

Love lost

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Journalist and author Meghna Pant's new book fictionalises a harrowing personal story of abuse and yet holds on to messages of hope and redemption



Meghna Pant says it took her eight years to gather the courage to write *Boys Don't Cry*, a fictional story that draws closely from her life

I WAS a victim of abuse for almost five years and despite my education, modernity, exposure and the fact that I was financially independent, I didn't have the courage to get out of the situation because I couldn't identify what abuse was," author Meghna Pant tells this writer over a video call. In her new book *Boys Don't Cry* (Penguin Random House) which is "based on a true story, mostly", we meet her heroine Maneka picking up white oleanders—markers of new beginnings—at a florist as she plans to throw a divorce party. Things soon take an unexpected turn when the police arrive at her door to arrest her for the murder of her ex-husband. At the police station, as Maneka relates incidents that brought her to the present moment, what unfolds are scenes from a marriage in which she is routinely humiliated, gaslit and abused. "No matter your background, it will not save you from abuse. There are 200 million women in our country today who are victims of some sort of abuse," notes Pant, citing a UN study that said that almost 50-60 per cent of girls and boys thought it was okay to hit women. "This book is as much about a woman's journey to redemption as it is about discussing mental health, and about breaking patriarchal rules set on women whether they live in Malabar Hill or in a chawl."

Pant says that she left her abus-



Bus stop advertisement for the National Centre for Domestic Violence in London in March 2021. Domestic violence in the UK saw a marked increase during the national lockdowns. PIC/GETTY IMAGES

er in 2012 on the night of the Dubai launch of her first novel, *One & A Half Wife* at a time when not many people knew what she was going through. Even as her career was reaching new heights, "my personal life was hell". She recalls, a harrowing incident from that evening when she was given exactly five minutes to collect her belongings before having to leave her house as he counted down the minutes finding its way into the book. "That was the last straw that broke the camel's back so to speak," she says, describing how she proceeded to remove herself from the site of violence. "That's the first thing anyone in an abusive situation should do—they should get to somewhere safe. The second thing you have to do is to take out time to heal," she insists, pointing out that this is something that is not discussed enough. "For me, it was writing, for you, it could be travelling the world, taking a break from your career, talking to friends and family, following a spiritual routine or even multiple sexual conquests," she laughs. "Don't apologise for whatever comes to you as a part

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of your healing. Embrace it, bring those broken pieces together and make a whole person again who is stronger and better than she was before, so that no one can do what your perpetrator did." It is only then that the journey to redemption begins, she suggests.

In 2014, even though Pant thought of starting to write a book about her experiences, she says she would break down often, the memories draining her emotionally. It was an article she wrote for a women's magazine that

finally opened the floodgates. "I had women from all around the country message me with stories of abuse—a dancer told me her boyfriend broke her spine, an actress said that her actor husband had thrown her out of a moving car and that she couldn't talk about this in public because it would ruin his image." The article and the responses it elicited became an impetus for the book.

Boys Don't Cry with its close references to Pant's own story rests somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. "I wanted to steer clear of tropes of the abla naari or krantikaari, so if I had just stuck to what had happened to me, it would have sounded too much like [a story of] victimhood," she says. "So, I wanted to give it a twist. We need to give women the narrative that there is hope and redemption and a life for you after you leave your abuser and you can get the redemption is whichever way you seek."

Pant's book has attracted love and praise and has even been picked up to be made into a movie, she tells us, aware that had it been written 10 years ago, it would not have got the same kind of response. "As a society, we are more sensitive, more aware and willing to speak up." "It's been 10 years since I left my perpetrator. It sounds perverse to say this but I am glad I went through what I did because I would never have become a writer if I hadn't been abused, I would have never found true love; I am now married to a wonderful man and have two beautiful daughters. I feel all the beauty that happened in my life, happened because of this tragedy because it gave me so much clarity about who I was, what my passion was and what I was seeking."

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Continued from page 18

Every bit as spry and spirited as we remember him from college days, the restaurateur served thousands of lunch customers history on a plate. The Kohinoor family had owned Britannia & Company since Boman's father Rashid opened it in 1923, coincidentally the year Boman was born in Yazd.

Despite a stoop and slowed gait towards 2019 when the city lost him, bow-tie firm against wrinkled neck folds, Boman shuffled taking orders between tables layered with red-checked cloths. Engaging customers with personal attention lavished on them, he treated each to staccato-style couplets. Everybody's predictable favourite whenever he recommended a cool drink was—"Try fresh lime soda sweet, to beat the Mumbai heat."

From the mid-1950s, Parsi theatre presented uniquely adapted Gujarati lyrics which stars sang before the interval or as curtain closer. A rousing example of the former, from the pen of the inimitable writer-director Adi Marzban, would be chorused to the 1904 tune



A children's limerick remembers the sugarcane seller near De Sa Hospital and Chowpatty Band Stand. FILE PIC

"Blue Bell" (albeit a complete departure from the original context of a soldier's farewell to his sweetheart):
"Chhaiyyey hamey Zarthosti
Ek mek ne daiyyech gaar,
Dhansakh ne aachaar gamey
Cricket ma khaiyyey maar,
Naatak, cinema, race ma
Nathi hamey pachhaat,

Lagan-Navjote ni ses ma
Peraavyech rupya saat.
Naach rang ni shaukheen
Khoob hasmukhi
Jeegarey dulli rehjey
O Parsi kaum
Tooj per chhey aafreen
Reh tu sukhi
Hamesaa hasti rehjey
O Parsi kaum.

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We are proud Zoroastrians
Swearing at each other,
Dhansaakh and pickle lovers
Though we tend to lose cricket games
In the theatre, cinema and the races
We sure never lag behind,
Weddings and Navjotes see us
Slip in gifts of 7 rupees.
Enjoying song, dance and

festivity
We're out to have good fun
A community so large-hearted
All blessings unto you
May you always stay happy
And full of laughter in the house
O ye Parsis!"

The traditional finale saw the entire cast of Marzban's musical revues wave to madly clapping audiences. To the jaunty riffs of "When Irish eyes are smiling", his actors chorused:

"Havey gup-chup gher jaavo
Nahi toh hall ma thi kaarsey
bahaar
Gher jai ne faraaghaat thhaavo
Khaavaanu hosey taiyyar...
Naatak paachho jovo hoi
Hamesaa taiyyaar hamey
Pun ticket veychaati leyjo
Khoda bakhast na thhataa
tamey!"

Now it's time to head home quietly
Or you'll be thrown out of the hall
Go home, relax comfortably
Dinner is ready and waiting...
If you want to see the play again
We are ever ready to stage it
But do pay for your own ticket
Don't shamelessly come without!"