

POETRY

Aha Nandalals

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Like my long dead father's face
 I'm forgetting the mole on your lower lip
 I'm forgetting the taste of cheap ice-creams

I'm forgetting that
 I learned to hate Nandalal
 since I was a boy.
 In these crippled cities,
 I must be a Nandalal to live on.

I'm forgetting the voice
 that used to bid me goodnight.
 It's hard to pull rickshaw
 keeping the mask on.
 Please! I can't breathe!

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FORGET-ME-NOTS

JOHN DREW

Splashes of blue in the springtime green,
 A braver array had never been seen.
 Little blue flowers, of flowers we dreamed,
 The flowers would go on forever it seemed,
Never so many forget-me-nots.

When dawn emerged the moon sank down,
 And birds were heard all over the town.
 The daffodils wilted, the tulips went
 But still the forget-me-nots weren't spent,
Never so many forget-me-nots.

This was the year the virus came,
 Raking the lungs with tongues of flame.
 Doctors worked without proper gear,
 None had been ordered for many a year,
Ever so many forget-me-nots.

The Earth is round, the Earth is flat,
 Some say this and some say that.
 Carry on, folks, go down to the pub,

But give your hands a jolly good scrub.
Ever so many forget-me-nots.

The rich went home and shut the door
 And left the streets to the hungry poor.

The buses crawled in their twos and threes,
 The drivers doomed by a cough or sneeze.
Ever so many forget-me-nots.

The sun still shone but stopped the clock:
 Locked down, we stayed in a state of shock.
 We clapped the carers and mourned the dead,
 We laughed and waved to cover our dread.
Never so many forget-me-nots.

Not daffodils yellow nor tulips red:
 Forget-me-nots blue remember the dead.

John Drew has lived on both sides of the Himalayas.

The Darkness Looming

FOUZIA MAHIN CHOUDHURY

They said, when it will be the darkest
 You must know the dawn is near.
 But it's not that dark yet
 That I can still see my fingers
 bleeding ink
 My hands tied tight
 And my face shadowed by
 a solar eclipse
 While my lips moaning
 to the magnetism of the moon.
 A wuthering typhoon
 I breathe.
 Smelling death
 My chest
 awfully heavy...
 So maybe it would be soon
 But not yet
 The darkest!
 But the darkness looming
 With an eye sneaking
 direct over my head
 No eyelets
 Lifeless

His cold metallic gaze
 Making certain
 My voice doesn't
 cross beyond this cell
 I have imprisoned me
 Sleep-deprived
 Listening
 howling at the mid-day light
 Tumult
 of the creatures of the night.
 Then it must be Now
 in the sky
 Sculpting a diamond ring!
 Or is it not?
 Is it still not that dark yet
 But the darkness looming?

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REVIEWS

An Intimate yet Epic vision: SURALAKSHMI VILLA

Aruna Chakravarti. ISBN-10: 9389109396. Picador India, 2020

REVIEWED BY NEEMAN SOBHAN

In the state of seige that we are living in across the world, or, like myself, in an Italy emerging from the pandemic battlefield, a riveting book is our best means of being transported beyond our confined horizons.

Just such a book is Aruna Chakravarti's richly imagined novel *Suralakshmi Villa*, which I read during the quarantine in Rome. Cocooned in the exquisite prose and the fascinating lives within its covers, I escaped to the world of Bengal of the past, its natural beauty, its lores and myths, and the stories of present day Bengalis.

After *Jorasanko* and *Daughters of Jorasanko*, her acclaimed historical fiction on the Tagore family, the Sahitya Akademi award winning Indian writer returns to pure fiction in this recent work. But history is never far away.

Suralakshmi Villa is both the multi-generational saga of a family home on the eve of its demolition, and the chronicle of the shared edifice of syncretic culture that housed both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis of undivided and post-partition India, till these seismic times of religious intolerance that threaten to destroy the historical structure of peaceful coexistence.

In the divisive world of riots, in which this book was launched this February, in Delhi, the novel exploring the interconnected local history and shared humanity of both Hindu and Muslim rural Bengal, lifts itself above the confines of fiction, on the wings of hope for mutual understanding and harmony in reality as well.

The writer deals with profound sensitivity, compassion and authenticity, an eclectic range of characters from both Hindu and Muslim communities of diverse socio-economic classes, and their intertwined lives and destinies.

The story starts in Delhi in relatively present times with an old villa being put up for sale, to be transformed into an apartment complex. The striking thing about the novel is that the owner and the house bearing her name are both protagonists and points of departure for a narrative journey that encompasses the stories of a myriad cast of characters whose lives intersect with both the villa and its mistress. Yet, much of the narrative takes place elsewhere.

Suralakshmi Villa is the portal through which we enter only to be led, as if through a backdoor, into the meandering geography of other lives. These concern both male and female characters, each vividly delineated with astute psychological insight. However, it's the gallery of women that brings this novel alive: full scale portraits, concise cameos, detailed miniatures, impressionistic sepia photographs, telling ink sketches, and incisive engravings of all sorts of women. We find both highly educated and illiterate women; independent, unconventional, and valiant women; and downtrodden, suffering but battling women.

In fact, the most memorable stories are those of the broken but brave women. Aruna Chakravarti's *tour de force* as a writer is the range of her deeply felt and impoverished Muslim characters, in rural Malda, struggling to keep their humanity in their sordid surroundings.

