

THE STRENGTH — OF A — WOMAN

As a child, **MALA MAHESH** loved the stories of her ancestors that her grandparents regaled her with. Inspired by the story of one who was not able to conceive, she wrote her debut book, *Padma*.

She chats with **Shraddha Kamdar** on her approach, the development of the characters, and the climax of the story



As a child, Mala Mahesh loved hearing stories about village life that her grandparents narrated to her. Her grandmother often spoke about an ancestor who endured endless humiliation and harassment because she was unable to conceive. Mala felt it was unfair to blame a person for a problem beyond her control. And that inspired her to pen a story imagining the pain and isolation of such women and the impact the situation had on their lives.

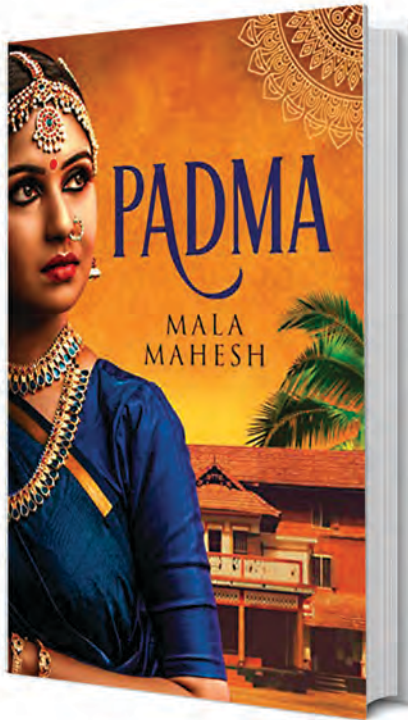
The result? Her first book, the captivating *Padma*, which intersects the stories of Padma and her descendent Naina, based, respectively, in the early 1900s in Manilkara, Kerala, and in modern-day Mumbai. Both face a similar situation in one sensitive matter – the inability to conceive. The book takes us on a journey with these two incredible women across different time periods and situations.

This intersection was not something the author had planned on; it came to her during her research. She had initially wanted to write a story set in the early 1900s in Kerala, about a character named Padma and her struggles with infertility. She was surprised to find that the taboo surrounding infertility still exists globally. That's where Naina's character stemmed from. Besides infertility, Mala touches upon relevant themes such as patriarchy and gender inequality as well. >

When we catch up with Mala over coffee to discuss the ethos behind the subject, her approach to the narrative and the need to juxtapose the stories of the two women to create a contemporary setting, she is upfront about what she was trying to do. “Even today, there are incidents steeped in patriarchy and gender inequality,” she points out. “While societal attitudes are changing, it’s not fast enough or widespread enough to reach every section of society. We hear of so many instances of abuse, neglect and alienation of such hapless women within our own circle of friends, relations or neighbours, and the consequent depression they often feel, that there is a need to highlight these factual cases.”

The thought behind her book might have been clear, but she needed to present her story in a manner palatable to fiction readers.

“I created Padma’s character from a mixture of personalities of my ancestors; some of these women were homebound yet alert, intelligent, and resourceful,” she says. Having listened to several anecdotes about their wisdom and presence of mind that saved the day and the family, she knew her character had to display those very traits. “The strong, loving character of Seshadhri, Padma’s husband, was inspired by my grandfather. He was big built, imposing and a little terrifying when he got angry. He was also an



Fast Five

A BOOK YOU KEEP GOING BACK TO

Amar Chitra Katha comics and *Where The Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls

YOUR FAVOURITE AUTHOR

Ken Follet

YOUR GO-TO BOOK FOR INSPIRATION

Who Moved My Cheese? by Spencer Johnson

A QUOTE YOU OFTEN USE

“There’s no bigger fool than they who lie to themselves.”

WHAT YOU ARE CURRENTLY READING

The Magicians of Mazda By Ashwin Sanghi

affectionate and generous person, who had his own way of showing love and concern, especially for my grandmother,” she recalls fondly.

Thanks to her grandparents’ excellent storytelling skills, Mala had no problems creating the setting she had envisioned. “I was able to recollect tiny details of their village lifestyle,” she smiles.

“Those nuggets of valuable information helped in the description of the traditional customs and settings I have mentioned.” She also had a list of topics for research and further reading, such as

Kerala history, the culture and customs of Tamil Brahmins, the migration of the Iyers from Kerala, the architectural and building styles of Kerala homes, and the political and social environment. “I visited libraries and newspaper archives and extensively surfed the net for reference books, images and old articles,” she reveals of her process. “I also cross checked certain legal terms, medical procedures, psychological references and architectural details with my children, cousins and a few friends.”

At some point during the process, Mala found it necessary to contextualise Padma’s tale with that of Naina, the modern-day character she invented. “There are subtle similarities and differences in their characters, psyches and in the way they react to situations. Both are victims of patriarchy and face societal pressure typical of their respective time period. To bring out their pain, struggles and innermost fears, I wrote a plot interweaving their stories, using a common connection as a catalyst for the climax,” the author tells us.

Always inspired by books and people, the first-time author hopes that her book creates awareness about and empathy for those facing the issue of infertility. “Whenever we understand a person, kindness follows. Overall, this book is about womanhood, about standing up for yourself, and finding what you want with courage and honesty,” she concludes. **F**

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