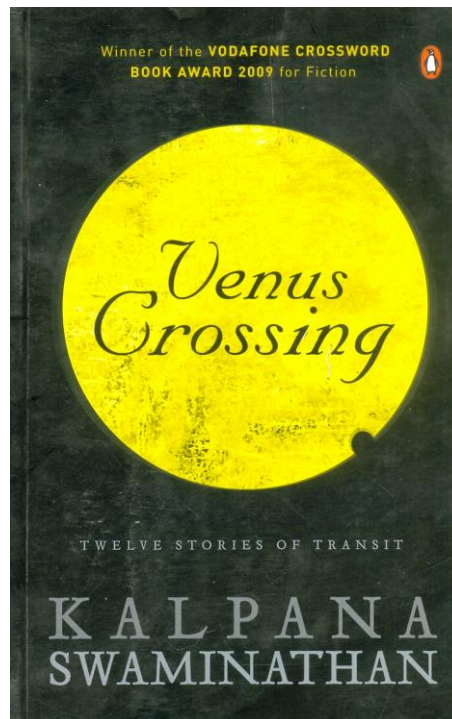


**Kalpana Swaminathan's *Venus Crossing: Twelve Stories of Transit* –
A Projection of Postmodern Indian Women and
the Crisis They Face**

M. Subha, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. T. Jayasudha



Abstract

With the assistance of education, Indian women who had been marginalized for centuries in most of the Indian cultural traditions due to the patriarchal set up of society, (except in a few places where women had a centralized position due to the matriarchal society - like Kerala state) are finally trying to assert their vital positions. But gaining something one had been denied for long, has never been a simple process; it raises severe protest from the opposite dominant sex. Like many other constant struggles in society, this hurdle is also unending. This paper analyses

the award winning novel *Venus Crossing: Twelve Stories of Transit* by Kalpana Swaminathan. It presents the contemporary challenges and sexism posed against Indian Women.

Keywords: Patriarchal set up, dominant sex, postmodern Indian women, Venus Crossing, predicament of women

Introduction

This postmodern world is challenging, complicated, and competitive even to the stronger sex, namely the male, and so one can see how the predicament of women is much more than what the man experiences. The equal status given to women in some jobs in some places, seems to add more responsibility coupled with restrictions and dangers thrust against them. Internationally women are used to the threats like: ‘You can be kidnapped’, ‘you can be sexually abused either individually or by a gang’, ‘you can become a victim of acid-throw if you refuse any love proposal’, ‘you have to pay dowry if you want to live your conjugal life with an equal partner of the opposite sex’, and so on. This is the postmodern condition destined for women; apart from all this, they have to establish themselves in the society and in the intellectual space as well.



Kalpana Swaminathan

Kalpana Swaminathan (1956 -) is a surgeon and she has authored the novels: *Ambrosia for After* and *Bougainvillea House*. She has written detective stories and six books for children too. She won the Vodafone Crossword Book Award (Fiction) for *Venus Crossing: Twelve*

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Stories of Transit in 2009. Previously a collection of stories was usually called ‘short stories’. But in postmodern narrative the small narratives have dethroned the mega-narratives to the margins. One such collection is this, which by default falls under the category ‘fiction’.

Like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* (2010) which tells one amazing story from the lives of victims soon after the massive earthquake hit the American city, similarly *Venus Crossing* tells twelve stories which capture the moment of *transit*. At that moment the impossible and unthinkable occurs in life so that the novel’s revelation or challenge bestows existence. It reminds the reader Thomas Hardy whose characters were helpless and the victims of circumstances; here the characters are victimized by the postmodern condition. The reader can only feel sorry for what took place. The writing moves the reader, purifies the emotions and reveals the current state accurately.

