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CONFLUENCE

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

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May - July 2025

Dance, Music and Fashion South Asian Heritage Month kicks off



Celebrating South Asian Heritage

South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM) runs from 18th July to 17th August every year. It raises the profile of British South Asian heritage and history in the UK through education, arts, culture, and commemoration, with the goal of helping people to better understand the diversity of present-day Britain.

<https://southasianheritage.org.uk>

Editorially Speaking

Dear readers,

It is my pleasure to write to you again through this issue of Confluence, which I am sure you will all enjoy reading.

In the UK, people of South Asian origin are currently celebrating South Asian Heritage Month in the major cities. South Asian culture has made a significant impact on Britain in many respects, such as food, clothing, music, and the overall ambiance of our towns and cities so this event brings about more closeness among south Asians from different countries in the region, as well as with the British public in general.

The last several months have been very troubling to the people who believe in justice and democracy. According to a UNICEF report, more than 50,000 children have reportedly been killed or injured, and nearly one million children have been repeatedly displaced in the Palestinian city of Gaza, since October 2023. Although several European countries and especially the members of G7 such as France, the UK and Canada have publicly announced that they are preparing to recognize a Palestinian state, their statements have not made any difference to Israel's attitude. They still keep blocking the aid distribution to Gaza and as a result it has caused prolonged starvation and untold misery to the children, elderly and other vulnerable group of people. Even though we have carried articles and editorials about the ongoing conflicts in various parts of the world, and voiced our concerns against injustice, I would like to stress that we, as the learned community of writers, should do more through our writings.

I thank all our writers who have done an excellent job by sending varied contributions. As always, I look forward to receiving your work for our future issues too. We would like to have your submissions for the next issue as soon as possible so that we will be able to release it on time.

Happy reading!

Vijay Anand

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The story of mass graves in Sri Lanka

by MOHAMED AYUB (Courtesy: Daily Mirror, Sri Lanka)

The reports about finding skeletal remains of children from what now seems to be a mass grave at Chemmani, the entrance to Jaffna city, inevitably remind the writer of a similar scenario that occurred some forty years ago, in 1984.

It was a time when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) did not monopolise the armed struggle against the Sri Lankan security forces. The Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), one of the several Tamil groups that were then attempting to outshine each other, had launched a massive attack on the Chavakachcheri police station and captured the whole armoury.

Not experienced with such a humiliating defeat at the hands of a Tamil armed group before, the Sri Lankan government's response was unprecedentedly brutal; the armed forces rampaged in Jaffna with indiscriminate firing and deaths of hundreds of civilians resulting in. However, with strict censorship in place, newspapers were struggling to tell the world what was going on in Jaffna. It was a time when the internet had not even heard of and the state-owned radio and a TV station related to a government minister were the only media outlets functioning in the country, apart from the newspapers.

One Tamil newspaper carried a long list of "terrorists" who were killed during the military operation, with their age, and there were 'individuals'

who were less than five years old in the list.

Skeletons of over 40 people have now been unearthed from the site at Chemmani, where excavation has been carried out since February. It was a child's skeleton with a school bag and another smaller one with a toy, which were found among the findings of the excavation that reminded the writer of this story of young "terrorists" of 1984.

The United Nations High

Leader of the National Freedom Front (NFF), Wimal Weerawansa and former Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara attempted to suggest that the remains unearthed from the Chemmani mass grave were those of the people, including the armed forces personnel killed by the LTTE, which cannot be ruled out legally, until a forensic examination is carried out. However, nobody would accept their suggestion until such a forensic examination proves it. On the other hand, if at least they believed what they suggest, their opposition to the UN High Commissioner's visit to the site is pointless.

As many people already know, Chemmani had been a talking point some thirty years ago as well, after the bodies of Krishanthi Kumaraswami, an 18-year-old schoolgirl, her mother, her brother and a neighbour were found buried there in 1996. The girl had been gang raped and killed by army soldiers, and the others who had gone in search of her had also been murdered later. Six soldiers were found guilty of the brutal crime in 1998 and sentenced to death. One soldier,

Somaratne Rajapakse, had told the court after his conviction that he did not kill anybody, but only buried the bodies.

In a statement from the dock, he had stated that "300 to 400 bodies" lay in mass graves near Chemmani and offered to identify the sites if investigators took him there. His statement corroborated the reports that were circulating those days that around 600 people had gone missing



Picture- Sakuna M. Gamage



Picture by Journalist Shabesh

Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, who visited Sri Lanka last month, also visited Chemmani and met relatives of people who disappeared during the war between the armed forces and the LTTE. However, many southern politicians were not happy with the excavation nor with the visit by the UN human rights chief to the site. Only small leftist political parties seem to be keen about the findings of the mass grave at Chemmani.

during “Operation Riviresa”, launched by the armed forces in 1995 to recapture the Jaffna Peninsula, then held by the LTTE. With Rajapaksa’s assistance, 15 bodies were later found buried in the area, but legal actions were discontinued subsequently due to administrative snags.

Mass graves were not confined to Chemmani nor to Northern and Eastern Provinces, nor to the ethnic

Jayewardene sent Brigadier Tissa Weeratunga to Jaffna in 1979, directing him to “finish it off” before the end of the year, and Tamil media reported heavy casualties. The outcome, in fact, was totally opposite to what Jayewardene expected.

The unprovoked first massacre in the country took place on September 10, 1984, when a passenger bus plying from Colombo to Jaffna was waylaid at

have also come under attack by the LTTE, where hundreds were murdered. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, has documented hundreds of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim villages where massacres of civilians took place during three decades of war.

The death toll at the hands of the armed forces and the pro-government vigilante groups during the second insurrection of the JVP in the late

Editor’s Note: Since the publication of this article skeletons of over 140 people have been unearthed from the site at Chemmani, where excavations are still continuing since February this year.

conflict. They were obviously a result of mass killings or massacres for which all armed entities, Sri Lankan armed forces, the police, Indian forces (Indian Peace Keeping Force - IPKF), pro-government paramilitary groups, the LTTE, as well as other Tamil groups and Muslim Home Guards were blamed.

Sri Lanka, after its Independence, first saw mass killings by the armed forces during the first insurrection of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971. Those violations were, in a way, legalised by the permission granted to the armed forces to dispose of dead bodies without an inquest.

With the Tamil Armed struggle intensifying, President J.R.

Rambewa and taken to Poovarasamkulam in Vavuniya, where 15 out of 47 passengers were shot dead. The army was blamed for the crime. The LTTE retaliated two months later by attacking two rehabilitation colonies for prisoners, Dollar Farm and Kent Farm in Mullaitivu District, in which 82 people were killed. They attacked two fishing villages, Kokkilai and Nayar, on the following day, killing 11 people.

These attacks were avenged in the same month in various places in the area, and both the belligerent parties took turns attacking civilians in Sinhalese and Tamil villages, killing hundreds of people in subsequent years. Since 1990, Muslim villages

eighties exceeded 60,000, according to unofficial reports. Mass graves were found in many places in the country, such as Hokandara, Sooriyakanda and Wanawasala.

Although people of all ethnicities lie in these mass graves, only what happened to “us” is always highlighted, ignoring or denying the similar plights undergone by “others.” Also, hundreds of such incidents have been forgotten, while only a few are being commemorated or at least rarely talked about. Justice is being sought only for a few incidents that occurred during the separatist war, but responses to those demands are tightly tied to the very political survival of those in power.



A Masterclass in Poetry

Poem Before the Poem



Yogesh Patel

A preamble

Don't start a poem just because some poetic words or a flash of an idea caught you. The real poem begins before that—in a quantum state, where nothing has quite formed yet. Like particles popping in and out of a quantum foam, a poem before the poem is pure presence. It hasn't arrived—it aches to.

This is the realm that cannot be taught—only entered. You don't write a poem, you arrive at one, by attuning yourself to a strange hum, a flicker, a pressure in the chest. It is not a technique. It is a state of being. What you are about to shape is not a product, but a field. A vibrating, pre-verbal atmosphere made of tensions, half-images, memory-fragments, and deep unresolved questions. That's the secret: a good poem rarely answers. It throws the reader into chaos, into startling unresolved possibilities.

So: begin before you begin. Write from the raw bag of contexts before narrative, before clarity. Don't tame it with logic. Let it breathe its own mist. Let your impulse slip, unguarded and alive.

Step 1: Begin with Tension, Not Intention

Don't begin with an idea—it will flatten the poem-scape. Begin with pressure, unease, a vivid feeling that doesn't yet have words. Ask: what here wants to speak, but hasn't found how? A poem's origin and often it as a being is not clarity, but ache. Let your lines follow that pulse.

Step 2: Practice Image-Mapping

Take one object alive from your ambience—a pebble, a teacup, an insect wing. Now, without logic, list 5 things it reminds you of. Then list 5 emotions they evoke. You're not looking for meaning, you're listening for atmosphere. A hardest graft for a poet. This is Where metaphor is born—not as decoration, but as intuitive mapmaking.

Step 3: Sit Inside the Silence

Choose a phrase that won't leave you—a dream fragment, a line overheard. Now sit with it. No writing. Just repeat it mentally for 10 minutes. Let it echo across your raw material. See what new paths open. Silence here isn't absence; it's a charged presence. What shows up in that hush is often truer than anything written in haste.

Step 4: Write a False Start

Draft something intentionally wrong. Avoid your strongest impulse. Create chaos. Disrupt. In the wreckage, one image may keep tugging at you. That's your door. Don't write to finish; write to discover. Absolutely fail, then listen to the ruin.

Step 5: Use Intuitive Interruption

If your poem begins to feel too neat—make it a mesh—at this stage, of course. Add a line that makes no sense. Something jarring. This break invites the unexpected. It cracks open a deeper layer where meaning isn't obvious but felt.

Step 6: Let Images Collide

Pick two emotionally linked but logically unrelated objects—a bone and a bicycle, a clock and a garden hose. Write a stanza where they simply exist together. Don't explain. Let the juxtaposition vibrate. But remember, there has to be some coherence. Maybe it is the message of the poem, remotely standing with its baton as a conductor. You're training instinct to choose image over reason.

Step 7: Write a Ghost Draft

Now write the poem no one will read. Read it aloud to yourself. Let it be messy, even bad. Then listen. Something will shimmer—one line, one turn. Keep that. Let the rest go. This is how the real poem introduces itself: not perfectly, but earnestly.

Step 8: Return to the First Line

Circle back to your first impulse. Does it still hold? If not, thank it and let it go. If yes, it must now earn its place by what the poem has become. The "poem before the poem" has done its work—it led you here.

