

TRIBUTE

I remember Kamla Bhasin through her children's books

An iconic feminist activist, writer, and educator, Kamla Bhasin (1946-2021) breathed her last on Saturday, September 25.

SELIMA SARA KABIR

Words fall short to describe Kamla Bhasin: how does one begin to describe a force of nature like her? Perhaps the simplest way to do so is with the word 'love'. Kamla was many things to many people—most famous for her fierce feminism, activism, and work in development, rights, peace and justice. However, at the core of it, I believe, Kamla embodied love.

It was her love of people—and of doing right by the people she loved so dearly—that made her work feel so accessible to everyone. 'Accessible' feels like a good word to describe Kamla as well. Despite being so beloved across borders, particularly in South Asia, Kamla never came across as aloof or distant. She was always there, on the ground, right beside you. It is what makes her work so special.

Kamla founded Sangat, a South Asian feminist network, and co-founded Jagori, a women's resource centre after leaving her job of 25 years with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. She was also the South Asian coordinator of the One Billion Rising campaign. Through these organizations, and through collaborations with individuals and institutions across South Asia, Kamla strived for gender justice and equality. She was one of the leading forces of the South Asian feminist movement, having shaped the outcomes of protests against dowry and having impacted the anti-rape laws in the country as well as the rhetoric around sexual assault and violence, the famous Shah Bano divorce case,



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

and more. To attempt to capture Kamla's legacy in this article would be doing it a disservice, for the extent of her impact on women's rights and the richness of her knowledge and compassion can fill pages upon pages of text.

She had immense talent in breaking down complex concepts to their simplest essence so everyone can grasp them. The books she wrote on gender, patriarchy, masculinity and more, which have been translated and adopted into several Women's Studies courses, never feel too difficult to understand. I remember her telling

us once, as we sat around the table having tea, that it does not make sense to write in academic jargon that very few can make sense of. It was an off-hand remark, as we shifted from story to story as Kamla regaled and entertained us. However, it was one that stuck with me through anything I tried to write.

In that vein, I must admit that my favourite works by Kamla are not her books on feminism. Important as they are, I believe her true talent lay in the witty rhymes she crafted for children's books. In a world where many are still struggling to find

compassionate, feminist books to read to children, Kamla left us a treasure trove. Her children's books unpack the need to humanise mothers, they explore gender roles, and her more recent books, such as the one about her iconic, little red electric car, *Laal Pari*, also discuss environmentalism. There is something magical in being able to distill these important, relevant messages into easy-to-grasp rhymes that we can teach to our children.

Yet Kamla's mastery over words extends far beyond the written word. She has also crafted several chants and songs that form the backbone of

organisations such as Sangat and One Billion Rising. Famously, her chant *Azadi* gained popularity outside of activists and development workers when it was discussed in the context of a song of the same name in Zoya Akhter's film *Gully Boy* (2019). Kamla's cleverness and creativity is reflected in how the chant has evolved over the years—she has added verses to the chant to suit whatever situation she is in. For example, from starting out as only being about the patriarchy, the slogan took the shape of, "Azadi from helpless silence, azadi from violence, azadi from media vultures, azadi from nuclear thunder" during a conference in Beijing in 1995. In several interviews, Kamla herself has stated that, "Everything is so bloody interconnected," and so it is impossible to untangle the desire for freedom for women, from the freedom from caste, class, and other socioeconomic factors.

She wore all of her hats so effortlessly. It is a testament to how strongly she believed in the things she stood for, that she was able to carry them with her through whatever she did. Whether she was telling jokes (I still sometimes find myself flipping through Sangat's book of feminist jokes, *Laughing Matters*, by Kamla Bhasin and Bindia Thapar), singing songs, or just having an earnest conversation, Kamla's conviction and heart shone through.

