

ALSPHERE

ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE

JULY, 2022

ALS LITFEST

2022

SPECIAL FEATURE

**INTERVIEW WITH
MEENAKSHI NATARAJAN**

**AUTHOR & FORMER
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT**

ALSPHERE

Literary & Art Magazine

July 2022

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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Readers

We are happy to release yet another intriguing and enthralling issue of ALSphere Magazine.

We offer you a bouquet of heartfelt poems and stories that express emotions of love as well as separation; some talk about the precious moments of our lives; some urge us to listen to our consciousness and be the true version of ourselves. There is an article in the spirit of 'Ekla Chalo Re' that talks about the strength in walking alone in the journey of life, and another about the echoes of silence and how silence can be the loudest scream and the greatest strength.

There are creative expressions of fascinating art in various forms as well as photographs that take you to places.

Every month we present insights, views, and ways of parenting and nurturing special needs children. This month we have covered an interview with Ms. Fionika Sanghvi, principal of SPJ Sadhana School for Special Needs, Mumbai, to share the perspective of a facilitator about the manner that can enhance the development of special needs children.

Our special feature this month is the interview with Ms. Meenakshi Natarajan, a woman who's admired for her intellect, efforts and views in her role as a politician as well as an author. Ms. Natarajan is a former Member of Parliament, and the author of two books.

I hope you find this issue a great companion to enjoy the monsoon season.

Happy reading!

Vandana Bhasin
Editor



A Forest Flower

A forest flower grows unknown, unseen
In the thick forest catching a beam
The flower never questions why
The rain falls or birds do fly

Content with the role it plays
Adding beauty to sundry days
Rooted, down-to-earth it grows
Simple are the ways it knows

Growing up to be the best it can
It holds no idol or temple plan
Competing not with neighboring flowers
Equally on all its fragrance showers

Despite the ants or bees, it grows
I think it knows
A way to be,
A way that's beautiful and lively!

Jyoti Prateek



Mizpah

Words so many she had never said,
A lot of feelings just remained unexpressed

Ample of time together, she thought they had,
Hardly did she know what destiny lay in hand

Forgetting was impossible; in her heart he was carved forever,
But death had been ruthless in taking him away from her

All his things in the house seemed to be in their place,
Even his coffee mug, she left untouched in its case

His musky duft mesmerized her all day and night,
Making her restless and urge for him with all might

She frequently opened his wardrobe and felt his clothes,
His myriad fragrance, the only way now left, to feel him close

Her love for him never seemed to cease,
With every passing moment, it just tended to increase!

Sheetal Pradhan Deshpande



Disguised Entity

She looked at me with imploring eyes
I looked away, one more time
She has no right to survive
I decided, I must smother her
And leave her to die
For I knew, if I didn't
Someday, she would defy
And reveal all my lies
Those till date, I had disguised

Under the shroud of societal validity
She must always hide
For I had no courage to change the tide
And divulge that inside this body of a man
A lively, vivacious woman wailed everyday
To be free from bondage
Of small human minds!

If only, she could survive...

Vandana Nadar



Love's Musings

Traffic jam on a busy lane
Like a clot in a deep blue vein

A thousand powers conspire
Against the forces of desire

Battles once won are lost
My heart's missing, forever gone

The noise, the lights, and the smoke
Can't stop these thoughts of love

Darkness closes behind me
As night swallows twilight

Every turn of the wheel
Takes me closer to a love that's real

I get that feeling – a kind of rush
I'm coming home to you – to us!

Rupali Mistry



Prisoner

We, the prisoners of destiny,
Bound by the norms of society,
Encircled with boundaries,
Of traditions and customs.

Freedom, though precious,
Gets curtailed as we grow,
Prisoned by our myths,
Never to bloom and glow.

Prisoners of our dreams,
Prisoners of our aspirations,
Struggling with perspiration,
Longing for life's adulations.

Life is indeed a troubled ride,
Flowing in the turbulent tide,
Full of hopes yet imprisoned,
In the so-called worldly prison.

Latha Warriier



Timeless Moment

At dusk,
The day looked bone tired

With indolent ease,
Birds flapping their wings journeyed homeward

I could hear the gentle footsteps-
A timeless moment, stopping by at my doorstep

My heart skipped a beat as I waited
My ears stuck to the wall, footsteps coming closer

An agonizingly infinitely long wait
For that awe-inspiring knock!

I was astounded by the sheer timeless beauty
Of that ethereal moment

The ensuing calmness
A lull before the storm

I readied myself to grab that moment
To make it just mine, life's kaleidoscopic panorama

Alas! All too soon that precious moment
Like the morning dew, it vanished

Without a trace, gone forever
Bewildered I was left, with my uneven heartbeat

Piercing the gnawing silence
Within me!

Bhargavi Ravindra



Motherhood

"Look! The two strips are strongly announcing your motherhood."
The elderly lady who had thrown words of accusation on her, calling her barren, was busy distributing sweets.

Did she realize that it was her son who had to undergo treatment to father the kid?
Why is the girl always blamed?

Sudha Vishwanath

Friend

Ramya, a lonely child, would walk to school every day. She looked happy these days. Mom surreptitiously followed her to find out the reason.

On her way, Ramya sat down on the roadside with an old woman, sharing her lunch and listening to stories.

Mom smilingly waved at Ramya's newfound companion.