8 June 2004

The title of the first story is *8 June 2004*. It mentions only the time that entails some occurrence. The story is told in the first person. The *koel* (cuckoo) breaks the silence by its music of despair in darkness, light comes out of the clouds, darkness is broken, but the silence is still there. The author substitutes the image of the *koel* for women who plan the day’s menu while sipping tea in the small kitchen. The stillness becomes unrecognizable in the morning sounds. Very much later the author finds the reticence of the crows. Here the imagery of the *koel* and crow represent the characteristic feature, rather than presume the appearance of women and men respectively. It represents the kind of hierarchy of the bigger creature ruling over the smaller.

The narrator is awaiting a female’s arrival. She always wanted to be ‘unwatched, unheard, untouched’. But it lasts for an instant only. Then she sees ‘Venus’ through the Mylar shield. Venus is a creature of ‘appetite’, ‘paradox’, ‘corruption’, ‘wanton’. But the fact is this cinder keeps the sun in its proper perspective. And it is smaller and slower than the earth, hotter (464°C) than mercury, the air is mainly carbon dioxide with sulfuric acid which can give the worst green house effect that the humans on earth are yet to witness. But this cinder is 1.9 times as bright as earth. It would take another eight years for its next occurrence, these are the scientific data derived by man. Here the personified ‘He’ is the sun and ‘She’ denotes the Venus.

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This furnace is ‘tired of the myths’ and ‘deafened by prayers’ from those who dream up a mad circus called life. The next day she understood that nobody noticed the transit of Venus; even those who knew about it were busy dabbling in horoscopes, expecting the event that would increase their bank balance.

In fact what the narrator saw was a black dot. She retells the myth:

In her Greek life, as Aphrodite, married to a brute and ambushed in Ares’ arms, trapped in Vulcan’s airy net, dragged across the heavens still in her lover’s clasp and flung before the gods to await retribution...the gods laughed at Vulcan. The lovers disentangled and walked home. They had separate homes. Ares belonged in the battlefield and as for Venus - she was a vagabond (VC xiv).

It is not known from where she came from or where she would go, but the only image that remains is that she left you. That one moment she made a transit your way. This story serves the purpose of ‘preface’ to this collection. It highlights the moment of transit in everyone’s life. As the blurb says: that moment is everything: revelation, challenge, and existence.

As a professional with science background, the author tells the scientific facts behind Venus crossing the Sun and also blends the emotions of women that go unnoticed, then the Greek myth, mocking at the helpless condition of human beings and their money minded attitude, and at last highlights the moment of Transit. The narrator patches something about everything and comes to humanitarian ground. This pastiche is a typical postmodern style of writing. This moment of transit varies in everyone’s life. Based on this concept the narrator tells the remaining stories of sustenance of life.

Self-reflexive dimension in *Sister Thomas and Mister Gomes*

The narrative takes a self-reflexive dimension in *Sister Thomas and Mister Gomes* (1995). The story starts with a narrative within narrative. Four women are sharing a compartment at quarter past ten; the three of them are reading love stories. The fourth one is Elsamma Thomas who is working on her crochet. She is in her early fifties. Her shiny face tells us that she is in

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love. She is running Ward 14 for terminally ill people. Hereafter the self reflexive narration of a surgeon is realistic, humanistic and also exhaustive. Indian reality may fascinate a foreign reader, but it stuns a native reader. All the patients are men. These people are ill-tempered because of their intolerable suffering; bad temper has brought them down to the image of an animal that craves to find the moments of solitude before it surrenders itself to the commonality of death. Here the patients are called by their short names as they were once in their childhood. These people who are ill - their wives and family have turned them out, to be discarded. The professional knowledge of the author startles the reader in this postmodern novel as:

That Ward 14 will never run out of oxygen. The suction machine will always work in time to clear the throat choking with vomit. The idle limbs will be touched and moved when the brain has lost its voice. The body will be cleaned and soothed, never allowed to fester in its foulness. (VC 5)

That means the professionals of contemporary India keep one permanent foot in writing. Sister Thomas has gained a solemn dignity from these sick men. She never talks much, seldom smiles, and makes three rounds per day. These men always “mistrust the tinsel smiles that doctors pin on them like badges of merit”. (VC 5)

The narrator is omniscient in telling the story. It explains the death of Mr. Gomes deliberately. He is suffering due to stomach cancer. Gomes is starving. Apart from all the gloominess of reality, dark comedy lurks in the narrative. Sister Thomas asks:

‘What is your name, Mr. Gomes?’

