



King Charles III, Monarch and the Head of Commonwealth

by Mark Robinson

When Queen Elizabeth II slipped away at the age of 96 on 8 September 2022, the Prince of Wales immediately became King Charles III. In times past the wands of office would be snapped in half, although in today's world they are unscrewed and immediately put back together again. "The Queen is Dead, Long Live the King" illustrates the seamless way the transfer takes place. King Charles had hardly any time to prepare himself, but having been the longest serving heir to the throne he was very well prepared.

First year of King Charles III

As we approach the end of first year of the Monarch's reign, events, including the Coronation, have passed without hitch or controversy, with the occasional protests by anti-monarchists only to be expected. No one could blame the new King of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, along with being sovereign of 14 other realms, for that.

The first question many may ask is what change has this brought to the British Monarchy? Well, it would be churlish to say not much, after all there was talk of a slim-downed institution with less Royals involved. However, this was accomplished on the advice of Charles and William before the late Queen died.

In addition, there has been a hardly controversial reshuffle of military titles for the Royal Family, but for the moment that is as far as it goes. That said, it has been made clear that more is

to come, especially in opening up Royal buildings such as Buckingham Palace.

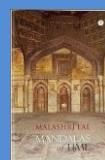
But that cannot be done until major renovation works have been accomplished and these could take considerable time. Such changes are not new, but a continuation of greater access is already in train.

The governmental role of the Head of State has not changed. The red boxes from the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office still come to the King every day, the diplomatic duties of the Court of St James, state hospitality for foreign leaders, ceremonial occasions such

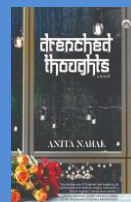
as the Trooping of the Colour in June or the State Opening of Parliament in the autumn, and state visits overseas have all happened or will happen without interruption, except when something exceptional, such as French domestic unrest, has intervened. That said there was hardly a ripple in domestic waters. The King may be new, but the Palace machine hums along, including the ceremonies to award honours and the garden parties at Buckingham Place in London and Holyrood House in Edinburgh. One thing the King is reported to have noticed is the sheer volume of the workload that has to be dealt with, at the same time as he and the Queen have involved themselves in the communities and culture of this country. **(Continued on page 3)**



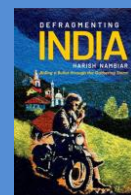
Interview: Miles Franklin award winner Shankari Chandran speaks to Sharon Rundle (Page -4)



Malashri Lal's Mandalas of Time – reviewed by Lakshmi Kannan (Page – 11)



Anita Nahal's drenched thoughts - Reviewed by Santhosh Bakaya (Page – 13)



Harish Nambiar's Defragmenting India -Reviewed by Anjana Basu (Page – 21)

Editorially Speaking

Hello our readers and writers,

Editing and publishing each issue of Confluence is a great challenge for us the editors but it also gives us much pleasure to read and edit each and every submission we receive from our marvellous writers. Many people in the publication industry know that an editor's job is not just putting together various pieces but it involves much more than that. Particularly for a small publication that operates with minimal resources, an editor's job is of several multitudes. In this context, I am really pleased to release this issue as each page comes with a must read.

As I am writing this editorial, there is a live debate going on one of the TV channels about climate change and the efforts governments are making to tackle this issue. Climate change has become a bread and butter issue in the last decade affecting every aspect of our lives. However, there are no signs of any significant progress in the reduction in reversing the rising temperature levels that affects every part of the globe. The rise of record temperatures has been observed in many parts of the world despite all the efforts taken so far to tackle it. Environmentalists predict we have a long way to go on this issue.

In this issue, we have introduced a new writer Shivankari Sivam who is a scientist working in the field of novel medicines. As many of us are aware, the old generation antibiotics are now becoming less effective in the treatment of several infective diseases. Based on her research she has been doing in Singapore, she has written an interesting article about new generation of treatment for tuberculosis. As I mentioned in my previous editorials, Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technology will soon change our lives in many ways, similarly we can expect that the application of modern technologies and new treatments to various diseases too will improve our lives. Changes always come with new challenges too. We might even become part of an aging society requiring more help and support.

While I thank all our contributors for writing for this magazine and making this issue an interesting read, I would like to mention that we are still experiencing difficulties in receiving enough submissions on time causing problems in scheduling our issues. Please help us by sending your works on time.

I hope you will find the entire issue an interesting read and I look forward to hearing your feedback soon.

Vijay Anand

CONTENTS

Page	Title	Author
1	King Charles III, Monarch and the Head of Commonwealth	Mark Robinson
2	Editorially Speaking	Vijay Anand
4	Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens:	Shankari Chandran's interview Sharon Rundle
6	Tuberculosis: Tackling an ancient disease	by Shivankari Krishnananthasivam
7	A Shared Love - A Tribute to Brian D'Arcy	Debjani Chatterjee
8	Poems	Brian D'Arcy, Debjani Chatterjee
9	"Jubilee" – The story of the iconic Bombay Talkies	Sunayana Panda
10	Two poems	Laksmisree Banerjee
11	Malashri Lal's Mandalas of Time - review	Lakshmi Kannan
13	Anita Nahal's drenched thoughts -review	Santosh Bakaya
15	A Masterclass in Poetry	Yogesh Patel
16	Short story: Thirty-Two	Subhash Chandra
18	Try, And You Will Get It - poem	Meenakshi Mohan
19	Ho do you practice your culture?	Cyril Dabydeen
20	Three poems	Sunil Sharma
21	Harish Nambiar's Defragmenting India - review	Anjana Basu
22	Short story: TriKone	Meenakshi Mohan



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The Coronation

If one event is to be singled out it has to be the Coronation. The King took a personal interest in the arrangements for this, with a close and careful eye on the fact that it would be televised around the world. There was always a danger that an overdose of grandeur might be sneered at, but rather than that it was judged a great success. The music chosen was fitting and praised by a host of potential critics. The ceremony was tradition but neither overdone nor short on interest. The King and Queen at the centre of the occasion did not put a foot wrong and those who forecast limited crowds could not have been proved more wrong, while worries of a Harry and Meghan side show did not materialise.

World of politics and Commonwealth

One concern expressed about King Charles, by the late founder of the Gemini News Service, Derek Ingram, is that as King he would have difficulty not treading on the toes of His Majesty's Government by slipping into the world of politics. Climate Change has been cited as an example of this. But so far so good. In that respect, everyone knows that the King is a powerful advocate of the planet and the inter-relationship, as its guests, which we have with everything else that thrives here. After all this time in waiting, no one is better versed in the constitutional role of the Monarch and it is hard to see King Charles III stepping into the quagmire that is there, even if he was to do so accidentally. If we have learnt anything as his first anniversary approaches, it is that being sure footed is his current hallmark.

Another title that King Charles carries is Head of the Commonwealth. This is not a hereditary title. As with his mother, it was conferred on him by Commonwealth Heads of Government, in his case at their meeting in London in April 2018 to take effect on his succeeding his mother. This was carried without dissent. The first thing to say here is that the word Head often implies some sort of Executive responsibility, but in this case it does not. That is carried out by all Heads of Government, through the Chair of the Commonwealth, who is the Head of Government of the country that chaired the previous CHOGM, as it is known, and their elected Secretary-General.

Confusion in the media often arises here because it is mistakenly thought that if one of the 14 countries that are Realms, with the British Monarch as Head of State, decides to depart that group it automatically leaves the Commonwealth.



But as recently demonstrated when Barbados became a non-executive Presidency, membership of the Commonwealth carries on regardless. There is no process of leaving and then reapplying to rejoin. This happens because of the Commonwealth Declaration of 1948 which was the brain child of Pandit Nehru, India's longest serving Prime Minister, who wanted India to have a President as Head of State, but did not wish to leave the Commonwealth. Derek Ingram felt the title Head of the Commonwealth should disappear on the Queen's death, or at least be changed to something less executive than Head. That might still happen but not in this reign.

The transition

In recent years, Charles, Prince of Wales, stood in for his mother at several CHOGM's overseas and became well known to Commonwealth Leaders and that, as much as anything else, secured the title for him. It is worth noting, that when the Monarch addresses or sends a message to Commonwealth Heads of Government at a CHOGM or at the annual Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey, these are two occasions when the British Government is not the author of the speech or message. Indeed, at this year's Commonwealth Day celebrations two changes were noticed. First the Head of the Commonwealth delivered his own message, it was not read for him and that the Commonwealth Day

Reception was not, as usual, held at Marlborough House, home of the Commonwealth Secretariat, but at Buckingham Palace and with a far greater attendance. For those who regard the involvement of the British Monarch as important to the future of the Commonwealth, this has been seen as very good signal from King Charles III of the importance he attaches to the Modern Commonwealth and the monarchy's light touch role within it.

In so many countries, when the Head of State leaves that person's picture disappears overnight from everywhere. Britain is slower. Indeed, some things change quickly. For instance, the wording of the National Anthem is immediately updated so Her Majesty's Government becomes His Majesty's Government and Queen's Council immediately become King's Council. No ceremony, it just happens. But currency and stamps only change when supplies are used up or coins wear out. Post boxes are interesting because some go back several reigns. Indeed, it has been reported that a new batch of EIRR was ordered just before the late Queen died and these will have to be used up before we see CIIIR. But for changes constitutional to move at glacial speed is quite normal in this country.

So as King Charles III comes to his first anniversary on 8 September 2023, town criers may ring their bells, the National Anthem will be played in different places, but the moment, marked as it will be by the Royal Family at Balmoral, will pass without much comment and this newest reign will continue without interruption, well supported, as it has been, by Queen Camilla, whose expertise should not be under-rated.



Mark Robinson has a long association with the Commonwealth and has held several senior positions in the organisation. Mark is the current Chair of the Governing Board of the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHEC), serving on its Board since 2006. He led CHEC's delegation to COP-26 in Glasgow. He was an Observer for CHEC at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) and acted as a Commonwealth Election Observer on several occasions in many countries. Twice an MP, he served as Wales Under Secretary of State for Health, Housing and Sport in Baroness Thatcher's Government.

Interview

Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens

Miles Franklin Literary Award winning Australian Author Shankari Chandran speaks to Sharon Rundle

The Miles Franklin Literary Award recognises a novel of “the highest literary merit” that presents “Australian life in any of its phases”. Perpetual is Trustee for the Award.

Shankari Chandran, thank you for this interview. Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens won the Australian 2023 Miles Franklin Award. What does that mean to you?

It’s such an exciting time. I am still shocked about this – I hope it will take my work to a wider audience.

How did you research the subject of Tamils in Sri Lanka and Australia?

