

something more than routine communalism, and yet to call it 'genocide' would not be accurate either. In literary criticism, one might applaud one term and decry another without any serious consequences, but in real life there is an ethical dimension involved, especially when the subject is violence.

I would suggest that there are three reasons why the Afterword seems so muddled. One is that the category of 'the subaltern' (e.g. p.319) does not take into account the possibility that someone who is subordinate in one relationship may be dominant—or, indeed, viciously oppressive—in another. In other words, the assumption of a fixed essence of 'subalternity' cannot capture the complexity of real social relations. At points, Spivak seems aware of this, but is unable to formulate the problem clearly. Another reason is the hostility of post-modernism to any form of universalism, which makes it difficult to take ethical positions on issues such as violence, since a universalist

ethics inevitably over-rides particularities of culture and tradition, community and nation, in the name of which most of the violence described in this volume is practised. And thirdly, her language and style might well confuse Spivak herself, apart from mystifying her readers!

To conclude, then: this volume takes up themes that are crucially important in our troubled subcontinent, and, for the most part, examines them in a thought-provoking and challenging fashion; one need not agree with every point in order to gain insights from the essays. Given that the issues are so important, it is unfortunate that the language is occasionally too inaccessible to allow the discussion to reach as wide a readership as it otherwise might. For those who are willing to make the effort, however, the rewards are substantial.

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## TALES OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS

Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled*

Chandra Chari

“I disturbed the clear still surface of my life long ago. Now I watch as the ripples fuse one into another, creating new ones, which spread and spread. Inextricably interrelated. I let the moments pass.”

Chandani Lokuge, a Sri Lankan based in Australia, teaches English in the University of Adelaide. Her short have been widely anthologized. *If the Moon Smiled* is her first novel. In telling the tale of an ordinary life of exile and alienation of the body and spirit, Chandani has succeeded in crafting a small little masterpiece. The magic holds, gossamer like, every step of the way.

At the centre of the novel stands Manthiri, delicate, sensitive, so like the *araliya* flower of the white-gold petals, enjoying an idyllic childhood, surrounded by parental adoration. But conversations overheard and half-understood, subtly endorse notions of patriarchy in the child's mind, sowing the seeds of guilt over the conflict between expectations of what constitutes an ideal wife and mother and the natural cravings and desires of the child-woman to seek an identity of her own.

Manthiri's marriage to Mahendra is doomed to failure on the wedding night itself. A bridegroom conditioned by his simple upbringing believes that his bride is not a virgin because the consummation leaves no bloodstains on the nuptial sheet, and condemns himself and Manthiri to a loveless marriage for life. The novel unfolds, transporting Manthiri, Mahendra and their two children on a cross-cultural odyssey to Australia, to patriarchal ambitions colliding with the individualist challenges of the adopted society. It is, however, the translucently emerging subtexts of the novel that would be a psychoanalyst's paradise. In telling the tale of an ordinary life, Chandani creates a tangled web of relationships. At first one is seduced into empathising with Manthiri, much-misunderstood wife and mother, her feelings trampled upon by a boorish husband and unmanageable Sri Lankan born Australian children. But nothing is black and white. What seems on the surface to be a character in love with life, loving and giving, unravels—as the plot

evolves—into an inwardgazing, narcissistic woman. Manthiri's stubborn refusal to take responsibility for her own life, subtly, but surely, distracts the lives of her husband, daughter and son. The passage quoted at the beginning which slides unobtrusively into the narrative holds the key to Manthiri's real persona. Conditioned by her Buddhist upbringing into a mock-surrender mode while rebelling inwardly at all times, Manthiri, at the sane time, adds her own endorsement to the notions of patriarchy in her blatant disregard for her daughter's desires and ambition and in the besotted adoration of her only son.

Chandani manages to carve out each of her characters with luminous brushstrokes of the pen. The ordinariness of daily living now assumes heights of tragedy and now swings back into ordinary tales of failures and successes. Each little chapter stands on its own, luring the reader backward and forward into a mosaic of complex human relationships. Even a harking back to the parental cocoon proves futile in providing Manthiri with the mental equilibrium which she needs to assuage her lack of self worth. Narcissism, the end, betrays the fragility of the hold Manthiri has on the real world and, to one used to taking the line of least resistance, the lure of surrendering one's self to a schizophrenia of selective memories seems irresistible. Chandani uses a couple of extremely effective devices in the structuring of the novel. First, there is the mix of the first person and the third almost continuously in the narrative, which invites the reader into the narrator's soliloquy and takes the story forward. The other engaging technique is almost visual in its impact, in the way the narrator, standing still, trails the absent character in a vivid telling of remembrance and memory: Words seem to be almost dispensable to Chandani's writing—a phrase manages to convey the sensuousness of touch, small and feeling—of a luminous inward glow, of water stirring against thighs. In the end one is left with a wonderful feeling of having gone through a poetic experience in prose, tinged with sadness about life itself: “Like a perfumed *araliya* in a dream, the memory floats. I pull down the shutter.”

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