

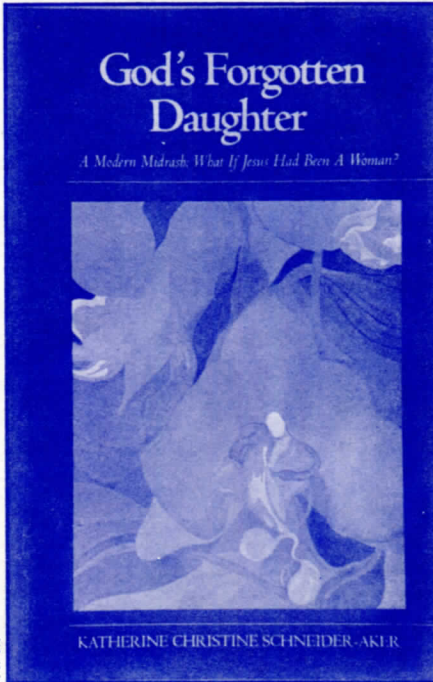
BOOK REVIEWS

God's Forgotten Daughter, A Modern Midrash: What if Jesus Had Been a Woman?

By: *Katherine Christine Schneider-Aker*

Lura Media, California, 1992.

Reviewed by *Luz Maria Martinez*, Isis International Communications Program



"I was the oldest. Our mother always told the story the same way: "D'vorah, you were born first, and then Jesus."

D'vorah, the twin sister of Jesus, is the narrator of the stories in *God's Forgotten Daughter*.

'Midrash', the author tells us, is the Hebrew term for interpreting and reinterpreting biblical texts. Over the centuries the 'midrashes' or stories have

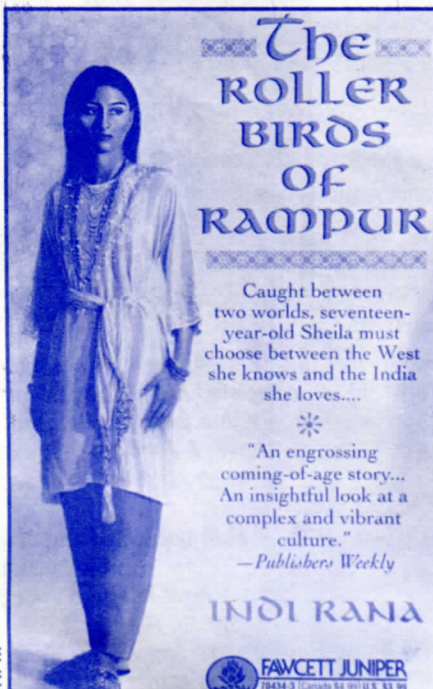
expanded and been enriched by each storyteller, taking on new meanings depending on the lens of the religion and the story teller.

God's Forgotten Daughter is a 'midrash' which is women focussed and feminist. D'vorah who is Jesus's older twin sister (only by a few minutes) is an intelligent, compassionate woman who possesses the same healing powers as Jesus and is in fact his close partner in his healings and preachings.

Because of the times, the culture and patriarchy prevents

her from ministering to all, so among the women she parallels Jesus teachings, wanderings, organizing and healing. In fact she is baptized along with Jesus and is deemed a preacher.

D'vorah not only prophesises but speaks out against the patriarchal system that allows so many abuses to happen to women. The women share with her their pains and joys and D'vorah brings their stories to Jesus. For example, the grief of a mother who buries her dead baby girl after being raped by the father, the story of the mother who calls her to bless



The Roller Birds of Rampur by *Indi Rana*. Ballantine Books, New York, 1993.

Reviewed by *Mylene Soto-Sol Cruz*, Isis International Resource Center and Information Program

The Roller Bird or Neelkanth "is a big bird with turquoise and ultramarine colored wings and brown gray on top. It seems to roll as it flies; large and generally dull when resting, but sometimes brilliantly colored, sudden...and noisy".

Picking up a copy of this book, I secretly hoped that it was not one of those 'boy-meets-girl-and-just-the-usual-things-happen' stories. I was at a book fair and wanted books that are more relevant to my pre-adolescent daughter than her very American romance collection. Reading this book made me sorry for my initial hesitation; I ended up reading it ahead of my daughter and scheduled adult books.