I am ancestrally Sri Lankan Tamil. My parents migrated to the UK in the

seventies when it became obvious that the country was heading towards massive unrest and most likely war. I was born in London and when they completed their studies, we migrated to Canberra where my brother was born. I think of myself as Australian Tamil. I was raised in Australia, and this is my home. I identify very closely with Jaffna, where my family is from, even though I have never lived there.

I’ve been studying Sri Lankan politics and Tamil history my whole life because many people in my family were involved in Tamil politics (from the diaspora), in activism and in supporting refugee resettlement outside of Sri Lanka. My extended family is large, and they are all storytellers, I’ve been literally taking notes since I was a child.

At university I was focused on post-colonialism, human rights, international

humanitarian law, nationhood and self-determination, using South Asia and Sri Lanka as my case studies for major research projects. In my legal career, these thematics were a feature of my work. I was privileged to support the

yourself while writing about such traumatic events?

The horror I write about is the horror experienced and survived by other people. I receive it respectfully, and I try

to write their grief, loss, rage and resilience. It’s important to receive it, to hold it and try to honour it. Respect is my compass. It helps me work out how to write, what to include and what not to include.

After certain writing days, I need to count my children to make sure they’re safe. I pray that they will be given all

the years of their lives.

Humour, love, even playfulness permeate and transform the narrative. How did you manage to leaven the narrative in this way?

Life and people are all the things – we’re funny, loving, cruel, and courageous. I don’t try to bring multi-dimensional and contradictory aspects of human nature into my stories, I’m just writing what I see, and human nature is multi-dimensional and contradictory. One of the best pieces of writing advice I was given is: don’t make stuff up, just write stuff down. This radically changed how I write. It helped me just close my eyes and write down what was happening around me and inside my mind.

There’s a strong and understandable tendency for fiction to stay in the dark places and I try to face into those places



work of extraordinary human rights organisations. Being a lawyer teaches you how to research with rigour. While academic texts are important, the social justice sector taught me that the lived experiences of survivors are far more important. In my literary career, I’ve had the privilege to interview many survivors who want their stories told, and many Sri Lankan lawyers, journalists and activists who risk their lives to advocate for justice.

How were you able to distil this complex information?

I work hard at it every day. I write drafts (and there are many) the way I see and speak when I am pushing myself into dangerous territory but feel safe to explore it.

Through your characters, you reveal the horrors of the war. How did you protect

truthfully. But I also want to embrace the love, humour and strength of our species. For me, writing is paying attention to all the detail, not just some, and then writing it down. If I'm not noticing and reflecting on what I'm noticing, then I can't write well or at all.

Your characters have back stories, experiences, opinions, and expectations of themselves and each other. How did you create such well imagined and well-drawn characters?

Maya and Ruben in *Chai Time* at Cinnamon Gardens came to me a long time ago and have been waiting inside my mind for me to bring them into the world. The other characters were deliberately and consciously created to serve the story Maya and Ruben wanted to tell. I kept writing "character profiles" on them to build them out because it was important to me that I didn't let them slide into caricatures. I tried to allow them the same level of contradiction and complexity as the central characters.

The Jaffna Library is unique but was burned down with books of great significance lost forever, why was it important to you to write about that?

The burning of the Jaffna Public Library features heavily in Tamil history, our collective consciousness, and my creative writing. As an archive, the Jaffna Public Library told a story about the place of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. The political authority of the time wanted to suppress that narrative – and burning the archive was a quick and conclusive way to do it; an overt act of cultural erasure. I was fascinated by the way this erasure of the past was a way of erasing the place of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, in the present and for the future. I wanted to tell the story of how historic and cultural narratives are appropriated, manipulated and mythologised to tell a story about the origins and formation of a nation, and in turn a story about who owns that nation, who has the right to be there and who does not. The burning of the Jaffna Library helped me better understand the connection between the story of Sri Lanka and the modern nation state of Australia.

What is your experience of Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese immigrants fitting in to Australian society?

I can really only speak to my Tamil experience and perhaps those of my extended family, from my generation. Our parents wanted us to fit in so we could do well in our studies and jobs. At the same time, they wanted to keep us close and hold onto the culture they were afraid of losing. We were in the middle, a generation trying to find its place in and across two very different worlds. As a rule, I'm asking myself what serves the people I care about? What aspects of our culture give us insight, strength and courage – what bigotries and limitations is it time to transcend?

You don't resist from showing how Australians perceive Sri Lankans and the misunderstandings which result from that. What gave you the confidence to write about it?

Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens is my love letter to my chosen home, Australia. I respect it and I wanted to explore its complexity, lovingly and to the best of my ability. I edited it until I had achieved the respectful conversation I wanted to have through this book.

Why was it important to portray the depths of racist behaviour?

If we don't talk about racism and sit in the pain and dehumanisation of it, we can't even begin to address it. In Sri Lanka, that approach led to war and genocide. In Australia, we have the rule of law to protect us and an opportunity every day to remake ourselves better than we were the day before. Storytelling and fiction should play a part in that.

Are reviewers and readers sufficiently aware of the Sri Lankan war and its impact?

Readers and reviewers often tell me that they didn't know very much about Sri Lanka and the book has helped them learn. I rely on books to tell me, remind me, connect me, motivate me to learn more, and inspire me to be more active and less passive in the world.

Were publishers encouraging about your novel, or reluctant to take on such sensitive material?

By the time I'd finished writing *Chai Time* at Cinnamon Gardens (end of 2020), publishers were publishing more diverse writers. There was much greater openness and boldness, and Robert Watkins (Publishing Director, Ultimo Press) has led a lot of that, nurturing the careers of many great Australian authors. My agent approached Robert and he understood my work immediately. I really trust and respect his judgement, when he critiques my work, I try to listen.

Are you happy with the way in which your book has been marketed?

I love the way Ultimo Press markets my work – they understand it and respect it and their marketing reflects that. They also work super hard at it.

Finally, what are you writing next?

I'm working on another literary fiction novel about a woman held captive by people and place.

Miles Franklin Award image:

<https://www.perpetual.com.au/insights/shankari-chandran-wins-2023-miles-franklin-literary-award-for-her-novel-chai-time-at-cinnamon-gardens/>

Dr Sharon Rundle
Institute of Professional Editors. Chair, University of Technology Sydney Alumni Writers' Network. Co-editor of several published



anthologies of short fiction. Her stories, essays and articles appear in books, anthologies, journals, magazines, and have been broadcast on radio. She has taught at universities and presented conference papers in Australia, the UK and India. Sharon was a finalist in the Indian Business and Community Awards 2023. She encourages international people to people links while nurturing innovative writing.

<https://sharonrundle.com.au>

Science

Tuberculosis: Tackling an ancient disease with New-generation drugs - Monoclonal antibodies

by Shivankari Krishnananthasivam, Ph.D

Tuberculosis (TB) is said to be one of the oldest diseases in human medical history. It is a life-threatening infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mtb), infecting humans as the primary host. Mtb was discovered by Robert Koch, a German physician in 1882. TB is transmitted from person to person via aerosolization of infectious droplets, i.e., coughing and sneezing. While only about 10% of the infected individuals show symptoms for the disease, the remaining 90% of individuals contain the infection in an asymptomatic and non-transmissible state, also known as latent TB infection. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated quarter of the global population is latently infected thus serving as a large reservoir of Mtb infection. These individuals may remain healthy showing no clinical symptoms, despite being exposed. However, they may develop active disease, when their immune system is weakened or compromised due to other clinical factors. Comorbidities such as HIV co-infection, type 2 diabetes, chronic lung disease, renal failure, and other factors such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, malnutrition and immunosuppressive drugs can exacerbate the active disease or aid in the progression of the latent TB infection stage to active disease.

Patients with active TB experience a wide range of clinical symptoms such as fever, fatigue, lack of appetite, night sweats, weight loss, persistent cough and haemoptysis (coughing up blood) in advanced state of the disease. TB is mainly a pulmonary infection affecting the lungs and the upper respiratory tract, but the bacteria can spread to other parts of the body such as lymph nodes,

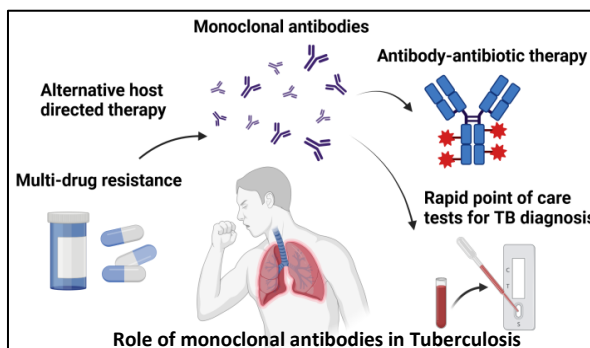
abdomen, genitourinary tract, skin, meninges, joints, and bones.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, TB was rated as the leading cause of death from an infectious disease and therefore defined as a major public health concern. Global TB incidence is estimated to be 10

the decline of vaccine-induced protection after adulthood. The vaccine efficacy can also vary based on environmental settings, particularly in geographic regions with a high prevalence of environmental mycobacteria. Mtb is particularly a notorious bacteria with host evasion strategies, notably dormancy (switch to inactive form) to escape from the human host immune responses. Therefore, it is imperative to identify important factors correlating to natural protection, and design vaccines that target the early, late and dormant stages of the Mtb bacteria's life cycle, and with a long-lasting immunological memory response, for new-generation vaccine development.

Treatment of TB mainly involves a combination of 4 antibiotics namely Isoniazid, Rifampicin, Ethambutol, and Pyrazinamide. For the first two months of intensive phase therapy, a combination of all four medications is given, followed by four months of continuous phase therapy with Isoniazid and Rifampicin.

The emergence of multidrug-resistant Mtb strains has become a significant challenge in TB treatment. When a patient is diagnosed with Rifampicin-resistant or multi-drug-resistant TB, a more intensive therapy with the second and third line of drugs is given for 12-18 months. It is extremely vital to finish the full course of antibiotics prescribed, as poor drug compliance leads to drug-resistant bacteria and relapse of the disease. The alarming spread of multidrug-resistant Mtb strains has challenged the use of classical antibiotics for the treatment of TB, thus, warranting



million active infections and an estimated 1.6 million deaths in 2021. TB occurrence is worldwide, however, Southeast Asian countries account for high TB incidence, with India and China bearing the highest disease burden.

Currently, more than 90% of newborn babies are vaccinated with BCG, the only available TB vaccine to date. Neonatal vaccination with BCG provides adequate protection against active disease in children, particularly against severe manifestations of TB such as miliary TB and TB meningitis. However, many studies have shown that BCG offers protection for up to 10-20 years, which coincides with a gradual increase in TB incidence after the age of 25, suggesting

an urgent need for alternative forms of therapies.

