

A woman with dark hair is the central figure, wearing a long, flowing dress made of translucent, multi-colored fabric in shades of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background shows a sunset sky with soft clouds and silhouettes of trees.

ALSPHERE

ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE
SEPTEMBER, 2022

ALS WOMEN'S
ALLIANCE
CONCLAVE 2022

SPECIAL FEATURE

INTERVIEW WITH
KIRAN MANRAL

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALSPHERE

Literary & Art Magazine

September 2022

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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Readers

We are excited to share that our current issue celebrates the unsurmountable spirit and power of womanhood.

A woman is the most powerful creation of God. She may seem weak but she carries an ocean of strength inside; she may be afraid at times but she emerges like a phoenix in every adversity; she may be silent or inexpressive but her thoughts and emotions can bring out the deepest transformation.

Our issue this month is an ode to the abundance of impeccable qualities of women. Our poets have presented various facets of a woman through their mesmerizing verses. Our storytellers have woven tales of women that will leave your heart yearning for more. The section on micropoetry and 100 word stories also touches upon the various tenets and traits of womanhood. Our artists have used their pens and brushes to bring out feminism too.

Our regular feature on People of Determination introduces us to the journey of a mother of a special needs child, Zeba Hashmi.

And last but certainly not least is our special feature for the month. We are grateful to Kiran Manral, the bestselling author of 14 books, to have shared her journey and insights with our readers.

From ALS Women's Alliance Conclave held at Radisson, Gurgaon this month, to every page of this issue, ALSphere recognizes and honors the women members of our community.

Hope the magazine proves to be a good companion to relax your body and mind as you get ready for the festival season!

Happy reading!

Cheers
Vandana Bhasin
Editor



The Bride

Like morning dew on rose petals, tears line her eyes
The hint of a smile upon her lips hides the uncertainty inside
And under the pressures of expectations that are on the rise
She has to metamorphose into a diamond shining bright

For today, she leaves the only family she knows
To embrace another one as part of her fate
While beautiful people in beautiful clothes arrive at her door
To eat, sing, dance, make merry and celebrate

What does she get when she has given up everything?
Are her dreams and wishes worth nothing?
And should her hopes be laid to rest, unceremoniously,
Under a pile of social norms and opinions?

Or is she an example of the one who is brave
As she sets out into an unfamiliar, uncharted territory
Of a new house, new relationships, and a new name
To be the half that begins life's very own story

Rupali Mistry

Poetry

The Wedding of Heaven and Earth

Jyoti Prateek

The Wedding of Heaven and Earth

Making Heaven and Earth meet
Wasn't an easy task
Yet they came together
In the horizon of love to bask

The earthy princess- Body
Was to marry Life- the celestial prince
This wedding of Earth and Heaven
Was such an auspicious thing

Life and Body were tied by breath
A strong bond they hoped would last
It only lasts a lifetime though
Yet to nurture it they both worked hard

Their nurturing made the bond gain weight in their lives
But soon it grew heavy to weigh upon their ties
Life started slipping out of Body's loving embrace
And Body grew tired of having Life's whereabouts to trace

Life, the eternal wanderer, transcended the bond to leave
Leaving behind the aged Body, their separation to grieve

The Body gave up, as their bond grew weaker with time
While Life wandered with reclaimed freedom touching bliss sublime

Jyoti Prateek

Poetry

I Am Proud to be a Woman

Staffy Bhateja

I am Proud to be a Woman

Labeled inferior
Made subservient by the structure
Though I am endowed with nobility

Possessing the potential to give birth to the entire mankind
I am the birth-giver; I am the nurturer
Like a Rubik's Cube is my persona
I am tender; I am a gush of gentle breeze

I am Sita, but I can become Chandi and Durga too
Creativity gushes into my body
Which I outpour through the pen

Not merely an object of desire- designed for the male gaze
I am much more
Yes, I am the best creation of Almighty
I am proud to be a woman!

Staffy Bhateja



Lost Voices

When did I lose my voice?
Was it when I entered the wedlock?
Sh! Girls must speak in a subdued tone
Let alone lend opinion in the male zone

When did I lose my voice?
Was it when my better half took to sermonize?
Avoid argument, pay due respect to elders
Even if they err, even if they blabber

Where did my voice disappear?
Suppressed under regressive veiled remarks?
That my real job is home, hearth, birthing
That my career is a mere time pass

Where is that vociferous articulate maiden?
Debating, declaiming on women's rights with conviction
Unsparingly questioning her parents for favoritism
Why taboos for daughters, while sons have all the fun?

In this milieu of lost vocals, perhaps I'm not alone
This perhaps is a grim reality in many homes

For peace in matrimony, they sadly choose to lose their voices
'Coz patriarchy and male dominance are still stark vices!

Manpreet Chadha



She

Strong she is, right from birth,
As she fought her way out of the womb,
She continued to fight for her existence.

Considered coy, but can be fierce too,
She, who can birth a human,
Can scale many heights too.

Laurels she did bring, to her motherland,
She proved herself time and again,
By climbing the ladders in all fields.

She, the epitome of courage and inspiration,
Continues to amaze even the Almighty,
With the multitude of roles that she dons.

Kirti V



The Resplendent One, The Chaste One

She stands before the resplendent One
Contemplating how do I bedeck her?
Gems and jewels illuminate her
Dazzling attire adorns her
Infinite lamps to brighten her up
Flowers of myriad hues swathe her
Not contented, searches for ways to beautify her
An epitome of a woman, her wishes and desires

But the chaste One
Wants no adornment
No embellishments
Just a few flowers and leaves
Is all that she desires
Gentle, serene, tranquil
Espoused women seek conjugal bliss
Angel for a long life of their consort

Both the deities are invoked
In the month of Shravan
And their blessings sought
But aren't they the two faces of womanhood?