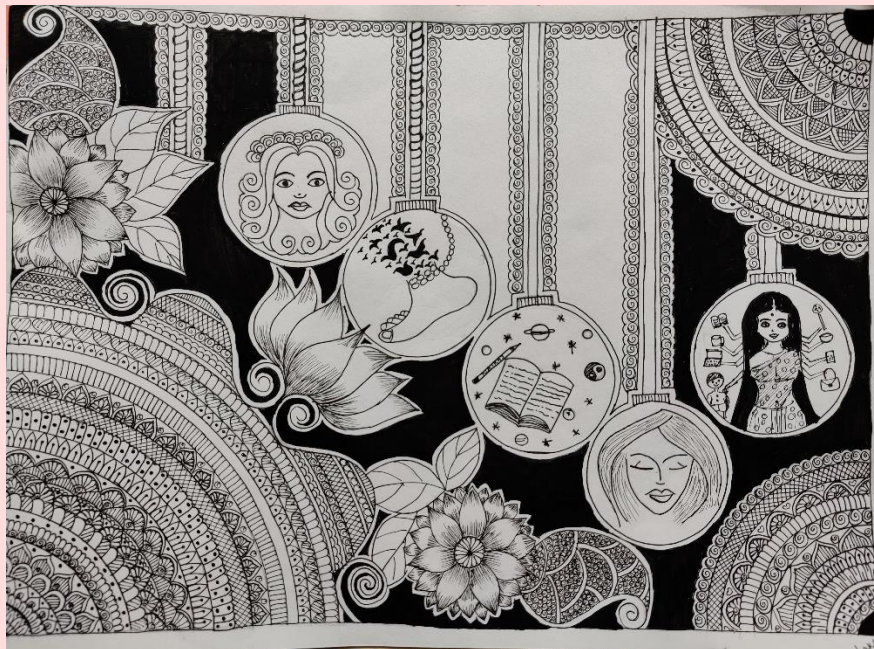
Manisha Amol

The Gift

Her gleaming face expressed her love unabashedly and I rushed toward her with the same eagerness. As I came closer, I saw what she had held in her mouth- her newborn pup. She had brought it out of hiding, only for me!

The most precious gift bestowed so unconditionally: Trust.

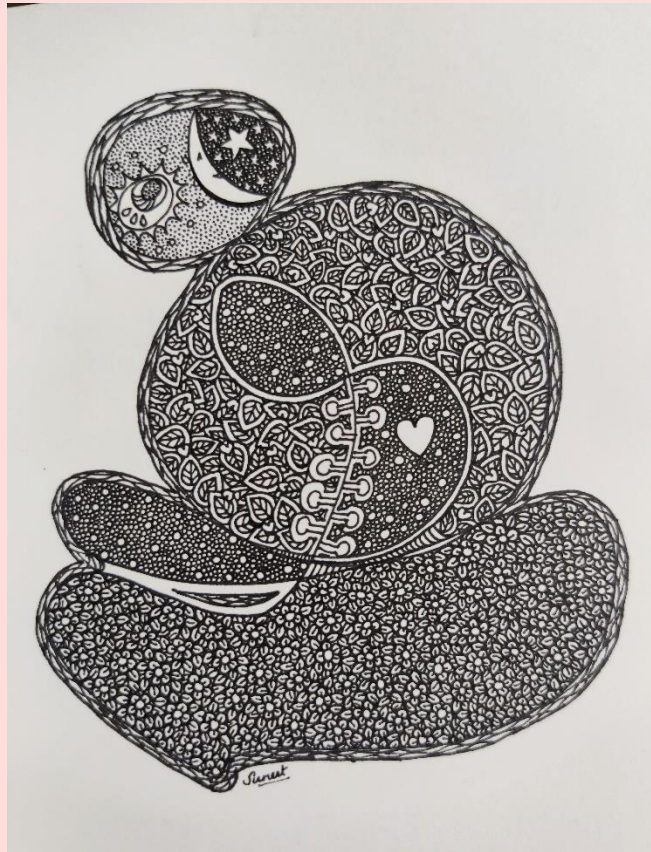
Vandana Nadar



Artwork titled "Woman- The Mystical Glory" by artist Lakshmi Ajoy

In the words of the artist:

A woman is the most aesthetic creation of the Universe. She symbolizes beauty, strength, ambition, endurance, desires, dreams, and aspirations. She is not just a multitasker but also someone who can handle challenges with utmost ease. My mandala is a simple dedication to the power creation of the Universe.



Artwork titled "Mother's Embrace" by artist Suneet Madan

In the words of the artist:

The cords are so interconnected for the mother and the child that there is a different symphony altogether that plays out between them. This is one connection where words are not important. Their hearts beat as one. The mother's lap is the world for her child, full of warmth, love, and a sense of security.