Let's drop anchor with a real example—my own poem:

*a river breaks its history—
on a stone
—fish do not wish to bang their heads on
the rocks—
flow avoids what is in gull's eyes
—it is always a catch—
but what
if they all dare to forget*

*the river breaks its name
but still keeps it...*

This poem didn't start with a message. It wasn't planned. It began with a feeling—an unsettled flicker of thought around history and guilt. The title came first. It tumbled into the first line. And the poem followed—not because I willed it, but because I listened. The metaphors found each other through mood and tone. There was no neat arc, no conclusion. The final line arrived, unexpected, like a voice stepping forward out of the mist. That's the point. The poem before the poem isn't a blueprint—it's a field of weather, a nervous system, a chemistry. You don't

TRY THIS: Your Exercise

1. Set aside 20 quiet minutes.
2. Begin with a lingering moment—not the full story, just a flicker (a gesture, a colour, a sound).
3. Write down five textures it reminds you of.
4. Write one line from that texture.
5. Step away. Return ten minutes later.
6. Write one more line that deepens or contradicts it.
7. Read aloud. What surprises you?

Yogesh Patel received an MBE for literature in 2020. His latest collection of poems, *The Rapids*, is published by The London Magazine. Patel's poem appears on the Poetry Wall of the Royal Society of Literature. His poem is also archived on the Moon. Featured on the wall of Cambridge University's Language Library, He runs Skylark Publications UK and the Masala project to promote literature. Extensively published, an award-winning poet, he has also received the Freedom of the City of London.

Book review

Saravanan Kuppusamy's Science – Fiction Thriller

PARALLELS

A Review by Priya Muthukannan

What if every choice we make births another universe? What if science, myth, memory, and emotion converge in an uncharted realm that is both wondrous and terrifying? These are the questions at the core of *Parallels*, a remarkable science-fiction thriller by Sai R. Anand and Saravanan Kuppusamy, a novel that seamlessly blends cutting-edge theory, ancient wisdom, and raw human drama.

At first glance, *Parallels* is a gripping interdimensional saga: an archaeological discovery leads to time travel, teleportation, and parallel worlds. But as one delves deeper, it becomes evident that this is not just a tale of cosmic speculation, it's a deeply human story, powered by characters who struggle with love, loss, fear, and destiny.

David, the novel's protagonist, is not your typical hero. A brilliant yet emotionally torn archaeologist, his journey begins at an excavation site near Brighton where a hidden chamber is unearthed, housing relics and remains that defy every known law of history and biology. The narrative catapults forward when David encounters a mysterious green gemstone, one that appears to heal fatal wounds and connect dimensions. But this newfound power comes at a cost. As David's mind stretches across timelines and worlds, so too does his sense of self fracture, leaving him unsure what is real and what is memory.

What makes David a compelling character is not his intellect or courage, but his vulnerability. His relationship with his younger brother, Vicky, is beautifully drawn, especially in the emotionally charged chapter where Vicky, feverish and desperate, yearns only to hear David's voice. This sibling bond—fragile, fierce, and filled with unspoken grief—grounds the story's fantastical elements in genuine pathos.

Jane and June exist as mirrored reflections—two versions of the same

woman across different worlds. Jane, a scientist grounded in logic, is David's closest ally, challenging his theories and grounding his quest with intellectual rigour and emotional depth. June, her counterpart in a parallel dimension, is mystical, intuitive, and action packed. While Jane navigates reality with scepticism, June embraces the unknown with grace. Their dual presence highlights the novel's central theme of parallel existence, exploring how identity, love, and destiny shift across dimensions, yet remain hauntingly familiar. Together, they embody reason and revelation.



And then there is Cyrus, a character shrouded in mystery. Introduced later in the narrative, Cyrus embodies the spiritual depth of the novel. A silent force moving between dimensions, he serves as both guide and enigma, a being who is far beyond human. Cyrus's cryptic interventions add a mythic texture to the story, evoking the presence of ancient seers or extra-terrestrial sages. His interactions with Vicky suggest that the universe's secrets are not meant to be solved, but experienced and that wisdom often comes from surrender, not control.

The novel's structure is cinematic, unfolding in crisp, fast-paced chapters that move like scenes from a science-fiction blockbuster. The action sequences, particularly the ambush in the underground chamber, the firefights, and the dimension-crossing finale, are executed with visual flair and dramatic tension. But what sets *Parallels* apart is its refusal to rely solely on spectacle. The philosophical undertones, discussions of DNA patterns predating scientific discovery, the ethics of parallel existence, and the merging of myth with science, echo the works of Philip K. Dick and Carl Sagan, while retaining a unique South Asian perspective.

The language of the book is both elegant and accessible, with poetic flourishes that elevate the prose without slowing the pace. The setting is international, moving between Worthing, Brighton, and unnamed ancient lands, yet the themes are universal: the thirst for knowledge, the burden of memory, and the longing for redemption.

Parallels is also a commentary on the dangers of unbridled ambition. The novel's antagonists, equipped with weapons and agendas, are not alien invaders but humans, governments, militaries, and scientists, who seek to control that which they do not understand. The result is chaos, destruction, and loss, a stark reminder that true power lies not in dominance, but in harmony.

In the end, *Parallels* offers more than entertainment. It is an invitation to explore, to question, and to feel. It challenges the reader to consider whether time is linear, whether identity is fixed, and whether grief can span galaxies. It asks: What if love, memory, and consciousness are the bridges between worlds?

This is a novel that will appeal to lovers of speculative fiction, fans of mytho-scientific thrillers, and anyone who has ever looked up at the stars

and wondered: Is there another me out there?

With Parallels, Anand and Saravanan Kuppusamy have delivered not just a thrilling debut, but a visionary work of art, one that expands our imagination while rooting us firmly in the human heart.



Dr Priya Muthukannan is a committed researcher specialising in Business Information Systems, with over two decades of experience in higher education, research and practice across four countries —India, the UAE, Singapore, and Australia. Her

academic work explores how digital transformation and technological innovations shape the evolution of incumbent banks toward open ecosystems. Beyond academia, Dr Priya is the Director of the Australian Registered Charity Society for Immortality Research Ltd, actively contributing to strategic direction and governance.

Book announcement

Anita Nahal's 'Animals' *Prose poems on sentience Decency and indecency*



This is not a collection that tells people to eat or not eat meat. That's a personal choice. It's a short collection that is entirely composed of prose poems speaking to the mistreatment of animals by some humans. This topic's been close to the writer's heart since her childhood—finally she was able to write poetry on it.

Poems in the book address some of the major issues of global animal rights, such as general cruelty to animals, animal testing, animal abandonment, animal experimentation, animal races, animal blood banks, animals in entertainment, animals & fashion, and so forth.

Here are snippets from the blurbs:

" With compelling storytelling and rich rhythmic language, Dr. Anita Nahal urges us to "stop pedestalizing" ourselves...

~John Burroughs, 2022-2023 U.S. National Beat Poet Laureate

"This collection of poems, painful at times in their acute graphic detail on how humanity has fallen from grace, is in essence a call to the prophecy of a new consciousness and a must-read...

~Dr. Gerrit Dielissen, professor of Sociology, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

"The loftiest goal of any poet is to engender empathy. Animals: prose poems on sentience, decency, and indecency by Dr. Anita Nahal attempts this through a direct approach. ~Candice Louisa Daquin, Senior Editor, Indie Blu(e) Publishing, Associate Editor, Raw Earth Ink. Editor, Tint Journal, the Pine Cone Review, Parcham Literary Magazine.

Available on Amazon at: <https://a.co/d/ifsGeYh> or <https://kelsaybooks.com/products/animals-prose-poems-on-sentience-decency-and-indecency?pos=2&sid=7bac51b7e&ss=r>

Of Fear, Fragility, Flight and Empathy!

by Mahua Sen

"We live as if we were never going to die, and die as if we had never lived."

-Paulo Coelho

Today, while traveling to Bangalore on an Air India flight, I felt something shift inside me. A disconcerting trepidation gate-crashed itself upon my heart. A subtle pandemonium, just like the calm before the storm. Something akin to an uninvited fear. Perhaps... aerophobia? Is it even possible for a frequent flyer like me? I thought to myself.

I've flown countless times. Just two days before the tragic Air India disaster, I had flown back from Paris

*What if this is the last flight I ever take?
What would happen to my children? Would they cope? Would they stand strong in a world without me in it? Have I given them enough strength, wisdom, resilience, tenderness, to face life's sharp edges on their own? The thoughts stung with a sharp precision.*

Then another deluge cascaded in.
Have I said everything I needed to say to the ones I love? The ones who

*final structure? The dreams just beginning to manifest, reaching toward me like tendrils of light. So achingly close, I could almost reach out and touch them, feel them, hold them in my palm?
Would they now remain like an unfinished verse?
Fleeting possibilities. Unrealized echoes of 'what ifs'?*

The boarding announcement jolted me from my thoughts, but the fog of questions didn't budge, like rebel they



to New Delhi on the very same airline. Without fear, without hesitation. Over the years, Air India had become a familiar skyward companion. But today, as I sat waiting at the boarding gate, a weird disquiet trampled me down. Slow, silent, and suffocating. My heart quivered with an urgency I could not explain. It almost felt my chest beating in my throat, as if to warn me of its escape. A thousand questions clouded my mind like unwelcome weeds.

carried me through my darkest nights and basked in glory with me during the sunny days? Have I expressed my gratitude to my silent pillars of strength who never demanded recognition, just stood beside me, quietly? Or have I let the pandemonium of everyday rush eclipse those essential, endearing gestures?

And what of the work still unfinished? The projects still smouldering in the kiln, taking shape, the ideas half-baked, waiting to be moulded into the

kept nudging. I stepped onto the aircraft, heart still heavy with its stubborn angst. Settled into my seat, I tried to compose myself, but the unease clung to me. Moments later, the cabin crew announced a secondary security check of all overhead baggage. No explanation. Just the sudden sound of zippers and the clickety-clack of shoes up and down the aisle. It felt arbitrary. It delayed the flight by forty minutes. And with every minute, my sense of disquiet deepened.

Finally when there was the final announcement of departure I took a deep breath, my lips mumbled the name of the God I follow, almost involuntarily.

The cabin crew began their standard safety demonstration, but somehow, it felt different today. I could feel a strange, unspoken heaviness in the milieu. The cabin crew wore expressions that were calm, professional, but if you observed closely, there was something else camouflaged under that customary composure. There was a quiet sorrow, perhaps a sense of helplessness, or a silent apology, I cannot name. They didn't say anything in particular. They didn't have to. Sometimes, you hear the pauses between words, in the silences, in the quiet reticence. And often, that is more eloquent than words.

