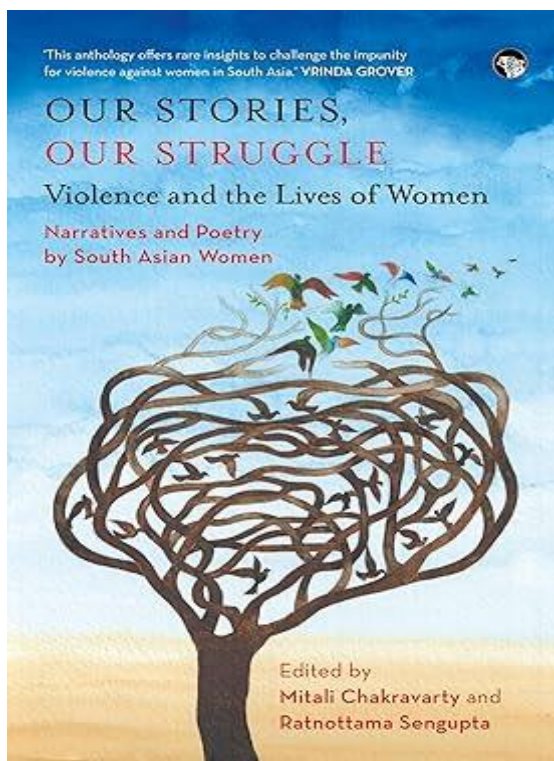


Mitali Chakravarty and Ratnottama Sengupta, ed. 2024 *Our Stories, Our Struggle Violence and the Lives of Women* New Delhi. Speaking Tiger. i-xxii+1-329 pp. ISBN: 978-93-5447-091-2



Portraying violence against women in writing can seem like a low-hanging fruit in these politically charged, troubled times. It is often a tight-rope walk—requiring an adept balancing act between the depiction of female characters as damsels-in-distress and the necessity of allowing them some agency. *Our Stories, Our Struggle Violence and the Lives of Women* edited by Mitali Chakravarty and Ratnottama Sengupta walks this fine line admirably drawing upon essays, fiction, and poetry to craft a simple but powerful narrative. “Every story, narrative, and poem in this book is curated with the purpose of stirring a sense of injustice and discomfort, with the ultimate goal of fostering equity, freedom and justice envisioning a better world” (xv), writes Mitali Chakravarti.

Our Stories, Our Struggle Violence and the Lives of Women has a taut structure and is neatly divided into three sections—Narratives from Life, Imagined Realities, and Verse of Resilience. Like their sisters in many parts of the world, women in South Asia have historically been at the receiving end of violence both

in private and public spheres of life. Academics, activists, feminists, and lawmakers have long felt the need for serious study of the nature of violence against women. The volume presents the cultural, social, and everyday struggles of women, their unmet desires, and unsatisfied aspirations across the length and breadth of South Asia. This new and compassionate way of looking at the incomprehensible and unsolved problems of violence against women finds a more inclusive, kind, and pragmatic way to change our perception of women in general. The volume also highlights the nature of violence and the possible role of legislation in this field and to create general awareness about it. *Our Stories, Our Struggle Violence and the Lives of Women* also highlights the areas of lacuna and limitations of the present framework of laws.

Meenakshi Malhotra's introductory essay "Nirbhaya: Twelve Years After" explores the "level of anger and outrage generated by the gang rape and the changes and legal reform that it led to" (3). Sexual and gender-based violence are political acts. Sexual violence synthesises and metamorphoses women into mere objects. Rape is the supreme expression of patriarchal hegemony where woman is reduced to a mere object of sexual pleasure. It is the ultimate violation of a woman's intimacy through sexual harm to her honour and dignity. The heinous crime in the capital of India was "perceived as a nation's betrayal of its daughters" (3). Even after years of independence, the misogynistic attitude of Indian society has not changed, and it tends to normalise violence at many levels.