New generation of drugs from Monoclonal Antibodies

Host-directed therapy (HDT) is a new and emerging concept in the treatment of TB and other communicable diseases, where human host response is modulated by treatment with small molecules, (with or without adjunct antibiotics), to achieve better control of the bacteria. Unlike antibiotics, HDT drugs act by directly modulating host cell functions; therefore, the development of drug resistance by infecting Mtb bacteria is avoided. Thus, HDT is a promising treatment strategy for the management of drug-resistant TB cases, as well as for patients with existing chronic, comorbid conditions such as HIV infection, where drug-drug interactions/complications may occur. This new approach has the potential to greatly improve clinical outcomes and reduce treatment

duration, in conjunction with current antibiotic treatment, thus opening new avenues for better disease management.

Monoclonal antibodies have been lauded as the “magic bullet drugs” in the treatment of infectious diseases. These highly specific protein molecules developed against a particular virus or bacteria can enhance the immune response to kill the pathogen such as Mtb. Several studies have indicated an imperative role for antibodies in the control and prevention of active TB infection. Antibody therapy in the form of monoclonal antibodies is a promising alternative approach in TB therapeutics. They are applicable in antibody-antibiotic conjugate platforms, as adjunct immunotherapies (along with antibiotics), and as prophylaxis in high-risk, vulnerable individuals. Likewise, the application of Mtb-specific monoclonal antibodies in point-of-care (POC) tests, based on lateral flow immunoassay

technology (similar to a rapid test kit for COVID-19), could be a simple, rapid, and cost-effective diagnostic platform for early screening of TB cases and thereby timely clinical care.

The strategy for eradicating TB by 2035 as outlined by the WHO, includes effective diagnosis, treatment, and prevention approaches. This will involve the development of rapid diagnostics for early case detection, improved vaccines, newer/alternative therapeutic interventions and most importantly implementation of strategies to address the socioeconomic and environmental root causes of TB.

Dr. Shivankari Krishnananthasivam is a Scientist based in Singapore. Her research work focuses on the development of monoclonal antibodies against infectious diseases.



A Shared Love A Tribute to Brian D’Arcy by Debjani Chatterjee



Brian D’Arcy and I first met fifty years ago at a student party at the University of Lancaster. Our shared love of poetry cemented a deep friendship. It would thrill us to see our poems published in the same issue of Continuum, the University’s poetry magazine.

After university we went our separate ways, but Fate again brought us together, this time in Sheffield where we married ten years later, in 1983. Despite the differences in our cultures (Anglo-Irish and Indian), religions (Roman Catholic and Hindu) and ages (a gap of nineteen years), ours was a blissfully happy marriage. We enjoyed a literary partnership too, occasionally writing a mondo together, a Japanese form of poetry in which two poets collaborate in writing a short poem; and sometimes writing separate poems on the same subject matter. We also jointly edited poetry anthologies for children – Let’s Celebrate: Festival Poems from Around the World and Let’s Play: Poems about Games and Sports from Around the World. We were active in the multicultural poetry group, Mini Mushaira, Brian serving as its Treasurer. Brian was hugely supportive through both my cancers and, when I founded the Healing Word in 2009, after my first cancer experience, he served as its Chair. We were also members of Sheffield Libraries’ Poetry Appreciation Group, which is holding a special event this September to remember Brian and to celebrate his poetry.

The two poems by Brian that are published here reflect his interest in India and in Ireland. ‘Lords of the Dance’ is typical of the playful style of much of his poetry for children, and ‘The Sidhe-Bean’ is evidence of his love of Irish folklore.

Of my two poems here, ‘Bookmarks’ is my tribute to Brian’s passion for poetry. It was inspired by the fact that, after his death, I continued to find scraps of paper with lines of poetry all over the house: within his many books and magazines, at the side of his armchair, on the back of a shopping list, in his coat pockets, at the bottom of his bed and under his pillow! My second poem is a tribute to the NHS, whose 75th anniversary was in July this year. It is about what the NHS is at its best, and what I, and all the nation, would desperately love it to be always. **(Poems on page 9)**

© TWO POEMS BY BRIAN D'ARCY

Lords of the Dance

I thought maybe – perhaps – perchance –
 Indian elephants could dance.
 In all the films from Bollywood
 people danced whenever they could.
 So surely, given half a chance,
 Indian elephants could dance?

In finery they should be dressed
 and maybe trumpets would be best
 to play the music to enhance
 their demonstration of the dance.
 For surely, given half a chance,
 Indian elephants could dance?

They would not want a film star's wage,
 though they'd demand a jumbo stage
 to show the world the elegant
 dancing Indian elephant.
 For surely, seizing half a chance,
 Indian elephants would dance!

Brian D'Arcy (1933 – 2023) was descended from Irish grandparents who migrated from Counties Mayo and Sligo late in the nineteenth century. His father William D'Arcy died in India during World War II. His mother Laurinea D'Arcy (1909 – 2003) wrote an autobiography, *Deep are the Roots* (Bellasis Press, 1999). Brian was a prize-winning poet for children and adults. His books are *Tha Shein Ukrosh: Indeed the Hunger*, *Ghost Horses Dancing* and *Hidden Haiku*; a pamphlet *Footsteps in the Dust* and, with fellow Mini Mushaira poets, co-authored *Another Bridge*. With his wife Debjani Chatterjee he co-edited anthologies for children. Brian loved music, painting, horses, Indian and Irish folklore.

The Sidhe-Bean

Last night I heard the Banshee cry
 her haunting mounful melody
 and deep within the heart of me,
 I knew someone close by would die.

Her siren song was drifting high
 above the lonely moonlit moor
 where none but I could hear her cry
 her haunting mounful melody.

Tonight I saw the Banshee fly
 and, moonstruck by her melody,
 I called her by to ask her why
 she sang her haunting song to me.

She gathered me and eased her cry,
 then closely, in a whispered moan,
 she said: "Shee came to gather tears
 from those she leaves behind to mourn.

Three nights the Shee-bean sings her song,
 and for three nights Shee gathers tears;
 then gathers too the earth-held soul
 whose time of passing brings her here."

"We'll meet tomorrow then?" I sighed,
 and taking up her haunting song
 that froze the very heart in me,
 "Indeed, the morrow," Shee replied.

Note: Ireland's fairies are the 'sidhe' (pronounced shee), a name from ancient days. Sidhe-bean is Irish for fairy woman or folk of the fairy hillocks or mounds where they live. The cry of a Sidhe-bean (or Banshee as she is now called) foretells the death of someone close or, as in this poem, someone very close indeed!

© TWO POEMS BY DEBJANI CHATTERJEE

**Bookmarks
(In memory of Brian)**

Love, you were always leaving bookmarks.

Now you are gone, and I am left in this house of books:
 books in the sitting room, the corridors and toilet,
 books under the bed and below my pillow,
 the car's glove compartment, even in ample pockets
 of jackets and raincoats.

Books bulge thick with your offerings
 and I open their mysteries with reverence.
 Every book is my companion, a pointer to the right
 page,
 one that disperses memories like
 aromatherapy oil plugged in to welcome a guest.

Every book tells me in no uncertain terms:
 'I am here. Unfold and unwrap me.
 In this dog-eared, tea-stained bookmark
 you will find me. See, here I have left my mark –
 read this – you will hear my voice.'

Every bookmark is your love letter from beyond.

**The NHS is About ...
(Written for its 75th anniversary)**

people caring and communicating,
 people talking and listening,
 people team-working in seamless joining,
 synchronising an orchestra of love,

amazing folk linking body and mind,
 creating heart-to-heart one family,
 each at one in unity of purpose:
 reviving and building bridges of hope.

Recovering, but also flourishing,
 human shells and grey matter connecting ...
 for these and more – humanity stretching ...
 LIFT US UP! THE NATION'S WATCHING, CLAPPING ...

Debjani Chatterjee is a poet, writer, and arts psychotherapist. Awarded an honorary doctorate by Sheffield Hallam University in 2008 and an MBE for services to literature in 2008, she has had over 75 books published, including eight poetry collections, most recently *Laughing with Angels* (2022). Former Chair of NAWA and the Arts Council's Translations Panel, she is also an Associate Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund and a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature. She has been called 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino) and 'a national treasure' (Barry Tebb).

Cinema

“Jubilee” – The story of the iconic Bombay Talkies

by Sunayana Panda

Indian cinema has been around for more than a century now. It is said that the first Indian feature film, Raja Harishchandra, was made in 1913. Through the decades films made in India have gone through many phases, taking in changes in content and techniques. In fact, Indian cinema has existed for so long that now films are being made on some specific era of its own history.

Recently, Vikramaditya Motwane's web series called “Jubilee” was released on the streaming platform Amazon Prime Video and has had very positive reviews. It recreates the life of the Indian film makers and their world in the very early years of this business. The storyline is roughly based on the people who worked in the famous Bombay Talkies studio. This is a period in cinematic history which is not so well-known beyond the circle of film buffs, because it goes back to the 1930s and 40s.

To understand the importance of Bombay Talkies as a milestone in the history of Indian cinema we have to see it in its context. The very first people who made films thought of them as an extension of other forms of popular entertainment such as folk theatre and circus. In fact, the laws relating to cinema made during British times clubbed it in the same category as gambling. It was a form of entertainment which was for the poor and the illiterate. Cinema had such a bad reputation that women who wanted to be respected didn't act in films. In Bombay the very early films had men dressed up as women playing the roles of women and in Calcutta only prostitutes acted in films.

It was in this atmosphere that the Bombay Talkies film production company was set up in Bombay (now Mumbai) by Devika Rani and Himanshu Rai, a couple who had come back to India after spending many years in

London. It was a production company which functioned in the format of the early Hollywood studios. The actors, the writers and the technicians were all paid a monthly salary. The Rais were not novices. They had already made a few films in London and now wanted to start a proper film studio in Bombay because they felt they had to do something for India.



Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani were both Bengalis and had met in London where they had formed, with a small group of Indian friends, an amateur theatre group. That activity evolved and they produced several plays. From the success in that field they started making films. They even went to Germany to get trained in film making. The interesting fact is that they had a team of technicians who were from Germany and who worked with them in London and who became a part of their new company in Bombay. Josef Wirsching was their cinematographer and Franz Osten worked as a director with a focus on the technical aspects of the production.

Bombay Talkies, set up in 1934, was the first production company to operate in a professional manner. It had its own shooting studios,

laboratories, editing studios and preview theatre. It invited the best of talents and technicians. This organised way of working was something revolutionary for those times. This new film production company completely changed the way films were perceived by people. Bombay Talkies gave to Indian cinema a respectability and sophistication which it did not have till then. In fact, Devika Rani made it a point to cast educated women as heroines. This is how Leela Chitnis was chosen by her to act in some of their films.

