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together

a national family magazine

BREAKING THE WALLS

together

Together is a national family magazine. It is a monthly, published by the Franciscans (OFM) in India. It was started in 1935 in Karachi, now in Pakistan. It got its present name in 1966.

The magazine *Together* is a conversation platform. Nothing changes until our families change. It is an effort at making worlds meet by bringing down fearful, pretentious and defensive walls. *Together* is a journey, an ever-expansive journey—from me to us, from us to all of us, and from all of us to all. Let us talk, let us cross borders. The more we converse and traverse, we discover even more paths to talk about and travel together.

Together is also an effort to uncover our shared humanity.

Your critical and relevant write-ups that promote goodness, inclusivity and shared humanity are welcome. Your articles must be mailed to **editor@togethermagazine.in** before the 15th of every month.

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From Gender Apartheid to a Third Space

Conduct a gender audit of our spaces: ask the question, around whose comfort is this space organised the way it is?

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

Let us begin with a wall. Not a metaphorical wall, an actual one. In many of our places of worship, in our schools, in the architecture of our trains and buses and waiting rooms, there is a wall, a curtain, a partition, a line drawn in chalk or concrete, or have a custom that says: this side and that side. The wall does not always announce itself as discrimination: sometimes it calls itself protection; sometimes it calls itself tradition, sometimes it is so old that it calls itself nature; as if the need to separate was written into the universe rather than into the minds of those who had the power and control to build. A wall is a wall; and when the wall is built not to protect everyone but to contain some and liberate others—that is apartheid.

Apartheid is a word that belongs, in our common imagination, to South Africa, to a specific and documented regime of racial segregation that the world eventually named, shamed, and dismantled. But the word, in its original Afrikaans, means simply separateness. The enforced separation of people based on a category assigned at birth, for the maintenance of a hierarchy that benefits those at the top of it. By that definition, we have lived inside a gender apartheid for most of recorded human history. And we live inside versions of it still. It feels like an exaggeration, an insult to those who suffered the specific horror of racial apartheid in South Africa or caste apartheid in India.

Gender apartheid builds a separation that decides what certain bodies may wear, which rooms belong to whom: kitchen, street, the boardroom, the pulpit, the parliament, who speaks and who is spoken for, and whose silence is read as consent. The apartheid has been so thoroughly internalised as the things ought to be that it no longer needs a wall. The wall has been built inside.

In Afghanistan today, women are banned from universities, from parks, from raising their voices in public. That is gender apartheid in its most naked, legislated form. But let us not use Afghanistan as a mirror that flatters us. In India, women are killed for marrying across caste lines, which means they are killed for claiming sovereignty over their own lives. Transgender persons are still, in vast parts of this country, pushed into begging and sex work as their only options for survival, not because of their own choices but because every other door has been closed. Dalit women are raped with a particular impunity that reflects the intersection of gender and caste apartheid in its most violent form.

The Third Space

There is a moment in certain conversations when something shifts. You are talking with someone who is, by every conventional measure, the other: different gender, different caste, different religion, different experience of the world. And somewhere in the conversation, the categories loosen; not disappear, difference does not dissolve and we should not ask it to, but loosen. You stop speaking from your position and begin speaking toward theirs. They do the same. And for a moment, the conversation is held in a place that neither of you owns—a third place that exists between you, created by the quality of your mutual engagement and respect.

The concept of the third space has roots in several traditions of thought. The urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg wrote about it as the informal public space: the café, the barbershop, the village square, that exists outside the home and the workplace and allows a different kind of human encounter. Homi Bhabha, the postcolonial theorist, used it to describe the space of cultural encounter where neither identity is fixed, where something new and unscripted can emerge, which he called cultural hybridity. In queer theory, it has been explored as the space that refuses the binary; that insists on existing between or beyond the categories we have inherited. It is the space where gender is not the architecture. It does not mean the erasure of gender. Gender is part of who we are—shaped by biology, culture, and experience. The third space does not ask you to stop being who you are. It asks the space itself to stop being organised around the supremacy of any one way of being.

Third space does exist, at least in fragments in many spheres, for instance, it exists in certain families, perhaps not in those ‘perfect’ families, but families that have done the work of questioning their own inherited structure. Where domestic labour is not assigned by gender but negotiated by capacity and willingness. Where children see their fathers uncertain and their mothers decisive and do not find this strange. Where vulnerability is not a gendered weakness but a human state.

Conduct a gender audit of our spaces: ask the question, around whose comfort and for whose ease is this space organised the way it is? If the answer is always the same, if every institution, from the family to the parliament, is organised around the ease of men of a particular caste and class, then there is work to be done. It requires redistribution of money and authority—which is perhaps the most difficult, because those who have money and authority rarely experience the injustice happening. It requires a new kind of listening; not the listening that is already formulating its response, not even the listening that waits for its turn to speak, but the listening that is genuinely willing to be changed by what it hears. This is, in practice, one of the rarest human capacities; and one most necessary for the third space to exist.

Every issue of this magazine is, in some sense, an act of imagination; this one more than most. I don’t believe that the third space is around the corner, but suggesting that it is worth building. There was a time when the distance between racial apartheid and a free South Africa seemed infinite. There was a time when the distance between untouchability as law and untouchability as constitutional crime seemed impossible to cross. It was crossed, not perfectly, not completely, and without reversals and violence, pain, and discomfort—but crossed. The crossing did not happen because the powerful became generous; rather enough people, at great personal cost, refused to live with the walls that had been built for them.

Feminism: The Rising Tide

How the waves of feminism changed the world; and what they mean for India

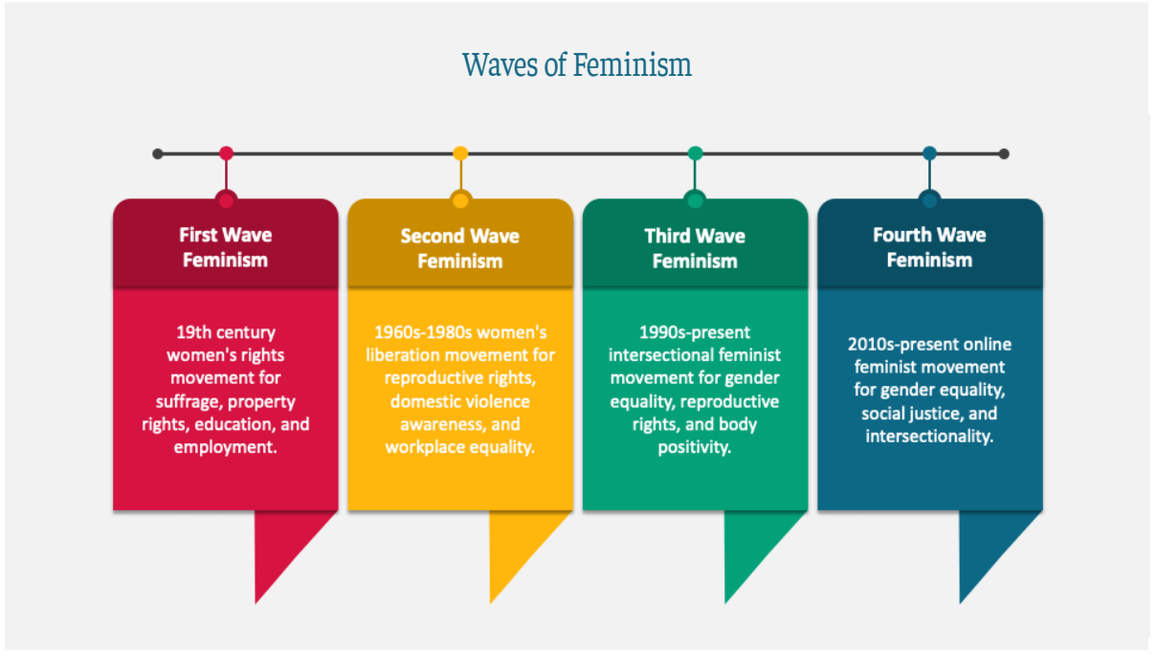
Dr DEEPTHI PRABHAKARAN

Imagine a world where a woman cannot vote, cannot own property, cannot choose whom to marry, cannot leave an abusive home, and cannot speak in public without being laughed out of the room. For most of human history, that was not a dystopia—it was simply 'another day'. The story of feminism is the story of how women, across centuries and continents, refused to accept that 'another day' as permanent.

It is a story told in waves—not because the movement was tidy or uniform, but because, like the ocean itself, it kept returning to the shore with greater force each time. Each wave built upon the last, each left a new mark on the rocks of history. And while these waves were born largely in the West, their currents reached every corner of the world, including India, where they collided with ancient traditions, colonial legacies, and the extraordinary courage of women who were already fighting their own battles.

The First Wave:
The Right to Simply Exist as a Citizen

The first wave of feminism, roughly spanning the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, had one deceptively simple demand: let women be full citizens. This meant the right to vote, the right to own property, and the right to receive an education. These seem



obvious to us now. At the time, they were considered outrageous.

In Britain, the suffragette movement reached its most dramatic pitch in the early 1900s. Women chained themselves to the railings of 10 Downing Street. They smashed windows on Oxford Street. They went on hunger strikes in prison and were force-fed by the authorities—a outrageous spectacle that horrified the public and generated enormous sympathy. The most iconic moment came in 1913, when Emily Wilding Davison threw herself in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby and died four days later. She had sewn suffragette colours into her coat. She knew exactly what she was doing.

> In the 1872 US elections, Susan B Anthony was arrested for the crime of voting. She refused to pay the fine, calling it a protest against an unjust law. The judge, fearing she would appeal and create a legal precedent, quietly dropped the case.

In America, the movement culminated in the 19th Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote, though it is worth noting, with some discomfort, that this victory applied mainly to white women. Black women in the American South faced poll taxes, literacy tests, and outright violence at polling booths for decades more.

Meanwhile, in India, the colonial period produced its own remarkable reformers. Ram Mohan Roy campaigned ferociously against sati and succeeded in getting it banned in 1829. Savitribai Phule—one of the most extraordinary figures in Indian history—opened the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, at a time when her very presence in public invited people to throw stones and dung at her. She carried a spare sari in her bag and changed into it when she arrived at school. She did not stop. She did not slow down. She taught.

> Savitribai Phule is also believed to be India's first female teacher. She and her husband Jotirao Phule were both excommunicated from their caste community for their work. Their family was the only one willing to support them.

By 1947, Indian women won something that many Western women waited far longer for: universal suffrage at independence. India never had a separate suffragette struggle - the vote was extended to all adults, men and women alike, from the very beginning of the Republic. It was a quiet but remarkable achievement.

The Second Wave:
The Personal Is Political

If the first wave asked for legal rights, the second wave—erupting in the 1960s and 1970s—asked something far more disruptive: it asked women to examine their own lives. It declared that the kitchen, the bedroom, and the workplace were all political spaces. The phrase that defined this era was coined by American activist Carol Hanisch: "The personal is political."

This wave was triggered, in part, by a book. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) gave voice to what she called "the problem that has no name"—the vague, gnawing dissatisfaction of educated, middle-class women who had been told that marriage and motherhood were their greatest fulfillments, and who found, upon achieving both, that something essential was still missing.

The second wave tackled abortion rights, marital rape, domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and the representation of women in politics and culture. In 1970, women marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City in the Women's Strike for Equality. In France, women left wreaths at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier—with a banner reading "One unknown soldier more than the unknown soldier: his wife."

> In 1968, feminist protesters disrupted the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, throwing bras, girdles, high heels, and copies of Playboy into a "Freedom Trash Can". Though no bras were actually burned (a bonfire permit was refused), the myth of "bra-burning feminists" was born that day and has never quite died.

In India, the second wave arrived somewhat later and took distinctly Indian forms. The 1970s saw the rise of the anti-rape movement following the Mathura rape case (1972), in which a young tribal girl was assaulted by two policemen who were subsequently acquitted by the Supreme Court on the grounds that she had not "raised an alarm". The outrage that followed - with lawyers, academics, and activists writing open letters to the Chief Justice, directly led to amendments in rape laws and the concept of custodial rape.

The 1970s also saw the Chipko movement—women in the hills of Uttarakhand literally hugging trees to prevent deforestation. It was simultaneously an environmental movement and a feminist one: the women were protecting the forests because they were the ones who collected firewood and fodder, the

ones who suffered when the forests disappeared. Their leader, Gaura Devi, had no formal education. She had extraordinary clarity of purpose.

The Third Wave:
Who Gets to Define 'Woman'?
By the 1990s, a new generation of women was growing up with rights their grandmothers had fought for - and they were asking harder questions. The third wave of feminism, beginning roughly in 1991, was born from a recognition that feminism had, thus far, been largely the story of a particular kind of woman: educated, Western, and white.

The third wave embraced intersectionality—a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, sexuality, disability, and gender overlap and compound each other. A Black woman in America, Crenshaw argued, does not simply experience racism plus sexism as two separate things—she experiences a specific, unique form of discrimination that is neither simply "racism" nor simply "sexism" but something altogether different.

