



INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON

WOMEN & LITERATURE

MARCH 14, 2021 | KOLKATA

Best of 2021

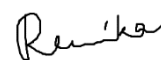
LITEROMA INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON
WOMEN & LITERATURE - 2021

A symposium on woman, literature and beyond...

Womanhood – how it is actually perceived by society, how it should ideally be perceived by society and as a standalone holistic subject has always been a part of our life. As they say, whatever forms an integral part of our lives inspires literature. Hence, women and literature always turned out to have a closely knit bonding. Consequently, when team Literoma met to discuss the theme for the symposium of the first quarter ending in March 2021, the discussion got over in a jiffy. Choosing ‘Woman and Literature’ as the theme of the symposium was a unanimous call and what a success it turned out to be!

We received write-ups from authors belonging to different countries, coming from varied walks of life, and demographics but all believing in the spirit of womanhood. Some writers talked about breaking the typecast, some emphasized on mentoring the young adults to handle womanhood better while some interwove womanhood with literature to find an answer to a plethora of questions, which the society failed to even ask!

We are sure this handbook of Literoma International Symposium on Women & Literature 2021 is going to play a tiny yet significant role in breaking not just the glass ceilings but also stereotypes. After all, who needs a ceiling when all of them are on the same floor?



Reetwika Banerjee
Honourary Director
ISWAL'21
Kolkata, India



LITEROMA INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON
WOMEN & LITERATURE - 2021

~ Broad Topics ~

1. Significance of women in Indian and/or World literature
2. Woman - A baby producing machine
3. Woman at a position of power - Pros & Cons
4. Womanhood in India vs World - A Comparison
5. Behind every successful man, there is a woman
6. Chic Lit - An upcoming genre
7. Women are not good with numbers - A Debate
8. Women are like trophies - only for showcase: A Debate
9. Crime on Women / LGBTQ+
10. Widow / Woman Remarriage is still a stigma
11. Your favourite woman influencer & Why?
12. Changing trends of women rights in last 25 years
13. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao - Save the girl child
14. Woman in corporate ladder
15. Women empowerment, education and/or justice
16. Women health: Why whisper about blood?
17. Widows should be invited in marriages
18. Celebrating women empowerment through festivals vs reality
19. Single mother - Women heroes
20. A child is mother's responsibility with father's surname
21. #MeToo : Workplace harassment on women
22. Gender equality : Myth or Reality
23. Bachelorette Party: Why should boys have all the fun?
24. Neo feminism
25. Housewife - 24*7 duty, no thanks, no money

(Note: Above topics were indicative only. We were open to any topic adhering to the symposium guidelines.)

~ Hall of Fame ~

Reetwika Banerjee (Hon. Director)
 Subrata Bandyopadhyay (Chief Patron)
 Candace Meredith (GUEST - USA)
 Tiffany Lindfield (GUEST - USA)
 Waqas Gul (GUEST - Pakistan)
 Ann Privateer (GUEST - USA)
 Alakananda Pramanik (GUEST - India)
 Dr. Hamdi Meca (GUEST - Albania)

Perna Avasthi	Reesha Masood
Vittal Arigela	Dr. Usha Sridhar
Kirti V	Sarita Pradhan
Rimli Bhattacharya	Kamalika Majumder
Dr. Iram Fatima	Monica Gupta
Shweta Mishra	Mahua Sen
SK.Yakubpasha	Ruma Chakraborty
Staffy Bhateja	Jayashree Pillai
Ketki Jalan	Sonali Ray
Namrata Singh	Shatabdi Mukhopadhyay
Nita Bajoria	Aditi Lahiry
Suvarna Mehta	Shabbir Patel
Dr.Padmakali Kar	Rashmi Mohapatra
Bhavna Jagnani	Dr. T. Sree Latha
Neeti Parti	Shikha Gupta
Priya Nayak-Gole	Zareen Khan
Bareera Masood	Faitha Subair

1. Reetwika Banerjee (Honourary Director, ISWAL'21)

Reetwika Banerjee is a Cyber Security professional but at heart she is a storyteller. She loves to observe people, places and incidents happening around her, which she believes, helps in character sketching and background setting for her stories. Many of Reetwika's stories have been adapted into award winning short films, often screened at prestigious film festivals like KIFF, Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival, SASFF, Cinematheque and many others. Reetwika was also nominated for Padma Shri Award 2020 for her contributions to Literature & Education.

Laal Bai's Scary Screams at Mallabhoom

We had been to Mallabhoom in Bankura district during the Rath Yatra holiday, which is mostly known for its artistic terracotta artworks on the temple walls. It can be easily reached via Ahalyabai Holkar Road and then state highway to Mallabhoom. It should not take more than 6 hours by road from Kolkata airport. The road conditions are moderately good with occasional patches in small stretches. No luxury accommodations available in vicinity, but plenty of local lodges to check in.

During our visit to one of those terracotta temples, a local guide introduced us to a blood warming story of the Malla Kings, who ruled the south-western part of present day West Bengal centuries ago. During their reign since 7th century AD, seven water reservoirs (commonly known as bandh or artificial lake) were constructed due to water scarcity in the region. None of them are in use now but even today numerous folklores are popular regarding one of the seven reservoirs namely 'Laal Bandh' (Red Dam). Natives believe that vengeful spirits of Laal Bai and his son roam around the place even today to take revenge of their deceived assassinations.

The Laal Bandh is located just at a distance of less than 5 kilometers from the town. After a light lunch, we planned to visit the so called haunting lakeside for an afternoon leisure walk. It did not take us more than half an hour to reach the entry gate.



The moment we approached the premises, it we could feel a chilling sensation. We had read about several popular spooky myths encompassing this dam! The overall effect of the solemn tone of our guide's delivery and our time of visit (towards late afternoon), left an enthralling impact on all of us.

During early eighteenth century, second Raghunath Singh succeeded the throne of Malla kingdom. Under his able reign, he defeated the fearless Pathan warrior Rahim Khan over a bloody battle of several days. The loser was beheaded by Raghunath's army and later they looted the Pathan's enormous wealth along with his harem full of concubines.

The harem also included Rahim Khan's gorgeous wife Laal Bai. She was truly a quintessence of beauty in all respects. Raghunath fell soft on her elegance at very first sight and soon started losing his interests on his own empire. Many of his people at the royal court had ill intentions with the angelic Pathan widow. Sensing potential risk of her dignity, Raghunath constructed a gigantic palace with an adjacent lake, away from his capital for Laal Bai and named it as New Palace. He also named the lake Laal Bandh as a token of tribute to his beloved sweetheart Laal Bai.

At the king's generosity, young charming Laal Bai too started growing erotic interests on him and soon they entered into an unlawful physical bond. The couple often used to enjoy their romantic afternoons on a private

boat at Laal Bandh. Actually it was never love on her part. She just wanted to own the vast Malla territories and regain the plundered Pathan riches. With a sole intention of revenge, she kept Raghunath hypnotized with her amatory charms of womanhood.

Within a couple of years, she was expecting king's first child and when the news reached the ears of his Hindu countrymen, they immediately rushed to the Malla queen Chandraprabha. She was a childless devoted wife of Raghunath. Initially, she refused to go against her husband but later anticipating the ensuing risk on their future, she agreed to stand by the masses.

As a loyal wife, Chandraprabha tried her best to convince Raghunath to come out of the fatal clutches of Laal Bai and take back the charge of his kingdom. But blinded in Laal Bai's lust, he denounced Chandraprabha publicly on her childlessness and asked her to depart if she could not tolerate Laal Bai and her child. To prove his point, Raghunath announced Laal Bai's newly born son as his successor to the throne and forced his people, majority of who were Hindu Brahmins, to have Muslim food on the child's birth ceremony. This infuriated his own men against the king and they decided to kill Raghunath, Laal Bai and their unlawful child.

Chandraprabha, down on her knees at her husband's treachery towards the innocent compatriots, played historic role of a black widow and joined their hands in murdering her own husband. After Raghunath's death, one evening she, with the help of her bodyguards, forced Laal Bai and her son onto the king's private boat and left them alone in the middle of the lake. It is said, Chandraprabha had intentionally made several holes in the boat so that they would sink in the waters as none of them could swim. While drowning, Laal Bai kept screaming for help to save her child, but none present came for her rescue. Since then people say they could hear a shrill female voice yelling for help at Laal Bandh.

The guide's increasingly deepening voice added a mystic flavour to our visit to Laal Bandh. And surprisingly, we too perhaps heard a faint eerie feminine cry while walking down the New Palace side of the dam. Running into an uncanny chill at sunset, we rather preferred to stride away from the lakeside and quickly headed back to our stay.



2. Candace Meredith (GUEST – USA)

Candace Meredith earned her Bachelor of Science degree in English Creative Writing from Frostburg State University in the spring of 2008. Her works of poetry, photography and fiction have appeared in literary journals Bittersweet, The Backbone Mountain Review, The Broadkill Review, In God's Hands/ Writers of Grace, A Flash of Dark, Greensilk Journal, Saltfront, Mojave River Press and Review, Scryptic Magazine, Unlikely Stories Mark V, The Sirens Call Magazine, The Great Void, Foreign Literary Magazine, Lion and Lilac Magazine, Snow Leopard Publishing, BAM Writes and various others. Candace currently resides in Virginia with her two sons and her daughter, her fiancé and their three dogs and six cats. She has earned her Master of Science degree in Integrated Marketing and Communications (IMC) from West Virginia University.

Swimming Like Mermaids

They walked together hand-in-hand toward the sun. Her legs were slender, long and thin, like a ballet dancer's. She tread water with him holding her body. He inspired her to dance; he was a musician with a voice like Picasso if his paint were vocal cords. She lifted his spirit with her smile that dazzled like the stars to the ancients. The water was pale blue like their skin; if she did not have legs she'd be a mermaid with fins instead of feet but he would tell her, "God I would miss those legs," and she kissed him. Their love for each other was infectious as if insidiously spreading a plague but their sickness was humble; their humility shined through their blue and iridescent skin. They laughed about being mermaids; they could live on the water.

"Buy ya a boat," his friend once said and they entertained the idea for a while.

"But why seek refuge?" He asked her and they took to the water to let the storm take them. They were crazy some would say but adventure had no limitations. They washed up on a sandy beach somewhere in Central America; the tourists there marveled over them. They were blue, nearly frozen, and their hair coated in ice by the time they found themselves on land. They lived and died on fish and the lobster that came later. They had not known how long they'd been in the water – the memorial service so long ago and Kelly told him, "Glenn, I don't think they'll like us this way." And he thawed her mouth with the breath of passion so she could speak of it – of the time they were stowed away and turned to mermaids and when that was over they came upon land frozen like icebergs in the Arctic waiting for the rest of them to thaw; they laid by the fire waiting to become human again.



3. Tiffany Lindfield (GUEST - USA)

Tiffany Lindfield is a social worker by day, trade, and heart working as an advocate for climate justice, gender equality, and animal welfare. By night, she is a prolific reader of anything decent, and a writer. Her work for women is via her advocacy efforts such as giving lectures at universities, and libraries--as well as arranging lectures.

Ballerina

I was stupid, and ugly, and my white dance shoes had scuff marks on them. I didn't know how to dance, either. The girls on the cheer team giggled in pretty dresses that hung cutely on their slim beach-tanned shoulders. They had mothers who cared about them, who put curlers in their hair, and took them to piano classes, dance classes, and gymnastics.

My mom beat me, and called me, "a little bitch," and took me to church where the preacher talked about God seeing all my thoughts, especially the bad ones.

My legs were fat, and my feet too big. I waddled them both to the punch bowl where teachers served as chaperones, chatting about whatever teachers talk about. Mr. Hinkley, the principal, sat in a plastic school chair too small for his round body, with a bored face. They knew I was the stupid, ugly kid and they all smiled at me with pity, except for Mr. Hinkley who was resigned to everyone and everything.

Hives crawled up my chubby arms as I fumbled for a plastic cup. Mrs. Rucker, feeling sorry for me, handed me a cup with punch already in it. "Enjoying the dance?"

A banner hung over her head: Sixth-Grade Snowflake Ball

The yearbook crew had decorated the gym for the dance. Friday, after lunch, the art teacher had blared over the loudspeaker: 'Yearbook crew report to the gym.' Tamara, a tall black girl with beads in her hair had jerked out of her seat, relieved to skip a boring math class. "That's me, Miss!"

"Donna?" Mrs. Rucker asked, with the cup still in her hand. "Are you enjoying the dance?"

I took the cup, my hands shaking. "Yes, Ma'am."

I took a sip and turned to look at the kids dancing. Other kids, awkward like me, lined the bleachers. I saw Miranda walk in with her bright red hair. An oversized pink bow sat on top her head. She waved at me with a big smile. I waved back, giggling. I was not completely alone, anymore.

She rushed me with her hands in the air. "Is Curtis here?"

My cheeks blushed, and my eye caught him on the floor, dancing with April: head-cheerleader, perfect blonde hair, and big green eyes. Her father and mother were both dentists and her smile made perfect. He was our crush—not hers. He had a head full of brown curls and told funny jokes that made everyone laugh—Miranda and I included.

I scratched at my hives. "He is."

"Ooohhh," she said, turning to grin at him.

He saw her and winked, while twirling April around like the ballerina that danced on my jewelry box.

"He isn't going to ask us to dance," I said, sipping the red punch.

"Maybe. Maybe not," she said, so carelessly. I noticed her long stockings with white dots on them. I had helped her pick them out for the occasion. They wrapped around her baseball bat legs like plastic wrap.

Mrs. Rucker handed Miranda a cup.

She took one sip, then squeaked. "I love it!"

I laughed. Miranda was contagious, and even though her status was only a peg above mine, she seemed not to know. She appeared oblivious to something as serious as social order.

"Mrs. Rucker this is best. What is the recipe?"

Mrs. Rucker laughed. "Sugar and water!"

"Food coloring, too!" Miranda said, when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around to see Curtis. Cute as a button wearing a suit with a green tie. Brown bears danced on his tie.

Miranda gave him a big smile. "You want some punch?"

He held his hand out to me. "I want to ask Donna for a dance."

My throat closed, and I couldn't talk. I looked at Miranda.

Miranda's whole face lit up like a lantern. "She would love to dance!"

I took his hand; my hands in a full sweat and I felt my knees lock as he led me to the dance floor. I saw April and her best friend Nicole watching us, laughing together. I assumed they must be jealous.

Curtis placed his hand on my back and my body went rigid. I forced myself to sway as he swayed.

"You like me, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes. I just get nervous."

He stopped and took my hand gently in his. "Don't be nervous."

"Okay," I said, taking a long deep breath. I let my body go loose in his arms. The first song was over, the next one came, and I was laughing, light on my feet, and I could see Miranda beaming on the side lines. I knew she was happy for me. She liked him, too, but she was still happy for me. On the second song ending, he twirled me around, like he had done April, and now I felt like the ballerina on my jewelry box. Dainty, pretty, with a pink smile.

But his arms didn't bring me back, and I could see Miranda's face go long right before I fell back. My butt slammed against the laminated wood floor. My dress flopped up, and I had to slap it down to hide my panties. People snickered as I tried to stand back up, but I was dizzy. I saw Curtis standing with April and Nicole, and the three of them were roaring in laughter. My eyebrows stitched together, and I saw Mrs. Rucker walking over to them like a drill sergeant.

Miranda helped me up. Other students pointed, barely holding in laughs. One laughed so hard, they had trouble breathing.

I looked at Miranda's safe eyes. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Let's just dance. We don't need him to dance."

Mrs. Rucker was standing over the three of them now, her finger pointing in their faces.

"Miranda, what happened?"

"Donna, come on. It's best to forget about it."

I saw Curtis with his head down, handing April a dollar bill, and then, he and Mrs. Rucker walked towards me.

Mrs. Rucker stood in front of me with deep pity in her eyes, and anger in her hands that rested on small hips.

She glared at him. "Apologize."

I shook my head. "What happened?"

Mrs. Rucker sighed, and Miranda took my hand, squeezing it hard.

I began to cry. "Someone please just tell me what happened. We were dancing, right Curtis? You asked me to dance, and then you spun me around, and then—"

"—I was paid to dance with you. Did you really think it was real?" he asked, his voice shaky.

Mrs. Rucker elbowed him.

"I'm sorry," he said, a sardonic grin.

I looked at Miranda who mouthed the words: "I'm sorry."

"Oh," I said.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Rucker mouthed, too, then she forced the trio to sit at the bleachers, where they began to laugh as soon as Mrs. Rucker turned away from them.

I walked past them with my head down, noticing black scuff marks on my white shoes.

Miranda walked beside me, and as we passed them, she barked. "Shame on y'all."

"Shame on me," I muttered.

Miranda grabbed my hand and squeezed it hard. Her eyes slanted into a soft look. "No. Shame on them."

She then slid her arm around my waist. "We can dance. We practiced for weeks. We don't need stupid people. Now, let's dance!"

I squeezed my friend's hand. "Okay."



4. Waqas Gul (GUEST - Pakistan)

Muhammad Waqas Gul is a medical doctor by profession. Writing and particularly poetry is his passion. He has been writing for the past 5 years. He hails from the small town of Mianwali, Pakistan.

Filthy Gaze

Do you know the filthiest of crimes?
That happens every day every time
How the men even fail to realize
The crime they're committing with their eyes.

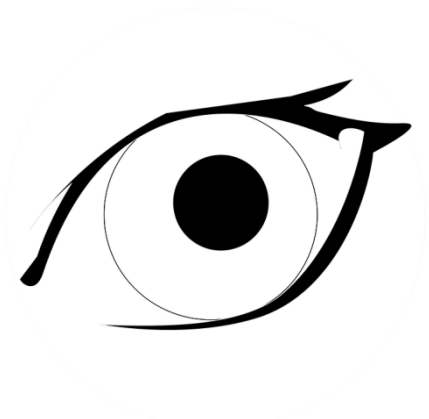
So listen what a women truly faces
When she goes out to work at various places
How she feels uncomfortable by prying eyes
Though she doesn't show but silently cries.

The cringe she senses can't be measured
When that creep ogles just for his pleasure
Tries the best to avoid his dirty gaze
But can't for she's trapped in his filthy maze.

It's so disturbing the way he commits this sin
Without moving anything except the eye within
Does nothing besides scanning her minutely
Her curves being his only specialty of scrutiny!

The effect of that man's piercing glare
Is such she feels her body unclad bare
Experienced by almost every women everytime
And she is told to ignore and not loudly whine.

This filth happens most silently and invisibly
But sadly this isn't condemned mostly
Nobody gives a damn ever about this crime
Because "come on woman, you weren't even touched this time."



5. Ann Privateer (GUEST - USA)

Ann Privateer grew up in the Midwest, United States and now resides in California. She is a poet, artist, and photographer. Some of her work has appeared in Third Wednesday and Entering to name a few.

I Was a Trophy Wife

We met in college
 Me the attractive one
 Idolized him, we
 Married after one year
 Had a child ten months
 Later, then another and
 Another. I grew physically
 Too, never losing weight
 And so, he left me
 For a younger version
 Who thought he was
 Wonderful.

Floating

Walking around the pond
 where Canada geese
 troll the surface, their heads
 burrowing into mud like
 washboard corrugations
 beneath my bare toes.

I gear up for a swim
 later rest on the bench
 watch seeds and floating
 leaves land on children
 and I think about geese
 that occupy two worlds.

That night, under my comforter
 stuffed with eiderdown, I nestle
 into coral satin, and seem
 to disappear, hear as the water facet
 drip and the day peel away, ...here I come,
 ready or not, my young voice shouts,

I scrutinize a Rorschach stain, doze...
 spill coffee on mother's white rug,
 hide in the barn, where geese are plucked
 clean their fleece, trip over a bloodied
 milking stool left before geese insulated
 pillows, jackets, and comforters.



6. Alakananda Pramanik (GUEST - India)

Alakananda Pramanik is a bestselling author of 'Soul Stirrer', an anthology of stories based on real life incidents that has received critical acclaim. One of the stories, 'Rupali' from her book has been made into a short film and is available on YouTube.

Alakananda has also co-authored books by Soulitare, including 'Quoting Scribblers – An anthology of quotes', 'Harmonious Symphonies – An anthology of English poems', 'Kavyaroh – An anthology of Hindi poems', 'NANO – An anthology of micro tales' and Starwords India's 'Written on the Stars – An anthology of short stories'. She has been featured in Literoma's 'Audio Story & Poetry Book'. Her short stories have also been published in 'Calcutta 64 Stories'.

She has acted in a couple of short films, Bengali short film 'Sujog – The Opportunity' and Hindi short film 'Shakti – The Strength Within'. In 2020, Alakananda was honored with the 'AUTHOR ACHIEVER' Award in the Literoma Achiever Award 2020.

Crime on Women and LGBTQ+

If he cared for her
Then why does he hurt her?
Her safety is portrayed to all,
Yet he didn't save her when she cried help.

He fulfils all her needs,
Yet tells other's she is after his wealth!
'She is my wife', he says proudly to all
But, whispers 'Pretty Pretty Baby' to his secret behind the wall.

He thinks she doesn't know,
But she knows it all
Who is he misleading?
Can anyone tell at all?

Though the poem portrays only one of the reasons of grief and depression that women at large face, there are graver incidents of abuses or crimes on women, both mentally and physically that continue to happen daily. In fact, it has risen, especially this past year when people had no option, but to stay at home due to the pandemic situation. While families got an opportunity to bond together, abuses on women and the depression rates have increased.

We always talk of crime on women and even the TV channels are flooded with news of crimes against women like the brutal gang rapes, torture and deaths, but what about crime and abuses on LGBTQ+ persons. If you observe deeply, you will find people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or gender non-confirming more likely to be victims of violent crime than those outside such communities. In most cases, the first persons to victimize them are those close to them, their own family members to begin with.

What really hurts the most is when women & people of LGBTQ+ community are abused within their own homes. Personally, I have come across several women and LGBTQ+ persons who have been mentally abused to such an extent by their husbands / family members that it has led them to high levels of depression, trauma and suicidal; it is almost at par with physical abuse without physical contact.

It so happened that once this woman that I know, was sexually molested in her own house by a close (supposedly respectable) relative from the in-law's family visiting them, and the husband did nothing to save her because his interests were somewhere else. He would rather take the side of the molesting relative, make plans to tarnish her image and have her leave him and the house. She even contemplated giving up her life, but looking at her children she stopped herself. The trauma upon trauma that she went through is unfathomable. There was another woman, who was regularly beaten up by her husband after he came home drunk. Yet another woman who is mentally tortured by her husband and in-laws, and though they don't raise hands on her, they have the habit of chucking glassful of water on her or throw her mattress and pillows out of the room or pouring water on them, etc. There are many other ways of abuse and crimes that happens to women within

the four walls of their houses. News of abuses and crimes against women in the outside world like sexual abuse, molestation, rapes, torture, deaths spread very fast, but what about the crimes within closed doors by the family members?

Coming to the individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, we have to understand that they are also human. They love, they cry, they feel, they get hurt just like any other human. Women who do not conform to societal expectations of gender presentation and sexuality are at great risk of violence based on their gender identity or sexuality. While talking on crimes against LGBTQ women, we must understand that there are abuses and crimes that happens against transgender men too, because much of the violence faced by these men is based on the attacker's treatment of them as a woman. They are attacked because of the belief that they are women by birth who are going against gender norms.

I have known several wonderful LGBTQ women, and believe me the warmth of affection & kindness that they radiated cannot be explained. Their stories, the abuses and crimes that they face is heart wrenching, sometimes even worse than what women from outside this community face. Unfortunately, the family members themselves make negative comments against them. Physical violence and harassment towards LGBTQ+ persons also come from acquaintances and strangers. They are mentally and sexually abused too, but do we hear of such crimes on news channels unlike women from outside this community? Fear of discrimination keeps many from reporting attacks. These individuals are living with the aftermath of trauma and the fear of possible repeat victimization.

Crimes and discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons may have gained more attention in recent years, and even efforts made culturally and legislatively to prevent attacks, but whether it is LGBTQ+ persons or women from outside this community, it is shocking when professionals who are in helping roles take advantage of their position to sexually or mentally assault the individuals that they are expected to be serving and protecting.

Though the increased acceptance of people who are LGBTQ+ and the issues faced by them has gained more visibility, crimes and abuses on them remain an unfortunate reality till date. Recent years may have seen progress in respecting and accepting their individuality, but there have also been reminders on several occasions that we still have to go a long way for their acceptance, equality, respect of personal choices and protection.



7. Dr. Hamdi Meca (GUEST - Albania)

Dr. Hamdi Meça is a poet, author, philosopher, scholar, from Albania. He has been honoured with international awards, important medals, honorary titles, diplomas, etc. Also he was elected on various international cultural boards. About 40 books by this multifaceted author have been published in Albania. Poetry is almost the whole nature of his creativity. His poems have been published in many languages.