I realized that I, like many others perhaps, had formed my own judgments and apprehensions after the fatal crash, fuelled by the relentless cacophony of the media. But as I observed the crew doing their jobs with grace, with quiet dignity, I felt my perspective changing in a jiffy. It struck me that it was an accident. Tragic, yes! But still, an accident. And accidents, by nature, are unpredictable. They can occur anywhere, at any moment, in the most unassuming situations. It can happen the moment you step out of the house, or even within the confines of your home. In an instant, I felt a deep sense of gratitude and reverence towards the pilots, the unsung heroes who fly, transcending several uncertainties, the crew who show up every day despite the glum in the air, for all the silent warriors who work tirelessly behind the scenes to make our journeys safe. They are human beings before anything else. They too feel, they grieve, they carry on. And they deserve our empathy.

My heart, still heavy, found a certain peace. Not because fear had faded, but because empathy had taken root. Life is fragile. It always has been. We often forget. We get caught in endless routines and rush through time, forgetting that nothing is guaranteed, not even the next breath. Maybe

that's why we need to pause. To reflect. To breathe. To simply be. It's vital! Perhaps that's why it's important to say the words to people who matter. To forgive, to let go of grudges, to love more freely, and to express our gratitude before the moment slips away. For, life is transient. Who knows – “*Kal Ho Na Ho!*”



Mahua Sen is an author based in Hyderabad. Her recent book, *Nostalgia: Crafting a Home Within*, published by Red River, became an Amazon Bestseller in Asian Literature. Her forthcoming work, *The Dead Fish* (Rupa Publications), is an English translation of *Machhli Mari Hui*, a critically acclaimed novel by renowned Hindi writer Rajkamal Chaudhary. The book is scheduled for release soon.

Rains

A poem by Ananya S Guha Shillong, India

In rains there is flutter
Sattering of poetry
Leavening thought,
The mind. The rains scatter
My upholstery, being;
In rains windows open
Doors close, ask for yes
Get a no
In rains there is mobility
Upward, downward
Memories are sprightly
In rains I am the peacock
Colours moving senses
And in rains the sprightly
Become dormant absorbing self.
I pause, glance at rains
Shaking my head
Dormant is the mind
I walk with the rains
Stupendously. Raucously.
Shout in the rains.
These rains clutter, are cluster
Of thoughts. Know it all the while
That these rains are a dream
Lying supinely at the feet.
Wayward are these rains
Speckled dreams
I walk on, delirious that they
Will abate.
One day.

Book review

Review of Santosh Bakaya: *Sunset in a Cup*

Radha Chakravarty

Reviewer Credit: Radha Chakravarty, writer, critic and translator, was Professor of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies at Dr B R Ambedkar University Delhi

"I write from the heart", declares Santosh Bakaya in an interview with Lopamudra Banerjee. "[W]hen I write, my heart takes over and the head rides pillion, unable even to put in a word edgewise."

[<https://cafedissensusblog.com/2015/04/25/an-interview-with-author-dr-santosh-bakaya/>]. In *Sunset in a Cup*, it is the language of the heart that we hear.

Santosh's poetry bubbles with joy at the small delights that life has to offer, pulsates with the thrill of ever-new encounters with the natural world, but also militates against the hatred spawned by human history. For all its effervescence, this is socially committed poetry. "Life was a celebration, why all this hate?" she demands in "The Cloud", counterpointing the natural beauty of sky, birds, trees, flowers and bees, with the devastation wrought by the atom bomb in Nagasaki, in 1945. She protests: "When there is so much beauty around, why do we hunt for chunks of hatred...!" (Introduction, 9). And to achieve this perspective, poetry signals the way. In this increasingly violent world, the poet has a duty. In "Nocturnal Whispers," a cloud urges the poet:

You call yourself a writer?

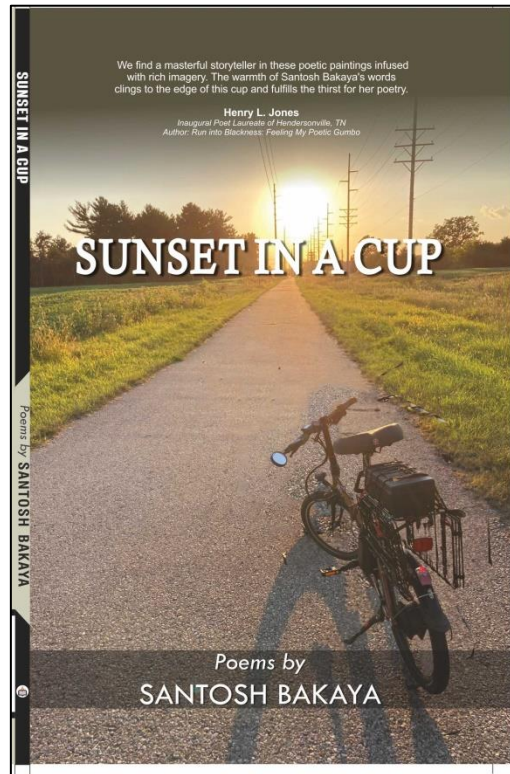
Why can't you write away this asphyxiating existence,

This uncompromising cruelty, this ruthless indifference? ...

Do something. Do something."
(27)

As an alternative to hatred, her poems conjure up longings for peace, beauty, sympathy, kindness and harmony. To project this dream, Santosh uses the recurring image of the

robin. The robin features in the book's epigraph, which, like the title, is taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson: "Bring me the sunset in a cup,/ Reckon the morning's flagons up / ... Write me how many notes there be/ In the new Robin's ecstasy". For this is also green poetry, with a profound sense of being part of an endangered ecological system, to which we owe a great responsibility



In Santosh's universe, ordinary, seemingly unimportant things, become the touchstone of deeper realities. "It is the small things of life that give me the utmost pleasure", she says (Lopamudra interview). For Santosh, "simple" does not mean "simplistic", though. "Sinister Shivers" opens with a man brandishing a pistol at "some scared women" (32), but finds a counterpoint in ordinary yet comforting

everyday details: a lapwing at the window, an old man trying out the keyboard gifted by his grandson, a neighbour pounding ginger for tea and a mother sparrow brooding over her nest. The eggs, waiting to hatch, bear a message: "Freedom was just round the corner" (33). Significantly, an image from the natural world shows the way.

For in Santosh Bakaya's poetry, humans are never far away from the realm of plants, animals, birds, trees, sky and water. Nature inspires art, and the two have an organic connection. In "The Rabbit in the Myrtle", the persona plants a seed that grows into a poem. "That Elusive Home" presents the parallel predicaments of a pair of bulbuls shrieking helplessly because their nest has fallen off the tree, and a homeless family languishing on the pavement. But even in their anguish, they dream of the idea of home, in a lovely lyrical fantasy:

They are home, tangoing in the mustard fields,

Where a couple of robins sing a cheerful song,

Perched on a scarecrow's wooden arm, unafraid.

And a butterfly rests on a blade of grass, thoughtful. (118).

In such poems, the poet's heart goes out to those who are deprived, neglected by society and pushed to the margins. "The Tired Farmer" speaks of human labour, and the power of healing that comes with sympathy. "The Cap Seller" contrasts the penury of the man selling Santa caps on Christmas eve, while Christmas Father is busy filling the stockings of children in affluent homes. "Uncomfortable rattle" (49) is a poem that rattles our conscience, for (unlike the "compassionate owl"), we too, like the poetic persona, are likely to

deliberately ignore the old beggar under the bridge at night, rattling his tin for alms.

Santosh Bakaya's love of reading is evident in the many allusions to writers from India and elsewhere, and to artists and other personages, including a poem addressed to "Vincent". The language too is alive with metaphor, wordplay and often, a mix of wry wit and deep tenderness.

These poems present a world that is dark and beautiful at the same time. Hope, faith and a determination to survive are the things that keep us going. The cycle of nature reminds us that even as some things end, there is a promise of renewal and fresh beginnings. The poems express a spirit of buoyancy, resilience and the will to survive. Hope is always there, just beyond the horizon. "[G]rey clouds disperse, making way for a blue and aquamarine sky – a blue that drives away my residual blues" (Introduction, 11). In "The Eternal Trance" (57), the endangered oak tree puts up a fight,

determined to survive. "No longer did it lurch, but stood upright with all its might."

These poems express an infectious, irrepressible joy in being alive, here and now, in this world. Poetry is seen as a special gift that allows the writer to develop what she calls "my own narrative", in the face of the darker side of our world. In "The Rooster of my Memory", the poet claims that she possesses what she calls "a vulnerable strength" (52). Perhaps that is the best way to describe the spirit of Santosh Bakaya's poetry.

About the Author: Santosh Bakaya is an internationally acclaimed novelist, poet, essayist, biographer, creative writing mentor, columnist and TEDx speaker. Her TEDx talk -The Myth of Writer's Block is very popular in creative writing circles.

Radha Chakravarty is a widely published writer, critic and translator.



Subliminal her recent collection of poetry, was listed by Ars Notoria (UK) as one of the best books from South Asia in 2024. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. She contributed to Pandemic: A Worldwide Community Poem (Muse Pie Press, USA), nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2020. She has published over 20 books, including translations of major Bengali writers, anthologies of South Asian writing, and critical studies of Tagore, Mahasweta Devi and contemporary women writers. She was Professor of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies at Ambedkar University Delhi.

Poem: ON THE OTHER SIDE by LAKSMISREE BANERJEE

Stars lie buried in the sunshine
A revolve, a light, a darkness there
As my six becomes your nine
Beyond this there lies another sphere ---

The glow worms flying minuscules
Diadems of fire unawares
Spreading light in dotted capsules ---

As night tiptoes from the other side
The moon in shimmer also arrives
Day or night, nothing absolute abides---

My sun is your moon and stars
Your sun is my stars and moon
Will you look beyond your own swoon?

Can you ever see the whole rainbow?
Except the arched one so seasonal
Many harvests from many seeds phenomenal ---

The horizon makes the day meet night
My smiles in surfeit flood your blight
My love or tears still not in your sight ---

Look the other side and this side too
As the twilight weds the seas and skies
Truth dawns from the womb of night ---

When was the part not a whole
Or the whole not a part?
Perspectives split can still merge ---

Look how the ring side
Is in sync with the other side
Look how darkness embraces light
With empathy and delight ---



Laksmisree Banerjee is a Multi-award winning Poet, Litterateur, International Sr. Fulbright and Commonwealth Scholar. As a Fmr. Vice Chancellor and University Professor of English and Cultural Studies she has taught in premier Universities of the world. Widely anthologised she has Twelve Books of Poetry and several Academic Publications to her credit.

The Mind is Its Own Place

Rashmi Sahi

What happens when voices of the past are louder than that of the present?