One, the essence of her wishes
The Other One, of her duties!

Ratnaprabha R Raykar

Poetry

God's Precious Creation

Dr. Sonia Gupta

God's Precious Creation

O' you are God's most precious creation,
You have got the power of giving birth even to a man,
You enrich the relations by playing variable roles in life,
Without you, it is impossible to survive.

Mother's angel and father's princess as daughter,
A paragon of care and affection as a sister,
You are the most beautiful queen for your partner,
An embodiment of purity and serenity as a mother.

A rare example of sacrifice and compassion,
You bloom a barren life with joy and passion,
Hiding your own tears you bring smiles to others,
You are blessed with a magical wand that brings miracles.

With your selfless love, you turn a house into a divine home,
You are an enlightening candle in the gloom,
You cannot be defined in simple words,
You are a blooming 'lotus' of this murky world.

Your inner strength is the strongest weapon
Do not let yourself become a victim of the world's evils and sins,
Live your precious life with courage and bravery,
O' woman, your place is more than you deserve actually.

Dr. Sonia Gupta



Poetry

Red was her Color

Pradnya Surve

Red was her color

Red was her color
Bold and tall was she, in love with the world
Her vitality expressed with vigor and precision
Though dismissed by many as egregious.
Dipped deep crimson red lipstick being her signature

Red was her color
An ambitious, intellectually rapacious woman was she
Burning with rage and genius, no man ever understood her
She felt too ordinary, too strange
Blazing jaunts and exquisite haunts a façade

Though red was her color
She was a conventional puritanical practical girl
Her quill assumed a bolder character
An expression defying a maze of signifiers
Often breaking down stereotypes

Red was her color that was ripe and alive
Her fiery image never vampy though complicated for the era
She rebelled against conflicting signals
Through an announcing shout of her visual signature
Red was her color

Pradnya Surve



New Girl in the City

Circumstances had steered the young, introverted, fearful girl away from her hometown, all alone to a new place. The new city overwhelmingly welcomed her, but being the cautious person that she was, she just treaded her way to embrace the city one day at a time. She unfolded herself one step at a time to become everything she had aspired to be. She was living that one day, every single day!

As you read this, she is transforming from the girl next door to an inspirational woman by exploring, traveling, and unraveling, undaunted by judgments and opinions. She is You!

Saumyaa Grover

Twilight Blues

"The twilight is in a hurry to go to sleep in the arms of the night," thought Payal as she saw the sky change colors. Payal was walking back home from her bus stop after a long journey and a tiring day at work. All she could think about were the never-ending chores that awaited her. She felt agitated and troubled as she turned the key in the lock of her door. To her surprise, Ajay stood near the dining table, smiling, as he gestured towards a candle-lit dinner spread. She blushed and laughed out loud as she hugged him.

Komal Gupta

Meeting at Sunset

He always met her at sunset. He would wait beside the river and she never failed him. Every day they would meet at the same spot. After the sunset, he would go back, have his dinner and sleep soundly and dream of her. This had been going on for many years after she had drowned in the river long ago. They laughed at him in the village and called him a mad fellow. But what did he care? He would continue to meet her till she took him with her into the river, and then they would be together forever.

Vasudha Pansare



Quintain: You are Life

You are life itself
You are creation
You don't need an occasion
For occasional celebration
You are celebration yourself!

Neeti Parti

Haiku: Woman She is...

exudes like flared stream
yet so abysmal within
she knows how to sculpt

Indrani Chatterjee

Tanka: Changing the World

Today's women are

The Epitome of strength
No more dependent
Multitasking and so strong
No task is impossible

Sheela Iyer

Artworks

"The aim of art is not to represent the outward appearance of things but their inward significance."

- Aristotle

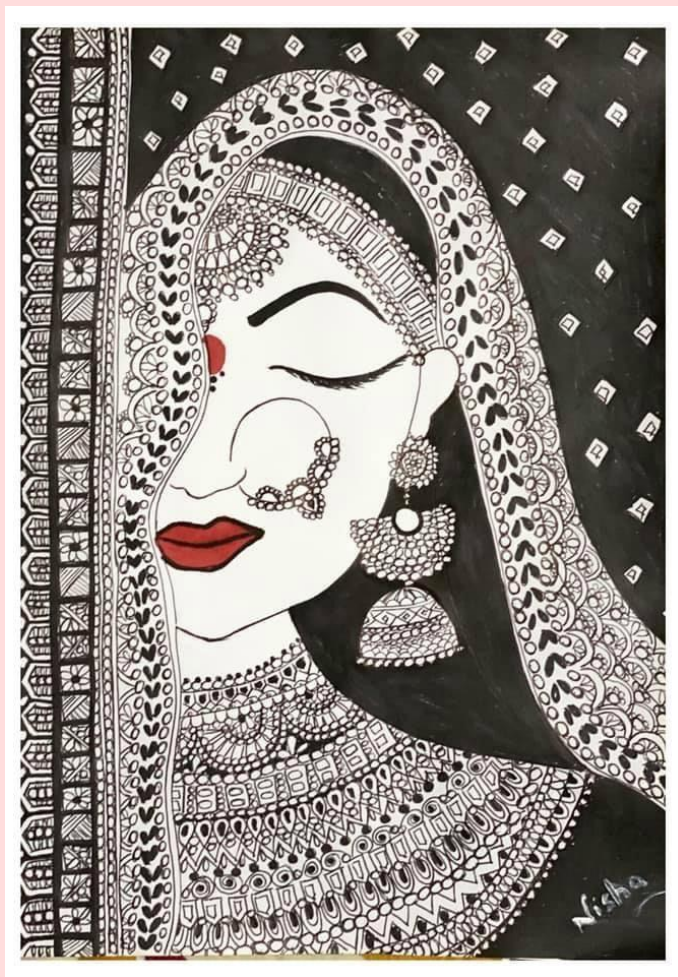


Leena Narang

Artwork titled "Beauty lies within you, in your aura, in your thoughts" by artist Leena Narang

In the words of the artist:

This artwork shows that dark times and new beginnings are not to be feared but to be accepted. People are more adaptable than we believe. One should have a fearless approach toward day-to-day hurdles. We must believe in our own beauty, in ourselves, in our own wings, and EMERGE beautifully in the form of branches full of flowers.



