



Sahitya Akademi

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# meet the author

Mridula Garg



*"I am thankful that I am not a midnight child. I have enough memories of the darker half of the night; earliest of Quit India Movement of 1942. My novel, Anitya (Anitya: Halfway to Nowhere) came out of the dilemmas and dissensions underlining our Independence movements."*  
*"The credo, which helped me weather many a storm was simple. When in doubt, I asked myself, what would I do if it were the last day of my life? It was an infallible way of separating the essential from the non-essential and it prevented me from getting swamped by societal injunctions. It also allowed me to see the funny side of adversity and injustice. When chance took away the choices and the last day of life became irrelevant, I fell back on satire. I knew if I could laugh at myself and at the powers that be, divine or otherwise, I could continue to write. I did."*

**Mridula Garg**



Receiving Vyas Sanman from Smt. Sheila Dikshit, C.M., Delhi, 2005

**M**ridula Garg has done creative writing in Hindi since 1972 with a couple of popular satirical columns thrown in. She had a fair share of controversy but managed to win acclaim for her commitment to the honesty of the written word. Her growth as a non-conformist writer can be traced partly to her upbringing and partly to her confrontation with the literary establishment. She did not suffer the usual deprivations of a girl child; three of the five sisters becoming eminent writers. Mridula was not a robust child, which meant missing school, three consecutive years once; games and having friends. It pushed her from action to reflection, from where it was a short step to writing. Thanks to her father, who believed that anyone on the brink of death should read the masters, she read classics of Tolstoy,

Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Henry James, Jainendra and Rabindranath Tagore and popular works of Somerset Maugham, Oscar Wilde, Graham Greene, P.G.Wodehouse, Jane Austen etc instead of text books at an early age. It made her lose the fear of eminence; she could look the most famous man in the eye and discuss his work candidly. Her mother was a chronic invalid, neither a career woman nor a



Reading in Berlin, Germany, 1993



Reading in Yamagata, Japan, 2003

caring householder or mother but an avid reader of literature. Garg cherished her for being different, which later helped her create non-stereotypical women characters. If challenge is the force behind creativity, she was well-provided. Each bout of criticism by patriarchic critics gave her fresh reasons to write in her inimitable style. One of her earliest stories *Avkaash* (*A Few Hours*, 1972) in which a woman having an extra-marital affair says, all she wants is a vacation, was the first to earn their ire. A mother of two and an affair, impossible in India, they said. As if children were amulets against lust! A critic reviewing *Daffodils on Fire* in English said, "Aversion, an understated story about a woman

who has quietly gone mad and refuses to acknowledge the presence of her retired husband is Garg at her best." A classic case of killing with kindness! The woman was anything but mad. Poised and competent, she did not communicate with her husband because she did not care to. Being misread deepened her sense of the absurd and honed her satirical skills, which she used with searing frankness in her later novels and stories.

She came to be known as much for the audacity of her themes as the lyricism of her style. She had broken new ground with form and content in her early stories like *Kitni Qaiden*, *Hari Bindi* (*A Date with Me*), *Daffodils Jal Rahe Hain* (*Daffodils on Fire*) and novels *Uske Hisse ki Dhoop* (*A Touch of Sun*) and *Chittacobra* (*Chittacobra*) in the seventies. The diversity of her themes varied from suspension of female guilt in *A Touch of Sun* and *Chittacobra*; the throttling hold of the joint family in *Vanshaj*; the passionate interplay between personal and political turmoil in *Anitya* (*Halfway to Nowhere*); the conflict between creative genius and human emotions in *Main Aur Main*; the male/female confrontation and its final resolution in the concept of ardhnaris'vara in *Kathgulab* (*Country of Goodbyes*) to the auto-fiction set in the age of



Keynote address at UN Colloquium of Women at IOWA, 1990

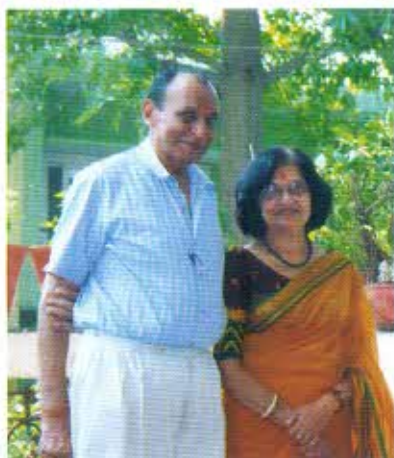


Sons Ashish and Shashank, 1991

innocence of our nation, in the latest *Miljul Man*.