As I watched this strapping man of 42, slumped in his comfortable counselling chair, sobbing uncontrollably in front of me, in our first session, normally meant for building rapport and understanding the decision that prompted the person to seek therapy. My usual question of 'What brings you here today? How can I help you?' was met with some muffled reply, so different from the baritone voice that I had interacted with as I led him to the room, where we were now sitting in. His suit initially conveyed authority. Now here he was dissolved in tears, his broad shoulders shaking intermittently, hunched with whatever pain he was carrying inside that had brought him here. I let him cry, extending a tissue box that I keep handy for situations like this. His eyes still lowered, tears streaming on his sun-burnt face, he dutifully takes a few and uses them. Gradually the sobbing stops and he regains composure, and begins to answer the question that I had posed 15 mins back that had resulted in this state.

Beneath the barrage of tears lay a vulnerable struggle, one that he began to articulate as he described the challenges he was facing at work. He shared that he has recently joined this well-known bank's IT department at quite a senior position, about 3 months back, outperforming 20 candidates in several rounds of interviews to secure this enviable position. His first month or two went into understanding the organisation and adapting to the new culture, understanding his new responsibilities and knowing his team. It was time to set his targets for the next six months and present the strategies to the directors of various departments. He knew what his vision and was very clear of the pathway, however whenever he tried to put that on paper, he would become anxious and would freeze. He would sit staring at the computer screen, typing and then deleting with the same speed. According to him, if someone would have watched him from a distance, they would have thought he was on fire. However, reality was starkly different. Sitting in front

of the screen was not a self-assured leader, but a terrified person who doubted him to the point of paralysis. Nothing moved forward. Each sentence was being obsessed over and being deleted constantly. The presentation was going nowhere. Late night stints at the office, sleepless nights, loss of appetite was adding on to the problem and it was then his wife convinced him to meet a mental health professional and seek help.

The Burden of the Past:

As he composed himself, his mind drifted back to a memory—one that had shaped his deepest fears. My next leading question of when and how it started, mentally transported him into his childhood home. He was a 9-year-old boy in Grade 3, hiding under the bed, clutching his report card in his hand. He didn't know how long he was hiding there for, but he could feel that it must have been long as his legs were hurting, and he was hungry. His mum was at his grandma's house and his dad was about to come home and it was him he was really hiding from and of course from his feeling of shame of again having messed up. As much as he tried making his dad happy and to seek his approval, he had never been able to get it. His father, who came from a very poor family had risen to respectable position in life through sheer grit and determination, fighting against all odds and ruthlessly cruising through the tough life. He was able to get married to a woman from a well-off family and was raising a family in an affluent neighbourhood and it is here that 9-year-old boy was hiding in terror. He knew his dad would not ever physically punish him, but this sensitive boy feared his verbal lashing, his disappointment. Last time, when he got an A and not an A+ in the English class quiz, that look had caused him nightmares and for days afterwards his stutter was bad. This is why he was hiding, to avoid that look of disappointment. It was his father's judgement that scared him the most, the silence that screamed 'You can't do anything right.' He couldn't hide there for ever. When he was ultimately found, his report card narrated a story of a brilliant

student at top of the class but there was one problem. The teacher had written a comment that said his handwriting could be better. The brilliant result was all forgotten and his father obsessed on the comment and for next one week, this is all he heard from his father: his disappointment in him. The little boy was ready to put effort to improve. He wanted his dad to teach him the skill, but his dad only had judgement and no help.

This treatment was carried on in different forms and shapes into his adulthood till he was able to leave home for university. However, the damage was done. He carried within him that judgmental voice of his dad - 'Why can't you do anything right?' echoing in every failure. Despite being intelligent and skilful, he felt like an imposter. That judgment was engraved in his brain, like a part of his cellular physiology. **Even in his marriage, he constantly struggled, fearing 'You'll never be good enough', always seeking her approval before making decisions, big or small.**

Authority figures of any form transmuted into his father's voice, and he braced for the familiar lashings: **'Is this really your best?'** His negative thoughts, anxious feelings, and avoidant behaviors were so tightly interlinked... It was never just his own mind judging him—it was as if his father whispering, **'Disappointing, again.'** And at 42, with the presentation coming up, he was flooded with self-doubt, and he felt that this will be the time when he will be outed in front of the higher ups in the company as an incompetent man who 'could never do anything right'. It was the voice of his dad that was haunting him. He was displaying the Cognitive Behavioural Triangle of Thought, Action and Emotion interaction. The thought of presenting in this important meeting created the self-doubt created emotion of anxiety and helplessness, leading to either doing nothing or overthinking. Something that was said or done in childhood still traumatised this man almost 4 decades later.

The Cycle of Trauma:

He acknowledged that his dad had best of intentions, and he wanted him to do better in life, but even with this awareness, he was suffering. Self-doubt and low self-esteem had followed him all these years. He had coped with this through people pleasing, negative self-talk, overachieving, seeking external validations and reassurance. After years of struggling, he had decided to understand the root problem. That was not all. He was also using the same disciplining method with his own children, setting the next generation on their own struggle. He was here to learn to break this generational trauma cycle which had started with his grandfather and which now he was passing on to his children.

Path to Healing

By the end of the session his whole demeanor had changed. There was a new sliver of hope which had always been hiding from him. *The bravest step—regaining his own voice, separate from his father's—had been taken. It was now time to target the cycle head-on: cognitive restructuring to challenge 'Why can't you get it right?' with evidence ('You outperformed 20 candidates'), exposure exercises to tolerate imperfection (e.g., drafting presentations without deleting sentences), and mindfulness to detach from the critic's echo. His homework for next week: To write a letter : What would I say to my 9-year old self—and to break the generational chain. Next week, he'd bring his first imperfect draft to session, deliberately unedited.*

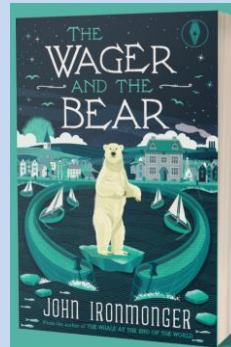
Milton was right: the mind is its own place. But it's also the most amazing student—not with a father's harshness, but with the quiet resolve of a man who's finally learning to speak back.



Dr Rashmi Sahi is a Hong Kong based academician and a Mental Health counsellor.

John Ironmonger Receives Prestigious Fly on the Wall Press Copper Award for "The Wager and the Bear"

**Acclaimed poet Yogesh Patel MBE sponsors
Recognition of outstanding literary work**



Reported by Belle Kenyon
Courtesy: [flyonthewallpress.co.uk](https://www.flyonthewallpress.co.uk)

In its seventh publishing year, Manchester independent publisher Fly on the Wall Press launches a one-off Copper Award, organised by poet Yogesh Patel. John Ironmonger has been honoured with the inaugural Fly on the Wall Press Copper Award, a prestigious recognition that celebrates his climate change novel "The Wager and the Bear" as a publication of exceptional quality and also recognises his seventh publication to date.

Ironmonger's publishing career spans seven remarkable publications, including 'The Whale at the End of the World', an international bestseller, and 'The Notable Brain of Maximilian Ponder' which was a Costa-shortlisted debut. His socially-conscious and climate change centred works mark him as a significant voice in contemporary literature.

Managing Director Isabelle Kenyon, Fly on the Wall Press, said: "*Exceptional literature has the power to illuminate truth and inspire change. 'The Wager and the Bear' achieves both, making it a worthy recipient of this recognition. It is rare to find climate fiction with rich, heart-warming characters.*"

The award, organised by acclaimed poet Yogesh Patel, recognises literature that combines artistic excellence with meaningful engagement on pressing global issues.

This recognition of John Ironmonger's climate-focused storytelling underscores the press's commitment to championing voices that combine compelling narrative with urgent social relevance.

About 'The Wager and the Bear':

When young idealist Tom publicly humiliates politician Monty in a Cornish pub, it sparks a simmering feud that cascades through their intertwined lives. The consequences of their argument, and the deadly wager they strike, will cascade down the decades. Years later, they find themselves a long way from St Piran onto a colossal iceberg drifting south away from Greenland, their only companion a starving polar bear. This is a heart-stopping tale of anger, tragedy, and enduring love, cast against the long unfolding backdrop of an irreversible global crisis.

Source: <https://www.flyonthewallpress.co.uk/blog>

The Cosmic Wonders

By Meenakshi Mohan

Enchanted

*I watched
from my window, the full moon
spreading its pearly chroma
on the brink of the deep blue brine
and the waves nimbly
dancing hide and seek
in its silver glory*

Enraptured

*I cognized
the welkin from far above
draped in sapphire hues
crossed its threshold
to kiss the ocean's edge –
It was breathtakingly beautiful,
a divine revelation.*

Entranced

*I witnessed
the ocean and sky all wrapped
in cerulean, blue in the quiet of the night
only the ripples of the waves
resonated the rhapsodies of love.*

Mesmerized

*I beheld
the ocean's vast embrace so deep,
it seemed to hold the sky in thrall,
a divine cotillion
where Amphitrite and Zeus entwined.*

Ah!

*The poor pebbled beach
along the shore
parched and desolate
waited still, longing for a kiss.
while a delicate breeze
carried forth a mystical melody
was it the raag malkauns?*

Bewildered

*I wondered
how the mystery and beauty
with a sinfonia of its own, would fade
as the dawn breaks, embers expire
leaving only echoes of a fading choir,
and the glistening stones on the shore
as a testament to the cosmic wonders.*

Notes: *Malkauns* – a classical Indian melody of the Night

Zeus – God of the sky

Amphitrite – Goddess of the sea

@meeenakshimohan January 2025



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

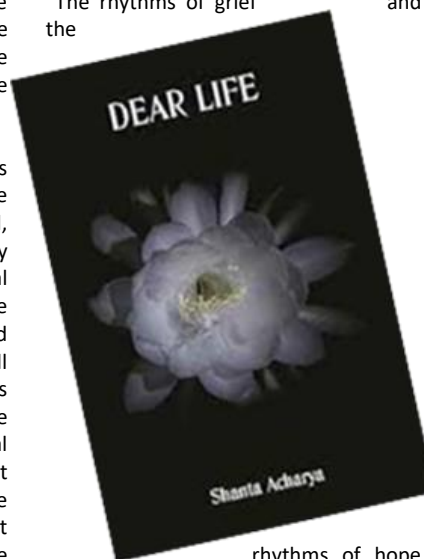
Book review

Shanta Acharya's *Dear Life* Reviewed by Mona Dash

Dear Life is Shanta Acharya's eighth collection of poetry. The cover image is of the Brahma-kamala flower, a rare flower that is often mentioned in Indian mythological stories; it takes two hours to bloom, and blooms only on one night of the year. The Shatkona star, appearing between the eight sections of the book, symbolises the fusion of the masculine and feminine as the source of all creation in Hinduism. It serves as a totem throughout the collection. Fittingly, the first and last section have only one poem each, *Being Alive* and the title poem, *Dear Life*, respectively. The aesthetics speak volumes just like the poetry.

