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Seeking peace in times of war by Chaitali Sengupta

"Only the dead have seen the end of war", said Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher. Throughout centuries, history has taught us that in war, there are no winners. And yet, if we carefully look at our history, we find that peace has lived on this planet for less than ten percent of our recorded history. The two great wars in Europe could not guarantee everlasting peace; of course, there was stability for a stretch of time, but finally it only led to smaller conflicts, cold war, new alignments, and then finally open hostilities. Wars never disappeared completely.

On 7 October 2023, the terror organization Hamas struck Israel in which at least 1,400 people were killed, most of them civilians. Many among them were slaughtered in their homes; after killing and storming through Southern Israel, Hamas dragged some 240 people, both soldiers and civilians, as hostages back to Gaza. The massacre was horrific, barbaric, and cruel. It shattered the status-quo, tore up the pretence of co-existence and opened a dangerous chapter that had war written on its pages with blood. Shocked and furious, Israel launched a deadly strike on Gaza to free its citizens, plunging the The horrendous violence that has engulfed Gaza has created unprecedented humanitarian crisis, too. The widespread bombardment has destroyed dwellings, infrastructures, and livelihoods. An estimated 1.4 million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes since the Israeli military began bombing the Gaza Strip in retaliation for a

world into two diametrically opposed camps: one that supported unconditionally, stressing on Israel's right to self-defence and the other that expressed solidarity with Palestinians under siege by Israel.

Over a month into the war sparked by the deadly attacks by Hamas, the Israel-Palestinian conflict put the Palestinian issue back on the

fraught with intricacies. While it is imperative that we understand it correctly before taking sides, there is no denying the concerns of this war spreading across the Middle East and spill onto the global stage. The longer this war endures, the greater will be the dangers. Infact, the consequences are already making their effects felt worldwide. The dangers include, among others, economic crisis, military escalation, social unrest in the Arab World, and a deeply polarised world.

However, the most terrible consequence of any armed conflict is the violent loss of civilian lives on all sides of the conflict and the mass population displacement. In less than a week after the conflict between Russia and Ukraine broke out, the world witnessed nearly half a million refugees. War is not merely bombs and bullets; it leads to severe

health emergencies-both physical and mental-beyond the fields of war. Civilians who are caught in the crosshairs of war and are forced to migrate find themselves in psychologically challenging situations, live in constant fear of war and persecution. This causes irreparable damage to their mental well-being. Once you live with war, it never leaves you.

table. It also once again brought back the attention of the world to the anguish, helplessness and terror of the common Palestinians, the civilians caught in the very difficult turmoil of war. The historical and political reasons of this conflict travel centuries back, and are long, complex, and

ghastly, brutal attack by Hamas militants. As the bombing continues, the emergency UN shelters where the displaced people are living are running out of water, food, electricity, and medical help. As many as 1 million displaced people have moved to other parts of Gaza, although there's no escape route for them in that area. In other words, there is simply no

way that the civilians could avoid the destruction and bloodshed. In just 3 weeks of war, thousands of children and their family members were wiped out. AP quotes: *"They were hit by airstrikes, smashed by misfired*

(Continues on page 3)



Editorially Speaking

Dear Readers,
Welcome to the latest issue of Confluence South Asian Perspectives – the last of 2023.

This year Confluence has published about 100 different pieces of work and nearly half of these were from our regular contributors. The quality of submissions and the calibre of each author make me feel very proud to be helming this publication. Several of our contributors are celebrated authors and well known for their contributions to South Asian literature. Some are exceptionally active within their community and recognised for their services in various ways. Our goal is to provide a platform where every voice, every story, and every perspective contributes to a richer, more inclusive understanding of what it means to be a part of the vibrant South Asian community. On that note, we are proud to have introduced about a dozen new authors this year.

As the Chief Editor of this publication, I feel gratified that authors from different parts of the world consider Confluence as an acclaimed magazine and send their stories, poems, paintings, and articles of general interest which enrich the magazine. I thank all of them.

As we navigate the complexities of an ever-changing world, I believe it is essential to amplify diverse voices and foster a deeper understanding of the multifaceted landscape of South Asia. This issue features some creative pieces and thought-provoking articles, which we hope, the readers will find riveting and thought-provoking. As a special three part series, historian Kusum Pant Joshi has written an article about the renowned political activist and poet Sarojini Naidu's visit to the UK and her experiences.

I have mentioned before that modern literature should reflect the issues that affect us on a day-to-day basis. Over a year ago, Russian occupation in Ukraine followed by the Western sanctions caused major upheavals in that region. In the last few months, there have been new developments in the Middle East. In our cover article, an accomplished writer and translator Chaitali Sengupta has described the events leading to the current conflict and has emphasised the urgent need for the international community to come together to bring an end to the hostilities and work towards extending the ceasefire in Gaza.

While I hope our readers will find the entire issue an interesting read I would like to ask them to give their feedback to us too. Once again, I would like to remind all our contributors to help us by sending their submissions well before the deadline specified. Please send your work to confluenceuk@yahoo.com only.

I wish all our readers, writers and well-wishers a relaxing and enjoyable end of the year holiday season and a very Happy New Year. I look forward to meeting you all in another issue in 2024.

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rockets, burned by blasts and crushed by buildings, and among them were new-borns and toddlers.” While it is a practiced ploy in the wars to use the vulnerable groups as human shields, this mindless killing of the innocent children is heart-breaking. This human catastrophe must be prevented.

While it is critical to understand the historical and political context of this conflict and condemn in strong words the taking of hostages and the brutality perpetrated by Hamas, it is also equally important that the physical safety of common Palestinians must be protected at all costs.

Israel has in the meantime released 39 Palestinian prisoners during the brief four-day truce and Hamas too has freed 17 hostages whom they had seized when they raided

Israel. There is an urgent need for the international community to come together to bring an end to the hostilities and work towards extending the cease-fire. There is a need for immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, and facilitate humanitarian access to the suffering people of Palestine. The need of the hour is to put out this fire without

further delay, work together to ease this suffering, look for solutions understanding the essence of the problem. **(This article was written in November 2023)**



Chaitali Sengupta is an accomplished writer and translator, skilled in crafting fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. Her latest book “The Crossing-poems on war, migration & survival has received critical acclaim by poetry press in the Netherlands. She garnered recognition for her debut collection of prose poems, “Cross Stitched Words,” which earned the ‘Honorable Mention’ award at the New England Book Festival in 2021.

Technology

Artificial Intelligence (AI) revolutionizing healthcare Shivankari Krishnananthasivam

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technology have started to transform our society since the new millennium. These technologies show great promise and potential in the field of biomedical research and health care. A large number of research studies have demonstrated that AI can augment human effort and decision-making in biomedical research and in health care.

Types of AI and its relevance to healthcare

AI in layman's terms is the simulation of human intelligence in machines, particularly computer systems. There are many aspects of AI that have immediate relevance to the healthcare sector. Machine learning is a branch of AI that uses algorithms and statistical models to perform complex tasks without explicit programming. It is one of the most commonly applied branches of AI in the health sector, aiding in disease diagnosis and treatment outcome predictions. A more complex form of machine learning is neural network, a technology that processes data in a way that mimics the human brain. This type of AI, otherwise known as deep learning is immensely beneficial in disease diagnosis to aid in imaging techniques such as MRI and CT scans. Deep learning is also used for speech recognition in the form of natural language processing (NLP). This system can analyze unstructured clinical notes on patients, transcribe doctor-patient interactions, and aid in the preparation of clinical reports.

AI and machine learning technology have also started playing a significant role in drug discovery

and development. Deep learning algorithms have been utilized in several drug discovery processes such as molecular structure predictions of candidate drugs, structure-based drug screening, toxicity predictions, drug monitoring and release, and drug physiochemical activity predictions. These advancing technologies provide an excellent platform for rational and efficient drug design and discovery processes, paving the way for effective medical care.



Surgical robots

Surgical robots are now widely employed in clinical treatment aiding surgeons during surgical procedures and in diagnostic procedures. AI's are aiding in clinical decision making using big data to diagnose and treat diseases with greater or equal accuracy than human clinicians Eg: retinal scanning, radiological image analysis, and genome-based precision medicine. Through patient data collection provided by systems such as biosensors, smart watches, smartphones and

other user-friendly instruments, AI can also facilitate effective treatment pathways and disease management. Physical robots have also started filling in to minimize human effort in research labs and pharmaceutical industries.

Administrative Application

AI also has useful administrative applications in healthcare such as clinical documentation, medical records management and medical transcription. They may play an effective role in minimizing human error during administrative processes. Healthcare organizations in many countries have already started testing out some of these AI features such as telehealth consultations, chatbots for patient interactions, speech and text recognition for patient communication and capture of clinical notes for simple procedures like repeat prescriptions.

Ethical Implications

A huge range of ethical implications exists in the use of AI, particularly around bias, transparency, permission and privacy. Patients may also prefer interactions with an empathetic clinician and trust their judgment of big-picture analysis for clinical care. In conclusion, AI systems will not replace human clinicians but will be a revolutionary tool to augment better clinical care and also aid in biomedical research.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE SHORT STORY

by Cyril Dabydeen

It was more than serendipity that brought me to the 7th International Conference on the Short Story in English (ICSS) in New Orleans, Louisiana, a few years ago with the theme of globalization. And with other Conferences hosted by the ICSS I still dwell on the notion of a greater sense of internationalism captured by the short story—as recently emphasized to me by a writerly colleague. Indeed the idea of globalization forces me to confront or confirm my own assumptions about the short story genre.

About the term “globalization” itself. In novelist Bharati Mukherjee’s words it’s because of how widespread the form is, and a story is interpreted differently by readers of different backgrounds. Indeed, the New Orleans Conference featured writers such as Clark Blaise, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Olen Butler among others from Europe, though it was mostly Americans who attended the three-day event.

A panel on Canadian literature I participated in was a highlight, as I was able to see Margaret Atwood close up in steamy New Orleans with the crescent-shaped southern Mississippi River and the distinctive French Quarter. This city is also known for stellar writers like Mark Twain, Anne Rice, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams: “Don’t you love those long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn’t an hour but a little piece of eternity dropped into your hand—and who knows what to do with it?” (*A Streetcar Named Desire*).

Inevitably I reflected on my own beginnings in the short story form—my reading of G.K. Chesterton, Somerset Maugham, H.E. Bates, James Joyce; and West Indian writers like Sam Selvon and V.S. Naipaul closer to home. Later would come Malamud, Cheever, Faulkner, and a panoply of others like Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant (in translation). I also read Hugh Garner, Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, Atwood—and Norman Levine and John Metcalf closer to Ottawa.

But how multifarious is the form when considering its morphology? Views focussed on sub-genres tied to narrative techniques. What emerged was that there are no constraints on form, but only endless possibilities. The term “slippage” suggested “enrichment” for one like Clark Blaise, a key figure in ICSS. Mexican-American Sandra Cisneros spoke about her own technique being analogous to the making of “a

quilt....I begin with something personal.” Other descriptions of the story like “metaphoric” and “a dream verbalized” came to me.

I’ve sometimes evoked Proust’s sense of the ubiquitous unconscious in reading my own short story. And the short story is unlike a novella, which is “one continuous kind of breath” (Phillip Roth). Indeed, the story consists of short, artful narratives composed of images, tropes, figurations. Prose-poems and the story-cycle are also in the picture, as well as the long story’s narrative being without boundaries; and that a genre is formal, but fiction is reality, if viewed as “something apocalyptic in a small cup” as I recall Pulitzer-Prize author Robert Olen Butler put it.



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.

Bharati Mukherjee (now passed on) reminded us of the rise in minority discourse without fancy image-making relevant to the subaltern critic’s stance. Canadian scholar-writer W.H. New asked about whose reality matters, and about the authority of space; and, he noted that epic cycles are really integral to the genre. As for technique per se, focus is often put on the story’s beginning, point of view, character and plot (life is “full of plots and no plots at all”). Interiority, closure, contexts of post-modernism, and the cyclical nature of the form are all relevant, and, as noted, “in the story’s beginning is its end.”

In context I heard about the “dark premonition of our own death” as echoed by one writer about the 9/11 tragedy in America a few years earlier. Ground zero symbolizes many things for and about Americans. Afro-American Professor Maurice Lee, long-serving ICSS Director, suggested that “creativity comes out of chaos.” Others pointed to the failure of the imagination among those in the military bureaucracy...“to imagine other people’s suffering.”