I was lucky to get to know Kamla Bhasin at an age where I wasn't really able to comprehend the magnitude

of her. For me, she was my phupu, Khushi Kabir's kind, raucously funny friend who was visiting from India. My earliest memory of her goes back to when Kamla had brought for me a bunch of adorably illustrated books—which I later learned she had written—including the Bangla translations of *Ulti Sulti Meeto* and *Dhammak Dham*.

These books quickly became my favourites at the time. *Ulti Sulti Meeto* definitely topped the list. It was about a silly young girl who did everything differently and how that's alright. Naturally, as a child, this was a special message. Growing up, however, I realised it was written for her daughter who had passed away. This was the magic that Kamla could weave, she could take the tragedies of life and turn it into something fun and beautiful for everyone else. She channeled this energy throughout her life, and even a few weeks before her passing she would share photos and videos of her singing and enjoying life and reminding us to do the same.

Kamla, though she may no longer be here among us, will live on through her work, her written word, as well as her chants, poems and songs, her kindness, her humour, and above all else, in the hearts of all who knew her.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Can widowhood be freeing?

NAMRATA

Long after I was done reading *The Illuminated* (HarperCollins India, 2021), by Anindita Ghose, I kept thinking about *Girl in White Cotton* (2020) by Avni Doshi. If one had to choose any recent novel that captured the crevices of a vacillating mother-daughter relationship accurately, it would be these two.

Ghose's debut work is as much about Shashi, a recently widowed mother who is struggling to cope with her loss, as it is about Tara, her daughter who is battling her own demons. Bringing together their vulnerabilities and strengths in a narrative that is part poignant and part erratic, *The Illuminated* keeps you on your toes. These women are mourning and struggling to cope with their grief and loss, which in Shashi's case manifests in freedom, mixed with relief and guilt. The book thus deals with sensitive topics like abuse, trauma, dysfunctional families, parental neglect, death, and adulthood in a remarkable way.

In one of her recent interviews that I attended at the Asia Society India Centre, Ghose talked about the extensive research she had to conduct for the characters of both Shashi and Tara, both of whom are scholars of history and philosophy. The research therefore included reading Sanskrit poetry and other texts of Tagore, Hegel, Kant, and Adorno to get into the characters' mindset. In addition, the author's friends also acted as inspirations in shaping her protagonists. For Ghose, it was important to depict how different Shashi and Tara are despite being biologically related. They are from the same class and have had similar lifestyles. However, the experiences which shaped them were strikingly different.

Shashi came from a different time, in which marriage played out differently for women. She laments the PhD she had to quit to embrace motherhood. Nevertheless, Shashi is sure she won't let the past define her present or future. Tara, on the other hand, knows what she wants and can afford those choices. Still, she continues to exist in a state of constant confusion for a larger part of the novel.

Both women have different coping mechanisms for their distress. Shashi copes with her feelings of grief, freedom, and relief combined with guilt with grace and optimism. Her self-acceptance can be inspiring and humbling for the reader. In one particular scene, Shashi is consoled by being reminded that "[she] had a good marriage". Her subdued response points out that it was her husband who had a good marriage; she was a small part of it. "I mourn him. But I also mourn me", she reflects.

Meanwhile, Tara allows self loathing and anger to rule her life long before realising the implications of her actions, disguising

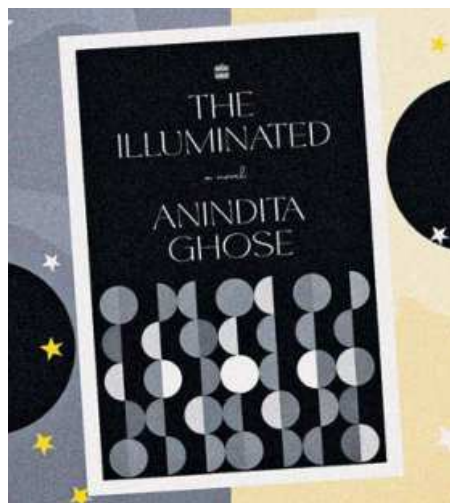


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

her lack of clarity with stubbornness. She struggles to depict herself as an independent woman who is in complete control of her life.

