

# The Woman as an Inspiration

Through the writings of poets from across the world, a new book looks at creating a dialogue regarding gender issues

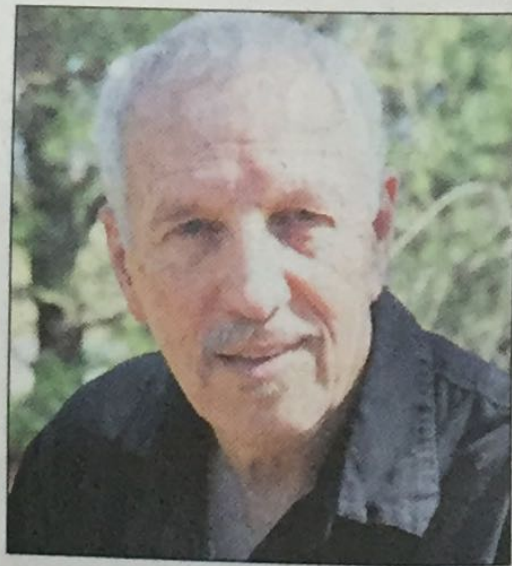


## RADHIKA SINGH

WE ALL wept when Jyoti Singh Pandey passed away," says Smita Sahay, recalling the Delhi gangrape that shook the nation. "We also realised that this was hardly an isolated case and that we needed to create a much broader dialogue". Sahay, a Mumbai-based writer, began to conceptualise an Indian-American poetry compilation that would address problems of sexism, discrimination, and gender atrocities. Titled, *Veils, Halos & Shackles: International Poetry on the Oppression and Empowerment of Women*, it is being released on Friday and includes poems from across the world.

Working alongside American poet, Charles Fishman, Sahay put together a collection of 250 poems from more than two dozen countries. Social media made it easy for poets to get in touch and send their work. "One of our biggest challenges was receiving too many poems. Another was that our book was getting too big," says Sahay, whose works have appeared in *Celebrating India*, *Muse India*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *the Cha Journal* and *Kitaab*. The 32-year-old experienced widespread sexism while growing up in Bihar and Jharkand. Standing up to gender inequality became an integral part of her consciousness.

Some of the poems were written specifically for the compilation, while others are reprints. It includes works from the Indian authors, such as K Satchidanandan, Ravi Shankar, Tabish Khair, Priya Sarukkai Chabria,



The book; Charles Fishman; Smita Sahay

and Sampurna Chattarji. One of the poets that Sahay is most excited about including is Chabria. A recipient of the Senior Fellowship for Outstanding Artists for Literature from the Indian government, Chabria had previously written *Not Springtime Yet* in 2008, and *Dialogue and Other Poems* in 2005. The poem she has included in the compilation is titled *Dialogue 1*. It was written after Chabria read *Tamilakam* poetry – love poems written by men from a woman's point of view.

The book is dedicated to Pandey and "the

uncountable number of other women and girls who have been victims of gender violence", Malala Yousafzai, whose "leadership and courage have inspired millions and for all of our daughters", and an Afghani woman, Nadia Anjuman, who was killed for her poems. Despite efforts to obtain the rights to print Anjuman's poem, Sahay and Fishman were unsuccessful. "Even the translator refused to acknowledge the work," says Sahay. "People were very scared". So, her name is published, along with the title *The Silenced*, on a blank page in the book.

Fishman, 74, was contacted by Sahay when she came across his work during a poetry-writing workshop. "His writing had a particular quality. It was celebratory about women. It demands justice for social evils, and fit right in with the book I was envisioning," Sahay says.

*The Death Mazurka*, Fishman's book on the Holocaust, was nominated for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. More recently, he published *In the Language of Women* in 2011, and has also contributed three poems to *Veils, Halos & Shackles*.

Dane Cervine, from the US, contributed *I Stare at the Headlines*, a poem about journalists speaking for those who do not have a voice. "In matters of gender and race, and all differences, it is important that those who are oppressed have strong allies, who will stand side by side with them and, when they cannot speak, who will speak for them," he says. Cervine's poems have won or been finalists at awards from *The Atlanta Review* and *Caesura*, among others.

Rita Malhotra, another contributor, is a mathematician by profession. She is the author of two books in mathematics and eight collections of verse. She sent in a poem called *Chrysanthemums*, with the following lines: "we were brought up/ by the rule book/ that spelt love for us daughters/ as immoral, infidel". Malhotra says, "Women have been marginalised for too long. Their bitterness at being exploited, day in and day out, naturally arouses the woman in me".

The book will be launched on April 9 at Prithvi Theatre, Juhu, Mumbai, and on April 11 at Kitab Khana, Fort