Abbey, and was one of the best we had been in. If only our discomfort had not distracted us from being more impressed.

The search for a cooler venue had proved futile, there seemed to be thick

Husband had grumbled of course but went along with my plans good naturedly. Because

all we seemed to do wherever we went, was to find small cafes or bistros, seeking out the ones with air-conditioning or a cool beer garden. The local ice cream helped. The two of us indulged in a lot of the famous Cotswolds' finest.

Our room had its own little library, a cosy little nook with a wondrous array of beautifully presented books. Under normal circumstances, just this would have been enough to enchant me into staying long hours indoors, but all I could do was mutter about how grand it would all be if we returned at Christmas time.

'Imagine spending hours curled up with the books on that fat sofa in front of the fire?' I had said. Because, you guessed it, the room had the largest fireplace, but alas, no fan. The little portable toy fan we had been given as a courtesy by the hotel does not merit a sentence

of its own in this story.

And thus, it was, we returned home to Glasgow, where I found two of these books while unpacking our case.

Which I now held up accusingly to Sarajit, who was beginning to look strangely sheepish. He had done the packing, after all, whilst I had gone downstairs to the restaurant to fill our thermos with ice water.

'I thought they were yours,' he said. 'I honestly did.'

A non-reader himself, did he truly think that every book in the universe belonged to me? If only, I fantasised.

'It's ok,' I laughed, 'but now I must phone them tomorrow and confess. Otherwise, imagine if our membership file had a big stamp across it, with the word Kleptomaniac.'

Anjana is a writer and poet from Glasgow. Raised in India, her dual cultures reflect in most of her work. She is the Secretary of the Scottish Association of Writers and writes locally with Eastwood Writers. Winner of multiple awards, including the Dorothy Dunbar Rosebowl, her words have found homes in various anthologies, magazines and online. She believes the best is about to be.



carpeting, old oak panelling and velvet curtains everywhere. Early bird guests had commandeered the few patches of shade in the pretty beer garden, and we had no option other than to drink copious quantities of cool drinks from the bar. Rose for me, and of course beer for him.

'Too hot for red wine,' we had chorused to the bemused but equally distressed young bar tender.

We did acclimatise to the heat over the next few days, we had both lived through similar temperatures in our childhood after all. And proceeded to having a wonderful time exploring the quaint villages in the area. There was Broadway the first day, Bourton-on-the-Water, the next. And of course, the mandatory trip to Stratford to pay homage to the Bard. I had studied English literature at university and deemed it a sacrilege if we didn't pop in and say hello.

Two Books

BOTH SIDES OF RAY

**Satyajit Ray's
Speaking of Films and The Feluda Journal 1
by Anjana Basu**

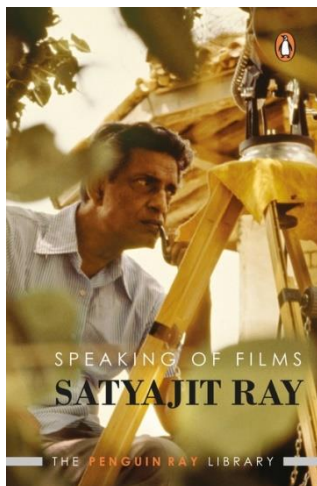
The Penguin Ray Library has been instrumental in bringing out the unpublished works of Satyajit Ray in different collections. While readers are aware of *Our Films*, *Their Films*, Ray's writings on cinema, this current collection is translated from the Bengali Bishay Chalachitra, by Gopa Majumdar.

In this collection, Ray talks about different aspects of cinema, from its history in Europe to the works of DW Griffith, Truffaut, Orson Welles, Eisenstein and Kurosawa. He then goes on to discuss the problems with Bengali cinema – lack of scriptwriters and the unwillingness of writers to allow their works to be adapted to the screen. He emphasises that the language of cinema was not widely understood in Bengal and while early film makers like Promothesh Barua might have studied techniques in Hollywood, they were unable to add any value to the medium. Nitin Bose in his opinion was deserving of praise, having moved to Bombay to make well crafted cinema, so too was Bimal Roy with *Do Bigha Zameen*, which, however, could not be considered Bengali cinema since it was in Hindi.