The third wave was also more comfortable with contradiction. It embraced lipstick alongside combat boots, pop music alongside political theory. It celebrated women who were aggressive, sexual, and unapologetically ambitious. Pop culture was reclaimed rather than rejected: the Spice Girls sang about Girl Power; Beyoncé declared herself a feminist on a stadium screen.

In India, the third wave found expression in the Delhi gang rape case of 2012—a moment that cracked open a national conversation about women's safety, public space, and the culture of silence around sexual violence. Hundreds of thousands poured into the streets. The conversations that followed were uncomfortable, necessary, and long overdue. Laws were amended. The conversation about consent entered public discourse in an entirely new way.

The Fourth Wave:
The Age of the Hashtag
The fourth wave of feminism is the one we are living in now, and its defining medium is the internet. Beginning around 2012 and accelerating dramatically in 2017 with the #MeToo movement, the fourth wave has used social media to do something unprecedented: give individual women the ability to speak directly to millions, without the permission of a newspaper editor, a television producer, or a publishing house.

When actress Alyssa Milano sent a tweet in October 2017 asking survivors of sexual harassment to reply with "Me Too", the phrase—originally coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 for a very different context—became a global earthquake. Within 24 hours, the hashtag had been used more than half a million times. Within days, some of the most powerful men in Hollywood, media, and politics had been exposed, resigned, or been dismissed.

Tarana Burke, who first used the phrase "Me Too" in 2006, is a Black woman from the Bronx who created it to help survivors of sexual violence in low-income communities of colour —precisely the communities that had long been ignored. When the hashtag went viral in 2017, Burke was initially left out of the story entirely. The erasure itself became part of the conversation about whose voices get amplified.

In India, #MeToo arrived in 2018 with a force that surprised many. Journalists, comedians, actors, filmmakers, academics, and chefs were named. Some careers ended. Many did not. The movement exposed how pervasive workplace harassment was in industries that considered themselves progressive—and how rarely women had felt safe to speak.

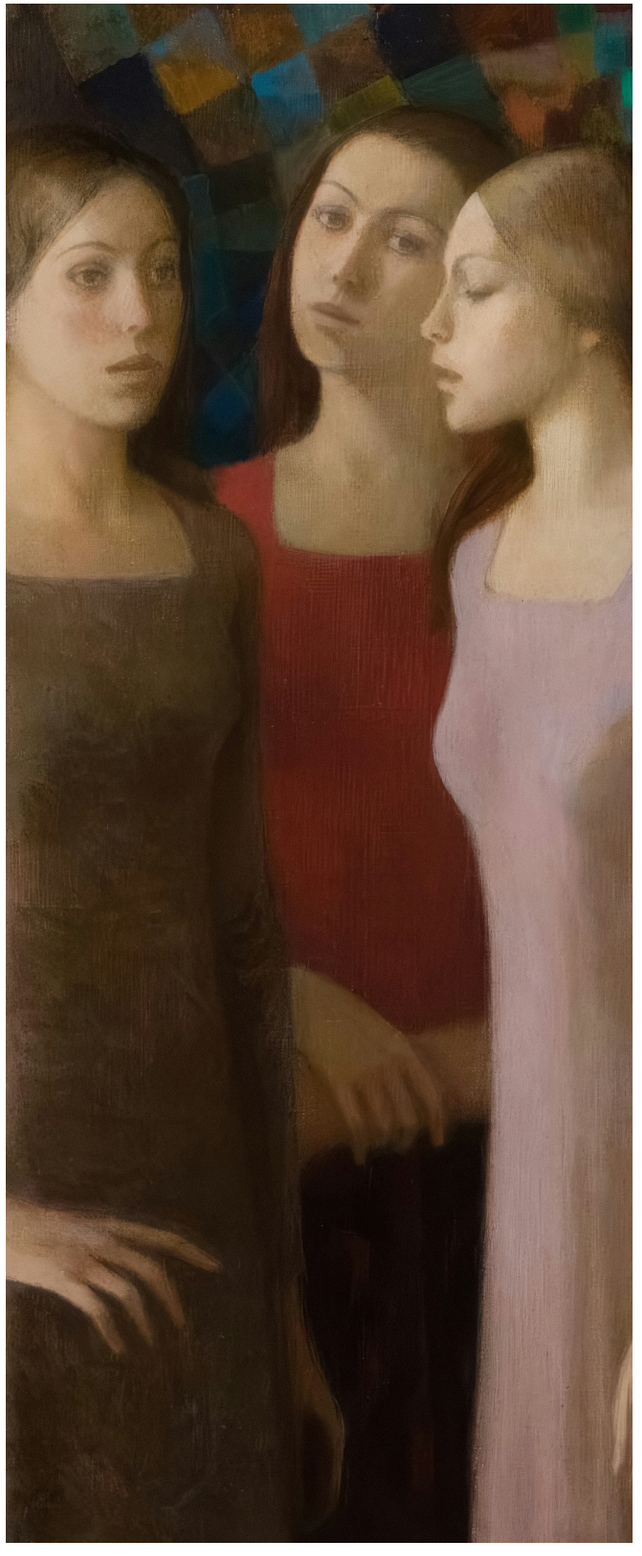
The fourth wave has also brought new debates into feminism—about trans inclusion, about sex work, about reproductive rights in an age of renewed political attacks. These debates are sometimes fierce, occasionally painful, and always necessary. A movement that stops arguing with itself has probably stopped thinking.

What All of This Means for India
India occupies a unique and fascinating position in the global history of feminism. It is a country where women have been worshipped as goddesses and treated as property simultaneously. A country where a woman led the government as Prime Minister in 1966, yet where female foeticide remained common enough to distort the sex ratio in several states. A country where the law guarantees equal rights and where the ground reality, for many women, remains starkly different.

Indian feminism has never been a simple import from the West. It has its own ancient roots—in the teachings of the Bhakti saints, in the philosophical tradition that revered female scholars, in the extraordinary lives of women like Mirabai, Ahilyabai Holkar, and Rani Lakshmibai. It has been shaped by the independence movement, by caste, by religion, by class, by the enormous diversity of a country where "women's experience" cannot be reduced to a single story.

What each wave of feminism has done—globally and in India—is expand the imagination of what is possible. The right to vote. The right to say no. The right to name the harm done to you. The right to be believed. These were not given freely. They were wrested, argued, marched, and sometimes bled for.

The waves continue. They do not always move in a straight line. There are undertows and reversals—governments that roll back women's rights, courts that fail rape survivors, workplaces that still pay women less for the same work. But the tide, on the whole, has been moving in one direction. And it is not going back.



A Lament: Forbidding Wailing

Ms ANONYMOUS

We are the difficult women,
the not-likeable,
the not-loveable,
the not-so-rosy
and the not-at-all-bubbly ones.
The women that laugh less, cry more,
scream into the pillow before falling asleep.

Apparently, we are either too serious,
or, too sad;
and that makes us not-so-preferable to be friends with.
True, I don't contest any of this.

We are difficult. As though you left us with an alternate choice.
We sit at night sewing ourselves together, all over again, to face your cruel world, for yet another day and, fight a losing battle endlessly.

Meanwhile, you fall asleep, you rest; to become an even brutal monster the next day.

I grant you all the liberty to call us difficult, stubborn, sad
and, whatever else your vocabulary can afford;
for we carry the wounds, the scars, the hurt within us,
walk on eggshells every day,
and yet, manage to not accept defeat, to show up the next day,
to sit alone and put the pieces together even as our hands bleed,
and hearts ache, a peculiar pain;
of needles, pins and swords making their way into our beings smoothly.
We show up.

Of course, we are not-so-friendly, not-so-beautiful, not-so-loveable.

We are the testimonies of your all-encompassing brutality,
refusing to bow down even as you win.
We are what puts your notorious ego to shame.
We are the heroes of your worst nightmares.
Of course, we aren't easy.

COVER STORY

The Cost of Being a Woman

India's mental health crisis is a social design, not a biological flaw

RASHI VIDYASAGAR

If you look at the medical charts, you'll see a familiar pattern: women in India suffer from depression and anxiety at significantly higher rates than men. To be more precise, women are more likely to have "Common Mental Disorders." But if we step out of the clinic and into the living room, a different story emerges.

The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) isn't just counting "broken minds"; it's counting the cost of a "gendered life." To understand a woman's mental health in India, we have to look at her life as a marathon of obstacles, where each transition, from the schoolyard to the bridal suite, is a potential trapdoor.

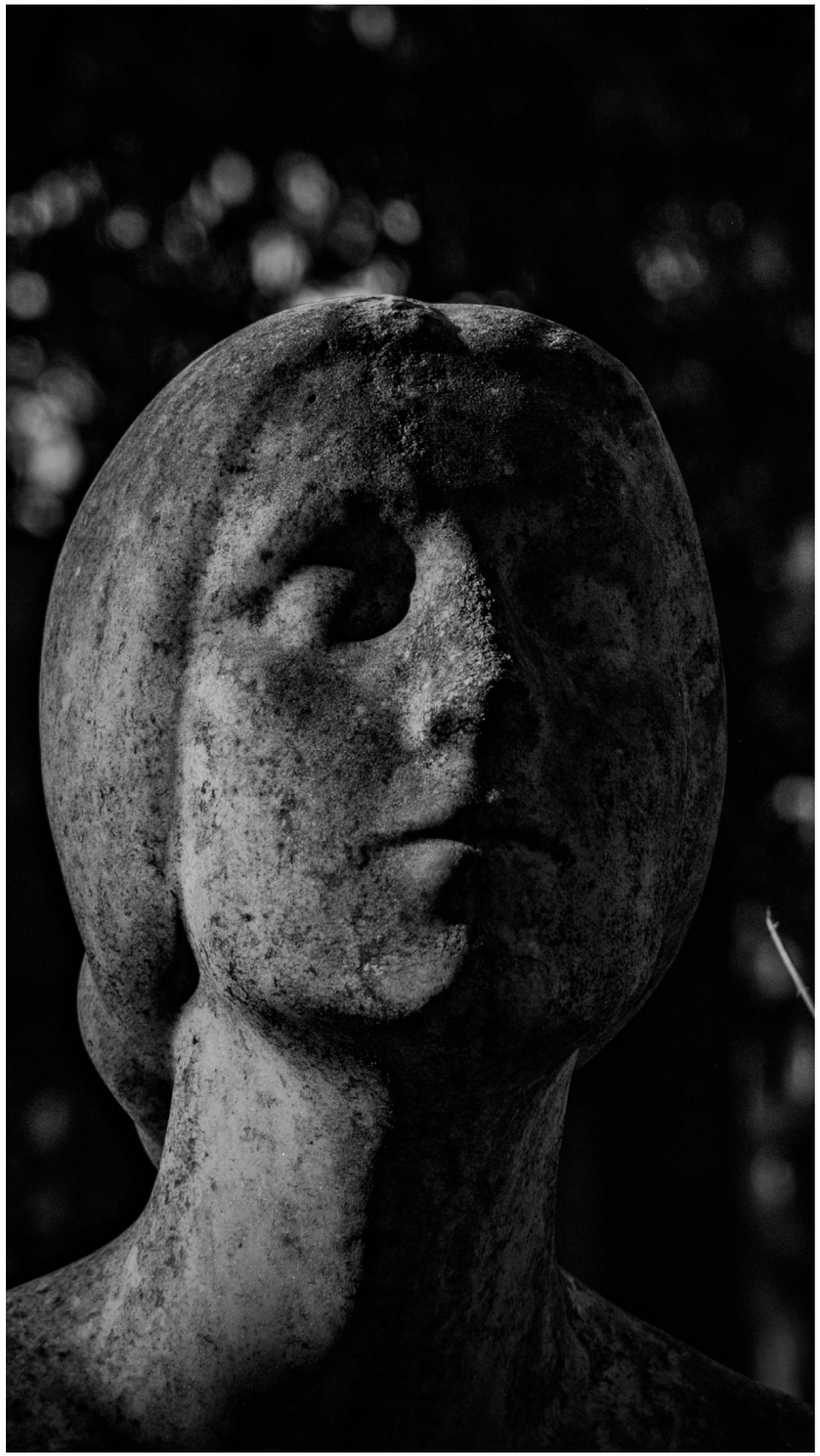
In India, the psychological blueprint is often drawn before a girl can even speak. "Son preference" isn't just a demographic statistic; it is the lived experience of being the child who receives less. Less milk, less schooling, and less emotional investment. And of course, we are still talking about it if and when she is allowed to be born and reach the age of one year.

As puberty hits, the world doesn't open up for a girl; it shrinks. Research shows a massive jump in female depression at menarche. In India, this is amplified by a sudden loss of freedom and the "period shame" that still haunts our classrooms. When post menarchial girls are pulled from school, they aren't just losing their education but also their sense of "self". This then shows up in the choices she allowed, who is allowed to marry, socialise with and how her life shapes up.

