

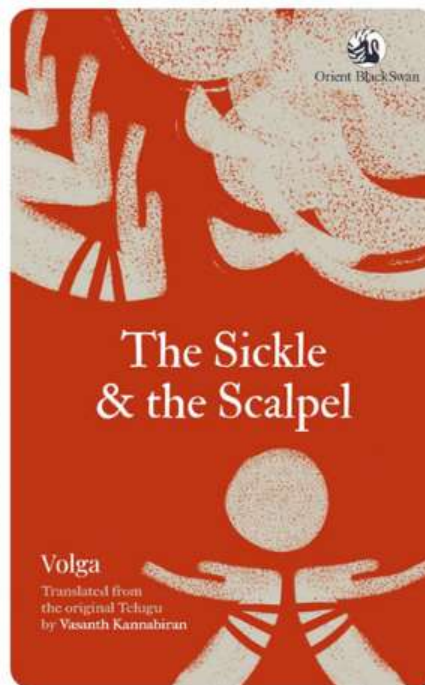
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“We Have to Build Solidarity and Sisterhood on an Urgent Basis.”

Volga , Githa Hariharan | 24 Feb 2023

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In this conversation with writer Githa Hariharan, Volga talks about how the personal is political, male solidarity, sisterhood and more.



Translated from Telugu by Vasanth Kannabiran, Volga's The Sickle & The Scalpel (Orient Blackswan, 2022) is a novel based on the extraordinary life and times of Dr Komarraju Atchamamba (1906–1964) — one of the first doctors in the country, member of the Communist Party of India, and a pioneer for women's emancipation in Andhra. Capturing the period of social reform in pre-independence Andhra, through the freedom struggle, it foregrounds the rise of the modern Indian woman and her struggle for rights and recognition, alongside the rise of communism and the Left in the newly formed nation.

Githa Hariharan (GH): *The Sickle and the Scalpel* is an apt title for the translation of the novel *Gamaname Gamyam*. The title signposts two powerful paths to greater freedom – the scalpel as symbolic of a woman's advancement through a career, but also as a vocation that enables her to contribute to society at large; and the sickle as symbolic of the ideology that drives both individual and collective toward greater equality and freedom for all. It's a powerful link between two symbols rich with possibilities. Would you comment on the ways in which you have addressed this link between the personal and political in this novel, as well as the rest of your work?

Volga: This novel, like many of my other works, explore how women realise, through their life struggles, that the personal is political. I try to capture their journey in the path toward this realisation.

The Sickle and the Scalpel draws on the life of Dr Komarraju Atchamamba. She was, perhaps, the first woman doctor in the India of her times to speak and write about health – women's health in particular – as a political issue. As you read in the novel, she was a founder member of the Communist Party of India. Every step and stage in her life could be described as political, including her childhood. We talk of the link between the personal and the political. Sometimes, many times, it seems to me that it is not just a link; it seems both are one. Even what we like and dislike, which may appear purely personal, have a political basis. Aren't these personal preferences deeply dependent on the socioeconomic factors of our backgrounds?

Liberation from oppression is the key issue. But liberation from the position of an oppressor, whether a man or a member of an upper caste, is critical too. Revolutions have mainly focused on liberating people from oppression.

They have not given enough importance to understanding how oppressive one can become in the name of the revolution, or in the process of revolution or reform. It is more difficult, for instance, to understand patriarchal oppression. Oppression is many-layered. I am trying to peel at least this one layer, patriarchal oppression, in my work.

GH: In *The Sickle and the Scalpel*, there are moving references to male solidarity with, and indeed active contribution to, women's achievement. The best example is Sharada's historian father. He is not only confident that his daughter will take care of her brother's education and career; he also thinks of her as "a great hope that guides my life." He says to his wife, "Our daughter should create history, not write history like me." How much of this character is based on a real person? Or is he, almost entirely, an ideal?

Volga: We need male solidarity. We know that people, both men and women, suffer from inequality. We should work hand in hand because the whole struggle is to have peace among genders. Men may have limitations in understanding what women want. But even then, how can we ignore the men who struggle for women's equality?

The father character in *The Sickle and the Scalpel* is real. Komarraju Lakshmana Rao was a historian. His sister, Bhandaru Achchamamba, inspired him in many ways. She was the first short story writer in Telugu; she wrote historical booklets; she organised women into Sanghas. She died looking after victims of the plague. Lakshmana Rao gave his sister's name to his daughter. He believed in her intellectual and physical capabilities and her energy. There were people like him who loved *and* believed in their daughters.

