

Title of the Book: *It Begins at Home and Other Short Stories*

By Sanjukta Dasgupta, Virasat, 2021, 123 pp., Rs 350.00, ISBN: 978-93-92281-06-8.

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The moment one picks up a book titled *It Begins at Home*, the inevitable question that arises in the mind is ‘–What begins at home?’ The titular story “It Begins at Home” in feminist writer Sanjukta Dasgupta’s anthology of stories, *It Begins at Home and Other Short Stories* brings the readers’ attention to the sad and unpleasant truth that molestation, especially child molestation, begins at home. Statistical reports of RAINN state that (i) one in nine girls and one in fifty-three boys under eighteen experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult (ii) eighty-two percent of such victims are female (iii) females aged sixteen to nineteen are four times more susceptible to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.¹ What is worse, the report also states that the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are very often related to the victims concerned. The story begins with Mrs. Ghosh, head of an NGO “Speak Up” receiving yet another shock caused by the report of a thirteen years old being molested by her father, an affluent chartered accountant. The father and abuser, keeps molesting and then raping his daughter luring her in spite of her fear and discomfort with ‘the latest Apple iPhone’(59) and also ‘[d]resses, pocket money, a new laptop’(60). The story brings to our attention another sad and unpleasant truth that such actions by the perpetrators often go unreported. The thirteen years old Mimi’s mother refers to her daughter’s behaviour as a gross ‘overreaction’(60), though she wishes to report the incident to the police. Nearly seven decades back Simone de Beauvoir had stated that in cases like these, the mother often guards the molester instead of the victim, citing his ‘reputation’. Mimi keeps the incident a secret even from her husband later in life, a secret ‘like a malignant tumour’(66). Dasgupta’s story alerts us to the sad plight of young girls whose fates remain unchanged in the andro-centric patriarchal world.

As a feminist myself, I have always been drawn to fiction centering around women’s issues and some of the stories in this anthology do address the issues of women in patriarchy — sexism, economic inequality, trauma, lack of access to equal opportunity, caregiving, balancing career and motherhood. The plight of women, girls and the marginalised in the rural belt or the suburban areas has indeed remained unchanged in India. This is underscored in some of the other short stories in the anthology.

¹ RAINN. Children and Teens: Statistics (2022) <<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>>

“Just Another Suicide” centres around a woman, Kalyani, who needs to have a surgery — hysterectomy. She, like a good wife, understands her husband’s difficulty in hoarding the amount needed and plans that she will pay off the amount by working as domestic help or in a factory. Kate Millett blatantly stated that “[one] of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another”.² Since patriarchy has already established the notion that women are the worst enemies of women, should it come as a surprise that the ones to curse Kalyani ‘for bringing ill luck to their family, first by giving birth to two girls, and then this cursed disease ’(14) would be her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law? When the mother-in-law takes the matter into her own hands, what transpires gets passed off as a suicide, the police and medics not even bothering to arrange for a post-mortem. The unnecessary burden of the wife removed effectively, Nemai the husband remarries, as most widowers with children do.

“Hair-raising” is a tale on the issue of eve-teasing, where Bela a high-school girl with big dreams is followed and pestered by Madan, who ‘had to have Bela as his wife ’(74). Amitabh Bachchan as advocate Deepak Sehgal caused quite a stir when he mouthed the words, “No means No!” in *Pink* (2016), a film directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. We could ask as Sehgal does, how many men in India, or for that matter how many men in patriarchal cultures listen to the ‘No’s of women – known women, unknown women, friends, girlfriends, sex workers, or their wives – how many? To Mackinnon, sexuality is “a form of power. Gender, as socially constructed, embodies it, not the reverse. Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalize male sexual dominance and female sexual submission”.³ Thus, in patriarchal phallogocentric cultures, conjugal rights imply the rights of property that men as subjects have over women as objects. In heterosexual relationships, when a man exercises his rights, sex occurs. And surprisingly, it is not only the husbands who claim such ‘possession-rights’, but also men with toxic masculinity who choose who they wish to possess. “Hair-raising” addresses this issue, a story based on a newspaper report.

“Bhajan Ram’s Last Night” deals with the predicament of the subaltern, a man of low caste, ‘abhorred by the upper classes as locusts’ (18) with a wife, so busy with household work that she had no time ‘for fear, low self-esteem, stress, trauma and bi-polar disorders’ (20). Such

² Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 102.

³ Jane Freedman, *Feminism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), p. 60.

women of colour, brown women in this case, led Alice Walker to develop womanism as an alternative to feminism.

“Bird’s Eye View” and “Divide” document phases of encounter between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’; the former story documenting a short and shallow phase of sharing between a lady Mrs. Gupta and a bunch of children and adults, and the latter dealing with another lady Mrs. Lahiri who feels guilty about her family’s affluence as she contrasts her grandchild with the grandchild of her maid. Both the stories underscore the often-shallow and often-distorted perceptions humans have of people belonging to another class. “Distress” is also a story of sharing, between the aged Prof. Roy and her students and research scholars in the era of ‘Post-Truth’ (31).

“Metamorphosis” contrasts the dream Indians nurture regarding their children and the American Dream that they usually get caught up with. “Loser” is a tale that tugs at the heart strings as it documents an unusual love-story between a simpleton and an insane human being. “Good Friday 1930” is a story ‘arising from a world of dreams’ as Kunal Basu mentions in his blurb. It is a story centering around the dreams of the young Kanti of freeing India from bondage, led by the legendary freedom fighter Master-Da Surya Sen.

Actually Kunal Basu mentions that ‘[t]hese sharply observed tales, [arise] from a world of dreams and despair’. The stories that follow are indeed tales of despair. “Change” documents the change that comes over a young girl Putul, daughter of a domestic help mother, who pursues Bengali Honours and a distance learning course in Masters with the hope of succeeding in competitive exams which would get her a job. Helplessly she is drawn back into the vortex of ‘jewellery and marriage’ (91), interestingly backed by a college principal who cannot overlook any young woman’s pressing need for security. “Mira’s Madness” is about Mira’s descent into madness after being spurned and humiliated by her husband and in-laws. Betty Friedan’s words ring true; often both mother and father encourage young girls “to find ‘security’ in a boy, never expecting her to live her own life”.⁴

“Retake” is a tale of male infidelity and subsequent re-union with Sumantra’s first wife, Srimati. This is a tale I personally disliked simply because the ending was unexpected from the pen of a feminist writer. But this ending probably is more realistic as most women do pardon husbands who cheat on them. Half a century before Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Laura Riding had written, “Woman has two works to perform: a work of differentiation, of man from herself,

⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), p. 391.

and a work of unification, of man with herself...”⁵ This is precisely what Srimati does; she decides to get back with her erring husband.

“Adjust” and “Freedom” are tales of female camaraderie, the latter with a touch of Kate Chopin. Adrienne Rich has used the term ‘lesbian continuum’ to include, “... a range — through each woman’s life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman”.⁶

‘Please write about me. ... Write about me’ (105) urges Ruchika in “Adjust”. Write indeed women must, for women and about women. There are millions of stories waiting to be narrated, even more waiting to be shared amongst women and with men / humanity at large. Dasgupta’s *It Begins at Home and Other Stories* offers a glimpse into the vast gamut of experience of the other half of the populace often neglected and muted in patriarchy.

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⁵ Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings*, ed. by Elizabeth Friedman and Alan J. Clark, (New York: Persea Books, 1993), p. 1.

⁶ Bonnie Zimmerman, ‘What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism’ in *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*, ed. by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), pp. 551 – 566 (p. 552).

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