I have read Shanta Acharya's previous collections, and these poems continue in her distinctive voice; philosophical, intelligent, and with a tinge of wry humour. The poems are often classical in their tone and not out to trick the reader in some cleverly constructed witty game, rather they arrive in all sincerity, densely constructed, both as an observer and evaluator of life and the human condition. There are several poems about lockdown in the first couple of sections, reminding us of the helpless loneliness felt by many at that time. In "Loneliness:" 'Lying under the duvet, grief torn, I marvel / at shafts of light that lean in like angels of mercy.' The angels of mercy are seen in other poems, leaning in when the reflection has been about grief and the tribulations that life brings, and as she says in "Believing," 'May faith enter the interstices of doubt, / find fertile soil to put down roots, flower in.' In "I Can't Breathe," a poignant reminder of the death of George Floyd, the poet asks: 'what hope is there for humanity, if after / all this we fail to the right thing...' This question comes up in multiple other poems, whether implicit or as a thought that stays in the reader's mind. There are other big themes she explores, such as in "Aleppo, My Aleppo," where the devastation is explored in the voice of the city: 'My beloved city – / what have the barbarians done?' Or the war on Ukraine. In "Sunflower Seeds," she 'cannot stop thinking of sunflower seeds / an old lady gifted a young soldier defending her street.' There is nostalgia too in poems about childhood and

family. In "Taste of Childhood," she says: 'This persistence of memory is no ordinary thing – / a lifeline like mother's milk, la dolce vita homecoming.' It is in something warm and homely, that it is in the kitchen where one can imagine generations coming together in simple acts of cooking. ("This Is Where We Learn What It Means To Be Human") As Carol Rumens points out in her analysis of "Find Me," (her chosen *Guardian Poem of the Week* of 12 May 2025): "The rhythms of grief and the



rhythms of hope coexist in many of the poems in Shanta Acharya's new collection, *Dear Life*."

The poems break at times into a form like a ghazal, such as "Find Me," couplets strung together, a line of repetition running through, like in "Exile," where we read about 'gods of exile,' 'tongues of exile,' 'walk of exile,' 'lifetime in exile,' and so on, the word like a note in a song. There are poems about the many gods and goddesses in Indian mythology. "Of Gods and Goddesses" describes a young man's arousal in a shop where the walls are adorned with posters of gods and goddesses resembling sensuous film-stars, a fairly common scene in wayside shops in India. Poems like "Grant Us," "If," "Song of Praise," "Always Beginning," are prayer songs, waiting to be put into tune. "From The Book Of Transformations" is a deeply philosophical poem: I like references such as 'the earth bears the scars/ of creations, extinctions, resurrections' or

'the moon sends images of her many selves.'

As the title suggests, the collection is about life, to life, and for life. The last section almost seems inevitable when we come to it, a memorial to the poet's younger brother who passed away recently. "Where Did He Go?" a poem after Rumi, asks simply, almost with childlike innocence and sorrow: 'we go to the rooftop, confess to the stars and constellations: / we scattered his ashes in the Ganges. Where did he go?'

As a true poet, Shanta ends with saying in her poem "Dear Life": 'I have nothing else to offer, dear Life – / words are what I breathe and eat...' But these words are enough. In a world of artificiality and show, *Dear Life* is at the same time, a dirge, a wail, a reflection about the illogical, unfair, cruel things we see every day in human life, but at the same time, humorous, positive, and uplifting, just like life can be. It is worth noting that *Dear Life* received a 5-star review and was the Editor's Pick at Booklife (Publisher's Weekly) in the US. Here is a brief extract of what the editor said: "Acharya's eighth book of poetry is a transcendent blueprint for healing in a ruptured world... addressing the spiritual needs of the present day... including one illuminating thread throughout (that) explores the poet's awareness of self... that Acharya so touchingly describes..."



Mona Dash writes fiction & poetry and has won various writing awards. She is a member of The Whole Kahani, a British South Asian

Writers' Collective.

**Poems from Shanta Acharya's *Dear Life*
(LWL Books, Los Angeles and London; 2025)**

DRESSING UP IN LOCKDOWN

A pristine summer's day, sparkling like champagne,
perfect for giving my garments an airing.
At home in a bubble of my own, lounging
in pyjama and dressing gown, numbering
my days' illusions, comfort reigns over style.
My wardrobe reprimands me, cries in chorus –
saris complaining the loudest of not being
touched, embraced, admired – their silks, chiffons,
satins, crepes, georgettes, chanderis, mothballed
in tissue, chide me for starving myself
in the midst of plenty. Unable to ignore their
pleas, I wear a sari with matching jewellery,
spray myself with Nirvana and Eternity,
with a glass of bubbly watch Downton Abbey.

FORGIVENESS OF BEES

Dancing in riddles, buff tailed, they buzz and bumble
against the double-glazing – swirling poems
on ecstatic wings, praying without ceasing.
I sit cross-legged, meditating, their swing and jig
the propolis protecting me – the peace of wild things
descends like a mantle woven with blessings.
Day my boiler stopped working, the gasman found
a drift of bees dead inside – warriors, brave
as Abhimanyu who knew how to enter the maze
of life, love and war, the invincible Chakravyuha,
killed for not knowing how to exit the battlefield.
Grief-stricken, unable to warn selfless explorers
that instinct can save or destroy at will, I feel
the forgiveness of bees, tender against my skin.



Shanta Acharya was born and educated in Cuttack, Odisha. She won a scholarship to Oxford, where she was among the first batch of women admitted to Worcester College. She was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy for her work on Ralph Waldo Emerson. She served as a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University before moving to London. Her latest poetry collections are *Dear Life* (2025), her eighth, *What Survives Is The Singing* (2020) and *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (2017). www.shanta-acharya.com

A Bakery, Bollywood Legends and Music

By Deepa Vanjani

Photographs of our all time favourite singers Lata tai , Kishore Kumar, Md. Rafi and Mukesh, posters of Bollywood classics Daag, Mere Apne and Dushman, and framed newspaper clippings draw your attention as you enter Sind Bakery (no, it's not spelt Sindh in this case).

An inconspicuously prominent place on a bustling street in the old part of the city of Indore- Sind Bakery has a special place in the hearts of the people of the city.

The journey began in 1952 and has been continuing since then. Harish

There is cake cutting ceremony held every year to mark their birthdays and the cake is then shared with customers who visit the bakery on those days. Harish has been doing this for years now because he idolises these legendary singers of Bollywood. For him music is god.

On his counter we can see on old tape-recorder-cum- radio, with a collection of cassettes stacked just below. In the midst of his work, he tells me that listening to songs played on Vividh Bharti helped him learn singing. He has even been giving stage

"I sent some varieties of biscuits to Lata didi's relatives who live in Rambagh (a known locality in Indore). I was pleasantly surprised and honoured to have received a call from the legend herself to thank me. It was the greatest reward I could have asked for," recalls Lakhwani. "Didi also visited the bakery and our old home in Nayapura," he adds. Lakhwani, as a mark of tribute, has special biscuits



Old posters of Bollywood classics and photographs of legendary singers adorn the Bakery walls

Lakhwani, the owner, has carried on the legacy of his grandfather Bhai Kimatrai Bulchnad Lakhwani who came from Hyderabad in Sindh during the days of the partition of the subcontinent. He passed on the baton to his son. The grandson- Harish- however has added a musical element to his life and to the bakery. His love for Vividh Bharti, which he regards as his guru, has lasted a lifetime, as has his reverence for the golden voices of Hindi cinema- Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammad Rafi, Mukesh and Kishore Kumar. The love for these iconic legends is such a passion that Harish celebrates their birthdays and observes their death anniversaries.

performances on several occasions.

The bakery has been famous for its range of products to which new additions have been made to keep pace with the changing demands of customers. Patrons come from all parts of the city, and while I look around the bakery, clicking pictures, I meet this gentleman who tells me how his uncle Haji Shahbuddin Qureshi. Qureshi had a golden certificate for the supply of military equipment to Mhow, and he would frequent the bakery since 1984. His family members have continued with the tradition.

named after Lata, Rafi and Kishore as well!

As I stood admiring photographs of Rafi sahab with Pandit Nehru and another with Dr. Radhakrishnan, Lata ji with the Lakhwani family at their residence, a childhood poster of Lata tai, and many others, I noticed many pictures of actor Vinod Khanna. Vinod Khanna is the most handsome actor our film industry has had and with his sunglasses on, he looked dashing beyond words", says the polite Harish, while reminding all customers to have water, a service he has been offering to his customers free of cost.



There have been no adornments added to the bakery to glamourise it, the size remains much the same, as does the quality. And yet it is not just

a bakery but a humble homage to the voices India, as also people living across the globe, love. It is about memories that live on and people who become eternal.

Tea is made in the bakery itself on a small gas stove. While we sip tea, Lakhwani reminisces how the songs of these icons have deeply embedded wisdom and philosophies of life into him. One particular one is the song which makes us understand that there isn't anyone who has not faced hardships in life or that darkness should not be the reason to be despondent as destination is bound to be reached, a thought echoed by the song "Kabhi to milegi...bahraon ki manzil rahi" sung by Lata Mangeshkar. That is what life is about. A thought worth pondering upon.

A busy afternoon: Lakhwani catering to his customers



The Times of India coverage of Rafi's birthday being celebrated at Sind Bakery

Book review

MISSING NOTES

Review of Payal Nagpal's poems Memory Keepers Lakshmi Kannan

"remembered forgetfulness" (Peel the Walls), is an inspired phrase by Payal Nagpal that expresses the contrary pulls of the primeval energy of creativity in any medium. What writers and artists do with their memory, even while they strive to 'forget' a painful past, is the paradox that cradles their works. They have to contend Thes with both Mnemosyne and Lethe.

While Mnemosyne in Greek mythology is a powerful goddess of memory with the ability to recall the past, she is also the mother of artistic inspiration. Her nine daughters in her union with Zeus known as the Muses, are considered as sources of inspiration for writers and artists. Lethe, on the other hand, is both the name of a goddess in Greek mythology, and a river personifying forgetfulness and oblivion. It is believed that souls in the underworld drink her waters to erase memories of their previous lives before they are reborn.

