

# PARANOID FRISKING: FIRST STEP TOWARDS MULTICULTURALISM

Ashwita Ambast

'Stand on the mat,' barked the Jamaican airport official, as she unzipped my backpack. I swiftly complied.

Shoving my bag in my direction, she gruffly said, 'Take out your laptop and turn it on. Hurry up!'

Nothing can prepare you for your first additional US Transportation Security Agency check. Nobody really tells you why you're being searched, what grave threat you somehow pose to America's homeland security. The process is particularly enigmatic if you're being searched in Jamaica where officials appear to have fewer answers and are consequently less forthcoming. Being openly searched at Kingston's Norman Manley International Airport for unclear reasons, understandably, made me feel incredibly vulnerable. A heap of not-so-carefully pressed autumn leaves I picked in Vermont, a rastacap I bought at the Bob Marley Museum and boxer shorts that said I <3 NY *inter alia* were all on display before a *flightful* of impatient people who had nothing better to do at the time than to glare at my paraphernalia.

A week ago, my sister was both confused and peeved when she was pulled aside and searched on arrival at JFK. Two days later, when she collected her bags to find a little sticker from the TSA saying that her luggage was checked on its way out of the US, she was plain furious: nothing like a little *post facto* notification from complete strangers letting you know that they opened your bags and went through all your stuff when you were not around.

The welcome tone of my laptop rang out cheerily while a collage of embarrassing pictures of me with different friends (possibly the most incriminating thing in my bags) popped up on the screen. The official peered over with an expression that read 'weird leaf collector woman has a selfie fetish' and sniggered. She waited till my distress turned into an acute sense of humiliation, and then dismissed me with a disinterested yawn and wave. 'Next!' she cried, while closely examining her bright pink manicure.

My initial outrage soon turned into introspection. The realization that you are being singled out by the leader of the free world, a 'melting pot' society that allegedly welcomes all, is not a happy one. For me, it was a quick, harsh peek into the reality of living in a country as a foreigner, outside the protected environment of a university and of the place that you call home. As I scrambled to put my things back in my backpack and shut down my computer, I realized that although this might have been one of the more uncomfortable of my experiences in the US, it was no longer surprising to be treated this way; as if I were an outsider, someone who did not completely belong.

## CLAIMING OWNERSHIP OF HER BODY

Amina Yaqin

Over the past few years media headlines in Pakistan have often turned to the woman question, taking note of controversies over the annual Aurat March that takes place on 8 March, International Women's Day. The event routinely evokes powerful emotions with liberals endorsing it as a move against social stereotypes and the *gatekeepers* of women's chastity disapproving of it. At the centre of the recent controversy is the poster campaign perceived by the latter as a threat to the patriarchal hold over society. Interestingly, some of the posters created by well-known designer and illustrator Shehzil Malik, have reached the level of public art. Malik is committed to empowering women by 'giving them ownership of what they wear'.

'My body, my choice' is a feminist slogan that asserts an individual's right to self-determination over their bodies for sexual, marriage and reproductive choices. This year the marchers' slogan '*Mera jism, meri marzi*' (my body, my choice) appropriately captured in Urdu the defiance of the powerful feminist rallying call for the local audience. However, the move was seen as an undue Westernization of the 'moral nation' metaphorically baring women in public. The slogan – offensive to the conservatives – led to a petition against the march that was rejected by the Lahore High Court. However, in order to exercise their right to protest without disruption, the march organizers were instructed by the court to get the relevant No Objection Certificate from the local authorities.

