

PORTFOLIO – CREATIVE WRITING

Portfolio of creative writing work

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PORTFOLIO OF CREATIVE WRITING WORK

In partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Master's Degree in MA English

By

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222ENG04

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This is to certify that AALAYA SONTI has successfully completed the Portfolio titled **“PORTFOLIO OF CREATIVE WRITING WORK”** in the course of MA English for the year 2022-2023.

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DECLARATION

I, Aalaya Sonti of MA English first year, would like to declare that the following Portfolio is mine, based on personal experiences and I have taken due care to avoid plagiarism. I understand that my portfolio can be rejected and I may be barred from writing the examination if any part of the work is found to be plagiarised or borrowed.

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SCRUTINY

Certified that this submission contains original work and has been duly checked for plagiarism and adherence to the announced norms for submission.

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SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Butter, banter, and rain

It seemed like the sun was too lazy to be awake, tucked in comfortably behind the enormous blanket of clouds. Aisha was determined, however, to make the best of a dreary Saturday.

It was set that she'd bake a cake for her mother's birthday, a decadent chocolate cake with some homemade cookies. She spent last night lying on the bed, mentally ticking off the ingredients she'd need from her list. She's got some dark chocolate in her pantry - yes. There's also some butter, flour, and eggs and everything else essential in the pantry, the fridge, and the shelves. With the plan set and the perfect execution in her mind, Aisha went to sleep that day.

Just like the sun, Aisha was too lazy that day too. Her eyes opened to look at the clock strike 10. It was 10 already, her mom left for the office. "That's okay," Aisha thought, she still has time till the evening to make the cake. Her mom wouldn't come home before 5 pm. All she needed to do was freshen up and bake the cake.

In an hour Aisha was ready, determined to bake her mother the best cake. The recipe was on paper with the ingredients and the exact amounts of each. She put on her apron, tied her hair into a bun, and began to take out the ingredients to place them on the counter.

The counter was soon piled up with the dark chocolate, oil, flour, cocoa powder and eggs. The butter, she hoped was sneakily glancing at her from the back of the fridge. If that were true, well the butter sneaked quite well.

Aisha didn't let this minor set back deter her plan. A small change in the plan was obviously not going to knock down her determination. She'd quickly go to the store, grab the butter, and start baking the cake.

Walking down the stairs, Aisha tried to remember if there's anything more than she needs to buy. She doesn't want to run another errand for just one ingredient. For a while, she considered swiggy-ing it, but the delivery charges made this baddie with a budget go to the store on her own.

The scooter started just fine, and on her way, she thought, "Yes, let's go quickly and get the baking started!" Alas, she hadn't anticipated what was in store for her.

The enormous clouds that covered the sun that day began to come down, raining heavily. Before being able to comprehend what happened, Aisha was beginning to get drenched. She was already on the main road, it was too late to just go back home empty handed, and too soon to give up on the plan.

Drenched Aisha continues to embark on this journey. Her clothes were heavy with water and the rain wasn't going to stop any time soon. "That's okay, the grocery store is just a minute away," she thought. The number of vehicles on the road increased in a trice. The grocery store that was a minute away, would take her longer to reach.

With great difficulty, she reached the store and went in, leaving a trail of water behind her as she walked. The butter was on the first floor. With the embarrassment of walking into the store completely wet, Aisha's anxiety took over. She wanted to be in and out of the store as swiftly as she could, but the heavy clothes were slowing her down.

"I'll just put some music on, so I wouldn't have to deal with people looking at me," she thought and pulled out her phone. She tried to unlock it once, and twice, and thrice. The phone didn't seem to respond. Her not-so-technical brain thought that restarting the phone would help. She

tried it, and the phone would just not switch on again. She started to panic more. In the rush to get to a store quickly, Aisha had completely forgotten about the phone in her pocket. It was the rain that wrecked her phone and the dreary Saturday was just to become worse.

For a moment, she just wanted to leave, go back home and sink into her bed till her mom came home. She wanted to cry a bit at her inefficacious attempts to make the best of this day. But she was so close, all she had to do was grab the butter, pay and leave. With dry clothes at home, and a spare phone, she'd still be able to bake the cake, and call her mom.

She picked up the butter, got some extra chocolates, a drink for herself and went to the counter. Getting a task ticked off her TO DO list, made her feel better. The anxiety she felt at the glances she received in the beginning began to fade away as more people who got drenched started to come inside.

Soon, the store was filled with people with dripping clothes and trails of water left behind each of them.

The line at the billing counter was huge, and Aisha was worried that she'd be late. Her phone was switched off, and needed to reach home quickly to notify her mom of the same. She could've asked someone for a phone, but with her house being so close, she found it unnecessary.

