Praise for the Book

'Anita Sivakumaran's renewed characters from our literary past speak in voices that paint landscapes of the heart and mind in which we can place our contemporary emotions and motivations.'

Arshia Sattar

'If you think (like I did) that *The Birth of Kali* is just another reinterpretation or retelling of mythology, then prepare to be blown away. The author takes characters and tales we know and turns them completely on their heads in a way that leaves you wanting to believe that this was how it must have happened, after all. The balance of archaic language with well-chosen anachronisms transports you into mythic times while always reminding you that these tales – and the travails they describe – are timeless, and deal very much with issues that are in the here and now. Strong women are the norm in this collection, not the exception, even as the author deftly shows that strength comes in many forms. Ms Sivakumaran's women claim their right to make a choice – and then live the consequences that come of their decisions, establishing her as a powerful voice that is much needed in these current times.'

Krishna Udayasankar

The Birth of Kali

Anita Sivakumaran

juggernaut

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or to actual incidents is purely coincidental.

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For Brân, little crow

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Sitai

A deer. Small, golden. If I spread my arms it would fit my embrace, and it is light enough to lift and fondle and smell. I imagine it squirming, giving me a mother's pleasure.

'Fetch me that deer,' I tell my husband, Raman.

He stands, silent. He wants to say no. But I have never asked him for anything before.

His brother, Lakshmanan, objects. 'That deer is of a most unnatural colour. It seems to me some wicked magic is at hand.'

'It is just a deer,' I say.

Lakshmanan is several years older than me, but, as my husband's younger brother, his position is that of a son.

'The most unusual shade of gold,' Lakshmanan continues, gazing at the deer. It lifts its head and looks straight at us, as if willing us to come to it. 'Where is its herd? Why does it linger so, in the presence of three strange humans?'

'I want that deer for a pet,' I say.

Raman takes an arrow from his quiver. 'I will go after it,' he says to Lakshmanan. 'You stay and guard Sitai. Do not leave her alone even for a minute. Upon your life.'

He leaves before I can say 'Pray, do not use your mighty bow. It is only a small, helpless creature. I want it for a pet, not to eat or to wear.'

In the short distance, the deer seems to vanish at Raman's approach. He disappears after it.

We wait in silence. Time rushes like a river between us, my brother-in-law and me, quenching neither of our bodies of its tension.

And then we hear Raman's dying cries. I insist that Lakshmanan go to his rescue. 'You must obey me,' I say. 'I am in the place of your mother.' I am expected to condescend to him. Although, if my husband dies without an heir, for the sake of continuing the family line I would have to marry him. Then I would not dream of patronizing him.

Lakshmanan draws a circle around me, for my own safety. 'Stay within,' he says, in the same tone he uses on the brace of goats when penning them in for the night. 'No one can break this line of defence. Only you can let anyone in, or walk out of it of your own will.'

Raman's cries stop even before Lakshmanan leaves the hut.

I step out of the circle. I let the demon in.

Surpanakai

Every day the handsome stranger comes down to the river and fills a pot of water. I desire him, though he has never once looked at me. He ignores me completely. We Dravidians must look like brown bits of rock or earth to a rosy-hued northerner like him. Why do they leave their cold plains and come to our elephant jungles? Spurning the natives, entangling themselves in monsoon vines and anthills? He must be one of those shy, shrinking hermits, with heart and balls of stone.

One day he doesn't appear. Instead, a woman comes. Not much more than a girl and cut from the same cloth as the northerner. She swings a brass pot by its neck. It is his pot. I recognize the dent in it. Thinking herself alone, she is humming. Then she sees me. Her eyes stare. Then, embarrassed, she looks away. She hurries to the river and fills the pot with scummy water at the edge, rather than wading in a little deeper to where the sweet, clean water flows. Perhaps she doesn't want to get her clothes wet. She certainly wears a number of garments. She is covered head to toe, and in such hot weather.

I decide that enough is enough.

'Where is the man that usually comes?' I call to her.

She is still as a deer, staying bent over the pot. She had been about to hoist it to her hip. It is filled only three-fourths of the way. It would knock about and spill all the way back.

I wait. She straightens up, leaving the pot on the ground. I repeat my question.

'He hurt his foot, gathering fruit,' she says, in a clear, low voice.

'Is he your mate?'

Her hands fly to her face.

'No, no,' she says. 'My husband is away on a trip.'

'A trip?'

'He was asked to slay some demons in the mountain at the northern edge of the forest. A coven of hermits begged for his special help. He . . . the man you mention, is my brother-in-law.'

'And what do they call you?'