The march, not unexpectedly, triggered a debate and dissension too. A well-known Urdu scriptwriter and director, Khalilur Rehman Qamar, who has been in the news for his popular drama *Mere Pas Tum Ho* (I have you) and its misogynistic representation of women, lost his temper during a live debate hosted by the Urdu news channel Neo News. He unleashed outrage at what he termed as violation of the Urdu language by sexually explicit slogans unsuited for a language of polite innuendos and subtle metaphors. When his fellow panelist, Marvi Sirmed, a journalist and campaigner for gender justice in Pakistan, interrupted him by seeking to offer a counterpoint to show her disagreement, he swore at her, calling her a 'bitch' and a worthless woman whose body was of no interest to anybody. The full exchange was aired live without any intervention by the channel other than some feeble attempts by the chair that reaffirmed Qamar's authoritative position on the panel. This gave Qamar the platform to reiterate his position as a gatekeeper of Urdu's moral landscape determining what can and cannot be said. In other words, if you speak Urdu you must abide by certain rules of decorum or you'll be thrown out of the community. Thus the language that gave the anticolonial struggle and later workers' movements on the subcontinent some of their most stirring slogans ('Inquilab Zindabad') was held hostage to a limiting.

Here I would like to think through how the divisions over women's representation impact culture, class, family and the politics of belonging in Pakistan.

## DRAUPADI: THE DAUGHTER OF FIRE

Danielle Hall

The *Mahabharata* has existed as one of the great Sanskrit epics from ancient Indian times, captivating audiences across cultures and ages. Surprisingly, the appeal of its fundamental teachings about dharma and history has shown no sign of erosion over the centuries. The secret of the epic's resilience has been ascribed to its simultaneously mythological and didactic narrative. It has resisted hundreds of years of potential erosion because of its transformation in popular imagination from a mere tale of kings and princes to a gripping account of war and suffering as a consequence of deep flaws in their characters. It holds a mirror to our life guiding us in our practice of politics and statecraft. Multiple redactions of the *Mahabharata* now exist across a wide range of cultural forms as its central themes or characters have been used as vehicles through which the existing story can be retold, or an altogether new story can be created. Oral retellings have long been superseded by new presentations, interpretations and re-imaginings of its story in both written and visual form.

It comes as no surprise to learn that less than 40 years after the invention of the very concept of film, Rustomji Dhotiwala's *Mahabharat* (1920) was released. Although visual representations of key moments in the *Mahabharata* had long existed in paintings, such as those found in Rajput kingdoms, this new medium of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be a popular way of accessing the story. Many revisions of the narrative have since followed, with the likes of the 1965 version of *Mahabharat* as directed by Babubhai Mistri. Such cinematic interpretations continue to be produced at the turn of this new century, demanding greater budgets in order to truly honour and reflect the importance of this story to Indian life. The lure of extravaganza and spectacle using new technology, outdoor shootings and rising fees of actors had already made filmmaking an extremely costly proposition. Amaan Khan's *Mahabharat* (2013) has been touted as the most expensive film in Bollywood yet. Of course, re-imaginings of the story appear in a multitude of other films, but the revisions I have selected demonstrate how the demand to see the story of the *Mahabharata* remains as great as it ever was.

In addition to the high grossing Bollywood interpretations, a number of TV dramas have also serialized the tales of the *Mahabharata*. Its twists, turns and cliffhangers make for an ancient story which still has the ability to generate high viewing figures week after week. Swastik Pictures' *Mahabharat* (2013) and BR Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1998-1990) give historical representations of the story, whereas *Kahaani Hamaaray Mahaabhaarat Ki* (2008), produced by Balaji Telefilms, takes a modern viewpoint with a contemporary interpretation of its story in a new context. Peter Brook also created the critically acclaimed nine-hour play, *The Mahabharata* (1985), using another medium to present key parts of the story. Yet, as well as such visual re-interpretations, the *Mahabharata* exists in a multitude of literary works too. *Leela's Book* (2011) by Alice Albinia re-imagines the *Mahabharata*, parodying its relationships in a new context. Similarly, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) also uses the backdrop of this Hindu epic to recast the story of the Indian independence movement in 1947.

## MY LORD OR MY LADY?

Leila Seth

The year is 1942; the month, September. It is a few weeks before my twelfth birthday. I am a student at Loreto Convent School in Darjeeling and have just got news that my father, who is in a railway hospital in Calcutta (now Kolkata), has died. I am devastated; and all I can think of, is his promise to send me to England for higher studies if I work hard and do well in my examinations.

