

'A woman's worth is judged on her capacity to bear children'

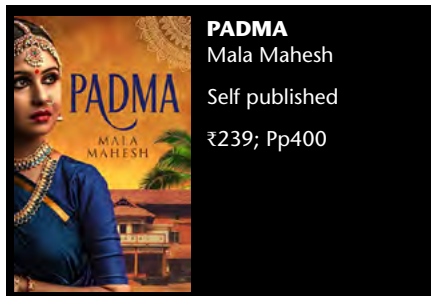
Infertility – an often-taboo subject that caused untold humiliation to those impacted, is explored in this novel by Mala Mahesh, set in two different eras. Excerpts from an e-mail interview to Suman Tarafdar.

Why did you choose to write on infertility?

I always loved hearing my grandparents talk about their lives in the villages in Kerala. One story that stayed in my mind was about a woman, my ancestor, who endured endless humiliation and harassment because she could not conceive and was targeted by her family, just for this one reason. From those times to now, a woman's worth is judged on her capacity to bear children. This inspired me to write a story exploring and understanding the pain and isolation these women face and the impact it would have on their lives and their families.

Traditional societies have highly valued the rite of child bearing. How challenging was life for women who could not have children?

The problem of infertility could lie with the woman, the man or with both. However, most men refuse to accept that fact. Hence, it was always easy to blame and shame the woman for the problem. Since people lived in a large joint family during those times, it would have been painful for her to watch other daughters and daughters-in-law being pampered and showered with love when they conceived. The family's insensitivity would have been so hard to cope, leading to further isolation and helplessness in her



own home, her loneliness possibly leading to serious mental health problems, which could have gone undiagnosed and untreated.

Are attitudes changing in modern times?

The lack of understanding, myths surrounding infertility, and the resultant loneliness and pain of those suffering still exist today, as they did many decades ago. People do not realise that difficulties related to childbirth are a common occurrence, so few go for testing. If they get tested, many of them could get treated with simple treatments. The good news is that the changes may be slow, but it's happening.

What are the differences between Padma's and Naina's Times – in terms of societal attitudes, resources, technology, laws etc?

Interestingly, though the resources, laws and technology have progressed significantly in Naina's time compared to Padma's, societal attitudes seem to not have shifted much. The taboos surrounding infertility continue to be prevalent even today. Regarding treatments, there are procedures in ayurveda, while modern medical science has options like Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) and In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF). Adoption is another holistic way to solve the problem for a childless couple, and this solution is also more accepted in Naina's times compared to Padma's. Surrogacy is an available option for such couples. ♦

NEW RELEASES



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Debarati Mukhopadhyay
HarperCollins
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₹499; Pp336

Delving into India's past is a favourite pastime for many at the moment. Fans of historical fiction can revel in this novel,

translated from Bengali by Arunava Sinha, set in the late 19th-century Bengal, where the trajectories of a young widow and a shy musician intersect. Notably, the cast of characters has a quite a known names such as Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, Rabindranath Tagore and Kadambini Ganguly. Fast-paced, mired in love, treachery and loss, it's a unique peek into the complex colonial era in Bengal.



THE BLUE BOOK:
A Writer's Journal
Amitava Kumar
HarperCollins
(paperback)
₹699; Pp176

A world of words of watercolours enmeshed together, this is the author's look-back into the Covid-induced times that the planet

went through. A journal of the pandemic, a memory book if you like, it looks at both the horrors, lonely deaths, shuttered lives, separation anxieties as well as love in the face of tremendous tragedies, of a hope beyond hope. A unique amalgamation of photos, paintings, postcards, poetry – remembrances all that capture the times and offer lessons for those willing to listen.