In a sputter of spit, Gomes, still holding out the urine bottle, mimics Sister Thomas.

‘What is your name, Mr. Gomes? Gomes’s name is Gomes.

That’s good enough for you. You can drop the mister, sister.’ (VC 7)

The utter helpless condition of Doctors is portrayed effectively, while convincing Gomes for one more operation in his stomach after six failed operations in Singapore, Tokyo, Sydney,

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Copenhagen, and Liverpool. This operation also cannot cure him but just to defer his death by making him eat. Gomes started his career as captain of a ship, now his sailing days are ended by this Cancer. Next day the operation takes place. He recovers gradually.

Elsamma stayed with her brother and his family but recently she shifted to the allotted one BHK in Borivli. But still she is providing financial assistance to her brother's family. Somehow Gomes comes to know Sister Thomas' name 'Elsamma'. It surprised her. There came a number of complaints on Gomes including stealing other's food, cheating at cards, using bad words, not taking bath and so on. She decided to talk with Gomes. During their conversation sister Thomas is attracted by Gomes. When Elsamma speaks about his wife he becomes outraged, he does not want to meet her. They had parted ways twenty years ago. She started preparing liquid food for Gomes. She takes care of Gomes completely. Under the guise of Judy, who is Gomes' cousin, Elsamma fulfills all his material longings. As the days go by, Gomes keeps on improving, while another patient called Salim bleeds to death.

Elsamma has become aware of the fact that now Gomes is becoming yellower, liver is failing and he does not have the appetite. So she forces herself to think about how the death will be to him? This is her reality, she knows that she loves Gomes but she can't tell him. And she can't avoid the fact that he is dying. It is expected that Gomes could get into coma anytime. She was away for three days, when she returned by seven, Gomes tells her that he has lost taste. He wanted his brown suit from his home, as usual under Judy's name Elsamma tried to get it from his wife, but his wife bluntly refuses saying she doesn't want to know anything about Gomes. The lubricious laughter of Gomes' wife and Carmen draws Elsamma out of the house. She informs Gomes that Judy will bring it soon. Gomes is in his death bed. Elsamma couldn't eat or sleep. In the middle of the visitor's conversation to Ward 14 Gomes dies. Elsamma signs the mortuary register as Judy Gomes. She finds life very late in her fifties which she couldn't live; even before accepting that Gomes is dying she lost it. She should not have met Gomes, like Venus crossing the Sun, Gomes crossed Elsamma. Life turns out to be mere existence, nowhere near any good manner of living.

A Prostitute's Tale

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In *A Prostitute's Tale* (1996), the author presents Shubhada, a forty-two year old virgin, who is well known for prostituting her feelings. It is expected that a woman should not show her emotions explicitly. She should maintain cultured maturity and indifference. As she doesn't know to keep her emotions under a veil, she is called a prostitute. It is not the literal meaning of the word that one might think it stands for. Today because of Kokila, who scolded her calling her a prostitute of emotions, she missed her 7.20 train. Shubhada overheard the scolding. There is an elaborate narration here about a short span of time. This narration tells us how she gets the train and reaches her destination. Meanwhile the variety of incidents that take place fill the story. A crust of bread falls at her feet; a 'Pagal' (lunatic) picks it up. It is the vernacular equivalent of her real life situation that she found, to state her condition. This creolization is a typical aspect of the post modern narrative. When Shubhada offers her an orange, she demands ten rupees to buy a good meal. Moreover, that 'Pagal' (lunatic) is pregnant.