My mother finds it hard to afford the school fees for my three brothers and me. But with the help of friends and scholarships she somehow keeps our education going. She does not differentiate between her sons and daughter, and only wants us to excel. I come first in the whole of – undivided – Bengal in my Senior Cambridge examinations.

The next year, in August, the British rulers leave and India is split and becomes two independent countries, India and Pakistan. I do a course in shorthand and typing so that I can earn some money. Later, I join college in Calcutta. I decide to graduate in English Honours but there is a great political demand for spreading Hindi in India. I am forced to take Hindi as a compulsory subject and do not pass the Hindi examination, so I lose my Honours and eventually get a compartmental result. I am unhappy.

I am married at 20 to Premo Seth, a shoemaker (a *mochi!*). My mother had never tired of repeating the adage, ‘It is no disgrace to be a shoemaker, but it is a disgrace for a shoemaker to make bad shoes.’ I suppose it had sunk in. So I found him to be ‘a suitable boy’; 27 years old, working with the Bata Shoe Company, ‘England returned’ and didn’t want a dowry. Luckily, he made good shoes. The best thing about him was he was caring and understanding and gave me the space to grow.

Well, grow I did; first physically and then otherwise. After 15 months of our marriage we had our first child, Vikram. He was always a poet at heart and has grown – as you would very well know – into a writer of repute.

After a couple of years of Vikram’s birth, the Bata Shoe Co. posted Premo to their office in London. This gave me an opportunity to further my studies. I always wanted to be a teacher and had a dream of opening my own Montessori school. So I did a six-month Montessori diploma course. But subsequently, I decided to study for the Bar exam, although only after ascertaining that it required minimum attendance, as I had a young child to look after and no domestic help.

Due to holidaying in Spain and bad, or rather no planning, our second son, Shantum, was born a few months before the Bar Final examination. This certainly created some logistical problems. We could not afford a babysitter, so I could not attend any more lectures and was without any guidance regarding the exams. Premo applied for three days’ leave for the actual days of the examination, but was not sure it would be granted.

## DELHI'S SCARLET WOMEN

Ankur Dang

The city seemed big and bustling like always. Business transactions were taking place, cash registers ringing, marinated meat was being skewered, boxes labelled and cartoned, packaged goods loaded onto rickshaws, lorries packed to the brim, shoppers busy looking at the new brands – all this even as some people quarrelled on the street. Nobody seemed to stop or idle around. The air was thick with a cocktail of various smells. At the first glance, there was nothing even remotely remarkable about Swami Shradhanand Marg, better known as GB Road, the infamous red light district of Delhi.

It was a rather cloudy day. There was a slight chill in the air, but it didn't seem to affect business in the least. If you tried hard enough, you could see the old stock exchange of Delhi, Zakir Hussain College, and Doordarshan Bhawan in the distance. Dusty roads, jammed by the chaotic traffic of carts, cars and all types of cycles greeted me as I made my way into the Street of Love. Ironically, nobody comes here looking for love, at least not the kind of love you'd read about in a romance novel. Depending upon how one sees it, sin and love are two sides of the same coin in this little world, where commerce and sex intersect.

The world's second-largest red light district is just yet another market during the day – unpretentious, and therefore unassumingly deceptive. Automobile spares, hardware items, machine parts, electrical goods, hosiery, clothing, foodstuffs; you name it and it's all here. However, as you move your eyes towards the upper floors of these shops, you would see very old, crumbling structures that from the outside look like very tiny rooms, with barely enough space to house even two people. There is a certain amount of charm to these rooms though. They look like something out of a history textbook or an old parallel cinema movie. You could almost see a coy nautch girl suggestively looking down at you, instead of the perfectly ordinary looking girl hanging clothes out to dry.

