

TLC Showcase

PALLAVI GOPINATH ANEY

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Introduction to *Musafir*

M*usafir* (which means traveller in Hindi or Urdu) is a story that I wrote a few years ago about the lives of three generations of Indian women, affected by the times they live in. Largely scripted by the men around them.

In 2019, I submitted the manuscript to SingLit (a National Arts Council funded initiative in Singapore to encourage local writers) who in turn chose it to send to TLC to be assessed. The manuscript was reviewed by Kavita Bhanot, who sent me some incredible feedback on both structure and content. And, equally importantly, told me what really spoke to her in the story.

Musafir is set in India in the seventies -- both the north (where I grew up) and the south (where my family is originally from). Chitra is a woman uprooted from the place she grew up in and moved by her husband to Delhi, a place alien to, and loathed by, her. Before there was immigration to foreign shores, hers was the kind of domestic economic immigration that so many women dealt with, travelling across the lines of language, food and festivals.

This story was written over the course of a few months, and I have revisited it from time to time, to pour more into it.

In my writing, I tend to pick a central character and write their story, until it exhausts itself. And as I go along, I choose other characters and come back to develop their perspective – sometimes they grow more important than the first character I chose and, at other times, they hit a wall. It's a style of writing in which one has to also be prepared to end up with several incomplete manuscripts where the characters have decided to go silent – but the story that does tell itself feels unexpected and worthwhile.

Extract from *Musafir* by Pallavi Gopinath Aney

She watched with wonder the women in her building in Delhi from the grubby window which overlooked the small concrete courtyard that the two ground floor flats shared. In summer they sat in folding chairs and cut vegetables, picked stones and grit from rice and *dal* and kneaded flour.

In winter they sat on the concrete on bright woven cane mats and cut large yellow lemons for pickle and knitted and stitched. They gossiped, bickered, discussed their husbands, bragged about their children, discussed the vegetable market's prices and the local butcher's perfidy and sometimes just lapsed into a comfortable silence. Needles clicked, stitches were dropped and balls of wool passed around to examine.

She scorned their mundane conversation, their balding husbands and their utterly unremarkable children; but she envied their common companionship, the way they headed out like large sheep at ten in the morning after their husbands and children were safely out of the way to settle down comfortably.

Even their petty squabbles had a reassuring sameness to them. She had already understood that the younger Mrs. Mehra hated Mrs. Chadha with a fierce passion – the roots of this lay in the fact that once upon a time Mrs. Chadha's nephew had engaged in passionate dalliance with Mrs. Mehra's younger sister and then refused to marry that worthy girl. The erstwhile lovers were now married (apparently happily) to other people and visited (separately) their vengeful relatives in Feroz Ganj; but the battle waged on.

Every so often Mrs. Mehta dutifully waited to do her washing after Mrs. Chadha had finished hers and then emptied the frothy, soapy water in a happy whoosh over Mrs. Chadha's drying washing. People who had watched Mrs. Chadha's washing receive the gray, sudsy waterfall swore that Mrs. Mehta had a manic gleam in her eye and tilted her bucket on purpose to ensure that an optimum amount of Mrs. Chadha's washing was soaked. This unhappy drenching was usually followed by Mrs. Chadha's hysterical screams; Mrs. Mehta usually just leant on her balcony railing and smiled down dispassionately.

Mrs Sodhi and Mrs. Mansukhani's son and daughter were in the same class at school (four) and were usually locked in a tussle for the first place at school. The two pudges

engaged in a continuous game of musical chairs of first-second, first-second, second-first, tie (catastrophe) and suchlike. In the meanwhile their protective mothers (neither of whom spoke any English or had studied beyond the fifth grade) sniped and griped at each other. Their relationship usually undulated in a cycle of two months (during which friendship prevailed), then exam time (cold silence), two months of peace, exam time... and so life had a comforting rhythm.

Although she would never have admitted it, Chitra watched them every day from the window. She usually sat in one of the folding chairs (precious little other furniture had been added to the flat) with a *paraat* of vegetables in her lap (often precariously balanced as she leaned forward) and peeked from the corner where the curtain didn't reach the window ledge.