'They call me one born of the earth.'

Sitai

I am born of the earth mother. Later, I ask to be swallowed by my mother, and she opens her arms, the ground trembles and cracks open, and she takes me back into her womb. But that is the story after my return to Raman. Another death, another day.

This is the story of our parting.

My father, King Janaka, undertakes a sacrificial ploughing of his fields to appease the gods. His plough strikes something. They dig. It is a crib, covered in earth. They brush off the mud, and there I am.

My feet aren't allowed to touch the earth again after my birth. Silk cushions are laid out for me to sit on,

rose petals strewn around for me to walk on. Then I marry Raman. More silk cushions, rose petals. After his banishment from his kingdom, during our sojourn to the strange southern forests, Raman bears me like a flower upon his breast. But my feet also know earth and rock, thorns and poison leaves. The two brothers treat me like the princess that I am. They cosset me, and I am grateful. Always shadowed by one or the other, I am a treasure they have to protect at all costs, left alone only for my morning ablutions. But even then, one of them follows me at a discreet distance and stands with face averted as I crouch among the drying leaves. One day and another, when I am lost in some useless daydream, he, I cannot remember which, clears his throat, and asks softly, 'Finished?'

Then this happens. Raman is away and Lakshmanan hurts his foot. I have to go to the river alone.

'Pray, mother,' says my brother-in-law, 'walk straight as an arrow to the river and back. Do not pay attention to the woodland creatures, for even the smallest of them can bite or maim. There is especially a creature you must avoid, in the guise of a barbaric native woman.'

'A woman,' I say, wondering. My heart lightening, then tightening. What would I have to do with a native woman?

I say, 'Perhaps downriver there are civilized people.'

'Pray, stick to your path like one of brother's arrows,' he says. 'You will, in any case, find it impossible to wander. I have drawn an impenetrable circle that will not allow

you to go even a stone's throw from the path between the hut and the river. It is for your own protection.'

Surpanakai

The girl comes to the river the next day too. I am disappointed. Where is the young man? I like to feast my eyes on him, the unattainable fruit. The mysterious, chaste hermit. But then I think, I could get to know him through her. I will make nice.

'Wade in further to where the sweet water flows,' I tell her in a friendly voice.

'I will slip,' she says.

'You might slip a little, but then you will find your feet.'

'My clothes will get wet, and then they will drag in the mud.'

'Pull them up to your knees.'

'How improper. I shall never do such a thing.'

She is an irritating creature. I decide to tease her.

'Let me help you,' I say, and grab the pot from her. I thrust my sarong into her shock-nerved hands and plunge nude into the river.

When I hand the pot back to her, she has tears in her eyes. Her face is averted. Without a word, looking down at the ground, she takes the pot and, with much effort, hoists it to her hip. Then she leaves, spilling half of what I've filled by the time she passes out of sight.

As I wrap my sarong, I feel a little sorry to have teased her so, but not too sorry. The dry cloth sticks to my wet

skin as I start making my way back to where I had been roosting before she came. But then I change my mind, take the cloth off me and plunge once again into the river.

Sitai

I shall never go to the river again. What kind of monster is this woman? I have heard stories of the dark-skinned inhabitants of this land south of the Deccan forests, but are they not just stories? The terrible ways of the terrible natives. Dances around stones. Possessions by violent bloodthirsty goddesses. Naked, domineering women.

I pour the little water remaining into a cooking pot. I stew the last of the wild berries Lakshmanan brought and the gourd I found on the way. This makes our paltry meal. Every sound at the door makes my heart thump 'Raman, Raman'. But he isn't here yet. Would a coven of hermits have some coins to give him in payment? Will he buy some grain with it? Some lentils? We cannot go on for long on goat's milk and wild gourd, nuts and berries. We would only eat meat if driven to despair with hunger, but after waiting for the animals to die on their own. We don't kill animals.

After Lakshmanan and I eat, there is still an hour of light and I go to look for birds' nests. Some eggs would restore my equilibrium. My head is light from the thinness of our repast. I search in the thickest part of the shrubs and groves, and the parts of trees I can reach, but I fear coming upon a naked native woman. My skin feels peeled

and raw and flinches at every snapping twig and rustling leaf. I don't search for long. I return home to the meagre comfort of my snoring brother-in-law, trying my best to forget about the woman.

But I return to the river, to the woman. She holds a strange attraction. I feel like a pig attracted to filth. I find her words and her person repulsive. I go to the river, come back swearing I would never go again. I go to the river again.

Surpanakai

She comes the next day too. This time, she holds my gaze, her chin jutting a little. I beckon her to sit beside me.

