Women Writers and Publishers in South Asia

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In 1998 when Manjula Padmanabhan won the Onassis International Cultural Prize (which carries a cash award of US$250,000) for her play *Harvest*, the first publisher to step forward with an offer to publish her work was our small feminist press “Kali for Women”. Kali had earlier published a collection of Padmanabhan’s short stories and in both instances, a number of mainstream publishers had been doubtful of the wisdom of these enterprises for short stories and plays are not hot sellers in the world of publishing. Today, Manjula Padmanabhan is a well known author, sought after by many publishers in India and outside. In this she is not alone: increasingly, in South Asia, women writers are claiming their rightful place alongside male writers, both widening and enriching the related fields of writing and publishing.

As recently as 20 years ago, this would not have been the case. Publishing had, for many years, remained a ‘gentlemen’s profession’. Not only were many publishing houses run by men, but most of their writers too were men, and indeed the subjects they chose to write about were mostly ‘male’. ‘Women’s issues’ as they were known then (and today we know these to be issues that affect everyone, women and men), were seen to be rather ‘soft’ subjects, and certainly not serious enough to merit being put into books. Thus, sociological analyses of institutions such as the family did not make even a passing reference to gender and most historical studies made it seem as if men were the only people who had ever existed on the globe.

Today, virtually every publisher who would like to be seen as a ‘serious’ publisher has a list of books by and about women. Many of the most successful authors internationally are women and this is the case in South Asia as well. Indeed when Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*, and Manjula Padmanabhan won the Onassis International Cultural Prize for her play *Harvest*, they were joining an established list of writers, some of whom may not have won prizes, but are well known nonetheless. Today most publishers will agree that women’s books-whether in the field of fiction or non-fiction-sell better and faster than most others on their lists.

**Women’s Publishing Houses**

Much of the impetus for such change was provided by the growth and development of women’s publishing houses and the entry of women into the world of publishing. In most places feminist or women’s publishing houses came up in the last quarter century or so mainly in response to the demands and needs of women’s movements. The pioneers who set up such publishing houses were women from within women’s movements who felt the need to build a knowledge base on the issues that were being discussed, to provide a space to women who were writing, and to reflect, in some ways, what was going on in the movement.

A second impetus for the entry of women authors—mainly academics—into the world of publishing came about as a result of the setting up of women’s studies courses and institutes. India is known to have been one of the pioneers in this for it was one of the earliest countries to institute women’s studies as a discipline. Although very few colleges and universities actually offer courses in women’s studies even today, there is nevertheless a fair amount of research work, much of which now finds its way into print. Most of the mainstream disciplines have had to open up to the interventions of women scholars working on gender and names such as Bina Agarwal, Nirmala Banerjee, Utsa Patnaik, J ayati Ghosh (economists), or Uma Chakravarti, Tanika Sarkar, Kumari J ayawardene, Nighat Said Khan, Kumkum Sangari (historians), Nivedita Menon, Zoya Hasan (political scientists) and others who work in one or more disciplines, are well known not only in South Asia but the world over.

These and other writers have been published both by women’s publishing houses and by others. In India the year 1984 saw the setting up of the first feminist publishing house in the country, “Kali for Women”. Focusing on southern writers, Kali began to publish both academic and trade books, as well as pamphlets etc., for use by women’s groups. This proved to be a successful mix and today the publishing house brings out some 12-15 books a year. The eighties were a time when women’s movements in Asian countries were at their height and this was reflected in the growth of women’s publishing houses in different countries. Shortly after Kali was set up, three women’s groups in Pakistan, Simorgh in Lahore, Shirkat Gah in Karachi and Lahore and ASR, also in Lahore, took on the task of publishing different kinds of books by women. Between them, they produce fiction, research studies, reports, primers, pamphlets etc. In India, Kali was followed by a women’s bookstore in Bangalore, Streelekha, and later by a small women’s imprint, Stree, based in Calcutta.