My own take: the good short story combines the poet’s sense of style and the novelist’s sense of drama—with Margaret Atwood’s words as a

backdrop: “Poetry and fiction are the most complete forms of human consciousness on how we live on earth.” I figured writing the short story gives me my own utterance, and narrative form I will continue to wrestle with.

Faulkner suggested that a novelist is a frustrated short story writer (who is also a frustrated poet)—as I note the remarkable contradiction in his characters and place in the American south. Hemingway, too, with his unadorned writing style—the so-called iceberg theory—comes to mind. Note: John Steinbeck was asked about his favorite authors. “Hemingway for his short stories and nearly everything Faulkner wrote,” he replied.

Hemingway’s story, “Indian Camp” I sometimes taught to young students—comparing it to V.S. Naipaul’s story “B. Wordsworth” by focussing on each story’s tonality and temperament with cross-cultural elements at play. Caribbean context is organic in Naipaul’s story published in his book, *Miguel Street*; whereas Hemingway’s American manner with Native imagery is closely observed. Different voices inform each story’s metier in embracing

globalization.

“Voice” matters most of all in the story I have suggested. Virginia Woolf describes it as “all rhythm.” Character and the quality of the emotion is key, especially as the writer extends the language with cadence and style (Chekhov: “A comma correctly placed can break the heart”). Woolf’s key story, “Kew Gardens,” comes to mind. Plot re complication, climax and resolution is recognized. But Chekhov says it best: “Plot is what makes people bang the door. What comes after”; or, with Dorothy Parker it is “the silent artillery of the heart.”

Hemingway’s classic six-word story I’ve focussed upon: “For sale. Baby Shoes. Never worn.” Sub-genres inevitably come into the picture, e.g., flash fiction, or threshold fiction, now popular with liminality as its *raison d’etre*.

We suspend disbelief when the story is viewed as “a bird in a cage, not a man in house”—with a window to look out on from to the outside world. The novel has many windows; but the short story will achieve its particular effects in what Katherine Mansfield calls the “artifice of a bird singing.” (*An earlier version of this essay appeared in Books in Canada: 9/2002.*)

Short story

The magical glasses by Sunil Sharma

The poet was getting popular and in big demand. Frequently invited to the various symposia and academic panel discussions over art and its relevance in mass society by the serious-minded faculties---on the margins, of late--- interested in raising the fundamental questions of living meaningfully in a soulless age, as reflecting beings, located in small towns and cities scattered along the feudal belt of a developing, post-colonial nation.

An urgent quest for the right answers that tend to lend a semblance of legitimacy and direction to the humdrum existence in a market economy through art, the only meaningful and relevant enclave left---according to the minority of thinkers keen for betterment.

And they found the right person in the poet Anaam whose fiery couplets provided a lot of insights into the contradictions of society.

Anaam went to these public venues by a bus or train; answered all the tough questions with sincerity and aplomb; an accessible figure without any airs or ego, unlike the city tribe of the opinionated writers that hardly talked to the hoi polloi---the literary elite speaking in a diction generally lost on office-goers.

The audiences---young and old; literate or semi-literate; traders or teachers---greatly admired his clarity of thought, his poetic idiom, syntax and imagery, and his sonorous voice that cast a spell.

Sheer delight!

Simple but profound truths artistically told in everyday speech that moved the packed halls in the middle of bustling trade-towns. When he sang those popular songs, the public went crazy and gave him the standing ovation, saying encore.

Most cities organized regular symposia and attended these literary events in big numbers. The local dailies also hosted such cultural programmes. Anaam was feted on many such platforms and wrote columns for some leading newspapers, gave interviews on TV and radio.

The poet was called as the conscience of the nation. The star status never affected Anaam. He remained grounded and humble, helping the poor people---cooks; rickshaw-pullers; drivers; tailors; peons, "the real drivers of an economy" --- in many ways. Gave free tuitions in math and English to the slum children. Wrote petitions on behalf of the poor.

In his free poetry workshops, he shared the mantra: "See from your eyes. Write simple. Write truth. Write pain of the others."

He was asked by the budding poets, mostly from lower classes with dreamy eyes and innocent faces; youngsters impatient to change the world overnight, willing to break free from the shackles of poverty and injustice: "What is the source of your poetry?"

Anaam smiled: "I see the realities through the magical glasses!"

They were stunned!

The cynics were unimpressed.

Magical glasses?

Impossible!

Just fooling around, this man with a twinkle in eyes?

Anaam was serious: he possessed the magical glasses!

One guy was not happy---a young rival who

The greying poet lived in a rented room on the edge of a far-off suburb of the town growing into a city, some fifty miles away from the capital city of the state. The area was populated by the migrant workers, drivers, tenant farmers and industrial labour in small brick houses, the old river in the background.

One afternoon, the rival finally found him wearing the magical glasses in his little room crammed with the books and newspapers, and writing furiously something in a fat diary with a fountain pen, looking up at the tin roof and muttering and nodding intermittently, like someone possessed.

The round glasses added a strange aura to the withered face. His eyes doubled up behind the rimless glasses. He appeared to be from another planet.

In the evening, as was his wont, the poet recited a long poem to the select few of his admirers without his prized glasses and everyone agreed that it was fantastic landscape peopled by the mortals as warriors fighting an unjust system!

Its breadth and depth and references were all organic and---breathtaking!

Next morning, the jealous rival entered the room that was never locked from outside and stole the prized spectacles kept on the dusty papers in a corner.

Nobody suspected the intruder as people kept on coming to the poet's room throughout the day and waited, even if he was not there.

It was a popular haunt.

The thief was overjoyed.

He flew down to his own little room, sat down in his tiny room and brought out the magical glasses from the pocket, a triumphal gesture.

As he slipped on the special glasses on his aquiline nose, hoping for wonder, the world started spinning violently---and the new wearer was thrown out of his chair, while the books and papers started flying off in the stale air and he stumbled and ran out of the swirling chaos around him, scared like hell---into the mad street---shouting for help!

But nobody understood his words--- pure gibberish. He kept on running mad, flailing his arms, as the magical glasses remained firmly clipped on his nose, despite the repeated and frantic efforts to remove the pair from their slippery perch; the slums following him like the leaping tongues of fires... .



Sunil Sharma loves to listen to the stars, birds, winds and watch the sky. Tries to understand the eye-language and enthusiasm of the pet dogs---feel the pain and weight of the leash, trapped in a home- cage, bound with the chains, watched by Covid-19.

Sunil has published 23 creative and critical books--- joint and solo. He edits the monthly Sefu Journal: <https://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>

For other details, please visit the website: <https://sunil-sharma.com>

publicly praised Anaam but criticized the older poet in private: How can a man find beauty in the slums? This man is a hoax.

Needs to be exposed for his lies.

Both were friends. The younger poet called himself as a disciple of Anaam but at his back, ridiculed his simple poetry.

Anaam heard those things but never reacted. Always smiled at those who wanted to create discord, as friends do.

The rival was unhappy with the rising status of his "Guru". More awards to Anaam and more desperate became the rival who could never reach those heights.

Frustrated and angry, the rival---mostly unemployed and alcoholic---decided to look for the magical glasses and find success in the commercial world.

He followed the poet from a distance, like a typical spy, carefully disguised behind the dark glasses, a trench coat and a newspaper.

Two poems by Lopamudra Banerjee

Scream: The Four Chapters

[Written during Napowrimo or the National Poetry Writing Month 2023, on the prompt 'Scream']

The muffled cries of a newborn
An odd, unknowing, twilight zone of consciousness.
The weightless limbo of a world
In between lives, between forgotten,
Or half-remembered selves.
Strangers pouring out perpetual wishes
And benevolence, intensified,
a tad bit unreal.

The blazing scream of the child,
growing, like a presumptuous flame.
In a swirl of life's bounties,
Scribbling life's stories,
Transitions scream, a perfect metaphor
of jagged edges, the bareness
of the pulses, sleepwalking
traversing through the intense drama of adulthood.

The bare-bone scream of the adult
Streaming in life's labyrinthine pathways,
The scream amplifies, merges,
collides with a cornucopia of voices
Learning to live again, in between
Recognized selves, crafted egos,
The scream becomes what we are called,
Our metaphors of becoming, unbecoming,
Evoked.

The screeching silence of our ennui
Just after that final muffled scream to live,
Chucked off from the echoing forests of humanity,
Plucked off from the butchering and slaughtering
Of human screams, animal screams,
The all-pervading silence of tongue and flesh,
Floating free in the womb of eternity.

Primal

[Ekphrastic poem about a mother and her progeny, while visiting a sublime statue of a mother and child inside the premises of a botanical garden in our city, in the heart of Dallas, Texas, USA. My humble offering is dedicated to this fascinating sculpture work.]

Before
the breaking of the water
in the womb
Before the conjoining of
Random algorithms of umbilical love
Enough to put
Any earthen poetry to shame and embarrassment...
Before the promise
of a wound,
a suturing
Never to be healed
Never to be nursed back
to pre-natal health,
Never to meander in
predictable pathways
The seed, the genesis of pain
took shape,
spread its wings.
In the center of the womb
A tiny cosmos of resistance
An ostentatious pattern
of vibrations at will,
A nucleus of potentials
Contracting, expanding,
Blinking, extinguishing the light.
Before the conflict zone is walked
by zigzagging footsteps of filial dust
The mother and the child,
the genesis and the progeny
reach the core of
An infinitesimal universe.
A universe, where
the primordial seed of maternity
lay buried
The first undulation
of a subliminal form
the primal cry of a life-stir.

Lopamudra Banerjee is an acclaimed Indian author, poet, translator, editor from Dallas, Texas, with eight books and six anthologies in fiction and poetry. She has received the Journey Awards (First Place category winner) for her memoir 'Thwarted Escape: An Immigrant's Wayward Journey', Woman Achiever Award (IWSFF, 2018), the International Reuel Prize for Poetry (2017) and International Reuel Prize for her English translation of Nobel Laureate Tagore's selected works of fiction (2016). Her English translation of Ashapurna Devi's award-winning novel 'Bakul Katha' received Honorary Mention at London Book Festival 2022.

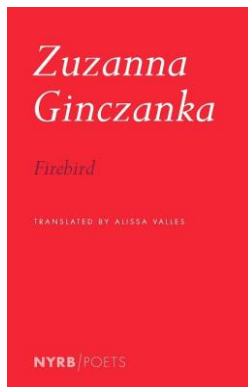




Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens

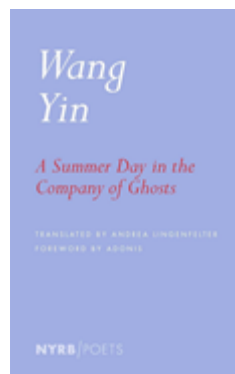
From Gestapo to beauty



[Firebird by Zuzanna Ginczanka \(NYRB, £10.49\)](#)

Considering the current Hamas-Israel war, Zuzanna's collection of poems is a stark reminder of the other side of the coin and the victims we deny. Born in Kyiv, but by choice a Polish poet, in 1944 or early 1945—exact records not available, the Gestapo executed young Zuzanna. She was only 27 and only had 13 years of writing period. She was lost to international literature for a time but was rediscovered through her final untitled poem. In the poem, she reveals the name of her Polish betrayer, who later became a symbol of national shame. That said, she was championed by the Polish poet Julien Pryboś. Her poems share themes of sexual openness and wit with Anna Świrszczyńska and Wisława Szymborska, who some critics believe had a narrower range of sensitivity. In her often-discussed poem, *On Centaurs*, a poem from the original book of 17 poems, she was unconventional for that period with her feminism, as in: "I call for passion and wisdom/

joined at the waste/like a centaur" and "I profess the proud harmony of a man's head and torso", in which there is a call for the transgression by men to come to senses. With *Firebird*, NYRB also updates the translation of her last poem that lands better on our ears. Zuzanna reveals herself as a poet of calm questions with 'wise sting', not the poet of rant, despite what she suffered in her short life. "Amid what sandalwood trees and among what angels,/bracing its vocal cords with the tongue's wise sting/does *Firebird* with flaming feathers call and disquiet?" (*Firebird*). Like all good poetry, these poems are timeless gems.