'Why do you come to the river every day?' Sitai asks me.

'To contemplate it.'

She looks surprised. Did she think all we did was roll around in our slain foes' blood and grunt at each other?

'I have been studying the river,' I tell her. 'It gushes in a straight line here and remains as such all the way to the sea in the southeast. But where it emerges, from those grey rocks in the northwest, it twists and turns. What do you make of it?'

'It is like a woman in her journey,' she says. 'Her mind twists and turns in infancy, her passions crude and meandering, until she encounters marriage, and becomes straight, abundant and fertile, giving life and sustenance.'

I snort. 'I have heard that said before. It must be one of those ideas that originates with you northerners, and spreads as you travel. Now tell me, why is the river a woman? Why are all giving things feminine? Land, occupied and cultivated, the rocks when they are broken down into soil, are feminine. The hard axe, the unpliable, is masculine. The mountain, peaking and unscalable, is masculine.'

'It is not my place to have opinions about such things,' she says. But her eyes shine, her forehead and cheeks have a sheen of heat, some emotion.

I close my eyes and let her stew.

After some time, she says, 'You come here every day, alone. I do not see a pot.'

'I come here to contemplate,' I repeat.

'Where is your husband?'

'No more.'

'Who do you live with?'

'Oh, all sorts. The palace is huge and so is my family.'

'Palace? Where are you from?'

'I am from Elangai, the great island country south of here, across the sea. My brother is the king. I'm visiting my mother-in-law, who is the head of her clan in the forest west to the river.'

'How strange in a woman,' she says.

'Strange?'

'Being head of a clan.'

'She would find you as strange as you find her.'

Sitai

I sometimes like to imagine a situation in which I have the power to help my husband who is in grave danger. I ask myself testing questions. For example, I imagine him being attacked by a lion or a jackal, the creature's dripping fangs fastened around his leg or his arm. Raman, bleeding and faint, feebly cries out, 'Help.'

I am but twenty yards away, and even to my ears, his voice is barely audible. In moments I will lose him. Do I run to his rescue? Or do I stand there and scream for help? Is screaming less becoming of a woman than running? Or do I simply pray to the gods to send him help? Surely praying hard in one's head is the most proper way. A woman shouldn't run. Saris are fashioned so that they encircle one's feet, round and round like leg irons, preventing one from walking too fast or running.

You have to hitch the sari higher, expose your calves, to get anywhere quickly. Princesses never run for their lives. Instead, they martyr themselves. Fisherwomen in my home town hitch up their saris to their knees to walk the long distance from the sea to the marketplace quickly. They are known for their immoral ways. They sell more than fish. Fishwives scream when somebody tries to take more fish than their coin's worth. Princesses do not scream. But what we can do well is pray. We stand still. We turn our minds to the almighty presence. There is no need to make a sound. There is no need to expose one's flesh and lose one's dignity by running. There is no

danger of tripping and falling and injuring one's delicate limbs. We are useless against the lion in any case. Or the jackal. We are not capable of brave rescues. If a brave man is at hand, a brave brother-in-law, trained in all aspects of weaponry and hunting and protecting the innocent, then we send him. We are to wait and pray.

When Raman went after the deer and I stayed within Lakshmanan's circle, I chose to believe his dying cries. He is dead, I told myself, and so my journey now is a pilgrimage of mourning. I realize I have been coveting my release from Raman all my life, even in the form of his death. For I have known he is my mate since memory began. I was brought up as his future bride. And I would be his permanent widow, unless, of course, Lakshmanan marries me.

Surpanakai

Once again, it is the man who fills my eyes as he fills the pot. I wonder why the girl has stopped coming to the river. Strange as she was, I was getting to know her. But I watch the man's smooth back, bending, beading perspiration, and I am content. I sit in different spots, under a leafy balsam, beside a mulberry bush, on a tree stump, a rock by the river, hoping our eyes would meet. He never once looks in my direction, no matter where I sit. I think, surely he is constantly aware of me, as he never misses avoiding me. Does he think his chastity is a treasure, that he must protect it from me? Does he think I'm a plunderer? Then

I realize I have a good reason to interrupt him. The girl, Sitai. One could not find a more neutral topic. So the next day, I wait once again and approach him as he crouches by the flowing river. As I advance, he stares intently at the water, like a hawk looking for a flitting fish.

'Where is the woman?' I ask him.

'She won't come here from now on,' he says.

'She is a curious creature.'

'She will remain uncorrupted by your alien mind.'

'Why do you not look at me when we speak?' I ask.

