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Home > Cities > Chennai

Taming the octopus

By Janani Sampath - CHENNAI



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Srilata K, professor of English at IIT-Madras, seems to have a karmic connect with the octopus and the sea. Her first collection of poems titled Seablue Child that was released in 2002, linked the ocean invertebrate and the water body, in a poem that she wrote about missing home.

"I wrote that during my stay in California for a month. It was about feeling homesick and how the sea connects California to home. In that I wrote about buying a blue octopus toy on the boardwalk there. I didn't think about it after that. Now, when I look back, I realise that the octopus figures there as well," she says.

But, it was last year that brought the octopus back in her realms of thoughts, during a stay in Korea where she met fellow poets. "There I met a poet who had written about eating an octopus. However, the poems I wrote during the period touched upon the whole metaphor of octopus as many-armed creature. It could be multitasking when you talk about writing and doing other things and there is the concept of octopus and ink. So, I figured Writing Octopus would be the best way to put them together," she adds.

Writing Octopus is Srilata's third collection of poems. Apart from poetry, the writer has a novel, translated works and academic books to her credit. Talking about dabbling in the different forms of writing, she says, "The writing rhythm for each of these genres is different. They may come out of the same emotional core, but the impulses for each genre are different. Pragmatically speaking, the time and head space you need are very different. I have learnt to be a better judge of when I want to write what. I go with my intuition. There is a need to write but unless I channelise the need, the poetry or fiction is going to get lost. You need to sit down with it and see where it takes you. It can be scary because you may not have anything valuable even after two to three hours," she says.

A great admirer of works by Sujata Bhatt and Vikram Seth, Srilatha says that she also gets a lot of energy from seeing prolific Indian works by young writers.

With a novel almost ready, Srilata reckons that it is heartening to see the boom in Indian writing.

"My friends from England are envious of Indian writers because here there are publishers willing to publish. On one hand it is good that it has become democratised and one can start oneself up as a writer. But what's troublesome is, as readers, we don't know what to read or what not to read. Some works may get hyped and it may not be for the right reasons," she says.

Published by Authors Press, Writing Octopus is priced at `195.