One cannot ignore the roles of men in these women's lives. They bring in the romance and the drama with their antics and Ghose captures exceptionally well the quintessential male ego, with its fragility and virility intact. In a lot of places, though Shashi and Tara are mourning the same man, the difference in their perceptions of and experiences with Robi—husband to one woman and father to another—makes it seem as if they are mourning two different men.

Their journeys, too, are completely in contrast with each other's, making us wonder: How do you cope with the loss of a loved one? And is there ever a right way to do so?

Shashi's story showcases some very relevant challenges faced by women in our society even today, when it comes to inheritance, living alone, handling financial matters, etc. The role of the MSS organization, replete with their leaflets on different behavioral guides for women and widows, hit close to home.

The journey of Shashi and Tara is intertwined with the waning and waxing of the moon layering the narrative explicitly with these comparisons time and again. From the title of the book to its cover, structure, chapter titles, and the name of the characters inspired by the moon (Shashi) and the stars (Tara), the metaphors are compelling. The story ends on a full moon night, suggestive of these women coming out in full glory after all the dark phases of their lives.

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REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

The need to be fierce: Toni Morrison allows a mother to explain her actions

In this monthly series, we review short stories that deserve to be rediscovered and appreciated.

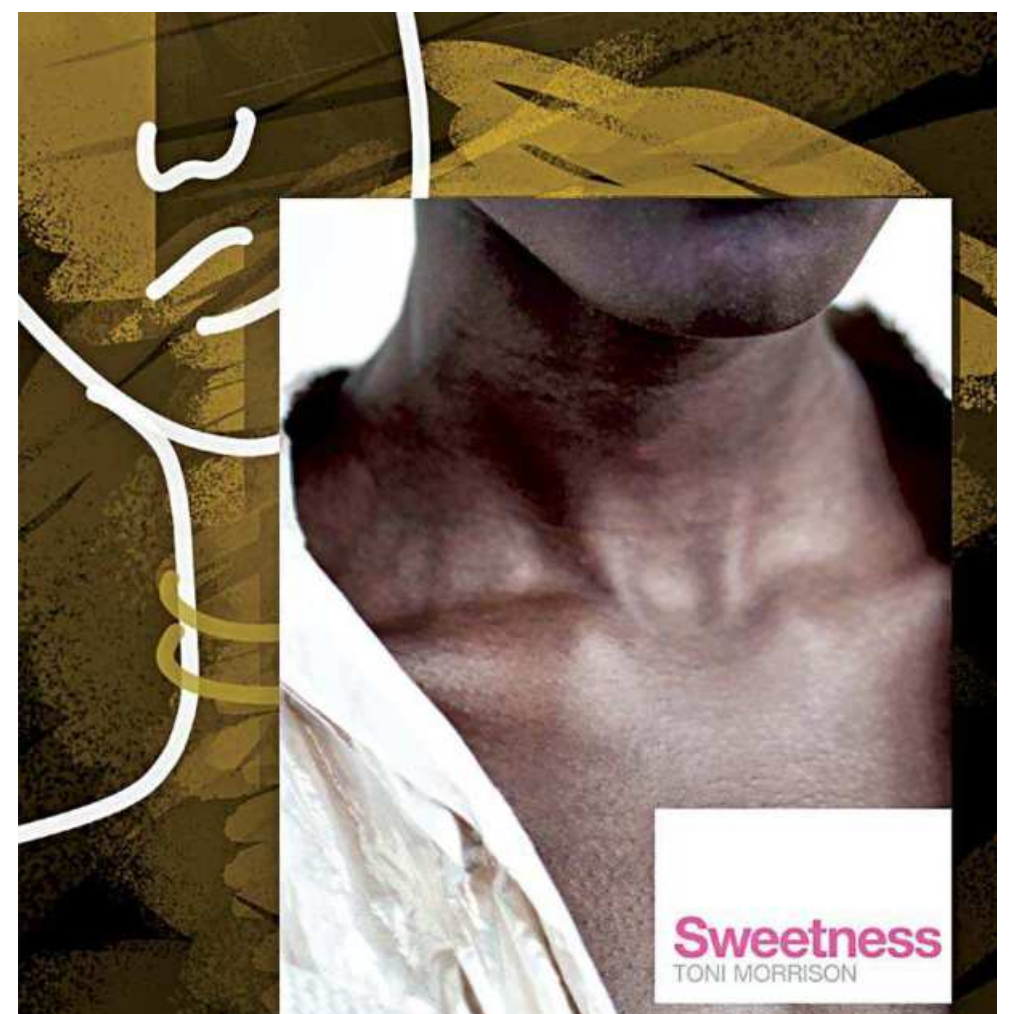
MAISHA SYEDA

Anyone familiar with Toni Morrison's work would know about the gutting picture of slavery and racism that she painted with her stories. I remember, from when I first read *Beloved* (1987), that the powerful narrative shocked and terrified me, but it also came with the promise of an enriching experience to be found in post-colonial literature. I delved deeper into Morrison's other works—perhaps to learn about and have a working understanding of, even if it was only the tip of the iceberg, the collective experiences of African-American people and the trauma that has reverberated throughout the generations born hundreds of years after the American civil war. One such work that I came to love forevermore was Toni Morrison's short story, "Sweetness" (*The New Yorker*, 2015).