Then, almost involuntarily, as though his eyelids are being pulled by another's fingers, his gaze turns and stops at my breasts. His eyes do not rise to meet mine.

'Immodest woman,' he cries, dropping the pot.

These northerners are always spilling their water at the sight of my breasts.

Sitai

My husband's death presses upon me. Or, I should say, the expectation of his death. He is so great, so perfect, so loved by everybody, that he seems too good to be true. I am always on tenterhooks. Every time I say to him 'I'll see you soon,' it seems a lie. The words, pregnant on my tongue, are, 'I shall not see you again.' It seems as though he can hear the unuttered words. He always leaves with a wry half-smile. And every time he returns, the expression he has for me is of bemusement, a 'Now what?'

After the upheaval of parting and the mourning

thereafter of each other's absence, we are together again, and all is well, but how could it be? We have already begun mourning for each other's absence, each other's death. How can we resurrect each other to life once again? But somehow, we do. Till the time for parting arrives again. And thus it goes on and on. The agony of the eternal bind between man and woman.

Lakshmanan, I know, does not understand this. He is jealous of our absorption in each other. He loves his brother beyond anything, more than his wife whom he has left behind, and his mother, his father, his stepmothers, his other brothers, his gods and goddesses. More than even his own life. He knows Raman loves him too, above everything. But Raman loves me equally, and his father, his mother, his stepmothers, his other brothers, his people. Above all, his people.

'Banished?' The strange nude woman who is so unexpectedly intelligent, like a man almost, asks me. 'Your husband and yourself and his brother are banished?

'No,' I say. 'My husband is the only one banished. I followed him because I am his wife, and his brother followed us because he is devoted to him.'

'Why? Do the people hate him? And the king and the queen cannot abide his presence?'

'No, the people love him. His father loves him. And his mother. Even his stepmother who demanded that he abdicate the throne and banish himself. But she loves her own son a little bit more and wanted him to be king.'

'And the old king had to accept this wish?'

'Yes. You see, in a battle twenty years ago, his third wife was his charioteer. She was responsible for his victory. That is how he attained this great kingdom and wealth. He then granted her three boons. She deferred them, till the time the king was about to hand the crown to Raman. She claimed her boons, and the king had to grant them.'

Instead of commiserating with our situation, the strange southern woman says, 'A charioteer. In a battle! How very clever she must be. Her demands do not seem unreasonable. After all, she won the king his kingdom.'

'Yes, but to banish a much-loved prince, to break his father's heart?'

'We cannot know her reasons, or what was on her mind. I am sure she would sound very reasonable when we hear what she has to say.'

'You have an uncommon way of looking at things.'

'Do I? I suppose I do to one such as you.'

So what then, to one such as her, is the common way of looking at things? Before I can find out, Lakshmanan's leg heals.

'I am happy to continue to fetch water,' I tell him.

'You must not exert yourself for a moment longer than necessary,' he says.

'I am happy for this opportunity to relieve you of one of your burdens.'

'I absolutely insist on carrying on this duty. You must rest, mother.'

It seems to me that he is a little too eager to resume

this duty of his, considering how he detests the woman's presence at the river.

Surpanakai

The night after I first speak to Lakshmanan, I have a vivid dream. I am lying on a rock by the river, but the rock feels like a bed of rose petals. There are ants crawling over my feet. Small, benign black ants. I hardly feel them at first, then I feel them creeping over my skin, and the feeling intensifies till the ants become the large red ants that sting like bees. I begin to fear the pain of the stings, but then the fear is replaced by a languor that spreads from my feet and up my legs, along the inside of my thighs. Suddenly, in place of the ants, I feel a tongue, giving me pleasure of such intensity that is almost pain. The tongue belongs to Lakshmanan, rubbing and moving across my skin.

I wake and make my way to the river to wait for him.

My mind is a beehive, my desire a thousand buzzing bees. When he comes to the river, I go to him. Finally, he looks into my eyes and, with a moan, falls upon my breasts. Our lovemaking seems a continuation of my dream, except there are no ants. I grow intoxicated as I taste, then feast upon his youth, and he fills me, sates me. My eyes grow drowsy and I close them for a moment. When I open them again, he is gone. But I know it wasn't a dream, for there are telltale signs, like the powdery crumbs left by black ants when they devour a ball of jaggery.

Sitai

Lakshmanan comes back wild-eyed and dishevelled from his trip to the river. 'Did a black bear slap your face?' I ask him.

Truly, one side of his face is red, as though about to form a welt. 'No,' he says. He hums and haws. Then he says, 'Will you go to the river from tomorrow? I have to gather more wood to make arrows. Game is getting scarce as the winter approaches.'

