

LITERARY JOURNAL



TRUTH

CHARITY

STELLA MARIS COLLEGE
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Editorial

The English Department of Stella Maris College conducted a National Seminar on “Indian Women’s Writing in English” in November 2013. This journal both explores and expands on the theme, broadening it to women’s writing, in general. Ranging from interviews with writers to creative writing to critical essays, this collection is a melange of expressions of womankind. Honest, uninhibited, breaking stereotypes and expectations, they celebrate their freedom to write.

We have all sorts of women.

Some dress up, wear makeup. Perhaps masks.

Some have voices. They speak out. Tolerating nothing.

Some are boys. Happy to play cricket in the sun, laughing at makeup and marriage.

Some fall in love. Delve, and emerge, drenched in bitterness.

Some, love. Know nothing but love.

Some give themselves up to beauty. They celebrate life.

Some are fragile. They need care.

Some play roles. Always, roles.

The other, live. Needing everything, owning nothing.

All of these women write.

- Vidhya Sreenivasan,

II B.A. English Literature

&

- Anuja Sundar,

I M.A. English Literature

Student Editors

G. Prabha

Ishleen

Faculty Editors

A Shadow's Life

Roxanne Nunes

II B.A. English Literature

My shadow lives a perfect life,
whereas I've been stabbed repeatedly with a knife.
Never knowing what the dark looks like,
Because upon danger it leaves my sight.
Like a child looks to you for dependence,
but then grows up, and against you has resistance.
My shadow and I are the same.
Whatever happens, we're both to blame.
The only difference between us is,
I'm the one left alone in the mist.
In the sun and summer light,
my shadow is there forever in my sight.
But when the time for life arrives,
my shadow thinks it's time to dive.
Dive into that deep black hole,
never to come out until I've paid the toll.
My shadow has the perfect life.
Always there through the joys but never through the strife.

Hidden Melancholy

Sinduja R.,

II B.A. English Literature

When the rays of the sun spread wide
Over the earthly body;
When a dimness crawls evenly,
Owing to the flaw of the moon;
My eyes burn to capture
That glimpse of your face.
My heart aches at the void chamber
Which awaits your presence, to be filled.
Dawn or dusk you are there,
In everything I am.
And you know that
You always mean more to me.
How else can I tell you I miss you?

Is it for you or for me?

Namratha,

II M.A. English Literature

Does this desk have a heart?

thuk thuk thuk

It is just the sound of the wood.

It was once alive, breathing in fresh air,

Eating, drinking, co-existing with its neighbours.

Sawed and separated,

An immigrant – cut off from its roots,

Chopped,

Nailed,

Shaped,

Painted,

Transported.

Shouldn't I feel proud of transforming a single trunk

into a desk with four legs and a body and giving it a definite Purpose?

Why do I feel guilty, using it for my own benefit?

Did I kill it or did it just die for a Purpose?

Second Chance

She looks pretty, pink gown, innocent smile
It is pleasant to see her playing around him
But he is not into it, busy on the phone making money
She is moving around him trying to divert him
Her every attempt fails
Finally she grabs him, holds his fingers tight.
decides not to let him go with all her strength
He turns,
(still his focus is on the phone)
Pushes her feeble fingers away from his without any effort
The child stands staring at her father,
What did she feel?
did she feel a wringing pain in her heart or
felt a pain like a little finger jammed between the doors.
I felt it, too.
She is still staring,
She rushes towards him and clings to his leg with all her might
He notices and lifts her up; she is smiling too, with her arms around his neck
and he is still on the phone
I am glad; at least she had a second chance.

The Listener

Meryl Mammen Kurien,

I B.A. English Literature

I have no solutions
Only two ready ears and a loving heart.
I can't make illusions
About the 'perfect' life awaiting you.

I cannot spew allusions
Or quote a hundred saints.
I won't lead you to delusion
Or coat you with false paints.

Your words form a story
Weaving a web of smiles and misery
Momentarily enveloping our existence
Through the fabric of experience.

Your hands move around in the air
Conveying your innermost thoughts.
Your world is now my surrounding
And your place, mine.

I imagine wading through
Your ocean of daily life.
I place myself in your shoe
And look at the world through your eyes.

Now I know what made you
Do what you had to do.
As my mind imagines, my ears listen

To your words breathing life,
To the labyrinth that you live in.
I become one with you.

I am the Listener
I have no stories to tell.
I sit there, silently observing
Your life unfolding before my eyes.

More than Love

Amudha,

II B.A. English Literature

I told a joke.
I saw you smile.
You fell for me,
hardly took a while.
I dried your tears,
you thought me 'The One',
"My life seems empty," you said,
"I need you to make it all fun."
You shared all your problems
knowing I'd never judge.
You yelled at me when angry,
Ever wondered if I'd hold a grudge?
Completely taken for granted I was,
All desires and wishes left unasked.
Always expected by your side I was,
to be your strength, when yours didn't last.
Yet how shocked you were,
when your offer I declined!
Did you hope I'd be so naïve
Or maybe just that blind?
Oh I know you love me
and that your heart I tore.
Love is important, I agree,
but sometimes Respect just means more.

My Fisherman

*Vidhya Sreenivasan,
II B.A. English Literature*

Amongst the rocks he stands,
Looking past the stretches of endless rippled grey
At the horizon.

The sea is his.
He has rested in her, and grown up drinking
The frothy milk she leaves behind, with
Gentle lashes against the rocks
As old and dark as he.

He stands solitary, and has taken
My heart into his.
He refuses to give it back.
I shudder. And flutter.
And delve into passions that only he can understand.

He is the king of the seven seas, and
Owns the skies. They converge towards him,
A paler reflection of the waters.
The rocks, jarred and black,
Are proud of their colour. It is his.

He belongs there.
His scent wafts towards me.
It carries his mother's milk.
Fresh, knowing no decay.
Desperate, I turn back,
And look.

With eyes of longing and tears that
Blur his form,
And a heart numb with fear.

He comes.
He walks.
With a swing of his arms
And a bend at the knee
That shock my body into movement
As I rush to him,
The gentle breeze wiping away my incessant tears
As the sea rejoices.

Resonance

The music in my heart I bore, long after it was heard no more.

- Wordsworth

It has been some time
Since this pulse has beat.
It has always been the same,
Marked by the steady rhythms of those anklets
Of silver meeting silver,
Tinkle echoing tinkle.

The wind carries it to me
And my ears listen.
My soul dances,
Despite monotony thundering,
Life must go on.

Art refuses to give in.
Resonating the gentle beats, I trace ink
While my soul dances.

The certain richness of those sounds
Strikes me, as I wonder
Who the creator would be.
I imagine swirls of movement
Harmonising those sounds, driving them into equilibrium.
The grace, and the beauty. The slender fingers,
Weaving magic across the air.
The dyed feet thudding gently against wet earth.

The eyes dart about, despite themselves
And the body sways, merging into
Patterns that have been, since eternity
And will go on, to long, long ago.
Patterns that move, trace, resonate, create.
And entice. That make life go on.
That civilisation dwells upon.
That bond souls to a soul, powerful with the
Gentlest of subtleties.
It has always been the same.

Why do you deny my happiness?

K. Saraswathi,

II M.A. English Literature

I know I am born out of you,
I know you have dreams for me,
I know you work hard for me,
I know you expect a lot from me.
At the same time
Do you know I am working hard to make you happy?
Do you know I am sacrificing my happiness for you?
Do you know you can never be satisfied?
Do you know I too have feelings and emotions?
All you need to know is
I am also an individual like you,
I too have my own dreams,
I am driven mad, making you happy.

I will never force my dreams on my children.

Know also that
I know my limits; I am not a baby but an adult,
Every time I am defeating myself to make you win,
I am capable of solving problems, if given an opportunity,
I can mingle with any kind of people, if given a chance,
What you are doing is
Denying me opportunities which can never recur
Denying me cheerfulness which can never be regained
Denying me joy, which makes me cry
Ultimately
Denying me happiness, which kills all my positive energy
For your pride, why do you deny me my happiness?

Safety

Earlier I was safe inside my mother's womb, when I started to grow;
I was safe holding your hands, when I started to walk;
I was safe being held by your fingers, when I started to write;
I was safe under your eyes, when I started to run.
Nowadays I am safe, going to college and coming back home
I am safe, walking from one room to another
I am safe, sleeping, watching and eating
I am safe, studying, learning and reading.
All you want for me is just safety and not happiness.
If all these are the only tasks in my life, then
In the future too I will be safe, because
No one will be there to disturb me;
No one will ever bother to look at me;
Even you will not be allowed to see me.
There will be a lot of people to ensure my safety.
I will be safe inside the asylum
I will be safe ever after... SAFE...

I Am

*Christy Grace Baby,
II B.A. English Literature*

What is to be done to break the cloistered castle?
Armed I am, to free myself; the walls are not strong.
Stony and sapless her face is, her womb's fruit I am.
Why is it that, now, her lullabies sound absurd, pricking my ears?

She loves me not, for I've broken the bars of her cage,
To fly away to a nest, a nest where he waits.
Am I safe? Not a man, but a human I am.
Not a toy to be keyed, not a sheep to be led.

A throbbing heart, a hot forehead, anti-facebook cries,
That clamour, those prying eyes, that vibrating alarm of sms.
But, why a churchyard? Amidst the tombs, that mist, that perfect solitude.
Like a magnet was my soul inclined...to that voice, glance and words.

That sudden escape of the heart, that complete vacuuming of senses,
That ecstasy, that thunderous explosion of my former self,
That shrieking siren, "You are not my daughter anymore."
You call me lost, you call me wayward...but, this is the real "I".

siren songs

Anuja Sundar,

I M.A. English Literature

we must not hide
and listen only to the sun
and open our windows only for
calm breezes.

there are the crackling
thunder and lightning things.
and unevil unrapturous
oppressed sirens singing
only in the dead and dark
of the night.

they sing softly,
always in fear
because
warned:

They will try to silence you.

warned over and again:

They will try to silence your voices.

so we must not
hide,
feign unknowing,
lock our doors—
we must not.
come, let us
brave the storm,
bear the thunder and lightning things
through the night,
to
listen.

for only that will teach us
the translation
of daybreak's poems.
then, let us sing
the songs of the
sirens within us.
we may be warned:

They will try to silence you.

let them
try.

we cannot cower another day.
let us sing in chorus,
fearless
strong and unquieted.
Let us sing,
we shall not hide.
Let us sing,
we shall be heard.

What all am I?

*Jedidah Joshem J.,
I B.A. English Literature*

The world is a stage they said,
And we are all but mere actors in it.
But how many roles do we play,
In one, single life story of ours?
I am a daughter to my parents,
A granddaughter to my grandparents,
A niece to my uncles and aunts,
A sister to my brothers and sisters,
A cousin to my cousins,
A friend to my friends,
A classmate to my classmates,
A student to my teachers,
A neighbour to my neighbours,
A stranger to many,
And someday I will be someone's employee or employer,
And someone's colleague too,
My boyfriend's girlfriend,
My husband's wife,
A daughter-in-law to my parents-in-law,
A mother to my kids,
An aunt to my nephews and nieces,
A grandmother to my grandkids,
And probably even a great grandmother to my great grand kids.
And to some others who know me, I am a writer, a guitarist and a cricketer.
Is that all?
Or, are there any more roles that I have to play?

Later, the historians examine your remains.
Wide-eyed, they peruse the petrified bones
Of your wrist and the crown of your skull with
Quivering hands and reverent whispers.

Before, close by, a star thirsts for hydrogen, and it shivers in rage.
It is about to die. But not yet.

The saints await the end of days in a giant explosion of
Light, but no one expects the death of the sun to coincide with
The piercing exodus of your first cry. Your royal eyelids flutter open,
And your royal father settles into an empire of ash.

Your mother, shattered, is hastily reconstructed with semi-colons.
She speaks some truths. You listen.

As woman-king, she says, you will bleed to prove your worth.
The bindi on your forehead does not mark you fragile.
Your clinking glass bangles, she says, are not shackles.
And do not fool yourself- you are the disaster, not the aftermath.

Your mother says: woman, you are exquisite; know that the world hates you already.
Your mother says: when it spits curses at you, smile; and reply with war.