When they were in London both Himanshu and Devika had acted in their own productions. In India Himanshu Rai did not act, preferring to remain only the producer, while Devika acted and became a star. It was an unusual situation where the actress was also one of the owners of the studio. At a time when women in India did not have a life outside their homes Devika was running a large production company.

One might wonder how much material there is in this story to make a series out of it. In fact, there was a great deal of drama in the story of Bombay Talkies. Devika Rani, one fine day, ran away with her co-actor. Himanshu Rai sent his assistant Sashadhar Mukherjee to find her and bring her back. When she came back they had to find a new actor to replace the one who had gone away. Sashadhar suggested they take his own brother-in-law who was a lab assistant employed by the studio. This young man was none other than Ashok Kumar. The new pair became very popular and their films were successful. Bombay Talkies made stars out of unknown actors.

The real story of Bombay Talkies ended quite sadly. Not long after Devika Rani

came back and got back to acting in new films, Himanshu Rai died and Devika Rani had to fight to keep the studio going. Sashadhar Mukherjee and Ashok Kumar wanted to take over the power. Ultimately these two men left Bombay Talkies and started their own studio, Filmistan. Some years later Devika Rani sold the studio and married a Russian artist.

The script of this web series is written in such a way that it cannot be called a true story but it takes up parts of real life stories of the film industry and combines them to make a new and gripping story. All the names of real people have been changed so that viewers don't think this is a biopic. One can catch glimpses from the

professional lives of Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor. In the web series "Jubilee" Bengali actor Prosenjit plays the character based on Himanshu Rai and Aditi Rao Hyderi plays the character based on Devika Rani. Vikramaditya, the director, has paid a great deal of attention to details in costume and makeup.

Before making this web series, Vikramaditya worked on several other series which were streamed on the internet, and this is how he gathered experience in this format of film making. This idea of making a film on the early years of the Mumbai film industry was in his mind for a long time. Vikramaditya started his career by working as an assistant to Sanjay

Leela Bhansali and he has also worked with young directors like Anurag Kashyap. This exposure to the inner world of cinema gave him the skills required for making a period film.

Those who work in the field of theatre or cinema know that there is always more drama behind the scenes than what is presented to the audience. This series just reveals that truth.



Sunayana Panda is a writer and an actress who divides her time between London and Pondicherry in India.

Two Poems by Laksmisree Banerjee

MOON-SPINDLES OF SINGHBHUM

*weaving cane baskets, darning rags,
making coconut-brooms, sun-drying dung cakes
stoking half-dead fires in wrapped up cracked huts
of murky loam along denuded roads,
is what they know of as destiny---*

*dented coal-tar, thrashed beaten corn,
wheat in meagre spread-outs
on the margins of highways
compose their muffled lives---*

*their nude children, progenies of darkness,
kick on the outskirts of life
prancing penumbras of remote light---*

*their black burnished bodies, shapely female figurines
heaving in sun-burnt labour, picking up firewood
or half rotten fruits in deep pachyderm infested jungles---*

*made for back-breaking chores in devastated fields,
farms or homes for leasing themselves out to lazy,
lascivious males, owners or husbands in liquor stupor---*

*The moon steadily blinks on these tired horizons,
frayed indigenous spaces of Singhbhum or Bethla
yarning their stories on an endless spindle---*

*Notes** Singhbhum & Bethla : Districts of Indian State of Jharkhand comprising some of the Tribal Areas of Eastern India, though with a lot of urbanization & industrialization*

Laksmisree Banerjee is a Multiple-Award Winning Poet, International Scholar, Litterateur, practicing Radio & TV Vocalist, a Former Vice Chancellor and University Professor of English & Cultural Studies. Having taught in premier Universities of the world, Dr. Banerjee is widely published and anthologized with Ten Books of Poetry and several Academic Publications and Books to her credit.



HARIA

*Haria is not allowed
to cross our threshold
or enter the thirty-three million
doors of our gods.*

*He can hardly combat
deceit.*

*His dreamy eyes clouded, dark, are
folded and supplicant like
the green, timid under-creeper.*

*The brooms of cactus-life
help him to clean our dirt with
the breath of a hopeful vigilance
for a simple flash of instant salvation
with a lurking fear of a ruthless eternity
of god knows what,
never leaving his heart.*

*He sweeps our outside verandahs, porches,
the dusty pathways, the lavatories,
cleans our sullied bins and grimy cesspools,
frittering away his doomed hours
on the dim margins of hope
which never arrives.*

*Our Brahmin cook with
a noose of a sacred thread
around his neck,
pounds painful thunders on him
driving him away like a street dog.*

*Notes**Haria---- generally a name from the
downtrodden, subaltern caste*

Book Review

SEASON OF FORGIVENESS

Mandalas of Time, Poems by Malashri Lal

A review by Lakshmi Kannan

Malashri Lal, widely known as a brilliant academic and critic has earned accolades for her books - *An Anthology of Indian Fantasy Writing* (edited with Deepa Agarwal 2017), *In Search of Sita*, (edited with Namita Gokhale 2018), and *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (with Namita Gokhale 2020) that won the Kalinga award for fiction. Always vigilant about the changing profile of women through the ages, her first book *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* (1995) continues to be a milestone. She has penned innumerable critical essays throughout her career as a professor and Head of the English Department, Delhi University.

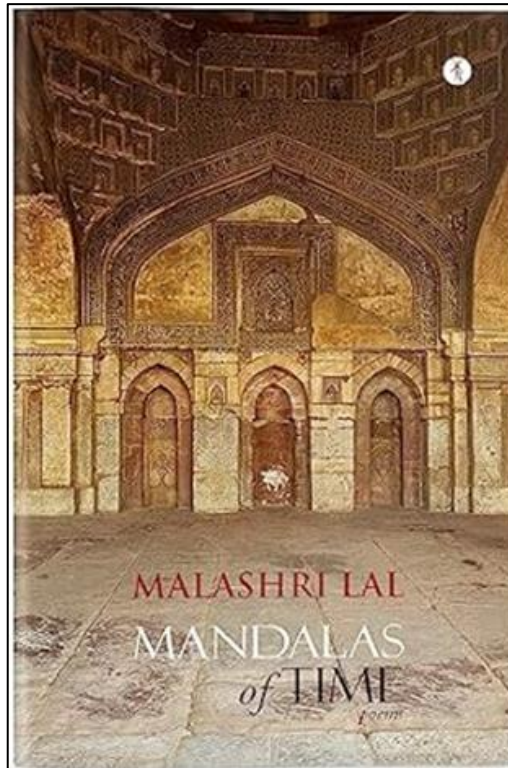
As her first book of poems, *Mandalas of Time* is understandably a thrilling experience not just for her, but equally for her family, friends and fellow writers who relive with her their days of 'a first book.'

In her Foreword, Bashabi Fraser, professor of English and Creative Writing with Edinburgh Napier University, observes how Lal was 'a secret poet who has emerged slowly out of her modest self to share her verse with the world'. There is something to be said for this reticence that every poet has before publishing her/his first manuscript. It is comparable, though on a different plane, with one's religion or spiritual practice that occupies a private, shy space in our lives, especially in these deracinated times.

This reviewer recalls an event in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal that celebrated the golden jubilee of India's Independence. The invited poets who

were scheduled to give readings from their poetry, were completely taken by surprise when Dr. Ramesh Chandra Shah, then the Director, asked them to recite their first poem: 'It doesn't matter at all if it's inaccurate. Please share whatever you remember,' he said. Lest

The wisdom of his perspective resonates with many of us till date whenever we read poems that come across as just clever sophistry, proving the timeless wisdom of in the words of John Keats: 'If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.'



The author's note aptly titled "Poetry – The Healing Touch" gives us a glimpse of the backdrop against which Lal wrote some of the poems. Her early memories of *Pabuji ka phar* that was recited to the accompaniment of songs and dance in Jaipur of the 1960s fascinated her because it had no written script, but was firmly lodged in the memory of the Bhopas. *Mandalas of Time* is also laden with her memory of a life spent with intellectual honesty, a passion for poetry and her sincerity in anything she sets out to do. 'Such poetry is mnemonic' she declares. So is most poetry, most writing, one may add.

The poems evoke her memories of mountains, rivers, countries, people, flowers and some places that are wrapped in history and myths. The pandemic is remembered because it just cannot be forgotten. The trauma left in its wake calls for an inner healing. Lal finds it in poetry.

we thought it was in jest, Dr. Shah was in deadly earnest.

A few poets ventured hesitantly. Emboldened by his encouragement, more poets followed.

'Ah...the poems sound so fresh,' said Dr. Shah. 'Pure, innocent, vulnerable even. This is the charm of one's early poetry. And it's such a pity when a writer loses this priceless quality when he/she moves on from one successful book to another.'

**Abandoned,
the solitary resident watches Lakshmi
from his dark window
Refusing to switch on the lights. ...**

**He chooses to rest his weary mind
Mourning the dead. (Diwali with
Goddess Lakshmi)**

The migrant woman worker's pregnancy '*was not anyone's concern*' as she joined other jobless migrants *towards a mirage called home*. (The Woman Migrant Worker. News Story, 13/5/2020). The 'insidious' enemy has imprisoned all of us in another Ashoka Vatika where Hanuman peers down with a glimmer of hope. His Sanjivani is deftly tweaked with a wry wit by the poet:

'I'm told it's called a "vaccine" in modern tongue.' (Sita and the Pandemic)

A black tone governs her lines that juxtapose the much -hyped glamour of Rajasthan's royalty with the sinister practice of female infanticide in a powerful poem:

Princely tales hide deep secrets of intrigues and violence

Two grains of sand throttle life in a baby's nostril

A mud paste of nettles destroys a nascent fetus

...The harem shrieks in pain, silently

We only get to see ***women encrypted in chiffons and the lustre of pearls covers the scars of her story.*** (Royal Heritage)

Lal's poetry shares her twin loyalty to two places – Rajasthan where she grew up, and her ancestral family of Rabindranath Tagore that courses through her blood. She writes

Dance divine Peacock in the monsoon rain

***Spread your tail of a hundred eyes
Quell the dust and cast it wide
Dispel the gloom with spangled light.*** (Peacock Feathers)

and then talks about another kind of dance that absorbs the very essence of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy:

***Then I learn from Gurudev
Emotions have no fixed language***

***The mind has no physical limits
Music resounds in the open sky
Dance is the joy of a free spirit
anywhere.***

The swing between moods of 'euphoria, of belonging in multiple places' as against 'the despair of a nowhere person' that she shares in her author's note is best understood by Ranjit Hoskote in his "Afterword". We should go past the polarities that we are habituated to, by nudging 'The dyadic interplay of opposites - the *dvandva*'. In Lal's poems the interplay of opposites permeates many areas. Between the interstices throbs the dynamic energy of life that helps her grow as a person, a writer.