There are subjects like dialogues, acting and art all mulled over with Ray's serious consideration. It also covers his own films, *Charulata* which opens with 7 minutes of silent action, unusual in itself but vital for conveying Charu's isolation from her husband which leads to the story. There are the issues he faced with *Pather Panchali* and *Apur Sansar* which would serve as lessons for other cash strapped filmmakers trying to follow in his footsteps. He talks about the importance of music in films, discusses the history and how composers in jattras added Western music instruments to get the right harmony since

traditional Indian instruments were too soft for drama.

He mulls over the problems of shooting in Bengal, like not finding the right actors after the death of Chhabi Biswas and Chunibala Devi or dealing with crowds on shoots. These are issues which still plague Bengal's film world - we are down to one senior actor Barun Chanda and Prasenjit as the reigning male star while actresses with calibre are few and far between and crowd control during shoots especially if word of a star leaks is difficult to manage. He goes



on to talk about the incredible experience of working with an actress in her mid 70's as professional as Chunibala Devi without whom he freely admits *Pather Panchali* would not have been possible.

As one would expect, the essays are accompanied by stills from the films. However, the quality of paper and print make these very hazy which is a great disappointment in a seminal work like this.

The *Feluda Journal* on the other hand is, as the name implies meant for fans of *Feluda*. The first in a unique series, the *Journal* is intended to contain the facsimiles of all surviving original art in the *Feluda* stories - not that it is possible for a single journal to hold all of Ray's illustrations. Part 1 in the series has been designed to hold the first

four *Feluda* stories starting with *Feluda's Goyendagiri*. There are short introductions to the stories written by Riddhi Goswami encapsulating the key points and accentuated by snippets from Ray's own memoirs, childhood stays in Darjeeling and visits to Lucknow and other places.

The cover has been designed like a box combining photoshopped 3D objects, created exclusively for the book. Inside there is a touch of Saul Bass with the whorls from *Vertigo* – thought they could equally easily be the whorls of fingerprints.

A collector's item, the *Journal* features facsimiles of each illustration created for *Badshahi Aangti* featured in *Sandesh* and the book version of the story as colour inserts. One can compare the differences between the illustrations Ray created for the magazine *Sandesh* with the bolder style he used when he redrew the same illustrations for his books.

Possibly a hardback version would have been preferable for *Feluda* fans, since a journal deserves to be sturdy though this one offers users a choice of squared, blank and lined pages for their professional use. However, it is a matter of speculation as to whether a journal like this will ever be used – the information is too valuable to be spoilt by jottings except for those who like scribbling in books. The journals will most probably adorn shelves issue by issue and be flipped over by fans.

Anjana Basu has to date published 7 novels and 2 books of poetry. She has BBC broadcast one of her short stories. Her byline has appeared in Vogue India, Conde Nast Traveller, Outlook and Hindu Blink.

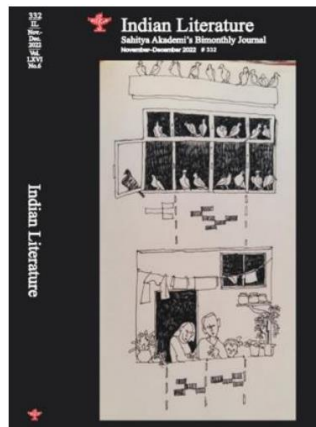




Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens

Would you throw a stone at me?



POETRY

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For all my woes, I have just finished writing my next collection of poems. I say woes because, in the world of leftist liberal academics controlling the narratives and media everywhere, including the nasty wokeism, I am heading for a big cancellation. Writings and poetry, instead of giving freedom of expression, in our woke and politically correct world, are busy cancelling writers who do not agree with the fashionable agenda. The woke brigade is busy amending classics or dismissing authors like J K Rowling. They celebrate Shamima Begum as a victim and put her on the front page of Time magazine. They also walk on the water as morally supreme beings. In such a skewed world, they select victims to suit their weird crusade. The stupidity comes from a rise of extreme liberalism, which has lost all rationales. There is a trend in these people to discredit Hindus and Hinduism. To this end, we now have a new American Valmiki sitting at Harvard who has rewritten the Ramayana to discredit Lord Rama. A nasty business!

Therefore, when, recently, Dr Meenakshi Mohan invited me to read my poems at the launch of her excellent anthology, The Tapestry of Women in Indian Mythology, I observed the elites mentioned are in cahoots to destroying the fabric of our good myths. With the recent controversial BBC documentary, yet again, it came home to me that these extremist gangs would go to any length to keep their side of the hate story alive. I remember how the 59 pilgrims burnt alive were reported in 2002. To date, none of these sanctimonious storytellers has bothered to find out about those 59 burnt alive. Thus, was born my next collection of poems, 2½.