O King, your soldiers sing, your bloodstained lips are worthy of worship.
The curve of your spine is a primordial temple arch, frowning.
The cut of your jaw is the deadliest, most vicious of our armoury.
O King, when you finally perish in flames or flood, so shall we all.

Your mother says: woman, you are king, and you are kingdom, and you are so full of life.
Your mother says: but, woman, heed- you shall be dead before your time.

Your story makes me sad. Sometimes, the hilt of your sword gets
Stuck in my throat as I quietly think about your last words.
I may never know what they were. Maybe they were,
“I welcome you.” Maybe they were, “No. Not yet.”

My history books take care to mention only the bare bones of your empire.
Not the dark, varicose alleys- not the arthritic barricades- not the soft flush of its horizon.

Later, my friend J. tells me that woman-kings have notoriously
Short life spans: they have jewels for teeth, rich silk for skin, and
Their sternums are gold. But they consume too much of our tremendous
Universe, he tells me- and then one day, they sigh, and they implode.

Of Knights and Knaves

Dr. Vasantha K. Krishnaraj, Asst. Professor

Department of English

Once upon a time,
the men were heroes...
They slew dragons and braved dangers
to rescue damsels in distress.
But perhaps I am wrong,
perhaps it was only a myth
created by men like the Brothers Grimm
and Hans Andersen
in their pretty fairy tales
meant to distract little girls
from sharpening their nails
and practising their punches.
Today the men fight their battles
only in boardrooms and courtrooms...
there is no time for slaying a demon
when the rat race is to be won.
Today there are no knights
in shining armour...
and what is worse,
the knaves have taken over.
Chivalry is now just a word
in the dictionary.
And Courage,
The name of a cowardly cartoon dog.

Father's Equation

Sai Prasanna P.,

I M.A. English Literature

Seventeen-year-old Meera was at home studying for an exam with her friend Raj, when her father arrived. Her mother opened the door and informed him that Meera was studying and he shouldn't disturb her. He simply nodded in reply. He did not see Meera till it was time for dinner.

"Meera, dinner is ready," Meera's mother informed her.

"Coming, Mother," replied Meera as she stepped out of her room with Raj. "Hello, Father," she greeted her father.

"Meera, why don't you ask your friend if he would like to have dinner with us?"

"Thank you but I must get going. My mother's waiting for me and I told her I'd be home before it gets dark," said Raj just as he was about to leave.

"We haven't met. I'm Meera's father."

"No we haven't. I'm Raj, Meera's classmate and friend."

"I see. And what brings you to my house this late in the evening?"

"You see, Father," began Meera but was rudely interrupted by her father who said, "I'm not talking to you Meera."

"Well, the first exam is Mathematics and I'm not good at algebra. So Meera offered to help and I accepted."

"Well, we all have our own problems, don't we? Meera, come and say goodbye to your friend," instructed Meera's father.

"Yes Father. Bye Raj, I'll see you tomorrow at school."

"Yes, and once again, thank you for your help."

"I'm glad I could help," said Meera.

Raj let himself out after wishing Meera good night.

"Nice boy," said Meera's mother.

"Maybe, but I don't want him coming inside the house again."

“But why?” asked Meera’s mother.

“Why? He’s a complete stranger, that’s why,” explained Meera’s father.

“He’s Meera’s friend.”

“Meera’s still too young to understand. How do you think Chetan will react when he finds out Meera invited a boy to our house? He might not want to marry our daughter.”

“I’m sure Chetan will not reject Meera just because she has a friend who’s a boy. I’m sure he has plenty of friends who are girls his own age.”

“That does not matter because he’s a man. God forbid if something were to happen after their marriage, people will blame Meera. End of discussion,” said Meera’s father. Seeing no point in arguing further, Meera’s mother went upstairs. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Meera’s father opened it.

“What are you still doing here?” he asked Raj.

“Sorry for disturbing you, but I forgot my book.”

“Wait here. I will get it,” he said and went to Meera’s room and quickly returned with the book. “Here, take it. Now leave.”

“Sir.”

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry but I accidentally overheard the conversation earlier and I think you’re being unfair to Meera.”

“Excuse me?”

“She’s just seventeen. She still has her whole life ahead of her. Don’t you see? You’re taking away the one thing that matters the most; her *happiness*.”

“Happiness means nothing unless you have someone to share it with.”

“True. But you can’t just share it with *anyone*. Don’t you think Meera should get to choose for herself who she wants to spend the rest of her life with?”

“She’s too young to know what’s good for her!”

“Then wait till she’s *ready*.”

“It’s too late for that. The arrangements have already been made. The engagement will happen during the summer holidays and the wedding as soon as Meera turns eighteen.”

“Making the marriage legal won’t make much of a difference if Meera is forced into it.”

“She *agreed* to it.”

“*Compromised*, not agreed.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The same difference there is between wanting a pink dress over a blue dress and settling for the blue one instead.”

“Are you trying to say that Chetan is not *good enough* for Meera?”

“No sir, not at all. I’m saying that Chetan is not the *right* man for Meera. They barely know each other.”

“What’s your point?”

“You said I was a complete stranger and that I shouldn’t be allowed into your house. But that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re letting your daughter marry someone she hardly knows. You’re letting a ‘stranger’ into your daughter’s life.”

Meera’s father stood dumbfounded. He did not react at all, or rather, did not know how to. He closed the door after Raj left. When he turned back, he saw Meera standing half-hidden behind the wall, tears welling up in her eyes.

Disclaimer: This is the journal entry of a teenage girl who shall not be named and has nothing whatsoever to do with me.

X. Catherine Shilpa,

III B.A. English Literature

10 February 2013

I am not so happy about the time I went to the park to see the flag raised and saluted, on Republic day. I was sad because no one looked at me. I went with the good intention of helping out with arranging chairs and things like that, but there were enough ‘efficients’ around the place for that. I don’t know why that bald man made it sound like my being there would make all the difference. No one even cared. That man himself politely ignored me after a greeting nod. I like attention though not always. I puff up so much when a teacher tells me ‘good’ in class that I can scarcely talk coherently and have to lower my eyes lest I seem immodest. But then, you know how pretentious I am.

The same day I also saw two men arguing on their bikes in Temple Street. Such foul language! They held up the 17E bus behind them. A girl in the bus stared at me as I squeezed between bikes, and she kept staring, craning her neck all the way around. It was offensive. I wanted to tell her to turn away. I wanted to glare like I do at rude bus conductors. But it would seem like I, dressed so modern, were being disdainful against her, dressed so drab. Why do I remember that day? I only wanted to talk about the compulsion I’ve been having these days to snip my hair. There is actually nothing to it. I just snip off a little from time to time.

I am clever. I know that. I once wrote about a Nancy Drew book, “This time round, the girl detective scintillates in her attempt to defy her feline foe.” Everyone admired that review except for that toothy girl Rinku who read it from my notebook with one of her characteristic smirks that makes my blood boil, and then handed the notebook back to me with that stretchy trying-to-be nice smile that makes me want to punch faces.

Before I realised that bad things can happen to everyone, I was angry at the good-for-nothings who whistled at me on the streets. Did those losers know they were messing with someone who had read ‘David Copperfield’ and ‘Little Women’, who knew such gentlemanly men such as Mr. Darcy and Gilbert Blythe, who was probably going to be famous by the time she was twenty? Once a dirty man even touched my breasts on the bus and I wanted to lambast him till I remembered my mom telling me not to react too much as the same man could come back with a hurt ego and throw acid on my face. I imagined myself grotesque; I imagined only a nice man, who valued my good character and virtues more than my face, loving me.

Nowadays, I am not so sure about the character bit – today, I went to a priest to confess about impure thoughts, I felt other girls were virginal and I was not. The kindly priest listened and then, without warning, smartly hit my hand. I could have said ‘ouch’ but instead made a sort of undignified burping noise. Smiling, he told me to hit myself when such thoughts pervaded my

mind. I then confessed I felt ugly and ungrateful. He assured me that I was beautiful and God's child.

I want to be like one of those girls on ABC Family series, who despite rebelling by breaking curfews, getting drunk, etc. are talented and hardworking enough for their parents to one day look at their astonished faces and say, "I'm so proud of you," which ultimately shows us, the audience, that it is not so bad to have children after all. There are moments and long-term benefits. I also like the drawl and big words used by empowered girls who like art and driving long-distance. I know girls/women in Indian series are "irredeemably stereotypical and unrealistically self-effacing" (not my words. An activist who came to school spoke about 'Representation of Women in the Show Business'). I am scared of being a brave woman and being shot for it like Malala was. I am also disgusted at how terribly scared I am—a cowardly woman. I can't even eat alone in public. I feel judged and stared at.

Some things move me to tears. I love being moved to tears. Except when some people die and I'm supposed to cry and I don't, I feel bad and think there is something wrong with me. Also, how could I have been the only one who did not cry when the kid got left at the hostel in *Taare Zameen Par*? I am ashamed to say I cry mostly for myself. Also, I think I'm not very tolerant.

I am forced to mutter 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph' in my mind whenever I have to help Gopesh from next door with his Maths homework. He always breathes like he is out of breath and shakes his legs. He is at times so dumb I am sharp with him. But I manage to compose myself with thoughts such as these: One must be kind to those whose capabilities are less. Besides, one must remember that people are always capable and better than you at other things like playing cricket, being street-smart or breaking world records (which I cannot do). And finally: Pride goes before a fall. However big or small, God loves us all.

I dislike writers who seem to think the world is made up of people with artistic temperaments, an anglicised (am I using the right word?) upbringing or an appreciation of literature. From my experience the world is not overly populated with such people. You can't blame them though. 'A writer must also write only about what one knows'. But I'm scared something bad will happen if I write something epic and awesome and become famous – like my mother thinking I don't need her help anymore and me having to fend for myself. So I will put off writing till I am sure I'll no longer need my mother. Anyway I don't really think I can create anything original. Like a wise person in a sprawling postmodern play once said, "It's something you realise by the time you throw your second costume party—it's all been done before."

Reading what I've written so far, I am so annoyed that I can't go on. I am never able to write about one thing at a stretch. There is no continuity. I am all over the map. Anne Frank never wrote a single entry like that. It's probably because I rarely write in my journal. So, things sticking to the corners of my mind come out and create some kind of word vomit. Also, I can't go on because my glasses keep slipping down my nose. Terribly annoying.

Stupidity Is My Birthright

Aazhi Arasi,

II B.A. English Literature

Why on earth does everyone expect everybody to be intelligent, or at least not be stupid? Is stupidity a crime? Is it illegal? I'm sure even Ambedkar wouldn't be able to find any such statement in our Indian Constitution. Well then again I don't think our constitution would have anything against stupidity, considering it has illegalized homosexuality and all that. To be honest, the concept of intelligence exists only because there is a concept of stupidity. To be clearer, without us, the stupid, you, the clever (I'm assuming) can't exist.

Stupidity is what comes to us naturally. It is easy. It is simple. We need not try hard, undergo various processes or perform rituals in order to become stupid. But to even pretend to be intelligent, you must develop some traits, read bulky books in bed, and do stuff like "learning from experience". Even if you did do all that, there is no assurance that you'll actually become intelligent one day because the chances are slim. We acquire stupidity and we 'learn' intelligence.

Stupidity is consistent. If you are stupid one day, you are stupid for the rest of your life. Each and every day is the same for you. But pretending to be intelligent is inconsistent because one day the stupid in you is bound to burst out, thus making you lose your 'intelligent' status.

Acting intelligent is also a burden. It needs constant renewal and reassurance. It cannot get a good night's sleep as it worries about what others are doing and it tries to develop itself and grow. And when you are intelligent, every day you'll have at least three people trying to prove otherwise.

The only harm done by stupid people is that by being vocal and bringing their stupidity into the conversation, they really irritate the hell out of people. The other problem is that the financiers (parents, if you haven't guessed it already) would not be too happy about it. Anyway they will provide you with money because, well, they are 'Indian Parents' (not stereotyping, that's the way they are). If you ever feel guilty for being your parents' stupid kid, the only consolation is that their parents would also have thought the same thing about them. Think.

Intelligence is subjective. You might be called intelligent by one and not by another but when you are stupid, you are stupid to everyone; no discrimination! Maybe everyone is stupid and the only difference is the degree that makes them intelligent.