The golden flowers, defiantly 'plump and succulent' in an arid, hot summer

***tease with
the promise of water***

Where there in none. (Amatas in Summer)

The collection is scented with the aroma of flowers that are so integral to the poet's life. An interesting dialogue unfolds between two unequal flowers with the 'older' flower Champa climbing the curve of victory. (Hibiscus and the Old Champa) and Easter lilies spread a message of regenerative spirit because *it's the season of forgiveness and Life's renewal is a beautiful certainty.* (Easter Lilies in an Empty Home).

Then, there are poems on her family. The touching lines

And may your tiny hands reach out to help

Those in grief and pain (Prayer for my Granddaughter)

recalls "A Prayer for my Daughter," by W.B.Yeats's, while "Dreaming of Ma by the Sea" speaks for every bereaved person who lost a mother.

As in all collections, some poems stand out with confidence and linguistic felicity while others delight in a way that tells us the poet enjoyed writing them. "Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzberg" is one such poem. Closer to home, Lal asks

Today do you see the scholars in free India

Who live in a colonial building and speak anti-colonial...

Where native languages are victorious over the fading

veins of English (Viceregal Lodge, Shimla)

In Italy on a Rockefeller Residency, she thinks of *Manjhi*, the eternal boatman

*Was his last boat ride hugging the shores of Lake Como?
Or crossing the Ganga at Rishikesh
The waters whispering the same message*

Of abdication – "Let Go?" Manjhi can embrace different lands, waters and shores and still belong.

Reading *Mandalas of Time* gives one the healthy, wholesome experience of sensing a writer's expansive growth, through her poems. Kiriti Sengupta, brings a poet's sensitivity to his Hawakal Publications, and the cover designer Bitan Chakraborty visual matches the dignity of the title.



Lakshmi Kannan is a poet, novelist, short story writer and critic. Her latest book Guilt Trip and Other

Stories (Niyogi Books, 2023) will be available on Amazon later in August. For more details, please visit her site www.lakshmikannan.in

Book review

Anita Nahal's *drenched thoughts* (a novel) An Experimental Literary Treasure By Santosh Bakaya

**"Go Priya go
Run fast run
Take your son and go
To a place far away and then some"**
.....
**"Her life she thought was going by
Going, going, gone
No need to stay or pry
Going, going, gone like in Bob Dylan's
song." (Chapter 1, pp. 11- 12)**

Thus, begins this 'philosophic diasporic novel', *drenched thoughts* and you are riveted from the first chapter, totally beguiled, eagerly wanting to read on. For well recognized poet and children's writer, this is Nahal's debut novel. One look at this beauty, written exquisitely by Dr. Anita Nahal, impeccably published by Authorspress, and I am absolutely *drenched*! *Drenched* in the intriguing wordplay, the enchanting juxtaposition of prose and verse, the tender wielding of the pen, and a whole gamut of emotions!

In the first chapter, we see a bespectacled Priya, sitting on a plush, queen-size bed in a fancy hotel room, in Chicago, feeling a sense of satisfaction at her son Avijeet's splendid wedding ceremony celebrations just a few hours ago. It was a great feat for a single immigrant mother, who had her son married sixteen years after leaving behind a heartbreaking past, in India, relocating to the USA, with a fourteen-year-old son in search of a calm, conflict-free life.

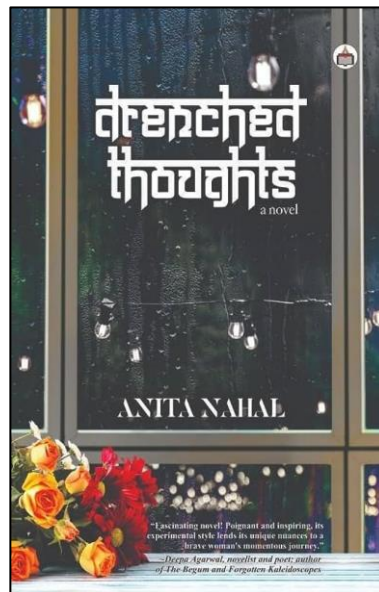
In doing so, Priya successfully managed to crush the condescending attitude of the naysayers, both in India and the USA who had predicted that she wouldn't be able to manage in an alien country.

Sitting in the hotel room, past incidents churn in her mind, and she

sighs, recalling the struggles and betrayals that she had had to face.

"Priya's sighs were usually very cavernous, unfulfilled ones like threads in needles that aren't allowed to stitch." (p. 16)

The novel epitomizes the dictum that 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going'. Many times, one finds oneself saluting the grit, gumption, and resilience of the petite, protagonist, Priya. A phenomenal woman!



Through flashbacks and flash-forwards, we become privy to the inner workings of her mind; her 'multi-layered emotional claustrophobia', a peep into their two-bedroom house in New Delhi, her estranged husband Satinder, and her parents. The sensitive juxtaposition of prose and poetry left me in an intoxicated stupor, and I was drunk and *drenched* in her words.

I remember interviewing Anita Nahal for my blog on March 2, 2021, where she said, "I have completed my novel...I finally approved the

fourteenth draft! It's written partly in prose and partly in Onegin style poetry, one in which Pushkin wrote and Vikram Seth in his *The Golden Gate*." I believe she did a couple of more drafts before finally sending it to the publishers. Nahal tells me that she keeps revising her writings even after these are published in new editions or reprints. Driven to be a perfectionist!

A bit on the Onegin stanza. I have always been enamored of Pushkin and his Onegin style poetry, popularized by him in his 1825- 1832 novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*. He uses iambic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme aBaBccDDeFFeGG. It has three quatrains and a closing couplet, with seven rhymes. It is undoubtedly, one of the most important works of Russian literature. In fact, Pushkin and his Onegin style poetry, figure in my collaborative book of poems with Dr. Ampat Koshy, *Vodka by the Volga*; hence, I was doubly enchanted by Nahal's book.

The protagonist in my section of the narrative poetry, is so obsessed with Pushkin, that, tongue-in-cheek, he asks his beloved, "Can you put some Pushkin in my soup?"

The cover of *drenched thoughts* has a blurb by Deepa Agarwal, novelist, and poet; author of *The Begum* and *Forgotten Kaleidoscopes*. She calls it a, "Fascinating novel! Poignant and inspiring, its experimental style lends its unique nuances to a brave woman's momentous journey."

The back page has four blurbs by erudite wordsmiths. Dr. Gerrit Dielissen, professor of Sociology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, says that it is a 'novel of urgency that will leave no reader untouched ...Anita Nahal switches effortlessly from

elevated poetry to earthly prose and back."

"Drenched Thoughts brings modernism to a new level with her desi feelings, instincts, images, and tropes. American literature has much to gain from this interplay of form and style." Writes Cyril Dabyadeen, novelist and Ottawa poet Laureate emeritus; author of *Dark Swirl* and *The Dreams of my Flesh*.

Nancy. J. Alexander, author of *Relentless*, *Seeing Double*, and *Twisted Realms* says, the book is "Intriguing and universally appealing."

"Delicate, taut and finally balanced, this heady mix of prose and verse will delight you as much as it wins you with its clarity, honesty, and all-forgiving love," writes Basudhara Roy, academic and poet; author of *Inhabiting*, *Stitching a Home*, and *Moon in my Teacup*.

Profound and philosophical, *drenched thoughts* is a gripping read, with its tender juxtaposition of verse and prose, flowing through 214 pages in an effortless, enchanting cascade, making one introspect. On page 12, she says,

"Now quietly bestriding the times and tides

Time had not changed

Only the times had changed."

Very sensitively handled, the novel seeps into the core of the reader's heart.

In her diasporic journey, I was alive to the vicissitudes of her life, seething with rage, sorry at her loss, betrayal, deception, and dejection, and rejoicing at her phoenix-like resurrection.

"Single women and single mothers are generally the target of discrimination all over the world, including in America. She hoped to create an alternate paradigm, modify the language." (p.133) And, she manages to do so successfully.

Other immigrants ran the rat race, full throttle, but Priya resiliently kept drilling certain things into her son's head. "Remember five things, beta. Ingrain them inside of you. Plaster them in, so you will never forget. Like kintsugi gold in a broken jar." (p 18)

To know what those five things are, I would advise book lovers to grab a

copy of the novel, which is a literary treasure.

By the time one reaches the last chapter, one is completely drenched along with Priya in a new shimmer, and an incredible new reality—a joyous daze, akin to the delight she felt as a youngster when, in the washroom of her Delhi house, water drops from the shower fell 'like powder-rain on her head.' (p.24)

Vibrating with a pulsating vitality, this is a book that all bibliophiles will love to have in their shelf.

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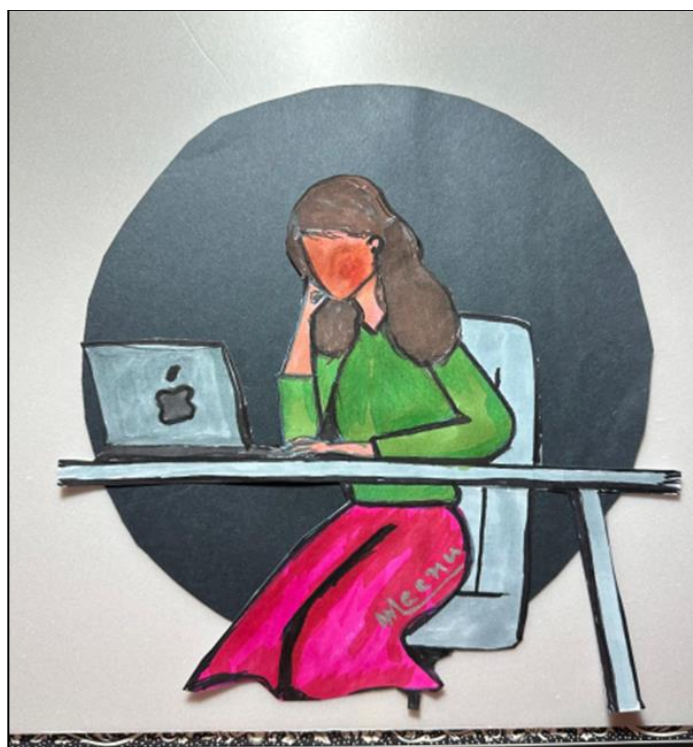
Pages: 214 Price: Rs. 495



Santosh Bakaya is a multiple award-winning poet, novelist, biographer, and TEDx Speaker,

internationally acclaimed for her poetic biography of Mahatma Gandhi, *Ballad of Bapu* and *Martin Luther King Jr.*, *Only in Darkness can you see the Stars*. Dr. Santosh Bakaya's twenty-three books encompass multiple genres.

