They’ve Got The Power! Indian Feminism and How Women Assert Power in Appachana’s Stories

Occasionally you come across one of those books – a novel, a collection of poems, an anthology – that seems to somehow perfectly encapsulate an entire slice of society. Anjana Appachana’s collection *Incantations and Other Stories* is one of those books, presenting a startlingly comprehensive sweep of women’s struggles and the ways they wrest power in those struggles. Though her stories focus on middle-class women in India, they all resonate powerfully with their frankness and deep, complex emotion. Appachana shows the different options middle-class Indian women have to seize power and control in their own lives against limitations like family expectations and a traditional patriarchy. The women of her stories often are forced to resort to painful methods of wresting control, but there are a few instances where we see the ideal, feminist, democratic ways her women could gain power in their own lives. The stories “Bahu”, “Incantations”, and “Sharmaji and the Diwali Sweets” show women claiming power through means like defying societal gender expectations and violence, and show the complex roles men hold in these struggles for individual and gendered power.

In the book’s second story, “Bahu”, the narrator is a disillusioned wife who describes acceptance of the traditional gendered domestic housewife role as being trapped and relinquishing her personhood. She says that “Each time you... persuade yourself that the
adjustment is necessary to marriage... There won’t be a next time. But there is. You slide into the kind of life that is completely and terribly contrary to everything you believe in” (Appachana 13). Later, she comments that her in-laws and husband “have assumed complete control over my life. I let them” (Appachana 20) and that “Acceptance would mean that I would live this way, always” (Appachana 23). Lisa Lau discusses women’s domestic oppression in Indian literature in her article “Emotional and Domestic Territories: The Positionality of Women as Reflected in the Landscape of the Home in Contemporary South Asian Women's Writings,” and describes just how dispiriting such a home can be: “‘home can, in negative life situations, become a concretisation of human misery: loneliness, rejection, exploitation...’” (Lau 1112). The wife’s struggles illustrate this concept; she shows how succumbing to her in-laws’ and husband’s narrow and unrelenting expectations restrict her voice, personal expression, and activity to the point that she is emotionally and mentally suffering every day. The prescribed housewife role depriv es of her very personhood, demanding that she give up her rights to assert any aspects of her independence and her individuality. Her story also shows how women can be oppressed and deprived of power quietly, subtly, not just on an institutional scale but through enforced, rigid gender expectations in the domestic sphere. The simple act of giving up without a fight, of accepting the household situation and power dynamics, is what allows the narrator’s subjugation.

Before completely breaking free of the restrictive home the narrator attempts to assert some power by slightly pushing back against tradition and assumed patriarchal dominance. When she finds out that her family will be expected to follow tradition and give her husband’s family gifts if she gives birth to a boy, she tells her husband Siddarth’s mother “I’m sure you don’t believe in such old-fashioned customs” (Appachana 18). She then asks “what do my
parents and sisters get for becoming grandparents and aunts?” (Appachana 19). Attempting to discuss the issue with Siddartha, the narrator tells him to “For once listen to me. I will not follow these customs...I stood against the door with my back to it...I won’t let you go out until we can talk about it” (Appachana 19). She subtly critiques the tradition by referring to it as “old-fashioned”, implying that it does not have a place in modern society and that it seems absurd for her in-laws to follow it. Her suggestion that her side of the family should receive equal treatment attempts to equalize the treatment of gender in their society and customs. It is also her personal attempt at telling her in-laws she believes they are treating her unfairly and that the traditional burdens placed on the wife-and-mother are unjust as well. The narrator tries to reclaim some of her power in her relationship with her husband, trying to force him to listen to her and desperately declaring that she will not go along with the tradition nor with his family’s expectations. In this way she explicitly tries to assert herself by going against traditional gender roles, giving herself an equal voice in the marriage rather than submitting to Siddartha and his family’s wishes. These are minor and unsuccessful assertions of power, but they show the narrator’s discontent and horrifying imprisonment in her own home, marriage, and expected gendered role in the family.