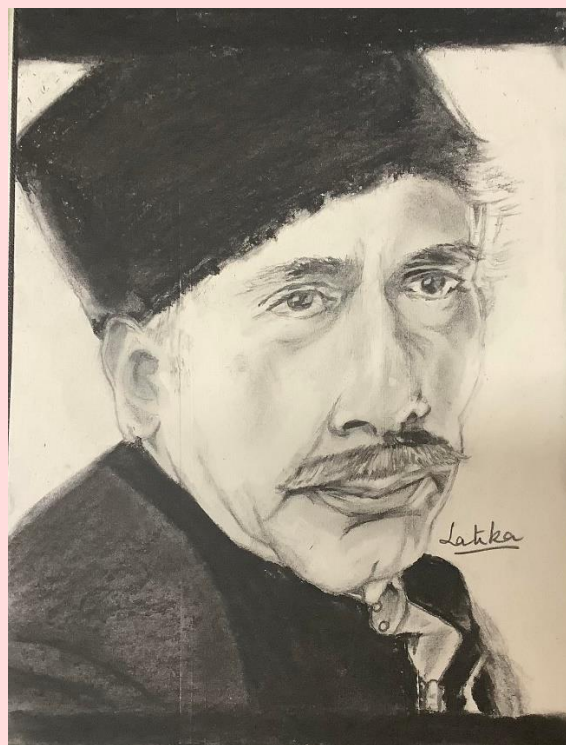
Artwork titled "Mother" by artist Staffy Bhateja

In the words of the artist:

A woman, a mother, is the birth-giver and the nurturer. We owe our lives to our mothers. She is the creator of the entire humanity, and her soul resides in her children. Her progeny is her world. I have depicted this thought in the artwork.



Artwork "Deepika Padukone as Padmawati" by artist Shalini Mathur



Artwork by artist Latika Shah



Interview with Meenakshi Natarajan

Meenakshi Natarajan is an Indian politician and former Member of Parliament from Mandsaur. She started her political career with NSUI. Later on, she became the President of the youth wing and then the women wing of the Congress Party. She is a postgraduate in Biochemistry and did her bachelor's degree in Law. She is the author of two books. One is titled "1857 Bhartiya Paripekshay," and the other is "Apne Apne Kurukshetra." She writes regularly for Sunday Navjeevan.

Here's our brief conversation with the politician:

Vandana Bhasin: What was your drive for joining politics, as you are not from a political family?

Meenakshi Natarajan: One of the most important reasons for me was the zeal to change the system. In our youth, we want to change the world as we keep finding fault with everything, and for that, we need to be a part of the system. I wanted to change the political consciousness of the youth, especially women. Change begins with oneself.

Also, politics is a journey of oneself. You try to understand your limitations and learn to deal with them. You learn about things that you never recognized as fears. If you are true to the political world, then politics is a spiritual journey if done rightly. When you meet other people like farmers, masons, carpenters, and butchers, you start seeing yourself and your life through their lens, and that changes everything.

Vandana Bhasin: What is the role of women in Indian politics? Should there be more participation of women in politics to create a balance in the system?

Meenakshi Natarajan: There are two different worldviews about the role of women. One is the Eastern world view which is more feminist, not in the sense of more women than men in the system or women empowerment but in terms of more women-related values like deep values of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

Masculine or patriarchal worldview is different where you talk about control and spreading fear. Whenever we have seen such a system being superimposed, there has been a decline. In historical times, even Ashoka and Akbar transformed themselves, but many others didn't. Wherever there is hatred, violence, or fear, there is patriarchy but love and compassion come from feminine energies.

This is the original clash of the perspectives in the world. So the fight is between these two systems, and therefore, I feel that in politics, there should be more women to maintain that balance and regain those feminine values and perspectives.

Vandana Bhasin: Ma'am, what would you like to share about the author in you? What prompts you to write? How often do you write?

Meenakshi Natarajan: I write every week, and my article is published every Sunday in the weekly Hindi newspaper Navjeevan. I write a lot about children's literature, and currently, I am writing a book about the Discovery of India through children's stories. It would be an interesting resource for children to understand different time periods in the history of India.

Vandana Bhasin: Please tell us about your book "Apne Apne Kurukshetra," published in Jan 2019, that won an award by Madhya Pradesh Sahitya Sansthan.

Meenakshi Natarajan: It is a novel written in a conversation style. It provides the perspective of various women characters in Mahabharata. It talks about how the war affects the everyday struggles and the struggle within, the dilemma, the insecurities, the struggle to take a stance, and the prejudices that come into play. It covers the entire story of Mahabharata by presenting conversations of Satyawati, Draupadi, Kunti, Amba, Gandhari, and other women with Bhishma. It talks about the Kurukshetra that goes within oneself every day.

Vandana Bhasin: What message would you like to give to women who aspire to create their own identity?

Meenakshi Natarajan: Every woman has the right to live a life that she designs for herself, and she should design life for herself. A woman is certainly a mother, a daughter, and a wife but a man is also a son, a husband, and a father. So these identities should not overshadow her individuality. No matter what happens, her identity should not get compromised.

Vandana Bhasin: Do you feel that communities like ALS help in bringing about a change in society?

Meenakshi Natarajan: Definitely. I am a great supporter of ALS initiatives because lots of women from various backgrounds get a medium for expression, and there aren't many such platforms that provide such opportunities.



4TH ALS LITFEST 2022

The Asian Literary Society organized its 4th ALS LITFEST on 14th July 2022 at Civil services Officers' Institute Auditorium, New Delhi. The celebration started with a welcome address by Mr. Manoj Krishnan (Founder, Asian Literary Society) followed by a lamp lighting ceremony and chanting. Chief Guest- Dr. Sreenivas Rao (Secretary, Sahitya Akademi), and Distinguished Guests- Dr. Lakshmi Shankar Bajpai (Eminent Poet and Former Deputy Director General, AIR Akashvani), Dr. Amarendra Khatua (Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs), Ms. Merry Barua (Founder, Action for Autism), Dr. Lakshmisree Banerjee (Eminent Poet and Former Vice Chancellor) along with noted writers from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, Goa, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, UAE, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Assam, Bengal, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Punjab graced the occasion with their august presence.