We celebrate Indian weddings with grandeur, but we rarely talk about the "social death" of the bride's autonomy. When a woman moves into a marital home where she has no voice and no "exit option," her depression isn't a chemical imbalance, it's a rational response to a lack of power. For those married before 18, the risk of violence and psychological collapse doubles. In this context, marriage isn't a protective shield; for many, it's the primary site of harm.

India has some of the highest rates of maternal depression in the world. While we blame "hormones," the truth is often found in the support that we offer pregnant women and mothers in general. The fear of not producing a male heir, the looming shadow of dowry, and the lack of social support make pregnancy a psychological minefield.

Post-delivery, women are expected to "bounce back", to manage the child and herself with an ease that is often impossible. Women are also expected to return to her marital and familial duties that she did pre-birth almost immediately as well.



A woman's mental health in India is a cumulative record of every "no" she was told, every choice she was denied, and every burden she was forced to carry alone.

The Invisible Middle and the Abandoned End

As women enter midlife, they become the "Sandwich Generation," crushed between caring for children and aging in-laws. Their distress is often dismissed as menopause. By the time an Indian woman reaches old age, she often faces the final blow: "gendered aging." Abandonment of older women, widows and women who are no longer productive or useful is common as well.

We need to stop asking "What is wrong with her?" and start asking "What is happening to her?" A woman's mental health in India is a cumulative record of every "no" she was told, every choice she was denied, and every burden she was forced to carry alone. If we want to "fix" women's mental health, we can't just hand out pills. We have to dismantle the patriarchy that devalues the girl child, the laws that trap the bride, and the norms that discard the widow. Mental health is not a medical luxury; it is the ultimate indicator of social justice.

Rashi Vidyasagar, a criminologist, victimologist, and crisis interventionist, is the co-founder of The Alternative Story, a mental health organisation based in Bengaluru.

Names Are Never Neutral –Address People Respectfully

SHRUTI ARUMUGAM

A guide to evolving gender and sexuality terminology; and why getting the language right matters.

Every word we choose to describe a person carries a history—of power, of shame, of resistance, of reclamation. When we get the language wrong, even without meaning to, we can make someone feel invisible, reduced, or unsafe. When we get it right, we give them something extraordinarily simple and extraordinarily rare: the feeling of being seen.

This article is for anyone who has ever felt genuinely confused—not hostile, just confused—about the vocabulary surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation. It is for the parent trying to understand their child, the HR professional drafting a new policy, the journalist writing a profile, the friend who wants to say the right thing but is not sure what that is. It is written without condescension, without jargon, and without the assumption that getting it wrong makes you a bad person. It makes you a person who has more to learn. That is true of all of us.

We will move through the terrain carefully: what the words mean, where they came from, how they have changed, and how to apply them respectfully in everyday life. Along the way, we will explore what all of this means for India, a country whose relationship with gender diversity is simultaneously ancient and, in its modern legal form, startlingly new.

Before we can understand the vocabulary, we need to understand that four distinct things are often conflated when people talk about gender and sexuality. They are not the same, though they can intersect in complex ways.

Biological sex refers to the physical and chromosomal characteristics a person is born with—typically described as male, female, or intersex. It is a biological reality, though it is more variable than most school textbooks acknowledge.

Gender identity is a person's internal, deeply felt sense of who they are; whether man, woman, both, neither, or something else entirely. It lives in the mind and the self, not the body.

Gender expression is how a person presents themselves to the world: through clothing, mannerisms, voice, and behaviour. A man who wears nail varnish is making a choice about expression, not necessarily making a statement about his identity.

Sexual orientation refers to the pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction a person experiences: towards men, women, both, neither, or others.

These four things are independent. A person can be biologically female, identify as a woman, dress in traditionally masculine clothing, and be attracted to other women. Or any other combination. The vocabulary we are exploring exists because human beings are, in their inner lives, genuinely varied; and because that variety deserves names that honour it rather than erase it.

The Evolution of the Names

Many of the words used today to describe gender and sexual diversity were, at some point in the recent past, either clinical terms used to pathologise, or slurs used to dehumanise. The American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973. The World Health Organisation did not do the same until 1990—meaning that for seventeen years, the world's two leading health authorities disagreed on whether being gay was an illness.

The word 'homosexual' was coined in 1869 by Austro-Hungarian journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny, not as an insult, but as a neutral, clinical alternative to the language of sin and crime that dominated at the time. By the 20th century, it had been absorbed by the medical establishment and used to justify conversion therapies, institutionalisation, and prosecution. Today, many members of the LGBTQ+ community find the word clinical and cold. Most style guides now recommend 'gay' or 'lesbian' in its place—unless the person being described uses 'homosexual' themselves.

'Queer' was, for most of the 20th century, a vicious slur; a word hurled at gay and gender-nonconforming people to wound and humiliate. Beginning in the late 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, particularly during the AIDS crisis - began reclaiming it deliberately, draining it of its power to harm by claiming it as a badge of pride. Today, 'queer' is widely used as both

an umbrella term (covering anyone whose gender or sexuality falls outside conventional norms) and as a personal identity. However, because of its history, some older members of the community find the word painful and prefer not to use it. This is not stubbornness, it is memory. The rule is simple: use it for yourself if it fits; do not use it to describe others unless they use it first.

'Transgender,' often abbreviated as 'trans,' describes a person whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth. It is an adjective, not a noun. One says 'a transgender woman' or 'a trans man', not 'a transgender' or 'a transgendered person' (the 'd' suffix implies that something was done to them, which is inaccurate).

'Cisgender' is a person whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. Most people are cisgender. The word was coined not to label a majority as unusual, but to give a neutral counterpart to 'transgender'.

'Non-binary' is an umbrella term for gender identities that are not exclusively 'man' or 'woman'. A non-binary person may feel like both, neither, somewhere in between, or entirely outside the binary. It is a broad category with many variations.

'Genderfluid' is a person whose gender identity shifts or fluctuates over time—sometimes feeling more masculine, sometimes more feminine, sometimes neither.

'Agender' is a person who does not identify with any gender at all—who experiences themselves as genderless or gender-neutral.

'Bisexual' is a person attracted to people of their own gender and of other genders. 'Bi' does not mean 'attracted to only two genders' - it means 'attracted to similar and different'.

'Pansexual' is a person attracted to others regardless of gender. Some people prefer 'pan' over 'bi' to emphasise that their attraction is not limited by the gender binary.

The acronym itself has expanded considerably over the years—from the original 'LGB' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) to 'LGBT', then 'LGBTQ' (adding Queer or Questioning), then 'LGBTQ+' or 'LGBTQIA+' (adding Intersex and Asexual). The '+' is not a casual afterthought; it is an acknowledgement that human sexual and gender diversity is broader than any acronym can fully capture. Some organisations use the shorthand 'LGBTQ+' for simplicity; others prefer the full 'LGBTQIA+' as a gesture of inclusion. Neither is wrong.

Pronoun preferences: Many trans, non-binary, and genderqueer people use pronouns other than *he/him* or *she/her*. Common alternatives include *they/them* (singular), *ze/hir*, or *xe/xem*. Using someone's correct pronouns is a basic courtesy, not a political statement.

How to Address People Respectfully

All of the theory above collapses into one practical act: how do you actually speak to and about people in a way that is respectful? Here is a guide grounded not in ideology but in basic human courtesy.

If someone introduces themselves as Rohan, use Rohan. If a trans woman tells you her name is Priya—whether or not that is her legal name—use Priya. Referring to a trans person by their birth name (their 'dead name', in community language) after they have transitioned is considered deeply disrespectful, and for some, genuinely harmful.

If you are unsure which pronouns someone uses, the most respectful thing is to ask - quietly, privately, and without making it a production. A natural way is to share your own first: 'I use he/him, what about you?' In professional settings, many organisations now include pronoun fields in email signatures and introductions. This normalises the practice for everyone.

If you are writing about a person whose gender you do not know, or speaking about someone before you have had a chance to ask, use neutral language: 'they', 'the person', 'the individual'. If someone corrects you, about their name, their pronouns, or a term you have used, accept it with grace and without defensiveness. The correction is not an attack; it is an invitation to do better. The appropriate response is 'Thank you for telling me', not 'That's so confusing' or 'You can't blame me for not knowing.' Language about identity should follow the person, not precede them. When uncertain, ask. When corrected, listen. When in doubt, use the most neutral option available. The goal is not to perform political correctness; it is to make the person in front of you feel that they are being addressed as they actually are.

One of the most common frustrations expressed by well-meaning people is that the vocabulary keeps evolving. The language changes because understanding changes. When communities gain more freedom to speak about their own experiences, they develop more nuanced and accurate vocabulary for those experiences. When the old words carry too much historical pain, new ones are forged. When a term turns out to be inaccurate or reductive, a better one replaces it. This is how language has always worked; in science, in medicine, in every field where knowledge deepens over time.

The purpose of all this evolving vocabulary is not to create a set of rules for policing conversation, nor to establish a hierarchy of correctness in which some people are perpetually guilty of getting it wrong. Its purpose is simpler and more human than that: to give every person the words they need to describe themselves accurately; and to give everyone around them the tools to respond to that description with respect.

Words are not everything. But they are not nothing, either. A person who is addressed by their correct name, in the right pronoun, without being reduced to a diagnosis or a slur, is a person who has been told, in the most basic possible way: I see you. You are here. You are real. That is not a small thing. For many people, it is everything.

Taliban's Gendered Apartheid and Women Under Necropolitical Rule

Policies that normalise gendered exclusion and tolerate violence have predictable social effects: diminished educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, economic dependency, and intergenerational trauma.

SUMIT DASGUPTA

The new regulations issued by the Taliban in Afghanistan formalise restrictions that push women out of education, work and public life and, alarmingly, permit forms of domestic violence under new domestic violence laws. These were widely reported across major outlets. Times of India, The Hindu, NDTV among others, in India have documented provisions in a recently published penal code that, critics say, legalise or normalise abuse by setting minimal injury thresholds for prosecution. Citing Islamic scripture, the 90-page code prescribes different penalties depending on whether an offender is considered free or a slave, formalising inequality within the justice system, as mentioned by the Independent. The code does not, in clearly defined terms, prohibit psychological and sexual violence against women as well. Violators face a maximum penalty of 15 days in prison, and only in cases involving what the code describes as obscene force such as visible flesh wounds, broken bones or other serious injuries. Even when

abuse meets that threshold, a conviction depends on the wife proving it in court by presenting her injuries to a judge, a process that is almost impossible under the Taliban. To contrast, if a married woman does not take permission from her husband to meet her family, she can be detained or jailed for three months without question.

Scholars are calling this gendered apartheid, the systematic exclusion of women from public, economic and civic life and brought into relief a darker mechanism of control that Achille Mbembe theorised as *necropolitics*, the power to decide who may live and who may die. The phrase gendered apartheid borrows from the vocabulary of territorialised, legislated segregation most famously associated with the South African regime to describe social systems that segregate on the basis of gender rather than race or ethnicity, when applied to gender, the term highlights an organised denial of rights on the basis of sex.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics reframes sovereignty in terms of death-making. Mbembe argued that contemporary forms of power do not only discipline bodies as Michel Foucault described but also determine exposure to death, to abandonment, to life lived under threat. In his influential formulation, sovereignty manifests in the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die, a grim calculus that applies where policies and practices effectively consign populations to precarious, often lethal, conditions.

According to Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, recent reporting and analysis converge on three linked observations. First, official instruments now in force create legal and practical conditions that normalise gendered subordination and limit women's access to justice. They described the new regulations as amounting to "legalising slavery, violence and repression of women," arguing that the text erases prior protections and institutionalises control over women's movements and bodies. Second, feminist outlets and regional reporting emphasise the lived consequences: bans on education and employment, requirements for male guardianship in courts, and rules that make it virtually impossible for women to report abuse safely. Multiple outlets describe how these measures make legal redress both risky and inaccessible for survivors. Third, these policies should not be read only as isolated restrictions. When law and policy both remove institutional protections and directly or indirectly permit harm by narrowing the criteria for prosecution by requiring visible fractures or open wounds for serious penalties, the state is effectively deciding which bodies will be protected and which will be left exposed.

As one legal brief put it, the code "permits husbands to physically abuse their wives and children, provided it does not cause 'broken bones or open wounds'." And Mbembe's oft-cited formulation captures the systemic design, sovereignty can be exercised through decisions that expose people to death or let them live under conditions that amount to social death.

Apartheid's structural design works towards isolation and segregation while necropolitics catalyses systematic abandonment, leading to social or physical death. Laws that block access to education and employment produce poverty, illiteracy, and enforced dependence while legal provisions that tolerate "limited" violence embed immediate physical and psychological harm that reinforces that dependence. What emerges is a two-pronged regime of violence, one systemic and accumulative, the other direct and embodied. Both are structured by the state. Research and civil-society analysis make clear that these outcomes are not unintended side effects but foreseeable consequences of a legal order that withdraws rights and evades accountability. When authority claims the right over the bodies of women or other communities on the fringe, they are pushed further into dire straits because the oppressive force just compounds over each other. The legalisation of restrictive norms delegitimises activism within the country and places heavy burdens on external actors who want to assist without causing further harm.