Although small in number, this handful of houses have made a major contribution by enabling the voices of women to be heard. Initially, they built upon the work already being done by women’s groups and produced books and pamphlets on issues of concern to women’s movements. But gradually, they also began to expand on this field and brought in women’s creative writing, as well as general books. Both Kali and Simorgh, for example, have begun publishing reprints of books by women, classics which were published in the early part of the last century. In the field of fiction they concentrated on translations from South Asian languages into English, which is one of the main publishing languages of the subcontinent. Writers like Ismat Chughtai—whose work was censored by the British—Quratulain Hyder, Khadija Mastur, Zohra Segal, Mahashveta Devi, and a younger group with names such as Geetanjali Shree, Anita Agnihotri, Bulbul Sharma, and many others were published by women’s publishing houses and became known through their work.
The world

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vened in the debate on women. Such knowledge has helped
ways in which feminist writers and publishers have inter-
of knowledge by and about women has been one of the key
add up to much. But there is little doubt that their contribu-
tion has been significant. The production and dissemination of
knowledge by and about women has been one of the key
when they began. Were they sure, they were
asked, that the activity they had undertaken was a sustain-
able one? Were there enough subjects to write about? Enough
women who could write on these? Did they really believe
they could publish on such a ‘limited’ area, and that too, in-
definitely? Was there a market for such books? While wom-
men’s publishers had little doubt about the sustainability of
their enterprise, and about the fact that a rich seam of wom-
en’s writing existed, what they were perhaps unaware of,
was the amount of effort they would have to put into making
women feel confident of their writing and the issues they
were concerned with. In this sense, women’s publishing can
quite aptly be called a development activity: developing not
only a base of knowledge on and by women, but also work-
ing with women writers to develop their confidence and of-
ten their capabilities, and, in the process, helping to educate
readers about the importance of such writing.

The Dilemmas of Small Publishers

In the field of publishing as elsewhere, it is the smaller, more
adventurous actors who take all the risks and put in all the
work to develop a particular area and market, and once the
groundwork is done, the big, mainstream businesses step in
to cream off the profits. Feminist and women’s publishers
are no exception to this time-tested tradition and when the
time came for the big publishers to move in, they brought with
them, as they always do, all the things that women writ-
ers had been looking for: stability, acceptability, a mythical
‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’, as well as a presence alongside
other, more ‘respected’ writers, financial security and a wid-
er reach. For most writers this was not something they could
turn their backs on—for who would not want to be able to
reach a wider audience, or to earn more money? Nor could
women’s publishing houses—now being rapidly abandoned
as the authors they had struggled to bring to public notice
made their way to what they saw as the better option—ar-
gue with this. They saw, and sympathised with the need for
authors to be better known. They realized the importance,
for women, to be seen as part of the mainstream. After all,
this was the very thing they had been struggling for.

Today, as more and more authors begin to move to the
larger houses, feminist publishers are faced with a peculiar
situation. In some ways, this very ‘flight’ marks the success
of their efforts to find a place in the sun for women writers,
but they see too, how this ‘success’ has helped strengthen
the very structures of patriarchy that they set out to fight —
mainly the market and the mainstream, both controlled and
defined by men. Providing greater choice for women writers
in terms of publishing was exactly what women’s publishers
set out to do. In this they were successful, and women writ-
ers now increasingly exercise that choice by going with the
mainstream.

Many women’s publishers have learnt, however, that the
task of making a space for women’s writing does not end
once a few writers become well known, for its boundaries
are not so limited or narrow. Once the field of women’s writ-
ing has opened up, there will always be new writers to be
discovered, new vistas to be explored. Indeed, after the ini-
tial disappointment at losing writers they had worked hard
to promote, women publishers began to understand that the
activity they were engaged in was a process—one in which
they would continue to perform the task of finding new writ-
ers and subjects and working to develop a market for their
work. And if even this could be achieved, their contribution
would not have been in vain.

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