Based upon what I'd heard and read of red light districts, I was quite unprepared for such a normal market scene. In my mind, red light districts were places of sadness and broken dreams, hurt womanhood and cheap thrills. Perhaps, like a forlorn love-hotel from a Murakami novel. However, leaving my pre-conceived notions behind, I continued walking towards my destination. To the uninitiated, GB Road would be a puzzle. It is, somehow, hidden yet not hidden, like an open secret which never seeps out of its enclosure. Yet, for the largest red light area of Delhi, GB Road does a very good job in being utterly discreet. And if you're a woman or someone who looks like she wouldn't want to be a customer, the people of this area would not guide you to the brothels, commonly called kothas. Perhaps the fear of raids is what instills such secrecy into them. However, with a little help from the local policemen, I was able to gain entry to one of the brothels with ease. I made my way up the stairs, treading carefully because of the steep and fragile nature of the steps and squinting from the lack of illumination.

## BEING THE OTHER

### Arundhati Ghose

Perhaps the most detailed and scathing analysis of the origins and wide prevalence of prejudice can be found in Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*. In this tome he illustrates how the Other is not only created, but judged on the basis of the creation as being the diametric opposite of the creator and judge; the dominant defines himself, therefore, through and against the dominated. Of course, while Said speaks of Western perceptions and study of the non-West, much of what he says can be as easily applied to the approaches to and prejudices about ethnic, religious, caste, colour, geographical and linguistic issues, to name a few. But what cuts across every culture and all strata of society is the prejudice against women – the eternal Other. There is, of course, a large body of work on women's studies, feminist writings and essays on issues relating to the status of women, but as a non-scholar of these issues, I am not aware of any that has examined the roots, the origins and the global cultural prevalence of prejudices against women. In India, there are multiple roots, from the *Manu Smriti* and other *shastras*, to borrowed perceptions from other societies, medieval Muslim or Victorian Christianity. As a result, women have been and are still by and large, treated as the Other, to be studied, portrayed, created, if you will, in images and stereotypes that define her as 'less' or 'lacking', as secondary to the main narrative, as susceptible to, and deserving of, domination.

Not being a sociologist or an expert on the issue, I am perforce dependent on my personal encounters with prejudice; and how subliminal and deep-seated the prejudices run that many harbouring such prejudices are not even aware that they are doing so and those at the receiving end only have a sense of discomfort rather than outrage. Before proceeding any further, I have to caveat my narrative with the submission that prejudice is not to be equated with discrimination which would entail overt forms of prejudice, though prejudice may give rise to discrimination. Prejudice, on the other hand, may only be an incorrect behaviour or attitude, impacting the intended person by affecting her self-esteem rather than her physical wellbeing. Secondly, since I will mainly be referring to events from my past, it is necessary to keep in mind the socio-historical context in which the events took place. While this does not in any way discount the fact that our society is one which is evolving, one can perhaps reflect upon the responses to these incidents, as to how commonplace or how outrageous they might seem to different readers. Besides, despite the overt changes prejudices still exist, if only less widely accepted or formalized than rank discrimination.

At a recent lecture (where there was a fair representation of women) on the approach of corporate India to the new Indian government, the speaker, a leading industrialist and apparently a man of otherwise impeccable manners, said that keeping in view the mobility of the Indian workforce it was clear that 'women are smarter than men'. I do not need to point out to the discerning reader the prejudice inherent in what might seem to be an unexceptionable statement. The prejudice is subliminal and while no offence was meant, women are seen as an undifferentiated group, rather than as individuals in their own right, with capacities and capabilities as varied as those of men.

## **IF I HAD REMAINED IN INDIA I WOULD BE WRITING VERY DIFFERENT STORIES**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

**Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** is not a writer who hit the literary stardom as soon as she wrote her first book. Her writing career never had that fairytale element in it. Her protagonists, mostly women, have lived imperfect lives and suffered. They are resplendent in their ordinariness. Their creator too is like an everywoman who has fought hard for everything that is hers now. That unassuming persona comes across in all its unpretentiousness in the email interview she recently gave to **Bhaskar Roy**, *The Equator Line* Editor in Chief. Excerpts:

**The history of the 20th century is one long account of dislocation, of migration – millions of people leaving their homelands for other parts of the world. Perhaps more people have left home for new addresses since the World Wars than in the previous 1000 years. Think of the Indian subcontinent, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia. The journeys have shaped sensibilities, triggered a new creative urge. Nabokov, James Baldwin, VS Naipaul, Milan Kundera, Mavis Gallant... they all left home to write. Rushdie would not have been the writer he is if he never left Bombay. Memories of the old familiar streets, awkwardness of being in a new place, a new culture constantly forcing you to look back critically and in unconscious defence – all that gives a writer the first idea of a story. Do you see yourself still writing in your Calcutta home if you never got past immigration at the airport at an unearthly hour one day?**

This is a difficult question. I came to America when I was 19. I did not start writing until I was about 23 years old. In a way, immigration made me into a writer – it gave me the need to write in order to make sense of the tremendous changes in my life (I came from a traditional Bengali family). It gave me a subject matter. It allowed me the distance to see my culture and the life I had left behind more clearly. I hope I would still have been a writer if I had remained in India – certainly I know many wonderful Indian writers who never lived elsewhere. But I am not sure. What I'm certain of is: if that were the case, I would be writing very different stories.

**Perhaps it is important for everyone to look back, appraise old values, the culture in which he or she was born, in the light of the new life, where everything around you is a throwback to similar objects in the city left behind, hastening, sharpening the contrast, comparison. Is this how the outline of the first novel emerges?**

My first novel, *Mistress of Spices*, a novel of magical realism, was different. It is set in two locales, neither of which is remotely like the Kolkata I grew up in. But yes, novels like *Sister of My Heart* and *Oleander Girl*, set in Kolkata, did emerge like that. Although *Oleander* focuses on modern Kolkata.

## LIFE IN A DAY

Jennifer Fatogun

You wake up early in the morning and sigh. Sometimes, one day can seem like a lifetime. You sigh again and get out of bed and put on some shoes to head out to watch the sunrise. You realize you like your hometown in the Northeast at this time because its streets are empty, devoid of people. No one stares at you at this precise moment; no one calls you 'nigger', 'iong', 'Negro', 'kaala'. No one calls your hair 'steel wool'. Such things sting, but you smile anyway because you're the new kid in school and the last thing you want is an incident. You don't protest when people grab your hair or throw chalks or paper missiles at it (and at you) or stick stuff into it. You're new, you're the only black kid, and you're alone. You don't want to get into trouble; you have zero experience in handling this shit and your ma tells you to take the higher road by ignoring it. At 15, you're already an angry kid and the rage inside you is real and you take it out on your family. So real is this rage that your therapist tells you when you're 25 that you don't allow yourself to process anger. She asks you why this is and you tell her, 'I was very scared that my anger would translate into violence, so I'd literally run or walk it off while thinking and rationalizing my way out of it.'

But hey, it's 5 am, and the streets are still empty. It's perfect.

You head back home, shower, eat, and head out. Down the road someone yells 'Nigga'. You understand now that these ignorant wannabe gangsters don't understand that nigger is offensive. They think they're being cool. They think this is how we talk to each other. You want to tell them about Yoruba's strict adherence to manners and respect. Bad language like that, and particularly to strangers, is considered an embarrassment to the entire family. It could get you slapped in public and thrashed by your parents if you dared mention it at home. You don't call people 'your nigger'. You realize that they have seen movies stereotype African Americans as gangsters and have assumed that this is the appropriate language towards all black people.

It is not.

You walk into a place for lunch and before you can even order, people want to know if you eat fellow humans or insects and other weird things in your country. You stare at them with a blank expression and say 'yes'. People have already asked if there are schools, cars, and tall buildings in *Africa*, and you tell them you rode to school on your pet gorilla, who is also your big brother. They are not sure if you're kidding, even then. You shrug. You want to tell them that the Yoruba Kingdom as it stood was one that not only flourished but produced some of the world's most beautiful pieces of metalwork and wood carving. That its cultural roots have grown far beyond West Africa and into the new-age religions in the US, Brazil, Cuba, and elsewhere and have given roots to religions like Santeria and Voodoo. You want to tell them that the Yoruba system of governance was something that baffled the so-called civilized British.