The lexicon of politics matters here. Necropolitics and gendered apartheid are not rhetorical. This is not a new phenomenon. This casts light, as always on the harmful systems that are legally enforced by the state. Women and other marginalised communities in India may have an inkling of empathy and understanding here. Moving beyond calling these as isolated third-world, religious or cultural problems and recognising them as parts of a larger governance strategy is the way to go. Systems of power that shapes who is a citizen and whose life is to be protected or discarded, if not directly, maybe discreetly. Some amount of urgency is needed. The need is practical, ethical, and moral. Policies that normalise gendered exclusion and tolerate violence have predictable social effects, diminished educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, economic dependency, and intergenerational trauma. When legal systems require women to produce visible bodily injury for justice, they ignore the far-reaching harm of psychological abuse, economic coercion, and social isolation, all mechanisms through which states can wield power without firing a single shot. The subjugation of life to the power of death will become more apparent when the government governs to facilitate selective abandonment creating death-worlds where life is barely liveable and social existence becomes a task not worth completing.

CONFESSIONS OF A CANCER SURVIVOR

My world paused. I stood at the edge of the unknown. Ordinary life continued around me, but inside, everything felt uncertain. Treatment demanded patience, courage, and trust – often all three felt scarce.

CHRISTY OFM

Life is full of surprises and contradictions. I didn't know that ordinary days could carry such weight until the day everything changed. The day began quietly, tucked in routines that felt familiar and safe – family conversations, shared meals, plans for the week ahead. Nothing looked different. But beneath that normalcy, something was already shifting. A storm was brewing – a storm that would shatter my world without warning. I've never had any major medical illnesses, barring a persistent backache. Riding the bike on bad roads seemed to be the only plausible explanation. But a routine ultrasound scan to find the seriousness of my back pain threw a curve ball I never imagined: a suspected malignant tumour. A consultation at Bangalore's Manipal Hospital identified the tumour as 'Retroperitoneal sarcoma'. My world paused. I stood at the edge of the unknown. Ordinary life continued around me, but inside, everything felt uncertain. Life divided itself without asking permission: before and after.

Why Me?

When the biopsy turned positive for retroperitoneal sarcoma, my reaction was: Cancer? Me? How? Cancer – the word itself felt heavy, almost unreal, as if it belonged in someone else's story. Yet suddenly, it was mine. The diagnosis shook not only my body, but also my faith. My "before" ended, and an unknown "after" began. I believed in God and held on to my faith, but that did not stop the doubts, the questions: Why me? What next? Will I survive this? The future seemed uncertain, and my strength felt very small. I was in denial. There were questions I couldn't answer, fears I couldn't soften, and a silence that lingered. I felt like an outsider in my own body. An outsider, my body was conspiring against. I had several programmes planned. I was also preparing to move to a new mission. All plans came to a standstill as I wrapped my head around my diagnosis with growing trepidation.

The weight of this question can be agonisingly deflating. It shatters the minds and wounds the souls. I was trapped in a world of conflicting emotions. Like many, I questioned God's silence more than His power. I asked God quietly: "Where are You in this suffering?" There were moments when prayers felt empty. I persisted, but my prayers felt broken. There were days I didn't have the strength to form words – moments when God felt silent, and I struggled to understand His will.

I asked heartfelt questions: "Why, O Lord, do you stand aloof? Why hide in times of distress?" (Psalm 10:1), I kept turning toward Him. Like the psalmist, my prayer became a cry: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!" (Psalm 130:1). The Word of God became my anchor. I held on to the

Yet, even during the most difficult moments, I discovered something deeply reassuring: I was not alone.

hope that "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). In that helplessness, the Rosary became my prayer. When my mind was tired and my heart restless, the beads guided me. Even when I could not pray, the Rosary prayed within me. It became my strength and drive. Mother Mary was my guide and support.

Medicine & Miracle

During this phase, I learned that faith and good medical care go hand in hand. Trusting God did not mean ignoring the importance of finding the right doctors. In fact, seeking the best possible medical care became one of the ways I lived out my faith. Finding doctors who were knowledgeable, experienced and compassionate made a great difference in my journey. A good doctor does more than treat the disease – they listen, explain, reassure, and walk with the patient through fear and uncertainty.

I believe God works through doctors and medical professionals. Each correct diagnosis, timely decision, and careful treatment plan was part of God's healing work in my life. I was fortunate to have found the best surgical oncologists – Dr. Shabber Zaveri and Dr. Devesh Ballal. They explained the risks, the complexity, and the possible outcomes. With the doctors' reassurance, acceptance came, even if late and with great difficulty. The numbness of my denial phase was wearing off, and reality kicked in hard. I sought a shoulder, a hug, a safe space to let it all out without judgment or explanations.

I slowly came to terms with my condition. Most crucially, I discovered that I wasn't alone. Far from it. Many others with far deadlier forms of cancer had fought the disease with courage and resilience. God often answers our prayers through human hands, wisdom and science. Seeking the best medical care is not a lack of faith. It is an act of responsibility, hope and trust in the God who heals through many means.

I withstood the 10-hour surgery to remove the sarcoma without needing to be shifted to the ICU. Post-surgery pain was agonising; every breath, every move felt like a battle. There were several days of physical weakness and emotional exhaustion. Treatment demanded patience, courage, and trust – often all three felt scarce.

Yet, even during the most difficult moments, I discovered something deeply reassuring: I was not alone. Support came in many forms. Doctors and nurses offered skilled and compassionate care. "Fr Christy, you are an incredible man. You are always smiling, your recovery is remarkable," the words of my surgeon kept ringing in my ear, and I bounced back. Family members stood close, offering strength when I had none. Friends prayed, called, visited, and quietly reminded me that love can be a powerful medicine. In all of this, I experienced God's presence, not always dramatically, but gently and faithfully, sustaining me through each day.

Waiting, Rising, Fighting, Healing

The journey through treatment was not easy. I also learned what it means to wait – to wait for reports, to wait for outcomes, to wait for strength, to wait for hope. Yet, even in those dark moments, I was never truly alone. God walked with me quietly, often through the doctors, nurses, family members, friends, and even strangers who prayed for me.

Looking back, I see that those doubts deepened my faith. They stripped it of fear and made it more honest. Cancer taught me that faith is not about having no questions, but about holding on to God even when answers are unclear. A moment of suffering can birth profound grace.

The sudden illness, which seemed a tragedy, became a source of inspiration to see the extraordinary, to embrace life's contradictions with faith, and to trust in the God of surprises – the same God who turned water into wine, a manger into a throne, and a cross into salvation. My resilience, deep faith, and the prayers of many helped me navigate my grief in a Christian manner, offering solace during a deeply tragic period. I was given the grace to accept and face the situation with positivity and serenity. I didn't dwell on fear or anxiety anymore. Instead, I chose to trust in the Lord and respond with a smile. "The sickness may hit me, but it cannot defeat me. I will RISE, I will FIGHT, and I will WIN," was my attitude.

With the surgery done, my next challenge was chemotherapy. The thoughts of chemo sessions, their side effects, felt like a punch in the gut. The nausea, fatigue, losing the sense of taste like someone had turned down the flavour dial, and the irritability... With each cycle of chemo, the intensity of the side effects varied. Each one knocked me out in different ways. I became frail and fragile. However, every time the doctor said I was tolerating the chemo well,

Cancer left its mark on my body, but it also reshaped my heart. I value relationships more, live more mindfully, and hold faith more firmly.

thanks to my healthy lifestyle before the diagnosis, I was encouraged to fight back.

The moment of truth came with the post-chemo PET scan. "You have done it," the doctors said. There was no trace of the sarcoma. A weight was lifted, not just off my shoulders, but from the core of my being. Active surveillance will continue at regular intervals with medication, but the worst is over.

The misconception that a cancer diagnosis is a death sentence is not true. Yes, acceptance is difficult, but slaying the fears in one's head is important before taking on the intruder in the body. I firmly believe that cancer is a word and not a sentence, as I move on. I embrace the love, faith and gratitude of everyone who helped me recover. Because that's all there is to life. "Every day is a day to be thankful... even when there seems to be nothing else, there is hope," says Ralph Marston.

The hardest part wasn't always the physical toll, though real and unrelenting at times, it was the uncertainty. It was the fear that crept in during quiet moments. Strength doesn't always look like bravery. Sometimes it looks like the small act of getting out of bed when you don't want to, or admitting that you are scared, or letting someone else be strong for you.

Treatment was a long road, marked by small victories and painful setbacks. We learned to celebrate what once felt insignificant: a good test result, a day without nausea, an evening that almost felt normal. My family became my anchor, even as we all struggled in our own ways. Cancer tested us, but it also revealed a depth of love and resilience we didn't know we possessed. Cancer is not meant to be faced alone. I remain indebted to my family—the ultimate human sanctuary in whose warm embrace you feel loved and never alone. There is no substitute for a kind and comforting home environment.

My sisters were willing to take a break from their lives to accompany me to the doctor, to be at my bedside in the hospital, and care for me for 5 months. I don't believe cancer happens for a reason. But I do believe that love grows deeper in the presence of hardship, and that families find ways to carry one another through unimaginable seasons.

A little extra makes a big difference. For instance: an extra smile, an extra eye contact, an extra hand to help someone in need, an extra word of encouragement to someone struggling to rise, a tighter, warmer hug. Family and friends quickly rallied around me during this difficult journey, some reaching out by phone and others visiting. Some close friends visited almost every chemo session, like a Kohli fan, never missing a single match. It was both shocking and comforting to see how much love surrounded me. And yes, it does take a village to nurture someone.

Cancer left its mark on my body, but it also reshaped my heart. I value relationships more, live more mindfully, and hold faith more firmly. The experience taught me that suffering can deepen compassion, and that hope can grow even in the most unlikely places. My story is not just about illness and recovery; it is about family, faith and the quiet strength that emerges when we face life's hardest challenges together.

The Courage to Say 'No'

MONICA FERNANDES

It was the year 1975. I had recently married my childhood sweetheart Jim. Life was not a bed of roses for us during those early days. Our finances were very tight as Jim and I had recently purchased a small apartment. We had to pay monthly instalments to my parents who had loaned us part of the cost and we had to financially support Jim's parents.

I was working as a Confidential Secretary in a small firm. I was very happy there but unfortunately the salary was insufficient and I needed a more lucrative job. It was at this juncture that a friend approached us and told us of a job that would pay me substantially more than what I was getting. He introduced us to his cousin Shaila who had previously worked in the company. She reassured us that the Directors were professionals and that I had no cause to worry. So I quit my job and took on this new challenge.

Alas! I was assigned to work for the company's new General Manager Mr Dogra. I had an inexplicable uneasy feeling the first time I met my new boss. My instincts proved right. Not long after I joined, Mr Dogra said that I must stay late to send an urgent fax message. Jim worked nearby and we used to commute together. I phoned Jim at his office and told him to come to my workplace which he did. And so Mr Dogra's plan was foiled.

After some time Mr Dogra reported sick. He now asked me to come to his residence to take down dictation. I politely told him that I was employed to work in an office and not in anyone's home. Nevertheless, as the work was urgent, my husband would accompany me which he did. Mr Dogra's devious plans were again thwarted.

He now began to harass me on a regular basis. I was once five minutes late after lunch break and he humiliated me in front of the entire office staff. But I stuck on as we needed the money. Fortunately, Dr Kapur, who was part owner of the company, noticed my predicament and reprimanded Mr Dogra, telling him to back off.

All was quiet for sometime until that fateful day. Dr Kapur had two Confidential Secretaries, Joyce and Nitu, who sat next to each other. My desk was quite a few feet away in front of their larger desks. The rest of the staff were seated in front of us in the same large hall. The bosses had their individual cabins. Joyce complained that she had kept her gold earrings in her drawer and that they were suddenly missing. My protector, Dr Kapur, was travelling on that day. Mr Dogra asked everyone to stand away from their desks. He saw this as a 'golden' opportunity to harass me further. He strode to my desk and in front of everyone yelled, "You Mona! You're the culprit! I know that you need money desperately. Search her desk!" he ordered the peon. "Certainly Mr Dogra, please go ahead. But how could I be the thief when I have not been near Joyce's desk the entire morning?"

The earrings were finally found in Nitu's purse. She came from an affluent family but her generous allowance from her family and her paycheck were not enough to satisfy her craving for expensive clothes and accessories. She was asked to hand over her resignation as soon as Dr Kapur returned.

I found the atmosphere was getting too toxic for my liking. Urged by Jim, I quit the company and joined another company in Sewri. The locality was not great but they offered a fairly decent pay. My decision turned out to be a blessing in disguise. My first boss was a kind and learned man who was on an assignment from the parent company. He urged me to broaden my outlook by bringing me management books to read. "It is important to continuously learn, Mrs. Lobo" he said. After a few years I was transferred to the company's head office in Ballard Estate and rose to become the Secretary to the Managing Director.