Try And You Will Get It – by Meenakshi Mohan (Poem on page 17)



A Masterclass in Poetry

Editing to level up a poem



Yogesh Patel

There are many ways to level up your poem. It means to tighten up the composition, form, meaning, and working of images—well, the prosody. However, the editor's role should not be mistaken for that of a proofreader! Depending on your maturity as a poet, you may accept only the part of editing, preserving what you absolutely believe in. But then be ready for the rejection. How ruthless your editors can be, however, is another story! The late Shiv Kumar Ayer once told me that, at The Times, he suggested an amendment to Bernard Levin's article. The chief editor agreed, but the almighty Levin was furious: How dare you?

The one way to level up your poetry is to be a minimalist in your writing. Each word has a job in your poem, whether you adopt a tone of a narrator or of an observer. The words are weighed and balanced accordingly. By just removing the words, as a Czar, you may kill the poem and your sentiments! There are no strict rules for the removal of wasteful words, but you must follow the rhythm. Robert Graves playfully once suggested a Game of Telegrams as a way of crafting poetry. Those of us who remember, as we had to pay per word, in the telegrams, the messages used to get ridiculously shortened, unlike texting, where the word is shaved off all its dignity! Graves took the micky out of Wordsworth's 'The Reaper', in which, according to Graves, Wordsworth says the same thing four times!

*Behold her, single in the field,
You solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain...*

The words 'single', 'solitary', 'by herself', and 'Alone' were enough to drive him mad at a kind of tautology. As a telegram, it would have cost a lot, and the argument is that if Wordsworth had to pay for each word, he would have written it differently! But stop. This is poetry and not a telegram. Repetition is a tool of the craft and can be deployed to great effect. What I am showing is that the tyranny of editing can destroy good bounces or an assertion in poetry.

This is a brief article, so let us straight delve into Reshma Ruia's short *Haikuish* poem to explore how one can work on a wonderful poem to take it a step further.

When I published Ruia's excellent collection, *A Dinner Party in The Home Counties*, she was still grieving for the loss of her father. Therefore, I left her tribute to her father,

a short poem, untouched. It captured her raw sentiments aptly.

*At night my father's face
Rises in my sleep, like the moon.
He is telling me something.*

Now that the time has passed, recently, I wanted to talk to her about this poem. Unlike many poets, Reshma has always been receptive to suggestions. For all its perils, I don't now engage with the others in any conversation about suggestions on a poem. Most poets get upset! Hence, a credit to Reshma that I can bring this small gem to you for a discussion.

First, there is nothing wrong with her original poem, except its ambiguous ending. 'He is telling me something is intriguing' has no previous anchor or a context. It is NOT a poetic crisis that can fail a poem. But the end remains extremely wanting. Ambiguity undoubtedly mystifies the poem and allows us to part with it pondering, keeping the awe in place. However, if it abandons us with no hints, it can throw us in a limbo. The handling of the end of a poem is often tricky, and most editors will tell you to leave the ending to the readers. Yet, they will also agree, it means an ending that grants a leap of imagination. Epiphany is welcome, but not, so it kills the poem. Therefore, as an editor, I had reservations about the poem's last words! It meant Reshma and I could still explore and capture more magic by taking the poem to the new avenue.

The prosody of the original is very loose and gives an impression of a haiku; its syllables are 6-8-7, instead of 5-7-5. Therefore, I needed to help tidy up the form.

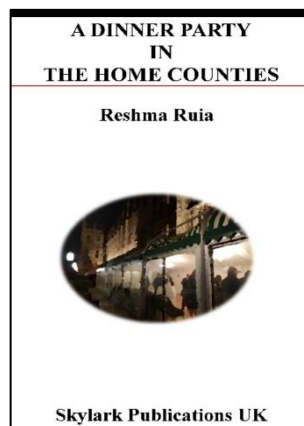
As the poet's sentiments are anchored in the memory of her father, it was best to leave the first line almost intact. I say almost, because by calling her father, a father, she implies 'my', and thus 'my' can be dropped from the line, giving us the 5 syllables needed: at night father's face. Remember, we talked about becoming a minimalist?

Examine now the second line of 8 syllables: Rises in my sleep, like the moon. The words 'sleep' and 'moon' are quite diluted as images. What if we bring a window into the play? That allows us to do away with the moon. It also hints to a child watching the magical moon rising in a window. By bringing a child in it, with her innocence and her time spent with her father, opens up the possibility for the magical interaction of storytelling; father reading one to her. To arrest 7 syllables, thus, we have a second line: rises in a window, reads

The enjambment at the end, with only one word left, 'reads', is full of energy and action, and compounds to anticipation that reveals lost childhood moments of a story being read by the father, as once-upon-a-time. Well, that triggers the connection to time, which generates the idea of its retreat. It means here are the moments to cherish and never to let them fade to oblivion. Thus, we arrive at the last words: time retreats; which completes our requirement for the 5 syllables. Now we have a perfect haiku with 5-7-5 syllables in three lines. There;

*at night, father's face
rises in a window, reads
stories, time retreats.*

Reshma profoundly identifies with it. After all, it is her poem, not the editor's. As an exercise, go back to one of your poems left on a burner and have a go...



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Yogesh Patel received an MBE for literature in 2020. His latest collection of poems, *The Rapids*, just won the finalist Medal in the Indie Book Awards. It is published by *The London Magazine*. Patel's poem appears on the Poetry Wall of the Royal Society of Literature. His poem is to be launched aboard a NASA rocket to the moon to be archived there. His poem has been featured on the wall of Cambridge University's Language Library. 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.

Short story

Thirty-Two

Subhash Chandra

Ever since he stepped into teens, his mother would make him open his mouth every now and then and peer into it ... so long, that he began to whine, "Ma, please ... my jaws are paining."

"Okay ... okay ... just a second, Beta."

"What's all this, Ma?" he'd ask her peevishly.

She'd smile enigmatically and get busy with a chore.

Yet another superstition added to her long list, he thought. After her husband's death, she had become paranoid about Arjun's safety.

"You're all that's left to me," she'd often exhale dolefully.

Every time someone praised his looks or good performance in studies, she'd drag him into their jhuggi, circle three dried-up red chillies around his feet, groin (he felt terribly embarrassed), limbs, and head mumbling incoherently. Then she consigned the chillies to the smouldering chulha.

"The smoke is acrid ... means the woman wished you ill," she'd declare.

Arjun wanted to tell her the smoke from chillies would always smell pungent, with or without her mumbo-jumbo.

One day, after this ritual, she grew pensive. "Those witches killed your father."

"But Babu died of a heart attack."

He didn't add, she was largely responsible for his death. Frustrated by Babu's refusal to take bribes in the Road Transport Office, where he was a peon, she nagged him unceasingly over trifles. What she wanted was beyond him. He grew increasingly sad ... and silent.

#

When Arjun turned 18, she counted his teeth and beamed.

"You have got the thirty-second tooth."

"So?"

She smiled meaningfully. "Now whatever you speak or wish would come to pass."

He laughed dismissively. Then inexplicably she started crying.

"Beta, your father was a coward."

Arjun didn't like her bad-mouthing Babu, even after his death.

"He was a gentle and kind man."

She had not heard him as it were.

"If only he had listened to me, we'd have got out of this hell."

"I think, he was a man of principles."

"Huh ...! Can't you see the thugs thriving. Bhaiyyaji has grabbed four jhuggies and is getting fat on the rent?"

"Babu has got me education. I'm in college, whereas most boys of my age in the Basti are drug addicts, and loafers."

"I've been a helpless woman all my life. Will you support me?"

He kept silent.

Then the Lt. Governor ordered the clean up and beautification of Delhi. Shanties were going to be removed. The residents were allotted a 25 sq.-metre plot each in Kondli. But our plot was misappropriated by one of Bhaiyyaji's cronies. We couldn't do a thing!

She looked at me expectantly. "Will you fight against this injustice?"

"Yes," Arjun said and spoke out his wish," despite his rationality.

After a week, a speeding truck turned the crony into pulp. He was riding his motorcycle.

#

11.30 p.m. A knock on the door. "Bhaiyyaji wants you," the man said.

Amma said to the man, "I'll meet him tomorrow morning."

"You know the consequences? No woman has ever dared to disobey Bhaiyyaji's orders."

The Gangster had been lusting after Amma for a long time.

The next morning, Bhaiyyaji appeared and bellowed, "You bitch, I'll teach you an unforgettable lesson!"

The same evening his hoodlums executed the threat. Arjun's mother and he spent the night under the open sky. No words passed between them. Yet Arjun understood ... and acted.

Nothing happened to the Gangster for a month; he went about smugly. But one night a street dog tore away a chunk from his fleshy thigh when, after a drunken bout, he was snoring under the Banyan tree. He was in the habit of kicking dogs for no reason. In a couple of days, he died of rabies.

A wave of joy rolled through the Basti. Arjun's mother went around bragging about the power of his thirty-two teeth. But the joy was short lived. Bhaiyyaji's nephew took his place, and the victimization resumed.

People looked up to Arjun for help. He voiced his wish publicly. One evening two motor-cycle-born masked men zoomed into the Basti, pumped several

bullets into the nephew and disappeared. They were from a rival gang wanting to take control of our Basti.

Arjun seemed to have divine powers; he cured ailing children, saved women from husband's violence, got girls married and young men jobs ... and more, but he'd feel uneasy when people pressed fruits, sweets, and provisions on him.

"Beta, you're helping people," his mother exhorted him.

#

Arjun became a new-age Guru. No beard, nor long hair, nor tilak. But his demeanour changed. His hand reflexively went up in benediction when a supplicant put forth her/his problem. His studies had gone for a toss, of course.

Meanwhile, his mother started behaving much like Bhaiyyaji. She collected hafta (weekly protection

money) from the residents on the sly. Worse still, she got into a relationship with a married man whose harried and helpless wife approached Arjun.

He was in a quandary, but after much cogitation, decided to do the right thing. Before long, his mother succumbed to Dengue. He continued to use his teeth-power to punish the victimizers. But now his primal libido began to raise its hood. When a pretty girl visited him for redressal of her grievance, he lusted after her.

One day, he kissed the hand of a girl, who smilingly blushed her willingness. From then on it was a downhill slide for Arjun. He began to bed different girls. But one of the girls got impregnated. The parents of all the exploited girls tried to muster support, but failed.

'He is a divine man!'

'He has done a world of good to the people here.'

