

‘Cascading Events and People’s Anger Have Inspired My Writing’

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“I saw last night as a meeting between old friends. That you considered my conduct overfamiliar fills me with endless regret.” A cryptic note found by estranged sisters Maya and Siya in their late reclusive mother’s papers in their dilapidated Delhi home sets Radhika Swarup’s book, “Civil Lines,” in motion. The portrayal of a family saga set amidst the backdrop of the global #MeToo movement, the book examines complex relationships, touches upon social issues, and takes the reader on an empowering journey with the Sharma sisters.

In a conversation with SEEMA, Swarup chats about her second book, a career change, the inspiring house, #MeToo, and everything in between. (The interview has been edited for consistency, clarity and flow.)

You’ve grown up in different parts of the world...
I have had an interesting upbringing. It allowed me to see different cultures and countries, see that it isn’t much different. Parents are still worried about their kids, you take pride in your culture no matter where



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you are, and people generally are kind and open to those who are curious about them. Maybe it allowed me to see India as well, partly from an outsider's perspective. I was a constant returner and that has been formative for me as a writer.

Are you a keen observer of society, then?

Yeah, I think it makes me odd as a first child. Normally the first born has all the attention... I see that with my kids. My daughter, who is younger, is more observant. I think the second child experiences different parents, maybe more tired parents. They see the older child succeeding or failing, and learning from their mistakes. I think what travel has given me is a second-child perspective. It has allowed me the ability to view and observe.

Tell us about your journey from finance to writing...

That's quite a well-trodden path, right? Turning one's back on finance and then turn to writing! But, my father has always written, so it is in my blood. As for my upbringing, there were always lots and lots of books. My father would always tell me to pay attention to the writing in them.

An old house you visited in Delhi inspired your second book. Did the characters develop first, or was it always the house that led to the characters?

I think the house is an extension of the family. People talk of houses having auras. I have never believed it. But, this one house... I did not think the house in particular was a living sentient thing but I got a sense of potential left unfulfilled from the inhabitants, and then by extension from the house itself. It was a lovely house but in disrepair. Maybe the people there have had really fulfilling lives, but it was a feeling I got. A sense of defeatism, fatalism... and in that sense it felt palpable. I find it hard to divorce the inhabitants [characters] from the house.

Can you describe the relationship between the estranged sisters and how it changes?

Maya and Siya are chalk and cheese. Their attitudes and approaches to life are quite different. I think this whole sense of destiny that probably was unintentionally bequeathed to them has propelled them forward... Though they've gone on different paths, the shared cultural inheritance has been part of their upbringing and it feeds into their relationship.

Do you identify with any of the characters?

It would be Saloni (the copy editor of "The Satirist," the magazine started by their mother and relaunched by the sisters). I think I see a bit of me in her. In terms of the sisters, I am not like Maya. The interactions with the inhabitants of the house really intrigued me, perplexed me, inspired me, frustrated me—all in equal measure. I found that I had to get under Maya's skin, walk a mile in her shoes. The person I am, would never have been able to do that—be so dependent on one parent for their life's blood as it were. The fact that I am so different drew me to Maya.

On #MeToo. I read a piece where you said certain friends on finding out about the book's topic just went, 'oh, okay,' and that was it.

The reaction certain friends had hearkened back to how polarized everything is now, be it religion, politics, identity. We've all been seeing #MeToo starting in Hollywood, and then different countries having their own #MeToo movements... So, it's not just an Indian thing, not just 2016, or Jyoti Singh [who was gang-raped and killed in New Delhi in 2012].

No matter how cocooned you are, it is always at the edge of possibility and that is not okay.



The cascading events and people's anger have inspired and fed into my writing. Also, it is a look at inequality. If you look at the pandemic, people who can sit at home and work are not suffering as much as those who are coming face-to-face with the disease. It's beyond the power imbalance between man and woman; it is wider in society, between haves and have nots. So, while "Civil Lines" is a very obviously an Indian #MeToo novel, it tries to shine light on societal outcomes and injustices.

You've used the line 'What's the worst that could happen' at many turning points...

It is very much the ethos of egging your child on, [saying], "Come on, things will be fine." I find myself doing that with my kids. There is usually always a silver lining in most situations. In the case of Maya, because of how cloistered she was, she was not a risk-taker. Where we leave the book, in terms of the outcome for "The Satirist" and the sisters' financial future, it is looking a bit uncertain. But I would call what they have built a resounding success, and validation for them in their enterprise to tell their mother's story. 'What's the worst that could happen?' has been pretty good.

How has the pandemic treated you?

The first three months were ridiculous. I had picked up a novella but was unable to concentrate to make it past the first line. But once things settled down, I was able to establish a routine. For a few months now, I am really cherishing being able to go out and interact with people.

Do you have a writing schedule?

I am an ex-banker and until very recently had very young kids and I was sleep-deprived. I would find myself waking up really early to write. Now that the kids are older, in terms of a writing day, I have a lot more time but I do feel my best work is done early in the mornings when the house is quiet.

What is your next project?

An uplifting set of short stories, a portrait of a community of the street I partly grew up in Delhi and the neighboring one. I am imagining the lives of the people living there during the first wave. I have not been back in Delhi since March 2019 but it was cathartic writing the stories. It is lighthearted, which was required by the emotional toll the pandemic has levied on us.