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# The Story of She

DORIS PUSHPAM
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*"What a magnificent invention a saree is. Eight metres of cloth for a lifetime of adventures. Each fold is a story, a tragedy, a comedy, held together by tradition".*

-from 'Ode to Sarees'

Doris Pushpam is a young Malaysian writer whose consciousness-shaping writings are deeply rooted in feminist advocacy for the collective Indian woman, transborder. The Story of She (2022), ~~*The Story of She* (2022),~~ Pushpam's first publication, is a collection of twenty-nine short stories structured into three thematic sections—Retrospect, Introspect, and Prospect—representing, in the author's words, protagonists' lives that are "already lived through", "at the start of her tale", and "exploring what could happen".

Using experimental styles and techniques, Pushpam examines themes of identity, social expectations, and the internal struggles of women seeking agency and empowerment. She weaves together a lavish tapestry of motifs to tease the reader into attention — from the organic grit of chickens laying eggs or the shell of a tortoise, to the tactile vulnerability of skin, clay, or thread, to the delicate fragility of porcelain and the rich intricacies of sarees — to give weight to the silent constraints of the Indian female experience. Pushpam's style in creating her plot is also not one-dimensional. Her versatile command over form is manifest in her structural experimentation of the narrative arc, whether to have longer descriptive passages, more dialogue-driven realities, or to linger on the interiority of a stream-of-consciousness reflection.

Pushpam strips the story collective down to a singular 'she' as the main character in each story. 'She' is the solitary focalizer, granting the reader an intimate view of the internal morass or the silent triumph of the protagonist. Pushpam intentionally leaves her stories unmapped, without geographical or geolocation bearings. She does this to ensure that Indian femaleness in her creative work is free from the distractions of national borders. With high narrative imagination, Pushpam maps the internal topography of the Indian woman, proving that the most profound 'location' in her stories is the one composed of memory, lived trauma, and the quest for agency. Perhaps the only material object that the author uses freely to anchor her characters is the saree. As per the epigraph, the saree is intrinsically linked to the Indian woman's imaginary, serving as a quintessential symbol of her identity and a trope that defines her cultural reality. Calling herself "Woman, Feminist, Dreamer", the author offers readers a glimpse into the interiority of the personas as they negotiate a sense of self amidst the deep shadows of cultural constraints.

The author transports the narrative beyond the conventional tropes of external patriarchal conflict to examine a more haunting reality: the internalised fractures of female solidarity. She poignantly reveals a complex web of inter-gender prejudice caused by the female intent to conform to patriarchal standards. In the opening story of *The Story of She* (2022), 'Musings of a Girl in a Tree', the protagonist contemplates, "I wonder where I would be today if it wasn't for all the women in my life". Though seemingly affirmative, the harsh dealings of other women slowly unfold. Women act as the primary enforcers of "a man's world". They demand the protagonist to keep smiling to maintain conformity ('The Conditioned Smile'). They hand over the bricks for the protagonist to "build her prison" ('She is Clay'). Having been schooled in subservience, the protagonist transforms into an oppressor of her own daughter as she "doesn't know an[y] other way" ('Loud Minds and Quiet People').

And yet, the raw glimpse into female-led oppression is merely a shadow of female identity being brutalised by male violence and utility. In 'The Story of She', a cycle of "fights and forgiveness" ends in a fatal beating where her life is reduced to "the story of him". 'The Sin of Skin' depicts five female lives burdened by "something" that happens "recently", but as the male perpetrators go scot-free, the female victims are left to carry the moral weight of their own "skin". In 'The Curse of an Empty Nest,' the chicken coop becomes a metaphor for the protagonist's own caged-up life. As her husband "would go into the coop to collect eggs", his only interest in his wife is "what is going on between [her] legs".

Pushpam also explores the shattered innocence of young girls who bear witness to the actions of the men in their lives—be they fathers or future husbands. The daughter's gaze becomes a mirror for maternal suffering—whether witnessing her mother "nursing her bruised eye" ('Talia') or fleeing a future husband as "she didn't like the way his eyes ran up and down her body", but at the cost of a mother's life ('Growing Jasmines'). Pushpam allows this inter-generational suffering to be avenged in 'The Many Nuances of Silence'. Here, the protagonist has had enough of the silent "watch your mother get beaten" tirade and uses a mallet to end the "leather belt on bare skin" by killing her tyrant father.