GH: One of the recurring questions in *The Sickle and the Scalpel* is about modernity – the Indian version, the woman's version. So much confusion remains about what is 'modern', and what its value continues to be in our times. What is Sharada's vision of a modern Indian woman in her time, pre-Independence and in the early years of the nation? And all these years later, yours?

Volga: Modernity – what a puzzle it is, and how colonialism and its cultural imposition have made us run around that word! I think we are still trying to figure out what modernity actually means. Before Independence, people had many clear ideas about modernism. *Modern* meant rational thinking,

believing in equality, believing in liberty. It meant the intent and action to change society, through education for instance. Women had many dreams around the idea of the modern. Now we have fewer dreams about it. We even use the word less frequently, though we still engage with the idea. I think that the meaning of the idea changes, depending on who is defining it. Now post-modernism has also lost its modernity.

In Telugu, the word modern carries all the previous meanings, but not when used to describe contemporary women. If we use 'modern' in a Telugu sentence now, it often has a satirical connotation, especially with reference to how a woman is dressed or how she conducts herself.

My vision of a modern woman? She is a simple, honest woman who understands the power structures of contemporary society. This modern woman steps forward to fight inequalities in whatever form she chooses.

GH: *The Sickle and the Scalpel* is based on the life of Dr Komarraju Atchamamba (1906–1964), doctor, communist, and a leader of the women's movement. How did you combine history, fiction, and the progressive ideas – as well as critical questions – that you and Atchamamba share? How much of Sharada is Atchamamba and how much of her is you?

Volga: I think the critical questions you refer to are still there, unanswered from her generation to the present day. I wrote the novel as a process of searching for answers. The character Sharada is, I can say, completely Atchamamba. When I began the novel, I thought some fictional elements would be necessary, and I changed her name and the names of her family members. But when I completed the novel, I realised that Sharada is Atchamamba – and I didn't use (or need to use) any of my abilities to write fiction. Maybe I should have claimed that "All the characters in this novel are real. There are no fictional characters or events in this novel, only the dialogue is in my words. The thoughts and meanings belong to the real people in the novel. Only the words are mine."

As for the similarity between Sharada- Atchamamba and me: I cannot reach the heights she did. There may be some similarities – I too was part of the left, then I came out of it. But Atchamamba's energy, her magnanimity, her selflessness – all these are unreachable for me. I can say, though, that I learnt many things from her.

GH: Both the mythical women you write about – say Sita in *The Liberation of Sita* – and the real women – say Sharada in *The Sickle*

and the Scalpel – are in search of control over their lives, choices and relationships. But, arguably, your Sita fares somewhat better than Sharada in her quest for freedom, and her subversion of notions of love and sacrifice. Is it easier for a writer to visualise a mythical woman realising herself rather than a woman from history or fiction?

Volga: I think so. Actually, a writer has quite a bit of freedom when writing about mythology. Of course, she has great responsibility too, partly because our mythology is deeply rooted in religion. And partly because of the way the fundamentalists and the right-wing react to mythology as well as religion. It's not that we are afraid; but if we are not careful as writers, the whole debate or discourse we want to engage with gets side-lined. So we have to figure out ways to make freedom and responsibility work together.

When [Chalam](#) was writing, he had much more freedom than we do. (He wrote from 1925 to 1975.) His way of dealing with mythology is hilarious and thought provoking. My approach is different – it's not humorous. And I do not ignore the original text completely. I want to retain the original flavour of the characters. I don't imagine Sita as a woman of modern thought from her childhood, or Ahalya as a wise woman from her early years. Their sufferings and struggles make these women strong, wise and free. Readers also go through this process as they relate to the struggle and the hard earned freedom of the characters – and hopefully, the readers also grow stronger.

So freedom, responsibility, strategy, purpose – so many things work together consciously or unconsciously. In Ahalya's story it works unconsciously; so it does in Surpanakha's strategy. In Renuka's or Urmila's, it works consciously.

GH: The rewriting of myth helps you to engage with some deeply philosophical questions in the context of a better life for women. In *The Liberation of Sita*, I was struck by Surpanakha's attempt to redefine beauty and self-esteem. She says "Gradually I learned to love my hands. I learned how to create, work and serve with these hands." From the passive site of beauty, the face, which can merely be looked at, she progresses to her hands, active makers of beauty. From appearance, inviting gaze, the woman develops into someone who is recognised for her work. From an ornament, she grows into a creator.