I was glad that I had the courage to say 'No' to the creepy Mr Dogra. I also knew that I was abundantly blessed. When one door had been slammed in my face, God opened another door with far greater opportunities.

Grace-Filled Eyes

TOMY PALAKKAL

Image: Unsplash/ Colin+Meg

On a day
when words became weapons,
and faces I once protected
rose like unfamiliar storms,
I stood unarmed.

Seven voices.
Once seeds I had watered.
Once hands I had held steady.
Once stories I had carried
with care.

They came carrying a story
that was not mine,
yet laid it at my feet
as a verdict.

I was asked not to speak.
So I swallowed fire.
I learned the weight of
silence
when it is not chosen
but imposed.

Something ancient in me cracked.
Not merely trust.
Not merely pride.
But a deeper altar -
the place where I once bowed
before the mystery of the feminine,
before motherhood,
before tenderness,
before the holy patience
I had learned from my mother's hands
and my sisters' laughter.

That altar lay in ruins.
By evening
I was walking with broken
gods inside me,
carrying doubts like shards in my
pockets.

We sat with drinks we did not want,
trying to numb a grief that had no
language.

And then—
a small pair of feet
crossed the distance
between tables,
between strangers,
between despair and
possibility.

A child.
Holding a quarter plate.
Holding cake.
Holding nothing else.
Holding everything.
"It's my birthday!" she said.

No performance.
No calculation.
No agenda.
Only offering.

She fed us
a piece of sweetness
as if this were the most
natural thing
in the world.

In that moment
my wounds did not close—
but they stopped bleeding.

In that moment
womanhood returned to me
not as theory,
not as argument,
not as ideology,
but as a child's open palm.

Later I learned her name:
Nayana — grace-filled eyes.

Yes.
Because grace had looked at me.
Because innocence had
recognized pain
without needing explanation.
Because something in her
knew where to walk.

She did not choose women.
She did not choose families.
She did not choose safety.

She chose wounded
strangers.
She chose me.

And I,
who had nearly lost
faith in humanity,
received it back
not through speeches,
not through apologies,
not through justice,
but through cake.

Small.
Ordinary.
Holy.

Nayana,
you will never know
how much you carried
that evening.

You carried back my respect.
You carried back my reverence.
You carried back my ability
to see beauty in the feminine again.

You carried back
what bitterness was trying
to steal.

You gave a stranger
a gift he did not know
how to ask for.

May your eyes always
remain windows of grace.
May your hands always
remember how to give
without fear.
May your heart
never forget
that you are already a healer
without being taught how.

May kindness find you
the way you found me—
unexpected, undeserved,
perfectly timed.

And when the world grows loud,
may sweetness keep choosing you,
the way you chose me.

Bless you, little one.
You did not just share cake.
You shared light.

The Line of Destiny

JOSEPH JOYSON CAPUCHIN

The collapse of the American economy had not been sudden. The wise had predicted it — foolish governance, misguided policies and arrogance together has deepened the fall beyond recovery.

How lucky I was to get a window seat. The massive Dreamliner of United Airlines was flying unusually low as it prepared for landing at the Kochi International Airport. A radiant tropical morning signalled warm welcome. When I looked down through the aircraft window, it felt as if I were descending into a dream land.

Just beneath me, rows of coconut treetops stood like tender green blossoms in a careful array spreading out like a vast emerald carpet — as though the earth itself had laid out a welcoming mat for newcomers.

On the other side, magnificent mountain folds opened their chest wide, exhaling a gently spiced aromatic breeze, and between them great rivers twisted and curved in serpentine grace, adorning their banks with indescribable wild beauty. My heartbeat quickened in wonder. I was landing in God's Own Country, waiting in royal splendour to receive me.

This time, I had decided — I would never go back to America again. And I was not alone. Most of the fellow US passengers around me were arriving with the same intention: abandoning their exhausted American lives to settle in Kerala. I had already understood that. Everyone was glowing with excitement.

Children had occupied almost every window seat. They couldn't contain their curiosity and excitement. They screamed in strange joyful tones, overwhelmed with happiness, while even the air-crew joined them with magical smiles.

The whole aircraft had turned into a festival in the sky. The collapse of the American economy had not been sudden. The wise had predicted it — foolish governance, misguided policies and arrogance together had deepened the fall beyond recovery. Those US citizens with foresight had prepared early. I was one of them.

For many passengers, Kerala had only been experienced once before — just like me. My previous visit had come through inspiration from my traveller friends in the US, and that journey had transformed my life completely.

That one-month stay had paved the path to uproot my life and replant it here — in this amazing God's own land. For most travellers on this flight, this was not merely travel — it was migration. A closing chapter of an era.

They were leaving forever the America that had once the reputation as a dreamland. What drew them here was simple: they believed Kerala held a welcoming people ready to embrace them, and a wise, service-minded administration to support them.

Using the AI-enabled Kerala Immigration App, KIA, I had purchased a beautiful traditional villa on the banks of the Periyar in Aluva. Years ago, it belonged to a Keralite family that had migrated to America chasing dreams. For nearly ten years they lived abroad while only the elderly members remained in the house until about five years ago. After their death, the villa slowly fell into neglect. The family in America ignored government notices.

Eventually, under new law, the Kerala government took ownership. With large-scale migration of foreigners from Western countries, the house was added to the residential allocation list for the migrants.

And finally — by fortune — it became mine. Last year, in the devastating blizzard that destroyed New York, that Malayali family perished... not a single person survived. Perhaps this is what they call destiny.

THE HUMBLING TRADITION OF WASHING OF THE FEET ON MAUNDY THURSDAY

Dr MARIANNE FURTADO de NAZARETH

As kids we loved it, if Dad was asked to come up to the altar in church and have his feet washed during the Maundy Thursday service. That's because he got a delicious and fresh Hot Cross bun, after the washing, which we all went home and shared! As I grew older I had a deep respect for the priest who was able to not only wash the feet, but also kiss them. Over the years I have seen a mix of people being called up to the altar for this tradition.

Washing of the feet is a significant act of service, humility, and hospitality, deeply rooted in both practical ancient hygiene and religious tradition. Most men of Jesus' time wore open sandals and walked on dusty roads from one city to the other. It was just a practice to wash their feet outside, before they stepped into the house or church. In India we leave our shoes outside the front door of the house to avoid defiling the house, with dirt from the roads.

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples during the Last Supper to demonstrate selfless love, serving as an example for his followers to love and serve one another. This tradition is carried out on Holy Thursday or as we commonly call it – Maundy Thursday. If we look at the Biblical Context: Jesus washing the feet of the Twelve Apostles symbolises his mission as a servant, reversing the social order where the master serves the followers. It highlights humility and the mandate to serve one another.

Looking at the Historical/Cultural practice behind washing of the feet: In ancient Palestine, washing the feet of guests was a customary act of hospitality due to dusty roads and the wearing of sandals. With regard to Religious Rites of Christians: Washing of the feet was practiced on Maundy Thursday as a reenactment of the Last Supper, focusing on the call to serve. So what does it symbolize: It symbolises the cleansing from sin, vulnerability, and the willingness to take on the role of a servant.

Like all symbolic actions of the church, the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday holds many layers of significance for Christians. The practice ritualises Christ's action on the night before he died, when he showed his disciples an example of how they are to love one another in imitation of his love for them. Thus, "the principal and traditional meaning of the Holy Thursday ...is the biblical injunction of Christian charity: Christ's disciples are to love one another". This

> Inspired by the foot-washing at the Last Supper, let us on Maundy Thursday follow Jesus Christ's example of humble love and service.

commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us, is given to all the baptized, those who are Christ's disciples today.

The priest who presides at the Holy Thursday Mass should be the primary example for the Christian community of Jesus' self-giving and humbling act of love for his friends. That is why he is called to lead the washing of the feet. It is also why this ritual reflects not only the command given to all the faithful to love as Christ loved, but also the command to complete and total service that is given to all those in ordained ministry, as an imitation of Christ's life of service, even to the point of death.

As a child I wondered if both men and women could participate in the washing of the feet? Studies says, although the Roman Missal refers only to men, the custom of having both men and women participate in the washing of the feet "is an understandable way of accentuating the evangelical command of the Lord, 'who came to serve and not to be served' that all members of the Church must serve one another in love. Thus, both men and women, including children, may have their feet washed as well as participate by washing another's feet.

I also always wondered if there had to be 12 persons selected to have their feet washed. Nowhere in any of the scriptures does it indicate that 12 persons are to be chosen for this ritual. Although the washing of the feet imitates Jesus' act of love for his disciples on the night before he died. It is a ritual that signifies our participation in Christ's mission of love and service to one another and to those in need, in our world today.

In light of the humbling service signified by washing of another's feet and its biblical connection to Jesus' action at the Last Supper, let us be inspired on Maundy Thursday, by Jesus' own act of service and love, when he stooped down to wash his disciples' feet.

A First Bow, A Lasting Impression

Thirty-three children from Anantha Academy for Special Education mounted their debut theatrical production, and the children who took the stage reminded everyone in the room why the arts belong to all of us.

RADHIKA SAJEEV

"I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being."
OSCAR WILDE

The lights went down. A hush fell over the auditorium. And then, one by one, they walked out: thirty-three children, some nervous, some beaming, all of them ready. What followed was an hour of theatre that was equal parts joyful, bold, and quietly extraordinary. Anantha Academy for Special Education, Bengaluru, presented Alibaba, their first-ever theatrical extravaganza.

A Stage Built on Belief

Anantha Academy for Special Education operates on a single conviction: every child's potential is real, and deserves to be recognized, nurtured, and catered to. Supporting students above the age of six across a wide range of disabilities, the Academy offers NIOS coaching, prevocational and vocational training, and programs shaped around everyone. Their motto, Infinite Possibilities, is not a tagline. It is a daily practice.

This practice extends well beyond the classroom. The Academy understands that children with diverse needs require more than academic accommodation; they require spaces where their whole selves are welcome, where expression, movement, and creativity are treated as essential, not supplementary. Their self-sustaining model, responsive to individual goals, is precisely this kind of space. This theatrical production was not a footnote in their calendar. It was evidence of a philosophy in action.

The Woman Behind the Curtain

Diana Thaloor, a movement, dance, and drama therapist with 27 years of experience, directed the play and drew out what lived quietly inside her students. Ms Thaloor's approach to theatre is not about polish or perfection. It is about process of what happens to a child in the months between the first rehearsal and the final bow. Working with a cast of thirty- three, she built not just a production, but a shared world.

Rehearsals began in August. In the early weeks, the children were reluctant. Waiting for cues felt abstract. Delivering dialogue on command felt strange. The stage, for many, was unfamiliar territory and unfamiliarity, for children with sensory sensitivities and diverse learning needs, can feel enormous. For children on the autism spectrum, the challenges were layered: the brightness of stage lights, the weight and texture of costumes, the sudden swell of music and sound. These were not small things to navigate.

They navigated every challenge, and week by week they grew familiar with the unfamiliar, learned their cues, delivered their lines with confidence, and wore their costumes with pride. What began as reluctance slowly, steadily, transformed into something that looked a great deal like ownership.

From Classroom to Stage

There is a particular kind of learning that only becomes visible when it is performed. In a classroom, a child might follow instructions, respond to prompts, and practice a skill in a controlled setting. Theatre demands more; it asks children to refine learning into expression. To move with intention. To listen, truly listen, to the person beside them. To hold a moment, and then let it go.

This production invited each child to step forward, claim space, and inhabit the role of the main character, encouraging performers to embrace visibility and engage fully with the moment.

This shift from in-class activity to full production is where the real growth happens. Research supports what teachers and therapists have long observed: theatre, movement, and music create pathways for development that other interventions cannot always reach. Inclusive theatre programs provide children the opportunity to practice eye contact, turn-taking, active listening, teamwork, and appropriate body language, not as exercises, but as lived, joyful experience. For children with special needs, the stage becomes not just a platform but a practice ground for life.

Stepping into the Spotlight

This production invited each child to step forward, claim space, and inhabit the role of the main character, encouraging performers to embrace visibility and engage fully with the moment rather than remain on the sidelines, while rehearsals gradually replaced hesitation with familiarity and strengthened confidence through practice and shared effort.

As the cast took their final bow and applause filled the auditorium, the thirty-three faces on stage reflected discovery and accomplishment, revealing performers who recognized their own growth, trusted their preparation, and carried pride in what they had achieved, a confidence that travelled beyond the stage into classrooms, homes, and everyday moments where it continued to take shape.

Even after the applause faded, the courage to stand in the light endured and continued to guide them forward.

A WALKWAY TOWARD THE LIGHT

BOBBY JOSE KATTIKADU CAPUCHIN

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

RUMI

There is no tragedy as profound as loneliness. It is perhaps why the story of the "Loneliest Whale in the World" left such a deep imprint on my mind. It is an old note; I am not well-versed in the science behind it, but in that observation, there is a deep, resonant thrum of melancholy, much like the song of the whales themselves. The plight of that solitary creature, without a single kinsman, is that the frequency of its voice is too high to be received by others of its kind. Each time it goes unheard, it retreats further into an echoing solitude.