The main character is Sheila Mehta who grew up in England after being born in India, she and her sister Rachna are both adolescents. Their father is a doctor who believes that there will be more opportunities for him and his family in England than staying in India, their mother works as a geography teacher. Both parents may be considered liberal in the sense that although they still possess Indian decor, film, music and

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her son who has been beaten by her husband and who carries the immense guilt of being too terrified by him to intervene, she brings to him the countless stories of the women who are abandoned, broken and in pain.

D'vorah tells us about the strengths of her mother, Mary, who like all women from that era had several children and despite her workload was active with women in the community. She tells us about the wives of the apostles who bore children and shared in the ministry work of their husbands. We learn about Mary Magdalene who, contrary to Roman Catholic stories, is not a prostitute but a strong and independent woman with the gift of natural healing and is respected by all who knew Jesus as his 'companion'.

D'vorah lives to a ripe old age and is saddened and fearful that the stories of the women who lived, worked and suffered

would get lost. She is already beginning to hear some of the stories in such a way that it only credits the men but forgets the women. She wonders if the stories will be lost, such as the story of Tamar who was repeatedly raped by soldiers, and who not only recovered but went on to protect other women against rape, or the story of Rebecca, Mary, two Martha's and countless other women who had conviction and commitment and worked tirelessly among the poor and the ill, just as the men did, and in some cases even more.

Katherine Schneider-Aker's story telling is not only crisp and enjoyable, but provides the central character with such depth and 'voice' that I almost heard and saw the scenes unfold before me.

I have always wondered about the women in the religious pictures which shows them

kneeling in front of the cross, looking up at Jesus, watching him die. I have wondered who they were? What were they thinking and feeling? Thanks to Ms. *Schneider-Akers* the image will no longer be one of women just grieving but of real women who have a place in the bible.

Katherine Schneider-Aker, according to the book jacket, is a poet, freelance writer, educator and activist who devotes her life to helping women rediscover their voices and their power in a variety of ways. A member of the **Wild Women Writers**, a writers collective, and the **International Women's Writing Guild**, she is currently working on a feminist/woman's re-telling of the Arthurian legends, a series of essays on depression in women, and an occasional newsletter. ♀



RPM

Luz M. Martinez, who was raised as a Catholic, continues to believe in a God but is intrigued by the inconsistencies.

food in the house, they have accepted the thought that their daughters should grow up responsible for their lives. This includes the option to choose whom to marry, if they ever do so. This is rather unique because most of their Indian friends in England still strictly follow their customs and traditions.

Mr. and Mrs. Mehta are raising Sheila and Rachna in a country with a totally different culture from their own. The sisters both have white friends and friends of color, with the children, it seems like one's color does not matter much. Sheila has an English boyfriend, Jimmy, but he avoids her after his mother reacts strongly to the idea that her son's girlfriend is a young

woman of color. Upon hearing this, her friend Sunaina's family decided to return to India because they do not want their daughter to be like Sheila who is thinking of getting married for love. For them the best would still be an arranged marriage with dowry.

These experiences deeply affected Sheila's life. Nightmares about the incident with Jimmy's mother and Sunaina's rage at her for being forced back to India because of 'Sheila's' behavior haunt and depress her more. All this contributes to her psychological and emotional dilemma. An identity crisis arises and questions such as who she really is, where does she belong, what does she want,

begin to disturb her. As a result, psychosomatic symptoms creep in, the doctor advises her to rest and Sheila decides to go to her grandparents' farm in India for a vacation, with the desire to seek answers to her questions.

In India she perceives widespread poverty and underdevelopment that are exacerbated by religious beliefs, the caste system and corruption in government. For example, the 'chamars' or leatherworkers have to remain 'untouchable' because they earn a living from processing the hides of cows, which is considered 'polluted' work. A police inspector has to earn grease money to augment his income and pays commission to a superior who also does the

same at a magnified scale.