Would you comment on how you imagined Surpanakha and rewrote her story, independent of a relationship with a man?

Volga: The characters and events are already there. We have to interpret them – or subvert them – so they gain new meaning. I have seen many Surpanakhas in contemporary society. Women mutilated, women disfigured by knives and acid. Many violent incidents. I have seen many of these women recovering, surviving with dignity and beauty and great courage. Though they may not express their survival in a philosophical way, their lives teach us a philosophy of life and a love of labour. Surpanakha represents all those women.

GH: Again, whether in myth or real life, women's strength – and their journey toward self-realization – involves the individual woman connecting with other women and learning from them. Would you comment on the importance of this sisterhood, as well as its limitations, given caste, community, class?

Volga: Sisterhood is very important for liberation. Patriarchy, which is strongly based on caste, religion and class, divides women along those lines. This division strengthens all the oppressive factors and holds patriarchy together. Patriarchy is very deceptive: it knows how to divide and rule. It operates various power structures and hierarchies in such a way that we who are prisoners willingly guard our chains. We protect the walls we are imprisoned in. If we want to break or try to break these walls, we are beset by doubt. We doubt each other. It is not our fault. Patriarchy actively works to make us feel insecure. To understand and hold our hands together in a joint struggle is not an easy task. Nowadays it seems almost impossible. Still, there is no other way but to go forward. We have to come together, understand each other, clear our doubts openly, fight our fears without inhibition. The situation is getting worse every day. We have to build solidarity and sisterhood on an urgent basis.

GH: The book *The Sickle and the Scalpel* – and many of our actual experiences over the years – show how difficult it is to *live* an egalitarian ideology. I am referring, of course, to how deeply men (and sometimes, women) have internalised patriarchal norms despite their location at the progressive end of the political spectrum. And we women of a particular class or caste or community background are also continuously learning that not only do gender issues manifest quite differently for working class women, but also for dalit women, or

Adivasis, or Muslim women. You have addressed these slippery questions through writing, but also activism as well as research. How do we work toward a broad front, among women, but also among men and women in progressive movements, without suppressing voices or risking identarian divisions?

Volga: This is not a simple question, and there is no simple answer. We have to learn to discuss and debate. We should not become like our enemies while fighting them. Remember what the poet [Audre Lorde](#) said? We cannot destroy the enemy's mansion with the enemy's weapons. We have to find creative ways to do that; we have to evolve new strategies. There is so much to be done. We need to make our male comrades realise they are patriarchal in their thoughts and actions. We need to help upper caste women and men to free themselves from their oppressive behaviour, language, and attitude. There are no readymade answers – struggle is the only answer. We have to keep going ahead. If there is a wall, break it. If there is a sea, swim.

GH: You have spoken of a liberal tradition of questioning our epics on the basis of caste and gender, especially in Telugu literature. Is there anything left of this, given the growing intolerance of questioning, speculation, and works of imagination?

Volga: Yes. There is space still which we have to protect. We have to grapple with intolerance with daring, intelligence as well as a sense of responsibility. Maybe we cannot write like Chalam or [Tripuraneni Ramaswamy](#) in our times, but we can still find ways to challenge intolerance.

GH: You have experience of collectives fighting for the right to dissent – such as the [Revolutionary Writers Association](#). How do we strengthen these organisations that back movements as well as freedom of speech?

Volga: We should set up new collectives. Build new movements. Have clarity about whether you want to back the movement, or you want to be the movement. A lack of clarity on this point has led to the loss of both the purpose and the base of many people's organisations.

GH: I know how difficult it is to balance the demands of writing fiction with the day-to-day involvement in political causes as well as academic research. How did you, and how do you, manage this?

Volga: You respond to the need of the hour – if you need to run, you do it.

GH: You have probably answered this question a thousand times, but let me ask about your pen name, Volga. And how does Lalitha change when she sits down to write and becomes Volga?

Volga: The name is personal and political. It began as a political one in my family and became personal to me. My father called my elder sister Volga. She was born in 1946, when the second world war ended. That day, the newspaper carried a story about a red army soldier named Volga; the story was about her courage in fighting with the Nazis. My father was inspired by the story and named my sister Volga. My dear sister died when I was 16 years old. I had begun writing poems by that time. I took her name as my pen name. Volga is alive. I am alive. So my parents still have two daughters. That name suits my politics too.

Read an extract from *The Sickle & the Scalpel* [here](#).

Courtesy: [Indian Cultural Forum](#)