"She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color...", a woman narrates in the opening scene of the story, as she frantically inspects her daughter minutes after giving birth, a voice that we later come to identify as 'Sweetness'. She is distressed about how her daughter's 'blackness' will reflect on her in a racially discriminatory America. As her daughter, Lula Ann, grows up, Sweetness mistreats and distances herself from the child, and even blames her for Sweetness's husband leaving, reasoning that she is only "hardening" Lula Ann to confront the cruelty of racism.

This story draws its strength from the viewpoint of its narration, in which Sweetness engages the readers by directly addressing them as she explains her actions and the mistreatment of her daughter. Her tone is equally affecting—simple, almost crude, yet powerful, sombre, and palpably claustrophobic. I find this most remarkable in Morrison's work that she uses language that is clean and uncomplicated, yet she manages to create an atmosphere of great complexity, evidently alluding to the complex themes of her fiction.

The themes of survival, acceptance, and liberation (from prejudice) at any cost echo throughout Morrison's larger body of work. In *Beloved*, for instance, Sethe is haunted by the child she killed in order to protect it from the violence of racism. In placing these ideas alongside the writer's other works, including *Sweetness*, another pattern makes itself



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

apparent across her oeuvre.

It didn't take me long to realise that the theme of postpartum depression is prevalent in most, if not all, of Morrison's works. Besides her physical and psychological state, the narrator of "Sweetness" is a victim to society's norms. The story, therefore, reads almost like an erratic rant at times, but perhaps it is closer to a lonely person pouring her heart out to the sole being who will care to listen—the reader. It is tragic the way she takes her roughness with Lula Ann with a grain of salt, yet as a human being she is losing the fight against the world. In the context of Morrison's body of work, "Sweetness" thus provides a rich and nuanced insight into the mind of a mother, a woman, an African-American hounded by the political

realities of her time.

Sweetness's need to be fierce and pragmatic, as a mother often is, may be egregious, but there are moments when her helplessness betrays her sternness; there is almost a silent plea in her tone when she defends herself. In a time when America is still rife with racism, the mother despairs for her daughter's future. She is skeptical about their survival in a grossly othering society. And she is afraid for herself.

Toni Morrison's "Sweetness" is available on [The New Yorker website](#).

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