Flaming Plus

We rub and itch ourselves against pumices of air
 We breathe in and out
 Eyes fail to see it
 Nose does not either, for it is impartial
 A border stone separating two States or parties
 The State or the party of the right eye
 From the State or the party of the left eye
 The State or the party of the left eye
 From the State or the party of the right eye
 But rub and itch ourselves against
 One another much more feverously
 Holding one another no to fall
 To the left or to the right
 Well, let this rubbing, this body-to-body
 And breath-to-breath rubbing and itching
 Leave not a single trace of us
 Well, let no traces of both of us remain
 In the sparkling galactic pumice
 We are climbing up now
 This sacrifice has nothing to do with
 The extreme polytheistic or monotheistic rituals
 This sacrifice is by no means a superstition coming
 From Dante's journey with Beatrice to heavens
 Well, no, no, it is but belittling of something
 And exaggeration of something else
 A great mystery is rubbing
 And itching of opposite genders
 Body to body, breath to breath
 They let out cosmic dust
 Dust of Eros, dust of Cupid, in abundance
 Galactic – the Womb –
 Inhales the whole of it, Conception occurs
 Stars look arch-shaped from near,
 But jaggy from far
 What can that flaming plus be?
 Why does it appear often and often?
 Yes, yes, yes, yes, that flaming plus is a new planet
 Another planet star of love between male and female
 The two of us are that new flaming plus
 Man is but one, Woman is plus one.
 Thus speaks this plus star.

The Anti-Biology

Time – drinking water gushing and walking
 This liquid light of paradise flowing
 Into the roots of every cell of her female body
 Filled with erotic images of dawns,
 Clouds, seas, mountains, forests
 Always absorbent, forever thirsty
 Neither rivers nor seas have enough water
 To satisfy the need of a girl's or a woman's nature
 As the evening dishevels its hair of shadows
 To quench his thirst
 The thorny ogre of raping and anti-biology
 Thrusts its muzzle
 Into the water source -
 Time in the fertile body
 Where the sun rises
 And the moon sets and the seasons change –
 Licking and devouring red and white juice cells
 That people call blood or anxiety
 The monster hurriedly sucks drinking water –
 Time in those droplet-like seeds
 That people call cells or sighs
 Until her body dried and only dried
 And thus, dried, emptied of the last drop of water
 Emptied of all the juice from the Heavens' Rivers
 It simply crumbled
 Ending up in billions of blind light grains
 And again the world's deserts grew larger
 Took other steps forward
 Hey, Bedouin, hermit, where are you imploring?
 The oasis is but saliva on your face.



8. Perna Avasthi

Perna Avasthi is an environmentalist and social Influencer. She's among the country's most influential women and has been nominated for the Rex Karamveer chakra Award 2019. She's been writing poetry of impact and working on issues like menstrual hygiene, mental health, sustainable development. She received the national leadership award 2019, Youth India Award, Rising digital lady Award and Green Influencer 2020 . Her constant effort is to make country a better place.

Learn to say no

Women, learn to say "No"
 For you deserve respect before love.
 You are here to live free without norms.
 Learn to say, "No"
 To everything that makes you uncomfortable
 And all that which makes you weak.

You ain't here to satisfy
 You're here to lead, to fly and to be treated equal
 Not to stand behind a man but with him.

Learn to say, "No"
 To anything that's less than your worth
 Anything that sounds crazy and unreasonable
 To everything that fades your smile.
 You're made from the storms and light, so come what
 may you'll shine.

Say No
 When it doesn't feel right
 When it feels too much
 Don't fit in anything that's less than your sight.
 Say it loud!
 Say it clear !
 And say it with pride
 Say No without fright.

Perfection

In this world full of competition
 Why are you my dear seeking perfection?
 You scream, you cry and stress yourself .
 This harm is taking all your affection.
 Stop blaming others and claiming your mistakes , learn
 to accept your imperfections.
 Please understand one thing my dear always have
 good intentions.
 Cuz any mistake done by the doer if surrendered
 could be redefined striving for perfection is nothing
 but just a waste of time.



Claustrophobic in my body,
 My skin felt tight .
 My mind Suffocated and the world seem to fight.
 I prayed for life, as I sensed each second in fright.
 My hands felt weak and body ached as I managed to
 fake a smile.
 In world with million followers nothing felt right. Felt
 claustrophobic in my body and my skin felt tight.
 Was shouting in silence and screaming for life. Looking
 for light that evening nothing seemed bright.
 As my dreams faded and
 Nothing felt right. My skin felt tight.

9. Vittal Arigela

Vittal is an English teacher in a government school in Kamareddy district of Telangana state. Many of his poems are published in international magazines and anthologies. In social media platform also his poems got good appreciation. He likes writing poems on contemporary issues very much.

A Saga Of A Woman

I pray the goddess of learning
To lead my words into writing
The woes of a woman at present
May be it is from times of ancient

My mother is woman of not so past
I am her son, a man, to be clear of times recent
Since my early perception I know
How my mother struggled so

Throughout her life till my father,
A man to be specific
Left this world giving her
As much pain as to be prolific
I see my mother eating rotten food
Hiding it when asked why it she did

I know my father never bothered
What food my mother ate at day's end
He knew only how to torment her
As he used to be in effect of alcohol ever

I know my mother facing the kicks and scolds
Till her body aches and mind fills
Even she wasn't dared be offensive
Only she was tamed to be submissive

As the youngest kid of the family
I witnessed my mother's toil to bring groceries daily
By rolling beedis she would get the amount
With which I used to pay monthly bill to merchant.

Here I would like to bring forth
The stigma society since times unknown suffering with
My mother was tortured by a man, her husband
Little did I know how my grandmother treated?

Who are the enemies of the woman?
Is it a man or woman to woman?
Why I see this because
When I got married my wife came into my house

Nor my mother see a daughter in my wife
Neither did my wife see a mother in her mother-in-law, what a real strife
As an educated man I don't want
To see my mother or wife suffer.

It seems the major problem in all our families
It really robs, as well, the happiness
A woman is sandwiched between
A man and women around
She is facing a knife double edged.

Why can't a woman adjust
With a woman herself in the end?
That is the dogma now we need
An answer to be finally found
A woman plays many roles,
A daughter, sister, a wife to husband.

May be it seems a problem need not notice
But many a families suffer with this
Why can't a mother become,
A mother to her daughter in-law
And wife, a daughter to her mother in law?

When this happens
A woman's empowerment begins
Itself right from her house I suppose!



10. Kirti V

An IT professional turned teacher, Kirti took into poetry writing during the lockdown last year. Apart from being a voracious reader, she enjoys music, sports, and drawing. She loves reading and writing across many Indian languages. She is a good orator and loves to recite poems.

Vision 2030

I dream of the days,
That are yet to come,
When a woman like me
Is recognized,
Recognized sans any tags.
 The tags that are attached,
 Are varied in nature,
 Wait! I shall take you
 Down a journey of
 Defining and breaking them.
Why do we need a name?
A name that beams
The history of a hierarchy
Just to grab the attention
Of the hands that walk us to power.
 Why do we need a place?
 A place in temples of knowledge
 Just because the studious men
 Have declined to visit
 Or join them.
Why do we need a position?
A position that is given
Just because we are women,
And to be called the puppets
At the hands of the masters.
 Why do we need to choose?
 Choose a career
 Just because it suits the way
 A woman should be
 In the eyes of the society.

Need a special quota,
Just to give us a chance
To prove our worth
And inborn talents.
 Why can't we guard,
 Lead and protect our country,
 When we can birth,
 Nurture and protect,
 A child and a family?

Why can't we get?
Get a name, a place,
A position or status
On our mettle
And virtue?
 Why can't you all set?
 Set your expectations high
 On our abilities
 And aid to push ourselves
 Beyond the closed doors and glass ceilings?
I dream of such days to come
In the year 2030,
When a woman like me
Is recognized.
Recognized sans any tags.
Why do we need?



11. Rimli Bhattacharya

Rimli has worked relentlessly for several women's causes. Being an engineer she quit her high paying job and ventured into the world of writing. She had written almost 200 articles for 31 literary magazines - national and international, authored four books - two anthologies, one Solo book and second book is upcoming in February.

Rituparno Ghosh's 'Dosar': A Dissection Of Dainty Emotions

I laud Rituparno Ghosh's storytelling of human relationships, marital infidelity, the diversified dainty human emotions and its aftermath in his black and white Bengali film, *Dosar* (The Companion), which was released in 2006. 'Dosar' is a Bengali word which means an emotional companion or just a consort per se.

The film opens with a scene shot from a hotel balcony where Mita (played by Chandrayee Ghosh) hums a beautiful song. Koushik (played by Prosenjit Chatterjee) is shown settling the hotel dues. During the checkout he enquires about the extra charges in the bill, to which the accountant replies that it was for the orchids purchased by his wife Mita from the hotel florist. The body languages of the actors speak for themselves and we find Mita is actually Koushik's beau (*dosar*). The reel rolls by and we see Mita hurting herself while placing the orchids in the car and Koushik nursing her. Koushik chalks out plans for a trip to Darjeeling but Mita refutes Koushik's choice and longs for a faraway place where the cell phones would have no network coverage and Mita can get Koushik's undivided attention. In *Dosar*, Director Ghosh depicts extramarital affair where both Mita and at least Koushik are shown happily married to their respective spouses, even as Mita is a mother to a little boy. And then comes the twist – the couple Mita and Koushik meets with a grave accident leaving Koushik severely injured to be hospitalized and kept under care of his wife Kaberi (played by Konkona Sen Sharma). Mita dies on the spot. Mita's role, though short, comes across as eloquent because of the powerful storytelling. On getting a call from the cops, Kaberi rushes to the hospital only to find out the illegitimate relationship between her husband Koushik and his colleague Mita which leaves her crushed and shattered. Ghosh could have followed the clichéd 21st century feminism and we could have witnessed a stereotypical storytelling where the wife refuses to forgive the husband who breaks her trust and moves on alone in her life. No. It deals with real life crisis where things are easier said than done. Kaberi is torn between her role as a dutiful wife who loves her husband unconditionally and also that woman who has to tote the repercussions of her husband's infidelity. While watching the film one can sense the internal struggle a woman faces in letting her emotions overpower her anger in due course of time and at a subtle pace. But the transformation proves a challenge for Kaberi. Kaberi is seen incessantly battling against herself. She faces the dilemma between helping her wounded husband and also in venting out her frustrations against him. Her exasperations can be felt in the scenes that follow, where in spite of asking for a divorce from Koushik, she still cares for his well-being. The small nuances like Kaberi breaking the news of Mita's death without a wince to her husband are commendable. One can see the distressed wife in Kaberi taking an intrepid stance where she no longer feels anything to convey the news of someone's death. On the contrary she suavely plays with the word BRAVE which her friends and relatives use to describe her and is seen lashing out at them in the later part of the film. This was Ghosh's way of showcasing a betrayed woman's vexation in a phenomenal situation. The concatenation of occurrences showcases irony at its best. There is another subplot in the movie where one more couple is involved in adultery. They are Bobby and Brinda (played by Parambrata Chatterjee and Pallavi Chatterjee). All this while Kaberi has been shown supporting her friends Bobby and Brinda's extramarital liaison. The trio works together for a theatre group. And now when she finds herself in that position she questions their relationship. While Bobby is a bachelor, Brinda is much older to him and is unhappily married to a "Monster Husband". Brinda is shown torn between a loveless marriage and a young lover. Coming back to the original story, Kaberi forgives Koushik ultimately and the film leaves the audiences with the perception that women have in them the capacity to forgive but it also daintily raises these eternal questions: Had Kaberi been the infidel one, would Koushik have forgiven her and nursed her back to health? Also had Mita been alive after this incident how would the same have had affected Kaberi and Koushik's relationship? What happens to the illicit relationship between Bobby and Brinda? The movie weaves a bouquet of dainty emotions. Koushik's journey in dealing with the loss of his loved one and winning back his wife's trust has not been a smooth sailing. Not to forget the broken husband of Mita who has in him the impotent rage in his failure to confront his deceased, unfaithful wife. And to direct such a movie and bringing it to the audience in this manner is an arduous task which needs a lot of hard work and dedication. But Ghosh merits a standing ovation for accomplishing such a marvelous one. I remember I had mentioned at the beginning of the essay that the movie was made in black and white. I guess Ghosh did it on purpose to put across the various roles with truly grey shades. Time you revisit the movie *Dosar* and discern the uniqueness of Ghosh's candid portrayal of human relationships in the film.



12. Dr. Iram Fatima

Dr Iram Fatima is working as a faculty at Ramanujan College of University of Delhi. She is also an academic counsellor at School of Open Learning, University of Delhi. She completed her doctorate in English from University of Lucknow. She is a writer, mentor, motivator, counsellor and a teacher.

Can You Write In English?

It was a Sunday afternoon. Sanjana was trying her hands at her Culinary Skills. A dear friend was coming for lunch at Sanjana's place. Sanjana was a renowned personality in Delhi. She was a Professor of English at Miranda House of University of Delhi. She was an editor-in-chief of many literary journals. She earned a good name and reputation in Delhi after coming from a very small village in Patna. She was a connoisseur of food and music. She was cooking and singing her favourite song. Suddenly the doorbell rang. Sanjana quickly rushed towards the door in anticipation of her dear friend. But it was Shanti, the domestic help at Sanjana's place. Shanti was teemed with anger. She was crying. She told her rigmarole to Sanjana that how her husband taunts her everyday for one or the other thing. The latest reason for their incessant fight was that Shanti does not know even the A, B, C of English. Shanti was getting ambivalent in expressing her emotions. She was crying and laughing simultaneously. Sanjana asked her to calm down.

Shanti- Madam, he hit me today because I don't know English.

Sanjana- Don't worry. I will teach you English.

Shanti (laughing sarcastically)- Madam, as if he is an Englishman and he knows English!

Bulbul- We will fix a class on Sundays. Now please help me out. Ananya is coming after ages to meet me.

Sanjana's husband was a renowned Ophthalmologist in Delhi. He was watching a movie on Netflix. A word "analepsis" struck Shanti's mind. Shanti- Madam, what is the meaning of "analepsis"?

Sanjana- Where have you heard this word?

Shanti- Madam, Sir is watching movie. I heard this word in the movie.

Sanjana- So you are focusing on movie. Better lend me hand in preparing food. Ananya must be here anytime.

Shanti nodded her head. Sanjana says, Well, let me explain the meaning of this word "analepsis" to you.

Well, "Analepsis" is a literary device in narrative, in which a past event is narrated at a point later than its chronological place in a story. Or simply, you can say that it is a flashback where you go to your past mentally.

Shanti- Got it, Madam. Thank you very much. Now, I will go to my house and tell my husband that I know English. After all, my madam taught me the word "ainalipsis".

Sanjana(laughing)- It is not "ainalipsis", but "analepsis". Repeat after me. Analepsis. Analepsis. Analepsis.

Shanti- Analepsis. Right, Madam. Sanjana (clapping)- Right. Bingo! Excellent.

Sanjana then went to take shower. After all, she had to look neat and beautiful. The dear friend must be here anytime. Sanjana called up her friend and asked about the expected time of her arrival. Ananya, the dear friend told her that she will take atleast two hours to reach Sanjana's place. Sanjana then decided to take a power nap after taking shower. She asked Shanti to take care of the kitchen. She then informed her husband about the expected time of the arrival of Ananya. After giving instructions and information to all the human present in the house, Sanjana went to take shower. All the memories were rejuvenating in her mind while she was deciding over which dress to be worn that day. Black one! No it's too hot. The colour black will add fuel to the fire in this scorching heat (talking to herself). White one! No, white will easily become dirty. Then Red! No Ananya does not like that colour. Let me try this pink colour. Pink is everyone's favourite. After deciding the colour of the dress to be worn that day, she went to take bath. After taking bath, she decided to take power nap. She went into a reverie. Analepsis. Analepsis. Analepsis.

Shanti- Madam, what is analepsis? Sanjana- I explained you an hour ago. Well. Analepsis. "Analepsis" is a literary device in narrative, in which a past event is narrated at a point later than its chronological place in a story. Or in simpler words, you can say that it is a flashback where you go to your past mentally. Let's set the time machine and go back into the past. No. No. I am not talking about H.G. Wells' The Time Machine. I am saying that I want to narrate an important event of my life from the past. It was when Sanjana was just five years old. A little girl who recently only started to go to school and was learning the English alphabets. One day she was playing and jumping in the verandah. Suddenly, her wicked aunt came and scolded her. She kept quiet. Aunt had a very robust and villainous look. Anybody could be terrified by her looks, let alone that little and innocent girl. Suddenly, the grandmother and the mother asked Sanjana to have breakfast with them. The Aunt was also invited for the breakfast. The Aunt asked, "What is the menu of the breakfast?" Grandmother replied- " Poha, Bread, Butter, Tea, Vermicilli." That's all for today's breakfast. Sanjana asked for bread and butter. Aunt gave the wrapper of the Amul Butter to Sanjana. Even grandmother and mother were unaware of aunt's next move. Aunt asked Sanjana to go through each and every word printed on the wrapper of the butter and for this task she provided five minutes to Sanjana. She said that after five minutes she was going to ask the spelling of any random word printed on the wrapper. Sanjana was unable to eat the breakfast. She got

terrified. After all, it was a Herculean task for a minor of five years old. The wrapper of the butter has many difficult words- Pasteurised, utterly, delicious, piece, natural, refrigerated, packaging, butter and what not. It was a very uphill task for a little kid who recently only has started going to school. I wonder that whether she was knowing the spelling of even butter or not. Granny kept quiet. She ignored what was happening around her. The mother became nervous and started praying to the Almighty. After all, a mother is a mother. She cannot see her child in any sort of trouble. What are you studying at school? asked Aunt.

Sanjana could not muster the courage to reply back. She was teemed with terror and trepidation.

Now, five minutes are over. Can you tell me the spelling of the word "PIECE" ? asked Aunt.

Sanjana was silent and nervous. Think. Think. I have already given you enough time, said Aunt.

Sanjana was doubly agitated. After some time, Sanjana was ready with the answer.

She replied " P-I-E-C-E". Aunt was shocked and surprised to hear the correct spelling of the word "piece" told correctly by a little girl of merely five years old. Sanjana's mother was smiling and thanking the Almighty for helping and guiding her little daughter. Sanjana was always on one or the other testing activity. Sanjana always faced the rude and arrogant behavior from most of the people associated with her. She was a warrior. Sanjana was a very bright student. She always used to get good grades. She passed her class 10th Board Exams with flying colours. Everybody including Sanjana was very happy. All the relatives, teachers and friends were elated and congratulated Sanjana for her exemplary and outstanding performance. But there is always one character in one's life who is everready to spoil one's mood. Instead of congratulating Sanjana, the Aunt asked a very out of the world question from Sanjana.

Can you write in English ? asked Aunt. This was definitely a very weird question to ask from anyone who has passed her ICSE Board exams with flying colours. Everybody including Sanjana's parents became upset after hearing this question. But sometimes "silence" is the best answer to avoid unnecessary drama in one's life.

Sanjana replied very calmly and tactfully- "Yes, I can write." Sanjana was quite different from others. She was a very down to earth person. She always used the language only when and where it was necessary. She never talked to maids and domestic helpers in English like the children of the Aunt. She was always considerate towards the rickshaw pullers, maids and domestic helpers. Sanjana was of the view that if she would talk in English with these deprived people, then they would feel low and humiliated. Her sole objective and intention in life was not to hurt anyone. But all these explanation was of no use. Sanjana didn't want to indulge in any kind of drama. She replied in the most calm and in the most tactful way. Perhaps, it was the best way to deal with such negative people in life. To avoid, to ignore and to stay calm is the best solution to these harsh situations of life. Sanjana was highly disturbed by the ear-piercing words of her aunt. But she was made of a hard metal. She took it as a challenge and pursued Honours Course in English from a very renowned college of Chennai- the famous Presidency College. After pursuing Honours in English at the graduation level, she pursued her Masters in English from the University of Delhi. She was the topper of her batch and got gold medals for securing highest marks in all the categories. Everybody was extremely elated with Sanjana's performance.

After that, her journey of pursuing doctorate in English began. And within 3 years, she earned the doctorate degree. So the tiny little girl Sanjana was now Dr Sanjana. Her journey from naïve to brave is really very exemplary. After some months, she qualified NET exam in English with 99.87 percentile. And the question of her aunt- "can you write in English ?" was always at the back of her mind. But Sanjana took every event of her life as a learning curve and she always worked for becoming a better personality. Now she is a Professor of English at one of the prestigious colleges of Delhi University, Miranda House, where even getting admission is an uphill task. But never mind, Sanjana is there to help everyone and she finally found her place as a mentor for everyone. Suddenly, someone was knocking at the door in the loudest possible way. Madam, madam, what has to be done with the sambhar? I don't know how to cook south Indian cuisine. Madam, your friend must be here anytime. Madam please open the door. Sanjana's reverie was broken. She got up and washed her face. She laughed and said ANALEPSIS. Haha. Sanjana quickly changed her clothes and went to the kitchen to do the remaining kitchen work. She wanted to surprise Ananya by cooking her favourite South Indian Cuisines. She did not miss even a single South Indian cuisine – Dosa, Idli, Uttapam, Payasam, Sambhar, Upma and what not. Suddenly, she received the call from Ananya. Ananya got confused with the address. Sanjana guided Ananya and Ananya reached Sanjana's house in twenty minutes. The two friends who were meeting after almost two decades were extremely happy to see each other. They hugged each other hardly. Both of them had lots of stories to share with each other. Sanjana asked Shanti, the maid to make tea and serve the starter first. Ananya was amazed to see the dining table at Sanjana's place. All the food kept on the table was Ananya's favourite. After having sumptuous lunch, Sanjana and Ananya decided to go to Lajpat Nagar and Chandni Chowk for shopping. They purchased many a things. They shared many events and incidents of their lives with each other. They even had their mutual favourite "Pani Puri" at a famous shop of Chandni Chowk. Ananya was extremely happy with the markets of Delhi. She was enjoying the lanes of Chandni Chowk and Lajpat Nagar to the fullest. Suddenly Ananya asked Sanjana– "Any update about that 'can you write in English' Aunt? Have you told her that you can write in English now."

Both of them could not control their laughter and laughed uncontrollably.

13. Dr. Shweta Mishra

Dr Shweta Mishra (M.A. Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor in English and presently teaches at MBP Government Post-Graduate College, Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh) India. A gold medalist in M.A. English, Lucknow University, she has authored several research papers that have been published in various reputed journals. Creative writing is what she passionately loves to do. Her notable works include What is a Woman: This is Trash. Leave it, The Most Orange (collection of poems) to name a few.

It's Like Shouting All Alone In The Caliban World

It's like shouting all alone
 In a deserted island
 Or in barren, vacuum space
 With nobody listening.
 Yet one needs to yell
 So everyone shouts
 And proves a point
 And all shouting goes into some damn pit.

But shouting gives result
 Like there was Sati
 Then people shouted,
 Some embraced death
 And Sati was abolished
 Like there was Slavery
 Then people shouted,
 Some embraced death
 And Slavery was abolished.

There are several gutters
 People get down and into it
 Get smothered
 Give their lives and die
 For CAUSES
 And then come out smokes of victory
 Hopefully you are more civilized now
 My dear human being!

Still there are many voices
 Shouting loud
 Blowing the trumpet and waiting for wars
 Still poverty kills
 And women raped
 And children trafficked.

And when outside is all clear of dirt
 In close cores murders and revenges
 Start to thrive
 Human psyche takes the toll
 With its strange distortions!

Let's continue the shouting
 As this beautifully obnoxious being
 Needs to be told all the time
 "Don't be a Caliban!"



14. SK.Yakubpasha

SK.Yakubpasha working as PGT english in TS Model Schools . His father SK.Mohiddin is a senior journalist in Telugu daily newspaper. Yakubpasha contributed his poems "Childhood Days" "Nature's Trick" A Silent Song of Tree" Mother's Love" to "Buoyant Bliss" , "Vibrant Verses ",and " Peerless Pearls" anthologies of poems. His poems "Talk of My Shadow" "Delight of Nature" "Mysterious Lady" published in" The Journalist magazine "and "Infinite Sky" Literary magazines.

Devil's Monologue

Human no longer to be called human
All they say slowly changing his name as devil of all
His own shadows clearly resemble all his sins
As if in shape of Devil's horns and sharp teeth.

All species were born to live freely
But man vanishing them slowly.
Here the conflict not only between man and beasts
But also between he and she.
His lustful desire can kill her bury as well
Though, they say devil is lurking in all his deeds.

Yes, I dwell in filthy hearts as noble art
I follow him like a lurking shadow
When man about to do heinous act.
Then I give my evil grin and fly on invisible shallows.

But, I do not claim that was my diabolic crime
Here man is making hellish things on earth.
I stood beside when he cut her flesh
Into pieces, oh! My goodness.

When I was called the reason of all
Since then started ill angels fall
Once I provoked you to douse my jealous
But not for mere pleasure or evil's treasure.

Oh! Man now I am afraid to see you
Your sins doubled and tripled
And your shadows turned into giant gargoyle winged shapes.
Oh! Man decide who won this land of God
Either you or me, who knows than me (he faded away with evil grin)?



15. Staffy Bhateja

Staffy Bhateja, who writes under the pen name Steffi, is a young poet hailing from The City Beautiful-Chandigarh. Staffy is an alumna of the Chandigarh branch of Delhi Public School of chains and was appointed as the third Head Girl of the prestigious institution. She has completed her Masters in English Literature from MCM DAV College, affiliated to Panjab University and is currently pursuing Masters in Philosophy at the University's main campus. She defines herself as a creative soul, with poetry and painting being two of her biggest passions.