Artwork titled "Bejeweled Beauty" by artist Nisha Tandon

In the words of the artist:

No matter how many precious jewels adorn a woman, her innate beauty remains unparalleled!



Artwork titled "I am Enough" by artist Vandana Bhasin

In the words of the artist:

A woman plays a multitude of roles seamlessly. She is a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife, and whatnot. But despite everything, she keeps striving to create her own identity, and live her dreams while balancing the multiple tasks and relations. This artwork is a representation of the same with the firm belief of a woman that she is enough!



Interview with Kiran Manral

Our September issue is a celebration of womanhood. So this month we interviewed a dynamic and versatile woman of influence Kiran Manral.

Kiran is one of the most acclaimed authors and has published a total of 14 books across genres. Her short stories have been published on Juggernaut, in magazines like Verve and Cosmopolitan, and have been part of anthologies like Chicken Soup for the Soul. Her articles and columns have appeared in the Times of India, Tehelka, DNA, Shethepeople, Scroll, BuzzFeed, New Woman, Femina, Verve, Elle, Cosmopolitan, and more.

She is a TEDx speaker and was a mentor with Vital Voices Global Mentoring Walk. She was awarded the Women Achievers Award by Young Environmentalists Association in 2013 and was shortlisted for the Femina Women Awards for Literary Contribution in 2017. She was named as one of the Womenovator 1000 Women of Asia 2021. In 2022, she was named among the 75 Iconic Indian women in STEAM by Red Dot Foundation and Beyond Black, in collaboration with the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor, Government of India, and British High Commission, New Delhi.

Here's a snippet of our conversation with Kiran Manral:

Vandana Bhasin: Kiran you carry in your repertoire, not one or two but fourteen books authored by you across various genres. That's an amazing achievement for any writer. From romance to horror, and thriller to parenting, your books have always found a special place in the reader's

hearts. Which genre do you enjoy writing the most? Which book of yours is closest to your heart?

Kiran Manral: I enjoy reading humor and horror, and I think I enjoy writing these two genres as well. I do recognize that these are two opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to genres and perhaps there is something to be said for the fact that I like to be amused and terrified as a reader, and I try to do the same for my readers.

As to which book of mine is closest to my heart, I would think my first book *The Reluctant Detective*, which is pure humor is very dear to me and after that, it would be *The Face at the Window*, which is slow burn horror or 'Himalayan Gothic' as one kind reviewer put it, which I feel strongly about. It was a radical shift of genre and voice for me when I wrote *The Face at the Window* because I had already written in the humor and romance space and this was a risk I was taking. But the book was very well received and went on to make international lists of best horror books from Asian authors, being mentioned on international sites like *Desiblitiz*, *BookRiot*, *MonsterComplex*, *HoneyKidsAsia*, and more, as well as being mentioned in studies on global women horror writers in academic papers in the US and India, and is stocked in some of the best libraries across the world.

Vandana Bhasin: Our lives are full of stories. From mundane to special occasions, from traditional to contemporary, from youth to old, from adjustment to rebellion, we find stories everywhere. Where do you seek inspiration for your tales?

Kiran Manral: Well, the answer to this lies right in your question itself. We have stories in all our lives, our own stories as well as the stories of those around us. We may be lead characters in our own stories, supporting cast in the stories of those in our lives, and peripheral characters in the stories of those we come into casual contact with. For some people living full and rich lives of their own, we may be just like that extra on a film set, just there to fill up the crowd. I always think that in someone's life, I am an extra, I am the woman who is next to them at the airport line to board a flight, I am the woman who is sitting at the table next to theirs in a restaurant, the woman browsing the next shelf in a store. As an author, as someone who calls herself a custodian of stories, I draw from everywhere, stories that are mine to tell, and stories of others which might not quite be mine, but which I draw from, to create my own stories.

Vandana Bhasin: Kiran you have been in influential roles in media, writing, and digital space. You are the voice of modern women. Do you think that we are progressing towards gender equality in some areas or are we largely a patriarchal society that has found new ways to suppress women?

Kiran Manral: This is a question that has no easy answer. The more we win in terms of gender equality, the more we find we have taken two steps back. The control of women's reproduction, something women fought for centuries ago, which women finally gained control over with the introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s, has been taken away in countries like the US where women no longer have the right to terminate a pregnancy. Statistics at the workforce say that equal pay is a long way off yet, and for there to be complete gender parity in the workforce we still have many, many years to go. Women continue to be

violently sexually assaulted across the world. The girl child is still discriminated against. We still have a long, long way to go before women in India and around the world can truly be said to hold up half the sky.

Vandana Bhasin: You have authored two books on parenting. How would you describe parenting in today's world in one line?

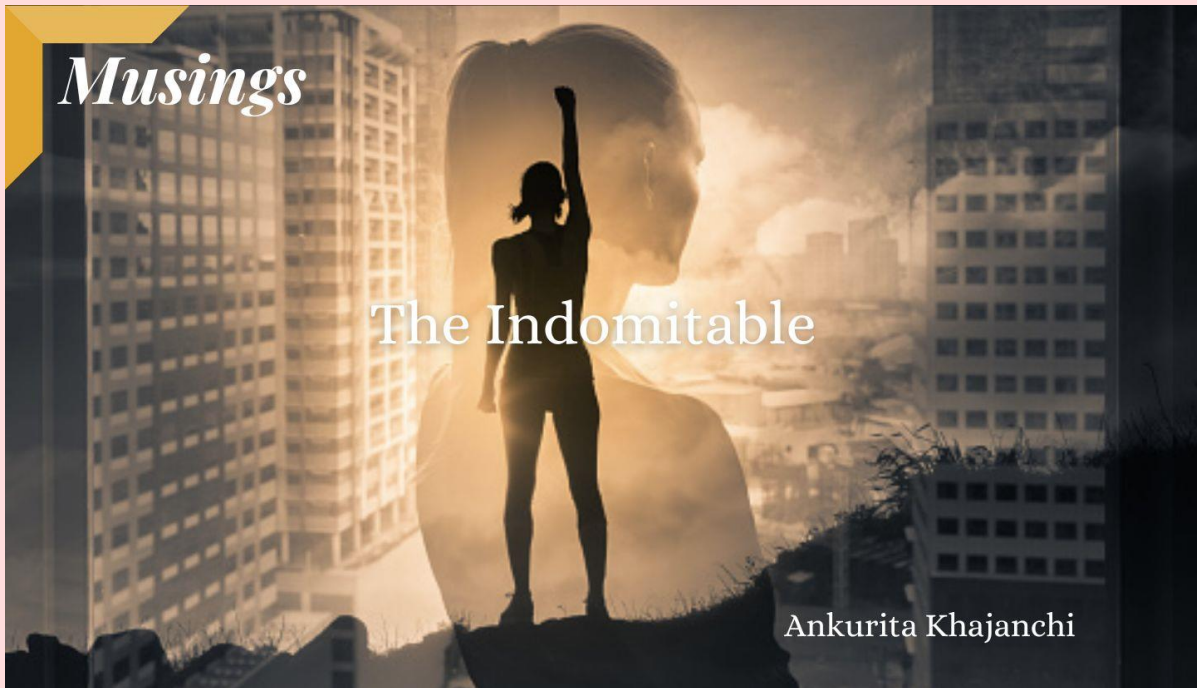
Kiran Manral: Tap dancing in a minefield.

Vandana Bhasin: You have a versatile profile that speaks volumes about your efforts, commitment, and perseverance towards your work. You are an inspiration for women who find it challenging to balance their work lives and personal lives. What advice would you like to offer to women who have to sacrifice their dreams for their personal life?

Kiran Manral: Be selfish. Put yourself first. It took me a long time to learn to put my work and my writing first, but when I did so I managed to get a few books out. You would be amazed at how much women can achieve if they only manage to let go of the guilt of not being perfect wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, sisters, or daughters. If they say to themselves one fine day, you are enough, and you deserve better, there is no dream they cannot achieve, no ambition they cannot make come true.

Vandana Bhasin: Digital space has transformed the paradigm of the writing field. The attention span of readers has reduced from a few minutes to less than a minute. You have been writing for a decade. What nuggets of wisdom would you like to share with other writers that can assist them in creating their identity?

Kiran Manral: I have actually been writing for three decades. As a journalist, a content creator, a researcher. I think the most important is to put in the work. Writing doesn't just happen, you have to be at your desk, writing the words, putting in the effort, every single day. The rest is all practice, destiny, and luck. And yes, to read extensively. Across genres, across fiction and nonfiction, across languages if possible. Only through reading will you be able to tell the stories you want to tell with the ease of a storyteller because you would have understood the process of crafting the story. And finally, to have one's own voice. While, as a reader and an author, one always writes from the shoulders of the authors one has read and loved, but one needs also to have a voice that is unique and distinctive so that your reader immediately identifies it with you. I feel that is non-negotiable.



The Indomitable

Ankurita Khajanchi

The Indomitable

Summing up the desires and marking a distant land (seemingly a chimera) can only be attempted by the resolute. Our aspirations appear confounding to some and mere obstinacy to others. Susurrations of people behind our backs and the murk within triggers apprehension. But then, what keeps us going? Yes, our dreams and our indomitable self that has undying faith in these.

*"Seemed beautiful and fulfilling, it cost me my solace
I kept telling myself 'even this shall pass...'"*

The hope of seeing the dawn after the deep dark slumber is always encouraging. The journey towards the aims of 'morrow becomes easier when we believe in our dreams, even when no one else does. The lonesome treading will be full of dismay. The prolonged, rugged, and rough pathways and the sky-high walls of anxiety might blur the vision. If you do not want regrets to take the place of dreams, do not forget that everything you ever wanted is on the other side of fear. That one dream is to be lived some hundred thousand times in your mind. It will help you to master the skill of striding on prickles. The anticipation of achievement, the hope of wholesomeness, and the contemplation of contentment will keep you going.