In the vast ocean of depression, even a whale becomes as vulnerable as a tiny minnow. What the reader holds now is a book written with the heart—a "moist" book that could serve as a gospel for the lonely and the despondent. With the balm of compassion, the author joins the healing ministry of a wounded world.He weaves a magic carpet of collective imagination, leading us toward a better world. Before him, a narrow path of self-sacrifice reveals itself. In every note he writes, the psalms of that sacrifice rise in varying measures. These chapters are variations of the same melody: stories of "small" people who, through their ordinary lives, ennobled the world they inhabited before departing.

It is the contemporary resonance of the hymn: "Why the delay in showing mercy?" The direction of this book's journey is set by an eight-year-old girl named Heng. From the moment a small child considers herself a sacrificial offering to be consumed in the fire for a friend's life, the world's dharma of redemption begins. Sergeant Major Nikolai Pestrestov, who was captured only because he refused to leave his wife's corpse, is simply that same child grown up in another land. Elsewhere, this child is named Franz Jägerstätter; having grasped the absurdity of war, he continues to write long letters to his woman... these are all the eternal sproutings of an undying imaginative love.

Ultimately, this book whispers to us: The world is not in darkness. Even a little girl, fading like the twilight, wanted to say loudly that the seagulls would return with messages of grace. One cannot read without tearful eyes the story of Amal, who, by playing his flute, wins back a flickering, fragile life. Tomorrow will be better.

This is also a book of "trials of seeking love." The fact that no one failed this test—save for a man named Frank—makes this little book a river of good omens. Amidst the ruins of a broken world, even a child swears: "Someone will come." This is what the old woman, with a rose pinned to her cloak, silently prayed for: Let no one lose...In Greek mythology, Antaeus was a powerful wrestler. He engaged in battles in the sky. When exhausted, his way of regaining vitality was to descend and touch the earth. He was the son of Gaia, the Earth. Hercules deceived him by lifting him high into the air, preventing him from touching the ground.
Lenin concludes the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) by citing this myth as a closing benediction. Every essay in this book ultimately tells us that it is time to return to the earth and to humanity—to strike roots and reclaim an existence filled with flowers and fruit.

As I close this book, which possesses an extraordinary humanity that purifies the heart, I feel as though someone is echoing what Naushad wrote about Vincent van Gogh. I believe this author, a devotee of love, also stands in the shadow of that radiant word: The women, children, and elders who came to see him off watched with tearful eyes as the extraordinary young man walked away with empty pockets and an empty suitcase. With a heart that could no longer bear the hypocrisies of this world, that youth walked away into his solitudes, his faiths, and his doubts. People wept silently, remembering his efforts to make their lives even a little bit easier.

My friend, my sibling... You who believe in winged humans and angels... A kiss on your forehead for making our lives a little more pure. Anasul and Afreen, who completed this work with your illustrations—this book belongs to you as well.

Of Sardines, Explorers, and Coastal Wonders—Lisbon and Beyond

SAJI SALKALACHEN

As a traveller from Kerala, the southern coastal state of India, where the Portuguese first arrived in 1498, a visit to Portugal was more than a journey westward—it was a loop back in time. It was on the shores of Calicut that Vasco da Gama landed over 500 years ago, forging a long and transformative link between our lands.

The Explorer Echo in Lisbon

Walking along the Tagus River in Lisbon, the towering Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument to the Discoveries) stood as a sentinel of that age. There, carved in stone and spirit, stood Vasco da Gama, the navigator whose name etches in Kerala's coastline and consciousness.

A short stroll away, within the serene Church of Santa Maria de Belém and beside the limestone grandeur of the Jerónimos Monastery, lies his final resting place. The filtered light streaming through the monastery's Gothic arches stirred a quiet familiarity: echoes of church bells in Old Goa, arches in Fort Kochi, and the Indo-Portuguese dialects that once filled colonial homes.

The discovery of the sea route to India was the crowning achievement of Vasco da Gama. On his return to Lisbon in 1499, King Manuel I—founder of the monastery—honoured him with a welcome as a hero. Vasco da Gama died in Kochi in 1524 during his third voyage, and he was buried there until 1538, when the government transported his remains back to Lisbon. His tomb now draws countless visitors, eager to witness this chapter of Portugal's colonial history.

Sardines – Our Shared Coastal Soul

But history alone does not bind us. It was in the aroma of grilled sardines—sardinhas assadas—wafting through the lanes of the Alfama district that one finds a simpler, warmer connection. Keralites, too, know sardines well: mathi or chaala, humble yet essential to our coastal kitchens.

In Portugal, sardines are more than food—they are a festivity. Central to the Feast of Saint Anthony every June, streets light up with bunting, music, and smoky grills. Sardines here are celebrated—cooked over charcoal, served with bread, potatoes, roasted peppers, and red wine. The word sardinhada is synonymous with gatherings, warmth, and celebration.

Since 2011, the Sardinhas de Lisboa contest has invited artists—locals and foreigners alike-to reimagine sardines in playful, creative forms. Today, Lisbon is home to thousands of decorative sardine images—paintings, posters, sculptures, and more—adorning balconies, walls, shops, and event spaces, especially during the Festas de Lisboa in June.

Beyond the festivities, Portugal and Spain jointly manage sardine resources through regulated fishing seasons and annual catch limits, guided by scientific surveys and sustainability models. Most fishing boats are family-operated, often crewed by immigrants, continuing a tradition shaped by the sea and demand for sustenance.

In Kerala, sardines may not feature in cartoons, but they are a relish in spicy coconut gravies, crispy fries, or pickled with green chillies and ginger. A local restaurant run by a chef from Thrissur captures this connection. Its aromas, authentic flavours, and colonial undertones draw a stream of locals, immigrants, and travellers alike—testament to the enduring culinary ties between the two nations.

The Lisbon Pulse

Riding Tram 28 is among the most delightful ways to feel the pulse of Lisbon. As it rattles through narrow streets and steep hills, past churches, tiled façades, and lively cafés, the vintage tram offers a fleeting sense of the city. Locals and tourists queue up for the ride, and on Friday night, the city soul buzzes with music, cheering, beer drinkers, and street revelry—amplified by the approaching Festival of St. Anthony, who was born here.

At one point, the tram halted mid-route to let a backlog of cars pass, and we walked down the hill instead. A 24-hour transport pass was handy,

Portugal welcomed us with warmth, surprise, and soul.

and with metros running until 1 a.m., returning was easy. Lisbon gleamed—an epicentre of camaraderie and freewheeling spirit, its streets alive with energy and charm.

So here we were—the discoverer and the discovered—once separated by oceans and centuries, now joined by memory, flavours, and fish. The association between Portugal and India spans over 450 years, entwined in history, culture, and legacy. What began with conquest and trade now continues as shared heritage—in Goan architecture, cuisine, customs, and diaspora.

The journey to southern Portugal—Lagos and Faro, where Vasco's sails first caught the Atlantic wind—would deepen this connection. That forms the tale of the next leg.

Cliffs and Caves of Lagos and Faro

After Lisbon's urban tempo, we sought nature's rhythm—and found it in the Algarve. The southern tip of Portugal, basking in over 300 days of sunshine a year, welcomed us with dramatic coastlines, vertical cliffs, and carved sea caves. Nowhere else in Portugal can one see such natural artistry—Ponta da Piedade, Praia da Marinha, and smaller, hidden coves that unfold along a 2-km-long boardwalk trail above the Atlantic.

A Portugal – We Will Remember

Portugal welcomed us with warmth, surprise, and soul—whether in the vibrant streets of Lisbon, the grandeur of the Jerónimos Monastery, or the sunlit cliffs and sea breezes of the Algarve. It was a journey rich in both movement and meaning, offering glimpses of the past, joys, and quiet reflections on life itself. And as we departed, Portugal's lingering warmth stayed wrapped around us.

BOOKS

10 Quick Reads that Interrogate Gendered Worlds

CELESTE CHARLES

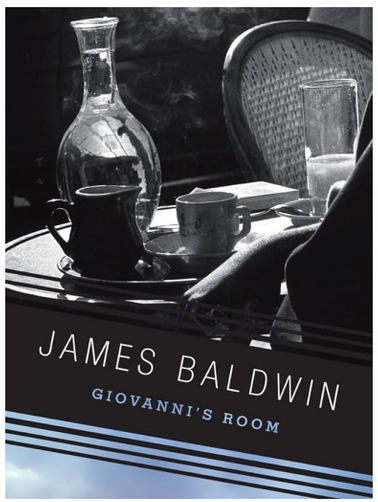
From intimate love stories to political reckonings, these books probe the subtle and overt ways gender shapes identity, desire and belonging. Across cultures and histories, their characters confront expectations that police bodies and futures, revealing how masculinity and femininity are constructed, resisted, endured, and quietly rewritten in everyday life.

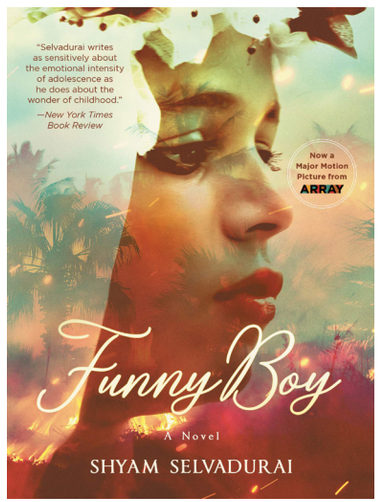
Giovanni's Room
by James Baldwin

In *Giovanni's Room*, James Baldwin strips love down to its most uncomfortable truths. The novel follows David, an American in Paris whose relationship with Giovanni exposes the gap between desire and the life he believes he is supposed to lead. Baldwin doesn't dramatize queerness; he dramatises fear, fear shaped by rigid ideas of masculinity, marriage, and normalcy. David's anguish is not only personal but social, while Hella's longing for domestic stability quietly reinforces the very norms that suffocate him. The novel works on multiple levels: as a love story, as a study of self-deception, and as a sharp critique of how gender expectations distort identity. It remains unsettling because its central question endures, what does it cost to choose safety over truth?

Funny Boi
by Shyam Selvadurai

Funny Boy by Shyam Selvadurai is a coming-of-age novel that moves quietly but leaves a deep mark. Set against the growing tensions of Sri Lankan civil unrest, it follows Arjie, a Tamil boy whose softness unsettles the rigid masculinity of his household. From the start, he fails at being the "right" kind of boy, he prefers bridal games to cricket, romance to roughness and for this he is labelled "funny," a word that carries both mockery and warning. Selvadurai writes these early scenes with warmth and humour, but beneath them lies a sharp critique of how gender is policed within the family. Arjie grows up in a space shaped by strict ideas of manhood, and even his father's decision to send him to an all-boys school reveals the belief that masculinity can be enforced through discipline and shame. What makes the novel powerful, however, is its refusal to turn Arjie into a tragic figure. His resistance is quiet, internal, and persistent. By the end, the roles his family tries to force onto him feel exposed as arbitrary, even fragile. In a deceptively simple style, Selvadurai uses a child's gaze to unravel patriarchy, making a subtle but firm case for the legitimacy of difference.





Unaccustomed Earth
by Jhumpa Lahiri

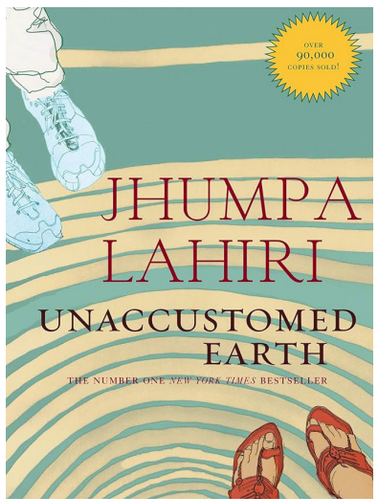
Unaccustomed Earth by Jhumpa Lahiri unfolds in a register that is quiet, precise, and emotionally exacting. Across interconnected stories of Bengali immigrant families, Lahiri traces the intimate negotiations between inheritance and selfhood, particularly through her women characters. Figures like Ruma in the title story, or the mother and daughter in "Hell-Heaven," inhabit spaces shaped by tradition, yet they are never simply bound by them. Their resistance is rarely dramatic; instead, it appears in pauses, withheld confessions, private decisions, and the steady pursuit of interior freedom. Lahiri's strength lies in showing how identity shifts through ordinary gestures a visit, a conversation, a job change moments that quietly carry the weight of migration, gender expectation, and generational distance. Rather than framing femininity through spectacle or rebellion, she reveals its endurance and subtle recalibration. In doing so, the collection offers a psychologically layered portrait of how immigrant women adapt, absorb, and, in small but decisive ways, redefine the terms of belonging.