I Am Proud To Be A Woman!

Labelled inferior
 Made subservient by the structure
 Though I am endowed with nobility-
 Possessing potential to give birth to the entire mankind
 I am the birth-giver, I am the nurturer
 Complexity remains my hallmark
 Like a Rubik's Cube is my persona
 I am tender, I am a gush of gentle breeze
 I am Sita, but can become Chandi and Durga too
 Creativity gushes in my body
 Which I outpour through the pen
 Not simply an object of desire- designed for male gaze
 I am much more
 Yes, I am the best creation of the Almighty
 I am proud to be a woman!

The Wild Zone

Rebellious and strong- epithets that aptly describe my persona
 I am not a damsel in distress like Snow White
 Or passive and submissive as Cinderella
 I don't fantasize about a knight in shining armour
 To rescue me from life's troubles
 I am neither irrational nor shallow, as often perceived

You delve deep inside the recesses of my mind
 And you will find
 The burning desire to throw the hackneyed notions of feminine beauty behind
 To achieve equality for my fellow mates in the rigid patriarchal structure
 To achieve my goals and fulfill my ambitions
 To write, express and convey as much as my male counterparts do
 To dismiss Freud's notions of Penis Envy, dismissing us as subordinate creatures

I absolutely love William Golding for having proclaimed us to be far superior than men
 After all, we give birth to the entire humankind, We are the life-bearers
 Such is the irony of our life....
 Endowed with nobility by the Almighty
 But suppressed by the "superior" gender

But I will protest, I will rebel against the unfair norms
 Until I reach the "Wild Zone".....
 Far away from the choking restrictions of the male tradition.



16. Ketki Jalan

Ketki is a poet and a doodle illustrator. She loves to connect with nature and surroundings, to entwine expressions into poetry and fondness to form doodles.

Nature's Gift To Mankind

"Oh Dear ! Stay within walls and abide to quiescence"
 Mother apprised her cramping offspring in adolescence
 "Do not elude boundaries ,discipline thy impious painted self
 Let the stained residues pass out and you become of sacred health
 Resurge into sublime heaven and sense surreal liberation"
 The daughter cajoled her mother lovingly and with inclination
 "Mom, its unkind myth about aching belly abrasion
 Abstain from whisper ,discuss blatantly and sprucely
 The dawn will outset whence innate stances amend thusly
 My body is my temple of priority not a curse or shame
 A godsend finesse ,giving birth to breathing life and frame
 I tolerate etiolated exhaustion due to people boring in me tucked
 Invoking glower and malaise, while purchasing disposable menstrual product
 Appetency for an unbiased avowal towards monthlies erupt
 Heart stirring whispers exhaust inwards and mentally impelling teary
 Unreasonable conversations of shrewd concepts about menses a bleary
 Mother Nature created females with caves of floral booms untouched
 Bestowed with dynamic hormone driven resilient anatomy unmatched
 An invocation imperative ,indication of our survival ,a universal precept
 But needs cautious watching to blossom modestly and prep up
 If versed from enclosure ,queasiness will not let impetus hit
 So will a proliferative nation with bankrolled support closely knit
 Awareness is the need of the hour and not exalted fancies
 The gifted pains need prodigious support to overcome windy anxieties
 Concerning safe keep and usage to the blessed and breadline
 A responsible assimilated savvy towards periods and also menopause align
 She is a woman ,a pragmatic blessing, she makes your family".



17. Namrata Singh

Namrata is an award-winning Blogger, an Author, a Creative Writing Coach, and a Life Coach. She is a contributing author, an essayist, and a storyteller to some of South Asia's leading online platform. Many of her stories have been award-winning stories with a wide readership. She is a contributing author of the e-book- No Apologies which came in early 2019 Lovers and Losers published in May 2020. She has co-authored two books- 'I am what I am' and 'Immortality'.

Hoodwinked

Some months are polka dots; other months it is spotlessly clean. Regardless, I wear a sanitary pad, just in case...one more time.

Men love beautiful women. Men love fully rounded breasts, smooth, soft, and squishy, similar to a stress ball, and a voluptuous rear. I have them all. Or at least I used to.

Lately, I have a lot running on my mind: the President's inauguration, Los Angeles weather, my teenage daughter's SAT exams, my husband, a podiatrist, new fixation with The Gita classes at Laguna Isckon temple. Most importantly, my soaked blouses and my spotless months have induced a feeling I can with some surety call-RAGE-sweat commingled with a sense of rage that I have recently acquired at 48. As an OB-GYN, my hands are always full. Twenty years of experience both in England and the United States does not go in vain. What I enjoy the most is the administration of Botox, cosmetic fillers, and laser procedures for photo rejuvenation, acne treatment, scar removal, and varicose vein treatment and make everyone look beautiful, just what they crave, just what makes them feel alive again, just what they deeply desire. It makes me feel good to see them feel good, mostly women, walking out of the clinic knowing they still have it in them, their privilege restored.

This patient who met last year in December visits again this morning and despite all my efforts, I couldn't take my eyes off her full rounded, soft and warm rose beige breasts. I examine them under the paper gown; the tanned nipples contrast to the white as I massage them gently to rule out any lumps. She is due for a mammogram, though, at 35, I hardly suspect her shooting pains have anything to do with an underlying condition. Minutes later, routine questions follow - Last period? Allergies? Mood swings? "We are trying to get pregnant" is what she responds. Strangely, my heart does a quick somersault at the mention of the word pregnant. Years back, I was pregnant too.

Motherhood is a declaration to the world that you can create the magic called life. The excitement and the anticipation swaddled with the attention the bump gets is unmatched. Every stranger is oh so ready to put you first, every face smiles at you with unusual kindness. Who does not revel in it? Our culture has clear definitions of what it prizes and what it is ready to sideline. We all have our moments of glory and then with time, it starts to fade, fade to a blur, and then it is so indistinct, it might as well not exist. The world won't even notice it. That feeling pricks. I am slowly getting sidelined; my body and the people around are making space for the new and tears erupt easily. It wasn't like this always. Now even the smallest, the most benign situations drive me to sobs.

I gain my balance, order a blood test and ask her to come back once we have the reports. Possibly, she is pregnant. At 35, you are fertile and so full of youth still. She is a journalist and a travel blogger. Her husband is a food blogger and both have quite an interesting life. Together they saunter the streets of Jamaica and Cuba exploring salted pigtailed and tree muttons. I once wanted to travel far and wide but my work took the better of me. I still want to travel, not just a vacation but the adventurous kind, the kind where you set out to explore not just places but their soul, their history and in the process find yours or lose a piece which has been rotting for long.

The door closes and I feel my cheeks burn like a furnace. There is a knock on the door and I spray Victoria's Love Spell under my arms. The spell part makes me wonder.

The girl looks reluctant, a bit shy, her mother though is loquacious. Her cheery greeting cools the temperature of the room though I can feel a bead of sweat trickle from the back of my head, travel through the neck, roam in a vertical line of the spine until the band of my trouser absorbs it. I ask her to change while her mother narrates the story- "She started her periods. Terrible mood swings, frequent headaches, insomnia, and I think there's something wrong with her breasts. They are too large for her age. She is just 14. I thought it would be good to see you. Remember, you delivered her. I try hard to recall. I have delivered close to 800 babies in the

last 20 years of my practice. Though her mom's face is familiar, most importantly her hyperventilating over benign situations- big breasts, small feet, skin break out, and even 'We Indians'.

Routine questions and examination follow. "It is so skanky," she says about her periods, "I always land up spotting and staining and my mom has a problem with my ..." she trails off in silence under the glare of her mother supplicating no further divulgence. Her breasts are like any other 14 -year-old, the right one slightly bigger than the left, conical, and the girl hesitates when I examine it.

"Sore breasts are normal during the menstrual cycle." I empathize.

"But I never had one," her mother interjects.

I compose her saying each body is different. After some more cross-examination, questioning, and a bit of counseling, I order a blood test to check her Vit D level and iron deficiency.

Her breasts stay in my mind reminding me of my youth. Lately, it has been my most intense preoccupation. Last week, I embarrassed myself, caught gawking at one of my staff, a woman in her late twenties with a straighter build and full lips painted, the color of toasted almonds. Such fastidiousness makes me uncomfortable, but lately, I have discovered things about myself that baffle me. Am I being hoodwinked? At 48, the unsettling comparisons, the microscopic indulgence in Do-I-Still-Look-Good, the trepidation over losing that something, something I haven't figured out what is not only agonizing but excruciatingly exhausting. I proceed, nonetheless. The black turtleneck and fitted houndstooth pants looked fabulous on her and each of her blossoms stood distinct, tall, and proud, unlike mine which had become one block of flesh. "The pendant is beautiful," I lied and hurried to my room.

During lunchtime, I slide into my private restroom. Removing the lab coat, I unbutton my silk shirt, a pale pink. Pulling the straps down, I examine my breasts. They stare back questioningly. The microfibre material in cerulean blue bra with underwires and wider cushioned front straps has been quite a support ever since they started dropping. In a seated position, they could touch the abdomen. After two kids, one who had flown and one fledgling ready to fly, my breasts bear the testimony of my effort to keep everyone satisfied. They have shrunk and look withered. My septuagenarian mother's breasts float before my eyes, no resemblance to anything round, rather flat, like the ears of an English Lop. I button myself back reassuring them that they still get a tickle from him once in a while. The mauling that a man does when he is hard as a sugarcane stock, has ceased. Just then a beep. "I have decided...have been in California my entire life Maa. I need to see the world just like akka. Btw, I would be home by evening. After school, the jing bang is meeting at BSQ. See you." I hold myself back from walking out and lean against the granite countertop to ponder over the message. I feel the rage spread. How difficult it is for a child to opt for UCLA, a college close to home rather than a university 3000 miles from home on the east coast? How difficult is the choice between 'staying close to Maa' and 'exploring life'? Or am I asking the wrong questions? Was it always supposed to be what Khalil Gibran once said- 'They come through you but not from you'? How is that possible? My body created this life, I felt her kicks when she was inside, and given a chance, I would have her back, safe in my womb. So, I mean, how?

I rush back to work. A 52-year-old with a chiseled face and ha eyes is deliberating on hormonal replacement therapy. Her luscious auburn hair with a chestnut mole right above the cusp of the upper and lower lip makes her look much younger. She is a familiar face considering she has been having her Botox in my clinic and was now facing intense irritability, vaginal dryness, and low sex drive which in turn is affecting her husband and her conjugal life. "A hormonal replacement therapy might bring back the magic," she says with a twinkle in her eyes as if being sexually relevant is the prime objective of a woman's existence, and the pliability of the vagina the key result area of a married couple's life. I feel something surge within. Let's again call it rage. Yes, it is rage. What makes a man continue to seek magic long after the curtains are drawn? Intercourse can be torture, I experience it every other night and yet I want to continue being desirable. Does he care about my racing heart, the foreboding that strangles my breath? My endocrinologist and my cardiologist have exhausted their tests and tools. The blood drawn during blood tests could as well have saved someone's life. Conveniently, we all surmised the inevitable.

Hours later, the traffic back home is easy going and I expect to reach home on time to tick off my leftover to-dos for the day: dinner, laundry, wash, clean, sex, read, and sleep. Ahead, a Tesla SUV veers left off Hollywood Boulevard and charges uphill, towards the canyons and the homes beyond the scope of star-spotting tourist buses. I cuss heavily. Rage is justified right now. Do women in Beverley Hill feel the ignominy of aging? I let my mind drift back home. He would be in the online Vedanta classes by now, I remind myself. What does Vedanta teach a man? His needs have reached the zenith and mine have plummeted to the nadir. Now what? The episode of heat strikes again and I feel my blouse soak. Lately, heat has accompanied me most of the places: examination room, restroom, CVS, Namaste plaza, Panada Express, and even while I am in the

shower. I can differentiate between the warm water and the lava erupting from the pores of my skin. Just how complicated can life become when the only two things you feel is heat and rage. The former has an outlet, the latter simmers within searing the present.

With reasonably blessed family life, reasonable life challenges, reasonable degrees, and certificates framed on the mantelpiece, a reasonably rewarding career, and a reasonable charm, maybe not the kind one would find in *GQ*, but good enough to trigger second glances sometimes even in sweatpants, rage has been the most unreasonable emotion I have known. Now it's the only emotion I know: exhausting rage. Ingrate, right? Huh! Most importantly, I don't even know why. Maybe I do. Maybe I am too frightened to accept. Maybe I am struggling to let go. I am plagued by the thought of what I can do differently, guilty for the times I am succumbing to my life circumstances with such disgrace. Amidst blooming hibiscus and jasmine, I park the car in the garage.

"Maa, why you stuck up on everything?" She comments, her eyes on the phone kept in the netted basket away from the dining table.

"Hormones," he adds with a whiff of nonchalance, his fingers pulling the meat away from the bone with a tug of a fork.

"Yeah! I guess. Menopause can be tough. Elina's mom has been behaving savagely for a few months."

"Few months? Haha! Women and their hormones are forever. Unpredictable is the word, my dear."

The banter between the father-daughter duo leaves me numb and startled. They are talking about me? As in her mom, his wife, or just a cocktail of hormones after all? Each word feels like a lawnmower running over my heart. They are talking about a woman who ensured every sleeping and waking moment of her life, including her dreams, was devoted to nourishing and providing for them in every possible way- body, mind, and soul together. Silently seething, I rush to the restroom. Minutes later, in the background I can hear Trevor Noah humorizing the day's political happenings and trending news.

I undress slowly and stand looking at the reflection in the rectangular mirror mounted on the beige wall. Stepping back, my full body becomes visible. Youth is definitely not the vocabulary here. The C-section scars, my badge of honor stare back in empathy. There is so much of our life that rests on looks, it hits you hard when looks start to fade and you rummage through the debris trying to find something to hold on to and still feel worthwhile. We all want to be seen, admired, appreciated, and needed. The society - you and me-hoodwinks us into what's 'worthy'. Menarche, Marriage, and Motherhood are rites of passage in a woman's life providing necessary proof of worthiness. Who knew the fourth M could cause such inadequacy and disorientation? However, there is a difference between proving your worth and realizing your worth. I slipped on the latter. The expiry of my periods is intricately linked to the lapse of my identity. How? Why? The mendacity of society hits back the moment our exterior starts to crumble. Each day can bring you new indignation because all your life you believed something that was never the truth.

I am learning this is in the most intimate way imaginable, that your own self can suddenly turn on you, the definition of you that you think is formidable can be wiped out in a flow. Which raises a question- How can women continue to live fulfilling lives when the facade has shattered and exposed our not so beautiful, not so youthful, not so appealing, not so promising, less fertile, and less of everything this society values in a woman? When the thunderbolt of orgasm has silenced, can you still find excitement in life? When the allure of beauty and youth dims, when the lady garden withers and the airbags flatten, how does one keep the glow on? After making space for the new, where does the old go? Life has presented an unreasonable permutation of suffering for which I wasn't prepared. Or is it another rite of passage, this time through a dark dungeon with splintered windows and chalky paint, enveloped in undefinable darkness and ivy gnarling with the black widow spider webs? Beyond this, maybe, the sun doesn't shine on you, it rises from within.



18. Nita Bajoria

Nita may be best described as a lazy bookworm who utilizes her moments of feeling out of place in a social gathering by observing people around her and plotting short stories. Before she started writing fiction, she experimented with various occupations like computer teacher, computer programmer, kitchen designer, kitchen manufacturer, and office magazine editor. But her favourite job is the one she's now doing full time — weaving stories.

Not Woman

The pink striped kurta was his birthday gift from his friend Rina. As he climbed the stairs swiftly, an elderly man with a paunch spat a stream of deep brown betel juice above the dustbin at the landing. A nurse passing by glared and mumbled curses under her breath. Patients, ward boys, attendants, all scampered in different directions in a hurry. The circus holding the pandemonium reeked of illness. The shaming accusations and the sound of cruel laughter that resonated this place a few years back, gnawed his ears, making him feel queasy. But then he was there. He needed the assistance of this place. Aruna Ma walked up the cash counter while Manav moved towards the hallway. Two black wrought iron chairs, chipped at the corners, stood there lined along the opposite walls facing each other. Women sat at one side, men on the other. Like always, he wondered where he should sit? Before that ugly incident, man and women were equal in his eyes. It was no longer the same. He glanced at the ladies chatting amongst themselves. That area seemed safer to him. But as he moved forward to take a seat beside a lady in an orange saree, the men shifted in their seats uncomfortably. He would have ignored them and sat nonetheless, but he chose to stand midway behind a wide pillar. Aruna Ma completed the formalities and took him to his ward on the third floor. The way he walked, the way he rolled his eyes, it induced whisperings and uneasy glances. But then, he was used to them and no more did they make him feel embarrassed. And moreover, things were going to change soon, very soon.

"Change", a short lady in white dress said to him as she handed him a washed gown.

Inside the washroom, he looked at himself for one last time; head to toe.

"The surgery will take place at 11:30 AM tomorrow. You can't eat anything before that", the nurse said as she went about her duties. Finally, she turned on the drip and went away.

"You will be all right. Don't worry at all. And remember, I am with you, always" Aruna Maa assured him. Though, not his biological mother, she was God sent. Survival would have been a challenge otherwise. Manav gave a smile and pressed her hand. As she left, he closed his eyes and tried to relax. But couldn't. The fan circulated the hot and humid air. The mind was also at work, playing a kaleidoscope of his strange life so far.

Manav was just five years old when his mother taught him melodious songs by Rabindranath Tagore. He was too young to play the keys of the harmonium and blow the air simultaneously. Hence, his mother bellowed and he played the keys and sang. As the soft texture of the cotton sari rubbed against his arms, he tried maintaining his tune to the pleasant rhythmic jingle of the white conch shell bangles she wore.

"Lovely. You have such an amazing voice Babai" his mother said as she cuddled him dearly.

"But nothing close to you. When will I learn to sing like you? When would people clap at my performance?"

"Very soon, dear. One day my child would mesmerize each and every soul with his melodies" she hugged him tight and showered him with soft kisses.

Happily, he sprang from her lap and ran to his mother's room. He once again performed the entire song he had learned just now, like a deft artist, in front of the tall mirror, beside the wardrobe.

"Great, but not perfect", he thought to himself. Something was missing. He checked around and pulled the green tant sari hanging at the verandah. Wrapping it up around four times, he placed the end over his shoulder, the way his mother did. The red bindi near the mirror edge soon adorned his forehead. Still, something is amiss. It took him some time to braid the dupattas the way he saw their maid do. She had a long hair, and before leaving home, she would undo her carelessly done bun and comb her hair in a snaky weave. He tucked the colourful strand with the help of a ribbon around his head and grinned at his own reflection. He crooned once again, this time more womanlike, clapped in joy at the end of his performance and kept gazing at his reflection in the mirror.

At school, his friends and teachers too applauded when he sang. As his voice echoed in the assembly hall, all his classmates who otherwise had never left any opportunity to bully him, strained their ears to enjoy his songs. That was one time when nobody teased him as "Meyeli", girlish.

This nickname followed him in his college years too. He showed that he cared a hoot, but cried bitterly inside the boy's washroom.

"Where's Manav?" Rina asked his college friends as they were digging each other's lunch boxes.

"Must be with his preferred girl gang, licking pickles and gossiping." They laughed mockingly.

Rina getting angry at their derogatory remarks, turned towards the banyan tree that stood at the far end of the campus. The boys were right. There he was jabbering and giggling with the girls. Manav, usually shy towards

boys, mingled well with the opposite gender. They too, welcomed him as they knew he was harmless. Rina sighed. Is he aware what's all this about? She must tell him, she decided.

"You mean this happens? It's all about hormones? There are more people like me?"

"Yes", Rina said, closing her folder.

"But I never came across anybody? And how did you figure this about me?"

"This is my project topic for graduation. I had my doubts the first time I saw you. And then I observed."

Manav stared at her silently. She read the questions in his eyes.

"I will be glad to help you," Rina assured.

"Great! Are you coming to the movie today with us?"

"No. My parents won't allow me."

"But your brother is coming with us?", Manav exclaimed.

"Yes. He is a boy" Rina sighed and started for home.

It was a new world altogether. His world. His people. No judgmental eyes. No hesitation. No confusion. Simple acceptance of who you are. Finally, he wasn't absolutely alone. He thanked Rina for the guidance and support. It was there only that he met Aruna Madam for the first time. Her face was glowing with grace as she walked confidently wearing a maroon silk saree. Her big matching "Bindi" and cute little "Jhumkas" resonated well with her clarity of thought about the way she wanted to live. After becoming a trans-woman, Aruna Ma'am had devoted her life as an activist for the cause. He too joined the movement and spent all his free time to the purpose. A new meaning to his life had emerged. Aruna Madam was equally thrilled to find such a lively person as Manav. With his positive attitude, he made her forget all daily struggles people like her to grapple.

"You Chhukka, you Hijra, don't try to act smart!", the tall man who was talking to him decently few minutes back suddenly snatched his mobile and pulled his hair. His other two companions grabbed Manav's bag and started hurling slangs, words they would never want their family to hear. They then started slapping and hitting him. This drastic change in the situation startled Manav and he was scared to death. He screamed and tried to escape, but no one was around to help. He had been coming here since a year to spread awareness about AIDS amongst the not-so literate people. They were mostly truck drivers or workers from the nearby factory. But never before had he felt so unsafe. He pleaded profusely, but to deaf ears.

They pulled him inside a barren house to fulfil their lust. When they were done with him, they threw him outside like a used and torn empty sack. The pain was unbearable, but when he realized that he was free to go, he gathered all his leftover energy and pulled himself up. He had expected death and nothing less. But he was alive. He still felt grateful. He zipped his jeans and limped to the cycle stand and pedalled to his house. With tears trickling down his cheeks, helplessness curdled his blood. But he must hide them. Hide them well. In front of the door, he closed his eyes and whispered a short prayer to God, though he wasn't sure if really listened anymore. He wiped his kohl smudged face, tidied his hair and somehow managed to ring the bell. Bodo Ma opened the door.

"What kept you out so long? What's that cut?" She noticed the bruise on his forehead.

"Nothing much. I banged my head into a wall by mistake", he replied in a slurry voice with a forced smile and walked straight into his room.

His father, still awake, came, saw him inside his room and then returned to his bed once again without uttering a single word. After his wife's demise, like an attendance punch, he kept track when his son left home and returned. He kept himself detached from the rest. He was a conservative Brahmin. Hence, Manav too avoided him lest he finds out his truth, gets disturbed and upset. It's common for a transgender person to find people upset about them most of the time.

Water flowing down his body, did little to make him feel clean. This is what all his other female friends might go through someday, he realized. Or maybe had already gone through. Humiliation, anguish, insult and despair poured through her eyes. If this is the way a man thinks about the other gender, he thanked God for leaving him halfway in the making of a man. Turning the shower off, he applied for medicine on his exposed bruises and tried sleeping, remembering his mother. Loneliness, his loyal friend, crept in and hugged him tightly. Clutching his pillow, he waited for the night to pass. He must rest and gather enough energy to go to Aruna Ma early morning. Only in her, he can confide.

Aruna Ma took him to a hospital near her house to tend to his traumatic mind and body. As they walked in, all eyes fell upon them. The stares of the hospital staff were menacing as he lied down for the checkup.

"How come people like you get raped?" the doctor asked mockingly as the nurses giggled.

Manav felt even sicker, and he requested Aruna Ma to take him away from there as soon as possible. A similar treatment awaited them at the police station.

"Aruna Ma, if I have to live like this, I would rather die", Manav finally broke into tears.

"You won't. You are a fighter." She caressed his hair and held him tight.

"What's my fault? God created me the way I am. Then why shall I suffer this hatred and abuse. Just because I am different, can anyone behave with me the way they want? Who gives them this right?"

"We. We will have to stand for our cause and fight dear."

"Fight fight fight. I am tired of this fighting. Since the day I realized the new me, I have been fighting, sometimes outside, sometimes inside. You know Ma, I love the woman inside me. I have named her Meenu. She has become my life, but the man inside me doesn't like her much. They constantly keep fighting for their individual existence."

"I know. I have been through all this as well. You just need to make up your mind."

"Is it really a solution? I mean why should I try to change myself? Can there really be a fault in God's creation? Can't we continue to live just the way we are?"

"You may. It is up to you to decide. But making a change in life is nothing unusual. People change their hair color, they get nose jobs done, opt for breast implants all the time. They change their countries, religion and even their names. Then what's the big deal about sex change or sex correction? But yes, you need to be confident about it first. You will have to take the decision on your own and be responsible for it."

"How well you have explained it. It seems very natural now. But I think I am not ready yet. In fact, I think I should try to reverse it all. My friends were right. Women in this society have a difficult path. I am probably fortunate to be at least born with a male body."

"Being born as a human being is fortunate enough, my child. But do follow your heart."

"Take your time dear. But before you leave let me tell you one thing, God knows why, but I feel a special bond when I see you. Like a mother, my eyes follow you. I feel good when I get to care for you. You can call me "Ma" if you want, and the doors of my home will always be open for you." She assured Manav, something he needed badly that particular day.

Back home nobody asked anything. Though everyone kept shut, he knew that they had an inkling. The air within his home stifled day by day. Finally, he packed his bags and shifted to Aruna Ma's place. His Aunt cried a lot. His father didn't show any sign of grief or anguish.