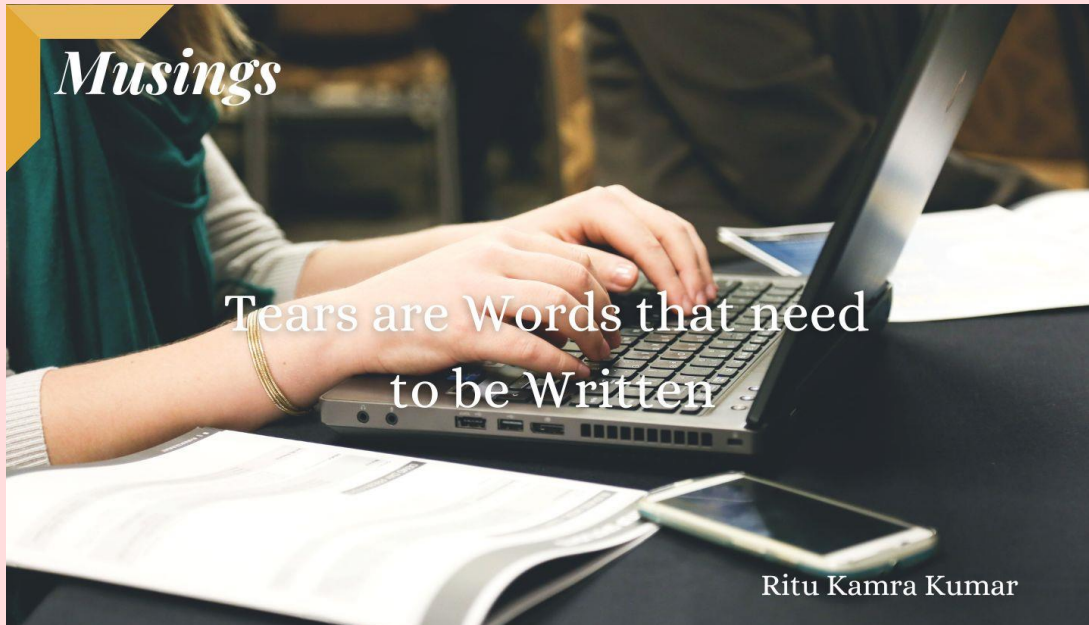
It takes courage to tread on, to live a dream that can be seen by none but you. It takes courage to keep incessant faith, to traverse a road no matter the doubt that befoes sanity. It takes courage to be your own light. One day we do realize that winning and losing is just a matter of courage- the courage to take just one

more step. Our dreams give us this audacity to endure the surreptitious arcane gloom. Do you know that the stalwarts keep an untold aurora in their hearts? Yes, they do. They nurture brilliance in themselves. They can smell the blooms from far away. They can see the silver lining. Like a mirage in the desert that heartens to struggle, to go on, and survive, their dreams keep them thriving.

With unfaltering confidence, we should know that when the chance will open its warm embrace, our choices, our dreams and the indomitable in us will make all the difference. All we need is to buck up and not lose our poise.

*"Yes, my heart has readily trodden harsher lanes
The greener other side must be worth the pains
The desolation somehow will face the wilting dry spells
For I have a corner of hope, where timeless iridescence dwells."*

Ankurita Khajanchi



Tears are Words that Need to be Written

D.H.Lawrence, the English novelist writes, "One sheds one's sickness in books." True are his words, as most of the literature is cathartic and therapeutic. When our only child, our son, left for higher studies to a far-off place, we faced empty nest syndrome. After dropping him off at Manipal Institute of Technology, when I opened the lock of my home at Yamunanagar with misty and moist eyes, I couldn't hold my tears. Gradually we came to accept the fact that my husband and I have to learn to live alone, looking forward to our son's occasional visits. It was only then that my tryst with creative writing began. The first few write-ups that I wrote, which also got published in distinguished newspapers, were basically tears that got transfixed as words on paper. Words polished and broken, scabrous and sad, rooted and torn; words grew on me like leaves on a tree- the tears and words came together, they never seemed to stop coming from silence somewhere deep within. Apt are the words of E.M.Forster "Let yourself go. Pull out from the depths, those thoughts that you don't understand and spread them out in the sunlight and know the meaning of them."

Crystallizing my tears on paper, and purgation of emotions led to the epiphany that every tear is the raw material for words. All of us face ups and downs in life. There are times when we sit alone and cry, not feeling like sharing our anxieties and agonies with even our dear ones. Then I believe we need to share our grief and tears with paper because the paper has more patience than people. Our story may enlighten or mitigate the sufferings of others.

I have been very close to my mother and when she left suddenly for her heavenly abode, I refused to accept the bitter truth of her demise. Words of Kamala Das from her autobiography 'My Story' echoed in my ears all the time, "My heart resembles a cracked platter that can no more hold anything." Hysterically I cried all the time. Finally, I mustered the courage and wrote about the grief in which I had drowned myself. I felt light by sharing grief with people I had never met. It made me strong that whatever has happened to me has happened to many others. There are people who too have lost their parents or sibling. When someone wrote that I sobbed reading your piece I felt it is normal to get depressed, lost and cry. Inscribing tears into words

on paper led me to a timeless zone where I cherished cupboard of memories with my mother with charm. I realized that the write-up and the poems that I dedicate to my mother have immortalized her.

Through words we create an imaginary society with authentic people, inscribing ourselves to a larger community and getting an opportunity to meet or say goodbye to our loved ones. We endeavor to seek a world where we can share our pain, a world full of warmth and emotions.

Well, tears create a world of words where we share empathy and elation with the dear ones that take us to a world where souls achieve immortality.

Every tear is writable if we have the guts to do it and the imagination to improvise. Tears are but mirrors of a pool of thoughts that haunt us. Let not tears become a deluge of mud and scum that settles at the bottom of the ocean of our hearts and spoil our peace of mind. Let us allow our tears to flow in the sea of creativity by writing.

Pertinent are the words of American author Joshua Wisenbaker, "Tears are the words that mouth can't say nor can the heart bear."

Ritu Kamra Kumar



ALS Women's Alliance Conclave 2022

The ALS Women's Alliance (An initiative of ALSphere Foundation) organized ALS WOMEN'S CONCLAVE 2022 at RADISSON Hotel, Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon on 17th September 2022. The celebration started with a lamp lighting ceremony followed by a welcome note.

In this conclave, three panel discussions were organized. The first panel discussion on "Empowering Women Entrepreneurs" was moderated by Ms. Vandana Bhasin. Panelists were Ms. Meenakshi Natarajan (Politician), Mr. Amarendra Khatua (Ambassador), and Ms. Sangeeta Bahadur (Ambassador). The second panel discussion on "Perspectives on Women's Creative Space" was moderated by Dr. Bishakha Sarma. Ms. Malavika Joshi (Theater Person & Choreographer), Vusat Iqbal Khan (Vocalist), and Rosy Ahluwalia (Fashion Designer) were the panelists of this discussion. The third panel discussion on "Women Entrepreneurship" was moderated by Ms. Ramniet S Mukherjee with Mr. Saurabh Saxena (SimplyHR), Mr. Rajneesh Singh (SimplyHR), and Ms. Vandana Saxena (Freelancing Expert) as panelists.

