

## Book Review: *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*

Priya Kuriyan, Larissa Bertonasco and Ludmilla Bartscht (Eds.). (2015). New Delhi. Zubaan Publishers. ISBN 9789384757106

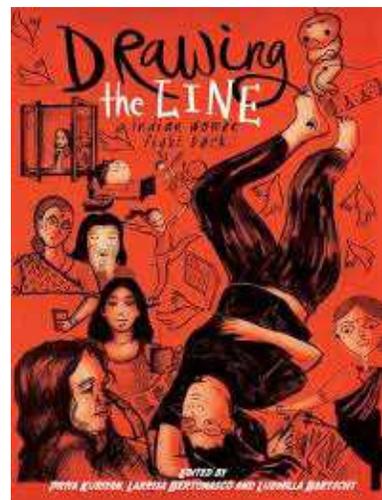
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The issue of uneven equations between man and woman is the long fought over and the most crucial of all human issues. Moreover, this is the most ancient and simultaneously the most contemporary issue too. Indian women who have always been subdued by men, in want of equality and liberation, have produced several pieces of literature that call for justice. Zubaan, an independent feminist publishing house, in its another attempt to give voice to the female psyche has published *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* that has received much critical attention on the literary sphere recently.

The book is an anthology of fourteen short narratives in graphic format and has been written and illustrated mostly by amateur women writers and artists. It was a culmination of a week-long workshop held in New Delhi by the editors Priya Kurian, Ludmilla Bartscht and Larissa Bertonasco. The book basically is a reaction sparked after the notoriously brutal and fatal gang rape of a medical student in New Delhi on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2012. The incident was followed by people protesting fiercely and demanding change and justice. In the introduction of the book Nisha Susan shares that at the global level too, this case drew due attention but was perceived as an 'oriental' issue that accordingly asserts the rape is 'an Indian problem', and further claims it 'a Third World problem'. Although it is quite unfortunate to learn about such predispositions of foreign countries but at the same time it cannot be denied that Indian women still have to fight to preserve their rights.

However, the book is not just confined to such cases, rather it is broader in its outlook and the discourse on everyday sexism is the integral part of it. The visual stories take into account the experiences of contemporary Indian women at various stages of their lives i.e., since their pre-natal stage to adulthood and call for the requisite attitudinal changes in the society that typecasts the image of women. Besides, the short narratives seek to expose the duplicity of Indian society that marginalizes and subjugates women in the name of religion, tradition and others and overlooks their rights of freedom and equality even in the twenty first century. Although the issue of women fighting for their rights is not very new but the contents, presentations, and mode are definitely new. The cartoon strips communicate the narratives either in a satirical or contemplative tone. Some of them are very distressing whereas some are handling the serious problems with a tinge of comedy.



The first short narrative “That’s Not Fair” by Harini Kannan is a light satire on the problem of dowry system in India and the situation becomes worse if the complexion of the girl is not fair. The comic narrative shows a female foetus enjoying herself in the womb whereas the parents are disappointed after learning about the female inside. The parents instead of planning for the studies, plan to save money for her wedding.

Similarly, “Melanin and Inner Beauty”, is another story that deals with the idea of fairness which is also a parameter of beauty of women. It presents the life of a melanin itself who is being tempted by an advertisement of fairness cream which persuades it to become “the real you” in just “14 days”.

Another story, “The Photo” by Reshu Singh explores a grown up girl Bena’s psyche whose family wants her to get married whereas the reluctant girl wonders why she cannot live always the way she lives now. She becomes anxious that she would lose her identity and looking at her own proposal photo she asserts that “I am more than my photos.”

In a similar stance, “An Ideal Girl” by Soumya Menon portrays the qualities of an ideal boy and an ideal girl. She efficiently draws how the biased Indian society wants both the girl and the boy to be equally educated and ‘cultured’ yet demands the girl to the household chores. After her marriage, she is expected to do all the household work and look after her family and if she wishes to earn, her priority must be her household chore.

With a serious note, the short inspiring biographical story “the Poet, Sharmila” by Ita Mehrotra, portrays the life of Irom Sharmila, a young social activist from Manipur who is on hunger strike for last fourteen years against the Armed Forces Special Power Act there. She is against the rapes and loot the military people do under the protection of this Act.

“Mumbai Local” by Diti Mistry is about the sisterhood and the bonding that women share with one another despite being completely strangers. Hemavathy Guha’s “Asha Now” presents the problem of women sexually harassed by their family members. In the story, Asha, since childhood, is sexually abused by her cousin and now she decides that she would never let it happen to her daughter.

Another story “Ladies, Please Excuse” by Angela Ferrao reveals how despite having good qualifications women have less options for their career. Most of them they leave their jobs because they have no proper facilities and washrooms in their offices which make it difficult to earn a living with dignity.

“Basic Space?” by Kaveri Gopalkrishnan portrays how women change their behavior and body language in public places just in order to keep themselves “safe” and to show “where their space begins from”. Women draw such (figurative) lines (around themselves) to create and preserve their personal space and identity which are often trespassed and mutilated by men. It also shows how the use of such lines registers their resistance against their diminished status. In a lighter vein, the story also tells about how women want ‘a world without boundaries’ but they know it is a utopia which nowhere exists except in their imagination.

To conclude it can be said that the forays made in the book are quite commendable and the book is innovative and relevant to the contemporary situations in India. The black and white visuals are quite impressive and sometimes quite naïve too. The book marks a strong presence of women in the field of Graphic Literature in India.

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