Tears swelled in his eyes, as the hairdresser snipped off his pony. How meticulously he had grown them. No more fancy rubber bands, no more kohl in the eyes, no more nail paints, no more singing. For whenever, he sang, his melodious girlish voice would bring out his effeminate side.

Pulling out the cigarette from his tight jeans, he took a few puffs and observed his own reflection on the windowpane. He now almost passed for a boy, except when he spoke and walked. While he felt like being strapped with metal tapes all over his body and soul, he kept telling himself that this was the only way out.

"I know of a hormone medicine that can solve all your problems. A person from my area works in a reputed hospital as a ward boy. He has a medicine for people like you. But they are quite expensive.", the college canteen boy whispered, looking around cautiously.

His manly behavioural changes were working fine, outwardly, but deep inside, they were creating complete chaos. If this medicine can really put all his inner turmoil to peace, it would be an end to all his difficulties. He must place the order.

"The mobile is ringing for ages. Where were you? You forgot your mobile here?" Aruna Ma asked Manav as he entered the house.

"Sorry! Went to the music class. I forgot to take it with me" he said, picking up the mobile.

Eleven missed calls. One from Rina, three from LGBT Center and two from an unknown number. She called Rina, the LGBT Centre and then the unknown number.

"Hello, I received a call from this number."

"Oh! Actually, I was trying for my friend's number. Sorry for the inconvenience", a male voice replied.

"It's all right."

"Ahh.... which place is this?" Manav was almost going to keep the phone when the voice asked.

"Konnagar" Manav replied hesitatingly. He was not sure if he should divulge this information to a stranger. But he sounded quite decent. What harm can a person possibly do on knowing your area?

"Oh, great. I am from Maslandapur."

"Oh! Isn't this the same place from where Antara Mitra, the singer belongs?"

"Yes. She stays just a few blocks away. You like singing?"

"I love singing." To his utter surprise, Manav found himself smiling.

"Meenu" Aparna Ma called from the dining area.

"I need to go now. Will talk later." Manav suddenly realized he is chatting with an unknown person. Whosoever does such silly things.

"Ya, I heard someone calling your name. It's Meenu, right?"

"Ummm...Yes"

"Nice. A name well suited for a girl with such a sweet voice."

"Thanks. Bye."

"Okay. Bye"

God! His voice was so heavenly. Macho, yet so soft. Authoritative, yet caring. Manav's cheeks were still burning red. The person had assumed that he was a girl. The thought thrilled him.

"Meenu."

"Yes, Ma, coming."

"Who was it? Anything important? Your soup is getting cold."

"Nothing important. A friend."

Post dinner Manav stealthily took out the tablets the canteen boy had given him and turned towards the kitchen.

Ting. An SMS popped up.

"Busy?"

"Who is it?" Manav mumbled.

"We spoke an hour back. Chat ?" The next one followed.

Manav dropped the tablets back into the drawer and sat on the couch.

"Oh, Hi!"

"Had dinner?"

"Just had. Tell me"

"Nothing much. Just wanted to know more about you. Are you in college?"

"Yes. Second-year, Arts. I learn singing and sometimes perform. What about you?"

"I am a painter. I also take painting classes."

"Wow!"

"Can I call you?"

"Umm...Not now. Maybe tomorrow, after 1 PM. What's your name?"

"Save my number as Dev."

A soft dreamy smile stayed on Manav's face for several minutes. He forgot all about the pills and slept thinking about the strange phone conversation.

He called precisely at 1:05 PM. Manav was about to settle down at one corner of the Garden Campus to have his lunch. The lunch box remained open until the recess got over. The wrong number had managed to strike the right chord. Since that day, text messages and phone calls became regular. It took them just a few days to open up and then they started sharing every little thing about themselves. And then one day he sang for him. Dev was mesmerized.

"Oh, my God! You voice is like raisins dipped in honey. This is the sweetest voice I have ever heard."

Manav giggled, pleased at having surprised him.

"I just can't selfishly continue doing this to such a loving and honest boy. I was really enjoying the way a girl enjoys her lover's attention. Rina, he is the first person who made me feel exactly the way I have always wanted to feel, like a woman."

"I understand dear." Rina comforted him and encouraged him to go ahead with his decision.

This was the first time Dev had sent him flowers for their third month anniversary of the wrong-number-call day. Manav danced around the house with the roses, attaching a few to his ponytail. This might be the first and the last flower from him. But he will never forget his days with Dev. He tore a few petals and pressed them inside his notebook. Manav chose the day to confess. It might jeopardize their relationship and even bring it to a halt, but he must.

Sharing a secret about someone else requires little courage, but divulging one's own, is a herculean task. Apologizing profusely, he declared his truth. Assuring him that rest of the facts were all true, Manav explained why he did so and how he felt for him.

"Give me some time" was all he said and hung up the phone.

He didn't call the next day. One more day passed by. And then a message popped up again.

"Can we meet?"

More than a dozen customers sat in groups of three or four, talking loudly inside the cafeteria. The room fell quiet as he entered. Women gaped at him and then turned away again quickly, but few men stared for a second longer, their expressions unreadable.

As he moved to find Dev, he noticed one face still turned his way. He was tall, fair, had sharp eyes and dark black hair. Their eyes met. Manav felt a lurch in his stomach. He looked down at the checkered tiles and tried his best to not appear as a nervous wreck

Their first meeting wasn't the way Dev had expected it to be when they had started chatting. The truth had shocked him to the core, but he was deeply impressed by his honesty. He had fallen in love with him within days of their initial chat. His voice, his liveliness, their shared interests, matching wavelengths, everything was just right. As he saw him for the first time, he told himself that he can't possibly hate this person. There was a kind of tenderness and transparency in his personality. And despite his difficulties in life, he was still brimming with an infectious positivity.

They decided to remain friends. But couldn't carry this for long. They were destined to be lovers. They joked, shared, travelled, teased and loved each other as if they knew nobody else. Dev's acceptance towards Manav was like God's blessing. Manav's confidence and self-respect had restored and the inner conflicts were pacified. He started to follow his heart again. His ponytail, palazzos, eyeliners and singing returned.

Manav's eyes followed the dancer's backless blouse as her long braid decorated with flowers danced along. She was wearing a blue silk saree and her eyes were lined with blue kohl. Manav visited Shantiniketan every year for Vasant Utsab, never before he had felt so joyous. With Dev by his side, he jumped around the fair like kid.

"I am sorry, Meenu. I won't be able to marry you." Dev suddenly blurted.

"I know. But that's okay. The kind of love you have given me; I can cherish throughout my life. Whenever you want to marry a girl, just tell me. I won't bother you any further."

"I will never marry. I can't even think of living without you."

A warm rush of love, respect and gratitude filled Manav's heart. How will he ever give back?

"Wake up, time for OT," the same short nurse alerted him and pulled him from his memories. He was taken to the hall area outside the OT in a trolley bed.

"We will have to wait a bit. The previous OT is taking more time than expected" she informed yawning.

"Feeling scared or excited?", she asked little later, this time a bit softly.

"Both" he replied and as his mind drifted back to his past.

Manav knew somewhere deep down in his heart that the picture-perfect life won't last long. But, it would come to an end like this he had never anticipated. Without a hint, Dev started retreating. Caught with a girl, Dev couldn't muster enough courage to tell his first love that he was planning to marry her, his parent's choice. Manav felt cheated. They had shared every little thing. Why did he conceal?

And though he had prepared himself that one-day Dev might leave him for a girl, he found it difficult to cope up with the reality. The days without Dev were emptier than the days when they hadn't known each other. The void he had created pulled Manav towards an abyss deep and dark. Suddenly, the riddle of his soul and body was clear to him. Many a time, he had felt confused about his mind and body, but for the first time, he felt betrayed by his body.

"I will never win. Loosing everywhere is my destiny". He wept like a child in Aruna's lap.

"Dear, a lot has been told about the soul and its importance. Phrases like "appearances don't matter" are flagged as being intellectual. But, I believe, they are the biggest lies ever. To every pair of eyes on this earth, we are defined by our bodies. Our physical characteristics, traits and physical markers divide us between a boy and a girl. No third gender exists or is recognized in the society we live in. Before any emotion, comes the identification through our contours, colour, movement of eyes and bodies."

"Would he have left me if I were a girl? He loved me so much."

"Why don't you think about sex change? I am not suggesting this so that you can win back Dev or find another person in your life. The endless conflicts within you will find a path."

"I have never told you before, but Ma, I am afraid of becoming a woman. Though my heart and soul screams to live like a woman, I am afraid of stepping into the restrictive world of womanhood as I see it in our society. I was too young when I lost my mother. My Aunt brought me up. I never saw her go out or enjoy life. She always kept herself engaged in kitchen or with her books. Not only she, I have seen other women in my life living a life in shackles. Men have all the freedom to choose their friends, occupation, clothes and hobbies. But the choices offered to women are completely censored and stereotyped."

"You are right. But, why get afraid of these challenges? To live a life of one's own choice, one must be ready to face all the difficulties that come along."

"Hmm... You are right. But I think I need time."

The incident, however, once again held the mirror right to his face. He didn't quite like what he saw. Then he tried looking inside. Slowly the exterior started getting blurred and it suddenly disappeared. And what remained was a beautiful orchard of fragrant flower and a beautiful girl singing in them. His eyes watered in rejoice. Meenu is very beautiful and perfect. She is a singer. Music is her passion. Henceforth, nobody can insult her, reject her. He won't let anybody do it. He will take care of her and let her music bloom. Like a lost disciple, he returned to his master. The void that he always tried filling with Dev was now brimming with soulful songs. Melodies were now his lifeline, a reason to survive against all the odds.

The nurse was right. It was one extraordinary moment in his life. He was going to rewrite his destiny. Tomorrow, the world will see a new Manav... or rather Meenu. No more confusions in public toilets. No more walking around with an invisible placard of "Hijra". No more slangs designated for his types. He was finally going to become what he dreamt with open eyes in front of his mother's mirror. He will now be able to wear sarees with handful of bangles, dance like a diva and sing like a cuckoo without being judged. He thanked God for showing him the right path. Identities matter to those who want to be limited by them. For him, his physical identity didn't matter anymore. What mattered was his voice, his melodies, his urge to sing and be appreciated. It was his only goal in life. Even after Dev's rejection, Manav wasn't ready to temper with his physical being. But when his contradictory identity came in the way of his music, he decided to take the required step.

"You have an amazing sense of tune, and you sing very melodiously. But I am extremely sorry to say that you can't participate in this contest. Only normal men and women can" words of a renowned vocalist resonated in his ears. "But never leave music. Keep singing" he had added when Manav auditioned to participate in a popular singing contest.

Normal. What's normal? Is a person cruelly ignoring other person's pain for their own greed normal? Is mocking weakness in others while hiding their own, normal? Is taking lives in the name of God, normal? Is terrorizing for few acres of land, normal? Is stealing your child's virginity while you should be guarding it, normal? Is beating your wife to pamper your ego, normal? Is leaving your love for a place in society, normal?

The warped version of normal hung over his head like a rope threatening to suffocate him. Tears rolled down his eyes as he touched the feet of the Guru. On his way back, he had resolved to come back again, very soon. A trolley pushed by nurses and ward boys went past Manav, reminding him where he was. He folded the album of his past and shoved it deep inside his heart. He shouldn't let anything disturb him now. It's an important day of his life.

"I don't understand one thing. When you are born as a man, why do you want to become a woman to get abused. In our society being a man is good fortune, and you are choosing the cursed gender. Weird!" The nurse pushing his stretcher trolley, suddenly asked, staring at him in disbelief.

Manav kept quiet. The answer to her question was not an easy one. Especially to a woman who had been discriminated against throughout her life. He could read the pain in her eyes.

"But it's your life. Now you would be able to write 'woman' as your gender from tomorrow", the nurse smiled warmly looking at him.

"No. Not Woman. I am doing this to sort my life and not to lose my identity. I would emerge tomorrow as a trans-woman," he clarified before the doors closed.

The nurse kept gaping at the door, trying to decipher what he had just told her. But in his eyes, she no doubt saw wisdom, an inner strength that only comes from fighting defiantly for your right to be recognized as a normal human being in this so-called civilized world. Maybe that's a good idea. Perhaps this upcoming gender identity of a "Transwomen" would be free of all the taboos and bindings that have suffocated the female gender for so long. Maybe this would change the perceptions of the world towards the definition of the gender and the values it attaches to them.

India's top court issued a landmark verdict creating a third gender category that allowed transgender citizens to identify themselves on official documents. Meenu ticked on the music audition registration form against "Transgender" and submitted it proudly.



19. Suvarna Mehta

Suvarna Mehta is a homemaker, mother and teacher. She is passionate about reading and also writing poems - both English and Hindi, having won laurels, for the same. She is teaching Communication Skills in Spoken English, affiliated to Trinity College, London, since the past 15 years.

ON A WOMAN

She comes into this world
With a smile that, disarms;
Why is she treated
With shrieks of alarm?

She aims for the stars
But is rudely brought down to earth—
Relegated to dark corners,
Once a boy takes birth.

And if she spreads her wings out wide
Determined, to soar;
Mindless notions shroud her success,
Discouragement, debar her door.

And yet she tries to play varied roles—
Mother, sister, daughter, wife;
She nurtures, guides, nourishes
Her entire life.

She balances home and career
To keep the domestic fires lit;
“Exhausted,” is her second name
But, does she get to sit?

She is a soothing ointment
When one is in, pain;
But woe! When she gets hurt,
Why does nonchalance, she have to feign?

Behind every successful man
They say, a woman stands;
Why is then she treated with disdain
If, she has the upper hand?

And yet, she is raped, tortured, teased,
Objectified, demeaned, betrayed;
For all her sweat and blood—
Is this, how she gets paid?

She is the support system
On which is based mankind;
Then why ignore her existence,
To her contribution, be blind?

Why should caring be confused with subservience
Or the weaker sex we be deemed
Coz', we possess the courage to capture dominions
And the verve to realise, our dreams!

Being a woman, is Not A Liability—
Let these words ring clear and resonate;
Let's voice the call to women empowerment
And be the Masters, of our own fate!



20. Dr.Padmakali Kar

Dr. Padmakali Kar is a consultant neuropsychiatrist attached to National Neurosciences Centre, Peerless Hospital and many other private establishments. She is practicing in Kolkata for the last 25 years and helping people overcome various types of mental illness. At present she is associated with a number of N.G.Os working for the benefit of the LGBT community, educating and treating people who are involved in substance abuse etc. She writes both in Bengali and English. Her first Bengali novella is due for publication next month. Some of her poems had been published in magazines and anthologies.

The Quest

Fallen leaves of autumn
Dazzle her eyes with their myriad hues
As she walks up the steep hill looking for cues.....
To her destination.
A sweet fragrance wafts in the gentle breeze
It seems so familiar!
She asks herselfis he too here
To join the celebration

The very thought makes her heart race....
She steadies her gaze and hastens her pace,
As dusk descends ever so slowly on the mossy hills;
Enveloping the horizon in a purple haze!

She walks along the stony path...
Echoes of her footsteps piercing
The stillness of the evening in a steady rhythm,
Keeping her company in her lonesome
Journey, as she tries to fathom
The depth of the woods.....
Night falls and across the dark sky
A star shoots....
Momentarily lighting up the horizon,
In that blur her eyes catch a glimpse
Of her old ramshackle home....
Hazy images of days bygone
Flit before her eyes
Oh! The years of youthful merriment,
The memories almost make her cry.

She walks upto the door and knocks gently;
The door flies open.....
In the starlight the marbled floor
Like snakeskin glistens....
Making her flesh crawl with fear
But making up her mind,
Crosses the threshold and into
The darkness she peers.....

'You are late! The feast is over
The guests have left and I am only the gatekeeper '---
Startled she looks across to find a
Shadowy figure looming over her shoulder;
'He has left this note for you....take this
And do not come back ever'
The words ring out in the darkness as he
Vanishes in the mist, like the grim reaper....

Intrigued, she stares at the note
He had laid on her palm -
Alas-the ink has faded....
Her heart grows numb.
She will never know the truth,
Will time ever clear her lingering doubt?
Wearily she trudges down the hill....
The wind softly whispering in her ears...
'This story is not over still'.



21. Bhavna Jagnani

Bhavna Jagnani is a college (1st year) student from Kolkata. She loves to read and write and aspires to become a writer. She has been writing since her 9th standard. Her writings had been published in the magazine, Kloud9. She had also won the third prize in "All-India Short Story Contest (Senior Category) 2019" hosted by Kloud9 and a consolation prize in "Covid-19 Article Writing Competition" hosted by Indianfolk.com

Through Rainbow Coloured Glass

Through rainbow coloured glass,
At the world, you look,
See the beauty of the colours,
The artist painted in the book.
World has seven colours,
Happiness, sadness, love, peace,
Anger, jealousy and hatred,
Without which it's incomplete.
Through rainbow coloured glass,
At the world, you look,
For the colours to appear,
Both sun and rain, it took.
The world is like a rainbow,
Colourful and bright,
Look through the blues,
To make everyone feel right.
Through rainbow coloured glass,
The world, you see,
The seven colours of rainbow,
Are seven stages of life, you see.
Somewhere beyond the rainbow,
The skies are blue,
Dreams you dare to dream,
Really do come true.
Through rainbow coloured glass,
The world, you see,
The sun will shine through rain drops,
And make your life colourful, guarantee.
To see the miracles occur,
To keep the blues away,
Remember just one thing,
Wear the glass every day
To keep the blues away,
Remember just one thing,
Wear the glass every day.



Moon

There it was in the sky,
Shining through the darkness,
All around, spreading happiness.
It seems to be enchanted,
You'll be filled with amusement.
It is the best companion,
To be seen when you need light.
If you're missing someone,
And you'll feel he's right by you.
It seems to be waiting,
For a lonesome to come,
To hear the sadness she is facing,
And lift her mood by click of a thumb.
It is our first lover,
It's always there watching us,
Just like us, changing forever,
And knowing our light and dark moments.
Whether you're happy or sad,
Look for the moon,
It watches over you like your dad,
It'll stay by your side forever.



22. Neeti Parti

Neeti Parti is an educationist, a prize-winning poetess and writer, an exhibited artist, an editor. She is the Pan India Education Director of a renowned chain of schools. As Founder Principal of a well reputed Senior Secondary School, she received the 'Award for Best Upcoming School in Uttar Pradesh'. She has contributed to more than forty anthologies and edited/compiled seven. For her creative efforts, she has received many awards like Certificate of Excellence and medal for Poetry from The Asian Literary Society and 'Wordsmith Award' etc.

Indebted To 'Devi'

"The fundamental right to carry on any occupation, trade or profession depends on the availability of a 'safe' working environment. The right to life means life with dignity. The primary responsibility for ensuring such safety and dignity through suitable legislation, and the creation of a mechanism for its enforcement, belongs to the legislature and the executive. This is the courageous saga of....

A daughter, a wife, a mother
 Raped, ravaged, ridiculed
 Ostracized, shamed, disgraced
 Beaten, mocked, harassed
 Belittled, diminished, dishonoured
 Taunted, harried, insulted
 Waiting for justice...
 Not for a day
 Nor for a week
 For two weeks or more.....
 The humiliating events of 1992.
 She had to be humiliated - that was the plan!

They had been lobbying with the other upper caste men. That day five of them came to take revenge. She was working in the field with her husband when they began beating her husband with sticks. Horrified, she ran to save him. She cried and begged for mercy but they caught hold of her and began thrashing her while hurling abuses and when was not enough, they took turns to pin her to the ground and gang raped her in rotation.

The reason

"Silence becomes cowardice when occasion demands speaking out the whole truth and acting accordingly."
 Mahatma Gandhi

Tension in the Bhatari village of Rajasthan had begun a while before the incident because of her activities. As a 'Saathin' of District Women's Development Agency, she had been going from door to door to sensitise her community against child marriage. She was horrified when she came to know Ram Karan Gujar was marrying his not yet one year old daughter. She knew she had to act! How could she let this crime take place? The DSP and SDO had also been taking rounds of the village to propagate the cause. She decided to go to the police as the 'Saathins' were required to inform the police in case anyone forcibly tried to marry off children and that's what she did. Ironically, they succeeded in preventing the marriage for the period of ONE whole day!

The marriage took place the next day. The police was conspicuous by their absence. Strong resentment built up against her because she was a 'kumhar'- a lower caste woman and she had dared to prevent the marriage of a 'Gujar' – upper caste family. Forty gujar households disapproved of her action and became hostile towards her. They stopped everyone from buying clay ware from her, destroyed her fields, took away cattle fodder, isolated her and her husband and began to threaten her. All of this culminated in the most horrific crime of gang rape against an innocent woman - a woman whose name became known all over the country.
 A woman called Bhanwari Devi.

The aftermath

"Whereas sexual harassment results in violation of the fundamental rights of a Woman to equality. "
 [Preamble, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition & Redressal) Act]
 Bhanwari Devi reached out to a co-worker and told her about the sexual assault. Along with her, she took an unusual step of going to the Police Station to register an FIR. Those days sexual assault was not a topic that was discussed in public or reported as a crime. Women who were assaulted and raped suffered their agony in silence rather than suffer embarrassment in public as it was likely that they would be blamed for bringing the unfortunate circumstances upon themselves.

She suffered hours of humiliation at the Police Station where they refused to register her case. Ultimately because of pressure from women's groups in Jaipur, a report was finally registered and a medical examination asked for. Strangely, the magistrate gave orders for a general medical examination and not for rape!

After the examination, she was sent back to the 'thana' where more disgrace was thrust upon her as she was asked to leave her 'lehanga' behind at the Police Station as evidence. With no clothes to drape her lower body, Bhanwari Devi returned home with the blood-stained turban tied around her waist! The villagers of Bhatari accused her of lying and fabricating the whole incident and the ostracization continued.

Three years later the court came back with a 'not guilty' verdict and all the accused were acquitted. The judge observed, "an upper-caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower-caste woman".

The case was challenged in the High Court of Rajasthan. Following her case wherein she was harmed when she was in the employment of the state government, a Public Interest Litigation was filed in the Supreme Court of India by women's groups. It led to formal guidelines for dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace.

Bhanwari Devi never received justice. Some of the accused have already died. A movie titled 'Bawandar' is inspired by her life and she has received several honours and rewards but she continues to live in poverty...

Vishaka Guidelines – a brief overview

"The meaning and content of the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India are of sufficient amplitudes to encompass all facets of gender equality...." Late Chief Justice J.S. Verma, Supreme Court of India,

Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan.

Based on Bhanwari Devi's case, a Public Interest Litigation was filed by Vishaka and other women groups against the State of Rajasthan and Union of India before the Supreme Court of India sighting the Constitutional doctrine of equality and personal liberty contained under articles 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution of India. It proposed that sexual harassment be recognized as a violation of women's fundamental right to equality and that all workplaces be made accountable and responsible to uphold these rights.

In a landmark judgment in 1997, Vishaka vs. State of Rajasthan, the Supreme Court of India created legally binding guidelines dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace basing it on the right to equality and dignity accorded under the Indian Constitution as well as by the UN Convention on the 'Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women'. These guidelines came to be known as the Vishaka Guidelines.

The guidelines included:

- A definition of sexual harassment
- Shifting accountability from individuals to institutions
- Prioritizing prevention
- Provision of an innovative redress mechanism

Definition of sexual harassment at a work place

"Vishaka was a victory for all women" - Bhanwari Devi.

The Supreme Court defined sexual harassment as any unwelcome, sexually determined physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct. Examples included sexually suggestive remarks about women, demands for sexual favours and sexually offensive visuals in the workplace. The definition also covered situations where a woman could be disadvantaged in her workplace because of threats relating to employment decisions that could negatively affect her working life. Sexual Harassment includes anyone or more of the following unwelcome acts or behaviours directly or by implication. These include:

- Physical contact or advances
- A demand or request for sexual favours
- Making sexually coloured remarks
- Showing pornography
- Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature

Shifting responsibility to institutions

"It shall be the duty of the employer or other responsible persons in work places or other institutions to prevent or deter the commission of acts of sexual harassment and to provide the procedures for the resolution, settlement or prosecution of acts, of sexual harassment by taking all steps required." With the argument that the attack on Devi occurred as part of her professional duties, the Supreme Court ultimately ruled that it was incumbent upon employers to protect female employees from harassment and violence.

Prioritising Prevention

“No woman shall be subjected to sexual harassment at any workplace.” Section 3(1) of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

The Sexual Harassment Act casts obligation upon the employer to:

- Provide a safe working environment
- Display conspicuously at the workplace the penal consequences of indulging in acts that may constitute sexual misconduct
- Organise workshops and awareness programmes at regular intervals for sensitizing employees on the issues and implications of workplace sexual harassment
- Organize orientation programmes for members of the Internal Complaints Committee
- Display names and contact numbers of members of the Internal Complaints Committee who will treat sexual harassment as a misconduct under the service rules and initiate action for misconduct.