[A Summer Day in the Company of Ghosts by Wang Yin \(NYRB, £14.99\)](#)

When a poet declares "At first, what drew me in was a quality/neither blankness/.../nor blackness/and I cannot call to mind its name", and takes you on a typical Chinese magical aspect of a poetic journey, you cannot but enjoy, line by line, what the poet has to offer in these translations. *Many everyday experiences in Yin's poems are renewed to fresh vigour as in "Flying towards a borderland of rain/the Boeing 757 in its rigid pose/steals some rest in flight/*

paper phantoms sit beside me/ watching a two-hour movie".

Yin says about his poems, "My poems are flecks of salt clinging ambivalently to a horse's back." This subtlety is in abundance in his poems. Born in Shanghai, he is considered a foremost writer of the Third Generation, aka the post-Cultural Revolution writers and composers. With the influence of the Western aspects, Yin has toned down the loudness of a dragon's presence in his poems. Thus, a universal aspect emerges in his poems that has easily found a popularity in the Western readers. However, the poet is bold enough not to lose sight of his unique identity and in 'I've Had Enough of Paris', he poses a metaphorical question to reduce the Western cultural imposition: "Can I ask you to turn off the music?" and commands, "You let me accept my own weakness/and understand the colors of your melancholy nights". That said, the collection is rich in traditional Chinese Imagism with poems' unforgettable magical details, their correlations, and the richness of passion that preserve the poet's identity. "Bobbing straw hats screen off/a landscape gone incognito/the fear that haunts life a sweater/The storm gathers to it every scattered soul".

Recently shortlisted for the Aryamati Prize for his forthcoming collection of poems, Yogesh Patel has received an MBE for literature in 2020. His last collection of poems, *The Rapids*, is published by The London Magazine. He runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote literature. Extensively published, an award-winning poet, he has also received the Freedom of the City of London.

Taha Kehar's No Funeral for Nazia

Yasmeen Doogue-Khan speaks to the author

Taha Kehar is a novelist, journalist and literary critic. He graduated in Law from SOAS University of London and has since written and co-edited novels, short stories, essays, reviews and commentaries which have been published in South Asia and in the UK. Taha Kehar is currently based in Karachi, Pakistan where he continues to write while also teaching undergraduate media courses.



Yasmeen: Can you share what initially inspired you to write this book and how you fleshed out the initial idea?

Taha: When I began working on No Funeral for Nazia, I wanted the protagonist to come to life through the anecdotes, observations and memories of the other characters. It was intended to be a radical departure from my previous novel, Typically Tanya, which was written solely from the perspective of an overpowering titular protagonist who dwarfed the voices of the other characters. Through my new novel, I wanted to make the title character, Nazia Sami, an 'absent presence' – akin to Rebecca de Winter in Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca – and empower the other characters by allowing them to narrate her story.

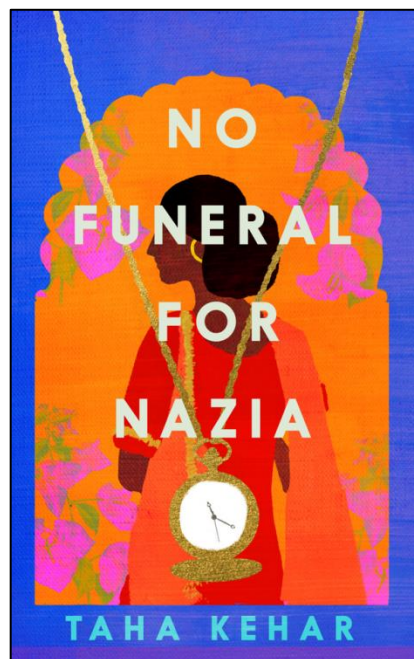
From the outset, what appealed to me about Nazia's character was her unusual demand for a party instead of a funeral. The idea was rooted in my curiosity about alternative rituals of death and grieving. My primary motivation to work on the novel was the desire to peel back the layers of mystery surrounding Nazia and understand her choices.

Yasmeen: Can you delve into how you developed the main characters for your book and what inspired their personalities and backgrounds?

Taha: I usually adopt a dialogue-driven approach to storytelling as it helps me understand a character's unique way of speaking. This consequently opens a doorway into a character's mannerisms and motivations. I'm also interested in the way characters interact with one another and form relationships that are either meaningful, strained or transactional. A dialogue-driven narrative was, therefore, vital for the characters to emerge as the beating hearts of the story. At the same time, I had to unravel the language of their hearts and minds. My aim

was to create characters who were driven in equal parts by their external circumstances and their inner turmoil. I made a conscious effort to recognise how our ethnicity, gender, political persuasions and emotional or psychological makeup shape our complex identities. I prefer creating characters who are fundamentally flawed yet somewhat humane. All of Nazia's friends possess these qualities to Varying degrees.

When I began writing the first draft in May 2019, I had a stronger understanding of Nazia's friends than of her. As I wrote the first few pages, Nazia was simply an abstract concept – the mere sum of her unconventional choice to eschew the rituals of death. She only emerged as a full-blooded individual in my mind when the other characters brought her to life. Nazia is, in a sense, a product of the way these characters choose to remember her. Yet, she wields an enormous influence over them.



Yasmeen: How did you go about creating the world in which your book is set, and were there any real places that inspired it?

Taha: The plot of No Funeral for Nazia unfolds during the course of a single evening in an upscale residential neighbourhood of Karachi. In my mind, the novel is set in the summer of 2019 – since that's when I was working on the initial chapters. As a result, most sociopolitical developments referenced in the novel have been selected accordingly. Since my characters live in modern-day Karachi, they are inevitably affected by the city's daily concerns, culture,

politics and history.

The first chapter of the novel begins with an image of bougainvillea creepers – a common sight in the houses situated in this neighbourhood. In recent years, the bougainvillea has been viewed as a seemingly stereotypical motif in Pakistani fiction, but I have used it to symbolise the only grain of peace Nazia finds in her brief but troubled life.

Yasmeen: Did any prevailing social or political issues influence the themes or plot of your book, and if so, how did you approach integrating these elements?

Taha: References to Pakistan's socioeconomic inequalities and Karachi's intricate history of violence tend to seep into the narrative. However, No Funeral for Nazia is primarily driven by its plot and characters. I didn't want my novel to come across as a sociological or anthropological treatise. At the same time, I don't want it to be read as an indictment of a particular political group or faction. My role as a storyteller is to fashion a narrative that appeals to readers. Wherever the personal lives of my characters intersect with any historical events, I simply want to reveal the effects of these events on their individual psyches. For instance, a few characters in the novel suffer from an intergenerational trauma that is linked to Partition, the separation of East Pakistan in 1971 and other more localised political upheavals.

Yasmeen: Have your personal experiences or connections influenced any aspects of your book, and can you give examples?

For many years, I found myself contemplating the conversation surrounding death, the grieving process and Pakistani society's aversion to therapy. Some of the observations I gleaned through discussions and my research have percolated into the narrative. However, the narrative is purely fictitious. My characters are far more courageous versions of myself. While these characters derive some strands of their emotional and spiritual trajectories from my life, they usually have a pulse of their own.

Yasmeen: How do you perceive your book contributes to today's literary landscape, and were there any authors or works that particularly inspired you in your writing journey?

Taha: It is difficult to predict how a book will be perceived by readers. I can only hope that readers accept Nazia's intentions in the same way that I learnt to accept them. A few months after I started writing the novel, I feared that Nazia was trying to seize control of

the narrative voice and take the story in the direction she deemed fit. After careful consideration, I gave in to her dictates as it was Nazia's story and she had every right to choose the direction it took. Apart from Rebecca, I sought inspiration from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* to understand some crucial relationships in the

novel. However, I found myself combatting Williams' vision in order to do justice to Nazia's character.

Yasmeen Doogue-Khan is a Marketing & PR Executive at independent publishing house Neem Tree Press, an organisation

that aims to change and broaden perspectives. Yasmeen's background is in digital marketing and she studied English Literature at Durham University.

Short story

Jhankaan Prasad by Subhash Chandra

Certain incidents chart out the course of your life.

#

My evenings were lonely and sad. Nobody my age in the neighbourhood. I'd meander aimlessly in the bazaar looking at the shops, vendors, people moving about purposefully, and the wasters playing cards on the thada (projection at the base) of a shut shop. After a while, it'd get boring, and I trudged back home.

Then Sunita appeared. Her father had been transferred to CDA (Controller of Defence Accounts), Meerut. I was delighted but my joy was short-lived. While talking she would frequently slide into English as she was studying in The Doon Girls' School in Dehradun. And English had been my bane. I mostly nodded or shook my head and sometimes managed a mangled sentence in English. I was in Lala Chajju Prasad School – a charitable institution – where English was taught from class VI onwards and by teachers who themselves needed coaching in the subject. She stopped coming out in the evening.

I made a resolution.

#

One day, I saw a ruffian teasing Sunita at the bookshop. I acted chivalrous and picked up a fight with him a la Bollywood hero. I glared at him and shouted, "Back off you scum!"

He pummeled me into a pulp. I had punched beyond my weight!

I made my second resolution.

I bought two second-hand grammar books and an English-to-Hindi Little Star pocket dictionary. Poured over the grammar books and memorized the dictionary from cover to cover. In time, I went on to join a Master's in English at Meerut College.

#

I have an elephantine memory and the perseverance of an ant. Started exercising regularly at the government-run free-access gym. The first to reach the gym, I often plucked Jhankaan Prasad – the young man in charge – out of his bed.

"Ram Ram Saheb," he'd greet me cheerfully and put out the weights.

Sometimes on a Sunday, after finishing exercise, I'd ask Jhankaan to get tea and cookies, which we savoured together in his room. One day, I inquired about his village and family.

"Saheb, my village is Purbari Telpa in Chhapra



Dr Subhash Chandra, former Professor of English, Delhi University, has published two short stories collections, *Not Just Another Story*, and *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles*, about sixty short stories in journals, 4 books of criticism and several research articles.

district, Saran. At home, I have Mai, Babu, and two younger sisters."

After a short pause, he added, "We have a small field, but no ox. So, Babu ploughs it himself. He can't afford fertilizers and, therefore, uses cow dung. He slogs the whole day and gets back home late in the evening, hungry and exhausted. But the yield is meagre."

I listened avidly.

"With advancing age, Babu could not work in the field for long hours. Our income got depleted, but thanks to our healthy Gau Mata, her seven to eight litres of milk every day sustained us as we sold more than three-fourths of it... and she got me a job here."

"What do you mean?"

He was lost in his narrative.

"Babu constantly worried about the marriage of my sisters. We needed to save up, but could not. So, I decided to come to Delhi. With Ram ji's kripa, I got this job easily. I hauled up eighty kgs with ease and could add to it if asked to. But one of the two Sahebs spoke up, 'He is fine, I think.'"

The other Saheb nodded. In a week, I received the appointment letter."

"But you haven't told me how Gau Mata got you this job."

"Oh ... sorry ... I used to do 300 plus push-ups and about 200 sit-ups daily. After Mai had finished milking her, some milk was still left in her udders. I squeezed it straight into my mouth. Fresh milk is excellent for building strength, Babu had told me."

#

Jhankaan was of a sunny disposition and welcomed everyone with a smile. But one morning, I found him morose.

"Any problem, Jhankaan?"

"Yes, Saheb. Babu has sent me this postcard," he said, handing it to me dolefully. Jhankaan's Money Order had not reached his father.

"Did you get the signed counterfoil?"

He produced it.

"But Saheb, this is not Babu's thumb impression."

"How can you tell?"

He showed me the other counterfoils which he had preserved.

"Yes, you are right. This thumb impression is bigger and its lines sharper."

"Saheb, please do something. You know a lot of English," he pleaded.

#

I penned a blistering complaint to the village Postmaster, with a copy to the Minister of Communications, Director General of Post Offices, and Postmaster General. My youthful gusto made the letter excessively abrasive.

I could not visit the gym for twenty days because of my M.A. Previous exams. Gymming is addictive. So, I went to the gym the same evening my exams finished.

Jhankaan had a guest -- a middle-aged man with stubble on his face, clad in not-so-clean Kurta Pajamas. The two were sitting cross-legged on the cot in a relaxed manner facing each other, talking intimately, and leisurely sipping tea. He must be a relative I thought, and began exercising. But I noticed Jhankaan whisper to the man who got up with alacrity, came towards me, touched my feet, and stood mute with folded hands. I felt embarrassed as the man was double my age. I looked at Jhankaan inquiringly.