Sheila was reunited with her relatives, some of whom have changed or remain constant with time, such as her radical and non-conformist cousin Tinkoo and his friends; Inder Uncle and Bumpy who rely on agriculture, and the raj and his family who persist in living in the royal shadow of the past. There are characters such as Bijili and other bandits who continue to seek redress for offenses committed against them but at the expense of innocent people whom they kill.

Munnia, her childhood friend epitomizes the fate of many females in India. As a female child, a marriage has to be arranged for her before she

The Roller . . .

reaches 15 years of age, her parents give her and the dowry away to a husband. This custom signifies the start of the husband's dominion over the young wife. At first, Sheila envies Munnia and even considered her lucky. Unlike her, Munnia does not have to deal with the complexities of acquiring education, nursing a career and determining what she wants from life, Munnia's fate rests solely on her husband and their traditions. Sheila ponders

these experiences and her resoluteness as a young woman surfaces. This will be very evident in what she does with her life when she returns to England.

All these occurrences and the conversations with her grandparents made her comprehend that no matter what society's expectations are she still has her own identity. In this case, she is an Indian because that was where she was born and she loves her heritage, and, she is an English girl

because she already adopted this country as home.

Finishing this book, I really admired the author, *Indi Rana*, for shedding light on topics like karma, dharma, Hinduism, racism, adolescence in different cultures and the caste system from a young adult's point of view and language. I returned to the bookshop eager to find the other titles on 'teens in other cultures' which are actually books for grown ups too. Adolescent books such as this one are highly

recommended for uncovering facades and differing perspectives and thus help in raising critical thinkers. ♀



Mylene Soto-Sol Cruz

RPM

Of Dorcas and Violet and Nettie and Celie - of Alice and Toni, a personal reflection on the works of two outstanding women writers, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, Isis International Communications Program.



Lynn Lee

Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

All Saints Day is something we look forward to in the Philippines but not for the solemnity of the occasion (on the contrary, it has become more and more festive), nor anything about the costume parties and the spooky trick or treat games. Rather, it's the long weekend that goes with it.

Looking forward to a restful but productive weekend, I borrowed an *Alice Walker* and a *Toni Morrison* book from the Isis Resource Center. Embarrassing as it may be for one who is said to be or who claims to be an 'active'

feminist, it was the first time that I was going to read these two Pulitzer prize winners Toni also won a Nobel!

The journey through *Alice Walker's The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* was far more exciting and fascinating than I had expected. While the former revolves around an African-American woman's (Celie) struggle against a patriarchal and feudal society's set norms, the latter reveals the cruel reality of female genital mutilation and why and how it is translated from misogyny. Now I think all the raves about this 'woman writer who can stand proudly beside *Faulkner*' were an understatement.

My reading of *Toni Morrison's Jazz* and *Sula* laid bare the normally unimaginable capacity of women to love and hate at the same time. Violet's character in *Jazz* showed how women can hate each other so much that one will be able to harm a

dead woman - she went to Dorcas' funeral and slashed her face. Dorcas is Violet's husband's lover. *Sula*, on the other hand, revealed the intertwined lives of remarkably strong and aggressive women.

Reflecting on this 'serious reading', I need to thank these two great writers. They allowed me to look into the lives of African-American women. I can see a bit of myself in each of the characters, and in the events and circumstances they write about are bits and pieces of my own life. Reading these books gave me the chance to see the lives of women we know, as some of the experiences they talk about are experiences women all over the world go through.

Alice's writing is like rich, intricate weaving - it is as colorful and beautiful as it is enlightening, poignant and moving. Whereas *Toni's* works may be likened to the wrong side of an elaborate embroidery,

you get a feel of the color and texture as you go through the process of untangling the threads that make up the story. These stories show that writing about our lives is an important way of sharing our tears, laughter and hope with other women. As Nettie told Celie in *The Color Purple*, "all things look brighter because I have a loving soul to share them with."

To *Alice* and *Toni* - many thanks for showing me that it is all right to be so mad and to be so in love, at times. I look forward to meeting more Sulas, Dorcas and Violets as I am anticipating an encounter with other Celies, Netties and Tashis.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS



Alice Walker from Ms., June 1988