When Shubhada reached the station at 7.40, the train was still there, since it was late. She sat down with a novel. Even now, she is mentally affected by the word 'prostitute'. Except the child who ran along the platform's edge, and another little girl who was trailing her arm in the dark no one else attracted her. It is the safety of these children which seemed more important to her. At Vile Parle as usual the school boys get in; they are swinging on the straps and leaning out. A thud is heard, the train is pulled to a stop. The dead body of Kiran Joshi was there with the satchel. First she hears the mad woman's voice, 'Get a police man! Get an ambulance!' (VC 41) Gradually she recognizes that it is her voice. The irony is that his mother is also in the same train. It seems that other than Shubhada, no one else seems to be moved by it; that's how she is called the prostitute of feelings. If the woman with common emotional feelings turns out to be a prostitute, will the woman like a robot be considered normal?

Euthanasia

In *Euthanasia* (1999) the author narrates the pressures thrust against mankind by the advancement of medicinal drugs and professional Doctors. Capital punishment and Euthanasia are legally not approved in India. In such a condition the husband Hemant seems to be addicted to alcohol consumption, the other medical condition for his cruelty is not plainly stated. His wife is tired of dragging him from bars, wiping his vomit, and watching his struggle to reach nowhere.

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They strictly follow the counseling of Doctor Parikh. He suggests to Hemant to adopt euthanasia by taking pills. He dares not to take it on his own nor is his wife capable of assisting him. But she wants to come out of this life and lead a happier one. So a lady is arranged by Parikh to assist him to take the pills, but she consumed all that, and this attempt also failed. She is also one of Parikh's patients. The story is highly ironical with a wife pestering her husband to kill himself. Hemant's dialogues are accompanied by his inner (mental) voice now and then. This stream of consciousness technique is a part of contemporary narrative. It becomes clear that when some diseases cannot be cured through clinical methods, then this kind of welcoming the fatal end has to be committed.

What Did You Do to Me

In *What did You do to Me* (1995), the author registers her voice against Female Genitals Mutilation. Female Circumcision is opposed in Western countries. Though this practice is Pre-Islamic, it is still in practice. This is being done at the very young age to the Islamic girls of selected sects. This extremely painful practice is not a necessary thing at all. It is simply an outdated cruel custom, a crude ritual which must be given up. When an extremely painful practice doesn't have scientific reasoning the young girls can be saved by discarding it. The protagonist is a lady called Tahera who goes to a hospital to do DNC as a medical practitioner. As the patient is already the mother of three girls, she does not want one more girl baby. It becomes a compulsion that a woman must give birth to a male baby.

When she travels in the train to reach the hospital, another lady is sitting by the window. Her *mangalsutra* (wedding chain) is snatched by thieves. The ironical condition of a married woman is presented like this:

The woman would get off at the next station to report the theft. Would she find it difficult to give her name without a mangalsutra round her neck? Her name was defined by marriage. Or was it defined by the mangalsutra? Do meanings die when robbed of the symbol? (VC 70)

The conceived child in the womb cries to its mother because of her unkindness rather than the pain. Anyhow the child soon after its conception in the womb must be removed, as the

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mother and father do not wish to have too many girl babies. Tahera completes the task. Apart from this she carries another pelvic identity. Dr. Mistry explained about Miriam, another circumcised female patient. Tahera is also circumcised, and she feels nauseated, physically and emotionally sick. After reaching home she refreshes herself, but dares not question the parents about it. This story is self reflective, explaining the empathetic stand of medical practitioners. This self reflective mood is an inbuilt part of postmodern novels. The ugly, painful reality that is known within the group of Gynecologists is being shared with the reader. Though it widens the experience of the reader, the extremity of the situation stuns and exhausts.

