

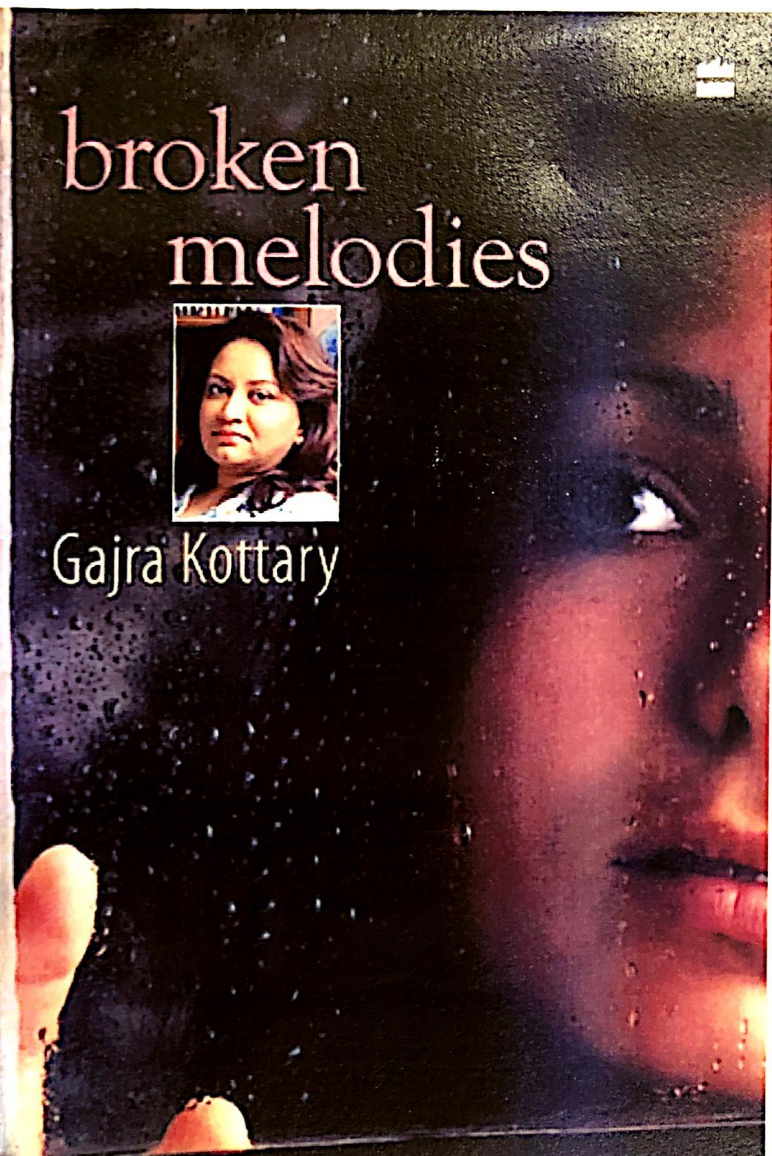
I am not a superwoman: Author Gajra Kottary

Savera R Someshwar

Former journalist and award-winning television scriptwriter Gajra Kottary discusses how she coped with writing her debut novel, *Broken Melodies*, scripting for the popular soap *Balika Vadhu* and being a mom.

Her daughter's reaction to her first novel may be Gajra Kottary's biggest compliment. "I realised," says 17-year-old Aastha, "how fortunate I am that I haven't been brought up in a family where I have to see my parents fight so much and just completely hate each other. I think, more than anything, my respect for my mother just grew."

Gajra Kottary's *Broken Melodies* is life seen through the eyes of its young protagonist, Niyati, a normal child growing up in an abnormal family. Her childhood is tainted by the aspirations of her father, a classical singer, and her mother's struggle to keep the home fires burning.



Broken Melodies is a poignantly written tale that will find resonance in a nation where family dynamics are paramount and where warring parents and broken homes are becoming increasingly familiar.