"Saheb, he is Lalhan Kaka from our village."

"Oh, Namaste," I said.

"He has come to meet you."

"Me ... but he doesn't know me."

"He does, Saheb."

"How?"

Both of them looked at each other nervously.

"He is the Postman in our village."

"Oh! ...Why does he want to meet me?"

"To return the money to me."

"He could have paid it to your father in the village."

"He wanted to give it to me in front of you, Saheb."

I saw the man count the money and give it to Jhankaan.

Then turning to me he said, "Saheb, please save my job. I have a large family and am the sole earning hand."

"What can I do?"

"Please write a letter from Jhankaan addressed to our Dak Babu (Postmaster) in the village that his father has received the money. And kindly also send copies to all those *barra* officers."

Jhankaan lent support to the Postman's entreaty.

How intriguing human relationships can be!

Poems by Laksmisree Banerjee

POWER OF LOVE

Dear my Beloved ---

Let me not fall into the ashes

As I wing up to the azure

Let me not descend to the abyss

As I reach the highest peak

Let me not drown in hubris

As I eagle up to your empyrean

Let me not soak into the grime

As I am cleansed in your lava

Let me not soil my ablutions

As I share my purity of well-being

Let me not delve into purgatory

As I reach your sacred summit

Let me not look down from the crescendo

As I look up for those who fall

Do swaddle me fully in your Love

Safe from the cinders of haughty hate

©Laksmisree Banerjee

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



VEILED CHIMERA

I often see them ---

these dragon flies dreamy,
deluded, dazed in fiery glimmer
in oneiric existence
with slender frail bodies
of ornate wings in shimmer,
with entanglements seamy---

One a veiled lady chimera
poised between two dead ends,
droning on blank walls
odes of non-existence
in spider-nets of iridescence
filtering through the glass façade
with no possibilities
of exits or entries
through light or fire or glass
stuck forever in desires,
throbbing in simmers,
an artefact glorious
with enough motion
to die—

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Film review

Lalit Mohan Joshi's documentary film *Angwal* on Kumaoni poetry by Sunayana Panda

A new documentary, "Angwal" which means "an embrace", was screened at the British Film Institute in London on 7th August 2023. It was the premier of this very moving film which is made by Lalit Mohan Joshi, the founder director of South Asian Cinema Foundation. He has produced and directed the film.

India is so vast a land that there will always be some unknown part to be discovered, particularly those parts which are far from the crowded spaces of the cities. Through this documentary Lalit Mohan Joshi reveals to us the people as well as the nooks and corners of the Kumaon hills in the northern state of Uttarakhand. "I am a Kumaoni first and then an Indian," said the film maker after the screening.

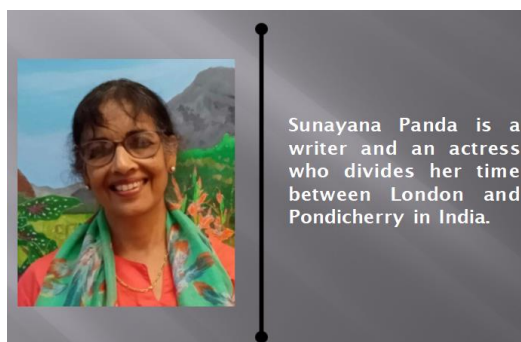
It is clear that the impetus for making this film comes from Lalit Mohan Joshi's deep love for the land of his birth. Having lived in the UK for more than three decades he decided to go back to his roots. He started with the idea of making a film on two of his maternal uncles who had been poets. But as he started his work of research he thought it would be good to also include other poets of the region as they were unknown outside the Kumaon area. That process led him to include some other aspects of the life of this region. He has interviewed people connected to this subject and these conversations form the greater part of the film.

The film progresses in that order and we are at first introduced to the works of the poets and after that we move to other subjects such as the abandoned places which had been a part of the narrator's early childhood. Then we get a feel of the people and see how the villages and small towns are gradually losing the

young population which wants to find employment in the plains. In the meantime businessmen who have nothing to do with the region have come up and built hotels and restaurants for growing influx of tourists. The images of the ruined or abandoned ancestral homes of the film maker make this point poignantly.



In countries outside India there is a wrong impression that everyone speaks Hindi in India or at least that the whole of North India speaks Hindi. This is very far from the truth. South of Madhya Pradesh it is the reign of the Dravidian languages and to the east people speak Bengali and



Odia. To the west the Marathi language is spoken and Gujarati is not the same as Hindi. The Punjabi language is very

different from Hindi. Even within Uttar Pradesh, the real heartland of Hindi-speaking people, there are various languages and dialects which are distinct to each area. What people don't know is that the dialects change after every 100 kilometers or so in every state in India.

This film points out that a language like Kumaoni has developed its own literature. Its written form takes the Devnagari script but has an identity of its own. Most dialects of India don't have a written form. The official main language of the state is used for writing but the dialects are used for spoken communication. Lalit Mohan Joshi has also included the work of women writers and it is the work of the poetesses which is more complex and deep. One poem speaks of the grief of a mother whose soldier son has died and another poem on the wheel of life and death, comparing it to the grinding stone.

One has to mention the music of this documentary. As the film progresses we understand that Kumaoni poetry, as all traditional Indian poetry, is always sung. Poets sing out their poems in India. In this film often poems are used in the background audio sound and these are sung by trained singers. One such singer is Uttara Joshi, the daughter of Lalit Mohan Joshi and Kusum Pant Joshi. Uttara is an extraordinary singer. What is noteworthy is that she doesn't speak any of the Indian languages in which she sings but she always gets the pronunciation right by putting an additional effort to get her diction corrected.

The documentary has a professional finish in every department, be it in cinematography or in sound quality in

recording, be it in music or in off-screen narration. The visuals are breathtaking. Nature's beauty abounds in the Kumaon hills and added to that is the skill of the director of photography Rangoli Agarwal who has captured such moments that deserve to be immortal. The script flows so naturally that the running time of an hour passes unnoticed.



This high level of execution comes from Lalit Mohan Joshi's background of a broadcaster. He is a former BBC journalist working with the Hindi service and has a clear idea about presentation. He is also the founder of the South Asian Cinema

Foundation which he has been running since the year 2000. For two decades Lalit Mohan Joshi has been promoting artistic cinema primarily produced in India. He has helped in bringing to the Indian diaspora living in London very important aspects of the history of Indian cinema. He has also brought over several filmmakers from India whose work has been of a high caliber and felicitated them.

Lalit Mohan Joshi started making this documentary before the pandemic hit us and this is why it had to be stalled. All the disruption and uncertainty created by this halt made it harder for the creative team to work on it in a smooth manner. Work resumed after the restrictions were lifted. So, it must have been a great relief and a moment of celebration for all those who were a part of the production to witness it being premiered at the BFI in London.

The end of the documentary moved everyone in the audience. As the end credits were rolling we saw the

information that four of the people interviewed during the making of the film had died. Although they had died during the Covid pandemic, these four did not die of Covid. While this was being shown on the screen the background music was a song (the sung version of a poem) which spoke of the wheel of life which is like a waterwheel which turns the grinding stone, turning grains into flour. The lines say that life grinds men and women in the same way that the waterwheel mill grinds the grains. The soulful voice of the singer touched the hearts of the viewers as the image of the watermill turning without a stop on the screen reinforced the idea, and brought about a meditative mood.

This film deserves to be shown widely in India so that our own countrymen become aware of these poets and their homeland in the hills. This film is in the Kumaoni language but has English subtitles so it is easy to follow.

Van Gogh's Silent Cry **A poem by Meenakshi Mohan**

Today, in the museums
When you walk
in Van Gogh's immersive experience
and become a part of my paintings --
The Starry Night, Sunflowers, the Irises, and many others
you marvel at my creations.
I move around the world,
You spend millions,
in owning my work

Where were you,
when I struggled with life?
I was a starving artist
with no money to buy food
I would sip on turpentine.
A poor artist toiling
with mental and physical health.
You did not see me cry
when I cut my ears.

Where were you in my lonely hours
when my every breath craved for help?
Today, you look at my Self Portrait
and say, "Here is the famous artist --
Vincent Van Gogh!"

When alive
I was struggling on the earth.

If only you had heard my
Silent Cry, then!

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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.



Lakshmi Kannan's *Guilt Trip and Other Stories* *An instance of a new feminist poetics!* Reviewed by Payal Nagpal

Bi-lingual writer and translator, Lakshmi Kannan has written several novels, short story and poetry collections in English. She also writes in Tamil under the *nom de plume* 'Kaaveri'. A translator of repute, she has translated from Tamil to English. Kannan is the recipient of the *Ilakkiya Chintanai* Award for short fiction in Tamil and the Katha Award for Translation.

Guilt Trip and Other Stories, Kannan's recent short story collection, has eleven short stories and two long stories. The glossary at the end gives the meaning of the Tamil words mentioned in the stories. The setting of these stories varies from the 1970s and 1980s to the present time. A complex understanding of women's position in the Tamil cultural milieu and the Indian society at large is presented vividly in these stories. Each one peels off a layer of the patriarchal structure to make us confront our assumptions about socially accorded roles, especially as women. The author shares her experiences and wisdom in relatable language, maintains an objective stance and refrains from imposing the authorial view on her characters. It is as if she stands apart with the reader to watch them perform, a difficult feat as an author.

A striking quality of Kannan's writing is her powers of observation. Kannan's pen delves into the inner thoughts of the characters especially the female protagonists in these stories. An important trope visible in almost all the stories in this collection is that of food. Stories such as "Dregs", "Kitchen Fire", "The Colour Green", "Annapurna Bhavan" and others use food as a trope to understand the patriarchal marginalisation of women in their daily life. Kannan pointedly mentions in the author's introduction, "The same people who so inextricably intertwine a woman's life with the food she prepares, are somehow incredibly obtuse in the way they cannot see—or will not see—that women have to eat too, or rather, women equally love good food as much as they do!" Kannan weaves situations effortlessly to bring out women's appropriation in domesticity through food politics, a factor that remains relevant to this day. Women such as Shiela in "Dregs", and Arundhati in "VRS" are wise as they quietly stack food for themselves before a meal, knowing full well the gluttonous nature of the male guests. Society's expectation of women to perform endless household chores including cooking is strongly critiqued. Savitri in "Ladies' Watch" devotes her life to accomplishing the routine duties expected of her. As she collapses,

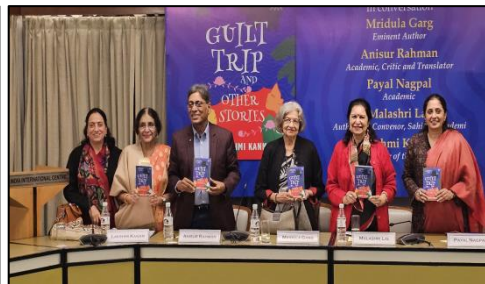
the doctor's question, "For God's sake, allow her to breathe. What's this pile of clothes doing on her bed?" jolts the reader out of complacency. "The Colour Green" presents the pathetic plight of parents who go to meet their children settled abroad, only to end up as house workers for their families. The stories underscore how it is certainly not a joyous situation for a woman to spend precious hours in the kitchen to satiate the patriarchal palate. The stories emphatically reveal how women remain trapped doing unproductive labour in the household. The grim realities of life are accompanied by moments of fun and gentle laughter—the young boy Prakash's struggle to negotiate with English through the vernacular turns "A for Apple" to "A for Aji"; the dapper man who helps Jayashree in "As Dapper As They Come" brings sunshine into the bleak atmosphere; the camaraderie of young girls in the

The two long stories in this collection have been written in the Tamil genre of "Nedung Kathaigal" where gender issues are presented in a phased manner. In the long stories too, we encounter strong women characters such as the ageing and near blind Janaki and Arundhati, a teacher in the University, struggling with age related osteoarthritis. The Teiresian wisdom of Janaki in "Janaki Turns a Blind Eye" through heightened aural powers helps her to protect her granddaughter-in-law's jewellery, her *stree dhan*, the ornaments given to her at the time of marriage. She overhears the devious plans of her daughter and grandson and forewarns their daughter-in-law Vidya. Janaki's perspicacity of thought and her conviction as woman are inspiring. In "VRS" the female protagonist Arundhati, is surprised at the indifference of her husband, a medical practitioner, to her condition.

