

INTERVIEW

"I completely share all the ideologies that 'Balika Vadhu' stands for," Gajra Kottary.

Gajra Kottary, a former journalist and an award winning television show writer came into her own with her first book, *Fragile Victories* in the year 1996. Two short story collections followed, along with the story/screenplay for shows such as 'Astitva', 'Jyoti', 'Panaah', 'Hamare Tumhare' and 'Godh Bharaai', among others. Besides, she's also the co-writer of the hit serial 'Balika Vadhu'. Recently, she launched *Broken Melodies*, her first novel, which was well received. Here, Gajra speaks about her journey so far and her plans for the future.

-Erica Billion



From being a journalist to writing scripts for serials to writing short stories to a novel! It has been a long journey. Was it a planned one?

It was both planned and unplanned in parts. The journalism bit was planned, which is why I qualified myself for it (post graduation from IIMC, Delhi). But, I was a practicing journalist for barely two years and then my personal life took priority over my professional one. I decided to stay home for a few years and give my babies all my time and attention. Ironically, that self-imposed break actually helped me discover that my true calling was to write fiction. After my first book of short stories got published, I drifted into scriptwriting when Mr Mahesh Bhatt offered me to be script associate with him on a film. But, ultimately it was television where I found myself happy and comfortable, and also achieved some success and acclaim. So, my last 12 years of working for television, though unplanned, took over my life

completely. The novel of course, has been planned. I felt compelled, both by the subject and by the challenge of writing a novel, to plan and write over a period of almost 3 years (counting both the English and Hindi versions of the novel), alongside my TV work.

How was the experience of writing scripts for TV shows?

Both, fulfilling and tiring. My shows have been a little different from the run of the mill stuff, so in that sense I cannot complain at all that I have not been able to write with conviction, or have had to compromise due to TRP figures. But, television demands discipline and no long vacations, so that part has been tiring.

How was it scripting 'Balika Vadhu'? Do you share the same ideologies and how did you feel while scripting it?

Of course, I completely share all the ideologies that the



show stands for... being against child marriage to start with and of all the other social evils that we portray and condemn in as poignant and entertaining way that we can do. I am immensely proud to be associated with this show that all of us have made in as straightforward and honest a way as is possible. We have been able to evoke the right emotions in this show, while entertaining people and standing for many ideals and have avoided any artificial gimmicks just to grab people's attention.

Is *Broken Melodies* also inspired by real life incidents, experiences, or is it all fiction?

It's definitely inspired and influenced by real life people, incidents and events. Set in Delhi of the 1970's and 80's – a time and place where I myself grew up, that was bound to be, especially for my first novel... and gave me raw material that I was familiar and comfortable with. But, it's far from being a disguised autobiography. I have done far too much writing in the last decade to believe that I can get away with that. So, it's a clever weave between reality and pure fiction that has come from my imagination.

In future, would you like to script similar shows with women-centric themes, or are you open to doing the regular *saas-bahu* ones?

I think by using the term *saas-bahu*, you mean a certain kind of serial that is treated in a certain overtly dramatic and unbelievable way; because, as a relationship, *saas-bahu* is one of the most interesting women-to-women ones that there is to explore for a relationship explorer like me! So, I can promise that I will continue to do believable and sensitive story-telling in my serials. Frankly, I am definitely going to explore the *saas-bahu* genre, though in my own way.

You favourite author – Indian and international...

I would be happier to answer this question in terms of listing my favourite books rather than authors... I thoroughly enjoyed Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*,

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and the first of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series.

Future plans...

I have started work on my next novel and have also been building up a short story collection that I need to fine tune. The next novel is very different from this one...more contemporary in its milieu and it has a lot to do with the current media scene. That's all I can reveal right now, as I myself don't know how it will finally shape up by the time I finish writing it. I have really enjoyed writing *Broken Melodies*, so I will make sure that at all times in future, I keep some time apart from my script writing to write more books. 'Balika Vadhu' will always be my first priority in terms of my television work and with God's grace it definitely looks like it's going to be around for some time. I am also working on two more TV shows that are still in the planning stage. But, apart from any plans that I may have, I am just going to go along with that unpredictable part of life that God plans for all of us!