It is fair to say that along with Krishna Baldev Vaid and Nirmal Verma, Mridula Garg has liberated the Hindi novel from the shackles of romanticism and created a space for irony in it. Acharya Hazari Prasad defined the modern novel as a fluid, ever evolving genre. This free-wheeling use of the genre is amply demonstrated in Garg's novels and it has reached its peak in the recently published novel, *Miljul Man*. The success of her literary craftsmanship lies in that her novels are usually remembered as distinct entities in their totality and not for certain characters, locations or historical time frames. In other words, the work acquires a distinct persona and more or less becomes the chief protagonist.

Memory plays a significant role in Garg's novels. She expects her reader to have a long memory as frequent flashbacks make



With husband Anand, 2004

forays into the personal and collective past, flowing in a stream of consciousness to the present. In the words of Manohar Shyam Joshi, "Mridula does not belong to any tradition, a word so dear to Hindi critics. She has a world-view and style of her own, which steers clear of Marxist doctrine, mythological throwback, feminist discourse, regional culture fix, in short of all possible stereotypes. She is modern but not in the Western sense, as her middle class milieu has a space for parents, siblings and domestic servants. But since these familiar characters are never stereotypical, the reader is constantly assailed by the



With grandchildren,  
Shringi and Mrigank, 2007

unfamiliar and the unpredictable." Significantly, no critic has ever held any of her novels to be influenced by any earlier work of Hindi or Western languages.

Garg's novels are unique in the way they juxtapose the personal and political in elucidating Sartre's axiom, 'I am my choices.' The protagonists meander in a maze of choices, taking self-destructive paths so that though they aspire and struggle for freedom, they end up incarcerated in increasingly narrower spaces. Ironically each has only himself to blame since he was the one who made the choice.

Garg's stories are memorable because of their geographical range; vast variety of social sections exposed; a mix of lyricism and irony in the language and intriguing characterization. But they hold the reader in thrall



With writer sister Manjul Bhagat, 1976

because their sensibility and sensitivity are hallmarks of a new way of storytelling.

She has traveled extensively in Europe including Russia,

Germany, Italy, many parts of USA, the U.N Colloquium for Women and Japan on the invitation of their Universities and other Literary and Cultural Forums to lecture on literary theory and to read from her works.

The lesson one learns from Garg's confrontation with the real, the ethereal and the demonic world is that freedom of choice, though a hard taskmaster is truly exhilarating. Once you get used to exercising choice, you can even create choices out of nothing. In the words of Bhagwan Singh, "Garg probes the bleak darkness within us ruthlessly as she journeys from one depth to another."

## A Select Bibliography

### Novels

- ◆ *Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop* National Publishing House and Rajkamal Prakashan 1975
- ◆ *Vanshaj* National Publishing House 1976
- ◆ *Chittacobra* National Publishing House 1979
- ◆ *Anitya* National Publishing House 1980
- ◆ *Main Aur Main* National Publishing House and Rajkamal Prakashan 1984
- ◆ *Kathgulab* Bhartiya Gyanpeeth 1996
- ◆ *Miljul Man* Samyik Prakashan 2009
- ◆ *Samagam* Samyik Prakashan 1996
- ◆ *Mere Desh Ki Mitti, Aha* National Publishing House 2001
- ◆ *Sangati-Visangti* (in 2 Vol.) National Publishing House 2004
- ◆ *Joote ka Jodh Gobhi ka Todh* Penguin Books India 2006
- ◆ *Chhat Par Dastak* Remadhav Publications 2006
- ◆ *Das Pritinidhi Kahaniyaan* Kitabghar 2008
- ◆ *Yadgari Kahaniyan* Hindi Pocket Books 2009