Providing Redressal

“...the time has come when women must be able to feel liberated and emancipated from what could be fundamentally oppressive conditions against which an autonomous choice of freedom can be exercised and made available by women. This is sexual autonomy in the fullest degree” Late Chief Justice J.S. Verma, Justice Verma Committee Report, 2013

The Vishaka Guidelines raised the bar, when for the first time it recognized “each incident of sexual harassment” as a violation of the fundamental right to equality. Legally, workplace sexual harassment can no longer be dismissed as a moral transgression. This notion has found its way into an Act : ‘Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013’, which promotes the right of women as citizens to a workplace free of sexual harassment. Complaints Committees at all workplaces are now charged with the role to ensure that the right remains intact through a fair, informed, user-friendly process of redress.

The long road ahead....

She-Box : The Ministry of Women and Child Development has developed an online complaint management system, called Sexual Harassment electronic Box. Complaints related to sexual harassment at workplace of government or private employees can be registered on the portal. Since 2014, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has started collecting data regarding sexual harassment at workplace under Section 509 of IPC under the category of ‘insult to the modesty of women at office premises’. The total number of cases registered under this category during 2014 were 57.

With time, the cases have shown an upward trend and according to NCRB the number of cases of sexual harassment of women at work have increased substantially. 965 cases of sexual harassment of women at workplaces reported in 2018. They were highest in cities such as Delhi, Pune, Bengaluru and Mumbai.

Frequently, women workers face sexual harassment at their work place but are not aware that it is a breach of their rights. They need to know that they can do something about it and get redressal. The greatest reason sexual harassment at the workplace has assumed serious proportions in resolution and prevention is that women do not report the matter to the concerned authorities in most cases due to fear of the harasser, losing livelihood, being stigmatized or losing personal reputation. Economically, empowered women are key to the nation’s overall development. This empowerment can only be achieved if it is ensured that women’s workspaces across all sectors and all over the country have a safe and secure environment for work.

Stay strong Womaniya!
 You create life
 Know your strength
 Take on the challenge Fight for triumph
 Lay your claim
 The earth is yours To win must be Your aim!

Rhymes Of Imbalance

In 2020, the sex ratio of the total population in India was 108.18 males per 100 females. There are 717,100,970 or 717.10 million males and 662,903,415 or 662.90 million females in India. The percentage of the female population is 48.04 percent compared to 51.96 percent male population. India has the highest numbers of ‘exceeded male population’ of 54.20 million. India is at 189th position out of 201 countries/territories in terms of female to male ratio. Among Asian countries, its position is 42nd out of 51 countries/territories. SOURCE: UN (World Population Prospects 2019). India is home to 31 million orphaned children. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Official records show that nine-in-ten of the abandoned children in India are girls. Most are doomed to never find homes. Very few are adopted.

Child abandonment is punishable under section 317 of India's Penal Code.

An Untold Tale

(Inspired by a True-life story of an abandoned girl child who was rescued from a dumpster while being attacked by a pack of dogs)

I carry a deep gash on my cheek
In the past it matched the gash on my soul
Now I carry it like a symbol of pride
Through my life it will be my guide

Discarded like trash
I attracted the street dogs
They would have had their stomachs full that night
But someone heard me cry with all my might

Deposited on the doorstep
And a bell of my arrival rung,

The kind lady – mother of all
Took me as her own that nightfall

I heard no Grandma tales at night
The stories of my kith and kin remain untold
Grew up I as a family of all the abandoned
Our collective mother gave us all she had

No shame, no remorse, mine was not the fault
I carry the message of survival against all odds
The Divine ordained me to live my life
I shall not let my existence be futile!

Girls in India disproportionately experience the abuses of abandonment, infanticide and sex-selective abortion. They are more likely to be abandoned, sex-selectively aborted or killed in instances of infanticide than are boys. This is rooted in a cultural bias against girls as dowries are costly. Female infanticide, abandonment of new-born girls and neglect of daughters have been used in our society to increase the male-to-female ratio in families, especially in situations where poverty has limited the number of desired children. Sons are preferred because they have a higher wage-earning capacity, they continue the family line, they are generally recipients of inheritance while girls are considered an economic burden because of the dowry system and after marriage, they become members of the husband's family and cease to be responsible for their parents in illness and old age. Consequently, India has an unusual number of "missing girls" and a skewed sex ratio. Son preference is manifest prenatally, through sex determination and sex-selective abortion, and postnatally through neglect and abandonment of female children, which leads to higher female mortality. Since prenatal sex determination became available in the mid-1980s it has made a major contribution to imbalance in the sex ratio in India.

Choose To Be A Seraphim

(An appeal in Verse to those who selectively abort the girl child)

She lay in the Scarlet warmth, cosy, snug, contented and cared for
She had heard her mother whisper sweetly to her and when she was restless soft music had filtered into her cocoon
In happiness she threw her legs about, dreaming of all that awaited her
Suddenly she gasped as she felt a tug at her throat, she panicked and wanted to cry out loud

Outside in the real world, her struggle was noticed by her saviour, the young intern
Within no time the chord that was threatening her was cut by a life-giving surgeon's knife!
Wailing in triumph she entered this realm looking into the tear-filled, grateful eyes of her mother
A life with infinite potential was born, claiming this earth-her ground to conquer!

In the vicinity gurgled another life that had been growing steadily within every day
A nose, a mouth, ears, intestines, brain appearing slowly
Then tiny hands and feet that kicked and stretched
Small hiccups escaping her as she smiled, tranquil, at peace in the vermillion surroundings

She was abruptly yanked, cruelly slashed away from her lifeline
Pulled out aggressively and thrown mercilessly into sudden darkness
Where she lay gasping, her newly formed innocent eyes filled with terror..... till they closed forever
A life with infinite potential waiting to conquer this earth was remorselessly cut short by a killer surgeon's knife!

A life saved: A life destroyed
By hands that held the tools and the power
To give all: Yet it took all!!
Was it a punishment for being a girl? Was it prejudice? Was it a mindless act of greed?

Bound you are, our guardian, by the Hippocratic oath to live true and give life
Denigrate, dishonour not your God like power
Buy not detestation, condemnation and shame
Allow us always to bow down in obeisance for you are worthy of worship!

23. Priya Nayak-Gole

Priya Nayak-Gole is a pediatric speech-language pathologist by profession, into clinical private practice for almost 19 years. Her professional exposure to varied personalities and family dynamics of the special needs children provided her with the needed impetus to pursue her passion in fiction writing. She writes articles, blogs, short stories and full-length novels mostly in the thriller-romance genres on various platforms. She published her debut novel in August 2020. She is an advocate for mental health awareness and pediatric disability awareness.

The Wind Beneath His Sails...

The auditorium roared in a thunderous roar as the emcee announced the name of the Aamte puraskaar winner for the year. Saurabh Krishna made his way from the backstage where he had been waiting for the introduction formalities to be completed as they called him to receive the esteemed honor in the field of social work. The special award initiated by the Ministry of Social Justice and empowerment was being conferred upon him. He was thrilled thinking about the avenues the award would open, for his work in the remote villages of Maharashtra. Especially since the award was to be handed over to him by the chief guest for the evening who was none other than the Marathi film industry's evergreen heartthrob Sunil Achrekar. The auditorium was packed beyond capacity filled with fans from far and wide who had come for a glimpse of their favorite on-screen hero who was also known to be a philanthropist in real life. What they probably didn't know was Sunil was Saurabh's friend from college and had been in touch with him for last few years even after attaining stardom. This award was Saurabh's biggest accolade in recognition for his work in the upliftment of tribal women and children and inculcating employment opportunities within their own domains in the far-flung corners of the districts.

The little cultural program had reached its crescendo with the wonderful performance by Saurabh's NGO kids on Achrekar's block buster numbers. The entire audience was gyrating to the feet tapping numbers to the finely choreographed moves by the organizers. The program ended with the talented children receiving a standing ovation by the guests as well as the excited audience. The dais was then transformed for the award event and after a little speech by the chief guest the host announced. "...we now call upon Sri. Saurabh Krishna.... A huge round of applause for the man who has changed the way the tribal live..."

As he hesitatingly trod on the dais, amidst the cacophony of loud cheers, the sparks off the flashing light bulbs clicking away to glory as people chanted his name, his eyes roamed around trying to find the all-important person. It was like finding a needle in a haystack. As Sunil Achrekar and the guest of honor, a local MLA, waited with the plaque and the customary shawl in the center of the floral decorations and spotlights, Saurabh stood still, scanning the shadowed silhouettes in the dimly lit audience.... And finally, his eyes landed on the shining almonds of his wife who stood in the right corner near the fire extinguisher as she had promised. Clad in a simple cotton saree with the palloo draped around her shoulders, Jaya was an epitome of humility and a perfect life partner...his soulmate. He was now in his element as he confidently strode ahead and accepted the adulations coming in from all corners.

The guests settled in their seats and as he took over the podium for giving his talk, he opened the folded paper from his pocket and saw Jaya's meticulous writing blurring before him as he teared up. He looked at her...tears streaming down her smiling cheeks even as she rampantly wiped them away. She gave him a thumbs up as she walked closer to the dais eagerness dancing on her beautiful face. He knew what she had penned down. It was a set of their future plans for the tribal belts neatly numbered with predicted durations and outcomes which he had calculated and a gentle demand for funds for their NGO. As the roving spotlight edge sprinkled its shower on her, he could see her hair had fallen out of her neatly made bun and her fair face sans makeup glowed in its wake.... even after a decade of marriage and knowing each other for twice the duration, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever known. The woman with a golden heart and an iron spirit. She stood skinny and tall, but he knew how strong she was....

He folded the paper back... and looked up at the overflowing sea of people gathered to shower their love upon him. Quite a few of them his friends and acquaintances gathered over a period of time, eager to felicitate their unsung hero. "Dear friends..." He addressed the gathered crowd and they roared watching Sunil cheer up his friend... it took a while for the organizers to quieten them. It was humbling for Saurabh to be at the receiving end of such an undisguised honor. He continued. "...thank you, MLA sir, Sunil for gracing this occasion and thank you everyone for the greetings and acknowledgements...it means a lot... As you all know our NGO 'Astitva' has been striving for the last five years to empower tribal belts of Maharashtra and recently we have ventured further towards Gujarat. I thank all of you who have contributed on very possible manner towards the cause. I... I however...would use this esteemed platform today to thank the special person without whom I wouldn't be here before you... I would probably be rotting away in some unknown prison corner..."

The entire auditorium was now an oxymoron as the shocked whispers quietened. The dignitaries seated on the dais too looked at each other wondering what was to surface next. Saurabh looked apologetically at Sunil... the guy didn't know about his past except that he was an orphan who had it hard. Saurabh then looked at a startled Jaya who now sheepishly turned her face away. For all her bravado she shied away from the limelight. "...dear friends... as some of you know I was born in this city of dreams Mumbai....in the leather belt and Asia's largest slum...Dharavi. My parents, who were a part of a migrant community from a poor village near Coimbatore... were rag pickers who could barely arrange to feed me, their only child... let alone anything else. I was only four years old when they succumbed to the famous monsoon floods of Mumbai. I was saved in the nick of time and then on began my crusade towards survival.... I was shuffled from one relative to the other for the next few years... I had to do odd jobs at those homes to earn my keep... and in the process I lost my childhood somewhere in those shanties. But... the only thing that kept me going was my school. The local municipal school...I longed to be there. I was transported to a different world altogether... But that came to an end after the tenth standard exams were done and I was no longer on freeship... By then I had to also move to a shelter house and though I wanted to study further... my dreams were almost squashed...."

The auditorium was in pin drop silence as they waited with bated breath along with Sunil who was surprised himself, for Saurabh to reveal more about his life.

"...It was in the shelter that I came against this group of guys who 'transferred' parcels for money. I was tall and could run fast so I got the 'job'. I made a little money in a year so I could enroll in a junior college... I wanted to study commerce... But it was still a constant struggle.... between learning to live and living to learn...I had to strive to be accepted a member of this so-called society..." He paused getting his bearings together. "...College in the morning and then the 'job' in the evening till late nights...I barely got time to study. I soon had to give up the job... I ran errands for some local watchmen and laundry men in the afternoons which helped me sail through... But when I got into the twelfth grade, I had to join a local coaching center and had no money for the same... without that I couldn't have passed that year. I... I then... got a new job... I just had to perform once a week... and I could get the time to study as well... it was... well... chain snatching..."

The auditorium rattled with murmurs and whispers and Saurabh continued. He just couldn't stop now though the silenced embers of embarrassment within were threatening to ignite. "...I hated myself for even considering it... I had promised myself to do it just this one time... I didn't have a choice... I had to deposit the money for the classes within a day... so here I was a novice all set to perform my first crime... intentionally...with my heart in my mouth...Physical fights with the big guys was one this but this... this was something at a different level...and I knew the repercussions of getting a juvenile record. I remember that day in June clearly... the early showers of monsoon brought about a fresh zeal of greenery everywhere and I was allotted a bus stop where I had to do the deed in the afternoon when there were very few people... So... I had pulled over a cap to hide my face and had worn the borrowed black jacket as I stood waiting for my ...prey... and I saw one... Even today I can visualise the middle-aged woman dressed in traditional Maharashtrian attire, with a nath adorning her pretty face and a thick gold chain dangling around her slender neck..." He paused again and took in a deep breath before continuing. "...I... I was all set to pull the chain from the unsuspecting woman who was walking towards me... and run before she could even recover from the shock... just like I had been taught...but then...right then I heard someone call out to me... and I ...I froze..."

The auditorium now gasped, and the whispers commenced again. "...I turned around and saw my classmate and best friend of two years, Jaya, run towards me.... Jaya knew everything about me... my past... my tryst with petty unintended crime... everything...and... and she was the only person who didn't judge me... I had mentioned to her in passing that I was getting the money next day for the classes but hadn't told her the means... but then...she knew me better and there she was ... all soaked in the rain as she came up to me and handed me a polythene wrapped bundle.... It was the money... for the classes...."

The whispers increased and people and the guests were now looking towards his wife who stood glued to the ground tears streaming unhindered down her cheeks. Saurabh looked into her unwavering eyes fixed on his and continued. "...I wondered from where she had arranged the money... She wasn't from a well-off family...and it was then I saw... her thin gold chain and earrings were missing...she was never without them... I knew what she had done... but still, I asked her about them...I knew her strict father would have her hide for it.... But then she just smiled her radiance and said that she would handle it... So, friends..." He looked around at the now hushed up audience. "...I was saved from committing a crime from where there would have been a point of no return... I finished my twelfth and joined a night college for further studies. Since I had completed eighteen years of age by then, I got a job as a watchman for a local library... Jaya studied regular hours and often helped me with notes and stationery and even homemade food... it didn't take us long to know we were in love with each other and finally a few years after I got a job in a bank post my graduation, we tied the knot..." The hall erupted with a loud cheers and claps.

Saurabh smiled at Jaya who continued to blink back tears. "...but dear friends, our journey didn't stop there... I realized, that afternoon Jaya had saved me not just by giving me the money but also by being there for me in

the important years of my development so... in a way it kept me from going astray. The world threw metaphorical stones and bricks at me... an orphan from the wrong side of the tracks...but Jaya...she used the very same scattered materials to build a successful foundation on which I could build a life... So... I wanted to do something for others like me. Hence Astitva came into existence.... We adopted few shelter homes near Dharavi and offered counselling to those boys helping them financially if they wanted to study... I was offered donations by a few local goons I had been acquainted with in my shelter days but I had sworn off that path years ago. Here...Jaya sold all her meagre jewelry to fund the initial phase of our crusade.... I think our honesty and decision to tread on the path of righteousness paid off and we got Astitva on steady grounds within a couple of years. We managed to keep most of those boys out of trouble and got the local public support. We then decided to expand to the tribal belts where they don't have access to even basic necessities... like sanitization facilities... so that's where we have been living in the last eight years. Though the idea stemmed from my heart, it was Jaya who nurtured it and poured her heart and soul into it... she has given up everything and has stood by me working relentlessly.... I am sure she was scared at the prospects of throwing away a set life in the city...but then her passion and her belief in me burned brighter and she didn't hold herself back. Even our little son Naveen has been with us in this endeavor and I am sure he will turn out to be a great human being because Jaya is his mother. So friends... here I am... receiving this award... But honestly, if anyone truly deserves this ovation, it is Jaya... So, I call upon my soulmate Jaya Krishna to come here and share the spotlight with me..."

A stunned Jaya wanted to walk away but the volunteers would have none of it as they ushered her to the dais. With a shy smile she walked up to Saurabh and held the plaque to the huge round of claps and hoots from the crowd. Saurabh took the microphone again and spoke. "...This is to my backbone, my spirit, my lifeline, my soulmate, the woman who had been behind my success... the woman who gave wings to my dream..."

Soon Sunil joined them on the dais and took over the reins. "Friends..." he spoke after the roar died down. "...You all worship us heroes on screen...but here are our very own real-life protagonists... give them a big hand guys..."

There was no stopping the audience this time...



24. Bareera Masood

Bareera Masood, currently pursuing her bachelors from Mumbai University. Resides in Mumbai, India. Fills pages with her soulful writings in English and Urdu. She has keen interest in nature and so believes in capturing the moment through her photography. Her blog, 'Paighaam' is in Urdu but written in English script for the ease of readers.

Red

I am a lover of colour red,
Not of white.

The paleness of my clothes,
The chapped lips
The dried swollen eyes
Which mourn the loss of him
Now also the loss of me.

I'll remember this and that.
I still wet my white saree
When I remember the holding of hands,
The caressing of hair
Us exchanging the forever bands
Not forgetting the promise of fair,
Which we made when we were aware.

You checked out early,
From this earthly hell,
From our little heaven
A little chirpy
A little sturdy we were
Which made us more worthy.

I want to move now
Not from our house
Not from our memories of hundred hours around.
But I want to live again,
With the remembrance of you.

I wish to see colour red again,
On my chest and on my hips.
And on my chapped lips

For those who bully me,
They dislike the colour red or me?
This question is on you not me.

Not to be guilty,
Don't want to be seen as filthy

I too want,
To see a future with someone,
Who remembers you with me,
To whom I am a being
Not a black shadow.
To whom the colour red is just a colour
And with whom I am not a widow
But a person who still remembers you.



25. Reesha Masood

The poet currently resides in Mumbai with her family. She has an MBA in Finance and Bachelor's in Mathematics (Hons.) Has previously served as a Senior Analyst for a US based investment banking/ research company. In her leisure time, she likes solving anagrams and playing word scrabble.

Eighteen

When the spaces between words widen,
I unmute myself from your cacophony.
and begin to rewrite my story:

With my face melted and ears distorted,
You may think this may be all,
all that is left of my face.

My voice felt muted,
and my strength uprooted
when you called me a monster
at fragile age of eighteen.
With the years that have passed in between,
All of eighteen.
I want to rewrite my words

With no lining on my lips anymore,
and my mouth disfigured, as you call it.
You may think this may be all,
all that is left of my face.
But it is not.

In my face,
I found solace.
In my face,
I found grace.
In my face,
I found a warm embrace.
As I continue to rewrite what's mine,
I unmute myself from your cacophony.
I unmute myself from your sympathy.
I unmute myself from you.
As I am not of eighteen anymore,
And
With the years that have passed in between,
All of eighteen.



26. Dr. Usha Sridhar

Usha Sridhar has authored four collections of poems, titled 'Life Matters', 'Drenched in Reverie', 'Heightened Senses' and 'Subtle Whispers', published between 2017 and 2020. She is the author of two collections of short stories titled 'Women's Corner' and 'Shades in Shadows'. She has been the recipient of literary awards notably: Poiesis award for excellence in literature - Bharat award (2018, 2020, 2021), and the Asian Literary Society's 'Prasanna Jena Memorial Award 2019' (First prize) and the 'Gitesh-Biva Memorial Award 2019'- for short story. She has received the Asian Literary Society's Wordsmith first prize for 2020 for best short story and a certificate of excellence for the Wordsmith poetry for 2020.

Driving Away the Blues

Kavita looked impatiently at her secretary Sara, who smiled and indicated that her cab had arrived. Kavita thanked Sara and left. She had a meeting with a client shortly after which she had to go to her uncle's place. The employees were surprised to see their boss leaving so early; she was usually among the last few to leave the office.

The security guard at the gate pointed to the waiting cab, Kavita walked briskly towards it. She sat in the cab and gave instructions softly to the driver. "Okay, ma'am," the driver replied, and started the vehicle.

Kavita looked with surprise at the driver, "Have I got into the wrong car? My driver's name is given, as Raja," she said, irritated at her blunder.

"Ma'am, my father was to pick you up, but due to a personal emergency, he asked me to complete the assignment," the young girl responded.

"Are you too in this line?" Kavita asked curiously.

"No ma'am, I work as a clerk in an office. My dad taught me to drive so that I could be of help to him. Late nights when I get some free time, I focus on my studies. My exams are fast approaching. My dad wants me to study and be independent so that I can lead my life as I wish," the driver said.

"That is very commendable; I wish more parents were like yours. What is your name?" Kavita asked. 'Rani', replied the driver.

"How old are you? You look too young to shoulder so many responsibilities," Kavita asked, concerned.

"Twenty-one," Rani said proudly.

"What are you studying?" Kavita asked inquisitively.

"My college exams are fast approaching. I know that I should have completed this earlier, but we were not financially well off to afford the fees," Rani said, with regret, in her voice.

"No matter, Rani. You are a smart girl; I am sure that you will do well in your studies. Good luck," Kavita said encouragingly.

"Thank you, ma'am, your words have been inspiring," Rani said gently.

"Do you think you could reach Colaba in twenty minutes; I do not want to keep my client waiting?" Kavita asked expectantly.

"I will do my best, ma'am," came the prompt reply from the front seat. "I know a shortcut that might help." She was going to elaborate, but Kavita dismissed her explanation with the wave of her hand; she did not want to be late for her appointment. Kavita had clicked off; she was busy on the mobile. The driver gave a faint smile and stepped on the accelerator to speed away.

"Here we are, ma'am," said Rani as she stopped the car at the destination.

"Thanks. I will be back soon," said Kavita, as she alighted from the car to go to her client's office. Rani nodded her head in assent.

"We need to head to Andheri West now," said Kavita.

Rani gasped, "But that is at the other end of the town."

"Is there a problem?" asked Kavita in surprise.

"No, ma'am," Rani said in brief.

"Rani, are you okay; your eyes are red. Have you been sobbing?" Kavita asked in a concerned tone.

"It is a windy day; I was standing out when some dust went into my eyes. I had a hard time removing it," Rani said in response.

There was quiet between them. Kavita looked out of the window at the city lights, and Rani focused on her driving. The silence was shattered by the shrill ring of Rani's mobile. Rani quickly put off the phone and continued driving. But when the person continued to dial Rani's number, Kavita reacted. "Why are you not picking up the call?" she inquired.

"Oh, I will do that after I reach you to your destination," Rani said.

"Rani, the call could be urgent; the person is persistently calling you," said Kavita.

"I know the caller, he can wait," responded Rani.

When the call came again, Kavita insisted that Rani attend to it. "Pull the car to the side," she said firmly. Kavita was surprised to see Rani ignoring her statement. "Rani, stop the car, right now," she said, angrily.

Rani reluctantly picked up the call. "Father, I am driving; could you please ask brother to get you whatever you want; I am at the other end of town, and I am not in a position to help. The prescription is near mama's bedside. Give her the first two pills; it will give her some relief." Rani was interrupted; Kavita could not hear the voice at the other end. "Father, you have to ask Akash for help; he is familiar with the situation and knows how to handle it."

Rani was speaking in riddles, and Kavita was unable to make sense of the conversation. She initially chose to ignore the chat as she did not want to eavesdrop, but the talk was getting intriguing by the minute.

"Father, I have to go; I will reach the place as soon as I can. Please do the needful, sorry I can't be there," Rani said softly. Raja continued to engage her. Seeing that she was making Kavita uncomfortable, she excused herself and got out of the car to finish the conversation.

Kavita was curious to know what was agitating the young girl. This much she got, that there was a health emergency at home and Rani's father was asking for help. What intrigued Kavita was why Rani was not being forthcoming with help. She was aware from her previous talk with Rani that she was close to her family and would do anything for them. Of that, Kavita had no doubt, seeing how Rani was shouldering so much of responsibility with such dignity. Rani was a progressive girl; and knew that education would be the only way to improve the conditions at home. Then why was she behaving so weirdly...??

Rani returned to the car, apologized to Kavita, and made to start the engine. "Just a minute, what do you think you are doing?" hissed Kavita.

Seeing Kavita's furious face, Rani said kindly, "Ma'am, please do not make a complaint; my father will lose his job. He has been serving this company dutifully all these years; he would not want to retire with dishonor. I promise there will be no more disturbances; I will stay with you till as late as you want."

"Child, what do you take me for, an idiot? Do you think that I wish to pursue my journey any further?" asked Kavita furiously.

"Ma'am, I sincerely apologize....," was interrupted by Kavita.

"Rani, come over to the back seat right away; I wish to speak to you," Kavita instructed Rani firmly, and the latter obliged with a resigned air.

"Come on out with what is happening at home?" asked Kavita. Rani kept a wooden silence and looked bleakly ahead. "Rani, I am waiting....," chided Kavita. Rani refused to oblige. "I think I should rephrase what I said earlier; that might probably help. If you do not spell out clearly what just happened, I will have to call your office and complain. By the way, do they know that you are driving the car in your dad's place?" Kavita asked.

That had an electrifying effect on Rani. "No ma'am. My father will be fired from his job- as it is a serious offense," she ended apprehensively.

"I thought so," said Kavita, simply.