## HOLLYWOOD HEROINES VS. BOLLYWOOD BEAUTY QUEENS

Kirti Kewalramani

In September 2013, hundreds of cameras flashed as young Nina Davuluri walked the ramp to make history by becoming the first Miss America of Indian origin. Her grace, readiness of mind, perfect, polite answers, and dance performance to *Om Shanti Om*'s 'Dhoom Tana' had won the judges' hearts away. As a fellow Indian-American, I was proud to see the crown sparkling on her head. To me, Nina Davuluri is what most Indian-Americans like me aspire to be – clever in studies, talented in dance, and graceful. As young Davuluri cried her tears of joy, I could not help but wonder, 'Could young Nina's victory possibly imply that more Indian-Americans will have a chance to participate in Hollywood? How do Indians back home feel about her? Would she have won the Miss India title too?'

Well, then there are ifs and buts, pauses and gaps. The face that sets a thousand ships off the Atlantic coast may not win approval on the Indian shore. The oomph girl in Beverly Hills may go completely unnoticed in Malabar Hill. The beautiful in the United States may or may not be so in India. The cultural prism for assessing and appreciating beauty is largely defined by the media. And the media in India and their American counterparts have different ways of portraying beauty. Look closely at Marilyn Monroe and Madhubala – you know what I am trying to say. The perception of beauty varies from culture to culture. Beauty may lie in the eyes of the beholder, but it is the media that is responsible for setting the standards and raising a new icon, providing a cultural framework and benchmarking it. It creates a collective taste for appreciation of beauty. So the distance between the Bollywood *dream girl* and the Hollywood sensation will always be very long. Naturally, the roles actresses get to play on screen will be in accordance with the cultural sensibilities of the people. The media, particularly primetime television, and the film industry, tend to stereotype the propensities and prejudices of a culture. The expectations of women in America and the expectations of women in India can easily be understood by closely analyzing the way women are portrayed by their film industries.

Hollywood celebrates diversity which is reflected in the great number of movies that are produced every year. This diversity in genres allows for more challenging roles for actors. The highest paid actress in Hollywood is 38-year-old Angelina Jolie Voight. She has had an amazing career and even a more interesting personal life that has kept her in the spotlight for a very long time. Jolie is the daughter of actors Jon Voight and Marcheline Bertrand. Her parents divorced when she was young. Quite a few in her family are in the film Industry – including her brother James Haven, Uncle Chip Taylor, and godparents Jacqueline Bisset and Maximilian Schell. Jolie started her career as a child actor when she was seven, then committed to acting at the age of 16. She had trouble at first; she was told at auditions that she was too dark. Her career began with a low-budget film *Cyborg 2*, where she played the role of a half-human robot designed to seduce her way into the rival manufacturer's headquarters and then self-detonate.

## **A SCENE OF ROBUST HOPE AGAINST A BLEAK BACKDROP**

Ankita Anand

The afternoon bus that has started from Delhi stops for tea, and close to the shop there is a poster of a boxer. I know it won't be long before I reach Bhiwani, a bustling town in Haryana known intriguingly as Little Cuba. How an urban growth centre in the northern hinterland, home to a number of Haryana's top politicians who rode the waves of caste politics in the past, can have anything to do with Fidel Castro's socialist arcadia, the island off the coast of Florida? Rolling the question around in my mind, I go through my notes. The links show up. Bhiwani has produced the highest number of boxers representing India in the international sports meets. Of the five boxers qualified for the 2008 Summer Olympics, four were from Bhiwani. Vijender Kumar, a heavyweight boxer, won the bronze. Kavita Chahal, a woman boxer from here, won the bronze medal twice in the World Boxing Championship in the 81 kg category.

The tradition began with Captain Hawa Singh, an indomitable fighter who won the boxing gold in two successive Asian Games – 1966 and 1970. That was a time when brute instincts and raw courage were all that mattered. Indian athletes were yet to think of technology or foreign coaches. Training in another country was an exotic idea. After he walked off the ring in glory following a rewarding career, the army officer, built the boxing academy, the nursery for the long line of subsequent boxers, both men and women. Indeed, this district, about 125 km from Delhi, is closer to Cuba which boasts of two fabled boxers with three Olympic golds each. Boxing which once thrived on the island as a kind of tourist attraction, later took deep root there. Of its total haul of 73 Olympic medals, 37 were golds. Yes, Bhiwani is Little Cuba.

Jolted out of my travel into the history of this fierce sport, I find to my horror the passenger sitting next is trying to molest me. Shocked, angry, I confront the disgusting man. A frustrating but common experience for women travelling in many parts of the country. In Kavita Chahal country a woman traveller is made to feel vulnerable! Kavita, a policewoman, won the boxing gold in the two consecutive World Police Games. I think of the challenges Kavita and many other women athletes in Haryana must have had to overcome on the long road to success, defying an obsessive patriarchy that condones rape and is responsible for the state's skewed sex ratio.

My first stop in Bhiwani is Bhim Stadium at 7 next morning.

It's a scene of robust hope. Youngsters are in the middle of a practice session. Financed by the government, the local athletic hub is free and open to everyone. Nobody is turned away, a coach tells me, unless some athletes call it quits running out of steam. If a novice pulls out that does not really matter. If an ace athlete who has trained for years and successfully competed for medals, does, that indeed hurts the team. They do drop out when their parents cannot afford it anymore. No sport comes without a price tag.

## THE LADY VS. THE JUNTA

Veena Ravikumar

When I see the smiling face looking at me from a large portrait in our alumnae office, I marvel at the beautiful woman who inspires so many by her actions and demeanour.

She recently visited New Delhi, home to the Lady Shri Ram College where she was once a student, batch of 1964.

She walked into the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation Auditorium, composed and elegant, with the hint of an unstated charisma that has pulled millions of young men and monks to the pro-democracy movement in Burma over the years. She, of course, applauded the strong endorsement and backing from the people of this country of her attempt to restore democracy in Burma ending the long spell of army rule. However, she did not hold back when she sharply commented on the little support her movement for democracy had received from the Government of India.

There was excitement on campus over the visit of perhaps the best-known pro-democracy campaigner around the world. Frail, steely, the lady with flowers in her hair had transformed resentment against the junta into a mass upsurge. Her life under house arrest and continued military dictatorship in Burma troubled the conscience of the world. A group of Nobel laureates once gathered at the border of Burma to protest the junta's occupation of power and refusal to free her. For more than two decades, she has been an inspiring story, a cause the intelligentsia loves to rally behind.

The air over our campus too was heady with expectancy and camaraderie before the visit of the iconic leader, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. An alumna and a known person of the principal of the college, she became a veritable cause for the students and faculty of LSR. At LSR, we had always recalled her bravery with a certain amount of pride: in the face of the brutal repression of students and Buddhist monks by the military, she had stood up to the junta in Rangoon, and remained a prisoner of conscience for 15 years. Her unwavering commitment to her land and people and accounts of her personal sacrifices had been animatedly discussed around the world. This is the stuff leaders are made of, especially leaders like her.

The story of her life has the elements of folklore; the little princess, the damsel in distress, the intrepid Joan of Arc going into battle – she has been all that and much more. Aung San Suu Kyi was born on 19 June 1945 in Rangoon. Her father, Aung San, founder of the modern Burmese Army and the country's independence hero, was the de facto Prime Minister of British Burma. He was assassinated in 1947 by his rivals. When her mother Khin Kyi was appointed Burma's ambassador to India, Suu Kyi followed her to New Delhi. She graduated in 1964 with a degree in politics. Buddhism, Michael Aris. Their two children – Alexander and Kim – were born in 1973 and 1977.

## A LIFE WITHOUT STARS

Neeru Iyer

The driver's seat was pretty much the same as the passenger's – its heated leather surface inclined slightly backward, a thin pool of sweat gathered near my bottom.

My clammy palms curved around the smooth steering wheel. The leather was old; it still had the distinct smell of overuse. I tried to turn it, but it felt heavy and tight.

'You wouldn't have this problem in a new model with powersteering,' the salesman said through the window. I couldn't believe he was still trying to sell a new car to me. When my husband had only written them a check for close to 20 grand.