It was followed by a dance performance by young dancer Amritvarsha Barua and recitations by Ms. Anita Chand (story), and poetry by Prof. Dr. Milon Franz, Ms. Komal Gupta, Ms. Mousumee Barua, and Ms. Neeti Parti. Mr. Ankur Bansal and Ms. Pooja Sharma of PMC group, Ms. Mamta Kumari from Careaholic, and Ms. Shivpriya (Director, ALSphere foundation) graced the occasion with their august presence.

The highlight of the ALS WOMEN'S CONCLAVE 2022 was the felicitation of the ALSWA Awards 2022. The award category and recipients were: ALSWA Author of the Year Award-2022: Mandira Ghosh, ALSWA Poet of the Year Award-2022: Aparna Suresh, Prof. Dr. Milon Franz, Dr. Minal, Mahua Sen, ALSWA Education Icon of the Year Award-2022: Neeti Parti, Vandana Saxena, Prof. Dr. Milon Franz, ALSWA Performing Arts Icon of the Year Award-2022: Poonam Kanwal, Nimisha Ladia, ALSWA Art Icon (Art/sculpture) of the Year Award-2022: Payal Agarwal, Deepali Gupta, ALSWA Community Service Icon of the Year Award-2022: Ramniet S

Mukherjee, ALSWA Wellness Icon of the Year Award-2022: Malathi Vivek, ALSWA Women Entrepreneur Year Award-2022: Pooja Sharma, ALSWA Healthcare Professional of the Year Award-2022: Dr. Shweta Mathur Lall, Dr. Gitika Verma, and Dr. Sujata Chatterjee.

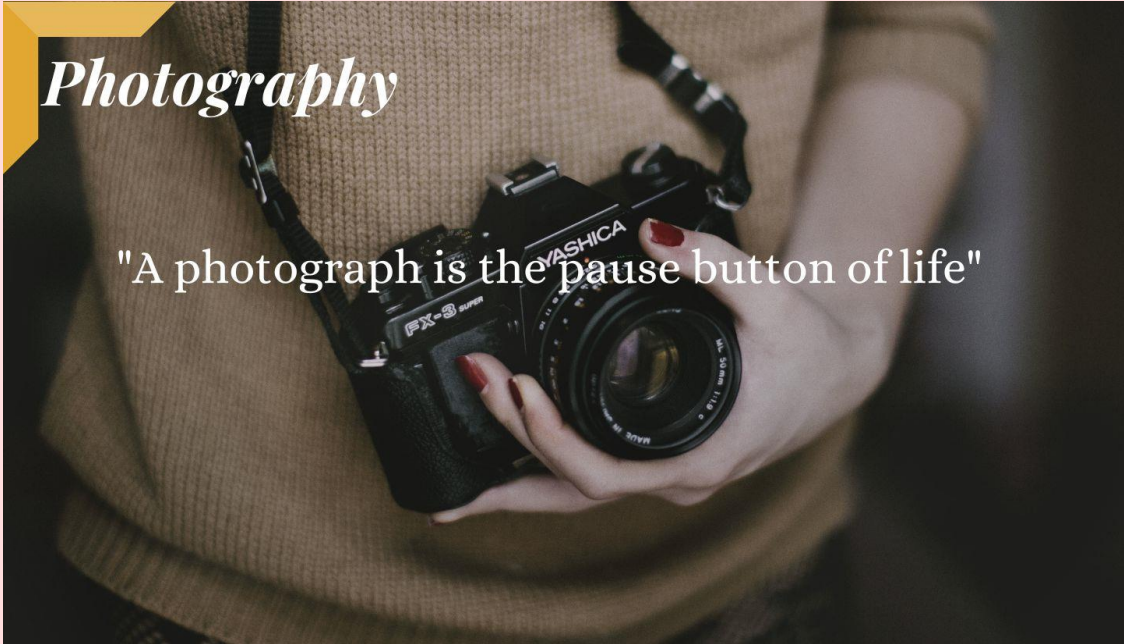
The program was moderated by Ms. Vandana Bhasin, Dr. Bishakha Sarma, and Ms. Anita Chand. The event ended with the felicitation of delegates and a vote of thanks.

At ALS WOMEN'S CONCLAVE 2022, many shining stars in the world of art, literature, business and healthcare congregated to share their ideas, and creative talents, in enthusiastic support of ALS and its initiatives.

ALS Women's Alliance founded by Manoj Krishnan is a comfortable nook for women to share their experiences, happiness, career aspirations or anything that matters to them or that can help other women. This networking and support group also aims to encourage women to engage in community activities and help them in their personal and professional advancement.

Photography

"A photograph is the pause button of life"



A photograph titled "Wo(man) Equally Tough" by Abhijit Sinha



A photograph titled "Our Durga- Durga exists in each one of us!" by Sreemati Sen



A photograph titled "The Calm Eventide (Fateh Sagar Lake, Udaipur)" by Upendra Sharma



A photograph titled "The Dance of the Peacock" by Narayani V Manapadam



Editor's Note:

We hope our series on People of Determination is insightful and beneficial to our readers. In our endeavor to cover all the aspects of nurturing a special needs child, this month we engaged in a conversation with the parent of a special needs child who is also determined to bring about a change in this community with her consistent efforts. Hope it edifies our readers.

Treading on a Different Path

A committed parent, mother of a differently abled teenager, an advocate of inclusion in society who relentlessly works towards the cause of the special needs community, and a woman with strong willpower, grit & determination, that's who Zeba Hashmi is.