"Ma'am, this is a personal problem. Why do you want to hear about it?" Rani asked, unable to figure out Kavita's real intention.

"Child, so that I can be of help if I can," Kavita said gently. Rani looked up, perplexed. "I have no intention to go to my uncle's place anymore. But before we move any further, I would like to hear from you. I have good friends in the medical fraternity that could prove useful now. Trust me," said Kavita gently.

Hearing Kavita's soothing voice, Rani's resistance crumbled, and she sobbed inconsolably. Kavita held her in a warm embrace and whispered softly, "I think we need to act fast, but unless I know the real state of affairs, I will not be able to organize the right help."

Rani was a sensible girl, and she was aware of the need to act urgently. She related her story in between her sobs. Rani was distraught, she talked incoherently, but Kavita did not interfere. The young girl, who had put up a bold face till now, broke down when shown some compassion.

"We are poor and live in a shanty locality. We would not have been in this financial state, but for the fact that three of dad's close friends cheated him of his small savings and left a debt on him, and fled. Dad is an honest man; he decided to pay off the debt without holding any grudge. That is why my dad is working in this cab company. They exploit his goodness, but he does not protest; because he cares for his family. At the slightest altercation, they threaten my dad with dire consequences.

"I started working at a young age so that I could augment the family income. That is why I had to give up my studies mid-way, my parents were upset about it, but they knew that there was no other option before us. The three of us were happy though we faced financial problems," Rani was interrupted.

"But don't you have a brother?" asked Kavita, bewildered at what she had heard till then.

"Akash has been adopted by my parents. My mother's best friend and her husband died in a road accident. We helped pay their hospital charges when they were battling for their lives; no one else from our basti was forthcoming. But they succumbed soon to their injuries. My mother promised her friend that she would adopt Akash, and my father supported her decision. It is our responsibility to now educate Akash and make him an independent person," she said tenderly, thinking of her brother.

"How will you manage all this?" asked Kavita.

"With the money dad and I earn, we are managing," said Rani lightly. "But a new problem has crept up, and that is my mother's health."

"What is wrong with her health?" asked Kavita.

"My mother used to work as domestic help, but because of her failing health, we have ordered her to sit at home. Physical work is tedious for her; she becomes breathless and faints, often," Rani stopped.

"What do the doctors say?" enquired Kavita.

"They think she needs to go in for heart surgery, but we cannot afford the expense. Earlier, the doctor we had consulted had told us to manage her health condition with medicines; we followed his advice. A few days back, however, he warned us that surgery had to be done at the earliest. We don't know how to collect funds for the surgery," Rani said in a faint voice.

"What happened just now?" asked Kavita; she was getting the picture.

"My mother had difficulty breathing, and she fainted. The last I know is that my father was trying to reach the doctor. I was supposed to have bought medicines and taken them home, but I did not have the time for it," Rani said, sobbing.

"Can I see the prescription?" asked Kavita.

"Ma'am?" asked Rani in shock.

"Rani, I can't keep repeating myself. For goodness sake, show me the medical prescription," Kavita said, exasperated.

Rani fished it from her bag and handed it over to Kavita. "Call up your father and find out the status, right away," Kavita said. She dialed her friend Nisha, a cardiologist.

Kavita briefly explained the problem to Nisha. "You are in luck Kavita; I am on night duty today, so if you bring the patient to the emergency, I will personally attend to her. Make it quick, because it does look like the patient is in a critical state." Kavita discussed the logistics and hung up.

Kavita heard grimly, as Rani updated her on her mother's health. "Come on, let's head to your house and pick up your mother. My friend is a heart surgeon; she will know what to do. We do not have much time, so you have to race home now. I have seen how you can do that without breaking traffic rules, so go, child," Kavita said encouragingly. Rani smiled and did as told.

Kavita came home and headed straight to the guest room. "How are you, Asha?" asked Kavita to Rani's mother.

"I am doing fine; you have treated me like a queen here," Asha said, looking gratefully at Kavita. "I have got a new lease of life thanks to you; I mean to put it to good use once I am up."

"Don't you worry about that; you will be spoilt for choice soon," Kavita said, grinning at Asha.

Bruno, the house dog, was fussing over Rani; he had grown very fond of her. "Where is my welcome?" Kavita asked, trying to sound cross with Bruno. He looked at her as if to say, 'you have to wait your turn, Rani, is my current favorite; besides, she spends more time with me and pampers me a hell of a lot'.

Kavita's husband, Kunal, entered the room with a broad smile. "I have just got off the call with Nisha, she is pleased with the progress that Asha has made, and she wants to see her tomorrow." There was clapping in the room; everyone was relieved with the news.

"Ma'am, thank you for all the help; we will never forget it," Raja said gratefully.

"Raja, life is a long journey, some will join in your voyage, and others will desert you. You will have to plod along to the best of your abilities. We have found each other, let us treasure it, and not spoil the relationship by giving labels to it or judging each other. Let us celebrate the friendship and learn to treasure it," Kavita said humbly.

"Ma'am, I was in awe of you the moment I saw you, but over the last few days, my respect for you has gone up several-fold. You are a great professional, but you have a sensitivity and empathy that is so rare. I am so glad that we met such a wonderful family," Rani said proudly. Bruno agreed with her. 'I could not have said it better', woofed Bruno.

"This does do well for my ego," Kavita said cheekily, trying to lighten the complement. Everyone in the room watched with a smile at the warm bond building between these two women.



27. Sarita Pradhan

Sarita Pradhan brought up in Mumbai and by profession she is a Corporate Business Analyst to Leadership Team for the last 14 years. She likes to explore places, meet people, pen down short writeups and loves to try various cuisines.

Gender Equality: Myth or Reality

Nature has fallen asleep underneath the blanket of night sky with blinking stars acting as a mediator of dreams and messengers from various times to another. It is at peace and in deep sleep with a heart full of faith and trust that the dawn will bring new opportunities and a fresh hope to its life.

Few moments pass by and then in sometime ...

Darkness is fading away; dawn is spreading its wings across the sky, slow and steady with its vibrant persona to touch the nature's beauties with its warmth. Sky surrendering itself in the arms of the dawn; shy, blushing, peaceful, confident, and hopeful. Nature has its own way of romancing! Even though it stands strong while witnessing evolutions of generations on this earth. Sea welcomes the early birds, who have come to its shore to begin their day with its warmth and fresh air. Mountains are full of chirping of the birds, fresh fragrances of wood, mud and flowers blossoming on the branches of trees, animals have come to the ponds for a cool shower. Waterfalls and rivers enhancing the fragrance of soil and rocks. If only this Harmony could last throughout till the night again take charge of the nature. But this universe is destined to move for the destined events to fall in place, and the Time is the witness to all these events. All the living and non-living things on this earth must walk their destined paths. Such is the story of one Species on this earth known as Human Being.

Trust me this species is yet to figure out whether they are "Human Being" or are they supposed to be "Being Human" With nature's grace and abundance, part of the earth is now called by its modern name "Human Societies". This concept is created by the Human Beings, a widespread species known for its intelligence have been reshaping the natural beauties into certain structures for their benefit since ages. This is a beautiful species which has by large being investigating and trying to get to the core of the nature's process of life. The knowledge it has gained is enormous and the automation it could develop is known to help humans fly places and space as well. They have given a new definition and dimension to Time itself; they have created different time zones in which they live, travel, and connect with Humans living in different Time Zones such as GMT, UTC, IST etc. If a human being can work so intelligently and strive so hard to achieve the unthinkable for self, then imagine how beautifully these species could have co-existed with the entire eco-system. However, it seems the nature underestimated the brain of human beings while it was in the design stage. This brain has two inbuilt factors namely intelligence and intention. While intelligence has been fulfilling its duty, the intention has been shunning away from its responsibility. As a result of this, we have plenty of concrete jungles called as "Human Societies" and the eco-system on land, water as well as space is suffering from pollutants.

Nature has at its core the responsibility to make available its resources equally to all the lives that thrive on it. However, Human Beings who are so obsessed with their abilities and intelligence, they have rightfully encroached and exploited the Nature solely for their own comfort ignoring the existence of other creatures. It had reached to a level where the exploitation begun within the human community itself, wherein the weaker section was exploited under the name of customs, culture, and tradition by those in the position of power. The humans in power were mostly male youth with muscle power disguised in the name of community protection. That is when the interpretation of the Nature's Law of Life was studied, one of the laws which these Humans discussed and implemented was "Equal ease of access to resources and opportunities to everyone" which is more commonly known as "Gender Equality" in today's times. Equality of gender is the state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making; and the state of valuing different behaviors, aspirations and needs equally, regardless of gender. Wherein gender is a biological identity of a human, and it is more than just male or female. This concept in its real meaning is a beautiful concept to maintain harmony and peace of the souls on this earth. It enables every soul to operate in this society with a complete freedom to express, plan, pursue and enjoy the abundance available in this universe. However, it comes with a lot of responsibility and should be applied and availed mindfully.

Onset of dawnHuman societies are awake by now, every house witnessing the race that every member staying in it must run every single day. This Race is also known by several names depending on the situation,

such as Survival Fight, Deadlines, and most of the times the finish line of this race is to satisfy someone who is in authority and empowered to decide whether the person will earn day to day living under their leadership or no.

School kids are in a rush to reach school on time, so that their class teachers consider them a punctual student; employees are in a rush for survival fight in corporate world; Entrepreneurs are busy working out strategies to impress customers to get more business. Sports person are busy practicing for the selection or next match to win the game; artists are busy with refining their talent to bag the new performance events. And most important ones who are the backbone of every house, who equip the residence of the house to participate and run their race, lady of the house and the senior citizens in the house. The race that this category runs is to catch up with the speed of other residents in the house, so that these residents begin their race dot on the final shot.

What is the need of this Race? Why is it so important to be part of it? Who is the Jury? What is the Wining Price? What is the Cost? And the final question What if someone chooses not to run the Race?

Typical Morning Story at the residence of Vohra's:

Rahul: Mom, have you packed my salad and dal in my lunch box? I cannot eat so much of carbs daily. I am training so hard for the football league of my college, you know it.

Payal (Rahul's Mom): Yes Son, also one tiffin has cut fruits in it. Eat your food on time.

Priya (Payal's Daughter): Mom! Mom! Have you prepared the Biryani? I promised my school friends that I will get biryani in my tiffin today.

Payal: Yes dear, one extra lunch box already packed for you.

Rishi (Payal's Husband): Honey, I am getting late for the meeting, will skip the breakfast. Oh! I forgot to tell you, will have outside lunch ordered in the meeting.

Payal: Okay, I will carry the Extra food to my office today. See you, have a good day.

Payal getting ready for her office while her mind wondering "Oh God! Can you help me with some additional source of energy; I am just getting ready to begin my day and I am already exhausted. Everyday story though, but today is a special day, my career growth depends on today's meeting with our Business Partners". "If I am able to crack this business deal, promotion is sure to follow with handsome hike". "Oh, did I mention this to Rahul? I might have to go on a Business Tour for 20 days if this really works out". "Come on Payal, leave these thoughts aside, take one moment at a time. It is your day your dream deal, no one can encroach your mind at this moment. FOCUS and Go for it!"

Déjà vu: Trust me most of the Women will agree, irrespective of their occupation

Can we irrespective of our gender, even imagine any different early morning scene in anybody's homes?

And we all know the answer to this. How did we manage to reach this stage? Evolution is inevitable! We, as a Human Society, adopted the concept of Gender Equality as one of the means of evolution. This Movement of Gender Equality was inevitable given the fact that unrest caused due to imbalance was infecting the society in every aspect of its life. It was required to protect the female gender from getting further exploited. But while growing with this concept, have we missed on something very important?

Think about this, all this while we were busy giving equal opportunities to Females; a gender considered weak because of being physically weak compared to Male counterparts. And this perception because of various stages of life that this gender must go through. Life has chosen Female as a gender for such kind of evolution in one birth, it is Nature's choice and who are we Humans to demean it? In my opinion, life has ensured that the souls born in this gender are enriched with valuable insights and learnings about the nature of life.

While teaching the traditional role we also ensured that every girl child should be educated, must be given a choice to select and make her career in the subject area of her choice, pursue her dreams in life, earn her living, live with her choice, and have equal say in the matters of family and socio-economy, business world, world politics, etc and reservations to ensure minimum quotas in education, job, politics, etc. But the important

question then arises; have we ignored the weakness of the other gender completely, the one perceived as a stronger since historical times? Have we, as a society been unfair with this gender? By not giving a boy child in the house equal opportunity to learn life essentials such as cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning utensils, planning the raw materials and essentials for the week's activity in advance, connecting with respect to each member of the family, valuing needs and opinions of female gender in the family and society, training on taking care of younger kids in the house and so on. This is a miss which needs to be fulfilled to begin with. If we ignore this aspect and continue living the way we are, there will come a time when Female Gender becomes completely self-reliant and the dependency on the other gender will reduce to minimal. Rather, Females might not find any value in their Male counterparts. The side effects are already visible in terms of health issues in all the genders on account of stressful lives juggling between meeting expectations of parents, society, corporate, own dreams, and the list goes on. Increasing number of divorces, youth shunning away from the institution of Marriage and choosing live-ins. Children unable to associate themselves with family values, tradition of joint families on the verge of extinct, self-centered and destructive mindset, inability to accept rejections or difference of opinions. And I am sure together we can go on writing pages on this. This might even lead to same gender being preferred as a partner not as a biological need but as a rational choice to live a peaceful and a more meaningful life. Any kind of imbalance is a disaster for the society at large.

Remember, Gender Equality movement for Women was supported by few courageous Men who understood the potential of a woman and chose to stand strong with her, even though it meant inviting hatred and conflict with the entire society. Time has come for Women to understand this imbalance and disasters it may cause soon. It is high time now to stand strong and train the boy child in their house for the essentials and make them compatible to live a self-reliant life. Deviating from the society norms to strike a right balance in near future.

Setting the right expectations from life, respecting the choice and opinions of other individual irrespective of gender, inculcating the importance of helping each other fulfil the dreams and ambitions, enrichment, and enlightenment through spirituality for peaceful life. These are few qualities we need to rebuild in this society and remember any movement begins at home. Having said this, evolutions do not happen overnight. It is a well thought process. Think through and once you have the conviction to bring in this change, then select what you want to begin with and carry the conviction with you when you act on it.

Day passes by and then...

The Sun is cooling down and shading its vibrant aura to welcome the night blanket of sky for its love towards the nature. Nature needs to relax at night so that it meets the dawn with a fresh and balanced mind. Few moments pass by and then in sometime ...

Darkness is fading away; dawn is spreading its wings across the sky, slow and steady with its vibrant persona to touch the nature's beauties with its warmth.

Hope this Dawn will see a Human mind full of conviction and willing to act for the good of Humanity!



28. Kamalika Majumder

Born and brought up in Kolkata, the author is an academican and has done her research work in the field of Women's Studies. Writing is her passion. She engages herself in the genres of fiction and non-fiction as well, alongside translating literary pieces from Spanish to English and Bengali.

Widows Should be Invited in Marriage Open-heartedly

Down the ages, since the hoary past, the loss of husband of an Indian woman has been considered as a blight in a woman's life. During the Vedic period, in some respects, women used to enjoy some sort of rights; for example, they could choose to be educated, choose their husbands among those invited by her father(*swayamvar*). During the later part of the Vedic age or for that matter the early medieval period, the status of women gradually declined. Post-Vedic *Shastras* (code of ethics/manuals) and *Puranas* upheld the patriarchal ideologies and these were written in order to condition the mindset of the women by the social constructs that were constantly interiorized into the womenfolk of the society. The bible of the proponents of such ideology was *Manusmriti* (circa 1250 B.C.-1000 B.C) which is ascribed to a person named Manu. In modern parlance, he appears to be a misogynist *par excellence*. This manual called *Manusamhita* or *manusmriti* actually stunted all the spaces so far enjoyed by women, making their existence parasitic - solely dependent on the wills of men. The shastras prescribed strong austerities for widows: “*At her pleasure [after the death of her husband], let her emaciate her body by living only on pure flowers, roots of vegetables and fruits. She must not even mention the name of any other men after her husband has died.*” A widow was glorified if she accepted *sahamarana*, that is, sacrificing oneself on the funeral pyre of one's dead husband. There was such ignoble custom as *Niyog* through which, a widow was appointed to conceive another man's child. Otherwise she was supposed to observe *Brahmacharya* (rigid celibacy). She could find another husband only if her marriage with her late husband was not consummated. Often she was given to her husband's brother. May be that is why in vernacular a brother-in-law is termed as *Devar* (*Dwi*=second + *Var*=husband). This was permissible as the offspring from this marriage would be of the 'same stock'.

Similarly outrageous was the “widowing ceremony” in vogue until a few decades ago and still prevalent in the remotely rural areas of the country. Several novels, short stories and films have vividly depicted this barbarous practices. After the death of a man, the womenfolk (senior widows) took charge of the hapless widow and started the rituals: smudging the vermilion dot (*bindi*), smashing all types of bangles-glass coral, conch shell, and discarding the metal ones. They would take off all jewelleries *mangalsutra* included, from her body (as it were criminal offence now to wear them). Earlier, her long hair used to be clipped off to a crop-hair. She was relegated to the state of a grieving woman devoid of all colours and happiness in life living on scanty vegetarian meals while most of the time tasting - her life dark and bleak. A widow is still supposed to wear white sarees with no sign of red or similar shade in her clothings. With her husband gone, all colours are supposed to be drained out of her life. So she is asked by the shastras not to use vermilion any more and accordingly she is not allowed to take part in the holi festival.

Skanda Purana is considered as the largest of the eighteen mahapuranas. In the fourth chapter of the Kashi Khanda of Skanda Purana are laid down the dictums regarding the characteristics of a chaste woman- how an ideal woman should be like. Under this rubric, the duties of a widow woman are depicted in clear terms which reflect the social mores of the time. The social structure of the Indian society is largely based on these strictures as dictated by the scripture. The 49th sutra of Skanda Purana states that a woman whose husband has died, is always inauspicious because she is as impure as a body without life. The next sutra suggests that a woman widowed by her husband, is the most inauspicious thing on earth. Even a glance at her before any great venture would prove ominous for the undertakers. A wise man should avoid such women and should not accept her blessings(except that the widow is his own mother). Following this norms, a widow is not allowed to be present in the marriage or any such ceremony which are considered auspicious. In southern parts of India, a widow is termed as *amangali*(bringing bad luck) and a married woman is *sumangali*(one who brings good luck). Like a collective unconscious this dogma is deep-set in our socio-cultural psyche. So much so, that even today the so-called educated families are not free from this taboo against the widow women. A widow, howsoever educated or economically independent she might be, is precluded from attending the marriage ceremony or performing the marriage rituals even of her own offsprings.

In today's century, even in rural India, it is a common belief that the widow is culpable for her husband's death. More often than not, she has to hear the comment, 'she ate up her husband'. Interestingly, soon after the 'Shraddh' or the post-funeral rituals, the widow is sent back to her parental house. There too, if she earns her livelihood by means of some work, her position is agreeable. But if she is totally dependent on her father or brothers, her situation is pitiable. She is considered a burden. This does not happen if the late husband's property was given to her. The opposite is normally seen. The brothers-in-law appropriate the husband's share of property. If the widow is allowed to remain at her in-laws' house, she is treated like a maid-servant of the house and sometimes also subjected to sexual abuse by the brothers-in-law.

In urban areas too, if the woman is non-working, she needs to depend on a male guardian, be it her father/brothers or her in-laws. There are other troubles too. If she is working, sometimes she is considered 'easily available' by her male colleagues. If she thinks of or does a remarriage, she is often scorned, laughed at. Question is, is a widowed man held responsible for the wife's death? Rather, the opposite things happen in man's case! He becomes the object of sympathy and his relatives soon start arranging his remarriage. Neither he has to wear white clothes nor he is supposed to subsist on pittance like eating only vegetarian food, fasting, etc. Never the widower's presence is considered sinister in any auspicious ceremony. The crux of the problem lies in the patriarchal construct of 'womanhood'. The existence of a woman is reduced to her socio-cultural ascribed roles as daughter, wife, mother. She is not considered as an individual free-willing subject who can have identity of her own Self with her own accomplishments. She is denied a voice of her own. Decisions of her life are taken by others. She only is supposed to acquiesce to these decisions and impositions thrust on her.

It is time that our society breaks free from all these patriarchal dogmas and shun looking at the women's issues with a gendered lens. If gender discrimination is not done away with, society cannot make progress. Every woman should be brought within the fold of education and their economic independence should be ensured.

Recently, some instances of deviating the age-old patriarchal norms have made headlines. For centuries, Vrindavan has been a shelter for abandoned widows. Their families refuse to take their responsibility and they take shelter at rehabilitation homes at Vrindavan. On March 24, 2013, Sulabh International, an NGO, organised Holi festival for thousands of widows at Vrindavan- a festival of colours hitherto denied to the widows. They played holi with glee and fervour, enjoying the colours of life anew. In another instance, on December 8, 2016, Daniben Makwana, a 50-year old widow from the village of

Dhrangadhra, Gujarat, took part in the wedding rituals during her daughter's marriage. This too, was an initiative taken up by the NGO Video Volunteers as part of their Khel Badal campaign aimed at ushering in a change in the public mindset so far conditioned by the patriarchal stereotypes. This should be a continuous process carried out by both the government and non-government agencies. As mentioned earlier, women should gain economic independence. They should have their own choice, make their lives' decisions themselves. True empowerment would be brought about only when women would be no more be 'silent', 'invisible' entities, but individuals with voices of their own, taking part in every rites and rituals of life on her own right.

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29. Monica Gupta

Monica in her own words finds words healing and empowering. Writing is her passion and profession. It's her gateway to imaginations and reflection. With an experience since 2015, in blogging, authoring, editing, reviewing and conducting writing workshops, she has created a niche for myself in the literary field. She is an English Literature graduate and a diploma holder in Creative Writing. She is presently pursuing studies on Indian Mythology and History and evolving into a speaker as a podcaster. She is based in Ahmedabad with a family of 2 blooming kids.

Ahilya In A Tete-A-Tete With Her Grand-Daughter (Draupadi)

After having shed her human form and entering the world of souls, Ahilya was relaxing in Swarg Lok. It was a place without the manifestation of time and space.

"Look! What I got for us, Dadi."

Draupadi walked in holding a tray with two glasses of refreshing drinks. She looked at Ahilya admiring eyes.

"You are the masterpiece of Lord Brahma. Your beauty is flawless. Your facial features and body, well-shaped and sculpted, so apt to your name, Ahilya. You are certainly the most beautiful woman Earth ever had," she complimented her grandmother.

Cupping Durapadi's chin in her palms, Ahilya replied,

"And the tej of your face still makes you the most radiant one. The perfect symbol of fire."

Hugging Ahilya, Draupadi continued in a reflective mood,

"You know Dadi, though we were born in different yugs, related as cousin grandmother and grandchild, somewhere our journeys were filled with similar challenges, destinies subject us to same atrocities by society."

"And what makes you say that, Draupadi?" Ahilya sounded intrigued.

"Your character was tainted with infidelity. Your short encounter with Lord Indra led to severe punishment of several years by Maharishi Gautama. He accused you of vanity. You were turned into a stone. You had to practise rigorous penance for purification. You were looked down upon for years. Everyone turned away their eyes from you as if you were invisible. Why didn't your creator, Lord Brahma, come to your rescue even once? If not that, at least he could have come to hear your heart. To share his part of the fault, of marrying away his most beautiful creation, an innocent girl, to an old ascetic. To acknowledge his failure, to see that this mismatch could lead to such incidents in the future. Even he was at fault for being thoughtless. It was only Ram who could see you as a human. Human who could falter and be flawed. Only when his feet touched you and when he accepted your hospitality did everyone begin to acknowledge you. Only after he saw you, did you become visible again. Isn't this a bit too harsh treatment from our loved ones?"

Draupadi continued, as Ahilya listened silently,

"Similarly, I was married to the Pandavas, became the wife of 5 husbands. A choice I didn't even make. I was character assassinated various times, by numerous people. Everyone called me names, either aloud or in hushes. They looked down at me. Saw me as an angry fireball. Despite being a wife of 5 yodhas, a daughter in law of magnanimous Kingdom of Hastinapur, before the powerful ancestors, I was humiliated, my dignity was raped publicly. And like in your case, who came to my rescue? Krishna! It was Govind, who dared to stand against all. Only he came forward and wrapped a bandage around me. Only he saw me beyond what everyone could and accepted me as a Sakhi (friend). Just like Ram, he saw the human in me. Isn't it strange Dadi that our loved ones, nearest and dearest ones can't see us the way strangers can?"

Heaving a sad sigh, Ahilya replied,

"Yes, it's strange. But it's also a reinforcement of God's presence. In whatever humanly form."

Mata Lakshmi, who was overhearing the conversation outside, walked in. Taking a sip from Ahilya's glass, she joined in the talk,

"Shri Ram came and rescued Ahilya, for he had to show the world that forgiving is a Godly act."

Then taking her gaze over to Draupadi, Lakshmi continued,

"Lord Krishna never judged you for being a wife of five husbands and accepted you as a Sakhi. Because in the new Yug, he had to set the norm of gender equality. If men could indulge in polygamy, so could a woman, if needed. He also had to introduce a new relationship. Of that of a friendship between a male and female."