As the sequence of events unfold, Arundhati is shocked and disappointed at how her husband had chosen to give up his medical practice and follow a Swami, as she was still earning and would therefore take care of all household expenses. Her firm decision to take voluntary retirement from service is a response to her exploitation as an earning member of the family.

In her introduction the author makes a statement for "a new poetics of feminism that can face up to the 'post'-ness of post feminism, and can match the complexity of creativity from writers who are women." This collection more than meets up to the authorial demand. The women in these stories are delineated in the context of their complex reality. The decisive nature of the women and their firm resolve to resist subjugation establishes the contours of this new feminist poetics, one that gives women agency to exercise their choice.

Dr. Payal Nagpal is Professor in the Dept. of English, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are Literary Theory, Modern Drama and Indian English Poetry. She compiles the India section of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature along with Professor Shyamala A. Narayan. In the Labyrinth is her debut collection of poems. A theatre person and literary critic, she has authored and edited many books that include her annotated editions of Shakespeare's Othello and Macbeth as well as Ibsen's Ghosts, Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie and more recently Mahesh Dattani's Tara, published by Worldview.



titular story, who plan a clandestine trip to Srirangapatna to take a bath in the river Kaveri, is endearing.

The story "Annapurna Bhavan" is placed at the intersectionality of class and gender. Tara has some time to have a quick meal before she meets a friend. She has received fancy suggestions from her family—she could eat at the "The Verandah" in "Taj Connemara" or at the "Raintree Hotel". Due to paucity of time, she rejects these options and decides to eat at Annapurna Bhavan, a place frequented by her driver. The experience is both liberating and transforming as she seeks a part of the community of women who come to be free of patriarchal surveillance. The women tell each other, "I feel like I've come to my mother's house. I can eat as much as I want without...". The women are well aware of how they are usually expected to eat last or not eat enough in their homes. In Annapurna Bhavan, they ensure all dishes are served on the "leaf", and they look out for each other's requirements. Eating uninhibitedly liberates them even though momentarily from the diktats of an oppressive society. This unrestrained flow of food, the smell of ghee, the female camaraderie in Annapurna Bhavan connects Tara with her childhood.

Book Review

TALES THAT ENCHANT

A Game of Dice: A Collection of Short Stories by Subhash Chandra

A review by Arijit Roy

To say that *A Game of Dice*, a collection of twenty-two short stories by Subhash Chandra is an exquisite work in fiction writing, would surely be an understatement.

In an age where reading, more so literature, is surely on the decline, this is the book you put into someone's hands who questions: 'What good can reading do?'

Subhash Chandra's writing style is as beautiful, and adventurous yet as unassuming as Sudha Murty's literary penchant.

The first quality of his stories is an ever-fluid language. To enter the hearts of the common men and women, one's language must be as simple and true as their hearts and lives are. Then comes the well-chosen subjects that are extremely relatable, making the stories a lived experience for most readers, thereby cultivating a special intimate bond.

And finally, the third comes from the old Hamlet, 'Brevity is the soul of wit'.

Chandra's short stories depict the inner realities and the existential struggles. One wonders: Is life indeed a game of dice? Is it all fated or is it about how we play the cards we are dealt with?

The book, rightfully after its title, is certainly a game of dice. Every short story is a journey filled with tremendous uncertainty, passion, compassion, and promise akin to life. One never knows what the next page might bring. The readers are always on the lookout as they roll the dice of words and are amazed to find themselves reading one short story after another.

The opening short story *Go Back* depicts how frustration can make one do the devil one consciously stayed away from.

The protagonist, a promising schoolboy who is the son of a sex worker tries his best to ignore the slurs of his classmates and teachers and instead focuses on his studies. He aspires to become a civil servant and free himself and his mother of a life filled with oppression and ignominy. But despite his lofty intentions, he is unable to achieve his dream as he is forced to choose violence in a moment of sheer pressure.

Like Oedipus, the Greek king, the boy too tries his best to avoid his fate but meets it on the very road he chose as a better option. Unfortunately, it is not always greatness that is thrust upon a person; in some cases, it can be violence too. Something similar happens in the

story "Dr P. Chhinder" as the doctor tries his level best to reform the prodigal son who is hell-bent on choosing the path of the devil.

Unlike a real dice, every short story by Chandra is a 'sixer' that goes out of the park. Every story deals with a subject that is so unique that all it takes is just the initial two to three lines to hook the reader.

Very skillfully indeed, he portrays the stark reality of India in his short story *Cremation*. In a developing nation with such inequality, even final rites become a privilege many can't afford. Pahir, an individual from the lowest strata of society has to use a heaven-sent forest fire to burn his father's body. This is truly master writing by Chandra, a short story that pierces through the armour of privilege and awakens one to the lucky hand they are dealt with.

However, it is not just realism in which Chandra is skilled. Give him any subject, any theme and he will weave out a short story that will re-introduce you to literature. "Born Loser" reflects the romantic stirrings in Chandra's writings as the soft sensitivity of the initial high tides that love raises within us is portrayed so beautifully. And so is the self-pity and low self-esteem of Ashim, the central character. In one of the most creative of beginnings, Subash begins the story inside the mother's womb as the protagonist recounts his birth tragedy and his memory being wiped out as he begins a new life. This is short story writing at its best!

The richness of vocabulary combined with years of experience as an English literature Professor lets Chandra come out with poetic descriptions like 'mental luminosity' describing not just the character's but also his own intellectual glow.

Subhash Chandra's writings can be enjoyed by all age groups. His stories are on, to, and for all people.

In the story "Eat Something," he brilliantly describes the anxiety of a patient, who the doctor thinks, has got diabetes. The anxiety making the person imagine every possible situation leading to death has been portrayed very well with major comic relief in between. However, the story that stayed with me was *Pandurang*. The ace lifeguard at the Dadar Sea face, who had saved countless lives on the coastline, ironically failed to save the one life that mattered the most to him – that of his son. The climax scene with Pandurang abusing

the sea and clenching his fists in fury is so remarkably written that it may or may not bring a tear from the eye but is bound to tug at the heartstrings, making one wonder at the tragic turn of fate.

Chandra is also a adept when it comes to writing thrillers and exhibits his skill quite well in "The Watchstrap," but it is in "You Are Late, Mister!" that he makes the best use of suspense as the pizza delivery boy, who is given no payment by a bunch of overly privileged kids for being three minutes late, takes revenge in a battle of wits.

"A Shocker" is one of the most delightfully crafted stories in this book. A wife feels ashamed as her husband loses the social filter and makes the most vulgar comments in public. When the psychologist tells her the reason behind such behaviour, the wife is indeed *Shocked!*

Chandra's keen introspection propelled him to write the short story *Differently Abled*, which makes one realise how much one is dependent on things one takes for granted, such as our voice. The story is neither a moral sermon nor an eye-watering cliché tale. It is a modern satire filled with plot twists right till the very end.

The titles of all the stories are so delicately crafted. They are the exact expressions that come to one's mind after reading them. For example, *The Vanishing Act* that focuses on a classic case of deception within a family, and "The Threesome" that revolves around a surreal event, bring to light Chandra's ability to excel at writing horror stories with equal ease.

All in all, this book is a literary gem. It is such a smooth read, that it was 'un-put-downable'. One is eager to know what happens next. Every short story raises the expectation bar and keeps the mind spinning long after finishing the reading. The sheer fact that Chandra is able to achieve this, makes me call him a master of the short story form.

The book certainly deserves a place on one's shelves.



Arijit Roy is a poet, writer, and performer whose works portray the world around in a new light. He has published a book of poems titled *In the Hour of Sky* and regularly uploads his works at YouTube, Instagram, and WordPress site.

SAROJINI CHATTOPADHYAY NAIDU & SOME OTHER INDIANS IN THE UK

by Kusum Pant Joshi

Sarojini Chattopadhyay Naidu (1879-1949), visited Britain thrice between 1895 and 1920. Though India was then a British colony and its ruling classes were notorious for their racism and discriminatory attitude, Sarojini was the first Indian poetess, after Torulata Dutt (1856-1877), to be hailed for her English poetry by English poets and critics. She was also welcomed by Suffragists and covered widely in English papers.

Before fathoming why she was received so warmly in Britain, let's follow Sarojini during her first trip to Britain in Dr. Kusum Pant Joshi's first of 3 articles on this remarkable poet.

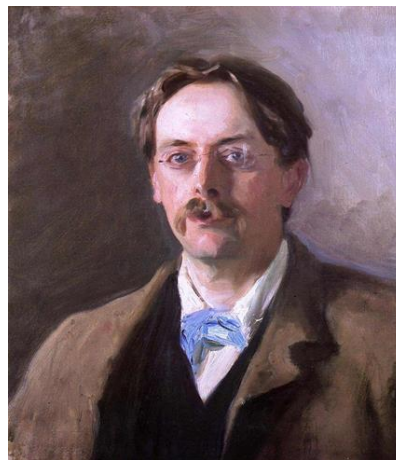
In the 19th and 20th centuries, numerous Indians travelled to Britain. They included students, royalty, administrators, politicians, businessmen, soldiers, sailors and 'ayahs'. From within this motley crowd of Indian visitors, only a few have left a mark. Among them was famous English poet and nationalist, Sarojini Chattopadhyay Naidu.

Sarojini first set foot on British soil in 1895 when she was about 16. She came on a scholarship awarded by the Nizam of Hyderabad who was impressed by one of her pieces of poetry. The background to her visit to the UK is interesting. Her father, Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, was a free thinker and a man of vision who had established the Nizam's College in the princely state of Hyderabad in the Deccan. A scion of a Bengali Brahmin family known since numerous generations for its knowledge of Hindu traditions and scriptures, Aghorenath was a scholarly person. He knew many languages including Sanskrit, but had violated social norms by travelling for higher studies to Scotland in the mid-1800s. Sarojini's mother, Varada Sundari Devi, was a Bengali poet. When their eldest child, Sarojini, showed signs of being drawn towards a man who both Aghorenath and his wife considered unsuitable, they took advantage of the Nizam's scholarship and packed her off to England.

After reaching London, Sarojini joined Kings College. Later, she attended Girton College, Cambridge. What is remarkable about

Sarojini was that she received an extraordinary level of attention from within important British literary circles.

Not long after her arrival, she was introduced to English poet, author and critic, Edmund Gosse. When Gosse read her poems, he was deeply impressed by her mastery of the English language, but sorely disappointed to notice how much she was in the thrall of English poets, English themes and English imagery.



Edmund Gosse

Deciding to take on the role of a mentor, Gosse advised her to break free of foreign influences. He also exhorted her to be an original Indian poet by writing on Indian themes and giving expression to her distinct Indian background, thinking and imagery.

That Sarojini took heed of Gosse's advice is evident from the kind of poetry that began to flow from her pen after coming in contact with him. She also recorded her thanks to her mentor by dedicating her first book of poems: 'The Golden Threshold' (Heinemann, London, 1905), where she described Gosse as the one "who first showed me the way to the Golden Threshold".

Another famous poet, literary critic and magazine editor who was deeply impressed by Sarojini's poetry, was Arthur Symonds. In his Introduction to her first publication: 'The Golden Threshold' (1905), he clearly declared his support for bringing out the publication as well as his appreciation of her poetry. In glowing terms he wrote:

"It is at my persuasion that these poems are now published. The earliest of them were read to me in London in 1896, when the writer was seventeen; the later ones were sent to me from India in 1904, when she was twenty-five; and they belong, I think, almost wholly to those two periods. As they seemed to me to have an individual beauty of their own, I thought they ought to be published ... They hint in a sort of delicately evasive way, at a rare Western language and under partly Western influences. They do not express the whole of that temperament; but they express, I think, its essence; and there is an Eastern magic in them." While still in Britain, she was invited to read her poems in poetic gatherings. Artist

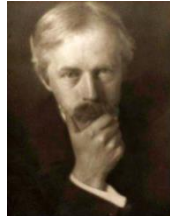
J.B. Yeats, brother of famous poet W.B. Yeats, made a sketch of Sarojini in 1896 that later appeared in her first book of poems published. Her poems also appeared in several English magazines in the UK during the 1890s. For example, Sarojini's: 'The Balade of Rohini'



Sarojini's sketch by J. B. Yeats
(brother of poet W.B. Yeats)

that appeared in her first book of poems, 'The Golden Threshold' appeared in 'The Sketch' of May 27, 1896. The June 24, 1896 issue of 'The Sketch' also announced that her poem: 'Song of Sleep: To Sunalini' was one of the English poems listed for publication in 'The Illustrated English Magazine' of July 1896. On 22 June, 1899, 'The Era' had an article announcing that her poem 'To Sunalini' had been set to music by a popular English singer, Cuthbert Kelly. ↓

A few years later, the 'Pall Mall Gazette' describing a well-attended programme of several poems by Sarojini being set to music and played at the Queens Hall, wrote: "A large audience assembled at the Queen's Hall last night to hear the first performance of Madame Liza Lehmann's new song-cycle, 'The Golden Threshold'. The words are



Arthur Symonds

taken from the book of verses of that name by Sarojini Naidu, and the selection embraces several subjects covering a pretty wide range of Indian thought

and feeling."