The highlight of the 4th ALS LITFEST was the felicitation of the Winners of the Book and Women Awards 2022. The award category and recipients were: Best Debut Fiction Book: Winner-As I Prepare for Landing (Ms. Gulnar Raheem Khan), Best Fiction Book: Winner- From the Womb of Darkness: Holding the Prophecy (Mr. Ashwin Karthik S N), Best Fiction Book: Winner-The Legend of Lachit Borphukan (Mr. Nilutpal Gohain), Best Non-fiction Book: Winner-The Priceless Petals (Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar), Best Poetry Book: Winner-Cocktail of Life (Ms. Akshaya Pawaskar), Best Poetry Book-Winner: Songs of Silence (Dr. Molly Joseph), Best Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence- Yes! You Are Audible! (Ms. Jyothy Sreedhar), Best Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Subtle Whispers (Dr. Usha Sridhar), Best Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Tranquil Ripples (Dr. Vedha Surendra), Best Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Myriad of Dreams (Ms. Nisha Tandon), Best Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Milestone (Ms. Sunita Singh), Best Debut Poetry Book: Winner-Our Togetherness-the Amaranthine Music of Love (Ms. Ankurita Khajanchi), Best Debut Poetry

Book: Winner-Island in the Streams (Ms. Sonal Singh), Best Debut Poetry Book: Winner-Ek Anjuri Khshboo (Dr. Aparna Pradhan), Best Debut Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Raining Drops of Rainbow Verses (Ms. Indrani Chowdhury), Best Debut Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Euphony of My Heart (Ms. Manisha Amol), Best Debut Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Geetanjali- Anjali Bharaa Geet (Ms. Anjali Srivastava), Best Debut Poetry Book: Certificate of Excellence-Humsafar Ehsaas-e-Maasoom (Mr. Ajay Kumar Verma), Indian Women Achievers Award: Winner-Dr. Usha Sridhar (Literature), Indian Women Achievers Award: Winner-Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar (Literature), Indian Women Achievers Award: Winner-Ms. Nisha Tandon (Literature), Indian Women Achievers Award: Winner-Prof. Dr. (Rtn.) Laksmisree Banerjee (Literature), Indian Women Achievers Award: Winner-Dr. Aparna Pradhan (Literature), Indian Women Achievers Award: Certificate of Excellence-Ms. Ishrat Umar (Literature), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Winner-Ms. Sunita Singh (Literature), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Winner- Ms. Vandana Bhasin (Literature), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Winner- Ms. Mahua Sen (Literature), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Certificate of Excellence- Ms. Lakshmi Ajoy (Social Service), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Certificate of Excellence- Ms. Indrani Chowdhury (Literature), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Certificate of Excellence- Ms. Staffy Bhateja (Arts), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Certificate of Excellence- Ms. Indrani Chatterjee (Literature), Indian Women Rising Star Award: Certificate of Excellence-Ms. Preethi Warriar (Literature), and Indian Women Rising Star Award: Certificate of Excellence-Ms. Ramya V (Literature).

In ALS LITFEST 2022, ALS group anthologies, as well as books by the writers of the ALS community, were also released. These included *Ebbing Echoes*, *Trails of Hope*, *The Peerless Pearls*, *Echoes of Silence*, *Tea-Time Sonnets*, *As I Prepare for Landing*, *Unbreakable Emotions*, *Unmukt*, *Naaritva ka Astitva*, *Matching Footsteps*, *Myriad of Dreams*, *Songs of Silence*, and *Euphony of My Heart*.

"*Ebbing Echoes: An Anthology of Articles on Lesser-Known Languages & Art Forms of Indigenous Communities of Asia*" (compiled and edited by Mr. Manoj Krishnan) is a collection of thirteen articles written by thirteen erudite writers of the Asian Literary Society (ALS) community. This anthology is a sincere attempt to spread awareness about the art and literature of indigenous communities from all regions of Asia and help these communities in preserving their culture and traditions.

"*Trails of Hope: An Anthology of Articles on Effective Teaching Strategies for People with Special Needs*" (compiled and edited by Mr. Manoj Krishnan) is a sincere attempt to bring medical professionals, NGOs, volunteers, parents, educationists, and subject matter experts together, and come up with strategies that can help the special needs people in their training, education, and development.

"*The Peerless Pearls*" by Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar contains poems that are embodiments of multiple facets of life. Pearls are of different shapes, sizes, and shades. Moreover, they symbolize purity and piety, her poems are pearl-like, photography of her mind, pure and spontaneous with soothing and sagacious effects. They evoke a world that is interesting, illuminating, beautiful, and belligerent. Words like Pearls shine and speak, infuse crisscross patterns, and sparkle in elation.

"*Echoes of Silence*" by Ms. Ishrat Umar's contains poems full of mystery about nature, love, and relationships. Some poems remind life's frail wonders, pandemics, grief, kindness, and despair. Her poems touch on human emotions and the sensitivity of various aspects of life.

"*Tea-Time Sonnets*" by Ms. Ishrat Umar is her second book of poetry. In this book, she tried her best to

express various aspects of life, nature, present situations, and the ever-changing world. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world. Every poetry in her book has a pictorial depiction of the subject matter with captions. The poems touch on human emotions and sensitivity on various aspects of life.

Ms. Gulnar Raheem Khan's maiden book, "As I Prepare for Landing" 'a Basket of Stories and a Casket of Poems', published by the Blue Rose Publishers, is a choice collection of twenty poems and ten short stories, each piece being the essence and efflorescence of the variegated experiences, good and bad, in the six decades of her life, spiced up with infinite imagination! The book is dedicated to the author's husband, Dr. Fazlulla Khan, who was the motivator behind the book, but who sadly succumbed to Corona in 2021.