'But we only eat animals that are already dying.'

'Forgive me, mother. I misspoke. What I meant to say is that I need to make baskets to store berries for the winter, and perhaps to sell at the edge of the forest, for any travellers that don't mind giving a coin for a basket woven by a prince.'

'Of course,' I say. I know his confusion must have something to do with the woman, Surpanakai.

We spend the rest of the evening quietly, each alone with our thoughts, and it gives me respite to speculate on what must have happened to Lakshmanan at the river. Usually, I spend my evenings imagining all sorts of agonizing and trivial deaths for my dear husband, who still hasn't returned from the grove of the hermits. I cannot help but think of them as a coven of witches, conspiring to keep him away and darken my mind with such foreboding and worry.

It seems that ever since I met the witch, the native

woman, the binds between Raman and me are twisting and twisting. Sometimes this tension threatens to snap them.

If I could occupy myself with something or the other, I wouldn't have to wrestle with these grim thoughts all the time. Oh, how I wish for a band of musicians, jesters, the reassuring talk of family women. Oh, for a good storyteller, soothing rich food, some silk shawls, some puffed rice, some singular entertainment father used to think up on a whim – six prancing elephants, seven pigeon shooters, eight gem-encrusted umbrellas set on a dizzying spin. Thus, I soothe myself to sleep with these fantasies.

Lakshmanan's discomfort gives me amusement. It makes me think kindly of the woman. Here is an opportunity to relieve my tired brain of its obsession with my husband's demise. I will converse with the woman, no matter how she revolts me with her strange culture, her bold statements, her impolite queries and her forward manner. And I shall try not to stare at her breasts as she speaks of mountains and rivers and men.

Surpanakai

Sitai comes every day and sits with me an hour before filling the pot. She is sweet and seems helpless. Doe Eyes, I start to call her. It makes her smile, and if there is a thorn hidden in the compliment, she doesn't appear to notice it.

Each day she grows a little more melancholic. The gloom inside her saturating her skin, circling her eyes,

stealing her bloom of youth. I want to ask her why Lakshmanan doesn't return to the river, to me, but her melancholy makes me hold my tongue. I gradually lose interest in the reasons for Lakshmanan's continued absence. He knows where to find me. Instead, the mystery of Sitai's melancholy occupies me.

'Oh nothing,' she says, when I broach it. 'It must be the lack of nourishment. I'm constantly hungry.'

Her appetite, I think, would return with her husband. She is lovelorn, I imagine, and feel kindly towards her.

'I shall cook the haunch of a deer for you,' I tell her. 'Tomorrow. I will stew it long and slow in just some water with salt and tippili. All the marrow from the thigh bone will restore your humours and your strength.'

'You are kind,' she says, her eyes lighting up, but then fading, 'but we only eat animals that are already dying.'

'Dying animals carry all manner of disease. Only vultures eat them.'

Sitai looks appalled. 'Maybe I've been eating too many dying animals; they have poisoned me, hence I'm so unhappy, possessed by evil humours.'

I laugh. 'Only dying animals! Are you sure your husband and brother-in-law have been telling you the truth?'

'They never utter a lie.'

'Why, are they superhuman?'

'Many consider them to be. Even grand old sages worship them. My husband is said to be touched by a divine hand.'

'I have a brother, the ruler of Elangai, who is touched by the dark hand of divinity. He can fly. He can play the veenai better than Saraswati. He cannot be killed by a god, demon or a wild beast. Give me an account of your husband's attributes.'

'He is righteous, moral, and is a supreme marksman. He is just a man, but his morality emanates from him.'

I cannot help but ask, 'Is the brother Lakshmanan also moral?'

'Lakshmanan is singularly devoted to Raman. He has left his wife and his parents, and taken a vow of chastity to remain completely dedicated to his brother.'

I lose my composure. 'You fool,' I cry. 'You have little understanding and great prejudice. Your men take you for a simpleton.'

'What would you know? You haven't even met my husband. You do not know him.'

'If he is anything like his brother, then believe me, he is of mortal flesh.'

'You do not know Lakshmanan at all. He is straight as an arrow. He will not touch another woman while he has sworn devotion to his brother.'

'I have seen all the parts of him that bend and straighten. And believe me, there was no room in his head for thoughts of his brother while he was with me.'

'That is enough,' she cries, and scrambles to her feet. 'Curb your evil tongue. Some powerful demon has sent you to corrupt my mind, to plot against my husband.'

I laugh at Sitai's wretched innocence.