

**Meenal Shrivastava, *Amma's Daughters*, Athabasca University Press, Edmonton 2018, pp. 340.**

Spanning the years of pre and post-independence India, *Amma's Daughters* chronicles the lives of two women, a mother and daughter within the context of huge political and societal disruptions. The writer, Meenal Shrivastava, is the third generation of this family and after her mother Surekha's death, Shrivastava took on the task of completing the book that her mother had hoped to write about her own mother, the Amma of the story. Amma lived an adventurous and dangerous life as a young girl revolutionary who was totally committed to Gandhi's independence movement. This story is a well-crafted memoir from the period and it also reinforces the reader's understanding of women's individual and collective importance in the struggle for independence. Within a culture that was undergoing huge cultural and political shifts, many courageous women invested so much for the principles of an independent India, yet they remained constrained and discriminated against because of traditional gendered attitudes. Within those restrictions, Amma constantly had to stand her ground. Fortunately, she had the stamina, stubbornness and fearlessness to do so, although it undoubtedly took a toll on her physical health and her family life.

The narrative is largely about Amma, a feisty, charismatic leader and educator, who was part of a challenging marriage in which her equally feisty husband (Babu), more frequently than not, abandoned the family for his own obscure reasons. He is never fully understood or forgiven by his daughters who, although they love him, are confused and angered by his quixotic behaviour. -Then the book shows Surekha's story, a story of how she viewed her mother Amma (and to a lesser extent her often-absent father). The story of Abha (Surekha's older sister or Didi) is channelled through Surekha according to her understanding or interpretation of Abha's perceptions and feelings.

What is invaluable is that both Amma and her daughter Surekha were diarists from an early age and writers who continually documented the events of importance to them. An autobiography of Amma's life was published in 1962, to little circulation. In Hindi and according to her granddaughter "not worthy of straightforward translation", it nevertheless provided Shrivastava with raw material for the current publication. Amma's daughter Surekha, both a musician and poet, had numerous works of her own published during her relatively brief life (she died at 64 after a number of years of suffering with cancer). Because of physical deterioration and the loss of many of the notebooks as well as the fragmented way in which Amma wrote, with disregard for chronology, granddaughter Meenal had challenges piecing together a complete picture.

However, with extensive research into contemporary records and interviews with people who knew her mother and grandmother, Shrivastava weaves the various strands into something of a whole cloth, providing a glimpse into a significant period of Indian history. Amma's adherence to Gandhian principles meant that her

daughters Surekha and Abha were held to a standard that was strict and sometimes socially challenging. As well, the family constantly moved, placing the sisters at a disadvantage with their classmates who lived more conventionally stable, middle-class lives. As author Shrivastava perceptively observes, “My mother and her sister were thrown together by their shared experience of two rather unusual and demanding parents [...]. My mother coped with her anomalous upbringing by putting her Amma and Babu on a pedestal, thereby making a virtue out of necessity [...] her outspokenness and embrace of the unconventional was, ironically, a gesture of obedience – while Didi, with her impeccable manners, politely rebelled, often questioning her parent’ values. She was determined not to let her life be a sum of other people’s choices, and she quietly insisted on the right to be “normal” (p. 288). In spite of the huge difference in their outlooks, the sisters were devoted to one another and Shrivastava (both as daughter and niece) manages to convey their relationship with respect and love, in some ways making up for the fact that Didi’s story is relayed through her sister rather than being her own personal account.

There are gaps of knowledge regarding Amma’s life, particularly when she was very young and left her family to become part of the independence struggle. Remarkable though it seems, she left home at age nine, never to return, after witnessing the tragic drowning of her three older sisters when they were swept away by a powerful eddy in the river. As she was mourning alone at night in a nearby orchard, two men approached her. In her despair, she told her story and wondered aloud if life was worth living.

The men, independence fighters on the run, were both sympathetic and, to some extent, self-serving. Recognizing the benefit of travelling with a child, they insisted that she could do something useful by joining them in the struggle. Convinced, she left with them and became very active in promotion of independence. Obviously very bright and precocious, the little girl wrote pamphlets, gave speeches and ran messages for the movement. She also spent time in jail along with so many other independence workers.

Anyone with an interest in India’s political history from this period will find the text containing references to major figures of the times. Because of her prominence in the movement, Amma was close to the leading politicians and their families in the post-independence period. She and her husband had explosive arguments over politics – Amma remained faithful to Nehru and believed that his path toward opening up the country to industrial development was right for India, whereas her husband did not. Amma and Babu’s very challenging relationship centred on major political differences of opinion, but in spite of Babu’s frequent disappearances, the relationship somehow survived and Shrivastava, who really did not know her grandmother Amma (she died at the age of 54, when the author was only little), did have a loving relationship with her grandfather who lived with her family until his death.

*Amma’s Daughters* is a memoir that encompasses the years when India was struggling towards and after independence. In spite of the many contradictions and tensions that exist in present-day India, the kind of idealism and commitment Amma had to social reconstruction can still be found among tireless volunteers throughout rural India, working for village uplift and economic empowerment, par-

ticularly among women. In reality, Gandhi's dream of developing non-violent, tolerant, self-reliant communities fell far short of expectations; however, India still holds its share of dreamers, like Amma, who remain faithful to that aspiration.

Sharon M H MacDonald