

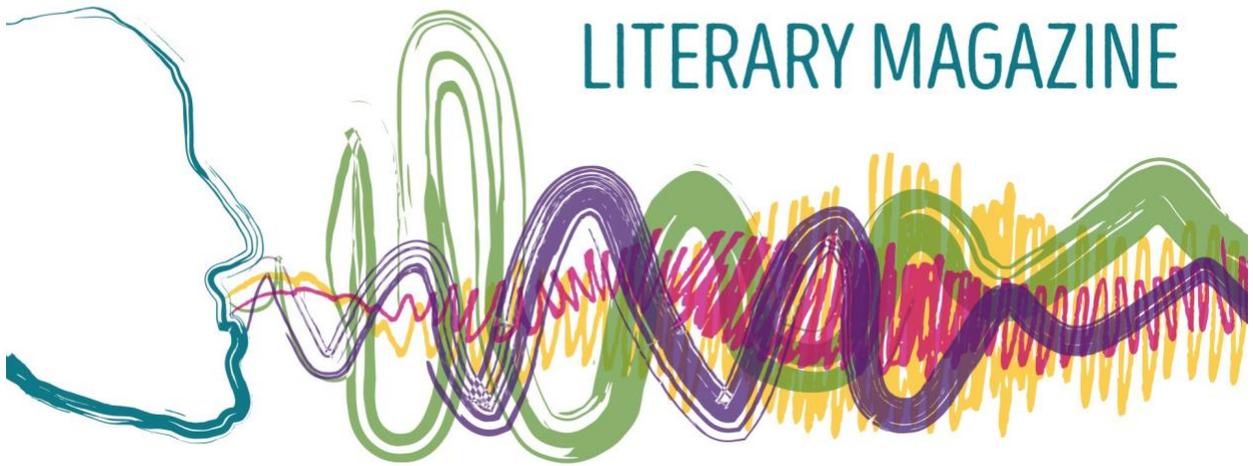
Issue 7

Here, There, and Everywhere

December 2018

AWAKENED VOICES

LITERARY MAGAZINE



Outside by Rhea Dhanbhoora

The status of women across the globe and especially in countries like India oscillates between creeping towards equality and jumping several steps back to being increasingly hostile. This is a fragment from the narratives of women based in a largely ignored Zoroastrian/ Parsi community that's fast going the way of the Dodo Bird — an attempt to carve a little place in fiction for them to sit in, through stories that revolve around or set the characters in situations that are uncomfortable, taboo or in some other way lead to cracks and breaks for them, for society and for minority communities like them the world over.

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All the other images fade, but for the orange flags. Stiff nylon, fighting lazily against a balmy breeze.

Orange. Always the strangest in the spectrum. A colour, a fruit, a flower — all rolled into one lazy word. As if there were no other way to describe the ghastly coalescence of red and yellow. A marriage of pigments, arranged quite conveniently between colours I have mixed feelings about. There was red, a reminder of period blood and bindis and rage and lipstick, muddled with yellow, a seemingly duplicitous shade that spits up images of Wordsworth's daffodils as quickly as it will Eliot's yellow fog.

I'm carded everywhere I go, and never with a smile when I'm alone. The world outside treats me differently than I'm treated at home, there's no garlands to celebrate the onset of womanhood, no smiles when I'm on my evening walk. Outside the safe confines of the colony, the women tuck belly fat back into their petticoats as they whisper about my painted face instead of gossiping about my alien boyfriends, the men brush past rudely instead of groaning about the loud music that kept them up at night. The world outside the colony suddenly feels more unfamiliar than it used to.

The surly man at the door of a club ten years past trendy wants to know why my bare arm is not linked in with that of a scraggly young man, bubbling over with the overconfidence typical of all those only recently released from the clutches of puberty. I don't want to explain where my scraggly young man is sulking tonight, so I simply nod to the acquaintances at the end of the room. He doesn't care how old I am.

My body moves laboriously past the dance-floor, squinting to find the edges of the room through a mess of sequined skirts and skyscraper heels, the women around me teetering on pointe. The women in more acceptable outfits wait outside to judge. My chic, slim jeans a pale comparison to tight leather skirts and skater dresses. Still, I can feel eyes dipping into the space between the cowl neck of my blood red blouse.

They can't help it if they're taller than I am. It's not their fault my breasts are just below their line of vision. Straphangers by day, struggling to squeeze themselves into every last remaining inch of the sweaty buses and rumbling trains, revellers at night, waiting to squeeze themselves into someone's contact list. You can tell who's here alone.

A night alone seemed like a better idea five years ago in my unsung archipelago; seven little pieces moulded into the big, bad city. Another one of those arranged marriages.

Images of the big little island city float through my mind in little vignettes through the night. Short stories playing out in black and white, then suddenly switching to colour whenever the

characters get too close to my bar stool. The lever is broken, and I'm being dipped gently towards the floor. The rest of the stools sit comfortably higher than mine. I'm not even surprised.

Bombay, I call it. Traitorous word these days, but the best way to help it feel like home. Such a heady mix. All of us trying to keep our names scribbled in its sand. There's the pretty young thing from the big building that flirts with the seaface, on her sixth drink. The coolboy from the outskirts who has to travel two hours to get to work every morning, nursing the one drink he can afford. The gaggle from the North, begging for a Bollywood tune. The preppy millionaire from the South in his red trousers and crisp

white shirt with a wad of cash in his pocket, bumming cigarettes off everyone else, pumping his fist to Friday night hip-hop. The boisterous colony boy, belting out Freddy Mercury.