The literal meaning of "Unmukt" is – 'Free'. Ms. Anita Chand's third poetry collection, 'Unmukt' is a poetry book that brings forth humane aspects as well as social values. As a poetess, what Anita felt during the difficult times of Corona and Lockdown, has been woven into the fabric of her poetry. Her emotions find themselves flowing freely from her pen. Corona pandemic, which took over the entire humanity by surprise like an unexpected tsunami, had spread havoc all around.

Dr. Molly Joseph's anthology of poems "Songs of Silence" is an ode to the silences we carry within us, the silences that are pregnant with multiple possibilities, and are like gentle ripples in water that cannot be heard but can lead to tsunamis one day which can tear apart the trappings of 'vile life' we lead. If she uses her words, her poems are gentle lullabies that, contrary to being soporific, are there "to outlive/ the vile life we leave behind." These lullabies exist on the fringes of hope and despair, do a tight rope walk between balancing, surviving and existing, even then they weave a tapestry of beauty, beauty that is both Immanent and Transcendent.

"Unbreakable Emotions" by Ms. Rafika Rangwala is a bilingual book of poetry in English and Hindi. The topics dealt with are based on various sentiments like love, hate, fear, happiness, beauty, and emotions related to the color of human skin, figure, desire, silence, motherhood, honesty, shame, and ecstasy. Language is simple. Poems are based on reality, imagination that can be turned into reality.

"The Castaway" is a collection of eighty-one poems of Ms. Mousumee Baruah encapsulated in the variable facets of the poet's life. Like a shipwrecked survivor, the poet looks back at her life. She saw more storms than sunshine but has no regrets. Like a castaway, the poet watched the ebbs and flows of life. It is reflected in the poem "Ebb and flow of life". Like a castaway, away from mainstream life, she celebrated her life in silence.

The "Naritava Ka Astitva" by Dr. Aparna Pradhan is her second poetry book. She has written poems on various women-related themes and tried to touch the heart of readers through these soulful verses. "Naritava ka Astitva" has successfully showcased how important the role of women is in the development and growth of the country and society.

"Matching Footsteps" is a rendezvous journey of two poets Ms. Kiren Babal and Ms. Aparna Menon pouring their hearts out with poetic expression. Though belonging from different generations, the ink of the heart that pours, remains the same- walking the path of one's soul! Matching Footsteps is laced with various moods, desires, longings, and belongings that are close to the poet's heart.

"Euphony of my Heart" by Ms. Manisha Amol is a collection of poems covering varied emotions of human life. The poems traverse across a wide horizon that holds the attention of every reader. One can easily relate to

the different themes that have been wisely chosen so as to create interest across all genres. The thoughts simply expressed will flow through you. Whether it is about life, or the ups and downs therein, or the sad or joyful emotions, all are beautifully crafted in verses.

“Myriad of Dreams” is a personal interpretation of Ms. Nisha Tandon’s memories over the course of her life. Unless we dare to dream, we cannot accomplish what our heart yearns for. Dreams, as they say, are windows to our souls, and through “Myriad of Dreams” she has borne her soul to express her emotions and sentiments. Her collection of poems in “Myriad of Dreams” reflects heart-touching refreshment of reality and the book is based on a harmonious interplay of words and rhythm. Her work knits a myriad of human emotions in those little moments of life that we all experience.

The program was moderated by Manoj Krishnan and Dr. Bishakha Sarma. The event ended with the felicitation of writers and a vote of thanks.

The 4th ALS LITFEST was a literary extravaganza where many shining stars in the world of literature congregated to share their ideas and creative talents, in enthusiastic support of ALS and its initiatives.



Dear Readers

Every month we present insights, views and ways of parenting and nurturing special needs children. This month our writer, Nisha Tandon, has articulated her interview with Ms. Fionika Sanghvi, principal of SPJ Sadhana School for Special Needs, Mumbai, to share the perspective of a facilitator about the manner that can augment the development of special needs children.

The role of the facilitator is not only to follow the standard methods but also to encourage and understand these children by finding new approaches that contribute to their overall development and we as a community, appreciate and acknowledge their efforts.

I hope you find this information beneficial.

Editor, ALSphere Magazine

Advocating for the special needs section of the society

Parents of children with disabilities are always concerned about child rearing and their education. Professionals who specialize in this field serve an important role as advocates for these students. Understanding the concerns and perspectives of these parents is essential to working effectively as partners in their children's education. Ms. Fionika Sanghvi, the Principal of SPJ Sadhana School for Special Needs, Mumbai, gives us an insight into what goes behind the efforts to design the personalized curriculum for these children.

On being asked if the school employs different teaching techniques for children with differing abilities, Ms. Fionika replied in the affirmative and said it is essential to do so as the learning style of each child can be different. Some can be visual learners, some auditory learners, and others tactile and kinaesthetic learners; hence one technique may not be effective for every child. Alongside, extra-curricular activities add to a child's exposure and learning. It's a holistic approach to the development of a special needs child. The Centre also engages the students in art sessions, which is very impactful as it is used as a therapeutic intervention besides perusing it as a vocational stream for a child with special needs.