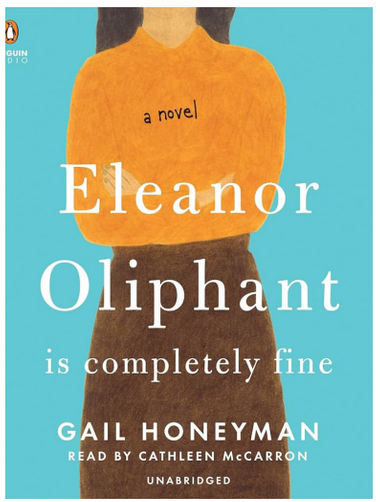
Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine
by Gail Honeyman

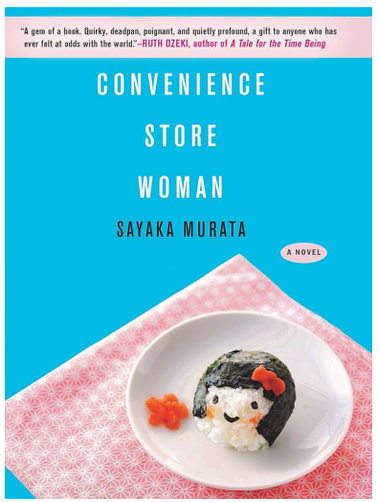
Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman begins as sharp, almost uncomfortable comedy but gradually reveals a more layered meditation on loneliness and gendered expectation. Eleanor's rigid routines and social awkwardness initially read as eccentricity, yet the novel steadily exposes them as structures of survival shaped by trauma. What unsettles those around her is not simply her solitude, but her refusal — or inability to perform the expected script of femininity: romance, sociability, polish. Honeyman uses Eleanor's dry, literal voice to undercut everyday sexism and the quiet dismissal of women's pain, showing how easily a woman's suffering is overlooked if she appears "fine." As the narrative moves toward healing, it resists sentimental rescue and instead foregrounds self-recognition and chosen connection. Beneath its humour, the novel becomes a study of resilience that reframes femininity as endurance, anger, vulnerability, and the slow reclamation of agency

Convenience Store Woman
by Sayaka Murata

Convenience Store Woman by Sayaka Murata reads with a calm, almost clinical simplicity that quietly unsettles. Keiko, a 36-year-old who has worked in the same convenience store for 18 years, finds clarity and identity in its routines, even as everyone around her insists she must "move on" to marriage and adulthood. What appears to others as stagnation is, for her, coherence. Murata uses this tension to expose how deeply gender expectations structure social life, particularly the assumption that a woman's fulfillment lies in marriage, motherhood, and upward mobility. Keiko's strategy is not open rebellion but adaptation: she studies her co-workers, mimics acceptable behavior, and learns the script of normalcy, even as she quietly refuses its ultimate demands. Her choice to remain in the convenience store to value rhythm over status becomes a subtle but firm rejection of imposed narratives. In its restrained tone, the novel offers a sharp critique of conformity, suggesting that what society labels abnormal may, in fact, be a lucid refusal to comply.







Human Acts
by Han Kang

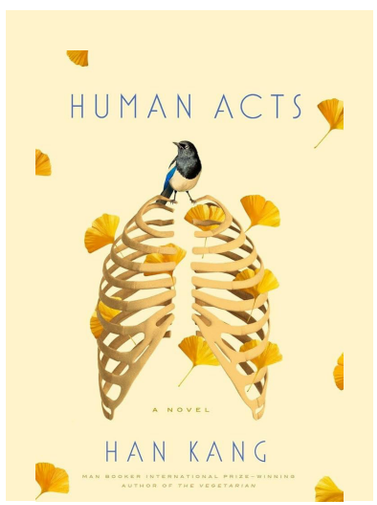
Human Acts by Han Kang is anchored in the 1980 Gwangju massacre, yet its power lies in how it renders political violence as lived, bodily experience. While the novel mourns collective loss, it is attentive to the differentiated ways trauma settles particularly in women's bodies and memories. Through figures such as Seon-ju, a young activist imprisoned, tortured, and sexually assaulted, Han makes visible how state brutality extends into intimate violation, leaving scars that exceed the moment of protest. The violence is not sensationalised; it is narrated in prose that is restrained, almost translucent, which intensifies its impact. Alongside Seon-ju, grieving mothers and sisters inhabit the text, carrying memory as burden and testimony. In foregrounding these interior lives, the novel reframes history not only as a record of political repression but as an archive of embodied grief. Gender here is not an added theme but a lens through which vulnerability, endurance, and dignity are understood within catastrophe.

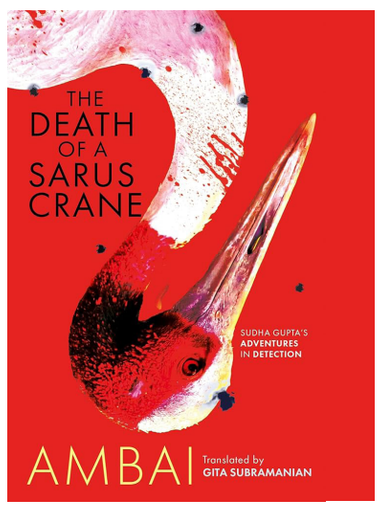
The Death of a Sarus Crane
by Ambai

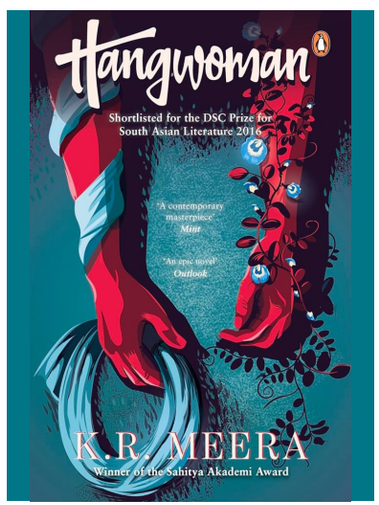
The Death of a Sarus Crane uses the structure of detective fiction to do something far more probing than solve crimes. Across four stories featuring Sudha Gupta, a middle-class sleuth in Mumbai, the collection moves beyond the mechanics of investigation to examine how gender, caste, and class shape vulnerability and silence. The cases themselves a trans woman forced out of familial belonging, a young woman burdened by guilt and expectation, a disturbing instance of child sexual abuse are not sensationalized; instead, they are framed as symptoms of social arrangements that normalise exclusion and harm. Ambai's feminist lens is steady rather than declarative. She attends to the emotional textures of queer desire, maternal conflict, and female precarity, revealing how prejudice operates within the ordinary. The detective form becomes a method of inquiry into power, asking not only who committed the crime, but what structures enabled it. In this way, the collection uses the detective form as a critical lens, implying that to narrate women's lives honestly is already to make a political intervention.

Hangwoman
by KR Meera

Hangwoman by KR Meera centres on Chetna Grddha Mullick, a young woman who inherits her family's profession as an executioner a role historically imagined as emphatically male. In a culture where the figure of the "hangman" is coded with physical strength, authority, and emotional hardness, Chetna's entry into the profession unsettles the gendered assumptions embedded in the very word. Meera does not frame this as spectacle; instead, she uses Chetna's apprenticeship to expose how deeply power and violence are masculinised within social imagination. At the same time, the novel interrogates the broader structures that demand women's silence and compliance, particularly within male-dominated lineages. By placing a woman at the centre of a system as stark as capital punishment, Meera fractures the binary that aligns courage with men and submission with women. The narrative is grim and unflinching, yet its force lies in its insistence that agency can exist even within oppressive frameworks. Chetna's determination to master the noose becomes less about death and more about authorship a claim to space, voice, and dissent in a tradition that was never meant to include her.







Publishers and the Years of Publications

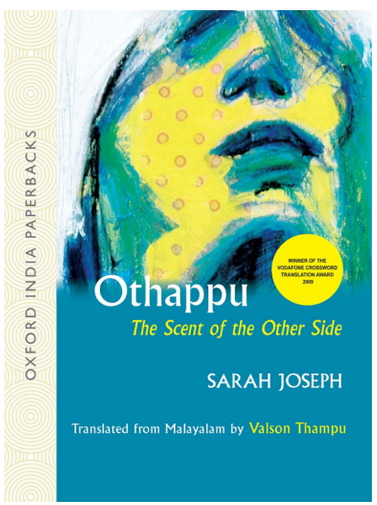
- **Giovanni's Room** by James Baldwin, 1956, Published by Dial Press
- **Funny Boy** by Shyam Selvadurai, 1994, Published by McClelland & Stewart
- **Unaccustomed Earth** by Jhumpa Lahiri, 2008, Published by Alfred A Knopf
- **Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine** by Gail Honeyman, 2017, Published by HarperCollins (UK imprint: Harper)
- **Convenience Store Woman** by Sayaka Murata, 2016, Published by Bungeishunjū
- **Human Acts** by Han Kang, 2014, Published by Changbi Publishers
- **The Death of a Sarus Crane** by Ambai, 2021, Published by Penguin Random House India
- **Hangwoman** by KR Meera, 2012, Published by Penguin
- **Othappu** by Sarah Joseph, 2005, Published by Oxford University Press (English edition)
- **Kim Ji-young, Born 1982** by Cho Nam-joo, 2016, Published by Minumsa Publishing Group.

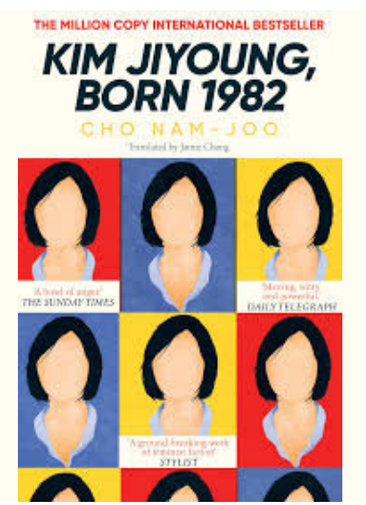
Othappu
by Sarah Joseph

Othappu by Sarah Joseph sharpens its critique of patriarchy through a decision that, in a Kerala parish setting, reads as both intimate and incendiary. Marghalitha, a nun who steps out of the convent and into the unsettled world beyond its compound walls, unsettles not just Church authority but the tightly woven moral fabric of her community. The very word othappu - scandal, social stain, whispered shame, carries the weight of parish gossip, catechism lessons, and the watchful eyes of achans and ammachis who measure a woman's worth through obedience and purity. Joseph's prose shifts between lyrical interiority and pointed social commentary, mapping the emotional toll of living within structures that sanctify sacrifice while disciplining desire. Marghalitha's departure is not spectacle; it is a slow, deliberate reclaiming of breath, body, and belief. In tracing her movement from cloistered silence to self-articulation, the novel exposes how faith and patriarchy often braid themselves together in everyday life. What emerges is a story rooted in local textures convent corridors, parish hierarchies, familial honour yet expansive in its insistence that a woman's calling cannot be reduced to submission.

Kim Ji-young, Born 1982
by Cho Nam-joo

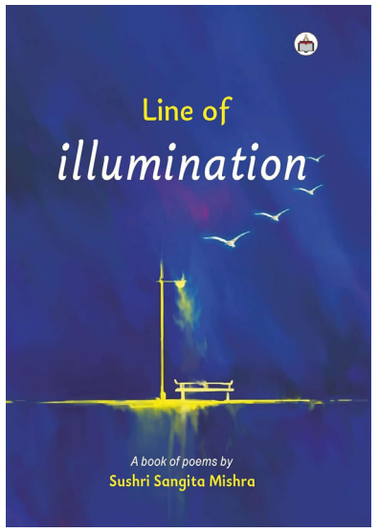
Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 by Cho Nam-joo moves beyond a simple account of gender discrimination and instead maps how an entire social order is reproduced through habit, policy, language, and silence. Ji-young's condition, speaking in the voices of other women becomes less a metaphor for individual trauma and more a structural echo, suggesting that what appears personal is in fact patterned. Cho's spare, report-like style accumulates details: classroom hierarchies, hiring practices, domestic labour divisions, casual remarks that pass as normal. Each instance may seem minor, but together they reveal an architecture of inequality that shapes aspiration, self-perception, and belonging. The novel is not only about what is expected of women; it is about how expectation becomes internalised as limitation. By presenting bias as ordinary, Cho exposes how power operates most effectively when it is mundane. The result is a text that reads as social diagnosis, an insistence that dignity, autonomy, and recognition are not private battles but collective negotiations embedded in everyday life.





Connecting The Everyday Matters

L N KOLLI



The 2025 collection of Sushri Sangita Mishra's *Line of Illumination* has offered a subtle yet intense cartography of the human soul, charted through fifty-two contemplative poems. This collection appears as a 'quant bridge' between tangible world and the metaphysical void, connecting the everyday matters of human life to the existential questions behind it.

Layered with striking imagery and metaphors, these poems, make the reader pause, to think, to retreat into the quietude of introspection towards the understanding of the 'self' and the 'world around'.