The billing process was taking forever to get done. The process that she thought would take her 10 mins, took her more than half an hour. Finally, after all, that wait, she could go home! It wasn't too late indeed. Despite the few variations in the plan, it could finally work.

The rain began to subside, and Aisha took her scooter to go home. She took her scooter and rushed back home. She had never ridden this fast. Her embarrassment, her need to find a phone and tell her mom everything took over her determination.

As soon as she reached home, she called her mom from the spare phone. To her surprise, her mom had the worst day at the office too and was on her way home. The meeting that her mom was in charge of got messed up because of a colleague.

The cake wasn't baked yet though, and neither of them had the patience to celebrate her birthday in the way that Aisha had planned.

After her mom came home, they gave the phone for servicing and it was going to be okay. With some peace they both sat, tucked into a blanket and for the rest of the day, they binge watched their favourite TV show. Aisha ordered her mom's favourite food for dinner. The butter was kept in the fridge and was waiting for another such day to hide at the back of the fridge...again

To you, Jum...

I'd like to believe that all of us have grown up to be a bit weary about each other's religion. Just like the 'hero' in *Kanthapura* holds by his bhramanical thread across his body while sitting for the first time in a Dalit household, I'd like to believe that each one of us has this ingrained prejudice and yet a sense of belongingness in different households. And yes, often it is a mix of both, which is exactly what Jum felt when she came home this time.

After my house was painted, for the first time in four years, my parents decided to keep a puja to celebrate or mark the occasion. The smell of the fresh paint blended with the freshly lit incense prevailed in the house. The priests started to chant a few verses from their memory and gradually began to recite them from an app in their phone.

"It's funny how there's an app for verses now," I thought and giggled to myself, knowing well that Jumaanah would've laughed at the joke too.

A week before, when I asked my parents if I could invite Jum to the ritualistic ceremony and the lunch following it, they were reluctant. They let me ask her, however, but didn't forget to repeat several times that this is a **puja** and also took the liberty to say "*woh log nahi aayenge.*"

Nonetheless Jum came for the whole ceremony. Being the first guest to arrive, my father got some time to spare. He walked up to her and said, "Thank you for coming, Jumaanah beta."

Awkwardly clinging on to my side for the whole event, and me sparing time in between the errands to slip in some gossip about the guests into her ear, the whole event came to an end. This meant, the most awaited lunch – was finally ready to be served.

Four people were responsible for the serving, my sister Shruthi, Jum, Myra – my neighbour, (is six years old physically but is a condescending grandmother mentally), and I.

The order in which people would be seated was never told, but was known any way. First, the priests would eat. Then the richer men and women would be served, the men of the family next often accompanied with their friends and finally the women, once they are done with all the cooking and serving ofcourse. If there's food left over then the security guards, maids, or other such labour would be invited to eat, often served with a feeling of pride and superiority.

Traditionally (tradition being that of a Hindu telugu culture), everyone is made to sit on the floor and a banana leaf is placed in front of them. The first ingredient served on the plate is salt. The practical reason being that one can simply add more salt in their food to suit their pallete. It is the first thing served on the banana leaf at the left hand corner, and is more often than not left untouched.

Then follows the pickle, beside the salt with some *kosambari*. It is made with a few pulses, mustard seeds, and sometimes split chickpea. It is known to cool the stomach and act as a dish that helps counter the *masala* in the food.

The priests sat on their seats to begin feasting. Instead of the tradition *aritaku*, or the banana leaf, we gave them each a disposable plate. Myra insisted on serving the salt. She placed it on the wrong corner. Shruthi, having the older-sister-syndrome, got irritated at this but we continued anyway. Jum placed the pickle beside the salt and I the *kosambari* in small amounts.

One of the first questions Jum asked me (in whispers obviously) when she came home, was almost right at the beginning of the event. As the priest was lost on the verses-app, Jum curiously asked,

“Aren’t you a lower caste person? What is the caste of the priest?”

What seemed like such a simple question had a little complex answer to it. I felt almost liberated at being able to explain to somebody the nuances of the Hindu system.

“Yes we are, but since we’re richer and have a good financial standing, our caste is easier to hide. The priest is always a Brahmin and nobody here knows or bothers to ask our caste because of the money we have or the lifestyle we follow,” I said, partially ashamed at how my family has to a great extent ‘brahmanised’ itself and partially at relief that this ‘brahmanising’ has allowed me to not be subjugated by the caste system.

