

History beckons again

SUNFETIA BALAKRISHNAN

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The Hindu Jaishree Misra. Photo: S. Anandan

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Jaishree Misra shares her experience of writing her latest book on Margaret Wheeler and the 1857 Uprising.

On A LOVE STORY FOR MY SISTER in THE HINDU

Written by Administrator

Friday, 13 March 2015 19:38 - Last Updated Thursday, 07 December 2017 17:59

Jaishree Misra was fascinated by the mystery of Margaret Wheeler's life, which she came across while researching her historical novel, *Rani*. A British teen, daughter of a British General and a Eurasian mother, Wheeler was kidnapped during the 1857 uprising and presumed dead. She reappeared in the local narratives in the early 1900s when an old Muslim woman admitted that she was Margaret Wheeler to a Roman Catholic priest, during her deathbed confession. "I was too involved with writing *Rani* to give this story more time but it interested me; what two women on different sides in the same period underwent."

In 2011, three books later, Misra came back to Margaret Wheeler. Misra also located Amelia Horne's journal at the British archives; another teen who was abducted during the uprising but returned. Amelia mentions how Margaret stayed on with her abductor, ostensibly in marriage, refusing to return. "I always wondered how Margaret could willingly stay with the man who was a part of the incidents that mutilated her whole world," says Misra.

She followed Wheeler's trail in narratives and visited sites such as Satichaura Ghat in Kanpur where the kidnapping happened. "I wrote the first draft of the book pretty quickly." By this time Misra had relocated to Delhi, which was reeling from the Nirbhaya incident. "The draft was lying around and contemporary elements started creeping in. Fear of kidnap and rape haunted women in Delhi. And I found the story of Margaret's kidnap was moving me too far from being a writer of the current time. So I created Tara Fernandez, who had parallels with both Margaret and Nirbhaya, and a narrator, Tara's sister, who finds the link."

Misra's eighth book, *A Love Story for My Sister*, is a binary narrative that straddles a contemporary and a historical storyline, and contains a novel within a novel. So how long did it take to write? "My last book was in 2011. After that, I moved twice: once from London to Delhi and then from Delhi to Thiruvananthapuram. The first move did not demand much of me, but the second was to Kerala, which demanded emotional and family commitments. I managed to finish the draft in about three years; and merged the two narratives and rewrote parts of it in another six months."

Misra says writing the book was an enjoyable experience. "This time, I was not writing formulaic fiction, I was chasing a story that fascinated me; I had no deadlines and I felt a little less of the constant self-doubt that pursues a writer, all because I wrote freely."

When she sent the book to the publishers, she met with acceptance. "Only one — a young

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editor I respect immensely for her abilities — suggested that I rewrite parts of it. She wanted me to give the book a darker treatment. If I had listened to her, it would have made the book different, perhaps a literary novel.”

Is she aware that the Wheeler story has been told before? “Oh yes, I had seen *Juno* long ago, and saw it again. But I had no idea it was based on Ruskin Bond’s *A Flight of Pigeons* till he himself modestly mentioned the fact to me when we met last year. I told him I was writing about Margaret Wheeler.”

Where does the title come from? “That was the working title I gave the draft. In all my books, the working title was replaced by the publisher, so I was surprised to be told that they would use the same title.”

Why didn’t she do a trilogy of fiction using the historiography of 1857 from three different female perspectives: Rani Lakshmi Bai, Margaret Wheeler and, perhaps, Begum Hazrat Mahal? “I could have, but I don’t think I will write a third book there now.”

Would she call this book her favourite? “*A Love Story for My Sister* ranks pretty high up in the list, but I guess each book meant something different to me.

Ancient Promises

was cathartic;

Rani

was the book I embarked upon to prove to myself that I can take on something more; the second book of the

Secrets

series was the one I enjoyed writing most.”

Misra’s books are in the news for other reasons too. Almost all her books have been translated into Malayalam, where she has a huge fan following. And the latest is that the film rights to *Ancient Promises*

have been sold. “Half the story happens outside Kerala, so I can’t see yet how it can be made entirely in one language,” she muses. But with ace director Ranjith Balakrishnan expected to direct it, this could be a film to watch for. That’s definitely good news for the fans of both the writer and the director!

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