After spending about three years in Britain during her first trip, Sarojini sailed back home in 1898.

(to be continued in the next issue)

Book Review

Gwen Bitti's Between Two Worlds Reviewed by Sharon Rundle

Gwen Bitti's memoir has a quest and a mystery at its core. It is a journey of self-discovery set in India and in Australia, which explores Anglo-Indian culture.

The narrative takes the reader between two worlds, into a troubled past and a mystery. Keen observations and conversations from the past impinge on and affect parallel stories in the author's present life. Born in Calcutta, India, with a caul enveloping her face, her arrival is disconcerting for the family and other people present. The caul becomes an important motif in this narrative, not only because it's a rare occurrence but also because it brings in metaphysical and preternatural aspects to the narrative.

"As if in Catholic Communion, she [her mother] raised up the gold box that she held. 'Dr Nag lifted the membrane for me to see. It is inside this box and is the size of a lady's handkerchief. With his chest puffed-up, he carefully placed the membrane on a nearby table, that was lined with a sterile cloth and identified it as a "Caul" and said that you were a special girl to be born with it ... This child is going to be very lucky. She will never want, but life will not always be easy for her. She will have extrasensory ability to see beyond the ordinary."

Readers are given an insight into what it means to have visions, premonitions, a sixth sense and second sight. The hierarchy, bureaucracy, and mysterious workings of India almost drive the author to distraction but her strong belief in India and her right to be recognised as Indian in the country of her birth keep her striving for this recognition.

The reader is transported as the author arrives in Kolkata and travels through India. The author's deep insight and evocative authentic recreation of these scenes immerse the reader in the story as Bitti captures the essence of the paradox that is India. The benefits of yoga are explored, as it is unusual for Anglo-Indians but a boon for the author who is a regular practitioner and teacher.

Gwen meets a friend Diana whom she stays with in Kolkata, and a past neighbour from her childhood, Melvyn. Melvyn has an excellent memory and helps Gwen revive scenes from the past, including a terrible memory of being trapped in a water tank.

Unexpectedly, scenes of violence, insurgency, fear, and secrecy emerge which are palpable and contrast vividly with the comfortable lifestyle, and the privilege and status of Bitti's family. These experiences continue to play on her mind and induce a fear of repercussions now that she is back in India.



"The police car is parallel to the car that I am travelling in. A policeman motions to the driver to pull over. I pray to be invisible. The police car pulls in at the nearest curb and my driver pulls up behind it. The driver turns to me and says, 'Ma'am.' I startle and jump a little out of my seat. The blood in my head is pumping with the terror of being thrown into the back of a police car and taken to the authorities to be questioned about my father. I compose myself, 'Yes, Driver.'"

The author's quest for formal, official recognition of her status as a citizen of India sets off sensory triggers which bring up sharply focussed episodes from her past as she re-lives her experiences of her childhood there.

Gwen Bitti has an engaging style with a distinct narrative voice and rhythm. The prose is accomplished and has great clarity. The storyline is exciting, unique, and revelatory.

The striking book cover catches the eye and depicts the author's caul box, passports and photos against a vivid background. I strongly recommend this book.

Gwen Bitti lives in Sydney, Australia. She was born in Kolkata, (formerly Calcutta) India. She has had short stories, haiku and tanka published. In 2020 her short story, *New Life in Kolkata* was selected for an online publication in *Agathokakalogical Aussie Summer*. She is a businesswoman, yoga teacher, meditation facilitator and former lecturer for the International Yoga Teachers Association (IYTA). In 2010, together with three other people, Gwen contributed to building a three-storey yoga/community centre in Rimbik, India, as a thank you gift to her birthland. She has served her local community since the early 80s.

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A long story

The Wild Stream (part -1) by Nandini Sahu

My mother sat on the hard wooden seat along the verandah the entire evening. I lit the round charcoal stove and placed it at her feet. Massaged her feet with some heated mustard oil with cloves of garlic in it, so that her pain would subside.

But pain seemed to cling to her bones quite obstinately today, refusing to leave her. She has been speaking of her grievances against all her maidservants, one after the other, telling them over and over again how she has been 'more sinned against than sinning' by all of them.

"I fed them, clothed them just like I would do for my daughters, against everyone's better advice! Now I am paying for my folly and no mistake. These girls and that old woman, and above all that wretch, Mami, who thinks she is nothing less than a Madhuri Dixit! Oh! I am going crazy! After all these years of taking care of them, finally police came to my house! Of all, my house!"

We sympathized with her, but couldn't help whispering that it served her right.

Mami, Mami Pradhan. The gorgeous, super-stylish maid of my mother, who was her ego-booster, oil-massager, cook, domestic-help, gossip-partner, gardener – all in one. Today Ma was cursing her.

But there is a background to her story.

Before Mami's mother joining the post of my Ma's maid, or getting all those promotions and increments after that eventful day, there were two other maids, who had troubled her so much (or at least she thought that they harassed her!) that she was losing weight every day out of stress. Sukamaa, our first maid, was a good woman, dedicated especially to my younger sister, now in the U.S., so much so that even if my toddler sister would pee in her plate, she would wash and eat her rice, would never throw it with the fear that it

may harm the child. My little sister would ease herself in her lap most of the times, and it supplied laughter and entertainment to us.

"See this silly woman!"

Ma would insist, "Sukama, don't you do that. Take a fresh plate of rice and eat."

"Ma, how can you be such an enemy of my daughter? You want her to fall ill?"

Yes, she claimed that my sister was her daughter. But the fact was, she had three daughters and two sons of her own. Shakuntala, Shaila, Koili, and I am forgetting the boy's name. Koili was her favourite; perhaps she loved her as much as she loved my sister. So the year Koili was pregnant for a third time after two abortions, Sukamaa had to leave our house.

My mother was grieving, fretting, fuming.

Et,too,Sukamaa?

"Ask Koili to come and stay here, why do you need to quit your job and go there? I will anyway get another maid, but then who will give you so much money, food and saris? Your sons-in-law?"

Ma was right. She literally pampered her maids. She was a school teacher, so she was totally dependent on them; the maids were her real home-makers.

Sukamaa left. We consoled Ma that she was not family, so forget her. Ma and all of us missed her tattooed face, tattooed horizontally and vertically all over to avoid attraction of other men towards her charming face; and her loud kisses to us, that would sound like the music of a tabla.

Sukamaa episode was over.

Next came Czarina.

She was street smart, a girl from the Mussalman basti having five brothers who were butchers; she was a hefty, strong,

dark-skinned girl in her twenties. She took over the kitchen, garden, under the beds, all extreme corners of the house where Sukamaa's old hands couldn't reach.

Ma was happy, instantly.

But we were not.

Because she started eyeing our make up kits, lipsticks, bindis and bangles from the day one. She would stare at us when we were getting ready to go out, and sigh, then ask us the price of things that we thought she can never afford to buy.

But it was not so. After many months we discovered her affluence on that morning when police came to our house for the first time ever. Czarina had been stealing money from my Ma's school bag, which Ma called her vanity bag. When asked, she would reply, "Do I look like a thief? Even if I look, I am not one. My brothers get better things for me than yours, ok?"

Czarina was notorious. My youngest sister, who was a few months old, would relieve herself on an old newspaper every morning. Ma would ask Czarina to take the shit wrapped in the newspaper and throw it in the large pit in the extreme corner of the street. But madame Czarina had a different plan. What she did was—there was Jaga Bhaina's grocery store adjacent to our house, and people used to crowd there from morning to evening. Jaga Bhaina made nice packets of dal, gudakhu (a tooth paste made up of opium), sugar, salt and tie them with a typical thread of jute. The packets were quite tempting. Czarina collected some thread from Jaga Bhaina saying that Ma needs some thread. Jaga Bhaina was very nice to our family, because he had a small note pad with Baba's name written on it, and we could take anything from his shop – chocolates, puffed rice, muan, (a sweetened puffed-rice cake) sweets, nuts, any time.

(continued on page 19)



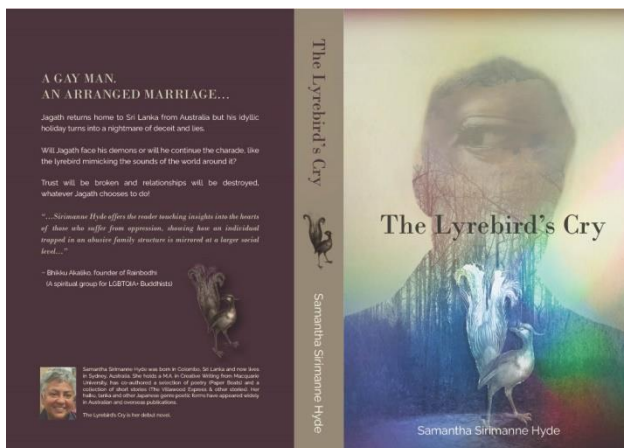
Nandini Sahu, Professor of English and Former Director, School of Foreign Languages, IGNOU, New Delhi, India, is an established Indian

English poet, creative writer and folklorist. She is the author/editor of twenty books. She is the recipient of the Literary Award/Gold Medal from the hon'ble Vice President of India for her contribution to English Studies.

Book review

The Lyrebird's Cry by Samantha Sirimanne Hyde Reviewed by Sharon Rundle

The Lyrebird's Cry begins with the protagonist Jagath's plight at front and centre. The argument at the beginning of the first chapter sets the tone and reveals his father's rage that threatens Jagath's future. Jagath's loss of control of his life, and his feelings of helplessness in the face of his father's rigid determination are palpable. His mother loads him with guilt and a sense of ingratitude. Jagath is forced to meet his prospective wife Sepalika and her family before his arranged marriage. This throws Jagath's life into turmoil and Ryan his great love back in Australia feels rejected. Jagath has a great deal at stake. Will he take the 'easy' path of pretence and not 'rock the boat' – or will he be true to himself and others, notwithstanding the price he will have to pay?



The plot is a page-turner and leads the reader into a narrative with many more problems and conflicts to come.

As Jagath's life unravels, the reader is immersed in the scenes, with aromas, tastes, textures and sounds complementing the vivid visual descriptions. The descriptive passages are poetic. Sirimanne Hyde's skill at narrative withholding keeps the tension and suspense going. Jagath must face his demons, overcome obstacles, and challenge the status quo. In the process, he learns that his parents (and grandparents) have family secrets and the family name may not be as polished as they portray in public. Sepalika, too, has secret friendships and relationships. Her 'make-over' makes the reader realise that she is much more than the unhappy, uncooperative character that she appears in the beginning of the story. Ryan represents forbidden love, he provides a foil for Jagath, and he creates the desire for change. Additional characters are diverse and represent various attitudes, outlooks and perspectives. These contrasting views give depth to the narrative, as various aspects of human behaviour are revealed and discussed between them. Even Saeed appears like a parable to emphasise what is at risk and at stake for characters like Jagath who rely on visas and permanent residency to remain in Australia.

Three core threads run through the narrative: Jagath's dilemma and finding a solution to the mistake he has made; Ryan and Jagath's star-crossed love; and the teachings of the Buddha.

The teachings of the Buddha, and the meetings with a monk work extremely well. Through his Buddhist practice Jagath becomes stronger within himself, better able to face the world – and eventually to deal with it in a way that relieves everyone of their burdens – except, perhaps, his parents. Jagath realises the repercussions of his actions and through his spiritual, internal struggle reassesses his need to project an exterior image of coping and managing life.