In the November-December issue of the coveted journal, Indian Literature, published by the Sahitya Akademi, the editors published my long poem that takes you to the other side of the inferno where 1 2½-old baby burns alive trying to stir up any humanity you may have left to witness his suffering and ask questions about your moral stance. My path, therefore, is risky:

Would you like to throw a stone at me?
Here, take all that's left of my peach
—D H Lawrence

In this daring and challenging collection, I am posing questions to your humanity! How is it that for our political and religious positions, we are comfortable with not seeing, feeling or hearing the cries of a 2½-year-old baby burnt alive? And if one talks about it, one is buried! You'll read, discover, and experience in these poems what you have denied yourself. The poems challenge you to shift from politics to humanity. It is easy to throw a stone at someone, but what happens when we change the context of that stone, as in Lawrence's proposal above? These poems allow you to open up to the different parallaxes. So, be dared to be taken to the new level of the probing podium. It is a salvaged POV shot left out in the can during the editing of a narrative by the biased media and politicians we encounter daily.



The existing void in the victim's narratives—no one ever bothered to record their life stories or feelings—means the poems have to fictionalise the storylines and arrest a new perspective for our humanity. That is what great art does. Then there is a question of the roles of gods who have messed up big time in our contemporary saga by meddling with our politics, magnified by the self-righteous fourth estate and the fifth column! This work also—uncomfortable for some—dares to go there. Cancel the screams of a 2½-year-old baby ablaze at your peril... Here is the opening subset of that poem:

2½
(20 years later)
- lost stories-

did you see my face
a blistered papadum roasting on a gas hob
did you collect its silenced cinders
to shuffle for my name

did you notice the fluid time
stop its tapping
to observe my face smudging
folding as Dali's melting clock
with both hands in ten-to-two horror

will you gather my face
an ignited blank paper dispersed by wind
blowing in its hysteria
to say anything good about it
instead of chasing wooden masks
with empty eyes

my mother's melting saree hides
my face of dripping wax
becomes my exo-skin
to remind those who have all the answers
will you write of Almighty's veneer
slipping away as a pretence

years drift as the dust would
forgetting history
to change a landscape
where winds howl but are ignored
mount Skeleton Coast
with dusted whale bones in arms of rusting
hulls
lingering countless stories

lost

Yogesh Patel received an MBE for literature in 2020. His poem is to be launched aboard a NASA rocket for the moon to be archived there. His new collection of poems, *The Rapids*, is just published by *The London Magazine*. He runs *Skylark Publications UK* and a non-profit *Word Masala* project to promote SA diaspora literature. Extensively published, an award-winning poet, he has also received the *Freedom of the City of London*.

The aim of these fictional narratives, while they obliquely shadow a skeleton of a notorious event in 2002, when fifty-nine pilgrims—hitherto cancelled and silenced—were burnt alive aboard a train, is not to celebrate or dismiss any faith. These poems are inquisitively looking at Lawrence's proverbial stone in a different context. They are humanising numbers 59 and 2½ to allow us to find ourselves again.

Short Story

Avarice

by Subhash Chandra

"Ill-gotten money never does anyone good."

"Don't become your father again. That one long morality lecture he inflicted on me before our marriage is enough for a lifetime," said Bhuvan.

Meeta inhaled deeply and said, "How can you even think of such an evil idea?"

"You don't know; their wallet is like a river in flood. It will make no difference to them... none at all."

"There is no dearth of Uber-rich. Will you go around robbing them?"

He kept silent.

"Look Bhuvan, they trust you ... it is a sin to betray trust ... and in this case, it is a crime too."

A faraway look came into his eyes.

"They are exceptionally kind and generous," Meeta said, "and treat you like a son. Not only do they pay you more than the due fare, always but also load us with gifts on festivals. How many taxi drivers wear Louise Philippe shirts and their children Nike shoes?"

He sighed. "A pity, you are bent on living a life of deprivation."

She tenderly touched his cheek.

"I'm happy living with my Bhuvan. You love me and have given me a lovely gift," she said pointing towards Babloo. What more could I want ... any woman want?"

He washed and vacuumed his taxi as usual, switched on the ride-receiving system and drove away.

#

One evening, he hesitantly broached the topic again.

"Meeta, it is atrocious that Babloo has to study in a sarkari school where the teachers are shirkers and duds. That is why the rich brats from public schools score higher in exams, speak farratedar English, and join as bosses in MNCs, whereas children of people like us become skilled workers, peons, or at the most clerks."