When you realize you are stupid, it means you are actually intelligent and if you think you are intelligent, it means you are really stupid. This is the universe which is filled with stupidity, stupid, stupid who know it, stupid who don't know it; and here, intelligence is just a myth!

P.S. You can accuse me of being stupid if you want because stupidity is my birthright. (Sorry, Tilak.)

Do You Have a Room of Your Own?

K. Saraswathi,

II M.A. English Literature

Suddenly at night, Virginia got up from her bed. Something was bothering her so much that prevented her from falling sleep. She sat for a while and thought about what she should do. Slowly she climbed out of her bed and left the room, avoiding the people lying down. She closed the bedroom door, blocking out the creaking sound of the fan. The living room was so calm that even the lizard's sounds frightened her. She could hear the water dripping from the kitchen tap. She walked up and down for a while in the portico, thinking about her sleepless nights. The reason was nothing but the urge to write a novel, and this realization carried her back to her past.

She had never been alone at home since her childhood. Her father was always careful not to let her be on her own. He didn't want his daughter to fall into the trap laid by young men. He always wanted her to sit with her books so that she could get good marks in the exams. While her father had all this in mind, Virginia had something else on her mind.

One day, she approached her father and said, "Dad, I'm in need of a room of my own." This didn't make any sense to her father, who said, "There are so many rooms in the house; is it not enough for you?" She hadn't known how to explain her mind to her father. She said, "Yes, there are many rooms, but I need a room where I can get some privacy, where I can be at peace, where no one would disturb me, where I can think." This annoyed her father so much because, for him, if a teenager needed private space, then there was something on their mind, which would ultimately ruin the honour of the family. He abruptly said, "There are rooms which you can use, but there is no such room which can be used only by you. Moreover, it is not necessary for a teenage girl to be alone with her thoughts, which would make her vulnerable to useless thoughts."

Virginia could not understand what he said, but she could understand clearly that it was not possible to get some private space in the house, where she was expected to sleep in the middle of the room, surrounded by her family. She got angry whenever she thought of her father's response. She was also angry with herself for not being able to do anything about it. She could not tolerate her thoughts being disturbed all the time by someone or the other. She was frustrated as she could not transfer her thoughts to paper.

Unexpectedly her mother opened the door and came out from the bedroom, which made Virginia snap out of her reminiscence. She murmured to herself that even at this time at night she could not think peacefully. But surprisingly her mother understood and let her be alone. Virginia was pleased with her mom's reaction. She scolded herself for being so judgmental and ran to take a notebook and pen. She took this as the right time to gather her thoughts and started to write, "Do you have 'A Room of Your Own'?"

The problem with literary barriers

Ananya Subramani,

I B.A. English Literature

Being from the English department, I had the pleasure of attending the National Seminar on Indian Women's Writing in English last year. As a budding writer, it goes without saying that I was inspired by all the talented women I saw and immediately decided to read a couple of their works. The first book I picked up was *'The Pleasure Seekers'* by Tishani Doshi. I think it was the full-on *Madrasi* aspect that drew me in, as it's pretty rare to find an English book set in my hometown.

I think it's safe to say I liked the book. It was, at its core, the love story between Babo, a Jain boy, and Sian, a Welsh girl. It not only told an endearing love story, but also dealt with aspects of family and death in a very sensitive way. However, the book surprised me. The reason I was surprised was, I'd fully expected the writing of an Indian woman to be about the oppression Indian women go through. After all, those are the books that make it to all the Top 10 lists and those are the books that get widespread press coverage. Yet, here I was, reading a book by an Indian woman that deals with the merging of two completely different cultures, rather than any kind of injustice towards women in our country.

I thought about it for a few days and I realized that Indian women's writing has unfortunately been categorized as writing against patriarchy. While it is, no doubt, important for stories like that to be told, I believe Indian women should be given the liberty to write anything they want without having to conform to the narrow paradigms of what Indians want women to write. Sure, women often write about their experiences as an outlet, but I don't think a woman who writes fantasy in our country should be thought of as a 'lesser' writer because she doesn't talk about the struggles her gender faces. In the same way, a woman who chooses to write for children shouldn't be considered a waste of literary space or a traitor to her sex because she isn't using her pen as a voice for women in the country. Women should be given the space to be creative in any genre they choose.

We take pride in having a growing number of women authors in the country, but, the truth is, there still isn't literary equality amongst the sexes. Books by women are widely read only if they deal with the above mentioned topics. A woman who writes about anything else is still considered lesser than a male author. In my opinion, Indian women's writing in India will only flourish when we drop the 'woman' in the title and call it 'Indian writing in English' without any rules to restrict our women from writing what they want.

A Sweet Venture

Chaithanya V.,

II B.A. English Literature

The best way to make a naughty child drink milk is by telling it not to drink milk. My wise parents did that to me too. I was informed of the risks of staying in a hostel, as well as the responsibilities. However, I decided to take that risk. My decision to take up higher education in Stella Maris College was accepted with pleasure. Was it for the satisfaction of self-reliance or independence from ‘recorded’ advice? Either way, a new life smiled at me. Very soon I started missing home-made delicacies. The daily sight of idly soaked in sambar and pongal showered with chutney at the hostel made me regret my adventurous decision. But the next step was still more adventurous.

Thankfully my roommate is a Keralite as I am. Bananas are all-time favourites for Keralites. The sight of this fruit, with its bright yellow skin and black dots makes my eyes twinkle. It was gifted to my roommate by her relatives. The thought of making Banana halwa struck me out of the blue. It was a usual evening snack that my grandmother made for me during my school days. Ghee, sugar, bananas - the ingredients were set. The grocery shop two yards away was the source of ghee and sugar. Our quirky excuses made our warden open the hostel kitchen for us.

The bananas were smashed and kept ready. The big challenge came when my friends mistook me for a good chef. I was asked to lead the venture. My face lit up with confidence, though I was very nervous. (I never believed that the face reflects emotions.)

Ghee was poured in the pan followed by sugar. An aroma filled the room and everyone around appreciated me. I triumphantly emptied the bowl of smashed bananas into the pan. By continuously stirring it (until my elbows started aching), I made it a pulp. I saw faces with mixed expressions around me. But I proceeded as if that was the right way of making halwa. The ghee on top of the smooth halwa was shining, as were the faces of my friends. But after a bite of it, the brightness vanished from their smiles. They exchanged strange looks and ‘appreciated’ the chef in me. But I secretly congratulated myself, and felt relieved that my grandmother was miles and miles away.

Down a very Indian Rabbit Hole

Based on an interview with Anushka Ravishankar

Amudha M. V. and Riya James,

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When we were children, we didn't really have good Indian books to grow up with. As much fun as it was reading Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl, the society we read about and the one we grew up in, were very different. Thankfully, now the times are changing and we have emerging Indian writers in children's fiction like Anushka Ravishankar, who has written more than 25 books including *Moin and the Monster*, *Moin and the Monster Songster*, *Catch that Crocodile*, *Tiger on a Tree*, *At Least a Fish*, etc. She has won many International awards and is particularly famous for her usage of nonsense verse and the "unpreachy" attitude in her books.

To say that it was "the mother in her" that made her a writer, just so her daughter could have fun Indian books to read, would be an oversimplification. In fact, Anushka Ravishankar says, "though I did get my impulse from here, I didn't go, *oh there are no books for my daughter, let me sit and write some*. I just thought that maybe I should write for kids, though I didn't immediately start writing. Actually it took me several years and by that time, she had grown up and was reading books her age."

What's so great about her, you ask? Well, unlike most other children's writers, she does not try to deliver "morals" in her stories. She says that kindness, honesty, etc are things that writers must put in their stories without shoving it down the children's throats. She says, "Children learn more from what's between the lines than what's told at the end of the stories as 'morals'. Morals are easy to forget and easier to ignore, while the other things in the story stick." Without even trying to be preachy, Anushka Ravishankar manages to question gender roles in her writings. By introducing characters like tigers that are afraid of deer (*Tiger on the Tree*), dogs that behave like fish (*At Least a Fish*), monsters that are funny (*Moin and the Monster*), and fathers who cook (*Moin and the Monster*), she breaks stereotypes and widens the horizons of young readers' minds. Her brilliant use of nonsense verse delights not only children, but also adults.

Aside from all the fun of being a children's writer, she also points out the responsibilities involved in writing for kids. Quoting Anushka Ravishankar, "when we write, we write from our own worldview. Even if that worldview is not right in terms of gender, class or even environment,

that is exactly what's going to end up in the book. So I think everybody involved in children's literature, whether they are writers, editors, or publishers, must be very conscious about this."

When asked about her inspirations, she explains that anything in life could act as a trigger. *At Least a Fish* is about a girl who longs for a dog, but her parents buy her some fish instead. This had actually happened to Anushka Ravishankar's daughter, when she asked for a dog. And the story for *Catch that Crocodile* was inspired by a newspaper article.

Anushka Ravishankar says that most of the time stories can be found anywhere and it's up to the writer to pick them and create characters and situations around them. But sometimes it's hard to actually trace out the source of inspiration. "The pink funny monster for example, I have no idea where that came from," she says.

According to Anushka Ravishankar, only those who remember what it was like to be a child, can write children's books. She says that is *the* most important thing when it comes to writing for children – to never forget. Books must also contain an awareness about what's happening around the world, whether they are books written for adults or for children. Lastly she says that while writing for kids, one must not try to be overly simplistic in order to make their books understandable. "Children are smart," says Anushka Ravishankar, "don't try to dumb things down for them."

Anushka Ravishankar believes that as exciting as it is to write for children, it can get equally hard when it comes to marketing. This is painfully true when it comes to our country because of the assumption that Indian books are "boring, dull and creepy". The other reason could be that Indian parents only buy books they grew up reading, and are hesitant to experiment with new arrivals.

Let's hope what Anushka Ravishankar has started here grows into a revolution in Indian children's fiction, and that the next generation would grow up reading stories that include *panjumittais* and *upperis* instead of just hot dogs and ginger pops!

Interview with Tishani Doshi

*Vidhya Sreenivasan,
II B.A. English Literature*

Speaking to Tishani Doshi was heart-warming, to give a one-word description of the experience. An excellent writer with a Master's degree in Creative Writing from John Hopkins University, Tishani has received critical acclaim and several awards for her works, starting with her debut collection of poetry, *Everything Begins Elsewhere*. What struck me was that Tishani was a dancer and journalist, apart from being a poet and novelist.

As I was preparing for the interview with my friend Sadhashi, I was reading Tishani's poetry and checking out her pictures in Google Images, so that going up to her and asking to interview her before the event would be convenient. I got the impression of a smart, confident young woman, who would make crisp and bold statements. However, when we actually met her, I was struck by her humility and soft-spokenness. I actually felt we were in the presence of a true artist, who valued, respected and lived her art.

Born to a Gujarati father and Welsh mother, Tishani feels free to choose her subjects from anywhere. For instance, one finds quotes of Nammazhvar and Jayadeva in her book of poetry *Everything Begins Elsewhere*. She has been influenced by Indian culture, and its idea of aesthetics and beauty, and has imbibed a lot of it in her works. The challenge now, as she says, is "how to take from tradition without imitating it and contribute to a modern India without imitating the West."

Here is an excerpt from the interview that enthralled me.

While we were getting to know more about you, we chanced to see an excerpt of your dance 'Sharira' on Youtube. As a person, how do you connect between literature and dance- how do they go together? And how much has Chandralekha influenced you as a person?

Well, I did a little bit of dance as a child, but nothing formal. Chandra was just a huge influence, whether for art or life, but I think what's interesting about literature and dance is that they speak to each other. Genres don't exist in isolation. You can be a painter, but music and dance will still affect you. Art is such a powerful thing - it makes you think about things and feel them. And, to have the opportunity to go quite deeply into writing and dance was so important because I understood that this was like having a conversation with the same thing but in different

ways. If you're only in one world, you stop seeing other things, and you're limited by that world. In the beginning, I felt writing and dance were two separate things, but slowly it became one thing. That's how I like to think of it. Both of these are forms of expression, and they're both different languages.

What are your views on feminism? And how do you think literature can bring about change?

The idea of freedom is very important. As a woman, I've wanted to assert my freedom, but without compromising my femininity. The feminine principle is very strong, and what happens sometimes in all this fight for equality is that the feminine is often removed, and that can be ugly. I think men should also learn to imbibe the deep and abstract idea that femininity is.