Mata Lakshmi's words, sealed the conversation well. Happily, gulping down the thoughts and drinks, Lakshmi, Ahilya and Draupadi giggled and posed for a selfie together.



30. Mahua Sen

Mahua Sen is a recipient of 'Distinguished Poet Award' in the 10th Rabindranath Tagore International Poetry Award-2021. She is a recipient of 'Poesis Award for Excellence in Literature' in the 7th Bharat Award-2021. Mahua Sen is the winner of 'Wordsmith Award -2020' by Asian Literary Society and a recipient of Nari Samman award 2020 by Literoma. She is also a winner of Indian Woman Rising Star Award- 'Certificate of Excellence' 2021 by Asian Literary Society. She has authored a poetry book and has edited and compiled one. Her poems find place in many national and international anthologies and journals. She is currently working with Bull's Eye Outsourcing as the Regional Director (South).

She!!

She, the lone petal,
That ambles freely, merrily-
The whimsical wind
Takes her to places, and She
Surrenders to a free flight!

Her serene silence
Carries voice in worm's cocoon,
Safeguarding design,
Her deep-rooted dreams and hopes;
To bloom into life someday!

For She, the stardust
Of the blue empyrean
She, the creator!
From her, through her, you exist;
With and within, not without!

The woman in her
Swallows the embers of sun
That crackle her throat,
She gulps amorphous shadow;
Pains atrium, but she smiles!!

Oft, she is smothered,
But she rises mightier.
Heaven heaves in her!
She brings smile to straying hearts,
Gulping gauzy wings of night!!



31. Ruma Chakraborty

Ruma Chakraborty is a senior English faculty in a premium institution in Kolkata. Teaching is both a profession and a vocation for Ms. Chakraborty. It is but one of the hats donned by her. An amateur painter, a budding poet and compulsive story-teller, currently she is in the process of writing a compendium of short stories. An alumna of Loreto School, St. Xavier's College and Calcutta University, an intrepid traveller; a typical 'Bangali' in matters of food; an example of the argumentative Indian; an inquisitive learner to boot—she is a quintessential Renaissance woman.

ANKUSH

She walks down the street everyday around this time
Staring ahead absentmindedly or looking down at her
feet or the dusty road as to divine some hidden
meaning in her traversing.

The slight figure, mundane, plain and dark till she
looks up at you.

There is something mesmeric in her gaze.

Dark brown eyes with flecks of hazel around the iris.
She looks at you without fear, rancour or coyness—a
direct gaze that travels straight to the soul of things.

The eldest child among eight, a mother before time, a
lost youth.

She doesn't mind not being a beauty. Of having the
village boys throw chits tied to stones through her
window or trail her on their bicycles to school. She is
glad that her poor father sent her to the village school
albeit to get one mouth off the rations as the school
provided the midday meals.

She grew up in peace. At her own pace, almost
unconsciously.

Then one day, he saw her.

Marked her with his spoor.

Followed her with his gaze as she walked past where
he sat smoking the bidi.

Desire curled out with the smoke through his sooty
nostrils.

He didn't know why she captivated him so.

Bewitched, he twitched with desire.

He wondered how she would react to his longing?

He suspected that she would look at him with that
calm gaze that didn't judge, rate or hate people.

She was different.

Crazed, he caught her, passing by the old unused
factory shed (a false promise to good days by the
prevailing government of that time).

The decaying tin shed and silent rot witnessed the cat
and mouse game.

She resisted, strangely, with vehemence.

Clawed, bit, kicked.

Each resistance acting as a spur, a goad.

He stared, surprised by his own carnage.

He saw the congealing blood with satisfaction.

The price to be paid for disinterest.

Pride is tolerable in beauty but seems an affectation in
the plain looking.

He packed up the battered body in a gunny bag,
weighed it with stones and dropped it into the pond.

The swollen body surfaced the next evening when the
birds were making their way back to their nests.

The elderly woman who found it, had a round of
hysterics. The sack had fallen open, the fish had

feasted on her face.

What was she doing out so late?

Inviting this fate, the smug verdict went.

RAKTABEEJ and KALI

From the darkness, She emerged

Her eyes glowed with a fiery malevolence from deep sunken sockets

Like the bowels of the earth emanating liquid fire

Her emaciated frame covered in sagging skin, mouth working

Tongue tinged in fresh bubbling blood, dripping down her jowls

Resting on the bleached whites of the skulls, adorning her vein-popping neck,

Before disappearing into the folds of her tiger-skin wrap.

Eyes sought out the prey, tongue flicked out in anticipation of a fresh kill.

Animosity voiced through a growl, attack launched.

The spray of fresh blood on the parched soil sprung forth a multitude of Evil beings.

Frenzied killing but from each droplet more sprung

Blood, blood and flesh torn, neck wrung each droplet creating more mayhem

Gnashing Her teeth, She launches into a frenzy of bloodbath

Till all blood stands drained and all evil lies vanquished.

Fear Her Darkness for in it lies the power to destroy

Every Raktabeej that ever raises its head.

32. Jayashree Pillai

Jayashree Pillai finds great joy in weaving words. She is a teacher by profession and is passionate about her work. Writing is her way of unwinding. Besides writing, she takes keen interest in cooking, reading, listening to music, photography and traveling. She is a philosopher at heart and believes that life is a journey that is meant to be lived in the truest sense of the word.

The Goddess Behind

It is a world,
That men have trod upon
And left a print
Upon memory's trail.
Who knows of the shadows?
That followed behind,
Holding decorated lamps
With nimble fingers,
Humming a tune of hope?
They did and still do -
Those shadows that we barely see
Or hear
Or think about.

Each trophy won
Glow in the fading light
Of dreams she had carved
And cast away.
His smiles become hers -
His hopes, her goals.
She walks behind -
A single step away,
A shadow:
And yet something more.

A woman she is - not mere.
The goddess who etches
Upon the fallen dust,
Paths that lead to the stars yearned for.
For love carries within its womb,
A strength, a power
That none can break -
And she, the goddess
Does love in a million ways,
Infinitely and eternally.
A good man knows her worth.



33. Sonali Ray

Sonali Ray is a selenophile, an optimist who wishes to change the world through her words.

The Guiding Star

I'm the daughter of the night
 Draping the darkness I scour through the forests, streets
 The glittering fireflies my childhood buddies
 The silent breeze cuddling my tresses and the silver beams flooding my cobbled lanes
 I wander alone in these empty alleys.

I'm the season, sometimes summer some times rain
 Drenching every soul with my love, wiping every drop of their pain
 Like the winter flakes, I am a gift from heaven,
 Autumn or Spring I am the fragrant cherry blossom blooming every day
 In the rustling leaves or the daisies, I leave behind my tale of events.

I'm the tiny star that shines above your window
 I'm the floating cloud that shades you from the scorching yellow
 I'm the mellow winter Gold that keeps you warm in the chill
 I'm the roadside dandelion and also the vibrant daffodil
 I'm the pulse that you feel within you.

Sometimes you worship me, sometimes you rip me off my fabric
 Yet during festivities, you worship me with fervour and reverence
 You celebrate the goddess in me yet you make sure that I never see the light of the world
 You are double-faced and you curse me for my lifestyle
 My life is shackled by your desires, your decisions and your laws.

But I'm also the daughter of Nature
 I'm the stream that spurts from the lofty peaks
 Smoothing the boulders, I carve out my way into the seas
 I'm the magma that bubbles beneath the mantle
 And creating new life everywhere I freeze.

I shine in the violet skies like the twinkling North Star
 Guiding the vagabonds through the dark alleys, aiding the lost travellers
 I'm the sunflower that you pluck and adorn your vase but you forget
 That real beauty can never be stolen, ravaged or lost
 And so I flourish for days to come, for I believe in myself and my dreams.

I'm the rose that you treasure and I'm the wildflower that none loves
 But your thoughts don't matter to me for I'm my well-wisher
 I am the woman whom you humiliate in every realm of life
 I stumble, falter, hesitate, sometimes cry yet my dry tears define my strength
 I am the kali, druga and the Lakshmi.

There's a smouldering fire in me that furnishes the vigour to battle
 With an undying hope and courage, I trudge the journey of life
 Storms, boulders, ice lakes, monsters spy my thorny path
 But the golden spark of faith and will helps me to traverse every dark
 I am the woman, struggling to ground my feet and make a mark in this patriarchal world.

34. Shatabdi Mukhopadhyay

Shatabdi Mukhopadhyay is a history honours student. Her relationship with writing started at five. A dream inspired her to pen her thoughts. She found writing a medium to fulfil her unfulfilled desires. She felt the thrill and suspense of the characters. She has written many short stories, poems, and a novel. She owns a blog at Dailyhunt named Life Hacks. Her favourite story genres are classics and mystery. She loves the works of William Shakespeare and Satyajit Ray.

Woman: A Journey Through The Century

Many of us are not familiar with terms as womxn or womyn. Well, let us keep the meanings for later. And explore some women-only hush hush topics since the dawn of civilization.

We all know that our society was matriarchal in the stone age. Women were polygamous then. Its mother's name identified the child. Even when clans and tribes formed, many of them were led by women. But what happens that the condition of women worsened in society?

First, not only women but the position of weaker men also worsened. The powerful individuals ruled this society. Through centuries they turned into tribe chief to the emperor to a rich business person. In the stone age, these powerful individuals contributed more to food gathering. So, they occupied an important position in clans. But eventually, people accept their weaker offspring as powerful too.

And they formed their own class. And since then, the actual problem started. People overlooked the contribution of women to society.

They turned into second-class citizens devoid of all rights. Their primary task becomes to serve her husband and in-laws, and raise her children. Their life expectancy became only 35-40 years for weathering during continuous childbirth.

But every cloud has a silver line. Here we will discuss some lesser-known mighty women and women-centric traditions.

We all know famous names like Nurjahan, Cleopatra. But how many people know about Sappho and Artemisia? There are countless names, but we can discuss a few.

Women practiced many male-only professions in disguise. Agnodice was the first female midwife known in history. She studied medicine under Herophilus disguised as a man.

Agnodice started practicing in Athens, still disguised as a man. She was specialized in helping women during labor, as men often refused to do this.

LGBTQ is still a debated and widely discussed topic. But ancient Greek men could practice it. The wives of Spartan men often dressed as men to make their husbands feel relaxed. Because they spent most of their life with men. The word lesbian derived from a place named Lesbos. Believed to be lesbian, her poetry shows her inner desire towards women.

We know the lives and contributions of Greek philosophers as Aristotle and Plato. But what about the important women who lived at the same time?

Hypatia of Alexandria is one of these influential female scholars.

Growing up, Hypatia's scholar father Theon taught her mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy. Hypatia taught her students mathematics and philosophy.

In March of 415 CE, Hypatia was on her way home when she was attacked by a mob of Christian monks. They stripped her naked, dragged through the city, and beaten to death.

There was a complete event in the Olympics game for girls. Heraean games was a footrace for young girls. Hydna was one of the top swimmers and divers of her time. During the Persian invasion in Salamis in 480 BCE, she and her father swam to the Persian fleet. They cut their moorings, causing the ships to drift and crash into each other and even sink.

There were influential women in politics, too.

Many of us hear the name of Queen Gorgo of Sparta and the wife of famous Leonidas.

This trend continued to ancient Rome as well. Though women spent at home most of the time, there were reputable positions. A group of priestesses known as Vestal Virgins was an influential force of politics. Courtesans were trained in various arts as recitation and singing. They were educated and influential women.

Now moving to the medieval era, we see the military leader as Joan of Arc. She united France against England. Later she was burned at a stake by Britishers. After that, she became a leading saint figure in Protestantism.

Everyone knows about famous male renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci.

Artemisia Gentileschi is one of the most accomplished Baroque painters of the generation.

She was the first woman to become a member of the Accademia di Arte del Disegno in Florence. She was raped by one of her father's friends. But instead of punishing the accused, the court tortured her for losing her virginity. Her zeal for revenge was her primary motivation.

Women performed many important duties in important events of world history. The peasant women performed an important duty during the French revolution. They marched on Versailles and captured the royal family from escaping.

Now from Europe, we should move to Asia. Women were given proper education in ancient India. Wise women as Gargi, Opala, Maitreyi glorified our country. Many influential queens took part in politics and war. The folklore of Samyukta and Prithviraj Chauhan is still famous today. Rani Rudrama Devi was the daughter of Ganapathideva of Kakatiya dynasty.

She succeeded her father when she was 14 years old. Born as Rudramba to King Ganapathideva, who ruled at Orugallu, her father designated her as a son.

Through the ancient Putrika Ceremony, her father gave her the male name of Rudradeva. She was brought up as a male child. She learned all the martial arts and traits of administration of the kingdom.

The queens often ruled as regent after the death of their husbands.

Maharani Tarabai was the regent for Shivaji. Akka Devi, the queen of Ullal, saved her kingdom from the hand of the Portuguese. Rani Chennamma and Begam Hazrat Mahal were the first women freedom fighters.

There were many famous names too, such as Nurjahan the wife of Jahangir. She was the pioneer of fashion in India. Rani Durgavati, Sultan Razia, Rani Laxmibai were capable women administrators.

Ramayana is a rich culture of our country. There are many variations of this epic. But few people know about Sitayana. It is the tale of Ramayana from Sita's perspective. Chandravati a poet of medieval Bengal composed ballades of Sita's life story.

In India, where menstruation is taboo, we observe puberty celebrations in various states. It is known as Ritu Kala Samskaran. The Raja Festival of Odisha is a famous festival for teenage girls.

Moving towards the modern ages, we see women became more and more involved in society. They worked in factories and offices for a living. But women also performed in offbeat professions as espionage.

Noor-un-Nissa Inayat Khan, also known as Nora Baker, was a British spy in World War II. She served as the Special Operations Executive.

She was an SOE agent under the codename, Madeleine. She became the first female wireless operator to be sent from the UK into France during World War II. Inayat Khan was captured after being betrayed and executed at Dachau concentration camp.

Homai Vyarawalla, known by Dalda 13, was India's first woman photojournalist. She began work in the late 1930s and retired in the early 1970s. In 2011, she was awarded Padma Vibhushan, the second-highest civilian award of India.

We are now facing turmoil for Covid-19. In the 19th century, smallpox ravaged India, a British colony of that time. So, the administrators ran a vaccination program in the country. But the cure was new, so they face opposition. They picked royal lineage for the advertisement of the vaccine.

Krishnaraja Wodiyar III was the ruler of Mysore when Devajammani arrived. She was chosen for the portrait alongside the king's first wife, also named Devajammani.

Now let us discover some unknown names in science. Rosalind Franklin, born in 1920, was a British biophysicist known. She is known for discovering DNA and understanding X-rays and molecular structure.

Everyone knows the name Charles Babbage as the father of the computer. But a woman was behind the first computer program. Ada Lovelace was the first computer programmer of Babbage's analytical engine. They were close friends as well.

Katherine Johnson was a mathematician who worked on NASA's early space missions. She was one of the "computers" who solved equations by hand during NASA's early years.

Women became more and more aware of their rights. They started fighting for their rights all over the world. Florence Nightingale was the symbol of women's empowerment in the 19th century. In India, we came across names of woman's freedom fighters such as Matangini Hazra.

In the Netherlands, Wilhelmina Drucker fought for the vote and equal rights for women. Margaret Sanger fought for the reproductive rights of women in the US.

In popular culture, women became the protagonist of the story. Women writers considered mad at medieval times. So famous authors such as Jane Austin published their writing anonymously. But we get strong female characters such as Jane Eyre in Charlotte Bronte's writing.

The terms womxn and womyn were coined to accept transgender women as females. Feminists across the globe are still fighting for the equal rights of everyone. It is unfortunate that society forgot such important women. We still have miles to go to close the gap of gender inequality



35. Aditi Lahiry

Aditi Lahiry is an English and French language teacher. She has a passion for writing Short stories, Poems and articles. She stays in Hyderabad with her family.

Amusement

Look at me, I am a woman
 Deep within my core,
 I have a vision
 I am not nearly
 Born for amusement
 I have set some goals
 For accomplishment.

Look at me, I am a woman
 Look beyond my exterior
 My core is equally beautiful
 I am serene, I am composed
 I m a human being full
 of hopes and desires.

Look at me, I am a woman
 I have the faith to achieve
 big missions.
 I have the desire to be loved
 and cared.

Please listen to my wishes
 Please give me the chance to dream big
 Believe me for once
 You will never get this one chance.

I have lost me! Have you found yourself ?
 Are you lost too?
 O! Dear we sail in the same boat
 isn't it so!
 They have already lost us,
 don't you know?

Isn't it agonizing
 to be lost!
 How others label us as women
 Trying to hide our name
 amidst the sea of men!



36. Shabbir Patel

Shabbir Patel is an engineer by profession and a writer by heart. He believes in spreading smile on faces rather than hatred in hearts. Find him behind your smiling faces because life is too short to cry on our stories is what he believes. He always prefers to express what his heart says on paper because every thought hides a secret story to tell. Making this world a symbol of happiness and love is his motto.

WOMEN, The Strongest Leg Of The Table

They said a women always need supporting men to be able to live freely in this world.
 But how can we forget that lap which gave a nap of peace when the world felt scary to us.
 They said a man carries the burden of a luxurious family.
 Remind yourself of that one women who carried that person behind the luxury for 9 months in her womb.
 They said women have very less tolerance
 Remind yourself of the day she suffered the worst pain of her life to bring you in this life.
 They said a women is always hungry for love and affection.
 Remind yourself of that affection you got from your wife/sister when the whole world stood against you
 Remind yourself about that one special women your mother whose love and support was like winning a war against all the demons.
 They said great things only a man can accomplish.
 Remind yourself of Bibi Maryam/Mother Mary who gave birth to great prophecy in the form of Hazrat Isaah/Jesus Christ.
 Remind yourself of The Rani of Jhansi who lead a war for Justice.
 We men maybe the backbone of the family but a body is always complete by a beating heart in the form of a women.
 Maybe you feel you are independent to live a life on your own,
 But your anxiety and nightmares get worse when you come home one day and don't find your mother around.
 It's true that we have typhoons in our country who claim they can buy the whole world, but remember landing on the moon is still in their dreams where reality gave first this opportunity to a women of our Nation named Kalpana Chawla.
 It's true that we have great leaders, preachers who has tremendously contributed to take us on the path towards our creator, Path to his created Paradise, but remember my friend God himself has kept its entry for every person from below their mother's feet.
 Yes they claim every person needs a support from family in when your life faces setback, but remember when you cry in loneliness and the first word you call out with tears, it's the emptiness that requires the filling of a mothers arm.
 Yes it's true that life is a complete circle with no ends, but at the same time this circle is sketched from the radius in the centre which is a role a women plays in our lives.
 Respect them for their roles and love them for their comfort.
 Concluding my thoughts I would like to share a small quote in Hindi for the most important women in my life, my mother.
***Tu dhundta raha khushiyon ka pata is saare brahmaan mein,
 meine toh Jannat ko apni maa k kadmo mein paai hai,
 Tarasta raha tu daulat ko puri zindagi,
 meine Maa ki sabse keemati muskaan kamai hai.***



37. Rashmi Mohapatra

Rashmi Mohapatra did her masters in Economics from JNU, New Delhi. She took VRS from a nationalised bank as an official in senior management level. She Writes poetry in Odia and English. She has three anthologies (Aparahnar Geeta, Abarna Pruthibi & Aparichita Pratibimba) of Odia Poems published to her credit while one anthology of English poems and one containing Haikus are in final stage of publication. She lives in Mumbai.

The born dead

Their arteries carry
cold black blood
Transgress the boundaries
they repeatedly,
Vulturous monks
Fake kins
The dark spots
Should they have any synonym?
Their presence a curse
And in all ages exists
The deadly virus.

That middle of the harsh night
Dragged her fragility,
Her innocence
Scratched impotent soul of air and soil
Her struggle and torment
Devoured the sleeping forest
Onlooker sky started bleeding,
Alas! The quivering failed
to quake the humanity sleeping,

The feast was on
behind the bushes
Hidden wolves' ruthless paws
dismantling her defunct system
Thorny tongues licking hot red blood
Silent fireflies and God
The mute witnesses,
So helpless!
Ah! They rightly say
God also makes mistakes!!

From all 'if's and 'but's
She is set free at last
Her naked body floating in cosmic dark
She can swim to another world
Does this planet deserve a girl?

Her end is the best kept secret
And her birth?
Was there light
Or she alighted on a lightless earth
A bundle of flesh incapacitated?
And what's the span of life
Granted to a born dead?



38. Dr. T. Sree Latha

Dr. Tangirala SreeLatha, Associate Professor of English is an educator for 26 years. As Training Head, she is instrumental in placing nearly 4000 students in various companies. She is a bilingual poet, short story writer and translator. Many of her poems are anthologized in National and International collections and other e-journals. She is a regular contributor to Innerchildpress, Muse India, The Criterion, Cape Comorin Publishers, Guntur International Poetry Fest and Amaravati Poetic Prism conducted by CCVA, Vijayawada. She published an anthology "VOICED THOUGHTS" and approximately 57 research papers. Her interest in modern fiction is inclined especially to Indian women writers.

Birthday

Tring, tring...., tring tring..... The telephone has been ringing. Alekhya hurriedly came into the hall. Why don't you answer the call? Sitting nearby; but won't move! She glared at Anand who has been sitting there and reading newspaper. He simply lifted his head and said, Ah! Anyway you have come na, you do it, why shouting at me..... Saying so, he again buried his head into it. What will happen to the world if you don't read by-heart all the news from it! Every day the same nuisance! She mumbled and rushed to the telephone lying at the corner of the hall. Hello! Ah.... Ananya! How are you Maa? Yeah, we both are good. Yeah, I remember, today is your birthday and I have to come to your house by 5 pm. How do I forget that my dear? No, No, Not at all. Yes, the blouse is ready, I will wear that saree. Sure Maa. Yeah, by the time you come from office, I will be there at home, Okay?! Yeah, bye. Take care. Prepare sweet at home, offer to God and sweeten your mouth before going to office. Okay, okay. Bye. She has a habit of talking one or two sentences after saying 'bye' for the first time. Anand is now ready to listen to the post conversation comments, remarks and appreciation. He is ready with his head out of the newspaper and folded it properly and kept it on the tepoy. Otherwise he knows his fate. Hmm... what's the matter,? he asked. Ananya is their daughter working for LIC of India in the same city. That day is her birthday. She has planned for a small get together that evening at her home. As post covid days have controlled people from going to hotels, everything is planned at her home. Turning to Anand she said, Ananya wants us to reach her a little earlier. She says she has applied for a half-day leave. So she reminds me again to come there by wearing the saree she gifted to me. Poor little girl! My little cute girl! Anand felt relieved as he is away from newspaper at that moment; otherwise he knows what happens. Moreover, he is enjoying looking at her excitement about new saree and her preparations for evening function. Alekhya is greatly enjoying the care and affection shown by Ananya. Her inner delight has brightened her face. Actually she invited Ananya and her husband Aditya to their house for her daughter's birthday. But due to an important meeting Ananya has to attend that day, she could neither apply for a leave nor go to her parents'. Very recently she has received a promotion and hence she has decided to invite her colleagues also on that day. So the whole programme has got fixed at Ananya's house. Alekhya is still sitting there immersed in deep thinking. Anand noticed it and came to her. What's the matter Alekhya, what are you thinking about? You look a little depressed and down. Are you alright? Yeah, I am fine, okay. But this monotonous routine has made me dull and disinteresting. I have lost interest in everything I do. Daily doing puja, cooking, eating and relaxing! Now and then reading a book, what else to do? I am fed up with this routine. Our son Aravind is also in the US. It's been three years since he visited us. Meeting his kids on video call is not at all a substitute; I miss all of them a lot. Ananya's children also got busy with their academic routine. Even they haven't been visiting us as they did earlier. Pchch... she sighed. Why don't you pursue your dream project now? Restart your research and do PhD. Anyway that's been your dream in the past. Due to domestic responsibilities you couldn't pursue that. Why don't you think about it now?, said Anand. What!! PhD.. Now!! Oh My God! Do you think its possible now? She is shocked.

Anand said, Why not!? You are not more than 46, you can definitely do it. You don't have any disturbances now. You continue your research and make best use of this time. Because of our early marriage, we have finished all our responsibilities in a quick pace. It is also good in one way.

She simply waved her hand and ignored that proposal.

By the time Ananya's car has reached their house that evening, they are ready and have left for her house immediately. Ananya has hugged her mother and welcomed both of them with great excitement. Alekhya went inside and picked up conversation with Aditya's mother. Anand has become busy with Aditya's father. Ananya's son and daughter came to their grandparents and took their blessings.

Wow.. it's really very beautiful to see you both in traditional wear. Very good my dears, both Anand and Alekhya have poured their love and blessings on the kids. Slowly Ananya's colleagues started gathering one by one. Suddenly somebody blindfolded Alekhya's eyes from behind. She started shouting Oh.. Who is this, I cannot guess, tell me, tell me. But she is not released. Ananya has come there and she started clapping and shouting loudly, You have to find out Maa, try to tell who that is, come on Maa, come on.