“Outside the wind had picked up creating rustling sounds through the surrounding eucalypts. Somewhere close-by, numerous birds tweeted. Jagath sensed that Yohan was staring at him but when he glanced across, his friend had his eyes firmly focussed on the ground in front of him. When the sermon concluded, the two men bowed down in reverence and took their leave. As Jagath got up from his seat, the monk smiled and encouraged him to consider visiting the monastery again to which Jagath nodded, replying that he would definitely try to.”

These threads intertwine and the impact they have on each other clearly shows the causes and effects of events and interactions. Each thread leads towards a resolution or closure of some kind. [The wisdom of the teachings of Buddha and the Dhammapada reverberates through the pages and resonates with readers.](#)

By the end of the story, there have been remarkable and significant changes for the characters. Not all is neatly resolved, particularly with his family in Sri Lanka (as with real life), but the story ends on a note of optimism. It feels right and will strike chords with many readers. One of the illusions of writing a work of fiction, is to make the reader think that this story may or may not have happened – but it could have! Sirimanne Hyde's novel carries that illusion beautifully.

Samantha Sirimanne Hyde was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka and now lives in Sydney, Australia. She holds a M.A. in Creative Writing from Macquarie University, has co-authored a selection of poetry (*Paper Boats*) and published a collection of twenty short stories called *The Villawood Express & other stories*. Her short fiction, free verse, haiku, tanka and other Japanese genre poetic forms have appeared in Australian and overseas publications. *The Lyrebird's Cry* is her debut novel.

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Cover image: Kyle Neo Design

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<https://www.amazon.com.au/Lyrebirds-Cry-Samantha-Sirimanne-Hyde/dp/0645538604>

-----The wild stream (from page 17)

All he had to do was jot down the item and its price on the note pad. In the end of the month, Baba used to take care of the bills. Also, Ma was especially nice to him, because sometimes when she was hurriedly getting ready for her school, Czarina would report, "Ma....garlic is finished, also dal."

"Oh! This girl will never spare me. All the time she has complaints. And there is the head-mistress, Jumelia Raut, to wait for us at the gate itself sharp at 10 am! You go and ask Jaga Bhaina to give you whatever you want!"

That was that. Czarina brought lentils, garlic and some jute thread from him. Then she did wrap my little sister's shit with the same newspaper, took another fresh newspaper and covered it for safety, and tied it up with Jaga Bhaina's thread with ultimate professionalism and put the neat packet in the middle of the road. Anyone would feel that some buyer from Jaga Bhaina's shop has dropped a packet on the road by mistake and pick it when no one was looking at him. Czarina's duty was to keep the packets on the road and call us to wait and watch who was picking the packet that day. To our surprise and giggles, everyday someone was sure to look around, and then lift our shit-packet pretending as if it was actually his grocery packet which he had dropped by mistake.

We were very impressed by her smartness. Until that evening on *Pana Sankranti* (an Odia festival when people have intoxicating drinks) day, she didn't lock the back door of the house, to facilitate her brothers to enter our house in the night for a burglary.

Next morning, we woke up to the wails of my mother and to my father's anxious talks to the police about the robbery. We were in deep sleep after drinking the sherbet with *bhang*, then Czarina's butcher brothers just pushed the ajar door, entered our house, spread smoke to make us lose our senses, and stole everything from our house. Old utensils, clothes, money, jewelry, Ma's puja box and Baba's old gramophone, bed-sheets, boxes, just whatever they could lay their hands on.

The police searched the near by areas and discovered that only my father's gramophone that he cherished (and

someday I am going to inherit that) and my mother's *gurubara pedhi* (box for Goddess Laxmi's puja) were thrown in the lake side. Ma says, "Idiot *Mussalman* thieves, how could they have stolen my Goddess Laxmi's box, would she have spared them?"

Both of them were relieved to discover that they hadn't harmed any one of us. We were jolly well sleeping when the theft was going on.

Thus, came to an end the Czarina episode. Czarina dynasty. (Anyway, after many years I saw her in the town during my annual visit to my parents' house. She stole her eyes and ran away.)

Ma had to take a week's leave from her school to find another maid. My second sister had to write her tenth board examination in her night suit, because Czarina's brothers had not spared her school uniforms.

Ma could manage to find a frail, shabby, poor woman, Mami-*bou* (Mami Pradhan's mother) for her maid. She had always fever, always backache; she was ever-complaining and ever-demanding.

Anyway, she was the savior, as she facilitated Ma to re-join her duty in the school. Ma was the only Hindi teacher in an Odia school, so she was much in demand. No one could engage her periods, so we were happy that our Hindi periods had been converted to games periods the whole week. Now Ma had to hurry up to finish the syllabi of all classes and make up for the absented week. She was upset. Her best friend was Urmila *mausi*, who was her colleague, our geography teacher.

"See Urmila, these maids are giving me a tough time. I pay them so well, feed them every day, still they are such ungrateful."

For a working woman, balancing between home and office is a Herculean task. Urmila *mausi* had similar problems; in her case it was created by her in-laws.

"Yes Mira *didi*, I can understand. My sister-in-law and mother-in-law are making my life hell. They came for a month, and now it's six months since they are here. Not taking the name of leaving. I am the in-charge headmistress these days, and I have to complete my syllabus for tenth class by next week. Their test exams are on. But again next week we are getting three days

off for the students, because Biju Patnaik is visiting the town and our school ground will be the helipad for his chopper."

"Oh, is that so? My girls would be very happy to see the Chief Minister!"

Ma was enthusiastic. On Monday we had no classes, no class work, and no homework. Three days off from the school! On Wednesday the chief Minister of Odisha would be visiting our town, and he has decided to grace our school, not the boys' high school, by landing in our play ground. We were teasing Baba, because he was a teacher in the boys' high school. There were many volunteers from the party, cleaning and labeling our ground, decorating the building, hiding the pits temporarily with soil, arranging a large canopy overhead under which the CM would sit and deliver his speech, cleaning rubbish from the ground, making room for water supply and food stalls where we used to play hide-and-seek, hanging colourful paper-cuts in different patterns on threads, putting two large freshly-cut banana trees at the entrance, still small raw bananas hanging on them, fixing loud speakers at four corners of the ground, one huge throne-kind-of-a-chair, red in colour, used for the brides and grooms in marriage receptions, placed at the centre for his majesty, the CM of Odisha, and the plastic *Neelkamal* chairs standing inferior around the throne, creating the binary opposition.

We were excited. Ma gave *chutti* (leave) to Mami, our maid's daughter, from watering her plants that day.

Mami was spending her childhood in our house as a woman while we, the children of the house, cherished her womanhood. She had no monotonous work like ours; no one forced her to go to school if someday she was delayed due to household work, or if she had no mood. She had no homework; she was in the kitchen, humming a tune to herself, peeling boiled potatoes, while we had to study from six to ten in the evening.

But she had, of course, a routine, not of her own creation; she had been fixed with a life of poverty that made up our lives. She had to water Ma's plants, polish our shoes, lay our uniforms on the bed, dry our clothes that her *Bou* (mother) would wash, broom our verandah.

But that day it was different.
(To be continued in the next issue)

**A Poem
by Nandini Sahu
As the Going Gets Tough**

The book of wisdom said, 'as the going gets tough, the tough get going.'
I told, 'but I am brave!' And it said, 'how do you know?
Till today only delightful things happened to you, you are young.'

I realized, justice builds a Chinese wall between conflict and interest.
I pondered, is this calm a precursor of the storm?
Why is justice so unfair? The beginning of apocalypse, is it?

It talks to my truth—these changes in the anonymous, the cosmic.
One is system-position and one people-position—I wonder, which
path to take? Then the bubbles burst with logic and magic.

Will the seed of this autonomy be equivalent to a greater success?
Are there some real prodigious people in the world, unlike me, or
are there just larger challenges that even the normal people can cross?

Tough people always don't roar. They take a pause and try later.
The 'road, not taken' isn't elusive. Measuring the immeasurable, immersive, they
merge with the boulevard immensely, they selectively disappear.

I know that I belong to a restored world. And I am aware that
often superlative minds lose objectivity in pursuit of excellence.
Well, to win the game, you have to be a part of it first!

If you pull a rabbit out of box once, it's a miracle. If you do it
more than once, it becomes your habit. Still, justice and kindness aren't
one and the same, but for a collaboration, one has to fight fit.

The life that we desire and the life that we deserve aren't one and the same.
In the middle there is destiny indefatigable. But the fact is, one has to
make a difference to the world and its unpredictable game.

Into a brave new world of possibilities mind-numbingly I stride.
One failure is one step nearer to success. Thus, even in my kitchen I serve
ladles of hope and love with a hint of asafoetida, it's such a delight!!

The shifting nature of power is—it exchanges hands.
Though time always doesn't reap inordinate things. Every so often
tolerance is not a virtue but a freight, resonating the cognizance it sharpens.

Sometimes we become more of exhibits than persons.
Then all liberties taken are quite deliberate.
Like a letter, sometimes destiny has to be picked from where we left it last.

For tough people, a shadow has no wish of its own.
They suffer their memories and go where the road takes them.
No crown comes without a dagger—no matter how much they mellow down.
Then they decide—go to a comrade's zone and take a molten heart.
Be volatile. As Confucius agrees, 'Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in
rising every time we fall.' That is the art.

Glitches are not stop signs; they are the stratagems of luck.
At the end of the rope, tie a tight knot and hang on.
Wait even if the very last key of the bunch opens the padlock.

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*Warmest congratulations to Confluence Magazine on its 20th Anniversary.
This incredible milestone is a tribute to the good work of Confluence and the
platform it provides to its creative artists. We wish them many more great
accomplishments and continued success in the years ahead.*

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Book review

WOOD THAT DOESN'T BURN EASILY***Lost to the World*****A Memoir of Faith, Family, and Five Years in Terrorist Captivity****Shahbaz Taseer****Reviewed by Anjana Basu**

Perhaps it should have begun with his father's assassination rather than in a dirty room that reeked of fear. Salman Taseer, Governor of the Punjab was gunned down in broad daylight by his security in the middle of a bazaar. Six months later, Shahbaz Taseer was lifted in broad daylight by unidentified terrorists who wanted to upset the Pakistani Government through a high profile kidnapping. As it turned out, the terrorists were mistaken in the scope of what they could achieve, but that did not make life easier for their victim.

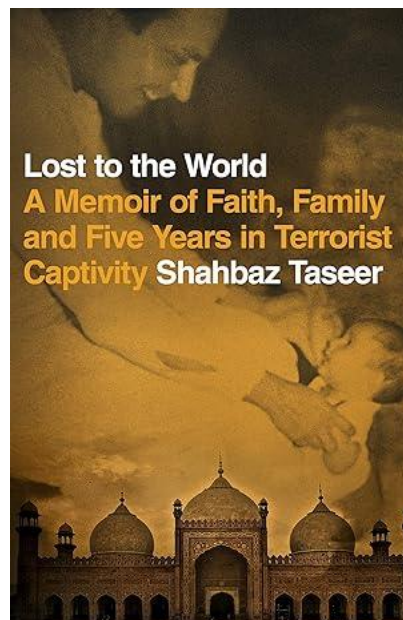
Taseer tells his story simply, his abrupt transformation from a man with a Mercedes and Bulgari watch to a prisoner in a vomit and blood stained salwar kameez living on the verge of uncertainty beside a stinking bucket of excrement. Taseer had no idea what he had done to deserve it, presuming it to be a ransom request. Certain things worked in his favour – one of the associate kidnappers was picked up, giving the ISI a clue to the identity of the terrorists – but that was not enough. From living life in the hope that he would be returned to his family any day, the ordeal dragged out over five years.

He finally met his chief kidnapper, a man called Muhammed Ali, an Uzbek terrorist from one of the most feared and violent organisations. Ali called him an infidel, a man who did not know the true meaning of Islam and referred to his father as a blasphemer. One of the conditions for Taseer's freedom was to be the release of Mumtaz Qadri, Salman Taseer's assassin, along with 30 other terrorists, something that Taseer's soul rebelled at. While it was to Ali's advantage to keep Taseer alive for pleading video calls to his mother that did not prevent Ali from torturing him in the hope that Taseer would break and beg his mother to buy his freedom.

Given a Quran to read, Taseer found solace and a deeper understanding of faith. It also pitted him against Ali's madrassah schooled extreme interpretation of Islam to suit his own ends. He and Ali would exchange a cross

fire of religious theory much to Ali's rage, since he knew Taseer's reading was correct. His explorations into faith also prevented Taseer from taking his own life, even though he was tempted by a razor in his hand.