I don't think of myself as an activist in any way. My role is not to bring about change. To address certain issues, I write separately as a journalist. Art is more subdued and nuanced, and people get deeply moved by art. That is what you strive to do as an artist - create something that will speak to a person individually. If change happens on any level, it's very individual. I can't think of changing the world- it's far too ambitious. But if I can show a small way through my writing, it's everything for me. It's why I'm doing what I'm doing. Otherwise I could just write and keep it in my drawer, but I try to find an audience precisely for that, because we are trying to have a dialogue. It's such a powerful idea in today's world where everything is instant and virtual. The book to me is so pure and beautiful because it's private, and you're still conversing with someone.

What do you think is the hardest thing about writing?

Uncertainty. On every level, financial and emotional. You never think you're good enough, or that you will survive or come up with new ideas. But we still continue to do it, because on some level, there must be another certainty which is stronger, telling you, you must do this, find a way. I'm always amazed by this, because I could have chosen to do anything. I'd studied business administration and accounting. I could have been anything - I had the skill to do it. But the passion was for this. And I'm a very pragmatic person. People usually think poets are flighty and walk under clouds, but I'm very practical as a person. I thought, ok, I love this, but how do I live? How do I become a poet, a writer? That uncertainty is always there. Even if you publish 5-10 books,

you always think it's not a certain job. It doesn't come with any kind of guarantee. But then, you also have the freedom which is very important. You are answerable only to yourself, and you create your own life, so for me that's huge, even if it means constantly being uncertain. I will take that any day.

Tishani is working on a new novel now, as well as poetry, and has recently published a novella, 'Fountainville'. She has also written the introductory essay to a photography book titled 'Madras then Chennai now', an experience she enjoyed a great deal. As for what Tishani's advice to budding writers, she says:

Read a lot. A lot of people want to write without reading, which I find strange. Now, I think there's a notion that writing is somehow glamorous, and it's not. I mean, it's hard work and uncertainty, but you're also doing something that's really beautiful. If you really think that, my advice to you young writers is to read – widely and deeply.

This just made my day.

Rewriting history: Going back in time

Roxanne Nunes,

II B.A. English Literature

“Re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 1). It is this act of “Re-visioning” that Mahasweta Devi does to the Mahabharatam in her acclaimed collection of short stories, *After Kurukshetra*. In this text, Devi gives us an account of the lives of those people who were hurt for the sake of the well-known heroes, the Pandavas. *After Kurukshetra* consists of three short stories with the battle of Kurukshetra as its background. The theme consistent in this collection of stories is that of the juxtapositioning of the Rajavritta from the Lokavritta. The first story, which this essay attempts to analyse, is that of five women who have lost their husbands in the ‘dharmayuddh’. Here Devi cleverly uses the title *The Five Women* along with its protagonists as a symbol of the Lokavritta to oppose the Rajavritta where the five Pandava brother acts as a symbol. Here the five women are asked to remain as Uttra’s companions until she is both physically and mentally stable. It is the lives of these five women that are being analyzed from the subaltern perspective.

Devi tells the story of Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta and Vipasha, who are taken into the Rajavritta to be companions to Uttra, wife of the late Abimanyu. Here, Devi provides a voice to all those who lost their lives fighting in a so called ‘war of justice’ but she mainly brings out the stark differences in the ways of the Rajavritta and Lokavritta. It is seen that the function of the foot soldiers, who were farmers and husbands to these women, was not to fight the war but to protect the ‘chariot-mounted heroes’. Devi paints a pitiable picture of these common men who did not have the voice or the agency to go against these so called ‘heroes’. They gave up their lives for the sake of a family feud that was neither their doing nor their concern. Mahasweta Devi goes on to give us glimpse of the ways of the Lokavritta and the Rajavritta. Uttra is stunned to find out that the women of the Kurujangal region do the same jobs as the men. This shows the vast gaps in the two lives they lead. The ideas of the Rajavritta and the Lokavritta are so different that the thought of women protecting their homes when their husbands are off to war and the thought of women using a ‘man’s weapon’ is an alien thought and is looked down upon by the Rajavritta.

There are many instances where Devi tries to portray the stereotyped thinking of the Rajavritta. “The earth can bear anything, they say – but that’s a lie”. This line suggests to us the

similar lies that the Rajavritta tell, both consciously and unconsciously, for their personal agendas. The Dharmayuddh in itself was a war that was said to be fought for justice but was actually fought among kinfolk for the sake of a throne. Devi terms it “a war for just a throne ... Just call it a war of greed!” Accordingly Devi goes on to point out the flaws of those held in high regard, of those royals who have no concern for the “common humanity”.

We can also view Ultra as a subaltern. She is the wife of prince Abhimanyu and is expected to do what her Mothers-in-law say. She does not have the voice to speak out and as a royal she doesn't have the opportunity of raising her own child. She is also burdened with the thought of bearing a son, not a daughter, who has to be healthy and who must go on to be the future king. The loss of her husband and the thought that she has to live as a Rajavritta widow also throws light on her circumscribed existence.

Here Mahasweta Devi also reveals to us the difference in the life of a widow in the Rajavritta and the Lokavritta. The widows in the Rajavritta are considered demeaned and do not have the right to happiness whereas the common women do not follow these customs. They do not have the luxury of falling into the role of a widow, since it is their duty to take care of the lands after their husband's deaths. I quote Devi “After a calamity, the sun always rises. Even after this dreadful war, nature has not stood still.” The common women also marry again. Devi also uses Madraja as an example for how one can be influenced by power. Madraja is also a woman from the Kurujangal region but shows no compassion to the five women. “Traditional history is fraught with gaps and absences. Devi makes an attempt at rewriting the historical given by depicting in her writing the struggle of the marginalized against the oppression and discrimination by the mainstream elite.”(page 69,*Writing the subaltern into being*) In *After Kurukshetra*, Mahasweta Devi tells us the stories that are not told and in doing so holds up a mirror to the Mahabharata. Its principal themes are retold from a subaltern perspective, with those unrecognized voices screaming in our ears.

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Jhumpa Lahiri and the Immigrant Experience

Hafsa Fathima,

III B.A. English Literature

The cities of Brampton, Markham, Detroit and Chicago are miles away from each other. Like dozens of other cities scattered across North America, they hold one important thing in common – their growing Indian immigrant communities.

For a community that finds itself American by birth and Indian by origin, discovering an identity and fitting in with two worlds doesn't come easily. These are themes that have resonated in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Born in London to Bangladeshi parents, she was raised in Rhode Island and spent her summers visiting her family in India.

Lahiri's debut, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was released in 2000, followed by *The Namesake*, her first novel, and then *Unaccustomed Earth*. Her works focus on the lives of several immigrant Bengali characters as they struggle with being different in America. Each story is unique, a few taking place in Calcutta, a few in the United States, and all letting the reader into a genuine look at what it means to be an immigrant in the 21st century.

Her characters are diverse in their range and experience. There are the characters of Sanjeev and Twinkle in *This Blessed House* and Mr. and Mrs. Das in *Interpreter of Maladies*, who represent first generation Indian Americans, born and raised in the States, more American than Indian in their outlook. Some try and stay true to their roots in absurd ways, and others half-heartedly try and establish a connection with their homeland by returning to it. Sanjeev is perturbed by the presence of the Christian images left by the previous owners of the house and believes that because they are Indian and Hindu, the images should be got rid of, an argument laughed off by his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Das are a couple who visit India with their children and are really only Indian by name; they remain aloof and indifferent from the land and the culture, leading their tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, to compare them to the only Americans he knows, the white characters from the TV show, *Dallas*.

Most of the immigrant generation in Lahiri's works, right from *The Namesake*, to *Unaccustomed Earth*, fall into the same category: middle class, settled in a suburb in New York or Massachusetts, with the fathers professors and the mothers housewives. Most start off in small cramped apartments, as brought out in the stories, *Mrs. Sen's*, *The Third and Final Continent*, and *the Namesake*, and slowly work their way into the American Dream, a house in the suburbs with a lawn, white picket fence, two cars, and American neighbours whom they eye with continuous

suspicion. The cultural and economic hardships are many, as immigrant parents rely on their children to translate English for them, deal with sending them to American schools and having American friends while also trying to impart a strong Bengali identity to them.

Lahiri focuses on the loneliness her female characters face, with Ashima from *The Namesake* mourning the fact that she had to give birth to her first born son alone in a foreign land, knowing that if she had stayed in Calcutta, her family would have made the process much easier. One of the poignant moments in all her writing comes through in *Mrs. Sen's*, when Mrs. Sen, a lonely housewife who looks after an American boy named Eliot, breaks down after her grandfather passes away in India. It is through her character that Lahiri brings out the fiction that Indians back home have created about life in America, with Ms. Sen declaring that her family thinks she lives like a queen, that she only has to push buttons to make things appear, when in reality, she and her husband can barely afford their car and apartment.

It is in the stories about the next generation, the children who are born and raised in America, that Lahiri's voice seems to speak the truest. Drawing on her own experiences as the child of immigrants, she shows that the first generation of Indian Americans face similar hardships, balancing two very different worlds and cultures. Both protagonists in the stories *Hell-Heaven* and *Hema and Kaushik*, and Nikhil Gogol in *The Namesake*, are often at odds with their extremely traditional, strict parents, who assert that they are Bengali first, American second. Nikhil would rather be known as Nick than any of his two actual names, making it easier to fit in at work and with his white girlfriend. In *Hell-Heaven* and *Hema and Kaushik*, Usha and Hema, the female narrators, identify more with their American counterparts than they do with their domineering Indian mothers. They employ a more quiet form of rebellion, sneaking away to parties, speaking English rather than Bengali, and cutting their hair short.

Intermarriage among the Indian and white communities is another issue Lahiri looks into, being a part of an interracial marriage herself. Nearly all her characters are married to either a white partner or a non-Indian, a fact that the elders of the community must grudgingly come to terms with. Lahiri captures the growth of a hybrid Indian community that is quickly on the rise, the children of mixed marriages that are "dark haired and pale skinned," who will be faced with an even bigger question of identity than their parents.

Jhumpa Lahiri has painted one of the most honest pictures of a diasporic community in recent times, and through her work, has brought to life what it means to be an immigrant in America.

Feminism in Kamala Das's Poetry

Meritta Joy,

III B.A. English Literature

Kamala Das (1934-2009), is one of the greatest feminist writers in contemporary Indian Literature in English. The themes of her poems focus on issues which are directly related to women. In the 1960s, women were not allowed to think about their own requirements, be they monetary, social or physical. Any woman who challenged the social codes was looked down upon. It was in this period that Kamala Das used poetry as an instrument to speak against the hegemony which always undervalued women and suppressed their identity.

Kamala Das uses neither the biting irony of Ezekiel nor the larger philosophical theme of Aurobindo. She is a confessional poet writing in the tradition of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov. Das found poetry a mode of release from her emotions. For Das, a "poet's own personality is the raw material for his poetry" (Kohli 20). Hence, Kamala Das's poetry is autobiographical in nature, as it exposes her sufferings and psyche, tortured by patriarchal society. Her poetry is the result of her childhood experiences when she considered herself miserable and a "misfit everywhere" (Das 109). Some of her poems, such as 'Tribute to Papa', 'The Old Playhouse' and 'Introduction', not only mirror her hurt self but also her frustration and struggle to achieve identity and individualism.

In 'Tribute to Papa', Das fights against patriarchy and the taboos of middle-class families with their "clean thoughts and clean words." (King 155)

"You suspect I am having a love-affair these days,
But you're too shy to have it confirmed.
What if my tummy starts showing gradually
And I refuse to have it curretted?" (Das 23)

Kamala Das hates traditional gender roles assigned to women by patriarchy. In the poem 'Introduction', she questions society for confining women to the traditional outfit, the saree. Das writes:

". . . Then I wore a shirt
and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of
this womanliness."(Das 12-13)

In the words of K. Satchidanandan, “The woman cannot change her body; so the poet changes her dress and tries to imitate men.” (Satchidanandan 13)

In another poem, ‘The Old Playhouse’, Das exposes a love that seeks fruition through the fulfilment of “the skin’s lazy hunger” (28): “You were pleased with my body’s response,/ its weather, its usual shallow convulsions.” (Das 8)

Das’s poetry depicts an expression of feminine sensibility with frankness. She articulates her longings, frustration and disillusionments. Influenced by Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, Das portrayed the identity of women in the post-independence period. The women in her poems play various roles – the unfulfilled wife, mistress to lusty men, silent long-sufferers, etc. In her poem ‘My Grandmother’s House’, Das speaks about the world of womenfolk as it appears to a feminist woman who has known what it is to accept humiliation.