The ultimate power move comes only at the end of “Bahu” when the narrator leaves her husband. When she describes this scene, she says that she “told [Siddartha] that I was leaving him...I said, I’ll find a place” (Appachana 25). In response to Siddartha’s pleas she responds only by saying “I have to pack” (Appachana 25); when he tells her “This is the way things are. You have to learn to accept it” and when her mother-in-law asks her if she has prepared the tea, both times she simply replies “No” (Appachana 25-26). When leaving the narrator says that “I did
not say anything to my in-laws. I left that to Siddartha...He said, I’ll wait for you. I shook my head” (Appachana 27). The story’s ending is fairly undramatic, the narrator’s language plain, straightforward, and detached; by this point she has already emotionally removed herself from her marriage and home. The narrator directly asserts herself, stating that she is leaving as a simple fact and being clearly unreceptive to her husband. She ignores his pleas, openly and directly refutes his attempt to reassert her traditional, submissive gender role, and physically rejects his attempt to reassert their bond when she shakes her head. Her rebellion against her role is quiet but unmistakable when she behaves similarly towards her in-laws. In this ending, Appachana demonstrates a form of power in which the woman has to completely distance herself physically and emotionally from oppressive gender expectations in order to regain personhood. It is not enough for the narrator to talk things through with her husband, or to try and question the traditions; to escape, the woman has to leave the situation entirely. Her power rests in her ability to throw off the gendered yoke and to walk away.

Appachana makes it clear in “Bahu” that a large part of the story’s problem was not solely that adherence to traditional gender roles restricted the narrator, but that it was also because Siddartha would not join his wife in her struggle. Lau sums up this issue in her article, making the accusation that “Most of the literature testifies that the men are singularly unwilling to be involved in these battles, find it uncomfortable...to take stances,” and “refuse to adjudicate even when called upon to do so” (Lau 1115). We see such a prominent unwillingness in Siddartha. When the narrator tries to force him to discuss the gift-giving tradition, he responds by first by saying “what is there to talk about?”, “That’s your headache then,” and “Very dramatic” (Appachana 19). When his wife asks him who he agrees with, essentially who’s side he is on, he
says “Whether I agree or not is immaterial... What does it cost you to observe these traditions?” (Appachana 19). The narrator reflects on how badly she needed his help, his “protection”, his empathy (Appachana 20). Siddarth’s responses invalidate and trivialize his wife’s struggles, showing his unwillingness to even recognize that there is a problem so that he does not have to get too intensely or emotionally involved in her oppression. There is no problem for him, so why cause strife in the family by getting involved or causing a fuss? He encourages his wife to ignore her discomfort with the situation and in doing so acts as an agent of her destructive acceptance of her expected role. The narrator literally “call[s] upon” him to help resolve the tensions in the house and for emotional support, but he refuses a part in either case. His passivity ends up being an additional source of stress for the narrator, when had he taken action, taken sides, he could have helped resolve at least some of the narrator’s fight and kept his marriage together. In this way Appachana shows that although the narrator does wield a type of power in the end, the story’s characters could have reached an ultimately more satisfying and fair resolution if Siddarth had listened to his wife and had stood with her.

Another of Appachana’s stories, “Incantations”, presents two different methods of asserting power through the characters of the tragic Sangeeta and the “maiden aunt” Mala Mousi. Sangeeta is subjected to the horrors of repeated rape by her brother-in-law Abhinay, and ultimately the way she takes back control is through violence. Though for a long time she endures the constant rape and terrifying living situation quietly, Sangeeta eventually commits suicide by hanging herself from a fan after killing Abhinay by cutting off his penis (Appachana 104). She “locked the bedroom door, watching and hearing him as he tried to crawl towards it, watching and hearing him collapse” (Appachana 104). In her suicide note, she writes that “I can
hear him dying and I like the sound” (Appachana 105). This is an incredibly horrific and dark form of taking back power that Appachana shows. It is an act of total desperation, and much like the “Bahu” narrator leaving is an act of escape – escaping the rape itself, the fear, the shame. The violence is also how Sangeeta reclaims possession of her body and seizes a single moment of dominance. By killing herself, she ensures that no one will ever rape her again; she also takes full control over her life and body, something she has been prevented from doing because she has to avoid the societal consequences of speaking out about the rape. The other dimension to her actions is how Sangeeta uses her outburst of suppressed power to gain total dominance over Abhinay. He had previously controlled and abused her body; she takes revenge by turning the tables, depriving him of his sex and taking his life. In this moment, she takes ultimate control and asserts ultimate power. We see her further assert and maintain this perverted form of power in how she observes the entire ordeal, watching and listening to Abhinay bleed out slowly rather than killing him in an instant.