Umar shook hands with the showroom manager and got into the car. He then proceeded to make doubly sure he had all the helpline numbers, manuals, and all the receipts intact. I almost smiled. Umar was always painfully conscientious.

I wanted to ask him when I would sign up for driving classes, but I knew with the instinct of a wife that it wasn't the right moment. There weren't many, really. But at least I knew him well enough to know when to talk about things. Besides, I didn't want this to end like my desire to learn how to swim. The right moment for that never came.

I wanted to learn to swim, but it would never be the perfect time to nudge him about that.

In what I consider my family's golden years, my father had two cars. One of them was a snow-white Ambassador, a symbol of prosperity at the time; the other was a versatile red Omni.

On humid summer afternoons, my father would leave the Omni's doors open when he came home for lunch. But he knew, although my brothers and I remained silent in front of him, the moment his back disappeared into the house, we'd be climbing into the car and making loud vrooming noises, messing up the gears and leaving the stationary wheels at odd angles.

One day, when my mother discovered me scraping to reach the steering wheel, my feet not even touching the brake, she plucked me out of the car in a hurry.

'But I want to drive,' I wailed.

'It was only a game!' one of my brothers said, accustomed to being disciplined regularly at the end of our playacts.

'We didn't force Parveen!'

My mother just said to me, 'You don't have to drive. Your father will do that. Your brothers will do that when they grow up. That's what men are for.'

It was the same answer she gave me when I asked her why I couldn't cut my hair short or wear trousers.

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## OUT OF THE COBWEBS

Usha Hayes

Walking towards Ruislip Underground Station she looked up at the morning sky and noticed the crazy confusion of the seasons. The sun which had shone brightly a while ago livening up the carnations, magnolias, daisies and the soft tiny buttercups, suddenly hid behind layers of moist loitering clouds. All the four seasons seemed to have overlapped into each other.

The well-groomed young man in a black pinstripe suit, leaning against the arched iron back of the lone wooden bench, looked up from the front page of the *Metro* and slowly went back to it. The paper screamed Brexit! in red, and yet – he intermittently looked up until the train slashed out after a 40-second stop. The station didn't exchange many passengers and the seats around her continued to move languidly.

The windowpane had quickly cobbled up her face and splayed it out fleetingly. Surprised, she looked at herself, expecting a sad, shrunken face, the sum total of the year gone by, a terrible time that had seen her stop smiling, lose her wry sense of humour, and her faith in the battery of angels that she had believed since her childhood had thrown a protective ring around her.

The face on the windowpane was still youthful and lustrous, and belying her worst fears, unetched. The ravages within would perhaps take some more time to show through. There was much to cry about, but also, now increasingly to celebrate. The latter of course was an afterthought, almost like a prayer she had said as a child, fearing to fail her exams, or at night, to make sure she did not slide into the pit in a corner of the sprawling courtyard of their haveli near Patna, to ward off ghosts and witches. All negative thoughts, fears, she learnt as a child, had to be exorcised; otherwise they would grow into a demon to devour her. She had learnt this a long time ago.

The recorded voice from the train's public address system pelted out messages in a monotonous drone as the train whizzed through outer London towards Euston, swiftly bringing closer Big Ben, Whitehall and the Thames.

'This is an all-station Metropolitan line to Aldgate. The next station is Harrow on the Hill.' It was a middle-aged, seasoned voice delivered in received pronunciation.

And very similar in auditory properties to the one from his phone that would say when he was underground: 'It has not been possible to reach this number. Please try again later.'

All those years ago, 13 to be precise, on her first trip to London, when she had met and loved him, exchanged hugs, kisses and promises before going back to India, this voice would often pelt heaps of coal to singe her. Something happened inside her every time she heard him. Much later, this baritone gave way to a sensuous earthiness: 'Hello beautiful.' That lit up her first trip making her feel the lightness of being.

'Please stand clear of the doors. This train is ready to depart. This is an all-station Metropolitan line train to Aldgate. The next station is Wembley Park.'

She looked around. The coach was largely empty. Maybe I should move to the next coach, she thought and continued to look outside at the houses and parks running by the track.