“...I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?” (Das 29)

It depicts the love she had in her grandmother’s house in contrast to her present insecurity. In another poem ‘Freaks’, Das depicts the disappointment of a woman who longs for true love which is denied by her husband.

“...Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hunger?”(Das 28)

In ‘An Apology to Gouthama’, Das asserts that it is her husband who must comfort her from her rejection from a young man. She thus manifests women’s needs for love and comfort other than “tired lust”: “Love-words flung from doorways and of course/ Your tired lust...” (Das 53)

To understand her writings one needs to get accustomed oneself to the practices followed by the Nairs, a community from Kerala to which she belonged. In *Marriage & Family in India*, K.M. Kapadia explains that the Nairs practised polyandry till the eighteenth century: “the practice of the Nairs where a girl before attaining puberty and fit for consummating is ceremoniously married to a person who has preferential claim over her and thereafter allowed to live a free life in regard to

sex,” (Kapadia 82) is thus hinted in the poem ‘Conflagration’:

“...you let me toss my youth like coins
Into various hands
...let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others’ arms.” (Das 263)

Das’s honest verses extend to her exploration of womanhood. According to her, womanhood involved certain collective experiences. Das says, “I am every woman who seeks love” (De Souza 10). Amar Dwivedi criticized Das for her “self-imposed and not natural universality” (Dwivedi 303). In ‘The Maggots’, Das illustrates the sufferings of woman by framing the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths.

On their last night together, Krishna asks Radha if she is disturbed by his kisses:

“Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said
No, not at all, but thought,
What is it to the corpse if the maggots nip?” (Das 30)

Radha’s pain is intense, and her silence is given voice by Das. By portraying a goddess as prey to such thoughts, Das suggests that common women may also have similar emotions.

In ‘Stone Age’, Das portrays a woman who finds neither love nor happiness in her relationship with her partner. Like her other works, this poem also deals with the theme of the failure of conjugal relationships. It also shows how the wife develops an illicit relationship, with the hope of finding true love, but ultimately ends up in a barren, loveless land.

“Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilder.
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone,
A granite dove...” (Das 47)

Kamala Das shows how it is difficult for a woman to preserve her sanity, let alone her identity. She writes in her poem ‘Suicide’:

“I must pose,
I must pretend,
I must act the role

Of happy woman
Happy wife” (Das 54)

The eroticism in Das’s poetry is very much verbalized in ‘The Looking Glass’. Das demands women to give their men “what makes you women” (De Souza 15). Das feels that the things which society suggests are dirty or taboo such as ‘sweat between the breasts and the menstrual blood’ are the very things women are supposed to give. “...All the fond details that make/ Him male and your only man, Gift him all.” (Das 23) In Das’s eyes, love should be defined by this type of unconditional honesty.

Kamala Das postulates that marriage without the basic sex-function is hollow and ostentatious. The wife has to seek pleasure from others to satisfy her urge like Connie in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. In ‘Substitute’, Das reveals her intense passion for her first and great love and expresses the true feelings she has for him.

“We kissed and we loved, all in a fury.
For another short hour or two
We went all warm and wild and lovely.” (Das 32)

According to the Vedic Hindu concept, man and woman are bound together by marriage as the source of dharma (duty), artha (material gain, polity), kama (desire) and even moksha (salvation). Kamala Das approves of the Vedic Hindu sensibility but objects to the concept of the pativrata preached by Dharmashastra where restraints are forced on women, and men are set free from any such restraints. She justifies her stand in an interview: “I always wanted love, and if you don’t get it within your home, you stray a little.” (Warrier Web)

It is quite evident that Das was totally against the Hindu Mythological concept, in which Brahma divided his body into two; one half became male and the other female. So separated, man and woman are only unified in wedlock. The important marital rites including the seven steps taken together are symbolic expressions of their union. Das believes that male dominated society has, over the years, interpolated these sacred values by not putting them into practice, and the woman has ever since been devalued. Through marriage the identity of the woman is lost. She has explicitly quoted it in her poem ‘Convicts’,

“...When he
And I were one, we were neither
Male nor female.” (Das 56)

Kamala Das's writing is born out of struggle. Her poetry oscillates from the modern to the traditional when she links the woman's extramarital affairs to the myth of Krishna and his Gopi in 'Vrindavan':

"Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind,
And the flute, luring her
From home and her husband." (Das 57)

Kamala Das questions that if a divine person like Krishna can enjoy polygamy, why can't an ordinary human like her go to the extent of polyandry. Kamala Das hints at the hidden desire of woman suppressed by societal norms that need to be broken. In an interview given to *The Times of India* (April 24, 1993), she comments, "Traditions, ideology, customs and beliefs that have gone beyond expiry dates should be discarded" (Warrier Web). Das always wanted modern legal structures to replace Manu's code, but she finds that the fundamental orthodox sentiments existing in today's society lead to continued sexual colonisation of women.

In a nutshell, Das in her poems vehemently attacks 'self-proclaimed men' who use women and discard them. What makes Kamala Das different from other feminists is that, she does not accept feminism as an extreme challenge against patriarchy, but rather speaks about the reconciliation between men and women. It is as the well-known saying goes, 'There is a woman behind every successful man'. It is time that the world found a supportive man for every single woman. Therefore, feminism cannot be a partial struggle but a joint struggle wherein men and women contribute mutually.

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Women of the Arthurian Legends as Depicted in *The Mists of Avalon*

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The Mists of Avalon is a novel that depicts Arthurian legends from the point of view of the prominent women who feature in it. Avalon was a place magically separated from the rest of the world, which was the centre of worship for those who followed the Goddess. The ruler of Avalon was the Lady of the Lake. The book is focused mainly on the diminishment of the Matriarchal Pagan worship of the Mother Goddess in favour of Patriarchal Christianity.

There was a lot of conflict between those who worshipped the Goddess and those who worshipped Christ. The religions differed in many ways, especially in the way women were regarded. Those who worshipped the Goddess revered women as sacred, as the bearers of life and the faith itself; whereas, in Christianity, women were told that the only truly virtuous woman who existed was the Virgin Mary. Among Christians, chastity was considered sacred, whereas among those who worshipped the Goddess, women could have several lovers if they wished.

The plot of the novel is centred on the lives of the women who played a key role in the traditional legends of King Arthur and Camelot. The lives and personalities of these women are strongly shaped by the faiths they follow and lives they live. This novel also serves to subvert the common misconceptions of these women and portrays them in a realistic way.

The story begins from the point of view of Igraine, mother of the future King Arthur. She is sister to the Lady of the Lake and was reared in Avalon till she was married at fifteen to Gorlois who was a Christian and an old man. She bore him a daughter, Morgaine. Gorlois treated Igraine with respect, but he wished that she confine herself to only womanly matters and not take any interest in matters of the state, and it was expected of her to follow her husband's faith. Despite her reluctance to marry him, she recognised that he had treated her well, and she wished to repay him by giving him a son. However, she was told by her sister that she would instead bear a son to Uther Pendragon, and he would be King of Britain. When she and Gorlois travelled to Uther's crowning, she found herself falling in love with Uther, but refused to betray Gorlois as a matter of honour. However, Gorlois, seeing Igraine speaking with Uther, immediately accused her of adultery and struck her. He refused to believe her innocence, even when Uther vouched for her, stating "But, you are woman and you put some enchantment on him, I suppose," implying that a woman was an inexplicable, mysterious creature who could put a man under a spell with the power of her sexuality. Gorlois kept Igraine imprisoned in their home while he waged war on

Uther. Igraine realised that all her life she has depended on others for guidance and decided to look to her own self. She, using what little magic she knew from Avalon, shifted her spirit outside her body towards where Gorlois was with his men and where he was planning on attacking Uther. She decided to use the same power to warn Uther and save his life. Later on, Uther came in disguise to see her, but she knew it was him. That night they conceived Arthur. In the morning they found out that Gorlois had died in the night. This differs from the popular legend where Igraine lies with Uther, thinking that he is her husband, and then passively marries him after she learns her husband is dead.

Igraine, in the end, takes control of her life, in variance to the traditional role she plays of passivity and virtue, where she is merely a pawn in the greater plans of others. However, she embraces Christianity out of guilt after Gorlois' death, and to have peace in her home.

Viviane is Lady of the Lake. She is a moving force behind the events taking place in the kingdom. As she dwells in Avalon, she exists outside the patriarchal structure of society, and is bound to no man. Though she has borne many children, she raised none of them, due to the responsibilities of her office, and sent all her sons to fosterage. However, she is like a mother to Igraine, Morgaine and Morgause, and guided them on their paths. Her purpose is to do the work of the Goddess and to keep the worship of the Goddess alive in Britain. She has no scruples in meddling with other people's lives, even those she loved, for the good of Avalon. She is the one who set Arthur on his throne. As a strong, powerful woman, she is often called a witch or a harlot by men who fear her.

Gwenhwyfar is Arthur's queen and a very pious Christian, raised in a convent. She falls in love with Lancelot, but is married to Arthur by her father's will. She has been taught that women should obey their father's will as if it were the will of God, and that women had to be careful to do the will of God, as it was considered that it was through women that mankind had fallen into Original Sin. No woman could be good except for Mary; all other women were evil. At the same time, she is angry that she is married to Arthur for her dowry, and feels like a broodmare, that she has no value in herself. She is torn with guilt over her love for Lancelot, and for not being able to bear Arthur a child. On one Beltane, Arthur, out of desperation to have a child, requests Gwenhwyfar and Lancelot to lie in bed with him, so a child might be conceived by either one of them and no one would know by whom. This subverts the common depiction of Gwenhwyfar as an adulteress who cares nothing for her husband, as it was he who pushed them together in the first place, and it is later shown that the kingdom did not fall due to the love between her and Lancelot. Later, Gwenhwyfar is raped by a man who wants her father's kingdom that is hers by

birth, and convinces her that Arthur would not care to save her since she is barren and she half believes him. After Lancelot saves her, she does not wish to hide her love for him any longer, and then believes that it is God's punishment when he is taken away from her. She still feels guilty for being raped as the priests have told her that no woman would have been raped unless she tempted a man. Finally, when the affair between her and Lancelot is found out, they run away together, but, despite wanting to be with him, she sends him back to Arthur and retires to a convent.

Gwenhwyfar is fanatically pious and lives in fear of God's punishment and for her soul. She believes that there is only one true faith, and is the driving force behind Arthur turning his back on Avalon. She resents having married Arthur when she had already fallen in love with Lancelot, and never completely forgives Arthur for marrying her for her dowry, even though they come to love each other. She feels an immense amount of guilt over her love for Lancelot – that despite it being unconsummated for a long time, she was still being punished for it by her childlessness. She feels that she has failed in her duty by not providing an heir for the kingdom.

Morgaine is Igraine's daughter by her first marriage. She is taken by Viviane at a young age to be trained as a priestess of Avalon. Igraine admits that she sent Morgaine to Avalon to save her from the priests who would make her believe that she was evil because she was a woman. During a fertility ritual she takes part in, she lies with an unknown man, who she later realises is her brother Arthur. Angry at Viviane for orchestrating it, she leaves Avalon, gives birth to a son and then lives in Arthur's court. However, she begins to miss Avalon, and when Arthur renounces Avalon, she attempts to turn him back. Morgaine, like Viviane, dedicates her life to the service of the Goddess to prevent Avalon from being forgotten. She also resorts to manipulating people's lives for the good of Avalon. She is an extremely learned woman, and is knowledgeable in the use of herbs and in the treatment of illness. She can also play the harp, which is frowned upon by the priests as it is considered unseemly for a woman to play music.