And then one evening the severed body of the pregnant girl was found on the railway tracks. Arjun felt choked with self-loathing!

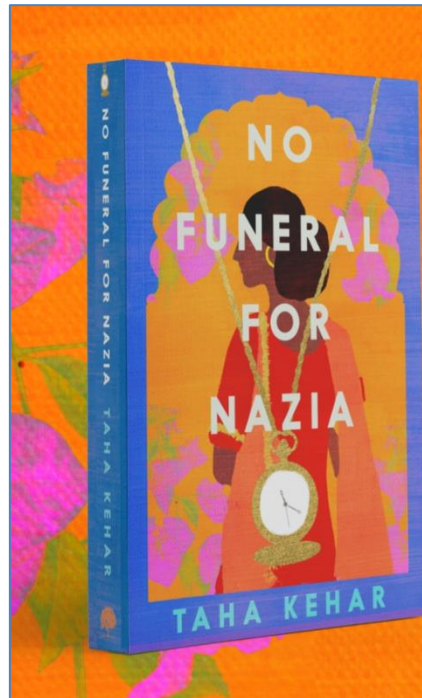
He's a sinner... He's no right to live... But who put him on this evil path? ... However, he had colluded ... and also misused the power for his foul ends.

Wish made for his own death ... The surreal power of thirty-two teeth had been confirmed repeatedly ... wakefulness for the most part of the night ... a night, pitch dark and clotted ... not followed by a day.



Dr. Subhash Chandra, former Professor of English, University of Delhi, has published three collections of

short stories: *Not Just Another Story*, *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles*, and *A Game of Dice*, and about eighty short stories in Indian and foreign journals. He has also published four books of criticism and several research articles.



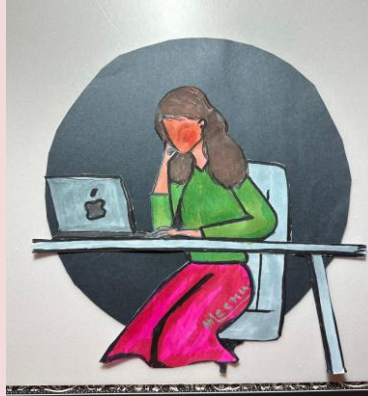
NO FUNERAL FOR NAZIA

When celebrated author Nazia Sami dies, there is to be no funeral. Instead, only six invitees are asked to attend a party, one of whom is a mystery guest. Over the course of an extraordinary evening, secrets are revealed, pasts reconsidered, and lives are forever changed.



NEEM TREE
PRESS

#NoFuneralForNazia by Tahar Kehar is a striking and inventive exploration of what death can mean for both the deceased and those left behind. Released on 19 October 2023. You can pre-order via website: <https://ow.ly/CIXf50PxkuP> Publisher : Neem Tree Press Limited.

A Poem by Dr. Meenakshi Mohan**Try, And You Will Get It**

When in school, I hated math.
My mother, a pro in numbers, said, "Try, and you will get it."
I loved her art and writing.
I wanted to be a writer and an artist like her.
And she said, "Try, and you will get it."

Time passed, I got married,
Crossed thousands of miles to a new country.
I did not know the ABC of cooking,
So, my mother-in-law said, "Try, and you will get it."

I got my first job in the USA.
Not having a car and commuting to work became an issue.
My husband showed me the bus schedule.
Tearful and full of apprehensions, missed my father's protective canopy.
My husband said, "Try, and you will get it."

Years passed; I got my new car with fancy features --
not knowing how to make them work,
I called my son eight hundred miles away from me.
He asked me to read the manual and said, "Try, and you will get it."

Time rolled by, and I almost became a pro in trying and getting it.
Then, I got my new Apple computer with the fanciest features.
I called my grandson and asked him the hows of its features.
He said, "Ammu, look up Google. It tells you all."
Google Maharaj became my Guru.
It doesn't tell me, "Try and you will get it."

It directs me step-by-step.
Thank you, Google, and now waiting for ChatGpt.
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HOW DO YOU PRACTICE YOUR CULTURE?

--Folklore & Memoir

by Cyril Dabydeen

"How do you practice your culture?" he asks with unaffected ease.

"My culture?" I reply, feigning surprise.

A moment of my *Canadian* non-being, let it be said. Non-descriptive, if swarthy-complexioned he is, but with aplomb--this confident-looking youth here with his friend of European background (you could say), also in his twenties. I am sandwiched between them in this open-air public space, but now confined we think we are.

His question is without malice aforethought; and maybe he is hoping for some kind of camaraderie, or familiarity. Verisimilitude, yes.

But strangers we are, in our anonymity here in this capital city with new peoples regularly coming to our shores and, inexorably the demographic shift taking place. Thousands of new peoples becoming settlers in Canada, with the presumably standard *Canadian* culture changing, ah.

Where now the "multicultural abrasion," as the country's main newspaper had called it, or "the cult of multiculturalism"—once ballyhooed. Passe it all is, because of the palpable diversity I see all around. Forty million people in Canada now!

This youth, perhaps wishing to "welcome" me as a newcomer with his sense of tolerance--not with foreboding. He sees me as a foreigner, at best a newcomer to Canada. His intelligent eyes move around with a wry smile on his face. I feign indifference, like a sudden ploy.

"My culture...?" I persist with my sense of intrigue, or simply being an interlocutor.

"Yes." he murmurs, with expectancy in the air; and the word "culture" is

with us. Some loaded term, with indefiniteness, you see—and now asking what really is one's culture, or cultural baggagery, so to speak?

He has assessed me with my ethnicity, the way I look--phenotypical, but not consanguineous. Real *Canadian*, do you know? The sense of my identity tied to topography--where I've come from and will occasionally look back upon with my poetic penchant. Janus-faced—looking forwards and backwards simultaneously, in my imaginative-cum-numinous manner.

Unconsciously reverting to my immigrant self I subliminally begin to question my having become acculturated (read, integrated) I sometimes boast about--provenance not lost on me.



Cyril Dabydeen -- "a noted Canadian poet" (House of Commons, Ottawa), short story writer, novelist, and anthologist. Author of 20 books, he was a Pushcart Prize nominee via *Prairie Schooner* (USA). He won the Okanagan Fiction Prize, and the Canute A. Brodhurst Prize for fiction. His work has appeared in *Oxford*, *Penguin*, and *Heinemann* anthologies. He has done over 300 readings internationally. An Ottawa Poet Laureate Emeritus, he taught Writing at the University of Ottawa for many years.

This youth with his aplomb nods—and yes, it's about practising my culture? Asian I am--where he has actually placed me, come from an exotic sub-continental place, maybe; he has demarcated me, placed me between border lines. Indian essentially I may be, if a Hindu? Deepvali festival gone. Holi (phagwah), yes. What's really emblematic, or more socio-politically relevant? Hejab-wearing women are now part of the natural landscape, I figure.

My hesitation imperceptibly grows; as the youth ironically warms to me, mixed in with my own forbearance (my visible minority status self-proclaimed). Cultural difference I still dwell upon. Margaret Mead

instinctually comes to mind--as anthropologists come and go. Famed Edward T. Hall whom I'd once met—his noted volume *Hidden Dimensions*--examined the cultural contexts of space and how people actually define themselves with their personal or community ambience, all part of the "accepted" cultural norm. And my being "highly-contexted," you see, meaning about my being people-oriented due not least to my tropical, or simply Asian, origins.

What more do I subliminally come to grips with?

Now in this month of Ramadan, the Muslims' own religio-cultural presence; and the Hindu holi celebratory event having just passed by. I have also intermingled with Jewish friends' own celebratory Passover. More to come--as we will imagine who we actually believe we are.

This youth seems, well, somewhat embarrassed because of my growing hesitation about how I will keep *practising my culture*-- a "foreign" culture, far beyond what's deemed the Anglo-Celtic and francophone norm. Who's the real *Canadian* with cosmopolitanism all around us? Sheer humbug!

Why not ask him how he practises his own culture, because I figure that he was born...where? Definitive-sounding, with everything correlative, not actually causal. More claims I am curious about, you see.

The other youth remains steadfastly silent, non-communicative.

Now everything is instinctively neural with me. My way of parlaying with him, you see. "And you," I ask, with forthrightness, "how do you celebrate your culture?"

"Me?" He's taken aback, by my countermand.

"Yes, indeed."

Comes revelation: he is a Native Canadian--an Ojibway. I should have read between the lines: he welcomes me in more than a ritual manner, with Canada now going through a greater awareness of the Native peoples' sense of themselves tied to self-governance. Culture and heritage existentially aligned.

We have come to an understanding in a matter of seconds. Now tell him that before he was born I'd lived in bush camps with Native peoples in the Lake Superior region and encountered bears and moose in the Lakehead. I'd also imagined myself a pioneer, like early Canadian writer Susanna Moodie-- as "a drawer of water and hewer of wood." And that over the

years I've read (literary, that is) with some of the finest Native Canadian writers; and, in my work Native images and metaphors are more than emblematic.

Tell me who I am and what really is my culture!

And when I was involved in governmental agencies I'd coordinated conferences of diverse peoples across the country on the East Coast and West Coast, and interacted with the leaders of the Assembly of First Nations.

Insider-outsider binary is still at work, with reductionism somewhere in our consciousness. And juxtapositions of the immigrant Canadian with the birthright Canadian, if corollaries at best. "The narcissism of small differences" (Michael Ignatieff) I reflect upon, and Canada being the

"first post-modern nation" (mused by former Prime Minister Paul Martin).

Importantly, tell this youth here with me what I've come to internalize-- now as folklore when I warmed to indigenous singer-songwriter Buffy Sainte-Marie (Cree)--an Oscar winner (in the Canadian Music Hall of Fame), who talked about her songs being "a bridge between worlds" --in the "tangle of colonialism."

A visionary at best she is, not a warrior, and an advocate for peace as she brings "rock-and-roll to the reserves"; and that her songs are an "alternative conflict resolution" she hopes "can last forever."

To the youth I declare that I will continue to admire Buffy Sainte-Marie, and it's how I will practice my culture. *Meegwetch!*

Three poems by Sunil Sharma

Alternate realities

Words coming straight
from the heart
connect with other
feeling
hearts,

the way scattered seeds
sprout
in the wet soil.

The common
songs of the community, winged
by the winds, in

the pre-dystopian
valleys and forests
kissed

by a clear moon
and soft mists over tranquil
lakes;

the music
heard first
by the First Nations,

the jobless artists
smoking pot, besides
graffiti-covered walls
of the

disused
railway tracks, behind the broken
fences
and a
dark underpass.

Impact

A flower
dances
in
a secluded spot.

The motion
finds home
in
a tiny heart.

