

### 'UNBOUND – 2000 YEARS OF INDIAN WOMEN'S WRITING'

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Edited by Annie Zaidi

I was looking forward very much to this book. Once in a while a title shows up in a publisher's catalogue that makes one instantly note its potential for gift-giving. What could make a better present for feminist friends, people living abroad, literary academics and bibliophile aunts than the promise of '2000 Years of Indian Women's Writing', accompanied by a witty cover image of a conservative looking woman wearing a sari, rubber chappals and a determined expression while sitting astride a Harley Davidson.

Sweeping all the way through from the 600 BCE Therigatha verses of Buddhist nuns to the Sangam era romantic verse of Tamil poet Velli Vitiyar, onto works from the 13th and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries by writers such as Rajai and Mirabai, and sashaying confidently into modern times, this collection, relying heavily on the work of some great translators, spans India's many linguistic and cultural sensibilities, sharing the experiences of women over perhaps the most diverse historical, geographical, religious and caste boundaries that exist within one country. It takes a similar irreverent stance towards the different genres, covering the entire gamut of fiction, non-fiction, history, poetry, memoir, dramatic works, seeking to find not necessarily the common ground of gender experience but to showcase the breadth of subjects that women have written about so powerfully for centuries.

Divided into eleven sections, there are the obvious subjects of marriage, children, food and love but other pieces are gathered together, sometimes rather illogically, under headings such as 'battles', 'myth & fable', 'journeys' and 'ends'. There's a puzzling sense of artificiality in this construct which makes for a jarring reading experience as many pieces simply do not sit comfortably under such sub-titles or even next to each other. Nor really should one expect them to, given the vastly different eras and sensibilities from which they spring. I can only imagine that some kind of structure had to be brought to bear on a collection so vast and unwieldy but it's a bit like stuffing a diverse group of women from different periods and genres together into one room with instructions to be friends simply for the fact that they are all women and all writers. In fact, each one of the sub-headings could probably have been carefully curated into a

volume in its own right, which would have far better served the subjects and the writers featured.

In her introduction, editor Annie Zaidi is honest in admitting the difficulty she faced in ploughing through shelf after shelf of wonderful material. Given this abundance of riches, she mentions some of the criteria that had to be enforced on her collection in order to make it more manageable (no diaspora writers, no works that did not focus on India). She also lists a few omissions that sharp-eyed readers are bound to question, stating difficulties with copyright, length and budget. I could add more names to that list of omissions – prolific contemporary writers such as Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair who have produced oeuvres far bigger and wider-ranging than some of those who have rather inexplicably been included here. But this is not an investigation of how such lists are drawn up in the first place, interesting though that question is: do writers qualify for anthologies by being acquaintances of the editor or because of a deeper vested interest, such as belonging to the same publishing house?

That, however, would be missing the point which, plainly stated, is quite simply that a collection containing the words '2000 Years' in its title is grasping at the impossible, certainly given its own far from substantial size of 300 odd pages. It is perhaps for this reason that most collections confer some kind of sensible restraint on themselves, sticking to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, for instance, or to a single theme. Even bigger collections, like the Nortons anthologies, only stretch as far as six centuries and, even then, provide the breathing space of several volumes.

I wish I could praise the ambition and audacity of this endeavour but the overwhelming sense a reader is left with is of a carelessly made promise. Even chancing upon the occasional gem (for example, 'Chilli Powder', a wonderful short story by Bama brimming with feminist humour and cheek) and the odd personal favourite (an excerpt from 'God of Small Things') created the frustration of an appetite whetted and left unfulfilled.

In terms of gift-giving, this would be akin to the prank of presenting someone with a large and glossily packaged assortment of chocolates only for the receiver to find that the pieces inside are half-nibbled morsels, there merely to tempt and titillate rather than satisfy.