Morgaine is later by accident forced to marry King Uriens, who is an old man, despite being in love with his son Accolon. She is forced to spend her time cosseting and caring for her husband in order to gain his trust and have influence over him. Eventually, despite the love she has for her brother, she convinces Accolon to challenge him for the throne for the sake of Avalon, though he is eventually defeated.

However, when Arthur is eventually killed by their son Mordred, Morgaine is with him as he is dying, and assures him that his work was not in vain, and he tells her that he always saw the Goddess in her, as mother and lover. The story ends with Morgaine visiting a convent near Avalon where Viviane was buried, and seeing that the Goddess still existed in the world.

Morgause is the sister of Igraine and Viviane. Unlike her sisters, she cares nothing for religion or the welfare of the kingdom, only for her own ambitions for power, and would even resort to murder to gain the throne. However, whilst in most legends she is portrayed as evil and selfish, in *The Mists of Avalon*, she is, nonetheless, a genuinely loving mother to her sons, Morgaine, and to Mordred whom she fosters in order to gain power. She raises Mordred to be ambitious and loyal to her, and is the driving force behind the downfall of Camelot. Of all the women in the story, she is the one who shares an equal relationship with her husband, ruling beside him, and having lovers like he did, disregarding the opinions of others and the restrictions of her time.

The women in the novel are not always united. There is often rivalry, resentment and jealousy between them due to reasons such as beauty, ambition, the love of men, children, often overshadowing their love for each other. Even Viviane is jealous of Igraine's beauty and Morgaine is jealous of Gwenhwyfar, and feels that Lancelot does not love her because she is ugly, while Gwenhwyfar feels that her own beauty is not enough. Morgause takes great pride in the number of lovers she is able to attract.

Morgaine and Gwenhwyfar are foils to each other in many ways. Despite the rivalry and hatred that often sprang between them, deep down they retain love for each other. Both are extremely passionate about their respective faiths and will go to great lengths to save it. Gwenhwyfar wished to have more importance than simply as a broodmare. She was taught that because she was a woman, she was less capable than a man and so she could not rule over men. Morgaine, however, as priestess of Avalon, never felt that it was her duty to follow the rules of obedience and modesty that were imposed on others. She believed in the old ways where it was the queen who ruled. Gwenhwyfar condemned all women who were not good Christians and who were not chaste, despite her love for Lancelot, and in turn felt that they were condemning her. She felt satisfaction when Morgaine, like her, was forced to marry a man she did not love, so she would know what it was like. Morgaine who has an affair with Accolon, felt anger at the prospect of being judged by her as she had had an affair first, and in turn condemned Gwenhwyfar for being unfaithful when her husband was young and good, and it created danger for Arthur's reputation. There is also fierce jealousy between them over the love of Lancelot and Arthur. These women's attitudes to each other are greatly shaped by the men influencing their lives and rules they need to follow.

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The Indian-American Diaspora in Divakaruni's *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*

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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's collection of short stories, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, captures the crucial, climactic moments in the lives of several South Asian Indian immigrants in North America. These stories explore the identity struggles of the Indian-American diaspora, who are torn between India –and the culture, traditions and ethnic identity inherited from it– and America, which for some threatens with cultural amnesia, and for others offers release from painful memories of their motherland. Ranging from the typical old Indian grandmother moving in with her son in America, Mrs. Dutta, from *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter*, to the young American-born Ruchira, the protagonist of the title story, this collection offers a varied pool of experiences. In presenting these experiences, Divakaruni also highlights the diaspora's feelings of loss, alienation and frustration. Her characters search for national identity, affirm their connection with their homeland, and attempt to establish for themselves a place of belonging in a foreign land.

The question of which country the characters should identify themselves with is very common across Divakaruni's stories. The struggle is essentially between fitting themselves into the mould of the American mainstream –which would mean smooth living– and choosing to retain Indian cultural heritage. As James Clifford puts it in his essay, "Diasporas", their issue is one of "entangled confusion", for "diasporas are caught up with and defined against (1) the norms of nation-state and (2) indigenous, and especially autochthonous, claims" (451). The diaspora seem to feel the need to define themselves because they are being defined by those around them. Divakaruni has managed to achieve a tentative balance between her characters' 'Indian' identities and 'American' identities, something that isn't easily done. Pawan Dhingra points out in his studies of multicultural groups that subjects often chose "primarily one community as the healthiest means of adaptation" (1). Shyamoli can be seen as this type of Indian American, who attempts to blend into an American lifestyle: she holds a full-time job, wears high-heels, has her hair permed, asks her husband to do housework now and then, and lets her children watch a lot of television and eat frozen food items. All of these things are drawn in contrast to Mrs. Dutta's very traditionally Indian lifestyle: hanging wet clothes to dry over the wall, insisting that folding clothes is not a man's job (when Shyamoli asks her husband to fold the clothes once). In Shyamoli's case, she has

attempted to fit herself into an American mould because it is easier that way: “All these years I’ve been so careful not to give those Americans a chance to say something . . .” (29) Her tone indicates that she doesn’t necessarily associate herself with “those Americans”, but has assimilated those aspects of American lifestyle that work for her.

The process for the diaspora is one of “creating, constructing and reconstructing identity” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 427), and identity-creation is not as easy for the diasporic subject as it is for the outsider: the Caucasian American may judge an Indian by skin colour, and by that standard alone, the Indian assumes an ‘Indian’ identity; this could be regardless of the Indian’s knowledge of his/her own homeland, culture, and tradition, which, for all the American knows, could be little or nil. The inverse also is true. Indian-Americans cannot help themselves from forming identities based on their own complexion, hair colour, and other physical attributes. Divakaruni brings this out at several instances, like in the short story *The Intelligence of Wild Things*, when the narrator discovers that her brother has a “white” American girlfriend: “For a moment, before I forced the image from my mind, I saw the girl’s red hair spread over the pillow. Her pale arms tight around my brother’s brown back.” (38) Tarun, the brother, is also pointed out as having “very black” eyes. (38) In *The Lives of Strangers*, even Leela, despite her American upbringing, finds a connection with Mrs. Das, and this connection seems to have something to do with her sense of longing for her motherland, in finding someone so representative of it, and with the two of them having skin colour in common: “Yet here she is, tearing strips from an old sari and bandaging Mrs. Das’s feet, her fingers . . . brown against the matching brown of Mrs. Das’s skin.” (69) Mrs. Dutta from the first short story draws a contrast between her own thick, silky hair and her daughter-in-law’s “permed curls” (6). Here, for Mrs. Dutta, her own hair represents her native culture, and her daughter-in-law’s, that of America. And for Mrs. Dutta, hers is decisively better.

Another process deeply involved in the formation of the Indian-American’s diasporic identity is either the forgetting or the recollection of their homeland. Some choose to forget India completely, such as Leela’s parents, who “never discussed their homeland, a country they seemed to have shed as easily and completely as a lizard drops its tail.” (61) Mira in *The Blooming Season for Cacti*, narrates, “The real reason was that I needed something as different as possible from Bombay. How else could I begin to bear the memories, the city smoldering in the aftermath of riot?” (169) In cases such as Mira’s or Mrs. Dutta’s, their reasons for leaving India and coming to America largely affect their experiences there, and how they fare in its cultural atmosphere. Avtah

Brah rightly states, “If the circumstances of leaving are important, so, too, are those of arrival and settling down.” (444) Ultimately, these reasons are what determine whether they wish to forget completely or remember and reaffirm their roots.

Most people belonging to a diaspora try constantly to remind themselves of their native cultural heritage. Dhingra studies that “interactions with parents informed participants about their ethnic social identity, including such symbols as languages, foods, and clothes.” (66) Divakaruni observes this in great detail in her stories and characters. In Leela’s case, it was clearly her parents’ refusal to propagate Indian culture that deprived her of knowledge about it. In other characters’ cases, symbols of Indian culture play a large role in their formation of an ethnic identity. For the narrator of *The Intelligence of Wild Things*, cultural elements like the “sharash” –a bird common in Bengal– and the term “didi” (elder sister) that Tarun uses to address her, have great significance for her (50), because it represents the parts of their Bengali roots that Tarun has not yet let go of or forgotten. The symbols lie in the language here, their mother tongue, which is a direct connection to their Indian culture. This can be seen in *The Names of Stars in Bengali* as well, when the narrator thinks, “*Ashwini, Bharani, Kritika, Rohini,*” (267) recalling the nomenclature for stars followed in her homeland. Language’s significance is brought out yet again when the narrator states, “Abhimaan, that mix of love and anger and hurt which lies at the heart of so many of our Indian tales, and for which there is no equivalent in English.” (42)

In *The Love of a Good Man*, Monisha intentionally appears before her estranged father in her late mother’s sari (ironed, besides); she also cooks a familiar Indian dish, and places jasmine flowers in the guest bedroom for him, all to evoke recollection. She regrets not having “covered the table in designer batiks” and dressed her son in his “embroidered birthday kurta” (162). There are also Indian cultural ideologies interspersed across the text, such as “*A good wife wakes before the rest of the household*” (2), “*The husband is God*” (109), “*May you never become a widow*” (110), and “Good families don’t let grown girls swim in ponds so everyone could ogle them” (246). These cultural ideologies, however, are not accepted plainly by Divakaruni’s diasporic characters, who belong also to an American culture where such values did not (need to) apply. Divakaruni’s characters constantly question these values, and in this way, they wonder exactly how ‘Indian’ they wish to be. In *What the Body Knows*, Divakaruni explores the Indian mother-child relationship after Aparna gives birth to Aashish and finds she is unable to breast-feed him, but still tries: “She remembers, vaguely, old Indian tales where milk spurts from a mother’s breasts

when she is reunited with her long-lost children.” (132)

Other symbols of Indian culture include the occasional prayer-chant, mentions of superstitious belief and religious deities such as goddess Durga, who is specifically significant to Bengali culture. Divakaruni’s characters also think of burritos and attend Lamaze classes. What illuminate the ethnic symbols in the book are the American contrasts interspersed skilfully alongside them, accentuating the kind of lifestyle the diaspora lead: one that is a hectic combination of two clashing ways of life, made in the process of adjusting to a new world.

Gender roles also play a significant role in the diaspora’s self-identification. It should be noted that in Divakaruni’s short stories, most of the men play primarily the role of husbands, sons or brothers. The father character, if ever present, is rarely a “good” one by social standards. It hints at a rejection of the patriarchal system of India. Characters who have assimilated at least partially the American way of life, particularly the women, seem to revel in the freedom it offers to them, being women: of having a job (such as Shyamoli and Mira), being independent, perhaps even privacy and the option of being alone (in the case of Leela). Even in terms of naming, while Shyamoli is mostly referred to in the narration by her name and by her husband occasionally as “Molli”, Mrs. Dutta is always either “Mother” or, in the narration, “Mrs. Dutta” – it is significant that she is identified by her role either as wife or mother; this is attributed, as it seems, to typical ‘Indian’ culture. There isn’t, however, a total rejection of traditional gender roles. Perhaps it is as Dhingra observes, “Men were presumed to be in charge of the outside world and women were to keep the home spiritually purified and generally take care of that sphere, even when women had full-time careers.” (59) This is true especially in the case of Shyamoli, who despite going out to work, also maintains her home. She reacts negatively to her mother-in-law’s invasion into her household and says, “She’s taken over the entire kitchen ... I feel like this isn’t my house anymore.” (30) One can tell that despite her working-woman status, she contributes largely to the care of the home. Some of the women in Divakaruni’s short stories even complain about how Indian men raised in India tend to be useless in the kitchen or with housekeeping. Standard gender roles prescribed by Indian society also contribute to the diaspora’s way of identifying themselves. Only occasionally does Divakaruni break completely these standardized gender ideologies, such as in *Blooming Season of Cacti*, when Radhika falls in love with Mira and thereby tests the heterosexual norm of Indian culture. The irony is that Radhika is more traditionally an Indian than Mira, but it is Mira who is frightened and runs away. Divakaruni does not leave her character

ignorant of her own assumptions, however. Mira narrates, “myself, being sucked into a vortex from which whispered words rise like ancestral ghosts: *disgusting, perverted, unnatural.*” (201) This awareness that Mira comes to, as with the other women across the short stories, is one way Divakaruni shows the way the diaspora challenge their inherited culture.