Ms. Fionika further reinstated that though functional academics are beneficial for most children with special needs, exceptions are possible. If a child shows the ability, inclination and talent for academics, then it can be pursued in different ways, i.e. through inclusive education. She, as a facilitator, feels that academics and extracurricular activities, if treated with equal importance, can provide a balanced educational program to a child with special needs.

If a child is not academically inclined, then the teacher, principal and the school management can identify other talents, interests and abilities of the child and help pursue them. ***The focus and involvement will be far superior if the child enjoys what he is doing.***

On being enquired about how the school makes decisions for the vocational fields of a child, and when they start developing and nurturing these skills, Ms. Fionika clarified that for vocational training, the decision depended on the child's ability, sustainability of the skill as well as a conducive environment, and possibilities to pursue the vocational skill. This is noticed and studied over a period. A team of experts (special educators and therapists) assesses, reviews, and reports on the selection of a vocation for a child.

Vocational training can open many avenues for a child from where a life goal can be considered. But all this is possible only if there is an effective Parent-Teacher partnership that is the key to an all-around development of a child with special needs. Parents are equal partners for the learning to be internalized in a child.

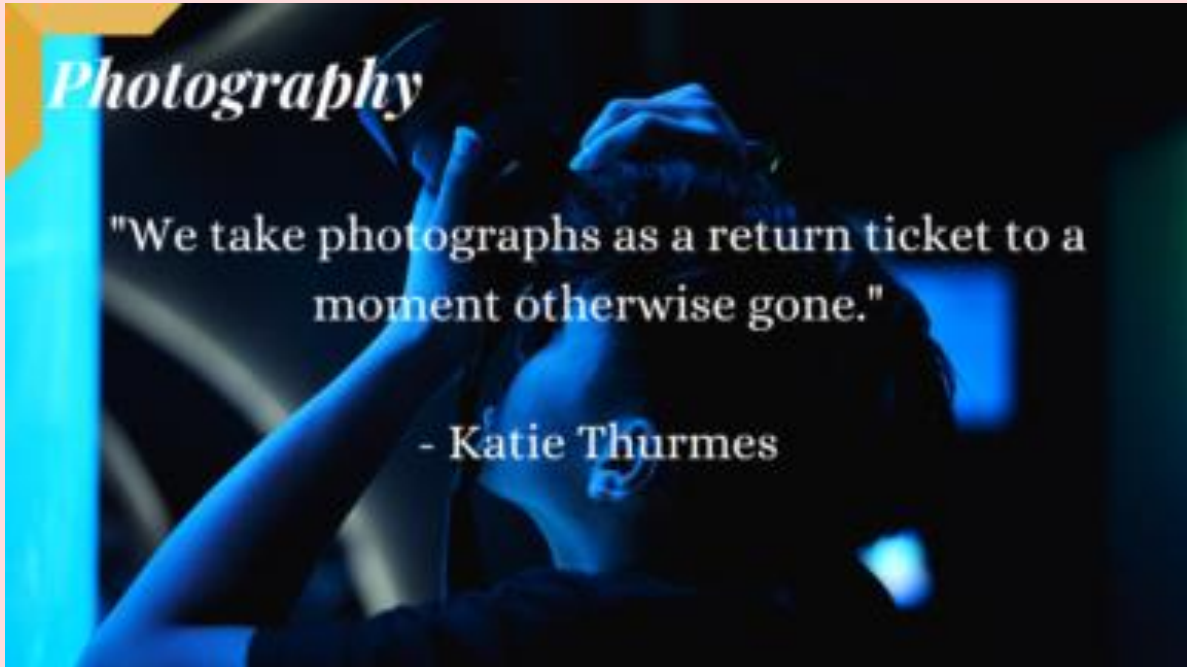
An array of pre-requisite skills for vocational training or pre-vocational skills can be introduced to a child as early as in the formative years. Therapeutic intervention (OT, Speech, Sensory integration), soft skills, and counseling also contribute to the nurturing and development of vocational skills.

There are arenas which are being explored in the field of academics and activities for people with special needs; it's an ongoing process. The special needs centers provide their students, access to educational services that allow them to enjoy the same rights as students without disabilities, setting forth a framework

that emphasizes that instruction should be provided in a regular classroom- a classroom specially modified to meet the special needs of students, or under special conditions (individualized education or instruction in small groups in a special-needs classroom).

"The duties of a teacher are neither few nor small, but they elevate the mind and give energy to the character" - Dorothea Dix

Nisha Tandon



"Under the Green Canopy"- A photograph by Vaishali Chandorkar Chitale



"Spiritual Nature"- A photograph by Mohammad Erfun Amin



"Mysore Palace"- A photograph by Narayani V Manapadam



"The Elite Sun-roof"- A photograph by Devyani Auti



"Infinite Blues and Greens"- A photograph by Vandana Bhasin



It's my Realm!

Breaking up with the foes of mirth (even for our sanity) is certainly not an easy task. Its gruesome cousins try to keep you clutched. Walking alone needs a lot of courage, not because you decide to face the world, but because you have to deal with self-doubt every now and then.

Despair, despondency and dejection stand tall, and there is really no antidote except the decision to not let the brute win. The doleful demon of the past and the trepidation of the next are the unsolicited guests who bring their allies along. Yes, their best friend, **'fear.'** The hours of chaos might seem unusually long and unnerving until you discover your real strength. "*Give up, you can't,*" the noises tried to persuade; the lamp flickered, but ardor never swayed.