A former journalist and an award-winning television scriptwriter -- Gajra has popular serials like *Balika Vadhu*, *Jyoti*, *Godh Bharaai* and *Astitva* to her credit -- her *Broken Melodies* is peopled, like her serials, with women of strong character.

Gajra has continued to be actively involved in scripting the daily soap, *Balika Vadhu*, even as she dealt with the challenge of writing a book that was scheduled to release simultaneously in English and Hindi.

Even as she celebrates the launch of *Broken Melodies*, Gajra tells **Savera R Someshwar** that she is looking forward to apply its learning to her next one.

NEXT: Excerpts from the interview

Image: Book cover of *Broken Melodies*; Inset: Author Gajra Kottary

Photographs: Gajra Kottary

Rediff Get Ahead

'Husband-wife issues eat away at family structure'



Considering the success you've achieved as a scriptwriter (Gajra co-scripts the hugely popular *Balika Vadhu*), how different was the experience of writing a book?

There's been lot of spontaneity and complete abandon in the writing of this book. I haven't thought too much about will this work and will that work, which we do quite a bit of in our scriptwriting work. In that sense, it's been very, very gratifying.

Though I've set the book in the seventies and the eighties, I feel some of the questions that bother me and the book tries to raise -- tries to answer also -- are extremely relevant today because we find marriages crumbling everywhere.

Issues between husbands and wives assume such huge proportions that they eat away at the family structure, at all faith and positivity.

Broken Melodies is about what happens to a child during the years when she is still in that environment. Personally, I feel that whatever a child sees of the most primary relationships of her life in the formative years stays with that child for the rest of her life. It impacts him or her for a lifetime.

In the writing of this book, you have dug deep into your personal life, into what you have either seen in your own life or in the lives of people around you...

When you write your first novel or make your first film, there is a lot of the creator that seeps in into that creation. This is what makes it more sincere and helps it reach out better to people.

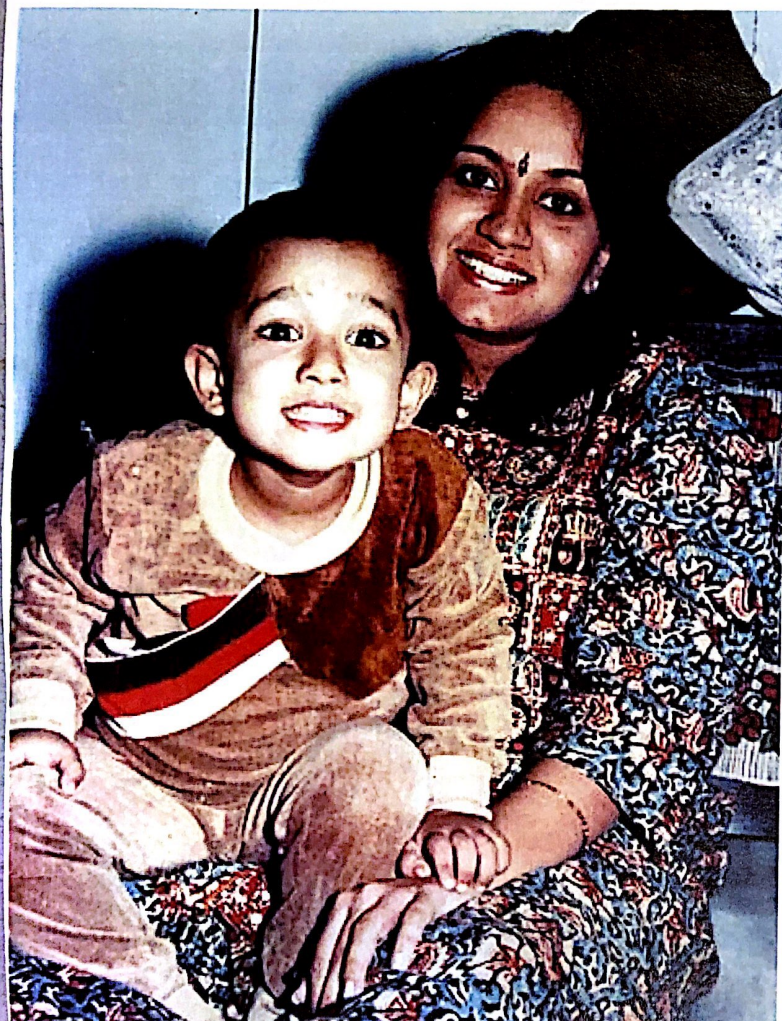
As a person, how public or private are you?