Divakaruni has left the diaspora undefined, still. Some characters find closure, others do not. Some choose an ‘American’ identity; others go back to their Indian roots. What Divakaruni truly offers, then, is their stories and their struggle to find a place of belonging – their *way* of forming identity, rather than the identity itself. Whatever *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* may be, it is primarily a place in literature for the diasporic voice, and each story is, in Divakaruni’s words, “a story that has waited a long time.” (117)

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An Indian woman writes...

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When my colleague asked me to contribute an article on Indian women's writing for the college literary magazine, I asked her a counter-question, "Instead of writing about Indian women's writing, can I, as an Indian woman, write about stuff that is close to my heart, stuff that needs to be written about, especially considering that we live in dangerous times...particularly for Indian women?" She looked a little dazed. Perhaps my question was a little convoluted. I remember a teacher of mine who had this habit of asking questions at seminars that were so convoluted that nobody understood what the question was about. My colleague pondered my question for a minute and then nodded. "What are you planning to write about?" she asked a tad suspiciously, knowing my proclivities for causing mischief. "Eve teasing...and strategies to deal with it," I replied. "O-k-a-y," she said, looking rather doubtful. "Don't worry," I said breezily, "this is the kind of stuff young girls need to hear. It is all about empowerment and that is what our women writers should be aiming at rather than writing about long-suffering women who silently endure the slings and arrows of a sexist, patriarchal dispensation which treats women like doormats or commodities."

There is a reason why I wanted to write about this subject. Violence against women is increasing exponentially. The papers are full of reports on rapes, molestations, acid attacks, and other depressing stuff. They are all about women as victims. Recently, following the gruesome Nirbhaya case in Delhi, the Times of India declared that in future, women who were subjected to such attacks would be referred to as survivors instead of victims. Even language has the power to victimise or empower. And it is this power that the Times seeks to harness by calling a raped woman a "survivor". And this is also what I wish to do through this article—by sharing my experiences as a woman in a culture which violates women in many ways—verbally, emotionally and physically—in a way that empowers you, the reader.

I grew up in Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala, a state that is tom-tommed about for its high literacy rate, low infant mortality rate and similar other developmental indices. But it was—and is—a place that is highly unsafe for women. Most women choose not to react to the various acts of violation they experience at the hands of men. They suffer silently, as men grope

them in buses and trains, on the roads, and subject them to verbal and physical assaults, accepting it as part of a natural order. But I was always someone who reacted. Growing up in a male-dominated household, I was very rebellious as a teenager. Wherever I looked, I could see men oppressing women, and it filled me with rage. My fantasies were not about love and romance but about getting a gun and going on a shooting spree, decimating those who tormented women. I imagined myself as a vigilante, a female version of Dirty Harry, accosting eve-teasers and saying, “Make my day, buster,” before I despatched them to their Maker.

Since I had no intention of putting up with pawings and gropings, I never ventured outside my house without some sharp objects. One was a pen knife. Another was an umbrella with a very sharp tip. But more than such accessories, it is your attitude that becomes your most potent weapon. Young girls are often told by parents not to react to provocation as the men might take revenge on them. So they become timid and quietly suffer the insults and harassment. In actual fact, it is this that emboldens the eve-teaser. Confident that he will face no opposition, he continues with it. The truth is, sometimes all it takes is a cold or angry look to fob off the aggressor. Basically, an eve-teaser is a coward who thinks women are soft targets.

Once, I was walking on a deserted street in Trivandrum when I noticed a fellow following me. I have a three-fold strategy to deal with such characters. The first step is a dirty look. If that doesn't deter him, the next step is belting out some colourful profanities. Usually this is enough to make the offender turn tail and flee. The third step is physical aggression—like throwing stones or punches. In this case, initially, I called him some names. But he continued to follow me. As it was a bandh day, there was hardly anyone on the road and this made him bold. Little did he know who he was playing with! I decided to teach the creep a lesson he'd never forget in his life. Further down the road was a police station. As I neared the police station, I could see a bored constable standing on the road, hoping for some action to liven things up. I decided to make his day. I went up to him and faking a piteous tone and expression, told him that someone was harassing me. Meanwhile, the creep, realising that he was in trouble, was trying to conceal himself among a group of people who were having tea at a roadside vendor's shop. “Ha! An eve-teaser! Just show him to me,” thundered the cop. I pointed to the fellow who was promptly hauled off to the station, kicking and screaming, much to my glee. While I was filing a complaint, the SI asked me suspiciously, “What are you doing out on the road on a bandh day?” “None of your business!” I wanted to snap back. Instead, I said with phony timidity, “I was going to the temple,

sir.” Actually I was on my way to meet a friend but I knew that if I told him that, I would have to listen to a lecture on the dangers of venturing outside on bandh days for frivolous reasons. My reply satisfied him and he turned his attention to the creep who by now had been stripped to his underwear. The SI asked me to leave the room, and the next thing I heard was the pleasant sound of a hard fist making contact with soft skin followed by a shriek of agony. I left the premises feeling very satisfied with myself. “A good day’s work,” I muttered to myself. Later, I came to know that he had to cool his heels in jail for a week.

On another occasion, I was sitting in a bus. A drunk standing near my seat kept leaning on me. I asked him to move forward but he didn’t pay any attention. An old man came to my support and entreated the drunk to move forward. The drunk fixed a baleful eye on the old man and growled, “What is your problem, old man? Stay out of trouble.” Nobody in the bus uttered a word. Even the conductor had vanished, sensing trouble. There were many people in the bus, including strapping young men who could have thrown the drunk out of the bus if they had wanted to. But no one intervened. Feeling contempt for my pusillanimous co-passengers I decided to take action myself. I placed my umbrella with the pointed tip in a strategic position so that every time the drunk leaned against me, the tip would poke his side. After a few sharp jabs, the drunk got the message and stopped falling on me. When it was time to get off the bus I ground the drunk’s foot with my stilettos for good measure. The crunch of bone and the yelp of pain that followed sounded like music to my ears. When I alighted from the bus, a middle-aged woman who had obviously been in the same bus, observing my activities, accosted me. “You shouldn’t have taken on that drunk. He might lie in wait for you tomorrow and attack you,” she said gravely. I gave her a disgusted look. “I am not afraid of that stupid lout. If he lies in wait to attack me, he will jolly well regret it.” With these stinging words I marched off. Needless to say, I never saw that drunk again.

After moving to Madras, I had very few encounters with eve-teasers. But they are equally memorable. I was working in an ad agency then. My cabin was on the second floor of a big building. One day, I noticed a young man standing near the staircase and ogling me as I walked past. This happened the second day as well. He worked for another firm on the first floor of the building. The way he stared (and he stared at all the women who passed by him) made one’s flesh crawl. The third day, I decided to put a stop to it. I began climbing the steps but when I reached mid-way, I suddenly whipped around and snarled, “ ENNA, POMPILAINKALE PARTHATHE

ILLIYA?” (What! Haven’t you ever seen a woman before?”). Stunned, the man blabbered something and fled. He had never expected me to turn on him like that. Later, I summoned our office boy and told him, “Go to the office on the first floor, meet the manager and tell him about this chap who loiters near the staircase and ogles all the women. Tell him that if I see him again outside the office I will beat him to a pulp.” Mission Ogler accomplished successfully!

This too happened in Madras. At that time I was staying with my aunt in Anna Nagar. One Saturday afternoon, I was returning home from work. The lane was deserted and a man cycled past, muttering something obscene. I was too tired to go after him. So I ignored it. Then, to my great delight, I saw him coming back. Pretending to be scared, I kept walking with my eyes downcast. I had reached my aunt’s house when he approached me again. He was on the opposite side of the lane. Uttering a blood-curdling yell like a Red Indian, I suddenly dashed across the road towards him. My intention was to push him down and do a war dance all over his face. Sadly, his reflexes were good. Even as my aunt and cousin came running out to see what the commotion was about, he escaped, pedalling away furiously for dear life. “Tchah! Got away!” I shouted in disappointment, as my aunt and cousin looked on, shocked.

The moral of the story is simple. There is nothing to fear but fear itself. My question to all of you is this - we have only one life. Should we live it like a tiger or like a mouse? Hopefully, after reading this article, you will reply, “Like a tiger.” Coming back to Indian women’s writing, this is what I hope it will fashion itself into – a potent tool/weapon for destroying the attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets that prevent women from living full lives in this increasingly violent and misogynistic society.

The Dastan of India

A reading of Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*

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Qurratulain Hyder's Urdu novel *Aag ka Dariya* was first published in 1959 and immediately became something of a landmark novel in modern Urdu literature. Hailed for its non-linear narrative and its ambitious project of narrating nearly 4000 years of India's cultural and political history, it was translated by the author herself into English as *River of Fire* in 1998 – nearly 40 years after the 'original' was published. The English version did not create as many ripples as did the Urdu one – possibly because it came out at a time when English fiction from India was already involved in the ambitious project of rewriting Indian history and 'correcting' British / colonial representations of the country. Perhaps the fact that the translation came out at a time when non-linear narratives – especially historical narratives – had almost become the norm in what was increasingly and swiftly becoming a formidable body of writing that fused history and fiction also contributed to the relative non-presence of *River of Fire* except in the form of reviews or essays in anthologies.

River of Fire is noteworthy for many reasons – like many Indian novels that were published in the 1980s and 1990s, it 'rewrote' Indian history, but its scope was much vaster than most other texts of the period. The method in which it chose to rewrite Indian history too marks it out as significant as does the image of India that it presents. It is also noteworthy that in the field of largely a male-centred historical revisioning, Hyder's is one of the few female voices. It is from largely these perspectives that this essay will read *River of Fire*.

Politically and culturally, the last two decades of the previous century witnessed a somewhat dual movement in India. On the one hand were the various regional and local voices clamouring to be heard while on the other, were the nationalist, homogenizing discourses that sought to subsume these multiple voices into the overarching metanarrative of nationalism. The same movement can be observed in the literature and criticism of the period too. A number of texts, many in English, sought to stress their 'Indian-ness' by returning to historiographical narrative modes that blatantly flouted norms of the European realist tradition. The non-local, nationalist discourse that this grand narrative structure appeared to valorise was countered by the many petit historical narratives focusing on smaller communities (like the Kammavar community in *The Gopallapuram Chronicles* or the Parsi community in *The Memory of Elephants*). These little narratives, often

but not always subversive, posit an India that offers space for dissident voices without denying the need for nationalist discourses. In other words, they offer a space where the two seemingly opposite and mutually exclusive discourses can simultaneously exist.

The English literary scene in India in the 1980s and 1990s was characterized by a spate of novels that are today characterized as ‘postcolonial.’ Though the term is much criticized today, the period under discussion was one when it was making its presence felt in the academic world. Hence, novels written in any former colony willy-nilly became part of the ‘postcolonial’ tradition. Texts like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* published in 1981 and dealing with ‘stock’ postcolonial themes were critically clubbed along with earlier texts like Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* that dealt with similar issues and themes. Critics like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha and Harish Trivedi, G N Devy, Meenakshi Mukherjee etc. further canonized the postcolonial model of reading and writing texts.

Among the thematic concerns of ‘postcolonial’ literature were the impacts of colonialism on the colonized and the rewriting of colonized history. That both of these were from the perspective of the colonized in a bid to regain lost narrative space is today too passé an idea to need elucidation. Hence, an influential novel like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* sought to rewrite a little of pre-independence and a chunk of post-independence Indian history from the point of view of an Indian.

Postcolonial criticism has focused not merely on ‘what’ history has been re-written, but also on ‘how’ this has been done. With increasing awareness that historiography is not the innocent, disinterested discipline it was long taken to be, the metanarrative that is used, consciously or otherwise, to order historical facts has been much critiqued. That the use of such a metanarrative has deep implications for the image of the ‘nation’ that emerges from these novels is again a common enough critical idea today. Perhaps Rushdie’s comment regarding the narrative structure of *Midnight’s Children* best captures this; he insists that this plural narrative structure is necessary for capturing the ‘too-muchness’ that is an integral part of Indian culture.