### Short Story Collections (Hindi)

- ◆ *Kitni Qaiden* Indraprastha Prakashan 1975
- ◆ *Tukra-Tukra Aadmi* National Publishing House 1976
- ◆ *Daffodil Jal Rahe Hain* National Publishing House 1978
- ◆ *Glacier Se* Prabhat Prakashan 1980
- ◆ *Urf Sam* Rajkamal Prakashan 1986
- ◆ *Shahar Ke Naam* Bhartiya Gyanpeeth 1990
- ◆ *Charchil Kahaniyan* Samyik Prakashan 1993



With writer sister Achla Bansal, 2003

## Plays (Hindi)

- ◆ *Ek Aur Ajnabi* National Publishing House 1978
- ◆ *Jadoo Ka Kaleen* Rajkamal Prakashan 1993
- ◆ *Teen Qaiden* (three plays) Indraprastha Prakashan 1995
- ◆ *Sam Dam Dand Bhed* Rajkamal Prakashan 2011

## Essay Collections (Hindi)

- ◆ *Rang-Dhang* Prabhat Prakashan 1995
- ◆ *Chukte Nahin Sawaal* Samyik Prakashan 1999
- ◆ *Kuchh Atke Kuchh Bhatke* Penguin Books India 2006
- ◆ *Kar Lenge Sab Hazam* Samyik Prakashan 2007
- ◆ *Khed Nahin Hai* Kitabghar 2009
- ◆ *Mere Sakshatkar* Kitabghar 2010

## Novels (English, translated from Hindi)

- ◆ *A Touch of Sun* 1978

- ◆ *Chittacobra* 1999
- ◆ *Country of Goodbyes* 2003
- ◆ *Anitya: Halfway to Nowhere* 2010

## Short Story Collections (English)

- ◆ *Daffodils on Fire* Books India International 1990
- ◆ "The Morning After" in *Cosmopolis*, Cleis Press, U.S.A. 1990
- ◆ "Big Apple, Black Apple" in *Yuvkatha*, Katha 2000
- ◆ "Negation" in *Aashaa* Books India Book Shelf, London 2003
- ◆ "Tree of the Century" in *Inner Line* Zubaan 2006
- ◆ "The Dance of Mira" in *Gourmet Garam Masala* Skrev Press London 2008

## Forthcoming Works

- ◆ Kriti aur Kritikal
- ◆ Sahitya men Manosandhan
- ◆ Word as Censor
- ◆ Cages

## Chronology

- 1938 : Born at Kolkata.
- 1960 : Did Masters in Economics from Delhi School of Economics.
- 1960-63 : Lecturer in Economics in I.P. and Jankidevi Colleges, Delhi.
- 1963 : Married Anand Prakash Garg and went to live in Bihar.
- 1965 : First son Ashish born.
- 1967 : Second son Shashank born.
- 1970-74 : Started and ran Primary School with English, Hindi and Kannada languages in Bagalkot, Karnataka.
- 1972 : First Story *Rukavat* published in Sarika magazine.
- 1975 : First novel *Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop* published.
- 1975 : Maharaja Veersingh Award by M.P. Sahitya Parishad to *Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop*.
- 1978 : First Prize of AIR to Play *Ek Aur Ajnabi*.
- 1988 : Guest to Conference on Feminist Discourse in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia.
- 1988 : Awarded Sahityakar Samman by Hindi Academy, Delhi
- 1990 : Research Associate at University of California at Berkeley, USA.
- 1990 : Keynote speaker at U.N. Colloquium of Women, Iowa, USA
- 1991 : Lectured and Read in Universities of Boston, Urbana Champaign, Virginia and San Francisco, USA.
- 1993 : Invited to Interlit-3 in Germany.
- 1993 : Seth Govind Das Award for the play *Jadoo ka Kaleen* by M.P. Sahitya Parishad.
- 2001 : Awarded Sahitya Bhushan by U.P. Hindi Sansthan.
- 2002 : *Kitni Qaiden* play performed in NSD Rang Mahotsava, Delhi.
- 2003 : Invited to Lecture and Read from Literary works in Japan.
- 2004 : Vyas Samman to novel *Kathgulab*.
- 2009 : Spandan Shikhar Samman
- 2009 : Play based on *Kathgulab* staged in NSD Rang Mahotsava, Delhi
- 2012 : Invited to Moscow, Icosal-10 Conference as plenary speaker and to Copenhagen for India Today Copenhagen Tomorrow Literary Meet.