

Caught in the winds of change

By Anusha Parthasarathy

Subhashini Dinesh's debut novel My Iron Wings is about a woman's dilemma in a changing society

My Iron Wings by debut novelist Subhashini Dinesh is not just about the protagonist and her personal battles. Set in the 1990s, it is also the tale of two cities (Calcutta and Madras) that have undergone a sea change and of how journalism has evolved into what it is today.



Subhashini, like her protagonist Maya Srinivasan, grew up in Calcutta, before she moved to Chennai a few years ago. A journalist, before she entered the world of teaching (Subhashini teaches at the Asian College of Journalism now), her book is all about her observations, professionally and otherwise. “Many incidents in it are my observations as a print journalist and a woman. The intent is real but I’ve tried to weave in fiction. There are parallel threads to the story; one is about a Tamil Brahmin girl evolving from a plain Jane into a professional who climbs up the job ladder. On the other side, her family wants her to marry and settle down,” says the author.

Maya is uncomfortable with the arranged marriage system and the idea of being sent to a family and getting rejected. “She has a dominating father. I built his character like that. There are strong but silent women in the house and they’re also important characters. All this makes Maya even more of a rebel,” Subhashini adds. Maya, on the other hand, also lives in the era before mobile phones became a staple and print journalism changed forever. “Newsrooms were turning into workstations. New page-making software was making an entry and artists were no longer making pages. There was some resistance to this change in the newsroom. Also, it was at this time that the electronic media made an entry. The book tries to picture how this affected print.”

As Maya repeatedly visits Madras to meet prospective bridegrooms, Subhashini tries to bring out the differences between the two cities and the change that Madras was going through in the Nineties. “Bungalows were fast disappearing and apartments were popping up. There are also some anecdotes about how the protagonist adjusts to the new city,” she says. Why choose the 90s to set the book in? “Because it was a period of turbulence and confusion where more women were pursuing professional careers than before but were still under pressure to marry young. People in their 20s were confused about this; they decided that a career wasn’t a stop-gap option and settling down was no longer acceptable,” Subhashini explains.

And so, *My Iron Wings* is a woman’s journey to freedom. “She wants to fly; yet, there are so many things that prevent her from doing so,” says Subhashini. The author is currently working on an idea for her second book. “I’d like to explore more women-centric issues — reproductive rights, the idea of personal space for women, the system of marriage which involves families rather than individuals.... I’m not a feminist but it is about finding my space in this world,” she smiles.

My Iron Wings is available online and at bookstores for Rs. 599.