Once the *kosambari* is served, the sweet *semia payasam* (which literally translates to ‘vermicilli pudding’ but does no justice to the emotion of *payasam*) is placed at the bottom right corner of the plate. This is followed by the fried items such as an *appadam* and some fried vegetables.

Once these appetizers are out of the way, the first dish of the main course is served. *Obattu* with *ghee* is one of the specialities in an Andhra cuisine. It is a flatbread made with all purpose flour and filled with a stuffing made of chickpea, cane sugar, ghee, and sometimes coconut.

With this comes the coloured rice, *pulihora* and the curry that accompanies this is *Gutti Vankaya kura* (a fancy name for a brinjal/eggplant curry). Then follows the white rice, with the Andhra speciality- *pappu* (dal), *rasam*, and *sambar*. The order repeats itself according to the request of the people eating and finally we serve the curd rice, with some cooked mustard seeds and pomegranate called *daddojanam*.

Growing up, my mother wasn't well versed with foods that I found tasty. She couldn't cook burgers, or pizzas and pastas. I was always ashamed at how I would carry some homemade dish, and on special occasions have *pulihora* instead of the usual chapatti with *pappu*. But if there was one thing that I proudly carried to school, it was *Obattu*. The love *Ma* had for cooking always remained disproportionate to how much Shruthi and I enjoyed eating the food.

Gradually, my mom stopped cooking too. Initially, while it was our lack of appreciation, it slowly became about her age and her loss of energy to continue to juggle between several roles and responsibilities.

This is why maybe, our slightly unconventional puja, had food that was ordered in. This was maybe the reason why, we had disposable plates, and maybe why we hadn't planned on renovating the house since the last four years.

While Shruthi and Myra were incharge of the *payasam* and the fried items, Jum and I took up the responsibility of serving the *Obattu* and *ghee*. In no particular order again, we served the rice items, the curries, and *pappu* to the priests.

Almost as if Jum knew exactly how much to serve and when to stop, she took on this role as she forever prepared for it.

Even though the dishes were different, the duty was oddly familiar.

The priests were done with eating. The people, next in the unspoken order of hierarchy came and took their places. The food was served again, this time with fewer mistakes and more quarrel. Jum became incharge of the rice items and I of the dishes that go alongside it.

Shruthi served the *obbatu* and the starters, and Myra, very proudly served the salt and the ghee. She was also solely in charge of giving the guests water in a glass and keeping them accountable to not using more than one.

In a conversation at the end of the day, Jum told me that the place where she felt the most comfortable was when she was serving the food along with us. The food served at her occasions are completely different.

The main dish served in Jum's household is *Biryani*. *Raita* is a must to go alongside it. There is often also a fried meat, her family usually had fried chicken. A vegetarian curry is a requisite and Jum's mom makes this delicious *baigan ka khatta* which is a brinjal curry.

There are several varieties of sweets, and is usually a choice between – *Gajar ka Halwa*, *Jamun*, *Dal ka mitta*, *Sawaiyaan*, *Fhirni*, *Ande ka mittha*, and *Biscuit ka mittha*.

The drinks served usually are either *Hareera* or a *Rooqsa Sharbat*.

Despite the differences in our style of cooking food, and the food served, it was typically the women who served the food and the men who ate first. The women, just like my mother, Myra's mother and even Jum's mother, always eat at the end. Through all this, it seems as though food and serving may have a religion but not a gender.

In the end, after everyone left, I patiently and very secretly whispered "I have some tiramisu icecream in the kitchen." and knew that upon gaining this knowledge, Myra would want some. Funnily, she wasn't the only child in the room, we were too. With this greed of wanting to keep the icecream for just us, Jum and I sneaked into the kitchen and slowly scooped out the icecream and ate it directly from the tub. We didn't stop giggling until my dad came in to check on what's happening. At that sight of seeing two versions of his daughter, my dumbstruck father giggled, mocked us for being kids, and helped Myra find where we were.

Jum laughed at how child-like and yet entertaining all this was. With the same giggly excitement, we continued to scoop heaps of icecream and gulped it in. My dad's mocking didn't deter either of us and was one of our favourite moments.

It was the epitome of knowing that we share the same brain cell. She loved the icecream and remembers my house by this playful side of our family.

This was the first house that my parents owned. Back in 2006, my area wasn't as happening as it is now. My apartment was just being built, and we had just one neighbour in the whole building

– Ahmed. Ahmed was eleven months old when I, a child of four, moved in. Shruthi, Ahmed, and I were inseparable.

People often told my dad, “Ahmed doesn’t look like you at all, I’m sure he resembles your wife.” We would giggle at this misconception but never attempted to correct anybody, anyway.