For me, the most powerful and lyrical part of the novel was here, in rural Bengal, where the author's most compassionate and compelling storytelling is deployed. The dialogue is full of the natural cadences and vocabulary reflecting the voice of each persona. Places are evoked with such visual and sensuous immediacy that even the ugly, the harrowing or the tragic have the impact and luminosity of poetry.

Those who have read Aruna Chakravarti's collection of short stories, *Secret Spaces*, might have read the story on which this novel is based. Whereas, in the short story we get a sketchy view of the muslim girl, Eidun's life, in the novel the strongest part is the exploration of Eidun's childhood: her brutish father, the goat-herd, her suffering mother, and three sisters (ironically named after queens) living in a slum like hall of an abandoned palace in what was once the kingdom of Goud, present day Malda.

What was the start of the short story, in Delhi, is subsumed into the prologue, and the actual novel opens with the chapter called "The Witch" and a stunning first line, which, being a spoiler, I will not reveal. Brilliant in evocative detail, the story of Eidun's maternal grandmother, despite its tragic elements is told with tenderness and humour. Particularly

touching are the anthropomorphic images of the Tamarind tree and Zaitoon Bibi living in the hovel beneath it.

By the time the prologue ends, we surmise what the story is about: resolving the mystery of Suralakshmi abruptly abandoning her home and child, taking with her Eidun. However, the central story, like the pebble setting a ripple in a pond, becomes less important than the world of the characters spinning from it, across time and space, plumbing the motivations for and the emotional repercussions of the action of the



prime mover.

Except for Suralakshmi, the dedicated gynecologist and unconventional protagonist, deliberately left as an elusive presence, most characters reveal dimensions that give them complexity and humanity. Among the strong female characters are: dominating matriarchs like Lakshmi debi, the mother of Suralakshmi and wife of Rai Bahadur Indranath Choudhury; Suralakshmi's cousin Pratul's paternal grandmother, "Korta Ma"; the crafty

mothers-in-law of Eidun's sisters Jeeni and Ojju, both of whom enlist their daughters-in-law as co-helpers and unpaid maids; the modern day journalist Joymita, the free spirited daughter of Tara and Pratul; and Tara, along with Deepa, the two grounded characters, who are instrumental in providing the reader with a deeper understanding of both Suralakshmi and her son Kingshuk.

In the cast of characters listed at the start, there are some brief appearances, but no minor characters. Each leaves an impact. Some, though, are not mentioned. For example, the co-wife of the protagonist Suralakshmi, is given no name except by the Villa (an invisible character in itself, telling its own tale) as that of "the Lady with the suffering eyes," and by Kingshuk as "Boro Ma," yet, despite her passive presence, she becomes a catalyst to the strong willed Suralakshmi's climactic decision at the end.

Then, there is Nadira, the female Museum guide of the Hazarduari palace in Murshidabad, who introduces a legendary character from local history: Bibi Begum, the Hindu lady, Shyamangini, who married a muslim nawab, who built her a temple to practice her religion, even as her children were brought up as muslims. Another unmentioned but fascinating cameo appearance is "Bishu Pagli," a Hindu girl who unearthed the tomb of a local Muslim saint, becoming a devotee and guardian, and gaining a following of disciples from both Muslim and Hindu faiths. The boatman Ayub, while navigating the cruise boat, in which the party of city dwellers, Suralakshmi, her friend Tara and cousin Pratul voyage down the Ganges, tells them stories of the legends of the villages they pass, including the one about Bishu Pagli, whom the city ladies meet in the forest at the Akhra of the Pir.

These incidental encounters and characters are nuggets of gold in the narrative, giving it an edge over Aruna Chakravarti's other novel, her accomplished first, *The Inheritors*, which was shortlisted for the Commonwealth award in 2004. Reminiscent of it for its multi-generational perspective and breadth of historical topics, yet the recent novel is more encompassing, layered, and moving.

"How beautifully you tell stories!...You make the past come alive as though you were actually there!" This is said of Nadira in the novel, but true of the writer herself. She deploys a mesmerizing array of storytelling techniques: a time frame that keeps the pendulum of the story swinging between the recent and remote past; diverse voices and perspectives, from first person reminiscences revealed through letters, dreams and flashbacks, to omniscient voices, both human and inanimate, such as the villa spilling the ultimate secret in the epilogue; and a palimpsest of local history, folklore, rituals, music and culinary traditions, in short, all the mythic and mystic elements of shared culture, forming what Suralakshmi calls "genetic memory."

The novel has some important male characters, too, who counterpoint the women: Kingshuk, abandoned by his mother and hungry for affection, hiding his tormented heart behind a mild personality shows up the brittleness of Joymita and the insightful depth of his wife Deepa, who sees through his inner conflicts but supports him, often without his knowledge. Pratul, is impatient with his impulsive cousin Suralakshmi but, like his wife Tara, protects her and accepts the instant empathy between Suralakshmi and Eidun. Some of the moving passages are Pratul's childhood memories of his bedridden mother and the quiet, wounded dignity of his maternal grandmother.

The characters I found equally captivating were the non-human ones: the Villa itself, and the natural world of rural Bengal, so lyrically evoked here. I would re-read the book just to make the boat trip down the Ganges, relishing the flora and fauna, the food, and the local history.

In these dark times, this work of literary fiction, with its intimate yet epic breadth of vision, is a magic carpet to carry you away.

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