A hand slips up my thigh. Warm and firm, but my skin shivers beneath it, a chill seeping into my bones. I knew when he sidled into a seat next to me. It's easy to weed out the depraved. Harder to scoot away quick enough. It's my fault for being alone. Just for a little music, a comforting drink, a break from the confines of a house too cramped for the six of us. A breather from text message fights and badgering boyfriends. No. There's no excuse. Peace of mind is for the strong, the wise, the virile. I am the weaker sex.

Besides, he's no stranger, he's introducing himself. Just a little too much to drink. Stop being such a prissy.

They're waving me over to come dance. I consider it for a second. It's a tempting idea. I think of the wave of disco lights that will blind me, the lousy music that will force me into a blurred stupor.

Dazed and confused — the perfect weekend. My phone purrs against my thigh. Time for another round. I can already hear the shrill cries of manly discontent. I've taken too long to answer.

The back door leads to smokers' paradise. Free from the judgement of families rolling by the front door on a busy Friday night.

Fresh air. A mistake to breathe in deeply, I'm choking on the familiar, stale stench of smog and ash.

The cigarette crackles, a sliver of a stick, barely visible in the thick smog.

My tears are angry tears, but I get a sympathetic smile from the woman smoking in the shadows in front of me, before she slips past and back inside. Two more visitors, a shared lighter, a casual conversation. One last cigarette before I'm ready to rumble. I can hear the door crack open again as I disconnect. Everyone seems to have found the easier way out.

The top of his head shimmers menacingly as he hovers by the door, as if even the hair had known better than to stay put. He doesn't approach, but the bulk of his frame blocks the little light I'd been watching, falling in patterns on the hard concrete in front of me.

I know this is not a friendly cigarette encounter, even as I nonchalantly bring the stick up to my lips for a deep drag.

Animals can smell fear.

The paper crackles and the smoke sputters out of my mouth, confidently sheathing my fingers, now beginning to tremble in the darkness. I inch closer to the door, pretending to be more invested in the act of smoking than anyone should ever be. Terrible habit. This would be my fault too.

He knows I can't make it past him. His hand flies up to my face, the smell of weed rising up from the cracks in his palms, his freshly cut fingernails digging into the sides of my cheeks as one finger pushes itself, unwelcome, into my mouth.

His unshapely body is pressing me to the wall, little bits of blubber pressing into my legs to pin me there as they turn to jelly.

I want to scream.

I am screaming.

My voice box has shut down. My legs have shut down.

I'm pushing my body up as hard as I can. But I am the weaker sex.

His teeth flash in the dark. He's happy with himself.

I avert my eyes. Don't stare into a crocodile's jaws, I was taught.

Make it as hard as you can.

It doesn't matter, as little bits of my skin are suddenly subject to an onslaught of scraggly beard and the sticky saliva of an over-eager tongue. Greedy, impatient. I can't even tell how my body is being pinned down, what parts of his body are overpowering all of mine.

It's getting darker, bile rises up in my throat. Hot and sticky, like his mouth, currently on my breasts. I don't know when or how his trousers unzipped. I can't tell how my knees are suddenly thudding to the floor, or with what strength I'm trying to pull my head back as he pushes it forward.

He's saying something, but I'm deaf now.
Everything is as red as my blouse, hanging limply from my waist. I know it's all over when my trousers find their way around my ankles.
It's her own fault, they'll say.
Sharp pain pierces my stomach. He's moving awkwardly, incorrectly.
Is it his first time?
Headlights round the corner, the door cracks open, he's gone. I sit, letting the hard concrete bruise my bare thighs, adjusting my cowl neck as I hear the click of a lighter and a tinkle of laughter. I'm too small now, to be seen from the shadows.
The sky is a pretty pink, the sort that comes after the clearing of a purple haze of factory smoke and sputtering smog let loose from taxis past their prime. A balmy breeze coils over the promenade, wafting over to dry the sticky saliva off my shoulders and neck. My cigarette crackles against a phantasmagoria of disapproving men and women, my swollen eyes settling on a vision of the Sabine women, staring down at me from the dilapidated fort on the edge of the sea.
A group of men walk past, brandishing their saffron flags as they stare me down. I have no business being here.
A stray ripple tickles my toes. Just a hint of a wave before dawn. A spot of red trickles down my scraped knee into the murky yellow water. I'm missing a button on my chic, slim jeans.
The sea looks magnificent. The waves are picking up steam as the wind begins to huff and puff over the breathtaking expanse of the water. The frothy white fringes tease the rocks I'm perched on, splashing over them onto little flecks of sand, then drawing back in a hurry.
It's quiet in the morning. The wide stretches of concrete twist and turn around the periphery of the water, separated only by a poorly paved promenade and a row of tall trees, swinging in the distance.
A flutter of wings and one of the supposedly extinct sparrow family flits past. A tiny feathered friend reminding me that the weak don't always succumb.
My island city.
Risky at night, resplendent at dawn.
I walk quickly towards the safe confines of the colony, back to the big rusty gates, taking in the pretty sights of a city still in slumber, marred only by the hostile orange flags still waving me on.

Rhea Dhanbhoora is a Fiction candidate at Sarah Lawrence who recently went back to full-time study after a seven-year stint in print and digital media. Back home in Bombay, her full-time job as an Editor included handling and writing for Features supplements for a daily newspaper and as a teenager, had a collection of what some people may call poetry published. Not counting a brief spell selling homemade cakes, cookies, and 3D sugar figures, she's worked for health portals, travel websites, a short film company, literary reviews, hotel chains, and India's first podcast network. She's currently working on narratives of women based in a largely ignored Zoroastrian/ Parsi community that's fast going the way of the Dodo Bird — an attempt to carve a little place in fiction for them to sit in, through short stories that revolve around or set the characters in situations that are uncomfortable, taboo or in some other way lead to cracks and breaks for them, for society and for minority communities like them the world over.