



interleaves:

A meditative reflection on illness

When Lata Mani sustained a "closed head injury", an internal brain injury, accompanied by cognitive and neurological impairment that brought her world, as she knew it, crashing down, she set out on a spiritual journey where she learnt to not only deal with her physical pain but also the psychological.

Nandini R Murali reviews *Interleaves* that is a *sangam* of prose, poetry, and contemplative writing, and says it a revelation not only to all those who have to deal with chronic illness or pain but to society around them which is unable to deal with such pain!

"For much of human suffering lies not in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but rather in the nature of our response to them," writes Lata Mani, author of the book *Interleaves*. It was a serendipitous experience that evoked an "I know-I've-been-there" feeling when I began reading *Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual life* (Goodbooks Marketing, Chennai, Rs 240; US: Bookpeople, US \$12) because I too negotiate with pain on a daily basis, following multiple spine surgeries. The blurb proclaims that *Interleaves* is "a paean to the transformative potential of catastrophic life changes".

Lata Mani, a historian, poet, and cultural critic, is well known for her earlier book *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. She was formerly teaching Women's Studies and Modern Indian History at the University of California, Davis. In 1993, a freak "automobile collision of astronomic proportions on her way to work changed her life forever. Mani sustained a closed head injury, i.e. an internal brain injury, accompanied by cognitive and neurological impairment, from which, she admits, even after eight years she is yet to wholly recover. "I could not return to my job as a teacher, researcher and writer, and I was forced to embark on a different kind of journey," recalls Lata Mani.

Interleaves, a cross genre form, is a narrative tapestry that weaves together prose, poetry, and contemplative

writing. Probing the inner labyrinths of consciousness, Mani deconstructs the true meaning and purpose of life and critiques societal perception of illness. In the process, she frontally challenges many of our cherished beliefs about well being, independence, self-worth, and the quality of life. Mani elaborates, "The form of *Interleaves* reflects the nature of my injury, which made it impossible for me to conceive a continuous narrative. Working within the limits of poor concentration and an inability to read and write, I chose to dictate on audiotape short pieces that, by their juxtaposition, could cover the multiple dimensions of illness as a lived experience. The form also permitted me to tell two interconnected stories - that of illness and that of spiritual opening. In the first half of *Interleaves* I describe my journey. In the second half, I meditate on the seven qualities that were essential to my survival: silence, courage, acceptance, concentration, faith, surrender, and renunciation."

Meanwhile, publishers had reservations about a book cast in an unorthodox mould being a viable publishing venture. Undaunted, Mani decided to go ahead and publish it herself. *Interleaves* is also available on CD to enable "those who cannot read or would like to be read to" to have access to the book. The first part of the book is on a two-CD set entitled *Interleaves*; the spiritual qualities are on a two-CD set entitled *Contemplations*.

"When life, as you know it, is abruptly transformed, you are brought face to face with questions about the

purpose, meaning, and value of existence. I cannot say that I consciously set out to find the answer to these questions. In the depths of pain and cognitive disarray, I began to sense the loving presence of Devi, the Divine Mother, inviting me to journey within," says Lata Mani. Thus, *Interleaves* wrote itself out as a response to a "catastrophic health crisis". "I turn to words as a way of composing something like a bridge, however partial, between where I have been and where I'm today," writes Mani. The book chronicles twin events of momentous importance in Mani's life following the accident: her transition into her new status as a "differently" abled person and her spontaneous awakening to the Divine Mother in that time of crisis.

A discerning reader can perceive several thematic strands interwoven throughout the narrative - a creative *sangam* of the inspiration of the muse, and spiritual insights about life and life changes. Some of these are as subtle as the lines on your palm, but are purged of all negativity and pessimism. These interlock to emerge as a voice of spiritual wisdom, articulating with sensitivity and perception the needs, special concerns, and point of view of the chronically ill, or those whose health is challenged by injury, pain, and illness.

An efficiency-driven, achievement-centered modern society places a premium on health and well being. Any deviation from this idealized image is perceived as an attestation of one's helplessness, dependency, and disempowerment. Why is it that we equate well being with an "able bodied life"? Are we sufficiently in touch with our inner selves to enable us to develop a heightened sensitivity to alternate ways of seeing and believing? Despite society's apparent compassion for those in pain, why is it that we hold on to entrenched, prejudiced attitudes regarding the possibilities of "differently" abled people leading as fulfilling and satisfying lives as those whose lives are not circumscribed by disability or illness?

Throughout the poignant narrative, Mani makes an eloquent plea for the need for an attitudinal change in the way society constructs and perceives illness. It is in this sense that *Interleaves* is different from the tried and tested but extremely popular "individual triumph over adversity" genre of narratives. Mani elaborates, "I would like all of us to reconsider how we, in our day, tend to think of illness as a negative thing, never as an opportunity. *Interleaves* does not in any way glorify pain and suffering. However, as the meditation teacher Steven Levine has proposed, one must distinguish between pain (the physical sensation) and suffering (our response to pain). What often makes the physical sensations intolerable are all the feelings and thoughts evoked by pain. I refer here not just to the response of the individual in pain,

but even more to that of society toward the chronically ill, disabled or dying. The experiences of such persons are not seen to be inherently valuable and, indeed, may often provoke fear and discomfort. No wonder then that those who are ill often experience loneliness, and a sense of worthlessness. Illness has as much potential to teach as wellness." *Interleaves* was discussed at the Department of Psychiatry, NIMHANS, Bangalore, with reference to the importance of narratives especially in the exploration of the experience of ill-health.

Perhaps what is remarkable about *Interleaves* is Lata Mani's authority in exploring questions about the ultimate reality, and about the nature of and limits to knowledge regarding concerns such as disability and illness, all of which coalesce into the larger picture of the very purpose and meaning of human existence - questions about which medical categories are silent. "One unfortunate experience I repeatedly faced was the inability of doctors and others in the healing professions to stay the course of the illness with me. The brain is little understood, and there is little treatment for my kind of brain injury. This meant that other than proffering painkillers (most of which I was allergic to) and antidepressants (which I did not need) there was little that allopathic doctors could do for me. One way they responded to this situation, I am sorry to say, was to be gruff with me, evade my questions, and even imply at times that I was not trying hard enough to recover."

She continues, "It seems to me that one problem is that doctors are often called upon to 'play God' by distressed patients (although I should clarify that I never placed this burden upon them). Their training and desire to serve also bolster the idea that they *should* be able to help others. Yet this is not always possible. In a curious way, doctors and patients alike face the same challenges of acceptance, surrender, and adaptation to the situation. If both parties were to cultivate these qualities, as well as that of compassion, then a different relationship might be forged between the two. Otherwise we have a situation in which those who need the greatest ongoing support from doctors are those least likely to receive it."

Given its range of concerns, it is hardly surprising that *Interleaves* is less a celebration of affliction than a glorious song to the liberating power of the consciousness. The voice of authorial experience, through questioning and dissent, concludes that illness is to be viewed, not as a setback, but as an opportunity for growth and renewal.

The book and the CD and can be ordered from Goodbooks Marketing Pvt Ltd, 76, Fourth Street, Abhirmapuram, Chennai.

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Her quest reminds one of Albert Camus' lines, " 'Who taught you all this?' The reply came promptly: 'Suffering.' "