"You are wrong Bhuvan. All the teachers in government schools are not alike. Much

depends on how motivated the students are."

He listened silently.

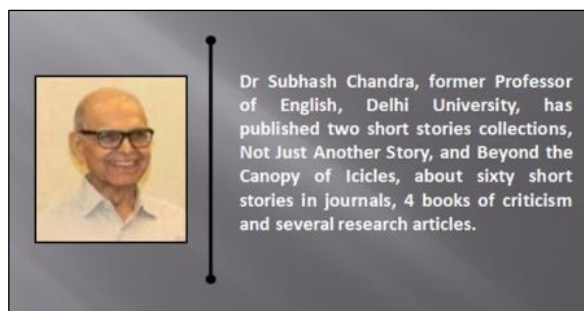
"We three sisters studied in government schools. You know, Kamini, the eldest is a Supreme Court lawyer, Neeta -- the middle one -- is working on a bio-technology project on a fellowship in the U.S. and ..."

Meeta's face coloured.

"And?" Bhuvan asked.

"... If you had not been impatient, and stalled my studies I, too, could have become a big shot," she said bashfully.

"Then I'd have lost you."



"Yes," she said impishly.

"And stop worrying about Babloo. I assure you, he will do well in life. After all, he is my Bitwa."

"Only yours?"

Both laughed.

#

Today he woke up late. She felt his forehead.

"No fever. Take rest today. You've been driving long hours."

Actually, he had been spending evenings with his loser friends. He got out of bed around noon. Bathed, had lunch, and made one last attempt.

"Look here Meeta, I can't understand your objections. We can do with some money and, as I said earlier, it will not make even a wee bit of a difference to them."

She got livid this time.

"You are not the man I fell for. Unlike other bus conductors, you never cheated Delhi Transport Corporation and ensured everyone bought the ticket. You helped the

old, and women to get into the bus, and never allowed anyone to harass a girl."

Her lips quivered.

"As a school teacher, my father did not earn much, but Mother managed and the five of us lived happily. He taught us moral values that shaped our lives. He and my sisters were dead against my recklessness in marrying you," she said and burst into sobs. He did not know how to placate her.

"I warn you," she said between sobs, "if you go down that despicable path, I'll walk out of your life."

Her vehemence jolted him.

#

However, the obsessive thought continued to hold him in thrall. He started coming home late, mostly drunk. Babloo watched him frightened, and did not run to him like before. Nor did he insist on a ride in the Taxi before Bhuvan left for the day.

Meeta felt disgusted... and apprehensive.

Then the dreaded happened. The police landed at their house, told Meeta, he had murdered two senior citizens, shoved him into their van, and took him away.

Chaos raged in her mind. She cursed herself for being intransigent ... the lower and the middle classes inhabit different worlds, which do not meld ... love is chaff ... a stratagem to lure, and cheat women. Her father and sisters' words hammered in her head.

After two days of despair, she wiped off her tears, sliced off the gangrenous part of her life. She resolved to bring up Babloo the right way. She had inherited the grit and dignity of her father. She joined a call centre and arranged with a crèche to pick up Babloo from school.

#

After about three months, a stranger appeared at the door.

"Namaste Madam,"

"Yes?"

"Bhuvan is innocent."

Her face became taut.

"Who are you and how do you know?" she asked sternly.

"I am a Taxi driver. We used to get together every evening to chat, share our day's experiences, and ..."

"Booze!"

"Umm, yes ... Ma'am."

"Go on."

"Bhuvan shared details about the old couple ... that they were flush with money ... ranted against the inequalities in society and so on. We have a man, Mintu, in the

group with a criminal record. He always listened to Bhuvan with curious interest.

"The night Bhuvan dropped the couple at their house Mintu climbed up the drain pipe, entered their bedroom, and looked for the keys. The woman woke up and screamed. The old man resisted. Mintu choked both of them to death."

"But only Bhuvan's finger prints were found inside the house."

"He carried up the stuff they had shopped to the first floor, and Mintu had worn gloves."

"How do you know all this?"

"Mintu jabbered to the group when he was drunk."

"Will all of you testify in the Court?"

"I don't know about the others. But I will. Bhuvan was close to me."

#

Kamini was delighted to meet her sister. Meeta told her everything and asked,

"Kamini, would you take up the case?"

"Why not?"