The difference between 'walking alone' and 'being lonesome' needs to be deciphered. The social animal in us gets anxious at the thought of being left alone. If you are not happy with yourself, you can't be happy with anyone, anywhere. Some relationships might shatter your conviction in facing off debacle. Set yourself free from the bonds that bring you down. An arm might not be stretched for you to hold, and a hand might not wipe off your tear that falls. But a worthy relationship will cue in your worth, pat your shoulder and trust your ability to get up and make headway.

Walking alone doesn't mean living alone or retreating into a shell, away from friends and family. It reinforces that your bonds are not bondages, that none can love you better than yourself, that the downpour cannot wash away your fiery form and that you can dance in the rain, *all on your own.*

What are the pros? "*The hardest walk is walking alone, but it is also the walk that makes you the strongest.*"

Strong people are often misjudged, but should that matter? It's your realm and the choice to be happy (sans the trammeling expectations) will appease your soul.

What are the cons? Trust me, there are none. Discerning your self-worth and taking hold of your life can have only a plus and no minus.

As soon you recognize your potential, the blaze that kindles within will keep every doubt at length.

All in all, the spirit of '*Ekla Chalo Re*' (Let's walk alone) will make you *bekhauf* and *aazaad* (fearless and free) and certainly happier.

Cause louder the thunder, the deeper the pain
One day I learned to dance in the rain
Then I realized I would row off the shortfall
With tenacity to walk alone, assiduity to stand tall
And no matter the gust of tumultuous storm
It's my realm; nothing can now dampen my fiery form.

Ankurita Khajanchi



Echoes of Silence

Every word has consequences. Every silence too- Jean-Paul Sartre

Whether it is the lull before the storm; the paradoxical deafening silence or the silence before you hear the proverbial pin drop; silence has its own language, silence has its own echo.

The words that reverberate in the subconscious mind when surrounding noises are at a break are perhaps more distracting and disconcerting than the others. The leaking faucet, the ticking clock, the cicadas rubbing their limbs, and the wheezing trees, leave a lasting impact in the throes of silence. Yet a guilty heart suffers the most when silence resonates.

Lady Macbeth suffered not in the deed but in the aftereffects of it when silence flooded her to reflect upon her actions. The silence that pursued post Duncan's murder, nudged her to the thought that "he resembled her father in sleep." Silence echoed in the chambers of her guilt-ridden mind and she suffered from somnambulism or sleepwalking. She would scrub her clean hands to wash off the imaginary bloodstains.

It is said, "*Silence is the most powerful scream.*" And yet, an innocent mind's silence echoes not to traumatize but to provide solace and sometimes answers the questions that remain a mystery in the cacophony of the immediate environment. The quietude responds with all sincerity.

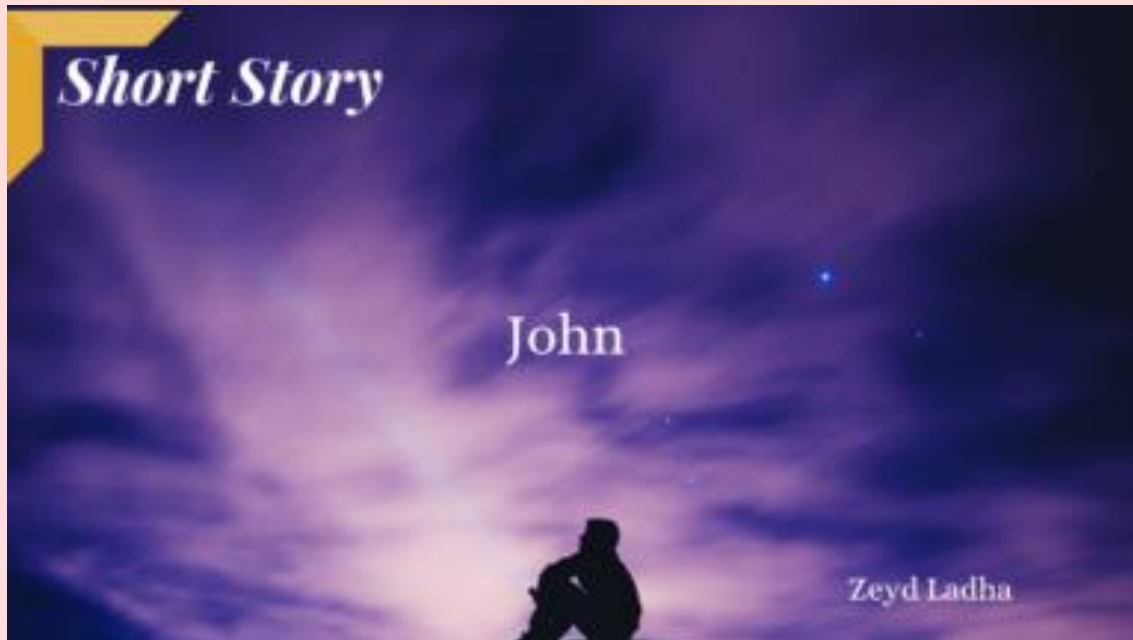
Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher said, "*Silence is a source of great strength.*" To a guiltless mind, silence is like a friend that speaks volumes, for the absence of words does not imply a void. There are times when

silence also implies resistance. When words fall short and lose their meaning, silence is the best option. Often loud lamentations fail to register the impact that silence does. It suggests that you do not wish to perpetrate violence through words, and therefore you choose the path of non-violent protest through silence. Silence, thereby, becomes the language of protest as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "*In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies; but the silence of our friends.*"

Wise men have always adhered to the power of silence for they believe that silence is the 'greatest art of conversation'. The adages '*silent waters run deep*' and '*Speech is silver, silence is gold*' lay stress on the significance of silence and its implications. It is in the silent moments that one can listen to one's deepest thoughts. Soliloquies created in the quietest hours lay bare the noisiest of minds and hearts while exposing the psychological setup of the characters. Similarly, internal monologues are the best source of self-exploration, for one tends to be one's true version when left alone in the company of silence. Silence is the mirror of the soul. Therefore, not only does silence tend to be a true friend but also a great comforter.