In terms of the work I do, I'm a very private person. Nobody recognises scriptwriters; nobody would even connect our names until somebody said it in so many words.

I'm happy with the kind of work I do. At the same time, if you are a scriptwriter, you have to be involved with people. You can't be writing in an ivory tower. It's not an extremely quiet activity like writing a short story or a novel.

Image: From left: Avika Gaur, Anupam Kher and Gajra Kottary

'I can't say it's been entirely smooth sailing'



Coming from that environment to writing your first novel where you've put out a lot of yourself for people to consume, interact with, appreciate or hate -- how does that feel?

It feels a little frightening. It also feels like you have graduated. I have to take the responsibility for this one (*the book*) and how it will be received by the people -- good, bad or indifferent -- square on.

At the same time, it's just such a big relief that I was able to do it. I feel good about it.

My last book of short stories (*The Last Laugh*) came out eight to nine years ago (*Gajra had earlier written another book of short stories, Fragile Victories*). I missed that kind of writing. I felt that was also me and I needed to do that kind of thing.

In the three years that you worked on this book, you were also working on *Balika Vadhu* and being mom and the family's organiser. How did you juggle these various roles and how did each one impact the other? Did they feed off each other or did they battle against each other?

Truthfully speaking, I can't say it's been entirely smooth sailing.

I'm against this imagery we have of being superwomen; I am not a superwoman.

I was doing a lot of television when my kids were at a stage where they actually needed a lot of my time and attention. That requires hard work and creativity, but you just hurtle from one day to another and you don't know how it all works out in the end.

You need to have a different kind of quiet to be able to write short stories a novel is ten times more challenging.

In the last three years, my kids have reached the age when they don't really want you breathing down their necks. It was a good time to go into myself a little more than I have been doing.

Besides, I've never allowed myself to get moody. I have a military-like approach to time. It's like... I have two hours so I am going to write. I am not going to wait for

Rediff Get Ahead

Balika Vadhu writer on how to get a break in TV

broken melodies



Gajra Kottary

Want to know the real reason why you are riveted to the television set every night? Or groan at the sight of your girlfriend, mother or sister, especially when you want to catch up with the IPL?

Meet **Gajra Kottary**, one of India's most successful television scriptwriters. The former freelance journalist has popular serials like *Balika Vadhu*, *Jyoti*, *Godh Bharaai* and *Astitva* to her credit. Along with her colleagues, she has won the Apsara award for Best Scriptwriter.

She has also just written her first book, *Broken Melodies*, which like her serials, peopled women of strong character.

She shares the secrets you need to know to become a successful scriptwriter for television.

Excerpts from an interview with **Savera R Someshwar**.

What kind of a mindset does it take to become a scriptwriter? If you could share some tips, what would you suggest?

The most important thing is to not take yourself too seriously. We are so caught up in what we create. It's possible that you've created something nice, but there's always scope for improvement. There's always scope for adaptability and flexibility. Temperamentally, one has to be extremely flexible.

People can't take criticism very well. They have talent but just having the talent is not enough. You need a lot of staying power, especially in television. The best of people run out of steam.

A serial gets more and more challenging because there is so much you can't repeat; you've either already done it or others have done it and you want to be different. Nobody wants to see the same story or the same situations all the time.

To keep yourself charged under such circumstances takes a lot of discipline.

There's also the give and take with other team members. You could have written something fantastic but your senior may think it's not so good or it does not go with where we are heading or it cannot be used for whatever reason. Instead of getting demoralised and upset, you have got to say okay, now what best can I think of?

Believe me, many a time, what emerges at the second stage is better than what happened at the first. It's just that you've got to bring yourself to do it and not give up.