For the next several years, Ahmed would eat with me, play with me, and sleep in our house. The first time he went to school, he came home and said “*Uncle, mein ab bala bacha ban gaya hu.*”

I would sneak him too, to have the ‘forbidden food’- icecream. If my parents were successful of hiding it away, we would take icecubes and gulp them in (I don’t know what was going on in my head, don’t ask me).

After the icecream incident as a 21 year old, my parents made Jum and I sit together. It was time for Jum to leave. Jum was made to sit down, was thanked from all our ends, was given a gift and more so was given this exchange that, in her own words, “felt like home to me.”

After this, my parents haven’t stopped talking about Jumaanah. They absolutely loved her and a huge part of it is for them to believe that she put her beliefs aside and came home to be a part of our culture.

Even when we have months in our house when we can’t eat non vegetarian food because of one ritual or the other, my mother told me “ If jumaanah sends biryani home, then they’ll go out atleast and eat it. There are no rules when it comes to her.”

It was a breath of fresh air to me.

In a conversation later on, I found out that her mom really likes me and I think it is safe to say that it is so because words like *Inshallah*, *Mashallah*, and *A Salaam Walekum* roll off my tongue normally, like it has always been a part of my vocabulary. And this too is because they believe that I have put my beliefs aside and have assimilated to a part of their culture.

While this is partially true, the whole truth is that Jum and I never ever belonged to what was supposedly ours truly. This space to love and grow has only come in because of our lack of rigidity in our parents' beliefs and the respect, curiosity, and understanding we have of other cultures.

While my childhood with Ahmed was filled with the mindless stealing icecreams and irritating Shruthi, these incidents were dealt with more consciousness of our religions for our parents. Sarwar uncle, Ahmed's father, once told my dad, "*Amu kahi bhi khel sakta hain Sudharshan, aur aapke saath kha bhi sakta hain, bas use mandir mein mat leke jana*" ("Amu can play with your children Sudharshan, and can eat with you, just don't make him pray with you").

We strictly followed this too. In retrospect, Ahmed was never part of our pujas or our Hindu celebrations.

Ahmed, Sarwar uncle, and Azra aunty came home for one function though- my grandmother's funeral; and this is ingrained in each of our heads. They were by my parents' side as they wept uncontrollably. Sarwar uncle helped my dad arrange the funeral rites and waited till the whole funeral was over.

If not in our daily rituals and prayers, maybe we're all in this together in death at least, I think sometimes.

It is not the same with Jum and I though. Like she came home for a "daily" ritual, maybe next time, I'll go to her place, visit her family, and eat some yummy beef biryani. Maybe my parents won't touch the food, but wouldn't stop me from having it and maybe in all this, her parents will love me a bit more too.

I don't know what butterfly effect will happen, but I hope it does, to create more functions like that which happened at home. Maybe, when we have functions, even the men in our families will serve. Unlike our dads, our husbands/ wives would be different and again, a breath of fresh air.

Maybe our children would grow up without knowing any of these bittersweet struggles we've had and how the solidarity we share has been built on years of unlearning and learning and no matter how filmy it sounds, the courage of a small friendship to remove misconceptions in two families. But I know, that if my children don't grow up to know what it took to get here, they'll never understand the importance of it.

And that... would a true cause, lost.

Vignettes

I don't understand what a good vignette is. I just got the spelling right this morning. They're like micro-fiction but I always have a lot to say. I don't know how to write a good vignette because all of them are bad to me.

I pour the hot cup of coffee into the beige ceramic cup. It matches my aesthetic. The house is filled with the silence of comfort, peace, and solitude. I remember how I used to write about the life I want to live. It's just me today, and my big cup of coffee. Maybe a book that's been lying at the back of my shelf will accompany me and hopefully a light drizzle before I have to run back to work tomorrow.

The old journal, lost in the pile of unpacked books is trying to find the light of day. From the day I started writing in it, it's been hidden. Sometimes in my bag, sometimes behind my clothes and sometimes at the back of the shelf. It was my first journal, and several succeeded it, in the same old fashion, hidden from my parents. Now, it's time to take it out and reread what 17 year old me manifested for her future.

Buy your own, live alone, read a lot, have money, make parents proud and list goes on and on. The smell of petrichor envelops the house as it's about to rain. I smile at how so many goals have changed and yet some remain. I take out all my old journals and place them proudly in the shelf

in the hall. The rain outside urges me to play some old music and enjoy this peace, I've worked so hard to get.

Now that I wrote a few vignettes, I think I have an idea. They are about capturing a very small moment in a few lines. It is about conveying a part of the story which is complete in itself and still could have more to say. I could be wrong about what a vignette is, but at least I found a few good ones.