'Memory is beneath all of myself/ Layers of remembered forgottenness are up/The wall is ready for me to speak to/Make holes of misery to escape/Ensure how I want to be' (Peel the Walls) shows the tension between memory and a wish to forget in many of Nagpal's poems. However, the complexity deepens when we read her Author's Preface which marks with indignation another kind of pretended 'forgetfulness' practiced on women blithely, by their culture and society: 'I realised gradually how the world to which I belonged to increasingly practiced an erasure of women's past.' (Let Them Keep Their Own!)

This is borne out usage by Shyamala A. Narayan in Preview One: 'The sixty poems here present woman as a keeper of memory, but society has little space for woman's personal memories,' and 'The instinct for survival makes the woman put up a façade.' (Reviving Women's Interiority) Radha Chakravarty says Memory Keepers 'belongs to the growing

Dr. Lakshmi Kannan, Ph.D is a bilingual writer who also writes in Tamil in the pen-name of "Kaaveri." She is a poet, novelist, short story writer, translator and critic. Her recent books in English include Nadistuti, Poems (Authors Press, 2024) and Guilt Trip and Other Stories (Niyogi, 2023), which was declared as "the best book of the year" in the India Section of Literature, Critique and the Empire Today, U.K. compiled by Shyamala A. Narayan and Payal Nagpal. www.lakshmikannan.in



archive of writings by women who seek to reconstruct self and society through the power of words.' (Foreword).

The poems are divided into four sections, out of which the second titled Unhinged has poems recording the political memory of a people at

this point in time and history. The arresting tone of the line make us stop on our tracks for a moment:

'I am Palestine/ The one controls me/ Through his many Israels.' (I am Palestine)

It is best to read the entire or complete poem to witness the scars left by memory, blurring the lines between what is 'Their stories' and 'My story', as fresh news pour in about what is causally mentioned as "the Gaza strip" in papers and TV.

The Afghan refugee says "I left my memories, my belongings," (Afghan Refugee)

And the poet Nagpal asks: 'Was there a difference/Between her and me?/Was I better or worse? 'What had I left behind?/As I looked back/I saw scraps of myself/Shards of memories'

Another poem asks questions that defies straight answers.

'Where does Punjab end, Jammu begin?/ Can simple postal code, hoarding demarcate?'

...

'Who judges, decides?' (Incestuous Borders)

Indeed. Borders are porous.

The section "Reminiscences" has poems that evoke memories: 'Next to my bed/The side table/ Made of dark wood/Holds memories' (Dark Wood, 42).

Some memories could work in a different way by showing how she has outgrown herself:

'She had grown in years, looks, colour of hair/Also grown apart yet from the young girl/In the photo' till she asks herself 'Should she create a new album of old photos?' (Missing Photos, 57)

'Can one go back in time?' she asks, while knowing that 'The key to the closure lies snugly in my pocket'. (Lock)

A woman who writes awakens to her situation in her cultural and social context. For this reason, her writing resonates instantly with women and

with men who are sensitive to the needs of women in their lives. Says Nagpal in her Author's Preface: 'Family as a unit mostly speaks as if women did not exist. Most women are present in their functionality where they remain of value to others. That diminishes their own worth.' (Let Them Keep Their Own!) A woman writer inevitably goes back to the memory of her mother, grandmothers, and other women in a consciousness that is so gendered it is almost akin to what we call a 'racial' memory in the way she has a sense of taking her place in a gallery of other women.

Despite her strong sense of self, she is never quite alone. Dedicating this book to Narinder Khanna, her mother, Nagpal introduces her as someone 'who dealt with life's ups and downs squarely, sensitively.'

It is a battle ground for her as well.

'This is my akhada/Where each day I

Her women-centric poems have striking imagery.

'Theft is important in a woman's life/She must constantly steal/Throw aside the garb of morality/Always must she strive/to be a skilled and sincere thief /She must develop strategies and techniques/Methods/To grasp moments/Tiny spaces/From the web of time.' (She, A Thief, 10)

One such strategy is to be an imposter:

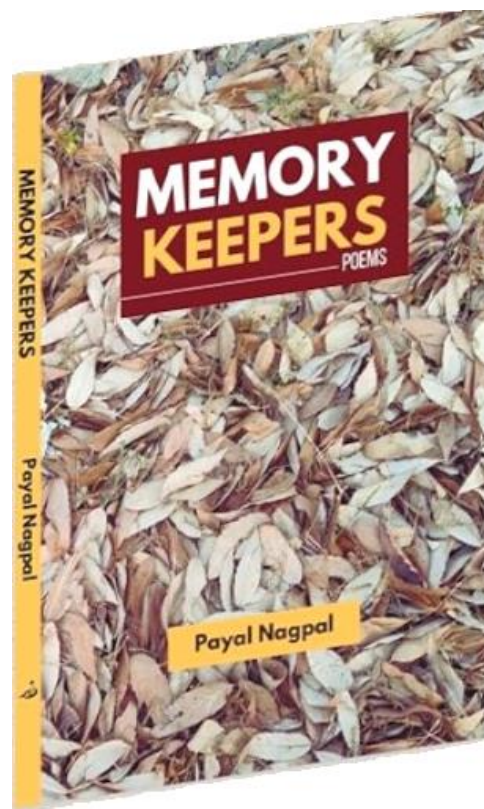
'I want to be an imposter/Who covers up her thoughts/in drab blankets/Swings between grey and black/the darkness of it. The quilt has another side/It hides beneath/A riot of colour/the flame red/The Robin blue/The beak yellow/The moss green/And many more.' 'So, I literally hide my true colours', she concludes. (Imposter, 5)

Conclusion Somewhere along the way, Nagpal realises that the book is just half her story. There is a sense of anticipation – of more poems, more lived experiences, more observations.

'As dusk adds to the fading noon sun/And throws on me cover of feeble logic/I try to catch the missing notes of my life.' (Missing Notes)

Memory Keepers has sensitive poems that speak with courage and candour about women who create their own space. Their retentive memories help in recording the changing contours of womanhood.

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learn/New skills, ideas, ways of movement/Twists and turns of life, looking out, beyond/The magic of living'. (Akhada, 14)

Short Story

Still Waters Bloom

by Ritu Kamra Kumar

Lolita stood at the entrance of the old age home, the gate creaking behind her like the final note of a long-forgotten song. The afternoon sun cast long shadows, and she clutched her shawl a little tighter — not against the cold, but against the strange mix of vulnerability and resolve in her chest.

The decision to come here had been hers. Entirely. Her children had offered solutions — a nurse, a helper, a virtual companion app — but none of it felt like companionship. After her husband passed, the mansion they had built together felt less like a home and more like an echo chamber. She sighed, looking at the modest building before her.

"Let's begin again," she whispered to herself.

Inside, the warden welcomed her kindly and showed her to her allotted flat. As she entered, she noticed the room was neat, warm even. A faint scent of jasmine and oil paint lingered in the air. She hadn't even placed her bag down when a woman stepped out from the balcony, her silver hair tied in a loose braid, a smudge of paint on her hand.

"You must be Lolita?" she asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes," Lolita said, adjusting her dupatta. "And you must be Saroja." Saroja nodded, wiping her hand on her apron. "I was waiting for you. I always peek when someone new arrives. Old habit from my school principal days — curiosity never quite retires."

Lolita chuckled, the tension in her shoulders loosening just a bit.

They sat across from each other with a cup of hot filter coffee — a welcome gesture from Saroja.

"So," Saroja began, "what brings you here? If you don't mind me asking."

Lolita sighed, her fingers tracing the rim of the coffee cup. "Loneliness. Silence, mostly. After my husband passed, the house was... too large. Too quiet. My children are settled in Europe, and I didn't want to be a name flashing on their phones once a week out of obligation. "Saroja

noded. "I understand that more than you know. I never married. Spent most of my life teaching and taking care of my aging parents. After they passed, I tried to keep busy — volunteering, painting, helping where I could. But when my health started to slip, the walls of my little flat felt like they were closing in."

"You seem so cheerful, though," Lolita said, surprised.

"I wasn't," Saroja replied honestly.

"Not until I came here and decided to paint again."

Lolita's eyes wandered to the wall behind her, where a bold, bright painting of a lotus in a muddy pond hung proudly.

"You painted that?"

"I did," Saroja beamed. "Funny, isn't it? I used to store my paintings in a dusty trunk. My nieces preferred the kind of art you see in hotel lobbies. Now, I finally hang my work where I can see it."

"It's beautiful," Lolita said quietly. "It feels... alive."

"Thank you. It's my reminder that beauty can bloom even in less-than-perfect conditions. Like us, perhaps."

Lolita gave a small, surprised laugh.

"Well said. I used to sing, you know. My husband loved hearing me sing. I'd perform at family gatherings, sometimes even on stage. But after he passed... I don't know. The music left with him."

"Then it's time to call it back," Saroja said firmly. "I'll teach you how to paint, and you'll teach me how to sing."

"Deal," Lolita smiled, and for the first time in months, her heart fluttered — not with grief, but with anticipation.

In the following days, their friendship deepened like the slow, steady coloring of dawn.

Saroja taught Lolita how to hold a brush without fear. "Paint like you're dancing," she'd say. "Messy strokes are full of life."

Lolita began singing again — softly at first, then stronger, her voice spilling into the corridors like a forgotten melody rediscovered.

They started gathering a few other residents once a week — sharing poetry, music, stories. One of them, Mr. Ghosh, recited Bengali verses. Another, Mrs. Desai, began knitting vibrant shawls while humming along to Lolita's tunes.

They called it "The Last Bloom Club." Not a retirement — but a return.

"I feel like I'm not fading anymore," Saroja said one evening as they sat under the neem tree in the courtyard. "I'm... unfolding."

Lolita smiled. "We're not wilting. We're blooming late — but blooming all the same."

They laughed then, a sound so free it startled a pair of birds into flight. Wrinkles crinkled at the corners of their eyes, but those eyes sparkled brighter than ever.

One evening, as the golden light filtered through the neem tree leaves, Lolita and Saroja sat side by side, watching children from a nearby school play in the distance — their laughter like bells in the wind.

Lolita turned to Saroja. "Do you ever think about what we leave behind?"

Saroja thought for a moment. "Not things. Not property. Not even names. I think it's the feeling we leave in people's hearts. Like the echo of a song, or the warmth of a sunset remembered."

Lolita nodded slowly. "You know, I used to think my life peaked years ago. That everything after sixty was just waiting. But now... now I feel like I'm finally blooming."

Saroja smiled. "Maybe that's the secret. We spend so much time chasing purpose in the world — careers, families, applause. And then, at the quietest hour, we find the truest version of ourselves."

She looked up at the lotus painting hanging nearby, now illuminated by dusk. "Like the lotus," she said softly. "It doesn't bloom in the spring like the others. It waits — and then blossoms in still waters, untouched by the mud around it."