The television business is very complex. We have so many artistes who are working for us round the clock that there are human situations. Somebody could be sick, somebody may want to go on leave, etc. You have to be able to deal with that.

Then there is expense -- television serials are expensive to make and there are certain dos and don'ts which happen in terms of rules. You don't want to show a person drinking or smoking. It may go with the character but you can't show it on television.

But if you look at the limitations as challenges, then I think it's quite a fun place to be in.

At the same time, do remember it's a lot of hard work. You just have to prepare yourself for the long haul.

Image: Book cover of Broken Melodies; Inset: Author Gajra Kottary

Photographs: Gajra Kottary

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'When you are making episodes, you have to balance the various tracks'



How much time do you invest once you start writing?

When I was doing screenplays, there was much more of actual hard work. It's not just conceiving the story but actually writing the scenes.

Now, with the pressure of dailies, that too five times a week on air, we have departmentalised our work. We have people doing stories, people doing the screenplay and people doing dialogues.

At every stage, there is enhancement; at every stage, there is a little bit of adaptation and modification.

A lot depends on how fast you are, to put it very crudely.

When you are experienced and you make a habit of thinking on your feet, then it's possible for a scriptwriter to do two shows. Two, I think, is optimum; it's like a full-time job.

When I say two shows, I mean story only, not screenplay. Otherwise, attempting an eight or 10-page screenplay is quite a bit for a day.

Let's take one of the earlier episodes of *Balika Vadhu*, say the clash that developed between the husband and wife, Jagya and Anandi. What would your contribution be to that part of the serial?

When you are involved with the story of the show, you cannot think episodically.

It's like a constant roll. You are thinking of a larger story arc -- what do I want these two people to do, what am I trying to say? What is the track? For example, we'd first decide if it was a Basant-Gehna (other characters in *Balika Vadhu*) track or is it a Basant-Gehna conflict track? At what point do we want to begin, what do we want to explore and where do we want to culminate?

And culminate may not mean end, it may mean pause for the moment because it's not the main track.

So, at one level, your mind is working towards the larger story arc. At another level, if it is a sub-track for example, you have to first write in detail how you see the story developing over the next few months before you get into finer points.

When you are making episodes, you have to balance the various tracks. You have to decide how much you will move with one sub-track because you know where you are moving the main track.

It's like being a weaver (*smiles*).

Image: From left: Avika Gaur, Anupam Kher and Gajra Kottary

As a scriptwriter, you have written a lot of serials. But *Balika Vadhu* has been by far the most successful. What did it feel like to create a serial that opened to so much angst and went onto to create such unforgettable characters?

It's not originally my story. The concept and story came from my senior colleague Purnendu Shekhar. He's from Rajasthan so he brought in the entire authenticity and everything that is so typical of that culture.

We have been working together since *Astiva*.

I've been involved from Day One with *Balika*. While the concept itself is very interesting, I really don't think it's the concept alone which has been able to last successfully for 700 episodes.

Each character in *Balika* is an author-backed character; so much so that you can give me a situation and I can tell you how any character in *Balika* will react to it.

It's not a fluke that a serial on child marriage has managed to do so well in the cities which have virtually nothing to do with child marriage.

The planning and waiting stage before *Balika* went on air was actually quite a bit; for a couple of months, we looked and relooked into whatever we were creating. Apart from the conceptualisation and the story itself, the situations we have created are immensely realistic and not just to do with child marriage.

We have taken a universal approach to inter-personal relationships. They will find resonance in the most unlikely of characters -- the middle class city couple sitting and watching will say, Oh my God, my

daughter could have been in this situation. Oh gosh! How would I feel as a mother if this were what my son did...

In terms of the social issues also, there has been a lot that is universal -- the fact that in every home there is either a matriarch or a patriarch. There are a lot of stifled emotions that age-old generation gap battle.

What's nice, I think, is that there are no blacks or whites in *Balika*; it's all shades of grey, every character, which is what we see around us.

Image: Gajra Kottary with her son