Sufi poet Rumi has much to contribute when he says, "*Let silence speak to you the secrets of the universe.*"

Dr. Sonika Sethi



John

It was pouring that night. John waited anxiously at the bus stop, afraid he had missed the last bus. He was drenched already, and his umbrella was no match for the rain and the cold gusty winds. He was alone at the bus stop. When the bus arrived, it was empty. He got in, bought his ticket, and took a seat. Suddenly, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He was shocked because he'd thought he was the only one on the bus. He turned around to see a hooded man standing there. The man asked him to move in. John wondered why the hooded fellow wouldn't sit elsewhere. Not wanting to get into an altercation, he obliged.

John was perplexed, for he could swear there was nobody at the stop, and the bus was empty too. So where did this man come from? The hooded man shifted in a little, cramping John for some room. John could no longer stay quiet.

"Excuse me," said John.

"You talking to me?" asked the hooded man.

"Is there anyone else here?" John asked sarcastically.

"You never speak to me and have always ignored me; hence I wondered!" replied the hooded man.

"What? I don't even know you!"

"That has always been your problem."

"I don't know what you are talking about, man. Anyways, why don't you take another seat?"

"I finally have an audience with you. I'm not going to let it go!" said the hooded man.

John felt lost for words. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"You sure do." As he spoke, he removed his hood and revealed himself.

John was shocked as the hooded man was none other than himself.

"How can this be?"

"I was sure you wouldn't recognize me," said the man. "You never spend enough time with yourself. How would you know me?"

"Who are you?" asked John.

"I am John, the real John!"

"That cannot be! I am the real John!"

"Hahaha!" laughed the man. "You are someone else under John's skin. You are an imposter!" he accused. John was stunned.

"You are what everyone wants you to be. Have you ever been true to yourself? You live a timid life, trying to please everyone, but what about yourself? None cares about you; rather, none cares about me, the real John! You are anyone but John!"

"Go away!" yelled John.

"You can't get rid of who you truly are. I am you; you can't get rid of yourself!"

"Go away! Go away!" he yelled again and again.

Suddenly, John felt a firm tap on his shoulder. Dazzled, he looked behind to see the conductor standing there.

"Wake up!" said the conductor. "Are you ok? You dozed off and have been yelling at someone to go away, but nobody is here!"

"Yes, I'm fine," replied a bewildered John, wiping the sweat off his brow. Tears welled up in his eyes as he sat up, contemplating the reality of his life.

Zeyd Ladha



As the Bells Chimed

I pulled up my sheet as the mild, warm rays flooded the room. The sun rose early in the North-East, as the snow-capped mountains turned to gold. I tossed and turned before I finally arose with a heavy heart, like every day.

"Up already?" Alice aunty called out from downstairs. My PG accommodation was on the higher floor of her house. The rent was nominal, and the old lady was sweet and non-interfering. More than anything, we were each other's answer to our loneliness.

She served me tea, and on her way back to the kitchen, she gently picked up a photo frame- her young son Gegong smiling mischievously therein.

"Five years today," Alice wiped her tears.

The monastery bells chimed at a distance. I closed my eyes and prayed.

I rode my scooter down the narrow lanes, wondering how many appointments awaited me at the OPD.

At lunch, my fellow doctor lamented, "My sister seems a bit disturbed back in Delhi. There's that new virus in China, Corona? Some street loafers hooted at her, calling her Chinese, Corona, go back. When will these Indians accept us?"

"We're Indians too, Binny. Moreover, let's not generalize. A handful of ignorant fools don't echo the voice of millions," I comforted her.

"Says the person who was brutally ragged in college and ran off in fear. All thanks to your ethnicity. They hate us, period," Binny fumed.

A tear pricked my eye. Binny apologized, "Relax. Have you told Alice yet?"

I shook my head.

The sun had set when Alice aunty brought me some Thukpa soup. She wasn't very talkative, but today she sat beside me and fidgeted.

"You know, Gegong loved my Thukpa. You remind me so much of him. If he hadn't killed himself that night, he would have been a doctor like you. All I had was him. Didn't he realize how alone I would be?" She tearfully broke off.

I couldn't take it anymore. I grasped her hands.

"Gegong wasn't a coward, aunty. He didn't commit suicide. That night the seniors bullied me; they were chasing me around the hostel with rods. It was only Gegong who came to help, and fought for me, as he did for all the students from North-East. He took a blow on his head for me. I left the next day as I was too scared to stay and be a witness."

I could feel her hands trembling in mine. I wept, begging for forgiveness.

"It's a huge load off my chest, aunty. Please let me take care of you. Consider that as my penance."

She freed herself from my clasp. Not a tear down her eyes. She stated in a matter-of-fact manner, "My son died a hero; it's a huge load off my chest too. But if it's penance you desire, get justice for Gegong. I can take care of myself."

I broke down as she moved downstairs without casting me a second glance.

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