The Arrangement

In *The Arrangement* (1996), the protagonist is Shirin, a fifty-four-year old lady, affected by cancer, and hallucination. Both physically and mentally she is deteriorating. One of her breasts is removed. She meets a Doctor by accident and they fall into a relationship, but when the neighbors talk ill of them she wants to stop him. They make an arrangement:

She wished to be alone in her weariness. And yet, she could not entirely give him up. He was to phone her on waking, once every day, and on hearing her voice, put down the phone. (VC 92)

She finally realizes and develops an aversion for him, since he is a cheat. She is also quite fed up with all kinds of fighting against cancer and hallucination. Finally, she accepts the call of her hallucination, and has ‘swung over the railing’.

In India when extreme suffering strikes someone, irrespective of the religion to which one belongs to, it is a common prayer that goes like this:

RamaKrishnaGovindaMaheshwaraAllahJesusHolyMaryMotherofgod, please please *please* don't let it be chest pain today. (VC 99)

This self-mocking reality is inbuilt in the structure of postmodern narrative.

The cause behind Suki's anger is not clear to her parents. The analysis goes on like this:

‘Boyfriend?’ Neena sounded incredulous. They don’t have boyfriends these days, not like in our time! No holding hands and making eyes, no such waste of time. Straightaway sex, bang bang bang on the living room floor. (VC 99)

These happenings can never escape the wry observation in the expression of contemporary writers. It is not the boyfriend, but her mother Sakina’s statement that she had been in Lyndie England’s situation and it was not difficult. She is a British soldier acting against Iraqis, who were never considered as of the same clan. But Sakina’s condition was very difficult when she started her practice as a surgeon soon after her studies at twenty-one. She witnessed a surgical procedure on a boy whose hand was amputated, because of complications that took place in a simple case. She wanted to help him by fixing a prosthesis for him. But it was spoiled by the Chief. And another time she had to witness the death of a twelve-year-old boy helplessly. And once she could not stop her Chief examining a seven year old girl child who had been raped, in front of fifty people in the hospital. In these situations her condition was more pathetic than Lyndie where she had to stand against her own people. Suki cannot understand these matters. Still Sakina wants her daughter Suki. But Sakina’s husband after twenty five years of marital life becomes envious of his wife’s life which existed even before his entry into her life and still exists in which he takes no sharing. He is a typical Indian husband who could never think there was life for a woman beyond the four walls of her home. Along with the main thread of the story there is sub-thread of the Sudha and Vasu story in which a wife suffers with her paraplegic husband and goes in search of a solution. All these medical revelations add interest to the reader.

The Life Uxorious

In *The Life Uxorious* (1996), the narrative is light and it presents the conversation among few women in a train travel. They boast of their sophistication, privileges and blessedness of not having become a wife of wife beaters, rapists, child molesters and bride burners. It is really interesting to know the preference of contemporary Indian women:

A coffee-making, dinner-serving man is a cherished houseplant, but a chef is an exotic. Being married to one is like wearing an orchid, a purple-tongued one, with blood-red spots". (VC 134)

Finally they come to know of an incident in which the husband throws himself off the train to make his wife collect the insurance amount of ten lakhs. The irony here is, as the case is proved to be an accident, the wife will be getting double the amount.

Fly away Peter

Fly away Peter (1995) tells the story of Anandhi who is forsaken by her lover and Kashmira who is also in the same depression. Kashmira attempts suicide in a public bathroom; Anandhi meets her accidentally and stops her from the suicide attempt. Next day Anandhi goes to Kashmira's home, meets her parents, hints to her mother about Kashmira's failure. Immediately the smart mother plans Kashmira's wedding which will make her fully busy, leaving no place for idle depression caused by Peter. Anandhi learns to banish her depression caused by her failure in love. At last Kashmira realizes that her ex-lover who made her to abort three times never would have loved her at all. This is a typical contemporary women issue who all struggle to fix their marital lives. It becomes challenging to accept the reality that life should not be finished after the pursuit and capture of a better half.

Eclipse

Eclipse (1999) - the narrative indirectly suggests how a female baby is killed. It is still in practice, if the second or third pregnancy is a female foetus, preferably to abort it in the womb or else to kill it soon after birth. Like *Dropdien* there are professional killers to do this filthy job. And the parents are relieved off their responsibility.