Zeba has been instrumental in the conceptualization of *ALS Parwaaz Forum*- an initiative of the Asian Literary Society to support this cause. This is a path less taken and has challenges that are not easy to overcome, but with firm determination and effective networking skills, Zeba has succeeded in making a difference in society.

Zeba shared a beautiful quote by Rumi during our discussion, **"I once had a thousand desires but in my one desire to know you, all else melted away."** She resonates with this thought since she as an individual has seen numerous dreams for her son and herself and has witnessed them shatter but she firmly believes that God is the best planner. Hence, she stopped dreaming and took it upon herself to tread on the path chosen for her by the Almighty. All she dreams of now is, for her son to be independent and survive well when she is not around, just like all the parents who are blessed with children with different needs.

The journey with her autistic child wasn't an easy one for Zeba. When she relocated to Ahmedabad a decade ago, she was quite taken aback by the lack of awareness, facilities, and opportunities for people with special needs. Through social media, she made various groups to bring parents of special needs individuals & professionals under one roof. Though the primary concern was her son, she considered it her moral obligation to support and guide this community.

She has been successfully organizing seminars, training programs, talent shows, and exhibitions where products made by the community are displayed and sold to raise funds. The panel discussions were held through the Asian Literary Society forum where speakers and dignitaries from across the globe were invited to share their viewpoints and suggestions to aid the community. She has also contributed to an anthology by the Asian Literary Society named "Trails of Hope", which has covered the various teaching strategies for special needs individuals.

It is important to create awareness and acceptance among society, and all these efforts and initiatives have helped to include people from all walks of life to come forward to collaborate and support.

We all wish to provide the best facilities to our children. Zeba believes that things are destined to happen and she's glad that she provided the best as per her abilities, knowledge, and resources available. She doesn't regret not having a lucrative career like many others around her but she believes that her son has brought her recognition, though in a different way. There are moments when she questions life and seeks answers, but she knows that she will be enlightened when the right time comes.

Nisha Tandon



The Power of Pink

"Ma, why can't I wear something bright and colourful tomorrow? Vijayadashami comes but once in the whole year," Kadambari's voice was a low whimper. Tears welled up in her large almond eyes as she tried hard to convince her mother. "I wear these dull, white cottons every single day. All my friends flaunt their colourful sarees, red bindi and shining jewellery. I never complain. Just once Ma, please let me wear that pink dhakai tomorrow...it's still lying new in the trunk!"

Kadambari knew she was chasing a rainbow. Losing her husband just a few months after marriage had sealed her fate forever. That her deceased husband was twenty years senior to her, that he was an inveterate alcoholic with a dysfunctional liver, was a different story altogether! His death gifted her the sobriquets of a witch, an evil omen, an unholy force, and so many others.

Kadambari was promptly sent back to her maternal home. Her mother almost fainted seeing her waiting uncertainly at the doorway — head tonsured, a frail stark vision in white. Her eyes had lost their innate sparkle, her infectious smile had disappeared, and she walked about the house in silence and despair. Her dream of going to college was cruelly nixed as she resigned herself to a life of seclusion and social rejection. At 17, Kadambari epitomised a lost, defeated soul.

"Mamoni, why are you being so unreasonable?" Kadambari's mother was torn between love for her young, ill-fated daughter and the rusted fetters of societal censure. "Our country may have just become independent but we, its women, still can't call ourselves free!"

"White is the only colour in your life now. We can't change the age-old diktats just to suit your whim," added her father, a man who brooked no dissent.

The next morning brought only gloom for Kadambari. Durga Puja festivities were almost over. She could not take part in most of the rituals owing to her widowhood. As she started doing her usual kitchen chores, Swatilekha, her Calcutta-based professor cousin, pulled her out and headed straight to her own room.

"Kadambari, I heard all that you discussed with Kakima yesterday. Wear this now and get ready fast. We're going down for Debi Boron, you and I!"

Swatilekha thrust the pink saree into her trembling hands.

"But Swatidi, I can't do this. Ma-Baba will never allow it. Neither the saree nor the ritual."

"Kadambari, society needs to change. Why don't you be the harbinger of that change? Why let others take charge of your life?"

And thus, Kadambari strode into the Puja pandal, looking resplendent in her favourite pink saree and bindi. Frenzied drum beats and devout cries of 'Joy Ma Durga' rent the air, as the goddess was given a ceremonious farewell to mark Vijaya Dashami. The knitted eyebrows, the collective gasp, and the conspiratorial whispers only strengthened her steely resolve to reclaim her life, even if it were just for a day! After all, fighting for a pathbreaking change...wasn't that what this festival symbolised?

Glossary

Dhakai – an exclusive kind of cotton saree, a speciality of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Mamoni – an endearing term for a daughter

Kakima – aunty

Debi Boron – an invocation ritual for Goddess Durga

Urmi Chakravorty



Girl in the Yellow Crocs

She lived in an under-construction house in my neighbourhood with her parents, who worked as daily wagers and caretakers, and her two younger siblings, one of them a mere toddler. I often noticed her sitting on the parapet outside the house as I left for work in the morning. Her intelligent eyes and bright face always made me turn around to give her a second look despite the rush hour.

That day as I crossed her on my way back, I noticed something bright and cheerful about her that gave her already sunny face an added dimension. A pair of stark yellow crocs adorned her grubby feet. I could not resist the urge to strike a little conversation with her. I parked my car on the roadside, got down and walked towards her. She looked at me with circumspection writ large in her quizzical eyes.

"Do you live here?" I pointed to the under-construction house.

She nodded her head while averting her gaze which was until now steadfastly fixed upon me.

"I like your shoes," I said to her. She didn't raise her head to look at me but kept staring at those bright yellow crocs.

"Are these new?" I was desperately trying to build up a dialogue with her.

She nodded again without looking up.

"Who bought these for you?" I tried to move over the 'Yes/No' questions. Being a teacher of English gives you an added advantage of knowing when to shift to the 'Wh- questions'.