Lolita looked at her — her friend, her mirror, her companion in this unexpected renaissance. "Maybe

that's what we're meant to be, Saroja. Not faded portraits of the past. But proof that the soul doesn't age — it deepens."

The bell rang for dinner, echoing through the home like a slow heartbeat. They rose, hand in hand, their steps slower but full of intention. As they walked toward the dining hall — a place once unfamiliar — the walls around them seemed to soften, their own laughter blending into the ambient hum of life.

That night, a new painting joined the wall of their flat — two blooming

lotuses, side by side, painted in hues of deep red and indigo.

Beneath it, a note written in Lolita's handwriting: "Still blooming. Still becoming."

And with that, their story — not ended, but simply paused — left behind a quiet, lasting bloom for others to find.



Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar, Retd. Officiating Principal and Associate Professor of English at MLN College, Yamuna Nagar, is an acclaimed academican, poet, and writer. With over 400 contributions to leading national newspapers and magazines, she has published 70+ research papers in reputed national and international journals and edited books. Featured as an Empowered Woman by *The Hindustan Times*, she has authored eight acclaimed books.

Dhrupad: A Legacy of Timeless Harmony – Niloy Ahsan and the Eternal Quest for Sound **by Tanusha Nagrath**

At the Jaipur Literature Festival 2025, amidst the grandeur of literary discourse and cultural confluence, the Morning Music Sessions became a sanctuary of spiritual resonance. It was here that Niloy Ahsan, a 21st-generation exponent of the revered Dagar Gharana, took the stage, transforming the crisp Jaipur morning into an ethereal soundscape. His soul-stirring Dhrupad performance was more than just music- it was a spiritual journey toward self-

awareness, inviting the audience to immerse in the meditative depth of swaras and the eternal harmony of the Tanpura. This profound experience set the tone for the festival's exploration of literature, art, and the self, reminding all present that music, too, is a language of philosophy, devotion, and transcendence.



In the intricate world of Indian classical music, the Dagar lineage stands as a towering testament to

tradition, discipline, and artistic devotion. Tracing its roots back to the 15th-century mystic Swami Haridas Dagar-believed to be the guru of Mian Tansen-the Dagar family has been the torchbearer of Dhrupad, India's most ancient form of classical music. Today,

this legacy is preserved and nurtured by the Dagar Archives in Jaipur, a pioneering initiative dedicated to the documentation and propagation of the Dagar Gharana. Led by its President, Ms. Shabana Dagar, and

member, Imran Dagar Sahab, the archives stand as a living repository of centuries-old wisdom, supported by the Government of Rajasthan's Art and Culture Department.

In a world where music is often reduced to entertainment, Niloy Ahsan's

artistic journey is a philosophical quest- a search for the essence of sound, the mystery of its impact, and the sacred discipline of merging with the perennial resonance of the Tanpura.

The Abstract Realm of Sound

"When people hear the word 'music,' they often think of a song, a melody, or lyrics. But if we take a step deeper,

beyond melody and words, we arrive at the fundamental element of music-sound,” Ahsan reflects. “And sound itself has two dimensions: one that is mechanically audible and another that is the unstruck sound, the **Anhad Naad**, which exists in silence.”

Dhrupad, as Ahsan explains, is not merely a genre of music but an exploration of this primal reality. Before melody takes shape, before lyrics imbue meaning, the Dhrupad singer immerses in abstract sounds-meaningless syllables derived from seed mantras. It is a sacred exercise, an initiation into the essence of Swara, the purest form of sound.

The Body as the Instrument – Gatra Veena

Unlike other musical traditions where instruments are separate from the musician, Dhrupad holds that the human body itself is the primary instrument, known as the **Gatra Veena**. “Our body is the best instrument. It is the air, the breath-the prana-that gives us everything. When we inhale, the prana dwells within us, circulates, and settles

before manifesting as sound,” Ahsan explains. “Music is not just about execution. It is about the entire internal journey of the breath, the vibration, the silence before the note, and the dissolution after.”

This philosophy of sound aligns with ancient Indian wisdom, where music was considered not just an art form but a yogic practice, a way of tuning into the deeper frequencies of existence.

The Eternal Harmony of the Tanpura

Music often emphasizes on harmony through chords, but Indian classical music operates on a principle of continuous resonance. “Some musicologists argue that Indian music lacks harmony. But if you look deeper, you’ll see that our entire system is built upon an ongoing harmony with the **Tanpura**,” Ahsan notes.

In Dhrupad, the Tanpura is not an accompaniment but an extension of the artist’s being. “When I sing, my

only aim is to merge with the Tanpura. If my sound dissolves into it, it means I have dissolved. It is about dying in the Tanpura,” he states with profound sincerity.

This dissolution into sound is what distinguishes Dhrupad from other forms of music. It is not about performance but **transcendence**, where the musician ceases to be an individual and becomes a vessel for something far greater.

Swami Haridas and the Sacred Lineage

The Dagar lineage reveres the wisdom of Swami Haridas, the saint-composer who shaped the tradition of Dhrupad. Though historical debates exist about whether he and Haridas Dagar were the same person, their contributions remain undisputed.

Legend has it that when Emperor Akbar wished to hear Swami Haridas sing, the saint refused. Only when Mian Tansen led Akbar deep into the forest, where Swami Haridas sang alone in divine solitude, was the emperor able to witness the sacred power of his music.

Such stories illuminate the true essence of art- an offering, not a display. “True art is not entertainment. If it entertains, we don’t mind. But entertainment is not the purpose. We seek something deeper- life itself,” Ahsan affirms.

The Genuineness of Artistic Expression

In an age where music is often dictated by commercial success, Ahsan believes the artist must remain **genuine**. “The duty of the artist is not to please the audience but to **be true to the art**. If you try to tailor your art to different audiences- young, old, foreign- you dilute its essence,” he cautions.

In Ahsan’s words, “We must maintain the genuineness of our art. Everything else will fall into place. We should never compromise- not for the audience, not for trends, not even for survival. Because in the end, true music is about dissolving. It is about

losing oneself, only to find something greater.”

A true artist does not chase validation but remains in **constant search**- searching for beauty in the nuances of sound, the *rasa* (aesthetic delight) hidden between emotions, the gradual transitions of human feeling, much like a sunset blending into the night. “Even a layperson can tell whether an artist is sharing something genuine. It doesn’t require musical expertise. It requires **truth**,” Ahsan asserts.

The Timeless Resonance of the Dagar Gharana

Through generations, the Dagar Gharana has upheld the integrity of Dhrupad. Great masters like **Ustad Zakiruddin Khan Dagar, Ustad Nasir Zahiruddin Dagar, Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, and Nasir Aminuddin Dagar** have shaped its legacy, each contributing to its evolution while remaining rooted in tradition.

Ahsan, who began his journey at the age of four under the guidance of his father, stands as a bridge between the past and the present. In an era where music consumption has changed dramatically, he sees a glimmer of hope. “This generation may be fast-paced, always engaged with devices, but I believe they seek genuine experiences. The responsibility lies with artists- to present them with something real, something beyond the fleeting,” he says with conviction.

The Eternal Echo

As Niloy Ahsan takes his place among the custodians of this ancient art, he does so with the humility and reverence that have defined the Dagar lineage for centuries. Each note he sings is a continuation of a timeless dialogue- between the self and the infinite, the past and the present, the artist and the divine.

Dhrupad is not merely music; it is a way of being. And through the dedicated efforts of artists like Ahsan and institutions like the Dagar Archives, this profound tradition continues to **resonate across time, unbroken, eternal**.

Story

I love 'Dream Killers.' Truly! They do you good.

I've had a few fruitful encounters with them over the years.

**

ONE:

As a child, every evening I visited one of my close friends and classmates living in the nearby mohalla. He was one of the brightest who consistently topped the class. His brother, Brij Lal, ten years older than him, conversely, was a loser. He lounged around the house throughout the day, eating, sleeping, or lording over his younger brother, who ironed his clothes, polished his shoes, and even brought him a glass of water. Their mother was unhappy that Rohit had to interrupt his studies because he had to carry out his brother's commands. Brij Lal was the only one who, unlike his peers, had passed his B.A. with a third division (the "Royal division," as it was mockingly called) and had not landed a job.

He chanced upon an old, most elementary book on palmistry in the second-hand book shop in the Chhota Bazaar, skimmed through it, and began to fantasize about becoming a renowned, much sought-after palmist.

One day, I was sitting with Rohit when Brij Lal came into the drawing room and settled beside me. His presence had always made me uncomfortable, but today I felt a sense of premonition. He suddenly seized my hand, scrutinizing it closely with grim attention, shook his head gloomily, and said, "No *vidya*" (education) for you.

Benumbed by what he had prophesied, I trudged back home like a zombie. Bolting myself in a room, I cried bitterly. Mother kept knocking on the door, but I remained closeted. For days on end, she kept asking me what had happened. But I did not tell her. I am like that. Certain things get embedded in the innermost chamber of my psyche, and nobody can ferret them out.

Brij Lal's words continued to rankle in my mind throughout my growing-up

I AM CRAZY

Subhash Chandra

years. I stopped going out to play after school. Now and then, a couple of friends came over to call me, but I doggedly refused to join them. After school, I spent most of my time with books, struggling with Maths, which was my *bête noire*, revising English lessons that I loved, and also pouring over other subjects. My only relaxation was a stroll in the neighbourhood at dusk when there was no chance of running into any of my friends.

#

I went on to complete a Master's and Ph.D. in English, a Master's in Political Science, and a course in Journalism in which I secured first position, and was awarded the Kulapati Medal, the Times of India Medal together with a modest cash amount of 300 rupees (which I used to get a new woollen suit stitched for myself) and an offer to join the TOI as a Sub-editor.

In my later years, I realised that the problem was not with palmistry, but with Brij Lal. He did not study palmistry in a deep, extensive, and systematic manner. In fact, being a lazy bum, he was incapable of studying any subject with serious attention. Whereas palmistry, also known as Samudrika Shastra or Hasta Samudrika Shastra, is mentioned in ancient Indian scriptures, particularly within the Vedic tradition, and is considered a comprehensive science and a form of divination rooted in Hindu astrology.

#

TWO:

I was about sixteen years old. One day, one of my peers thumped me on the back, making me almost keel over, and called me a 'dried-up twig.'

Yes, I was reed thin and felt embarrassed about it.

"Don't stir out during a storm. You'd be blown away!" he said, pouted, and blew on his spread-out palm to rub in the joke.

A mocking titter rippled through those present.

I started avoiding my friends. About one and a half years of manic exercise – weight lifting, push-ups, sit-ups, and more -- and lots of milk (which I didn't

like), laced with oodles of pure ghee, almonds, raisins, etc.