She sliced and diced, strung and shelled and listened to all their conversation. Occasionally she got up reluctantly to put something on the small stove or to stir, but she tried to save these for a lull in the conversation. Listening to them was her first step to learning the Hindi she had longed to study in Kerala. A potato was an *aloo*, some peculiar thin beans were *phalli*, a tomato was *tamatar* (that was easy) and milk was *doodh*. There were the more fascinating vegetables that she hadn't heard of, but that seemed to be staple ingredients in North Indian pickles. A little crunchy green pea-sized vegetable called a *karonda*, and lotus stem or *kamal kakdi* that looked very pretty when cut in neat slices, like little wheels. All alien, but she would later admit that they made for tasty pickles.

She was tired of being housebound but the fear of making a fool of herself kept her from going out. Krishnan bought vegetables on his way back from work. Often withered and old, the evening's offering, selected indifferently.

And they fought. Over his inability to choose proper vegetables and over her inability to step out and do the things any housewife would.

* * *

"Welcome to Feroz Ganj ji! Chitra had managed to avoid her neighbors for the first few weeks. Now this; she sighed.

Mrs. Sodhi's not insubstantial bulk pushed past a startled Chitra into the house.

A large woman, with bright orange hennaed hair, Chitra had trouble guessing her

age. She was not young, but not old either, just suspended in eternal middle age. She had an open face with large jowls and a hairy upper lip.

Charulata Sodhi was prone to wearing polyester *salwar kameez* in lurid colors, violey-purple, magentas, egg yellows. Polka dots (in keeping with Hindi movie trends of the time) and big flowers (generally feminine) were favorites. Her hair was usually put up in an unnaturally large bun (Chitra suspected cardboard and cotton stuffing) and braided in a long plait on her more girlish days (the days that Chitra would come to recognize that she was planning a seduction of the potbellied Mr. Sodhi). The *salwar-kameez* always went with gauzy lace *dupattas* and the bun or the plait always had colored pins with tiny bells at the end stuck in it. These saucy pins acted independently of Mrs. Sodhi and it was not unusual to find them on the staircase after she had jingled her way past. Many years later, Chitra would only remember kindly eyes and generosity when she thought of Mrs. Sodhi and Shuchi would remember a large, enthusiastic whirl of color.

"Arrey, look at your house! So nice it is and so much light and fresh air! Oh look, such lovely, lovely windows, and so much color is entering the house!"

Chitra looked at the woman as at a slightly insane and dangerous intruder. Was she stark raving mad? She hardly knew any Hindi, but it was easy to tell Mrs. Sodhi liked this ugly hole.

"I am so happy you came no, so long this house has been empty, boring it is. Arrey look at me, talking and talking and talking, not even asking how you are!" Chitra forced a half smile, more grimace than smile, and gestured weakly to the cheap red and white checked aluminum and plastic folding chairs set up in the corner of the room.

Mrs. Sodhi blinked again, "You speak Hindi no...? Hindi?" She gave a loud gasp as Chitra shook her head and slapped her forehead with a loud thwack. "Uff.. lo.. you poor child... no wonder you haven't talked to any of us. And that stupid woman was saying it's because South Indians think they are too good for our Delhi... never mind, never mind..."

Then hesitantly: "We... English talk?"

And Chitra smiled and nodded.

She went to the small stove to boil water for tea. The process of getting to know the woman who would be her first friend in Delhi had begun.

* * *

Girish held the comb under the tap and studied himself in the mirror. He nervously pulled the comb through his already damp hair. He was not a vain man but today he was terrified about the way he looked. He had never done this before and had no idea what it entailed. He was wearing his best shirt (an utterly horrendous green affair with a flared collar and thin cream stripes), teamed with butt hugging, crotch enhancing brown trousers.

There had been no newspaper yesterday. Mrs. Batra was furious. She blamed the newspaper boy. But he insisted nothing had been delivered to them. How could he go to an interview at a newspaper office not having read the papers?