I could barely hear her when she said "Papa". I think I must have imagined the answer. But this time she did look up and I discerned a glimmer of excitement in her eyes.

"Where did you buy from?" I tried another shot in the dark.

"There's this shop in the market where Papa took me," she opened up a bit.

"Do you really like this colour or did Papa buy these for you?" I asked baring my curiosity.

"There were so many colours- green, blue, black and orange. But I liked the yellow ones. They remind me of the yellow lemons," she chirped along.

I burst out laughing. "The green ones could have reminded you of a parrot, the red ones of an apple, but you chose the ones that reminded you of lemons?" was all I could manage between fits of laughter.

"I don't know what an apple is. But my mother says lemons are very expensive these days," she laid out the clinching factor for my better comprehension.

I patted her on the head, got into my car and drove home bemused by the conversation I had with her. I replayed the entire tête-à-tête in my head all through the evening.

Over the next few days, I failed to sight her at her usual hangout. On the fifth day, I sighted her yellow crocs in the driveway of a neighbouring house while barefoot she swept the driveway.

Dr. Sonika Sethi

Short Story

A Mother and her Daughter

Akshata A. Hegde

A Mother and Her Daughter

Nanhi opened her eyes and looked around herself. Her mouth felt like cotton wool- remnants of the effects of anesthesia. The sluggishness and exhaustion- were overwhelming.

"Awake?"

The nurse was by her bedside, smiling at her. She continued, "How are you?"

Nanhi nodded, not quite able to formulate words yet.

The nurse laughed, "Rest. The social worker will be here in a while."

Social worker? Nanhi felt rising uncertainty in her mind when her mother entered the room, "How are you feeling?"

Nanhi shook her head.

"Having a baby takes a significant toll on your body, but you recover."

Nanhi attempted to speak, croaking, "The...nurse..."

Her mother looked up at her questioningly.

Nanhi lifted her hand, swollen from the IV line, "Social worker?"

Her mother nodded, "Yes, the social worker should be here soon. They must have notified her you are awake."

Nanhi swallowed- nervously this time, "Maa! I ...want...my...baby...girl."

The social worker and the nurse were about to enter the room when they heard Nanhi's proclamation.

"She just gave birth. It is natural to have doubts," the nurse stated.

The social worker touched the nurse's arm, compassion in her eyes, "Yes, I know."

"Perhaps give her a little time before talking to her," said the nurse.

The social worker nodded and smiled, "Yes, good idea. I'll wait in the reception area?"

The nurse nodded.

Nanhi's eyes begged for her mother's approval.

Her mother sighed, "Nanhi..."

This time Nanhi's eyes filled as she sensed the disapproval, "My baby, Maa!"

"Yes, she is," her mother sighed again, "But we discussed this Nanhi."

Nanhi looked away, knowing she was going to burst out crying. Her mother touched her hair and that pushed her over the edge. She caressed Nanhi's hair gently till she had calmed down.

"Nanhi, you are just 16. This is probably the hardest thing you will ever have to do but it is also the best thing you will do as a mother for her."

Nanhi continued looking at the door, too overwhelmed to respond.

Her mother continued, "Besides, you are helping another family that really wants her and has yearned for her for years. She will be well loved and cared for Nanhi."

Her mother took another deep breath, "You are not abandoning her. You are taking care of her future and giving so much happiness to another family."

Slowly, Nanhi nodded. She wiped her eyes, "I know Maa. I guess I just felt selfish."

Her mother held her close, "Not selfish, that is motherhood. But what you are about to do is also motherhood."

The nurse peeked into the room and found the duo huddled in. The adoptive parents were here too, and the social worker was with them but looking at the rich emotion in the room, she hesitated.

Everyone's life was set to change in the next few minutes. Some more waiting would not hurt at all.

She closed the door softly.

Akshata A. Hegde

Short Story

The Intruder

Pradnya Surve

The Intruder

The morning sun rays softly crept in through the window. The light pink lacey curtains rustled as the soft breeze brushed past. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and saw the greenery waving at her. "Another day in my life," she said while pushing away the duvet.

Six months back she had visited the doctor. High fever and weariness had kept her away from work. "Oh, it is just the viral flu. Take some rest. Probably you have been working too hard," the family physician told her.

The symptoms started to emerge at a regular frequency. She was used to the paracetamol dose by now. But what worried her was, lagging behind in her office work. She was always appreciated for timely submission and diligence in her work.

"Are you going through some stress?" her boss asked her with genuine concern.

"Why don't you go for a full health checkup," he advised her.

She lived away from her parents for professional reasons. A warning bell rang in her mind as she went through a rewind of medical problems she had faced recently.

Leave for personal reasons was sanctioned and she took the first flight to her parent's home. Several tests and diagnostic procedures were followed. The kindfaced white coat clad physician broke the news. He named a very complicated term as the reason for her frequent illness. She could not remember or rather preferred to forget the name of the disease. It was an uninvited guest in her body space. Six to eight months of life would be a miracle for her. She named it "*Intruder*."

She jumped out of her bed with a sprite. As she splashed water on her face the image in the mirror smiled back. "Should I be happy that I am alive, or should I be sad that I will die soon? So many great minds have left the planet in their thirties. Life is like a box of chocolates. The unpredictability gives you the incentive to stay alive. It is the essence of life that generates energy. Why should I let the *Intruder* be one of my worst nightmares? I may be among the great names that left this overcrowded globe early."

As she sipped her morning coffee her mind spelled out some amazing thoughts. The ink flowed smoothly as she penned a new poem. The books on the shelf beckoned her lovingly. She had a good laugh while the *Intruder* was locked up in the closet.

"Life is no different than the weather. Not only is it unpredictable, but it shows us a new perspective of the world every day."

Pradnya Surve

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