"Impunity Guaranteed: Brazen Condonations of Violence against Women" by Kalpana Kannabrian brings out the universality of abuse against women and external control over their lives. Gender-based violence is socially tolerated and accepted because they are women. Hoineihing Sitlhou's perceptive essay "Manipur's Daughters? Or Victims of Conflict, Targets of Politics" is like a strident literary dagger that focuses on the brutal atrocities against women during the ongoing Kuki/Zo-Metei conflict in Manipur. Teresa Rehman's "The Defiant Woman" opens up against racial discrimination and sexual harassment. A defiant woman is dangerous and may topple this very power structure called society. Ratnottama Sengupta's powerful essays titled "A Face that Makes Death Shiver" and "When Kin Says Kill" are an eye-opener. The very attempt to disfigure the face of a woman by throwing acid on her calls for severe punishment. The government should deal with such cases with an iron fist. The essays in the volume throw light on the seemingly benign paternalism found in families and communities across the length and breadth of South Asia which prevents women and girls from doing what they want for their own good.

The stories "When Fighters Write: The Literary Legacy of Sri Lankan Women" by Simran Chadha, and Sandhya Sinha's "Sati, a Wife Divine", "Jauhar,

and Other Suicides: Heroic Suicide or Murder?” by Ratnottama Sengupta probe deep into the social ills that plague South Asian societies. Each of the stories of the women in the volume switches from one area to the other, each with a varied set of struggles, pain, and suffering differentiated only by geographical boundaries. Mallika Bhaumik’s heart-wrenching story “A Smudged Kohl-line,” Nishi Pulugurtha’s powerful story entitled “Sreeja’s Story,” Ankita Banerjee’s “I don’t Walk on your Carpet Anymore” and Selma Tufail’s “Women are Charpai” speak volumes on gender violence. A careful analysis reveals that in these stories sometimes violence is used unconsciously to perpetuate masculine power and control and sometimes it is an unconscious expression. It is high time that society stops interfering and lets women call their shots.

These real-life stories are echoed in the next section of the volume— that is ‘Imagined Realities’. “The Witch” by Aruna Chakravarti reminds one of Mahasweta Devi’s “Bayen.” Chakravarti has skilfully interlaced the pain, the suffering, and the loneliness of Zaitoon Bibi, giving us a more authentic and moving picture of *Other* in society, making it a powerful commentary on various forms of exploitation perpetrated on the gendered subaltern. As one goes through these imagined realities one travels across borders – Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh and one hears the shrill cries of the victims.

All the narratives (real or imagined) give a clarion call to stop promoting hierarchical gender relationships. “Verses of Resilience” inspires courage amidst delineations of the deadening gloom and victimisation. “We are the upstarts, / ready finally to take up space, / demand time, settle down on the page,” writes Arundhati Subramaniam in “Claim”. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha talks of such spaces as “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life” (Bhabha, 2009). Women are ready to reclaim their ‘spaces’ and metamorphose those spaces as solely theirs. Subramaniam uses language as a weapon to tear open the entangled wire meshes created to subjugate women. Sadaf Saaz pays an apt tribute to the “Birangona”— the term given to the rape survivors of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh who were brutally raped by Pakistani soldiers. Saaz writes “You are one of countless/ Whose story was never told/ And never will/ As all records were burnt.” “Amphan Calls” brings together century-old lore to justify male supremacy over the gendered subaltern. Deepti Naval in “The Abyss of Night” delves deep into the inner world of several women who had mental health issues and whose lives were as dark as the night. At the same time, she speaks of a time when she went through difficult times in her personal life.

Our Stories, Our Struggle Violence and the Lives of Women: Narratives and Poetry enables us to see not just the acts of violence, but also the myriad processes in which they develop and are justified by male hegemony and stratified society. The

volume voices the pain, torture, sorrow, and angst of several women across South Asia and brings to fore the most important finding – gendered violence is present in all stages of women’s lives. It takes different forms according to age, class, and community. We enter an arena where caste, violence, and exploitation bedevil the lives of the gendered subaltern. In the foreword to the book Subhashini Ali writes, “I hope many readers will be prodded into speaking with and for them and will rouse others to do so, too: speak and resist” (xxii). The volume has also some pieces that are translated into English while retaining the intriguing cadence of the original. The editors have done a commendable work, and all the contributors of this volume demand a big shout out. The stunning book cover adds to the overall aesthetic experience. This volume helps lead to serious thought, strengthen women's empowerment, and build up resistance.

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