The author uses the thematic structure of life and death to accentuate the intricacies of gendered oppression. This continuum provides sites of struggle, where her protagonists fight for agency, though they fail. In some stories, death is sought as an escape from grief. In 'The Tragedy of a Tortoise Shells', the author allows her protagonist a euphemistic end – "perhaps she was reaching for the sun when she fell". In other stories, the ending is plain and pungent. The protagonist "lived and died…leaving no marks of her own" ('She is Clay') or "contemplate[s] death" as she "bleed[s] out" ('Just Another Day in May').

Other stories depict the bleakness of life, like a nuanced death. Sisterhood is fractured by skin-deep prejudice ('Snow White and Tar Black'). "Daydreams of dragons" and broken "pieces" of a "cracked" heart are given up or given away ('Cotton Candy Clouds and Graveyard Stars' and 'The Paradox of Porcelain Hearts'). Mental anxiety over imagined nocturnal monsters ('Monsters in the Moonlight') or thoughts of an incessant, monotonous work life ('She Unravels') never go away, leaving the protagonists in a deadlock of internalised fracture.

Evoking Edgar Allan Poe's 'singular effect,' the most unified expression of this collection is found in 'Ode to Sarees,' a story that interrogates how patriarchy governs an Indian woman's entire life, literally from birth to death. This fabric cradles the protagonist when she was a baby, beautifies her when she comes of age, adorns her in her quotidian life, then becomes a brutal necessity—"a bandage" that "soaks up [the] blood" of her husband's violence. This powerful cloth motif is also the very instrument the protagonist uses to end her life with – "her last saree" is worn

"as she hangs from a beam" and later "as she is burned". Alluding to the epigraph, Pushpam masterfully elevates the symbolic fabric of the Indian woman from a cultural semblance to the ultimate, tragic expression of agency.

In striking contrast, it must be added that Pushpam *does* provide stories that offer a hopeful counterpoint, stories that celebrate love and life. From the independent artist who doesn't need another husband ('Henna Stains') to the ninety-year-old widow whose life "all worked out in the end" (Story of My Life), there are protagonists who secure their own happiness with agentic ease. In a charming subversion of tradition, the shift toward female empowerment in stories of wedded bliss is also storied. Whether it's the trickery of the bride who strategizes her way to her mother-in-law's heart ('Existence Precedes Essence'), or the bride who finds herself unusually happy in an arranged marriage she could not escape ('The Runaway Bride') or the young girl whose father, in an unexpected yet welcoming plot twist, suddenly suggests that she run away from the arranged wedding that he himself had planned for ('Creating Constellations')! The culmination of these 'happy-ever-after' stories is found in 'Fishes and Promises', where the protagonist finds the love of her life, chooses him over all other possibilities, and enjoys having "many adventures together" before dying happily, she before him.

Whilst these are the stories that make up both the 'Retrospect' and the 'Introspect' parts, there is the last section – 'Prospect' – where Pushpam shifts gears into a futuristic, allegorical vein, offering readers a dark setting of brooding scenarios and unsettling realities of the future. 'The Variety Store' delineates women wanting to be "flawless" and "perfect forever" through forms of plastic surgery, at the cost of health or sanity. In 'Justice is Sweet', a women's magazine provides a recipe for housewives to bake "the most amazing chocolate cake" which includes the alternate ingredients of poison (which can kill their oppressive husbands). In 'If We Were Bees', planet Earth overcomes a worldwide crisis with "Operation Hive Mind", where society is structured into "Worker Bees" and "Drones" who support the supremacy of the female "Queen Bee". The last story, 'Choose your Fate', is akin to a 'choose your own adventure' video game, but the players don't know that "no matter your choices[,] it all ends the same". Whether trapped by the need to be perfect or wielding justice through the contested space of the kitchen, Pushpam continues to question patriarchal pressures in undetected forms. Whether searching for the elusive new option or suggesting a gendered change of leadership in the system of the world, the struggle for female agency remains a contested frontier.

Pushpam's success lies in her masterful construction of a literary imaginary of the Indian woman, who seeks to find herself battling not physical borders, but the rigid structures of patriarchy. In some stories, the sombre reality of the passive victim is captured, reifying female subjugation. In others, a strong rebellion acts as an exposé to defy the normalised violence of patriarchy. Coming full circle to the epigraph, the saree that serves as the cultural anchor for the Indian woman's experience is revisited. Though its traditional form is clearly evidenced in 'Retrospect' and 'Introspect', it is stripped of its material form in 'Prospect.' Here, the garment stands without its exterior garb, but its symbolic essence continues to represent Indian women's struggle for identity, amidst a shifting and unpredictable future. The heart of *The Story of She* (2022) is a fearless interrogation of Indian patriarchy in many forms, and this is Doris Pushpam's triumph.