Mother was surprised but happy.

One day, I opened the door to a knock. It was the same guy who had made fun of my skinny frame. He forgot to blink.

"Wow. Dara Singh!" (famous Indian wrestler at the time, who had a broad chest and rippling biceps), he exclaimed and patted me on the back appreciatively.

#

THREE:

One day, a family friend – who was from the elite stratum of society -- vastly read in literature, visited us. I showed off my poem published in the journal, *Thought* (edited by Late Keshav Malik), and a short prose piece in *Century Review* (both defunct).

Reclining elegantly on the divan, she drawled, "Stop writing prose."

I tore up the notebook containing about fifty poems (Regret my impetuosity to date!) and have since penned only prose and achieved a modicum of success in writing short fiction.

After a few years, I presented her with a complimentary copy of my short story collection.

"I enjoyed all the stories. I particularly liked the subtlety and economy of style of your writing," she said with a smile. I could not tell whether she remembered her earlier judgment.

#

FOUR:

I've been trying to write a novel ... for several years now. I wait ... wish for a 'Dream Killer' to cross my path.



Dr. Subhash Chandra is a former Associate Professor of English at the University of Delhi. He has published three collections of short stories, viz., *Not Just Another Story*, *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles*, and *A Game of Dice*, and more than eighty short stories in Indian and foreign journals, and Guest Edited College Fiction Section of MUSE India.

Devika Brendon's documentary novel *Aversion*

Reviewed by Sharon Rundle

Devika Brendon was born in Sri Lanka, raised in Australia, and currently lives in Sri Lanka. This gives her documentary novel *Aversion* set in Sri Lanka both insider and outsider perspectives.

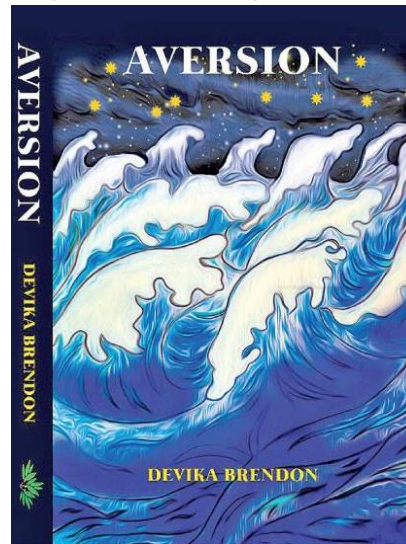
Barbara Foley an American writer and academic posits the 'fictional work (of a documentary novel) as a contract designed by an intending author who invites his or her audience to adopt certain paradigms for understanding reality in which a truth is being told, with "facts" to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts.' In the documentary novel *Aversion* 'the mutual interactions of different textual features—characters, events, social conditions, philosophical debates—determine the text's reference to the world of the reader. According to the terms of the mimetic contract, the reader agrees to view the structures and processes represented in the text as equivalent to structures and processes existing in historical actuality.' (Foley, 2018).

The novel opens and closes in third person from the perspective of Clementine, a journalist in Sri Lanka who discovers a diary from a past time which motivates her and drives the narrative, and resolution. In between are passages written in first person by a narrator who relates stories about Clementine and her niece Liyara, as well as other characters such as Juanita and Ashwariya with whom Clementine discusses matters that arise. At times, Brendon creates an objective distance of observer to convey the setting, social and political to the reader, for example, "Sri Lankan people don't seem to realise how intrusive they are. Not only those tough little ladies with big bags in the queue at the Post Office, jostling their way to the counter to make their transactions." (p 34) In other sections, particularly poetry, the tone is intimate, and sometimes the prose takes a quasi-autobiographical style, using irony to mimic real life and explore the concept of identity.

Brendon's novel *Aversion* takes a mimesis approach in an historical context in which "its reference to actual people and events empowers it to tell a particularly compelling truth" about the nature of reality. *Aversion* shows in stark relief the desires of one milieu of

society compared to the reality of the lives of other not so fortunate people.

René Girard, French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science, proposed that we "imitate the desires of others", desiring things because others have them or want them, an example would be the Hermès Birkin bag, for which a client needs an invitation to buy a highly priced, highly prized object of desire for the rich and famous. This copying of desires is what Girard called mimesis. In *Aversion*, in Sri Lanka, this mimesis takes the form of, for example, "being successful, beautiful, famous or fortunate in the possession or acquisition of desirable quantities which



the luckless observer feels the lack of" and hollow flattery such as the desire 'to launch events and products in a sort of euphoric, glittering dazzle of beauty queens and strobe lighting, and cleavage with amplified claims about the person whose product is being sold or whose talent is being showcased" (p 54) and in Chapter 9, 'Cars. Houses. Holiday Homes. Luxury villas. Frequent Flyer Points. First Class Lounge. Loyalty Cards. And people clamoured to measure up. Designer Brands. Ticking the boxes. Showtime every night and day' (P 100). Brendon describes the desire for 'curated menus, bespoke garments and custom-made modules and asks: 'Where does the false high flying feeling come from? Is it weighed down by ankle weights, stretching back to the Gross God Mammon, who has the keys to our freedom in his horned, thorny hand?' (p102).

Brendon references Dante's *Inferno* nine circles of Hell as an analogy to show how *each culprit must suffer contrapasso, an equal and fitting, though metaphorical, poetic justice for their transgressions. She writes of how privilege and paying taxes gives them licence to indulge in excess, but that 'Rich people have further to fall. Their elevation makes them vulnerable'.*

Aversion is written as a prosimetrum, a composition of prose and verse composed in alternating segments, a form which is contemporary yet with examples reaching back to the earliest times of literature, and popular in medieval literature. It has post-modern elements of meta fiction, intertextuality, and reflections by the narrator—about alienation and aversion—as well as past and present politics and social mores.

The style of language and the wide range of text and vocabulary in Brendon's prose and poetry includes journalistic—a central character Clementine is a journalist—and lyrical prose, as well as both stream of consciousness and fragmentation. It's a novel of ideas, a fragmented mix of fiction and biographical elements'. The impact results in a narrative that has depth and complexity.

As the text on the back cover reveals: 'This is Sri Lanka, seen through a specific lens, somewhere in a place located in Samsara ... We prefer to live on its surface, and avert our gaze from what troubles us, but its tendency to chaos is also inside us ... They call it Paradise, but it is still a work in progress. As are all of us, who live in it.'

My thanks to Elaine Rundle for her invaluable input.

Sharon Rundle is a member of the Institute of Professional Editors who has co-edited five published anthologies of stories from Australia and South Asia. Her work appears internationally in books, anthologies, journals, magazines, and on radio. Her family connection to India stretches back over six generations. <https://sharonrundle.com.au>



Book review

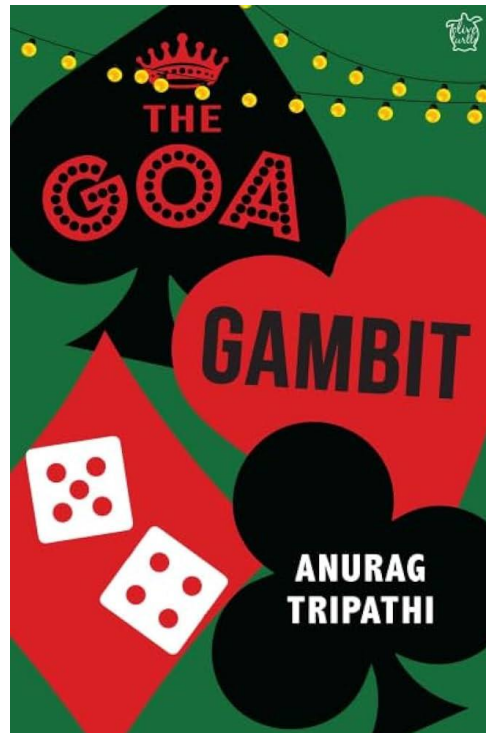
THE CASINO OF LIFE Anurag Tripathi's *The Goa Gambit* Reviewed by Anjana Basu

The Czar of Casinos with a cigar in hand and a ladyboy on his arm makes quite an entrance. Amish Tripathi's *Goa Gambit* is set in the high stakes glamorous world of casinos in Goa. Tripathi plays his hand with a varied suite of characters, kings, queens, jacks and all. Jayesh Shah is the lead, the Casino king who apparently has it all but is mentored by a politician who prefers to lurk in the shadows while calling the shots. The buzz in Jayesh's casino empire as he is on the brink of opening his most ambitious and luxurious casino is that he has lost it. His security and administration honchos are working against him and there is every possibility that they are involved in a double game.

Tripathi's cast of characters come from varied backgrounds, including Jack from Singapore whose father runs a restaurant in the Hawkers Corner, Ruby, the ladyboy, the beautiful Nisha the child of Bollywood celebs, the coke sniffing sadistic Anton and the drunken gambling farmer Balwant. Each character has his or her issues which are explored in pensive moments so that readers can empathise with them as much as possible. The question underlying the book of course is will Jayesh be able to hang onto his empire and his reputation or has he really lost it – especially since the casino belongs to a politician with yen for Goldfinger. The life of a casino owner is in many ways a greater gamble since it deals with handling greed of different kinds adeptly and coming up with the winning hand.

The writing is slick and the storyline managed to take the reader by

surprise. Here the author's trick is to balance the different characters and their ethics setting one set of circumstances against another to keep the pace going. The fact that glamorous settings and accessories are at hand to whet the reader's appetite helps balanced by the sex and violence that accompanies settings like this. Tripathi isn't Ian Fleming with his mastery of casino tricks and characters like Le Chiffre



but he has the expertise to keep the interest of most readers going in Arthur Hailey style. He also has the knowledge of how casinos operate and the various aspects that can be used for to heighten the suspense of the story.

There are those cliff hanger moments when a character's fate rests on a

single roll of the dice but that is what the entire world of gambling rests on. Fate's reactions are more instant in this pressure cooker world. Perhaps the number of characters and incidents does cause hiccups in the pace, however if the reader perseveres he or she may find the effort worth it. If casino's don't interest you, you could take the book as a more concentrated metaphor on life and the frantic quest for success that most people devote their lives to, hoping against hope. . "In the casino of life," Tripathi writes, "every choice is a gamble, and the stakes are always high."

The author is not stranger to high stakes – he has a background in investment banking where the rise and fall of things is equally high octane. He draws on his life experiences to bring grist to his fiction mill. He also throws in a dissertation on how the balance of a roulette wheel can change things for a perceptive gambler. There are some characters in the story who are not what they seem but the reader doesn't realise it till the very end. Like a master poker player Tripathi does not put all his cards on the table until the game is over, with the hint perhaps of more to come.

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