After a little while she is released and cannot see the person's face clearly. There were twinkling stars amid darkness spread in her vision for some time. Though slowly, she has seen her son Aravind, his wife Advaita and their loving kid in front of her eyes. Immediately she has become too emotional and is filled with tears. She hugged her son, daughter-in-law and her two grand children. She then sees Anand and shouts,

So! You too know, you cheat! Why haven't you told me? You all joined hands in the conspiracy and made me aloof. Ananya,...! She looks at her and catches hold of her by the ear. Aaw... Ananya shouts and teases her mother. Here is your endearing son, Aravind. See, I have made this possible. How is it Maa,? she said embracing her mother and brother. When their hearts are filled with immense joy and are busily engaged in deep conversations, Ananya engaged herself busy checking all the things and also welcoming the guests who have started gathering one by one. When Ananya's branch manager Mr.Rao has arrived, she introduced her parents and brother to him. They all are busy in chit chatting when a big cake is placed in the centre, on a table. After a mini formal talk about Ananya's performance at office and congratulating her on the recent promotion, important people gathered around the cake. When everybody is about to see Ananya cutting the cake, she suddenly brought her mother to the front and asked her to cut the cake. Alekhya is confused to the core and looked around in utter bewilderment. What Maa,... what are you doing! How do I cut the cake my dear! She said to Ananya. But Ananya, Aditya, Aravind, Anand and everyone there have insisted that Alekhya should cut the cake as it is her day of rebirth that is being celebrated there. Look at your name on the cake Maa,... it's your name. Today you have to cut the cake, said Ananya. But why!? Why my name is written on the cake!? Don't embarrass me Anu... said Alekhya. No Maa, it's your day of rebirth, when you have given birth to me after undergoing severe situations in the process. So after your real birthday, you are reborn as a mother on my birthday. It is because of your many sacrifices I have achieved anything and everything in my life so far. For all my birthdays and other achievements, you are the one who has celebrated with many sweets, chocolates, gifts, etc. But after marriage, generally, a girl will miss her parents on her birthday. Today I want to make it memorable by gifting this whole event to you. Dad, it is because of your wonderful support and upbringing, I am able to reach this position; both personally and professionally. So, please cut the cake Maa, Dad, you also join her, said Ananya. Mr. Rao said, this is really so amazing and fantastic Ananya. The way you have planned to thrill your mother and express your thankfulness is simply superb. Generally children of your age and more particularly children during these modern days should learn from you and get inspiration as well. Mr. Rao thus appreciates Ananya for the excellent act of gratitude, respect and love towards her mother and requests Alekhya to cut the cake. All the invitees there have joined their hands and encouraged her to cut the cake. Then Alekhya looks at the cake on which her name is written wishing her happy rebirth. She cannot see anything clearly for some time as her eyes have become seas. She cut the cake and shared the pieces with her family, Anand, Ananya, Aditya, Aravind, Advaita and all kids. She is on the ecstatic cloud feeling greatly elated and overwhelmed with joy. Then many of Ananya's colleagues come to her and appreciate her for the worthy upbringing of her children. Alekhya is surprised at a few instances they have been referring to. But it is understood that Ananya has shared those things with them. Exactly at that moment, Alekhya's husband Anand comes to her and gifts a cover. Everybody feels very anxious to know and see what is there inside. Even Alekhya is spellbound with such an unexpected act of her husband. Her children gathered around her and

hurried her to open it. To everybody's surprise, there is an application for PhD entrance examination in that cover. When Alekhya is gaping at him in surprise, Anand announces, I wish to see my wife Alekhya as a doctoral degree holder. It has been her dream for so many years. Now I even ask her a return gift, that is, her doctorate. I wish she will definitely gift me back with that. Everybody clapped and expressed their wishes to her. Then Aravind said, I really appreciate my sister Ananya for this wonderful idea and my dad's desire to see my mother's dream to be fulfilled. It's truly a fantastic experience to commemorate the celebration of my parents' efforts in shaping our lives. Generally after settling in a particular employment and getting engaged with our own lives, we forget our parents' birthdays or their unfulfilled aspirations. I could not even find time to meet my parents for three years. I regret this act of mine; as I now understand that my presence itself is a valuable gift to them. This is a very good gesture of acknowledging their effort and felicitating them my dear sister! Excellent Ananya, amazing thought and marvelous celebration! He went to his parents and hugged them once again. Their eyes are filled with overwhelming happy tears. Then Mr. Rao asked Alekhya to respond on this. She hesitated at the beginning; but finally said, Actually I have done nothing special unlike any other mother. I supported my family to the extent needed and wished for their wellbeing always. But I said one thing to my children in their childhood. However much educated you are, well settled you are, though drenched with busy schedules; you should not ignore your family. One shouldn't lead a mechanical life forgetting his own people. More importantly, one should never ignore or forget one's parents, who have given him this precious birth. It is one's family which is always the backbone of any person's wellbeing or success. Look back to your family always and find time to spend with the family; a precious gift of god. Now I observe and notice these words showing their impact on my daughter Ananya, who has made this memorable day possible in my life. God bless you my dear child! My best wishes and Good luck to all those who have made this event more memorable and beautiful by your graceful presence. Thank you very much for blessing my children and their children. God bless you all. Though she started with hesitation, she spoke wonderfully and everybody personally met her and extended their appreciation for her valuable words. She felt on the top of the world and filled with greatest excitement and joy. Her love for her children grew more and more and started playing with her grandchildren. In the inner layers of her heart, she strongly decided to complete PhD and see the joyous faces of her people.

Nobility, Thy Name Is Wife

Born and brought up somewhere
 She enters your life with aspirations bare
 Becomes part of the family without a word
 Builds and strengthens your familial world
 Willingly takes up new responsibilities
 With unbiased preferences and possibilities
 Works laboriously for inmates' benefit
 Erasing limitations and restrictions implicit
 Joyously takes up new tasks and promotions
 Effortlessly turns down her individual intentions
 Renounces her past identity with inherent ease
 And creates her new world to appease
 Concentrates on raising her loving children
 Having a noble aim and profound vision
 Embellishes the crown of family repute
 With plethora of successes to salute
 Accepts criticism with a smiling curve
 Showing ideal modesty and challenging nerve
 But, what have you given her in return?
 Never have you cared for her and gaze
 To appreciate, appraise and praise

Never have you dared for her buried grief
 To inquire and realize at least in brief
 Remained apathetic and casual in intention
 Always ignoring her loyal exertion
 Rushed to your routine pushing her off
 And her shrewd advices far off
 Habitually put her to all sorts of stress
 Leaving her thereby in loads of distress
 Haven't found time to read-through her fantasies
 In her filmy eyes that conceal brilliant galaxies
 She swallows the profound pain in vain
 Engulfs tons of turbulent torments for no gain
 Wins the whole world with an undying smile
 Readily agrees to cross another mile
 Defeats man displaying a decent indifference
 To the loss of her majestic self with least preference
 Destined to be the most divine of all the creation
 She is the noblest boon on the Earth's elevation
 She is the moon of noon
 And "The Better Half" forever.



39. Shikha Gupta

Shikha Gupta is an interior designer by profession. She stays at home by choice. Writing is her new form of happiness. It's like a meditation to her.

Stay At Home Mom

Payal packed Anshi's tiffin box, ready to take her to the bus stop. "Mumma I had to make the family tree," Anshi in class 2 said.

"Oh sweetie now you are a big girl. Should do your homework yourself," said she while pulling out her notebook.

Quickly helping her with her homework at the same time making porridge for Ritesh and mummyji.

"Mumma, what's in my tiffin today".

"Hey sweetie, its a surprise. You will love it."

Immediately feeling guilty. She had made the roll of of a last night's paratha, with fresh veggies and sauce.

Ofcourse, her trademark smily on top.

"Wow my mom is best," squealed Anshi.

Back home, Ritesh was on the table, eating porridge.

"Honey, can you make an omelette for me."

"Sure," saying she moved towards the kitchen.

"Honey i can't find my wallet." Ritesh called from the door.

She ran inside. Picked up from his cupboard, right in front of her eyes.

"Ritesh really!"

"Oh honey! Where's my red file. Its very important. I've a meeting." From the car he shouted.

Again she rushed inside.

Searched everywhere only later to find under the table, must have slipped while he was working late.

All the while, Ritesh was honking the horn.

Smilingly she handed the file. Maid was at the door. "Madam Auntie is calling you." Referring to her mother-in-law. "Yes mummyji."

"Payal please give me my tablet so that I can have breakfast." Jayanti said.

She was perfectly fine only had diabetes. She enjoyed pampering, never bothered to even take her medicine.

Payal gave her medicine and porridge.

"Payal you can make poha sometimes."

"Ok mummyji" she said.

Sitting alone on the dining table with her cup of tea. "Finally, me time." Saying to herself. Bell rang. She got up. At the door was Bahadur, small boy to take clothes for ironing.

She got the bundle. Jayanti called.

We have to go for the wedding. Which sari should i wear, you know what suits me. Where my sari are kept."

She went inside checked her cupboard and gave pink kanjivaram sari for ironing along with her yellow georgette, Ritesh's blue blazer and Anshi's red princess gown. All this planning took another 20 minutes. Gave Bahadur all the instructions and came inside. In the evening, Payal remembered. "Oh dear I forgot to ask Bahadur to bring clothes today itself. She sat down on the steps of the staircase. Her face in her hands thinking. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Ritesh, Jayanti and Anshi were astonished. Had never seen her like this before. Breaking down.

"Hey honey, here let's enjoy a cup of tea together," handing her a cup, sitting beside her.

Jayanti from the sofa called, "Payal I'll wear my blue kanjivaram. I like blue colour.

"I'm wearing my black jacket honey," added Ritesh.

"You wear your red anarkali. You look hot in that red chiffon suit." Winking added Ritesh.

Anshi watching them smiled. I will also find something in my cupboard. Everyone started laughing.

"Its ok to falter at times. Its ok not to know at times. You are not a machine.

If you forget something we are a family.

What everyone should wear that you know, but at times to tell you what you should wear, is like taking care of you."

"Like that cup of tea which you know I've, first thing after coming back from the office. But even you can just want to have your cup, without having to go in the kitchen and making it."

"At times even we can help you in making decisions, though very small, it may sound, but surely it will take a weight off your shoulder." Added Jayanti.

Payal was relieved. Smiling. Wiping her tears, she was thinking, 'I wasn't taking anyone's help, when everyone was ready to help. Life is easy when you have an understanding family. Feels good when someone tells you what to wear. Ritesh knows me and observes me. Feels good to be pampered, rather than know everything.....'she was thinking picking up her red suit.

Just because she's at home doesn't mean she's available 24/7 for everyone. At times give her a break from the daily routine. Though it may seem small for you but would take a weight off her shoulder, carrying all the load of the home. Have you thought, everyone's tension, happiness, effortlessly, without complaining, carries all. Can't the family members make her, at times, the centre of attraction; celebrating her, the homemaker. She makes the house, a home. Gives you children, offspring to carry your legacy. Her name is not there on the name plate. Children are known by fathers name. What in return can we give her? Time, respect and a little contribution in her daily household chores. She may have her mood swings. Just because she's at home doesn't mean she doesn't feel anything. Be mindful of her emotions. If you cannot deal with her at her emotional outburst, you do not deserve her at all.

Judgemental people step aside...Please

God couldn't be everywhere so HE created Mothers, mother's decision often looked down upon, by the roaming free advisers.

After all carrying for 9 months in the womb, is no joke, keeping aside her health, bearing pain similar to all the bones breaking at once.

Mother's job is a thankless and 24/7; though accompanied by hugs and feelings of heaven.

Please everyone step aside, stop judging a mom; after all child is most comfortable in mom's arms.

At times mother may be withdrawn from the child, that's ok and it's her business, none others to mind.

Child can enjoy and be playful with everyone, but when hungry or to sleep will always want mom.

She has a party and she wishes to attend it; what's the wrath who are we to judge her action, dam it!

Toys or the school, playtime, best for the child, mom knows best and let her decide.

Me time, with friends is a bliss, step aside let her be what is to stop her, why so much of hiss.

A beautiful sculptor, right from bearing to bringing life on earth, makes child her priority, nothing can shake mother's faith and her hearth.

Happiness at heart is desirable the most, that state of mind is when mommy to baby shall be the best host.

Let mother be the mother to her child, don't go on and on till she gets wild. Life will be beautiful, if surrounded by positivity, children would be grown confident with no negativity.

Yup! Read it right. Entertainment to development... Who is for her baby, except passing comments and giving judgement.

Leave child and mother in their world; they will include you when needed.

Leave it to the mother to nurture her baby; It's the best for her and her bundle of joy's safety.



40. Zareen Khan

Zareen holds a Masters in electronics engineering. She always had a deep enthusiasm towards the English language and was fascinated by the poems her mother wrote and taught when she was a kid. Taking on her, Zareen's passion has driven her to write poems about women empowerment. She is eternally grateful to her parents for good education that roots this verbiage. She is always thankful to her husband, who understands her ardour towards writing and supports it despite his hectic schedule. And finally, her little toddler, who awe inspires her with his innocence to help her create beautiful pieces.

Never Give Up

YOU are a star.. you are hope.. there's not a single role you cannot fulfill. O woman, put your mind onto it and see what you can achieve. If you ever feel down, let these words find your soul and uplift you like the light that shines upon a diamond revealing its pure and unmatched potential.

A thousand suns, a myriad stars and a million storms of rage,
 Countless galaxies, endless time space, in the flawless mind's cage
 Meaning to say, but holding on always to the mere fragments of life
 Failing and falling, crawling then walking, thus we've begun to age

Disappointments, regrets and all those unfulfilled dreams,
 Keep calling you back with the wildest screams
 Never will you find all of these in a single stare,
 But, Beneath, every simple smile is a story rare!

Don't you give up,
 Don't you give in.
 Hustle and toil to reach the voice within.
 Cause the greatest battles are alone and often fought,
 When you hold the universe in one solitary thought.

And trembling and shaking, you reach the darkest of nights,
 When fear whispers to doubt your own strength and might
 Persevere through the pain and never be afraid,
 Deep through the tunnel, there's a beaming ray of light.
 When the zenith is attained and the quest is solved,
 When you conquer yourself and are truly loved,
 When nothing deters you, out of the blue or black
 And then my friend there's no turning back.



41. Faitha Subair

Faitha Subair is working as an Assistant Professor in English, Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET), University of Calicut. She often writes short articles in magazines.

My Teacher: The Golden Rays Of Hopes Are Sown In My Life.

“A good teacher is like a candle – it consumes itself to light the way for others.”

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Great teachers are recollected not for the knowledge, they teach but for the way they inspire and boost their pupils' achievement, not just in a subject, but also in the vital talents of living a rewarding life. Teachers are the illuminations of our life. They are carving us to bring the best out of us. They are the persons whom we revere and admire most. I have had many teachers in my lifetime and each one of them has affected my attitude toward education in a unique way. I have developed a different relationship with each one of them; and of course, I reminisce about some of my teachers more than others. A teacher never knows which student he or she is going to inspire to achieve his or her goals. Sometimes, a teacher might feel that he or she has not done much for a student, but that student might feel that that teacher has highly contributed to his or her education and has unquestionably affected his or her boldness about education in a positive way.

I am blessed enough to have a lot of great teachers, but one in special, shaped the person I am today: Mrs. Mary Josephine Vinantia. She was class tutor during my bachelor's degree. She doesn't like called as a mam or madam; she likes calls 'teacher'. I feel so blessed to be her student. She used to scold us if we do something mistake, so we developed fear with reverence and love for her which is essential between student and teacher. But I always remember her in a neat cotton sari with spectacles on her nose with smiling face. Teacher and my mother were born one day apart in the same year. So, I am happy, both mothers' birthdays are on close dates. The greatest sorrow in the life of the loving Vinantia teacher is that she does not have children of her own. The teacher is a person who loves to travel, forgetting the misery of not having children is through travels. During my college days, I came to know more about her and that's when I realized she is mother to us and not a teacher. In class, we have a hearty laugh at her jokes. But she is a sincere, dedicated and a genuine teacher. No matter what I really love her! I don't know whether she likes me or not, but I will always love her and see her as my mother! Express my gratitude to you teacher for all the memories that you gave us. Even though, spending 5 years with you was a short span of time, you made it sweet and memorable!

She treated her students the way she would have wanted to be treated if she were a student; that was, with respect and dignity. She always had a smile on her face and helped poor students with an open heart. I could see teacher's passion for teaching from the very first day I met her. One of the things I have learned from teacher that has strengthened and is keeping me going in life is “Every problem has a solution. You may not find the solution today, but it is there”. She gave me very simple notes on all the subjects and helped me to achieve high marks in the degree examination, as I was very backward in my studies.

From the first day to the last, she always gave great advice on different things. She would stress the subject of following our dreams and staying focused on what is best for us. If she noticed someone was upset, she would address them and try her best to help. She desired everyone to be happy and to help each other out with tough times. Not only did she need people to be happy, but she desired them to be audacious too. The teacher presented the best memories in our life. We are familiar with the teacher's anger that faded as she finished. The teacher told us that only laughing friends can stop us when life is in every corner outside the class. My favorite teacher and one who made all the difference in both my personal life and in my career. All these things taught me how to be a happier person with myself. She helped me a lot with overcoming my shyness. Traveling has never interested me as much as it had before until I heard about all the trips she went on. She made me look at things inversely and more positive than they were before. She made me need to live my lifecycle to the fullest and to try novel things. She helps the weaker students in the class through giving extra time.

She is one of the very few teachers that I will remember in my lifetime. I am happy to say that Mrs. Vinantia is the one teacher that has inspired me the most. In addition to the subjects, she teaches good ethics to strengthen our character. We were with the for the last five years before the teacher's retirement. The teacher did not tell us big things. She said only love and happiness. We were also familiar with the teacher's anger that faded as she spoke. She likes to laugh rather than stand in awe. She sees and hear of sources of laughs and any laugh that her companions do not pay attention to. In a way, teacher is synonymous of laughter. Our teacher is a person who

gave a lot of importance to friendship. She tries for maintain contacts and keeps in touch with her friends since her schooling.

To this day, I teach with the same devotion my teacher displayed. Many of my pupils remind me of how I was when I met my favourite teacher for the first time. I try giving them what my Vinantia teacher gave me - joyfulness, trust, and life. I might be indebted her all the good things that have happened to me. She is the one responsible for who I am today. I thank the Almighty for having given me such a wonderful teacher when I most needed a miracle in my life. When I see my students, many of them remind me of how I was before I met my favourite teacher - doomed, lacking self-confidence and fearing to go to the college. I try giving them what my teacher gave me - happiness, confidence, and life. When I see my students, many of them remind me of how I was before I met my favourite teacher - unhappy, lacking confidence and dreading to go to school. I try giving them what my teacher gave me - happiness, confidence, and life.

Since February 2019, she has been travelling on a different road, an unexpected deviation, that started with abdominal pain, surgery, biopsy, RCC and chemotherapy. She is a pillar of hope and inspiration. She showed such strength, courage and grace through her illness and treatment. We are walking the journey with her with prayers and love for her every day. Through it all, your faith, being spirited and carried you to a place of comfort and renewed life. We will always be with you, teacher....



42. Subrata Bandyopadhyay (Chief Patron, Literoma)

Subrata Bandyopadhyay was born in an elite Zamindar family of Lalbagh, Murshidabad. Today, she is a resident of City of Culture, Kolkata. An alumna in M.Sc. from Visva Bharati University, she keeps keen interest in writing, mostly in Bengali. She draws inspiration from her rich childhood, surroundings, relationships and human emotions, routing them through her words. Subrata's works have been published by leading Bengali houses including Patra Bharati and Sristisukh. Her ninth book is packed under cards for October release.

Oley Chadda

Near Beniakhari in the Middle Andaman island, two young men named Ugane and Thaglus reside at a jungle hut called 'Oley Chadda'. Every morning, slightly before sunrise they go for hunting together and come back to their chadda by evening. They are like the king of their own kingdoms in the forested lap of Bay of Bengal.

By birth, Ugane and Thaglus belong to one of the most ancient tribal inhabitants of our country called – Jarawa. Standing right at the middle of twenty first century, they are yet so isolated from modern civilization. Today, the entire Jarawa community comprises of hardly four hundred inhabitants spread across the entire South and Middle Andaman coastline.

Mother Nature is their dearest friend, caring guardian and biggest enemy – playing different roles at different phases of life. For them, the external world is limited to the forests of Andaman, the blue sky, the roaring Bay of Bengal and few discrete pieces of land by the sea. They have no idea of the bigger world around, nor do they want to know. They are happy with themselves and the nature around.

They call themselves 'Ang' meaning human beings while we tag them as 'Jarawa' which means stranger in local Andamanese language. They are still nude, nomadic forest dwellers who entirely depend on hunting for food. They heavily oppose the presence of any non-Jarawa civilized inhabitants within their territory, mostly due to a perceived threat from urban development. If they happen to come across any poachers or outsiders, they launch a fierce attack unitedly and force the intruders away just like the way animals infiltrating to a tiger's den is confronted by the monster.

Jarawas mostly live in three groups or bands and every group is headed by a leader who have their own areas visibly demarcated. And they strictly do not allow other Jarawa bands to enter their territories so much so that if Jarawa troops from South Andaman try to encroach Middle Andaman, they break into a violent revolt. At times, young Jarawa men from Tirur region of South Andaman cleverly infiltrate into Middle Andaman Jarawa islands, targeting especially young ladies. They are first assaulted physically and then forced into a marital bond. Some of the convicts also cleverly flee under the nocturnal cover of the woods.

All the Middle Strait Jarawas reside in a common village called 'Oley Chadda', so are Ugane and Thaglus. They live in smaller social communities with segregated huts for men, families and unmarried women within that. Men are strictly not allowed inside the huts where unmarried or widowed women reside.

Mahesh is a civilized resident of Andaman's Rangat island – a small town with rustic touch of development. Generally, the Jarawas need not come outside the dense canopy of forests. And thus, there are apparently no fights with the civilized co-residents. It seems as if nature has divided the two extremities through the Andaman Trunk Road running along the spine of Andaman Archipelago. At times, at the dead of the night some Jarawas silently break into the gardens of locales and steal away fruits and vegetables without knowing that civilized world calls it an act of theft; they only look at it as an easier way of food collection.

Mahesh lives with his wife and baby, earning a simple livelihood through honey collection from the forest and fishing in the bay. Every day, he leaves home before the break of dawn in his small canoe with mere equipment and comes back before sunset with the day's catch.

Mahesh had gone a little far that day in search of bigger fishes. Fortunately, it stood out to be a day of his best catches. Due to the additional distance traversed, it was taking him longer for retreat than usual. Afternoon time and Mahesh had hardly reached half his way back home when the trees started swaying very unnaturally; the birds behaved extremely intolerant towards the blowing winds; the sea waves were tossing innumerable

jellyfishes and shells back on the shores – As if Mother Nature was hurling alarming signals to Mahesh of an impending danger. The clouds too were little different from other days. A sudden gust blew off the boat's sail, heavily impacting navigation. He quickly rowed towards the shore of an unknown island full of dense woods. Mahesh had passed through this island many a times before but had no reasons to take a halt ever. That was the perfect day. Looking at the accumulated monsoon clouds, he anchored his small canoe with one of the giant trees and decided to take refuge under it till the clouds get thin.

When his eyes opened, Mahesh discovered himself surrounded by a gang of black nude human beings with amateur weaponry pointed at him. He did not know how to respond. There was a whistle hung around his neck. Utterly scared, he blew it thrice in quick succession and started running madly towards his boat. The sound was very unfamiliar to the Jarawas which pushed them backfoot for a few minutes and that let Mahesh quick start the canoe. It was a tough race against powerful swimmers with a weak diesel motor. However, luck was on his side and he managed to flee.

The sun had already risen by the time Mahesh reached home. His wife was utterly tensed anticipating thousands of premonitions about him. Seeing Mahesh back in good health, she got back her breaths too. At dinner, Mahesh explained how he closely escaped death just by a whisker. After a sleepless night, the small family indulged into a snoring sleep.

It would be somewhere around midnight, when Mahesh's doze got disturbed at the husky sound of footsteps outside their mud house. His senses aroused at the flick of an intuition. His ears have heard this damping noise occasionally earlier. But for the first time, his heartbeats accelerated frantically. Did it have any correlation with his escape? Had they trailed him to his place? Goodness!

Mahesh jerked his wife silently, giving her a hint of the perilous threat outside. They only had fire, whistle and lights to fight against the carnal beasts. He made every possible attempt to save his family from the invaders, but all went in vain against their superior mob attack. Both Mahesh and his wife were shot dead with poisonous darts in the futile struggle. However, they did not harm the baby at all. While leaving, one of the female Jarawas caressed its tender fingers with motherly love and carried it along with her.

The sun was about to rise the same way again, asserting the start of another day. As it was almost dawning; the beasts vanished in the obscurity of the forest heading towards 'Oley Chadda', celebrating victory in their own ethnic way.

Ugane and Thaglus had secretly followed Mahesh along the land route during his escape in the morning and later led the entire troop at night to strike back. Regardless of touch of civilization, they proved their human instincts of revolt against humiliation and selfless motherhood. They could not accept defeat which forced them to take the revenge in an organized way. Nevertheless, however primitive they may be, an altruistic feeling of love prevented them from harming an innocent life – re-establishing the connecting link between Mother Nature and Human Nature.





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