Apart from the Quran, Taseer had his father's example as inspiration. Salman Taseer had been jailed for his political stand by the Zia Government and he had sworn that nothing would shake his beliefs. Separation from his family and the threat of imminent execution



made Taseer realise what his parents had brought to his life and their different versions of strength in the face of overwhelming odds. His mother watched videos of her son's torture without flinching and offered to meet Muhammed Ali in person to negotiate, if that would help her son's cause. However, the game of spy versus spy did not allow that encounter to take place.

Taseer's account is straight and simply told, with no bitterness. It reads like a thriller with the difference that this is a real life event and

it is a fast paced page turner which has you wondering how the writer will win through at every step. Taseer was buried up to the neck in sand, his fingernails were ripped off and yet he kept his intelligence and determination intact pouncing on opportunities whenever he found them. *Lost to the World* is also filled with the moments that can make a difference to a captive's sanity – the company of a spider or the sight of a voluptuous woman on a soap packet for the first time in two years.

The memoir divides neatly into two – the first his kidnapping and getting used to the situation through a time bound almost day by day account; the second his learning more about his kidnappers and their motivation, mainly Muhammed Ali and his family. Taseer delves into moments of contact with Muhammed Ali and his other guards and mentions how even a three year old child could talk about becoming a suicide bomber.

He found kindness from the most unexpected sources – Ali's mother in law put a stop to one particularly gruesome session of torture declaring that Taseer was a guest in the house. As a study of terrorist mentality, the book is particularly illuminating – dotting not very clever fathers can lead Jekyll and Hyde lives while ManU enthusiasts can participate in torture.

Taseer recounts how his kidnappers were forced to move from their base, when Ali switched allegiances, finally ending up in Afghanistan. In the chaos of drone attacks and assassinations, he was finally able to escape and end his four and a half year ordeal.

More than an account of terrorism the book is story of how faith and the love of family can bring strength in the face of despair. There are no in depth insights into the politics of terrorism – but then, the writer lays no claims to particular political wisdom – he is simply proud of his father's legacy.

Press Release

Vatayan-UK Announces Indo-European Hindi Festival-London and the Vatayan International Awards-2023 Report by Divya Mathur

London, 13 October 2023, Organised by Vatayan-UK in collaboration with the UK Hindi Samiti, Oxford Business College, Indraprastha College-Delhi University, Antar Rashtriya Sahyog Parishad, Vani Foundation, Kavyadhara and KavyaRang, the three-day Indo-European Hindi Festival (Bharopiya Hindi Mahotsav) with a tagline 'Hindi: European Scenario: Teaching, Literature, and Translation' was inaugurated with the lighting of the ceremonial lamp by the former education Minister and MP, Honourable Mr Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', the chief guest Mr Deepak Johri, Minister (Co-ordination) High Commission of India-London, Mr Santosh Chobey, Prof Anamika, Prof Heins Werner Wesler, Dr Rekha Sethi and the organiser Divya Mathur, FRSA, alongside Saraswati-Vandana by Dr. Nandita Sahu, Attaché (Hindi & Culture), High Commission of India-London.

Welcoming the distinguished guests, Mira Mishra-Kaushik OBE, said that this Festival has many festivals within it, especially as Vatayan is also celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year. The managing director of Oxford Business College and festival director Dr Padmesh

Gupta brilliantly conducted the programme in the presence of eminent guests including the Mayor of Hounslow, Mr Afzal Kiyami, British MP, Mr Virendra Sharma, Dr M N Nandakumara, Padmashree Alok Mehta, Dr Sachchidanand Joshi, Pratyaksha Sinha, Dr Alpana Mishra, L.P. Pant, Sanjeev Paliwal, Aparna Kuchhal, Neelima Dalmia Adhar, several Councillors of Ealing, litterateurs and many budding writers, who wanted to meet their favourite authors.

In his keynote address, Mr Anil Sharma Joshi, President of Vaishvik Hindi Parivar said that Hindi is going through a transitional period and the creativity of expatriate writers is

making a strong impact on its expansion. This festival reinforces the fact that in the next two decades, the entire world will be immersed in a vibrant cultural awareness through Hindi and its rich literature. Mr Nishank's book, 'Shiksha ke madhyam se rashtira nirman' and the special issue of Pravasi Sansar (dedicated to the Indo-European Hindi Festival) edited by Rakesh Pandey were also launched on this occasion.

Vatayan International Annual Award Ceremony was conducted by writer and presenter Astha Deo, in which the eminent educationist, entrepreneur and writer Mr Santosh Chobey was felicitated with the Vatayan International Life-Time Achievement Award and the Sahitya Akademy award winner poet and educationist, Professor Anamika was felicitated with the Vatayan

The entire day of 14 October was divided into eight academic sessions, led by prominent scholars, educationists, authors and media personalities, featuring representatives from Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Singapore, France, Portugal, US, Spain, Switzerland, Poland, Germany, India and America including Dr. Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi, Prof. Niranjana Kumar, Dr. Rama Pandey, Prof. Monika Browarczyk, Prof. Milena Bratoeva, Prof. Tatiana Oranskaia, Dr. Archana Painuly, Maria Puri, Dr. Gokul Kshirsagar, Dr. Kusum Knapczyk, Dr. Yuri Botvinkin, Dr. Shailja Saxena, Dr. Pragati Tipnis, Dr. Satyaketu Sankrat, Dr. Vandana Mukesh, Dr. Maria Puri, Dr. Ila Kumar, Dr. Yevgeny Reutov, Pooja Anil, Shivani Bhardwaj, Prof. Rajesh Kumar, Dr. Jamail Gibson, Prof. Aishwaraj Kumar, Ravi Sharma. Dr. Anupama Srivastava, Pragati Tipnis, Dr. Ramsudha Vinjamuri, Dr. Riazoul Ansari, amongst many others.

The wide variety of subjects included: Translation in cultural and professional fields, Diaspora Writing, Globalization and Hindi Language, Teaching Hindi in Europe, Literature and Cinema, Unity of Indian Languages, Unity of Indian Languages, Hindi Language and Literature: Outline of the Future. The day concluded

with a Kavi Sammelan, conducted by Ashish Mishra, in which eminent poets recited their poems including Santosh Choubey, Prof. Anamika, Anil Sharma Joshi, Dr. Nikhil Kaushik, Dr. Padmesh Gupta, Dr. Rama Pandey, Usha Raje Saxena, Shail Aggarwal, Dr. Ajay Tripathi, Jai Verma, besides the UK based young poets: Shikha Varshney, Dr. Gyan Sharma, Shefali Frost, Tithi Dani, Richa Jain, Antareepa Thakur-Mukherjee, Aastha Dev, Ashutosh Kumar, Madhu Chaurasia, Pawan Kumar Dhanauri, amongst many others.

Presented by the Prabha Khaitan Foundation in association with the British Council and Vani Foundation, the final day featured Kalam-O-Utsav, showcased a galaxy of eminent Hindi authors in 6 parallel in-depth conversations by Prof. Anamika, Prof. Sachchidanand Joshi, Prof. Alpana Mishra, Prof. Rekha Sethi, Anil Sharma Joshi, Manisha



International Literary Award. On this special occasion, two eminent educationists - Prof. Heins Werner Wesler from Sweden and Dr. Rekha Sethi of Delhi University were also felicitated with the Vatayan International Education Awards. Introduced by Dr. Jawahar Karnawat, Manisha Kulshrestha, Prof. Rajesh Kumar and Dr. Naresh Sharma, credentials of the four award winners were read by Shikha Varshney, Dr. Nikhil Kaushik, Dr. Sandhya Singh and Richa Jain.

Brief speeches were given by eminent author and Editor of Purvai Tejender Sharma, MBE and Mr. Arun Maheshwari, managing director of Vani Prakashan-Delhi. After the Vote of Thanks was presented by Antareepa Thakur Mukherjee, the programme concluded with a dinner hosted by Mrs. Faiza Khawaja of Oxford Business College.

Kulshreshtha, Pratyaksha Sinha, Neelima Adhar Dalmia, Sanjeev Paliwal (Aaj Tak TV), L K Pant (Dainik Bhaskar), Dr Rajesh Kumar, Apra Kuchhal and Arun Maheshwari. The day concluded with the scintillating performance by the Dona Gangully Troupe.

The Festival came to an end with the Valedictory session, conducted by the educationist and founder of Singapore Sangam, Dr Sandhya Singh, the programme began with the felicitations of eminent Hindi authors: Shail Agrawal, Usha Raje Saxena and Kadambari Mehra, UK Hindi Samiti's teachers: Sitla Sharma and Nirja Sharma and Shivani Bhardwaj (Switzerland), educationists Dr Naresh Sharma (London University) and Dr Aruna Ajitsaria (Cambridge University), our collaborators Mr Sanmukh Bakhshi (Kavyadhara) and Mrs Jai Varma (KavyaRang, Nottingham), along with Dr Ragasudha Vinjamuri and Krishna Bajgai, Vatayan's IT team including Antareepa Thakur Mukherjee, Shivi Shrivastava, Astha Deo, Richa Jain, Ashish Mishra and Krishna Kumar, media team led by Dr Manoj Mokshendra, Shubham Rai Tripathi, and last but not the least, the excellent staff of the Oxford Business College including Salman, David Judge, Phillip, Atif, Prankit and Puru.

Dr. Padmesh Gupta presented some major proposals with a comprehensive outline and strategy in coordination of the participants to establish an international mission to promote Hindi. In the concluding statement, the Global President of Hindi Parivar, Mr Anil Sharma Joshi said that Festival is a milestone in the journey of Hindi, where eminent writers have also gathered in London for the first time after many decades, courtesy the Prabha Khaitan Foundation, with an objective to make coordinated efforts by identifying the issues of Indian languages in foreign countries.

Taking initiative in the implementation of the proposals passed in the conference, Mr Santosh Choubey, who was chairing this session, announced to hold a teaching conference in Bhopal in December 2023. He also added that his university will be happy to do the preliminary work of certification of

Hindi courses running in Britain. He reiterated his resolve to play an important role in the global campaign of Hindi. On this occasion, Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi, Secretary of Indira Gandhi Centre for Culture and Arts, assured to arrange accommodation for the Hindi students coming from Britain.



The following proposals were made:

1. An International Hindi Centre should be established to prepare an action plan, its steering committee will include representatives of major organizations working at the global level, with a special core group making efforts to take Hindi to the United Nations.
2. The next International Hindi Conference will be held in Singapore, the next International Teaching Conference will be held in Bhopal in December 2023 and the Conference of Indian Languages will be held in Delhi in January 2024 in collaboration with the global Hindi organizations.
3. The concept of Writer Village in Dehradun, is important, an action plan will be prepared to give it concrete shape.
4. Ongoing efforts for online training of Hindi will be materialized
5. An authorized standard curriculum should be created to be implemented at the global

level for working knowledge of Hindi, which also has a provision for online studies.

6. Arrangements for the stay of students of Hindi Knowledge Competition in Delhi will be made by Indira Gandhi Cultural and Arts Centre.

7. Special efforts should be made to preserve the memory of Hindi litterateurs.

8. The best 100 books will be translated from the respective languages into Hindi and vice versa. Efforts will also be made to develop a website in this regard.

9. History of migrant literature will be prepared.

10. In all Indian Missions/Embassies, an officer should be given the responsibility related to Hindi and Indian languages.

11. Special efforts will be made to prepare and disseminate children's and adolescent literature.

12. Creative Workshops will be organized on major topics of Hindi.

The chief guest, Mr Atul Kothari, head of Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Trust, praised Vatayan and its collaborators for organizing this grand festival and stressed upon the Indians living abroad to

integrate their languages in their daily life. He agreed with all the resolutions passed in the conference and assured his full cooperation in their implementation. The Valedictory Session concluded with the Vote of Thanks presented by Ms Titiksha Shah, the events manager, thanked each and every individual at a personal level, it must be put on record that she and her team excellently managed the festival.

The Frederick Pincott UK Award of the High Commission of India-London and Arts Council of England's Achievement Award winner organisation, Vatayan-UK is celebrating its 20th birthday this year. Since Lockdown, it has organised 160 programmes over the last 3 years, in which eminent authors and audiences participate from all over the world. For further information and registration details, please visit <https://www.vatayaneurope.com/festival/>

News Source: Literature Desk, Indo European Hindi Festival-London