He looked out of the broken window pane of what served as the living area of his little *barsaati* flat. The "flat" was only one large room with a small alcove that had been partitioned into half kitchen and half bathroom. It had a lot of windows (a good thing if you liked light) but most of them had broken panes (not so good if you weren't partial to being rained on).

The view was ugly.

It mostly comprised other terraces, dirty and paved with different kinds of cracked stone and concrete, electric wires tangling over many of them, dipping and looping around stone water tanks stained with mould. A few years later, this view would be even uglier, with telephone wires adding to the matted mess and ugly black plastic water tanks joining their moldy concrete cousins.

But, in 1975 few people owned phones in the middle class neighborhood where the Batras rented their *barsaati* to Girish.

Suddenly a wave of longing swept over him for Thrissur. A lump rose and settled in his throat. Suddenly he missed the dense green foliage that surrounded their home, the tall coconut trees, the moss and shrubs on the ground, the plantain trees that reached the windows and the funny *chembu* trees that grew around the garage, so weighed down by pink bell-shaped fruit that you could hardly see the green. He missed the sheer lushness, the wetness that he had taken for granted.

He missed the massive coconut tree that grew right through the dining room roof on to the terrace. The tree was older than the house, God alone knew how old. His grandfather had refused to cut it down when the house was being built in the late nineteen thirties. The plans were fixed a little and finally the tree stayed and was allowed to grow through the dining room roof, much to his grandmother's perennial disgust. Cane chairs were put out beneath the green canopy and the children loved to pretend that the trunk was all sorts of things. A mast they clung to in storms as their ship was battered on evil rocks, a post to which they were chained by robbers, a pillar to shimmy up to escape a prison... The tree had lived in that house longer than any of its other inhabitants.

Suddenly Girish's eyes fixed on a dusty mango tree. It stood tired in the heat, carrying dusty and parched leaves through which sagging wires passed. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to banish the sense of utter loneliness that washed through him.

As if not looking at the mango tree would somehow quell his despair.

* * *

He waited in the reception. There had been no paper this morning either. The large, maternal looking receptionist had smirked in a distinctly non-maternal way when he told her he was there for an interview. He stared at a large Bharat Times directory on the table. He itched to pick it up but knew the receptionist was watching him. So he stared blankly at sandalwood flower garlanded photos of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru and picked nervously at the sunmica strips on the arms of the bright-blue-but-darkened-by-butt-shaped-grimy-patches polyester covered armchair. The edges were already jagged; clearly other nervous or angry visitors before him had had the same idea.

Delhi in 1975 had discovered polyester, nylon, sunmica, formica, plastic, floral chiffon sarees... These hadn't reached Kerala. Kerala was still teak, brass, cotton, coconut husks, banana leaves and gold bordered silk.

He remembered being overwhelmed at the railway station when he had arrived two years ago. The colours, the smells, the *stink*; overflowing toilets and fried food co-existed happily. It was like nothing he had experienced before.

Well, if he didn't get this job, he would have to head back to paradise.

But he already knew, guiltily, that he wanted to be *here*, where it was all happening. This city from where an imperious, statuesque Indira Gandhi controlled a bewildered nation. This city of colours and smells, of political intrigue and machinations, had dug its claws into him.

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About the Writer

Pallavi Gopinath Aney is a lawyer by day (and quite frequently into the wee hours of the morning) and a lover of the written word.

She has been writing fiction in her free time for almost as long as she can remember and mostly finds herself writing stories about migration and the complexity of community and families. She is particularly drawn to the stories of women and the opportunities and vulnerabilities that migration presents them with. She was born and brought up for the most part in Delhi, India and has called Singapore home for the last fourteen years.



Pallavi is a lawyer at Allen & Overy, an international law firm. Her work is cross-border in nature and she enjoys interacting with clients from a number of countries, including India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand and The Philippines.

She draws upon her childhood, her life in Singapore and her extensive travels in Asia to indulge her love of telling a good story. In her free time, Pallavi enjoys spending time with her dog, yoga, running outdoors and reading.