Critics approach Sangeeta’s violent power in varying ways, attempting to explain its larger societal causes and what the character becomes through the violence at the end of the story. Stephen Alter references Appachana’s stories and says that “in the case of many prose writers in South Asia, fiction does serve as a voice of discontent and provides the same emotional impact of a protest poem or a play” (Alter 24). This is certainly the case with “Incantations”. In his article “Who’s Afraid of Mala Mousi? Violence and the ‘Family Romance’ in Anjana Appachana’s ‘Incantations’,” Suvir Kaul states that “The revenge fantasy that is encoded in these narratives suggests nothing less than a pervasive despair...[Sangeeta’s] act resonates with this larger lack of faith in the ability of the family or of the organs of the state
to intervene humanely” (Kaul 128). He also claims that the “fundamentally misogynist social sense that rape is in some direct or indirect way to be blamed on the woman raped prevents Sangeeta from retaliating or even talking about it with anyone but Geeti, who is too young and terrified to do anything” (Kaul 126). A book review describes Sangeeta as “a victim unable to escape her curse...The gods did not smile upon her and rescue her, and she did not have the inner resources to help herself” (Pyrros 279). For both of these critics, Sangeeta’s violence is an act of power that only proves the extent of her victimization. Kaul focuses on the institutional and social attitudes that he sees as ultimately responsible for Sangeeta’s actions; unlike her aunt Mala Mousi, he understands her inability to come out about the rape because of intense societal attitudes, judgements, and prejudices. It is not an excuse for weakness, but rather an unfortunate psychological reality of communities that view rape through a misogynistic and patriarchal lens. This view is further compounded by Kaul’s point that Sangeeta could probably not have put much hope in any of the supposed “support” systems around her anyway. He highlights her utter lack of realistic societal support by pointing out that the only person Sangeeta feels she can confide in is her little sister Geeti, a totally unhelpful surrogate. Her violent form of power is terrible and undesirable, but necessary.

Pyrros’s review takes a more introspective and spiritual approach, but seems to speak to a similar lack of resources that would have helped Sangeeta’s mental and emotional wellbeing. “The gods” that could not help her can refer to the literal deities, but also can be interpreted as the larger support systems Kaul references. Sangeeta was “cursed” because from the very beginning, she had no one to turn to and no one to help cultivate her “inner resources” (methods of coping psychologically and emotionally with her trauma); the law would not be able to help
her, she would be disgraced in the community, and her own family would treat the situation as
shameful. Similar to Kaul, Pyrros describes Sangeeta’s violent assertion of power as something
inevitable. Kaul and Pyrros’s evaluations help illuminate and clarify how Appachana is not
necessarily condoning or advocating for women to use violence to maintain power, but is using
this method to critique how society handles rape and the women it victimizes. She is not giving
approval, but rather understanding and empathy and a cry for rethinking misogynistic power
structures.

Interestingly, Appachana introduces the idea of violence as a way for women to reassert
power early on in the story through its narrator and perhaps most technically powerless
character: Geeti. She relates how at Sangeeta and Nikhil’s wedding, “Abhinay patted my hand.
I found myself holding his finger and bending it back and I think I would have broken it if he
hadn’t, in shock and pain, snatched it away” (Appachana 94). It is a short moment and a small
gesture, but it concisely and effectively illustrates the idea Appachana is driving at. As the rapist
and villain in Geeti’s life, Abhinay’s touch is symbolically weighty; he begins to physically
encroach on Geeti, and to her it feels like an act of violation. Geeti reasserts and maintains her
power and control over the situation by inflicting pain on Abhinay and forcing him to withdraw.
The warning lies not only in the fact that Geeti was bending his finger at all, but particularly in
how she says she is sure that she “would have broken it;” if violated, women can go as far as is
needed to reclaim their bodies. Unfortunately, Abhinay did no withdraw from Sangeeta and this
resulted in two deaths. Geeti’s reaction emphasizes the emotional toll men’s violations of
women’s bodies can have, in turn emphasizing the need to instill in society a presumed sense of a woman’s exclusive power over and ownership of her own body.