"Do you see hope for Bhuvan?"

"I will try my best," Kamini said and patted Meeta's hand reassuringly.

Black Hole by Zilka Joseph

**Lucifer-like, a law unto itself
eternal hunger
collapsed star insatiable
neediest mouth of mouths
sucking in in in**

**the airless circle
upon circle unbroken
emptiness without end
eating sunlit dust, moon
glazed ions of substances
we do not know the names of**

**but names whisper
like hope
like mangled words
hovering in the umbrage
of our borealis dreams**

**Light Eater
who could survive its dark swallow
Electric appetite, unforgiving
un-forgiven existence**

**where does it end
no tunnel
through the dense flesh of space
no rumor of resurrection
to other dimensions
no trumpets**

**light forced to its knees
look how it bends
and is devoured
shard by shard**

**killed jealously
by that which it once was
and can never be again**

Zilka Joseph was nominated twice for a Pushcart, for a PEN America and a Best of the Net award. Her work has appeared in Poetry, Poetry Daily, Frontier Poetry, KRO, MQR, Ablucionistas, and in several anthologies. Her book, Sharp Blue Search of Flame was published by Wayne State University Press was a finalist for the Foreword INDIES Book Award. She teaches creative writing, and is an editor and manuscript advisor. www.zilkajoseph.com

South African Newsletter

Dr Navanethem Pillay by Devi Rajab

In terms of human capital South Africa has an enviable abundance of wealth that she is not fully aware of. As the world came together to bid farewell to Dr Navanethem Pillay the outgoing United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights they recognised her great contribution to human rights in a presently destabilized world. Widely acknowledged as the world's most powerful and effective champion of human rights for the past six years South African born Navi Pillay has been a force to reckon with. She wisely asserts that there can be no lasting peace unless there is justice. Her motto Speaking Truth to Power is a socially cohesive injunction which she proudly claims she imbibed in SA.

In her six year term of office she has had to contend with anarchic mobs for which human rights meant nothing as they decapitate and destroy their way across northern Syria and Iraq. Sri Lanka has been yet another of the many battlefields that Navi Pillay has had to deal with. But it is perhaps the one that has evoked most strongly her courage and determination. She has also incurred vitriolic fury from both sides in the Gaza wars and been described by the Syrian ambassador to the UN as "a lunatic" a label which is more applicable to him than to her.

The US has never agreed to her requests to look into what she calls "the many issues that trouble us" in that country, in particular drone strikes and targeted killings, while somehow the Chinese could never find a suitable date for her to pay a visit. In all she has had to contend with gender and ethnic chauvinism, political superiority, racism and bigotry yet she managed to steer her way through keeping the pressure of accountability alive. The fact that "elsewhere even tyrants still feel the need to keep torture, unlawful detention and extra-legal killing under wraps is

a measure of how Pillay and her colleagues have kept up the pressure."

Judge Navanetham Pillay, universally known as Navi, sits as comfortably in her Durban home in the heart of a previously Indian area as she did in her United Nations office. She has the ability to dine with the Kings and heads of government and yet enjoy the dhall rotis that I have brought for her. Perhaps this is her overriding strength. In her meteoric rise to fame, which resulted in her being responsible for shining a spotlight on human rights abuses from around the world she seems not to have forgotten her people or her roots. She relates with ease, confidence and warmth and shares

Navi Pillay believes in the motto that "it takes a village to raise a child". In recalling her formative days at school, she says: "It was through the endeavours of my teachers, who kindled in me the appreciation of English literature and drama that I was able to overcome my impoverished background and aspire to greater levels."

It was a community effort. "When I needed a bursary to study at university, the entire Clairwood community raised funds for a bursary for me." Her teachers recall finding this little gem of a girl who was outspoken and sharp: a rare water lily among a mixed group of children. Growing up in the 1950s, Navi was

always the proverbial tallest poppy in the field, defying any attempt to lop her down to size. A close colleague once aptly described her as "a single rare flower sprouting through rubble" As a young girl I watched her shine in the community and was often in awe of this rough diamond. I remember sitting in the audience holding thumbs for my elder sister who was competing against her cousin in the Hofmeyr Speech Context. The impromptu

speech was entitled, "Every dog has its day", and the participants were given five minutes to prepare their speeches. My sister lost to Navi, who breezed through her presentation and concluded by drawing the attention of the audience to a pitiful looking drape on a window high above the hall with the words, "and someday that curtain too will have its day!"



her accolades with her family and friends more out of a sense of wanting to share the joys of success than bragging about her accomplishments. "The Palestinians gave me this gold medal she proudly shows me". The awards that she will now bring back home are worthy of a personal museum of exhibits.

How did the debilitating apartheid system allow such talent to surface?

Supported by her local Indian community with donations, she graduated from the University of Natal with a BA in 1963 and an LLB in 1965: huge achievements at a time when females of colour had significant political, cultural and economic obstacles to overcome in the search for higher education. Her prodigious talent saw her opening up her own law practice as the first black woman attorney and later attending Harvard Law School, where she obtained an LLM in 1982 and a Doctorate in Juridical Science in 1988.

Her recent inclusion, in 2008, at number 63 on the list of Forbes magazine's choice of the 100 most powerful women in the world, which ranged from the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama and Queen Elizabeth II, is phenomenal. Navi at 73, is something of a star among international legal experts and has been described as "a woman for the era". "I think I am fortunate," she says appreciatively – and deprecatingly. But her rise to this height did not just emerge outside of a context. South Africa produced this outstanding personality, shaping and moulding her character through its hard surfaces and unyielding laws. Her life was characterised by a pattern of resistance to the proverbial glass ceiling imposed by the apartheid regime. For close on three decades, she found herself quietly toppling barriers and exceeding expectations as the first black attorney to fight for the rights of prisoners on Robben Island. Her memories of the rough seas in small boats to the prison are still vivid. In her quest to defend anti-apartheid activists she exposed the use of torture and the poor conditions of political detainees. In 1973, she won the right for political prisoners on the Island, including Mandela, to have access to lawyers. As one wades through the charmed life of this amazing woman one wonders what forces shape people and what circumstances lead to others. There is a thread that runs through her life: a rare combination of ambition, drive and innate intelligence mixed with a deep sense of cultural identity and a sound value system. Such personalities are able to overcome poverty, through a hunger for education, overcome prejudices through an innate sense of their worth and reach great heights through sheer hard work and determination. Her mottos are compelling: "You can have no lasting peace unless you have justice" and "victims should be allowed to speak loudly". With her legal prominence established by the mid-1990s, after South Africa abolished apartheid and held a democratic election, she was appointed to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 1995 and was its president for four years. The

tribunal, the first of its kind, adjudicated crimes from the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

She was the only woman on the judicial panel. As its president, her groundbreaking rulings included establishing rape as a crime of genocide, in the case of Jean Paul Akayesu, a local official who knew of gruesome sexual attacks and failed to stop them. She also ruled against media organizations run by businesses among Rwanda's Hutu majority that spread hate messages, inflaming murderous attacks on the Tutsi ethnic group and moderates in the middle. It is estimated by human-rights groups that at least half a million people were killed in the genocide. Others suggest the number may have been as high as 800,000.

In 2003, Pillay was appointed a judge on the appeals bench of the new International Criminal Court (from 2003-2008) and later United Nations high commissioner for human rights, from 2008 to 2014.

Personal firsts piled up for Pillay. She was the first woman of color — an ethnic South Asian Indian — to open her own law firm in Natal Province, where she was based, and the first South African nationally to be awarded a doctorate of juridical science by Harvard Law School. With her legal prominence established by the mid-1990s, after South Africa abolished apartheid and held a democratic election, she was appointed to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 1995 and was its president for four years. The tribunal, the first of its kind, adjudicated crimes from the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

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This daughter of Africa is indeed worthy of emulation. As a world class trouble maker Prince Zeid Raad al Husein of Jordan her successor will find that he has very large boots to fill especially since she has been widely acclaimed for having briefed the UN Security Council more times than all her predecessors combined.



Dr Devi Rajab is an award-winning journalist and the author of several books. Now she is the Chairperson of Democracy Development Program of South Africa. She is also the former Dean of Student Development at UKZN.

Short story

Shadows by Sunil Sharma

Stalker?

Footsteps.

Stop here!

Faint steps, also stop.

Unsettling!

---A bare corridor; the neon-lit interiors of the closed shops of the arcade; pools of light alternating with gloomy spots---scary scene!

The wind comes down hissing; kicks at the sign posts and boards, produces a strange whistling sound heard in the old Gothic building, blue-lit, in a noir film.

The spaces are filled with brooding menace, reversed energy.

The after-business-hour desolation of the cities---the ghost places; haunts of the vampires, urban species with fangs!

The familiar becomes sinister.

Her heart flutters as a caged bird, listening to the faint footfalls, coming up from behind, increasing in speed; louder.

Cold night!

A trickle of sweat runs down the spine---little stream of hot sweat. Wet arm-pits.

Thudding expands in her bosom and rattles the rib-cage.

Breathing becomes difficult.

Fear has got a classic language.

She feels the palpable sensation of fright---cold, debilitating!

A female prey in a jungle of another sort.

Fight or flight!

She stops, middle of a short flight, to recheck the ghostly tormentor---classic tactics of dodging the pursuer.

Looks back, adjusting shoe lace; a slightly-bent figure, well-lit, eyes peeled back, ready to fly, a tiny bird.

A shadow flickers and blends with the thickening gloom of a moonless night. An *absence* hovers over the street.

Some unseen stalker!

She straightens up. Speeds up.

The nightly street, corridor, path, they look the opposite of the day: just an unending stretch of loneliness, amid illuminated towers and malls.

How things look different!

Night brings its own versions of the urban terror!

Overwhelmed by the giant shadows, she moves on in big strides; shoes click, the tik-toc-tik-toc resounds and returns, tiny soundbites, in an echo chamber.

The main street gets decongested---in little degrees. The manic pace of the city decreases, incrementally.

The homeless are out, reclaiming the city, bit-by-bit. Each laying stake to a corner.

Passages.

Shop fronts.

Some sit with their pet dogs, eyes blank, un-seeing.

The perpetual outsiders.

She dreads these outcasts.

The bearded guys mostly here, this part of the mega city, the guys that refuse to be *integrated*, within the larger circuits of commerce, business and trade; a permanent threat to the citizens working for consumption and more possessions, big-bigger dreams of owning this-and-that; eating this-and-that cuisines; shifting from Thai to Mexican to Italian to Indian or Mediterranean menus, within weeks!

Takeouts.

Dining in.

Hunting for dining places, preferably with discounts.

The hobos challenge that life style---to be shunned!

They refuse to be productive!

Animals, unpredictable.

Feral.

A hobo appears.

An urban apparition!

Almost detaching from a column of the foyer of a hulking bank complex---solid money expressed in solid architecture; the monumental, neo-classical style---a frail shadow; slightly limping, muttering sotto voce to some unseen figure, airy nothing.

Emitting a low howl, she manages to dodge the spectral presence, more startled than startling! and almost breaks into a short run from that fleeting source of terror!

Stops mid-way, near the traffic light, recovers breath.

The heart beats out of the rib-cage. The sound buzzes harshly---bees trapped inside the ear-canal, frantically humming!!!

Avoided being ambushed in that empty lot!

Lucky!

She breathes easy, slowly. Gulps air. Regulates breathing by inhaling and exhaling, stock still; a yogic exercise on the feet for quick relief and control.

A few late strollers join her and cross the street at the green light.

As outer part of the ring, she feels confident and relaxed and starts walking in measured steps.

The city consists of the standardised design. The skyline is jagged. Irregular line of high-rises---shorter ones dominated by the bigger. The latter to be dominated by the still-higher silhouettes of yet-to-be-finished skyscrapers.

She is in the Kingdom of Shadows!

An interesting region of light and fluid darkness.

All around, there are towers-blocs: vertical boxes of glass; tiny but pricey cages full of dark secrets; the bulky structures harbour lingering menace.

Nocturnal Toronto---different, startling, mysterious!

Not as reassuring as the day-time Toronto.

Same applies to every mega city of the world---unpredictable; predatory. Read the screaming headlines: shoot-outs; terror attacks; hate crimes; sexual assault; what not!

Anonymous centres of isolated living amid millions of souls---these cities!

A dog from hell appears and runs down on her from the elevated parking lot.

Without leash. Eyes blaze!

She is rooted to the ground.

Hit it! The brain transmits command.

She swings her backpack---the dog whimpers, circles and runs back into the shadows, the bark trailing it like a thread.

"Watch the *shadows!* Lethal for a young, female immigrant, returning late!" Her brother from Delhi; text message.

She looks up at the dark sky.

And catches the sight of a gargoyle---hunched man-monster with wings and red eyes, reclining on the parapet of a solid building---in a stance of about-to swoop.

Quickens steps; statute's malevolent stare follows.

A creepy sensation---fierce eyes, round and red; set deep in a hideous face!

Somebody coughs.

Vehicles with red tails.

The wings flutter.

She looks back.

The gargoyle comes down from the stone perch and hits the street, transformed now into a stout, bald man, rapidly walking in her direction.

The wind howls like a wolf.

The chill is high.

Runa shivers.

The steps echo. She increases the speed.

The bald man matches the speed.

Pools of light separate her from the stranger with the folded wings.

Stalker? Late commuter?

Runa prefers walking to the terminus. Taxis are costly. Holidays, she works part time.

Bills!

Back home, sends pictures with beaming faces against varied locations in Toronto, the parks and malls. All friends do that: Putting gloss over the tired eyes, faces, bodies--- hiding the draining struggles, in an alien city of plastic money, smiles, long nails, false eyelids, stilettos, leather jackets, tattoos and rings.

Hiss!

The gargoyle comes flying down.

On short wings; talons out; tongue hangs!

Runa runs fast; shadows hug the solitary commuter, as the darkness closes in...

Sunil Sharma is a humble word-worshipper: catcher of elusive sounds, meanings and images.



Published 26 creative and critical books--- joint and solo. A winner of, among others, the Golden Globe Award-2023, and, Nissim Award for Excellence for the novel Minotaur.

His poems were included in the prestigious UN project: Happiness: The Delight-Tree: An Anthology of Contemporary International Poetry, 2015. <https://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>, <https://sunil-sharma.com>

Book review

A review of RV Raman's Grave Intentions

THE CURSE OF THE ISLAND (A Harish Athreya Mystery)

By Anjana Basu

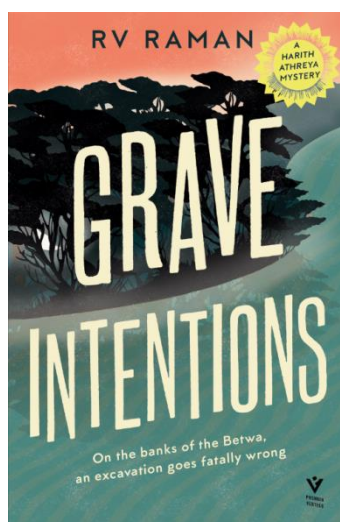
Pushkin Vortex

Set along the banks of the Betwa River, the second Harish Athreya mystery takes readers into the heart of Bundelkhand and confronts them with a mysterious haunted island. The cast of the book comprises a group of archaeologists funded by the archaeological version of the Bill Gates Foundation. Wherever they dig they are shadowed by the legend of Naaz Tapu an island where a beautiful woman and her royal lover once took shelter. Anyone who sets foot on the island invites a violent end and this is apparently what happens to Mrs Markham, the leader of the dig.

Harish Athreya has been called in by the head of the American trust to investigate certain irregularities in the dig. However as he moves through a group of uneasy people he realises that the situation may be graver than it appears. One of the archaeologists has been sacked, another one appears to do nothing constructive, the accountant is under suspicion of embezzlement and the lady who heads it has a reputation for plagiarism. As he sifts through a host of petty crimes, murder strikes with the paw prints of a Hound of the Baskervilles clone all over it.

Where Raman's first book followed tried and trusted Agatha Christie technique, the second widens out into more accepted police procedure, two parallel investigations in coordination with the local on ground force which are then brought together through a process of question and answer. The fact that a ghost is rumoured to be at loose on the island with a vicious hound only lends added fascination to the story. Then there is the fact

that one of the archaeologists, the beautiful Nazreen, is a dead ringer for the tragic heroine who vanished into the depths of Naaz Tapu so many decades ago with her prince. She also appears to have an uncanny knowledge of the island though no one in the area seems to have any idea of her family or where Nazreen lives.



The question is, whodunit? Everyone on the dig has a motive, some more than others. Nazreen is a little too efficient and accurate to be true but then she has this supernatural cloak about her. Korda may be the man with his fingers in the till – but then why? And there are the Bronze Runners, a group of thieves who specialise in filching artefacts from archaeological digs.

Athreya is imaginative and fancies that he is at one level a man of reason but even he is affected by the mystery surrounding Naaz Tapu. The cast of characters Raman assembles complements each other and is perfectly suited to the accepted standards

of classic murder mysteries. In the end, of course, it is a wrap, though not easy to guess except for Pratap Yadav's identity and the fact that Madhav is probably up to some kind of hanky panky. Despite editorial glitches and the fact that there are probably too many criminals gathered together in one base to be quite conceivable, RV Raman is a criminal mystery author on the rise.