This also introduces the idea of representation of an ‘authentic’ India. Often, English texts dealing with Indian history face the charge of homogenizing Indian culture and disregarding local variations and voices. This homogenization is often seen to go hand in hand with the method of narration used. The cyclical, non-linear, jack-in-the-box narrative structure adopted by many English novels of the period has been linked by critics and the writers themselves to Classical Pauranic narratives that similarly fused history, mythology and legend. This narrative structure, though potentially plural and having the capacity to include subversive, contradictory voices is

nevertheless associated with a homogenized classical metanarrative that posits India as a space where the colonial encounter ruptured a 'pure' culture. The focus on themes like colonial encounter, the changes in 'Indian culture' due to this encounter, the problems with the English language and European narrative models encouraged by early postcolonial criticism forged an image of India as a nation whose pristine culture was ruptured by the coming of the 'outsiders.' Fiction in these cases was used to recreate such a space. Although the subversive voice was ever-present, critical commentary on many canonical postcolonial texts tended to rather ignore them. Hence, very little critical material on *Midnight's Children* has focused on Salim Sinai being an Anglo-Indian, a community that virtually came into existence during the British rule and that sometimes by its very existence, questioned the binaries of colonizer-colonised. The same can be said for Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*

In contrast to all these, *River of Fire* posits an India where the very notion of a 'pure' India is always suspect. Indian culture is seen to have always been 'on the move,' never stagnant, to have always been in contact and dialogue with other; it also acknowledges that this dialogue is often violent, drawing unsuspecting victims into itself. Implicitly, it also questions the centrality of the colonial period in modern Indian history, thereby deflating one of the earliest assumptions of the postcolonial critical model.

River of Fire has four broad strands. The first one, set in Magadhan India, portrays the cultural changes that occurred in the country because of the coming of Buddhism and Jainism. From here, the novel takes us through Islamic India and British colonial India to the Independence struggle and the Partition of 1947. Some of the motifs that run across the four large historical strands of the novel are introduced right in the first part – characters such as the academic, the traveler and the artist, women in love who wait and love that is at the mercy of historical events. Running across and cutting through these motifs are ordinary lives that are affected to various degrees by historical events over which they have no control. If these motifs cut across 4000 years of Indian history, so do the names of people to whom these events happen – Gautam Nilambar, Champa, Nirmala, Kamal, Cyril appear in almost all the stories. The Hindu student and the Hindu women are present right from the first section while Kamal, representing the Islamic community, comes in later and Cyril Ashley, a Christian, comes in even later. How long they have lived in India, however, in no way decides their 'Indian-ness.' Kamal, in the second section, towards the end of his life when he is arrested for 'originally' being a non-native laments:

He had no quarrel with the Afghans or the Mughals, he merely wished to be left alone . . . This was his country, his children had been born here, his dear wife

lay buried here. He had put all his energy into making these fields bloom, spent years beautifying the language these men were speaking. He had written songs and collected stories and he was going to continue living here. Non one had any right to call him an outsider or a traitor. (102)

The India that emerges from *River of Fire* is a country that has always been a site of cultural dialogue; even if at times, the dialogue becomes violent. In the process, both the host and the guest cultures underwent changes. Hence, we have Kamal in the second strand of the novel asserting how 'native' he has become ("... he had started thinking of himself as a Hindustani. He was no longer a Vilayati." 87); just as Buddhism had become an inextricable part of 'Indian culture' in the first strand.

This is not to claim that *River of Fire* is the only, or even one of the few novels that portrays this dialogue as an integral part of Indian culture. However, it *is* unique in that it is devoid of any sense of nostalgia for a pre-contact, 'pristine' culture. This 'nostalgia' we might remember was a staple of much postcolonial criticism and fiction. What Hyder's novel portrays rather, is the inevitability of such an interaction and dialogue.

In this context, we need to also note the time during which both the Urdu and the English versions of the novel came out. 1959, we may remember, was a few years after independence and Partition; it was the time when the two newly independent nations were consolidating their national identity. This 'national identity' was, perhaps inevitably, seen in terms of a 'pure,' singular national-cultural identity. 1998, the time when the translation was published saw India in a similar cultural situation. Cultural nationalism was fast becoming monological and homogenizing. Notwithstanding dissenting and subversive voices, this homogenizing voice was getting louder. The suspicion of outside voices, the large number of reported and unreported ethnic and communal clashes that rocked the nation during this time is evidence of this.

It was amidst this that *River of Fire* voiced a notion of India as a place where a search for a 'pristine,' 'pure' culture was a futile task, for it acknowledged that the cultural-political entity called India as we know it today was always and already an amalgam of dissenting and assenting cultures and voices.

Therefore, the repetitive nature of the novel in terms of its themes, motifs and names of its characters is significant, for it helps underscore the timelessness of the plurality and dialogic nature of Indian culture. While a number of critical readings of the *River of Fire* have noted its resemblance to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in terms of its treatment

of time and its repetition of names of characters, both these features are inextricably linked to the image of the nation that Hyder's novel projects.

If therefore, Gautam Nilambar, a Hindu student and part of what may be called 'mainstream culture' in the first strand exclaims, "I am not interested in King Nanda, Vishnu Sharma and Chandragupta. Why must they drag me into their conflict?" (39), the same sentiments are echoed by Kamal in the passage already quoted. The flow of history is relentless and in a multiple, multicultural country like India, it is all the more so, making the concept of a pristine, pre-contact Indian culture a myth. Both in its Urdu version and in its English translation therefore, the novel offers an almost subversive view of Indian culture – one that accepts, without judging, the many strands that go into its making.

This pluralistic vision of Indian culture is also presented in a way very different from what the English reading public of the 1990s was used to. As already noted, critical commentary had tended to foreground pauranic narratives as perhaps the only possible alternative to the European historiographical model. This importance given to the pauranic mode has tended also to obscure other narrative modes like the 'everyday historiography' that the *Gopallapuram Chronicles* uses. In this context, *River of Fire* is significant in its use of the Persian *dastaan* mode of historiography narration.

Today largely associated with the romance mode, the *dastaan* as a mode is ornate, oral history. Used in Persia and many central Asian countries, the *dastaan* mode narrated the trials of a single hero in getting independence for his tribe / community. J B Paksoy's studies, especially "The Dastan Genre in Central Asia," itemize the various features of a *dastaan* – among them the travails of the hero, the help he receives on his way and the fate of his tribe resting on him. Paksoy further brings out the political importance of the *dastaan* mode. He points out that the *dastaan* was the storehouse of the identity of the tribe. While the content of existing *dastaans* was strictly guarded, newer *dastaans* could emerge only under two situations – either when a hero achieved something great enough to have a *dastaan* written about him, or when the identity of the tribe / community was gravely threatened. The *dastaan* was thus the means of consolidating the identity of the community. The subversive nature of the *dastaans* is nowhere better evident than in the ban imposed on the creation of new *dastaans* and on anthologizing older ones by the Stalinist regime in the USSR:

. . . dastans were collected by the authorities in order to be hidden away; reciters were killed Many paid with their lives. The message of that era was, once again, freedom. ("The Dastan Genre in Central Asia" 6)

It is this use of *dastaan* to consolidate national identity at times of crisis that we need to focus on. In the light of the monological, nationalist discourses threatening to subsume the plurality of India, a new ‘*dastaan*’ was needed that would stress the essentially multiple nature of Indian culture. This is a *dastaan* that cannot, by force of its theme, have a single hero – it has to narrate several stories and it has to narrate them across centuries. Hence, *River of Fire* insists that Indian culture is a plural entity and necessarily interweaves various narratives: “There are many ways of telling a *dastaan*,” says Talat. “How shall I begin? I don’t know which characters are more important. Where did this story start? What was the climax?” (184). There is no single ‘hero’ whose exploits the novel celebrates; it is Indian culture itself that faces oppression and opposition, but emerges resilient precisely because of its ability to be inclusive. Hence, the epic sweep of the novel. Hence also our reading that Hyder’s novel transforms both the traditional and literary idea of Indian culture as well as the form of the *dastaan* itself.

What binds this plurality is the idea of history as a relentless force affecting and being affected by nameless and countless people in its way. It is not mere a narrative extravagance that so much space time is spent intermittently in the novel on historical developments in other countries like Spain and the Middle-East. History is the binding force; binding and separating lives, bringing lovers together and separating them, taking people tantalizingly towards a new home and leaving them insecure there. The cyclical and repetitive nature of history is merely reinforced by the repetition of character names and the situations they see themselves in.

River of Fire then, both in its English translation as well as in its original Urdu version can be seen to operate as a text that offers a vision of India as a nation characterized by plurality and cultural dialogue. In the process, it also insists that to try to define India in any monological way may be a complete falsification of Indian culture.

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To Be Or Not to Be in a B.A. English Class

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Varied are the reasons for choosing to do a degree programme in English, ranging from a flair for reading and in a few cases, a flair for writing to just doing something.

The B.A. English Language and Literature of yore has now been renamed B.A. English for no particular reason I suppose, and this renaming adds to the confusion which is already present in many a college entrant. During the admission season, I noticed a girl weep uncontrollably on the corridors of the college, her dad looking helplessly at her. Thinking that she may need some help, I approached her. Amid sobs she told me- in Tamil - that she wanted to do B.Sc. Maths and her dad was trying to force her into the English department. When I turned to the dad, he was clear about what he wanted for his daughter. "She can't speak English, *ma*. If she does B.A. English, she will speak English." Not an unworthy goal, yet, we understand the underlying confusion. I had to explain to him that in a B.A. English class, they don't teach spoken English.

Another happy group of students think that they can just relax and read novels in a B.A. English programme. True only to an extent. If one takes pleasure in reading, she or he is the ideal student for a B.A. in English. But the reading list include more than just fiction. Fiction as a genre is studied exclusively in courses like British Fiction, Indian Fiction, Contemporary Fiction etc. but even in these courses fiction is not read for the story line. Authors like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens are studied with reference to the social milieu; works by Modernist and Postmodernist writers like Virginia Woolf and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who do not narrate a story are appreciated for the narrative techniques and other features.

If the English Department offers elective courses like 'Popular Fiction', 'Children's Fiction' and 'Detective Fiction', the student gets to read J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* and the like. There are other courses based on the genres, Prose, Poetry and Drama, with Shakespeare as a separate course, and the approach to each genre is different.

The study of literature is no more restricted to pure literature as there is a crossing of boundaries resulting in inter-disciplinary courses which provide interesting links between areas like Literature and Psychology and Literature and Ideas, Literature and Gender etc. Students

usually find these courses interesting as these are application oriented and concepts from various fields are applied to literary texts. For example, they can attempt a Freudian or a Kantian analysis of a character or the author, often choosing a fiction or a movie, not prescribed in the syllabus.

Yet another trend now is the shift from British and American Literature as the canonical core courses, (though they still retain their primacy), to the inclusion of a more global variety like South Asian Writing, Subaltern Studies, Indian Writing in English and in Translation, etc.

Catering to the needs of the major stake holders of education, the employers, English departments too have included elective courses like Journalism, English for Specific Careers, English Language Teaching, English for the Workplace, Technical Writing and the list is endless.

With a B.A. Degree in English, when a student leaves the portals of the college, what does she or he do? This depends upon the aptitude and the interest of the learner, who amid all these core and allied and elective courses should identify their area of interest. In many institutions (obviously at Stella Maris), there are mentors, class teachers, Career Guidance Cells, who try their best to give directions, but students know best.

Career choices these days are plenty. Some may prefer to be school teachers who pursue a B.Ed. programme; some continue with M.A., and M.Phil. in English, if they want to be college teachers. For this they need to qualify in the UGC National Eligibility Test, which is mandatory. The M.Phil. degree is not mandatory for college teachers but many colleges see this as an added advantage. Those who wish to be employed in the field of Journalism seek admission at Institutions which offer specific advanced level courses in Journalism. Research is the option for those who love literature and wish to explore deeper into a particular area of the subject. Some seek education in universities abroad, and they need to keep track of the application procedure.

If someone wants to take up a job with just a B.A. degree in English and doesn't wish to study further, there are many openings. Companies keep asking for Literature graduates who can '**write**' – to develop content for the web, for user manuals, for special courses offered online, for editing and for varied purposes, as the world now seems to need people who can communicate in English, and communicate well. If one's writing skill is not all that perfect, and if one can only speak well - that seems to be the majority now - there are jobs for them too, in BPOs, in the hospitality industry, and in marketing companies.

So, for anyone out there, who wonders what is happening in a B.A. English class, there's God's plenty and variety too. All that you need is a passion for reading and writing.