The title itself is rooted in a cognitively-engaging metaphor – the 'terminator line' or the 'line of illumination', the geographic line that divides the planetary body—the earth, into a day side and a night side. Mishra utilises this as her central conceit, positioning the poetic persona at this edifying edge of shadow and light. The poet stands in this liminal space, as a witness and suggests that revelation is not a destination but a dynamic interplay between what is known and what is unknown.

Mishra's work is characterised by an 'excavation' of existential truths using both insight and intellect. Her poetry doesn't merely observe; it interrogates the nature of reality. It looks into the paradox of truth, duality of Nature and non-duality of existence.

Where is the distinction between virtue
and vices when I know,
culprit is but a victim of another.

Destination waits from me
at the other side of the battle,
I know, I must cross over
But who should I fight against
And who should I fight for
Who am I,
And who am I not...
(*Battle of the Blazing Sun*)

In the thought-provoking opening poem *Truth*, the poet characterises truth as an entity that resists rescue, suggesting that for the absolute, the 'earth' is trivial. This set a tone of intellectual humility which can be observed throughout the collection.

In her poem *Road* metaphorically spoken about the journey of life, Mishra deconstructs the linear concept of the journey, positing that the destination is inherent in the path itself— a thought that echoes the Vedantic philosophy regarding the non-duality of means and ends.

Eschewing romanticised pastoralism, Mishra's Nature is both 'bleeding' and 'beautiful'. It is 'mesmerizing' and 'murderous'. She perceives the 'tears of sky' within the ocean and 'sobs of centuries' in the air, presenting a picture of the world where beauty and suffering are inextricably linked.

Aesthetic and Stylistic Framework

Mishra employs a free-verse structure that retains what scholars have termed 'hidden lyrics—a rhythmic ebb and flow reminiscent of 'eternal-tides'. Her imagery serves to transmute the abstract into the visceral. Resolve becomes a 'Sharpened sword', words are 'arrows' seeking 'shelter of a bleeding heart'. In *The Blank Canvas*, she explores the aesthetics of surrender. Here the absence of form becomes a 'soft hum' and the ultimate artistic achievement is not creation but the dissolution into the 'white' of a silent end.

Colours fade into themselves.
Lines, untethered treads,
unravel from Time.
No thoughts take root,
No silhouettes remain—
Only a soft hum of absence
Breathing through the void of mind.

****

Many saw the blank canvas
And walked past,
until
one read the caption—Surrender.
The crowd gathered.
Lines, colours, shapes emerged
In the frame.
Each one saw a different picture.
(*The Blank Canvas*)

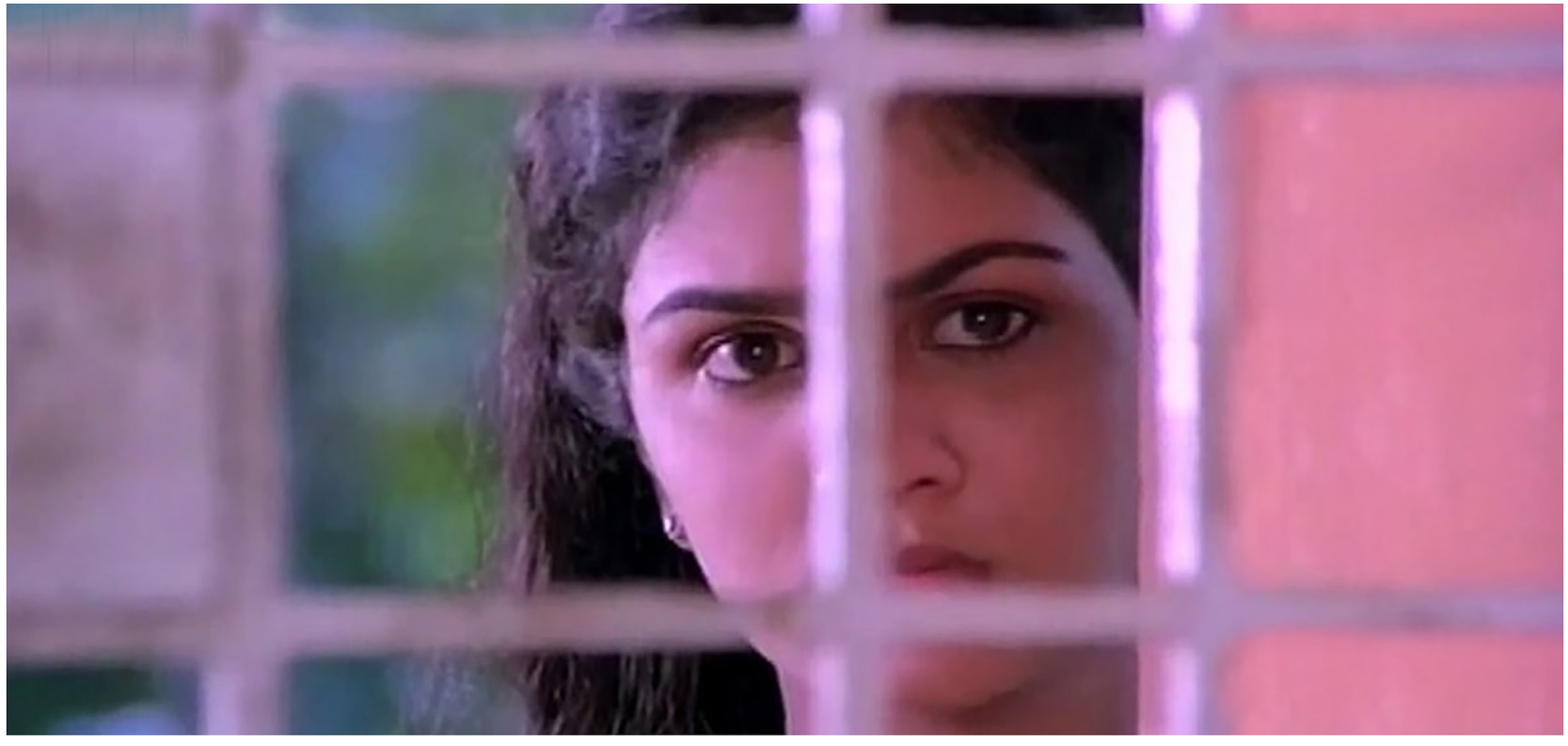
Critical Reception and Global Resonance

The write-ups of international figures such as Georges Fridenkraft Chapauthier and Ori Z Soltes underscores the collection's universalist reach. David Blake Willis and Marcus Bussey identify in Mishra's work a *sadhana* – a poetic endeavour that seeks a new harmony between the human limitations and the divine potential. As Ananta Kumar Giri notes, these verses invite the reader to 'rise from the ashes' of the mundane.

The *Line of Illumination* is a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English Poetry. It is a work of 'subtle watermarks' where the poet successfully navigates the 'unpredictable detours of imagination'. Mishra does not merely present a book of verse; she provides a meditative apparatus for those seeking to understand the 'ripple and the river' of their own existence.

The *Line of Illumination* is a work of 'subtle watermarks' where the poet successfully navigates the 'unpredictable detours of imagination'.

Gender Representation in Malayalam Cinema



PARVATHY ANIL M

Malayalam cinema has long prided itself on realism and social engagement. Yet when it comes to gender and queer representation, its journey has been uneven—marked by moments of startling sensitivity, long stretches of silence, and recurring patterns of stereotype and tragedy. From the tentative subtext of the 1980s to the conflicted visibility of today, the industry's engagement with gender diversity mirrors Kerala's own evolving social anxieties.

Any serious discussion of queer representation in Malayalam cinema inevitably begins with *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1986). Directed by Padmarajan, the film tells the story of two schoolgirls who run away together. Their relationship is never explicitly labelled, yet the emotional intimacy between them strongly suggests a sapphic bond. What makes the film remarkable, even today, is its tenderness. At a time when Indian cinema largely erased queer desire, Padmarajan allowed ambiguity to do the political work. The film gently unsettles the "naturalness" of heterosexual pairing without openly declaring a queer identity. In doing so, it created space for interpretation while still slipping past the moral gatekeeping of its era.

But the film is also a product of its time. It's tragic ending participates in what is now widely recognised as the "bury your gays" trope. The narrative ultimately retreats from its own radical potential, signalling the limits within which even progressive Malayalam cinema then operated.

After *Deshadanakili Karayarilla*, Malayalam cinema did not immediately build on this fragile breakthrough. For nearly two decades, queer lives largely disappeared from the mainstream screen. The early 2000s marked a cautious return. Ligy J. Pullappally's *Sancharam* (2004) stands as a landmark independent film that finally centred a lesbian love story openly rather than through suggestion. Unlike Padmarajan's coded storytelling, *Sancharam* names desire—and pays the price through its marginal industrial position. It remained more celebrated in festival circuits than in mainstream Kerala viewership.

Meanwhile, the mainstream industry took a very different route. Lal Jose's *Chanthupottu* (2005) introduced one of Malayalam cinema's most visible gender-nonconforming protagonists: Radha, an effeminate man played by Dileep. On the surface, the film appears sympathetic. But its narrative arc ultimately "corrects" Radha's femininity, pushing him toward normative masculinity.

This pattern became depressingly familiar. Through the late 2000s and early 2010s, queer-coded characters in Malayalam cinema frequently fell into three problematic categories:

- Comic effeminacy – gender-nonconforming men used for humour
- The shocking villain – homosexuality revealed as a twist (notably in Mumbai Police, 2013)
- Tragic queer bodies – characters punished or killed

These portrayals reveal an industry struggling to process queerness except as spectacle, pathology, or punchline.

The 2010s saw Malayalam cinema cautiously approach transgender narratives. Films like *Ardhanari* (2012) and *Njan Marykutty* (2018) attempted empathetic storytelling around trans women's lives. These films deserve credit for humanising trans experiences for mainstream audiences. Yet they also exposed a persistent limitation: both cast cisgender male actors in trans roles. What was framed as progressive representation simultaneously reproduced structural exclusion.

Still, the very emergence of trans narratives marked an important shift—from invisibility to contested visibility. The last decade has produced Malayalam cinema's most complex engagement with queer lives. Geetu Mohandas's *Moothon* (2019) offered one of the most tender portrayals of queer male desire in Indian cinema. Its visual language—intimate, tactile, unhurried—signalled a new aesthetic confidence.

And yet, even here, tragedy persists. Recent mainstream attempts such as *Monster* (2022) and *Mike* (2022) reveal the industry's continuing confusion. Both films flirt with progressive themes but ultimately retreat into conservative comfort zones, reaffirming heteronormative frameworks.

The pattern is clear: Malayalam cinema today is more willing to show queer characters—but not always ready to let them live fully. From the coded tenderness of *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* to the conflicted visibility of contemporary cinema, Malayalam film's engagement with gender has been a story of hesitant progress.

What began as subtext has become text. What was once unspeakable is now narratable. But what remains unfinished is normalisation. The next leap for Malayalam cinema is not merely to include queer characters—but to allow them ordinariness, joy, and narrative agency beyond trauma. Padmarajan opened the door in 1986. Nearly four decades later, Malayalam cinema is still deciding whether to walk fully through it. For Malayalam cinema—so often fearless in confronting caste, class, and politics—the real test of its modernity may lie in how honestly it learns to see gender.

Trust Is Built by What We Do, Not What We Say

YOGINDER SIKAND

Image for representation only

Many years ago, I needed to travel to another continent. I was on a very slim budget, and so, I took a relatively cheap flight, with an airline company that belonged to what was then a rather remote country. The airlines permitted me to stop over in that country for some days and then take another flight to head to my final destination. And that is what I did. I can't recall exactly, but perhaps I spent around a fortnight in this country, rushing from place to place to see as much of it as I could.

The country was relatively small in size, and so it was possible to see many, if not most, of its major tourist attractions in a few days. After having spent some time in the country's capital, I decided to head to a region that had a fair share of tourist sites but was considered quite unsafe. I don't suppose many tourists went there.

Now, this was a time, several decades ago, when things like ATM cards and online banking were yet to be invented, or perhaps even imagined. This was an era when travellers would have to carry money in cash or, for those who could arrange for it, in the form of what were called 'travellers cheques'. I suppose I had sufficient money with me for my expenses for a budget holiday, but perhaps it was not safe to carry all of it with me on my trip to the part of the country that I now intended to head to. What if I were robbed?

It so happened that while I was in the country's capital I met with a Christian nun. I was visiting a historical place and maybe she was based in a congregation somewhere there. I can't remember the details exactly (this having been so many years ago) but I seemed to have intuitively felt that I could fully trust this woman of God. For her part, although she had never met me before, she seemed to trust me, too. And so, I gave her the portion of my money that I did not want to carry with me in safekeeping. She willingly agreed to keep it for me till I got back after some days. When I returned, she returned it to me, fully intact.

Decades later, I still recall this 'little' act of great kindness on the part of this noble nun. I wonder where she is now. I wonder how her life went on to unfold. I wonder how many needy travelers like myself she proved to be a blessing for. I wonder how many more lives, like my own, she touched with her trust. I wonder how many people she inspired through her goodness, of which I was a beneficiary of. Wherever she may be, may God bless her abundantly!

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