Shame

In *Shame* (2007) Stella is ashamed she is busy with her job, when her mother Marie Claire is hospitalized and struggling to die, but no one would believe it. It is the irony of reality since her mother has been dying all her life. Narrator presents this irony of reality of other similar cases as well. Freny, another bed-ridden character at the age of 104, is expected to die by

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her grandchildren every now and then. They visit her every alternative day. Freny feels free to share her emotions with Stella rather than her relatives. It tells the depth of irony behind real life. Mr. Kwadia says, “old people feel shy with their own family, but they will talk to strangers”. (VC 178) Another survivor in the bed is Hasmukhbhai who finds life easy when Stella is in the ward. He is very particular that he doesn't want to die while being hungry. 'ICU' an inevitable lounging place between life and death is the axis point of the narration. Another girl who is made pregnant and forsaken by her lover took Rat Poison, but has been saved. The irony is that her lover begins adoring Stella who tries to mediate over phone. Dayabhai, another patient with chest pain who has financed a number of box office hits, a pimp, a simple fellow, gets admitted. All this rattle between life and death lengthens their life on to another day. The indepth expression of this struggle exhausts the reader. Indian mythological references to 'Yamdoot' (Yama the god of death), 'buffalo' (Yama's vehicle for travel is the buffalo), 'chitragupt' (the short cunning fellow who plots and conspires against others), reveal the fact that this idea is from India.

Acts of Aggression

Acts of Aggression (1995), as the title suggests, portrays the acts of aggression of men over women. The narrator tells about her sister, brother-in-law and their life. Unfortunately she is surprised and depressed by the aggression caused by her brother-in-law in the ladies' compartment of a train. It is a war that she diagnosed as one that goes on between men and women, husband and wife, boy and girl, brother and sister and ovum and sperm (VC 198). Simultaneously it tells Sapna's story who is impregnated by a kitchen helper of their restaurant. Somehow an arrangement is made to dispatch the baby off to adoption by a childless parent. The special feature of reference to myth is that Sapna's mother has an idea of telling others of Immaculate Conception like Kunti, Mary, Leda, and Danae. The reader can understand this concept well if he/she is aware of any one of these stories. This is the postmodern compulsion thrust on an Indian writer that it should be understandable to the people of many cultures rather than one. In a women's compartment already this fellow was an intruder, apart from that when a woman asked him to make way, he pushed, touched and slapped her. But it is unbelievable that it

is her brother-in-law who is always mild with her sister. The narrator concludes that “there are no barriers to outrage”. (VC 207)

Yellow Dupatta

In *Yellow Dupatta* (1995) the narrative is made up of the technique juxtaposing the enjoyment of love of Aparna - Jayant and Masuma – Hamid’s bereavement of loss of their small baby. In the beginning of the story at seven o’clock in the morning, the baby Fazlu dies of pus that got stored in the pleural cavity. They receive the body after post mortem. It takes almost a day, and the next day they set out to reach their native Nasik from Bombay. Aparna and Jayant are relieved of their responsibility of accompanying them. It creates a dark, gloomy atmosphere, bringing an exhausted feeling to the reader.

Short But Yet Harrowing Narratives

Though these short narratives are compiled together, they obviously create the heaviness that is produced after reading a harrowing, long narrative. It is qualitative rather than quantitative to look into the separate stories. But everything put together it equates the volume. This pinching black humour is an inevitable part of the postmodern narrative and it never adheres to the order of space and time also. So there is no chronological sequence between the stories. Thus challenges of postmodern India and the place of women are very realistically pictured by the author.

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M. Subha, Ph.D. Research Scholar
Bharathi Women's College
Chennai - 600108
Tamilnadu
India
subhamarimuthu@gmail.com

Dr. T. Jayasudha
Research Officer
Tamil Nadu State Council for Higher Education
Chennai – 600 005
Tamilnadu
India
Sudhatj70@yahoo.co.in

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