The feet stop and
a kid beams
in
that part of the scented
trail, near
Lakeshore Boulevard.

Things remembered

The gaps
between the treetops
reveal
expanses of blue and
grey,

the meditative zones.

---Arabian Sea, the catamarans,

shimmering waves

glimpsed
from an aeroplane
window

with eyes, moist.

Sunil Sharma

A humble word-worshiper: 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. Editor of the monthly Setu journal (English): <https://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>
For details, please visit the website: <https://sunil-sharma.com>

TRAVELLING THROUGH MATTERS OF FAITH

Harish Nambiar's Defragmenting India

Riding a Bullet through the Gathering Storm

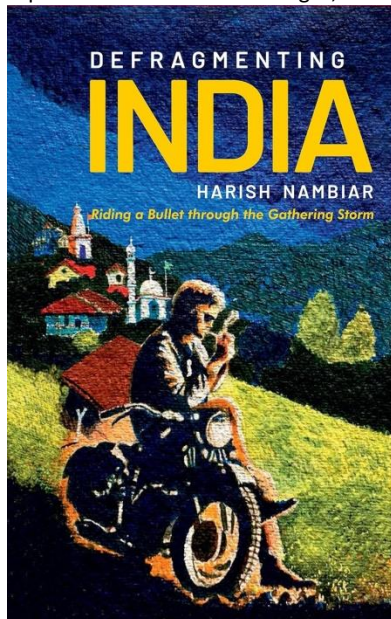
by Anjana Basu

Though Harish Nambiar focuses on his ride on a Bullet through post-Godhra India, the Bullet and Rohan the main rider, actually play a secondary role. Nambiar's task is to piece together the fragmented shards of religious relationships through a series of conversations with friends and people he meets along the way from Vapi to Vizag. The fact that he sets out without realising the depth of the riots in Gujarat adds meaning to the text – that an investigative journalist who covered the Mumbai blasts could be so complacent goes to prove how unaware India was of the explosion of hate to come. Perhaps the unity of his small town Vapi had something to do with it – he and his friends are all small town boys, including Rohan who hails from a Mumbai chawl.

Nambiar takes his time getting into the journey– he talks about his friends' backgrounds their individual characters and their approach to religion with the Mumbai blasts and Godhra hovering over it all. There are issues about Muslim mechanics with Hindu names which emerge in Chhattisgarh and care is required as news of the Gujarat riots is breaking. Ultimately the journey has to be rerouted to avoid trouble spots – though the narrative travels through 7 places picking up information on faith relations along the way through different types of anecdotes and experiences.

When they reach Sambhalpur the Hindu-Muslim divide takes an interesting turn with the story of Kala Pahar, credited for destroying statues in hundreds of temples because he fell in love with a Muslim woman and converted to Islam. However interfaith atrocities creep in with the death of the Staines at the hands of a mob. Nambiar has his count of atrocities throughout the book, witnessed in the Bombay riots and heard from eyewitnesses – though

he does try to balance the sides. To keep the travel going there are descriptions of forest bungalows and tea stalls on the road but on the whole, the book is an account of the various people that he meets along the way, friends, friends of friends and their religious preferences or lack of them. It is also an account of the different histories that the subcontinent has experienced interfaith marriages, mafia



dons and their success or lack of it and more. The rise of Hindutva for example resulted in the fall of Dawood Ibrahim who could never believe in an anti-Muslim India.

Nambiar notes the dissonances in families in the choice of names. His friend in Bangalore calls herself Maggie, short for Magheswari, a name which will evoke Christian vibes in those who hear it. Another Hindu friend has named his daughter Fida simply because he likes the name and is not worried about communal consequences. There is Taraz who hails from Iran and is a Bahai but his name is unlikely to protect him in a communal riot when no one stops to

clear details. The next generation Indian is free, the writer asserts, from religious ties and chooses to take life as they choose. Nambiar emphasises that Hinduism is an easy going religion 'modernised' by the BJP, VHP, RSS and Shiv Sena but he wonders how this easygoingness will weather storms. There are different theories which his friends share – conservative theories of insularity, everyone keeping to their own communities to avoid confrontation and this is counterpointed by an increasing globalisation, Indian migrants sticking to nationality as an assertion of identity. It is a world of contradictions, liberalism, moderatism and fascism all gathered together in one subcontinent, embodied by the west coast which has seen the most upheaval and where a wave of migrants has resulted in different languages and cultures coexisting; with Urdu finding a new home among Konkani Muslims. Even Rohan, the solid driver is typical of the west coast, practical, unflappable and open minded.

According to the writer, the children of the middle classes are the hope for defragmenting the country since they are untouched by the political turbulence and the ones he meets are the children of liberal parents. Defragmenting India covers a lot of ground and in-depth research – possibly the numbers of people along the way and their different theories and stories may be confusing but the reader who persists is bound to be rewarded by the experience.

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



Short story

Trikone

By Meenakshi Mohan

Today, after a long time, Dev, Raj, and Jay met in the same cafeteria where they used to meet during their college days. They had a lot to say and share. The waiter brought steaming, stuffed dosa for Dev, an espresso for Raj, and a fish cutlet for Jai. Raj picked up two cubes of brown sugar using stainless steel tongs and dipped them in his coffee. Jai kept playing with his fork, poking at his fish cutlet. He looked at his friends to read their expressions. With a frown on his forehead, Dev seemed deeply absorbed in his thoughts. He sipped a spoonful of sambhar. A silence impregnated the atmosphere. It was not like the old times when they could not stop talking with each other or laughing at some joke.

Dev, Raj, and Jai – these names often came together in their college days as they participated in college debates and sports. Their college had won the Intra-College Cricket match and won a trophy.

The principal called them, shook hands with them, and said, “Dev, Raj, Jai, you are the pride of our college, not only in sports and debates but also in academics. I wish you the best in whatever you decide to do.”

They were like the streams of a river that flowed together, but gradually, their lives diverged when they met the ocean of life. They were occasionally in touch through social media, which neither was very active, and through emails, but never to the level of sharing heart-to-heart talk.

Dev moved to America for further studies and finally settled there. He married Guang, an attractive and intelligent colleague from his office that his parents disapproved of. Dev felt attracted to her since their students’ days at Columbia University in New York, and coincidentally, they found jobs in the same company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their independent spirits

suited both. The first few years went by happily – eating out, movies, vacationing. But soon, the newness and excitement of initial attractions started wearing off.

One day, Dev returned from his official trip, and he found a house full of Guang’s friends. She said, “Honey, I forgot to tell you about this party. Li Jie and I have been good friends since childhood in California, and he has just moved here, so I decided to have this get-together.”

Then, after that, Guang and Li Jie were often together, watching movies and eating out. Dev felt left out. Many times, he was not even aware of Guang’s plans with Li Jie. He wished he had married a girl from India like his friend Raj or stayed single like Jay.

“I hope I do not go mad in this life of emptiness,” Jay thought of his singleness as he was neither married nor involved in any significant relationship. He had all the comforts of life – an excellent job, a spacious, three-storied, five-bedroom house overlooking the Arabian Sea in Juhu – the poshest area in Mumbai.

Before going to work, he liked having morning tea on his deck. He loved watching children playing on the sandy beach. His heart ached with longing when he watched couples strolling on the beach. In the evening, his whole deck would light up with the embers of the setting sun. If only the soothing sound of waves washing up the shore could soothe the emptiness of his life. He wished someone was waiting for him when he came home, and children ran around the house. The immaculate setting of the place with decorative pieces, carvings on the walls, and paintings of famous artists was now becoming an eyesore. Instead, his eyes craved to see toys scattered around the

house. He would have given anything to play with children of his own.

As he was driving down from work one day, he stopped to look at a younger couple, laughing and giggling, perhaps at some joke, and not too far off, an older couple was sitting on a bench watching the sun bidding good evening. The older man had his left hand around his wife’s shoulder. They both were enjoying their coffee. Jay sighed and slowly moved his car. He wondered what his old age would be like – a haunted structure. He thought of his friends Dev and Raj. They must be happy with their family lives.

He cursed the day when he had that terrible car accident. He was in the hospital in a coma for so many days. He survived, but with severe internal injuries, which impeded his relationship with his long-time sweetheart – the person he was about to marry in a month – he was so heartbroken when she married someone else.

“Oh, stop this ruckus,” Raj yelled at his children, who were jumping and shouting around the house.

He wanted quiet when he came home from work. Toys were scattered all around the house. The leftover food and dirty plates from lunchtime were still not removed from the dining table. He sat on the sofa, tired after the busy day at the office. He felt disgusted looking at the dining table -- flies hovering over the leftover food. The dining area was adjacent to the living room, which was also a mess, with unfolded blankets on the sofa and a blaring TV that no one was watching.

The sharp, spicy smell of turmeric, fried onion, and other spices seeped from the kitchen. Arti, his wife with an apron tied on her untidy dress, entered the living room, wiping her hands on the apron.

She shoed the children to play in their room.

She looked at her husband and said, "When did you come? I didn't hear the doorbell."

He looked at her and said, "The door was open."

She said, "I have been calling you all day, but you were not answering the phone."

"Yes, I had important meetings all day," Raj replied matter-of-factly.

Arti complained, "Well, the air-conditioning has not been working for the past two days, and you said you would call the air-conditioning company to fix it."

"Yes, I couldn't find time to do it yet. I have been busy with the foreign

delegates this week," Raj sounded tired and annoyed.

"And I had a call from Aarav's teacher from the school. She wants to meet with us regarding his behavior in school," Arti continued with one more thing from the list to do. Raj did not say anything but looked at her with a worn-out look of exhaustion.

Raj thought his life was in disarray. He wondered about Dev and Jay and their lives. His life would have been so different if Seema were his wife, his college girlfriend. Seema was a thoughtful, intelligent, and modern-age girl. But his parents insisted that he marry Arti, the daughter of his mother's friend. He wished he had stayed single like Jay. At least, there would have been peace.

Today, after so many years, Dev, Raj, and Jay met again. After the Alumni Association party with the old batchmates, they decided to catch up in the same place. They wanted to know what was going on with each other's lives. They looked at each other and asked with one voice, "It seems like life is going well with you guys. You look so happy." In return, they bent their heads with dry laughs. Each had their stories yet to be shared.



Meenakshi is an educator, writer and an artist. She has published widely in UK and USA. Currently she is serving in the editorial committee of Inquiry in Education, a peer reviewed journal for National Louis University in Chicago.

The advertisement features a light blue background with a stylized illustration of a desk. On the desk are a laptop, a smartphone, a cup of coffee, and two pens. The logo for A1 Accountancy LLP is a stylized orange 'A' with a white '1' inside a circle.

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