



WHERE
I WAS

*a memoir about
forgetting and
remembering*

CONSTANCE SINGAM

WHERE I WAS

Where I Was: A Memoir About Forgetting and Remembering
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Prologue

THE MOST URGENT IMPULSE to write my memoir came in the aftermath of the AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) Saga in 2009. A group of women whose religious beliefs were contrary to AWARE's secular values took over the organisation at its Annual General Meeting. The memoir was prompted by my own questions as to how I had arrived at that point in my life and got caught up in this whole ill-fated historic episode. I was president at the time of the takeover. In updating my memoir, I take stock of what has happened since.

It has been thirteen years since I looked back on those traumatic days in 2009. Those days were very painful ones for me especially since my involvement in civil society activism, through my membership at AWARE, had been one of the most enriching and satisfying phases of my life. I was left shattered, with so many questions about my sense of identity and my place in the community where I had spent more than thirty years. I am now at a calmer, even more serene phase of my life and can even look back and assert that the past is a foreign country! I no longer grieve for that old self, the AWARE activist.

But even as a child running barefoot in the sands of my mother's village in Kerala, South India, where I had

PART ONE

REMEMBERING

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And So It Begins

I HAVE, in more recent years, looked at my life with a mixture of feelings, sometimes in a spirit of wonderment, and sometimes in a state of hopelessness as I watch the comfortable and familiar Singapore of my childhood change into a bewildering global city. My plan is to write my way to understanding, to build a bridge across this chasm of aloneness.

It came to mind that the previous time I had been caught up in a morass of self-doubt and unhappiness, I had gone on a retreat. I had checked myself in at the Marymount Convent retreat house for three nights. Convents and monasteries are wonderfully silent, healing sanctuaries that are ideal spaces for meditation. But property developers had persistently closed in on the convent property such that it was no longer the quiet cloister that it had once been. Today, the Convent's completely made way for the North-South Expressway. This continual destruction of what is part of our history, which connects us emotionally and physically to our country, places such as the Marymount Convent, Saint Theresa's Home for the Aged, the National Library, the CHIJ Chapel, the Bukit Brown cemetery tells us something about the Singapore Government's disregard for things sacred, for what is essential

for the nourishment of the spirit, the soul and one's sense of place and belonging.

Still, I was lucky that Marymount Convent, or what was left of its grounds, was there for me when I needed a quiet sanctuary for reflection, contemplation and self-examination. A time of rest became like a door opening into a new morning. My spiritual advisor at the time suggested I write about my experiences. A year later, she asked if I had started writing but it would be two years before I would embark on this journey, before I would take the plunge.

So where do I begin? My primary influences have been those from my childhood and from my early adult years when I had more control over my life. These experiences have conditioned my view of my surroundings and defined me. But I do not lie awake wondering, 'Who am I?' or 'What is my identity?' or even 'Am I a Singaporean Indian or an Indian Singaporean?'. I do not want to be labelled. I do not like labels. My identity card labels me as a 'Malayalee' rather than as 'Indian'. I am not sure how that came about unless I had used my maiden name, Constance D'Cruz, to confuse the government's registry and thereby subvert an attempt to racially tag me. I am not what politicians tell me I am or what my passport says. My identity does not reside in how I look. None of these make me who I am. I am who I think I am. I am what I believe. I am what I do. I want to find out how I got to be what I am, to believe in what I believe and do what I do.

*

In the last forty years of my life, I have been a social activist.

I took an active interest in the things around me, joined other like-minded people and campaigned for change, especially in the areas relating to discrimination and injustice. To questions as to why I am so involved in ‘politics’ and what drives me, I laughingly respond, “I am a Malayalee.” There is some truth in this as Malayalees are known in local history for their activism. For instance, Malayalees headed the leading trade unions in both Malaya and Singapore. There is also some truth in how family values influence us and how life experiences, “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, shape the way we live our lives.

Within months of joining AWARE, I became keenly conscious of the importance and relevance of social activism. Sometimes, women would stop me and thank me for speaking up. On that morning *The Straits Times* published the interview, “How to Win a Woman’s Vote” (19 October 1991), with me, a young woman rang me at work. She worked in an office in Margaret Drive and said, “Thank you for speaking up for women like me. I am a clerk and I have two young children. I am so tired of working long hours, then going home and having to see to the housework and the children.” She repeated, “I am tired,” continuing with, “If I could stop work, I would. But I can’t afford to stop work.” I felt so helpless. I put down the phone and cried. Her gratitude at just that simple act of speaking up and the reactions from other women would be major sources of inspiration and strength whenever I started to doubt myself and the work done by AWARE. At other times, at the supermarket or in libraries, women would come over to chat and then ask, “Haven’t you been threatened? Has the



left:
Kerala
village.
Constance
is the 4th
from the
right.

right:
Constance and sisters,
1949.



left:
Wedding with
the family,
1961.

PART TWO

NOT FORGETTING

"I am the Feminist Mentor"

ON SATURDAY, 28 March 2009, the secular women's group AWARE was taken down by a group of Christian women.

I spent the first week of April 2012 reading through newspaper clippings and AWARE reports of the event now known as the 'AWARE Saga', and felt just as angry and puzzled as I did the morning after the takeover. The collective neglect and apathy of AWARE members had allowed the organisation to be taken over. Only twenty existing members attended its Annual General Meeting (AGM) that year against eighty-two new members, all of whom I suspected, were associated with the same church. Newspapers covered the saga on a daily basis and just re-reading the reports brought a flood of memories that exhausted and overwhelmed me.

The writing of this chapter has been a major struggle. I put it off for a month, distracting myself with other pursuits, buying more books on memoir writing and reading and re-reading them. Jeanette Winterson writes that "book collecting is an obsession, an occupation, a disease, an addiction, a fascination, an absurdity, a fate." I would not go as far but it holds a greater fascination for me than buying clothes. Books on memoir writing, memoirs and autobiographies have taken up a significant amount of space on my shelves and I will soon

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