The other character in “Incantations” who demonstrates a significant amount of asserting power against expected gender roles is Mala Mousi. Kaul claims that she “predates, but helps make possible, the middle-class feminism that became a feature of cultural and intellectual life in urban India in the seventies and after” (Kaul 133). This refers to the “credo…that feminism was based on the need for personal solidarity” for that era and class of Indian feminism (Kumar 26). Mala Mousi is a highly educated woman who “at thirty was single and…seemed none the worse for it,” was “intimidating…too outspoken, too independent” and who has a scientific career as a gynecologist (Appachana 98-99). Geeti wonders “Where did she get her optimism from, how could she be so cheerful about her future…always alone?” (Appachana 108). Her character exhibits “personal solidarity” because of how satisfied she is with this unconventional female life. She has and uses power in a simpler, more passive way than Sangeeta does by living the way she chooses to, defying society’s expectations for women of her class by actually using her education and remaining independent of marriage. Uncompromising and unapologetic in her views, unafraid to make others hear them, Mala Mousi exercises power by asserting individualism in every aspect of her life and thus, ultimate personhood.

One of Appachana’s most positive depictions of women exercising power, and of men and women’s relations, is in the story “Sharmaji and the Diwali Sweets”. The character Malini and two of her unnamed friends are workers in the same facility Sharma works in, and their methods of asserting power follow some of the initial ideas of early contemporary feminism.
Radha Kumar explains that “The general feeling was that the primary role of middle-class groups...was to generate a consciousness of women's oppression not only among women but among workers, tribals and others” by “organiz[ing] and represent[ing] themselves, then coalesce[ing] to fight their common enemies” (Kumar 21). When Malini becomes angry that Adesh, their union secretary, is taking credit for getting the workers extra Diwali sweets from management, she goes with her friends to speak with the personnel officer Miss Das and ends up confronting Adesh (Appachana 124-127). She says “Wasn’t it we who laid down our tools?...If we had decided to continue working, what would you have done...And if Miss Das had not spoken to the management on our behalf, would we have gotten our one kilo of sweets?” (Appachana 126). She even threatens to beat Adesh in next year’s union elections (Appachana 126). Here, the women employees recognize and call out how little their presence and ability is appreciated; they band together for solidarity, and in doing so begin the process of gaining better representation for women in the workforce. This pattern of feminist organization follows the pattern that Kumar describes, and also demonstrates how women can assert power democratically. Malini is not a victim of despair or an uncertain, lonely future; on the contrary, she is awakened, sure of her capabilities and her rightful place in society, ready to do battle. It is a battle of debate, elections, and peaceful but impassioned organization. This story presents an ideal mode for middle class, working women to take control over their lives and society’s gendered injustices.

A remarkable aspect of this story is how it presents men supporting women in their attempts to exercise power. Sharma is the one who reaches out to Malini and makes her aware of a need for the women workers to assert themselves, and he originally does it to give Miss Das
some support (Appachana 124-125). When Malini is confronting Adesh, Sharma “stared at her in admiration...What a woman! She was Kali!” and later, “rapt, sa[ys], ‘Truly, this is the age for women’ ” (Appachana 126-127). At the end of the meeting Adesh and Miss Das resolve their conflict when Adesh apologizes to her and they “smiled at each other”, and Sharma tells Miss Das “‘I have concern for you, just as you have concern for me’ ” (Appachana 128). Throughout the last part of the story, Sharma demonstrates genuine concern for his female co-worker Miss Das through his actions and verbal affirmation. And even though he precipitates Malini’s showdown with Adesh because he wants to make Miss Das feel better, he sincerely and enthusiastically admires and supports the women workers’ efforts and abilities. He repeatedly admires Malini as she argues and asserts herself; rather than shirking from or deriding her strength, he is excited about it. His verbal affirmation of the reciprocal concern between himself and Miss Das emphasizes the idea of an equal, coordinating, balanced relationship between men and women in the work place, and the conflict resolution between Adesh and Miss Das reinforces this. Adesh does not get huffy and bitter that women have just stood up to him; instead he acknowledges his wrongdoing and apologizes, bringing peace to his relationship with Miss Das. It is all-in-all a beautifully positive portrayal of women asserting their power in the workplace and against societal gender norms, as well as of men supporting women in working for better treatment. “Sharmaji and the Diwali Sweets” surprisingly is the story that presents the ideal.

All of Appachana’s stories in *Incantations and Other Stories* hold painful kernels of truth about the oppression Indian women can face in a class that is caught in a struggle between modern feminism and traditional gender roles. When taken together, “Bahu”, “Incantations”,
and “Sharmaji and the Diwali Sweets” provide a miniaturized spectrum of how these women maintain their footing and assert their power, their personhood, in the midst of such a struggle. It is in the home and in the working world, sometimes highlighted by painful, lonely decisions and separations, sometimes by politics, and sometimes, unfortunately, by desperate acts of last resort.
Works Cited:


