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Book Review

A Review of *The Strength to Say No: One Girl's Fight against Forced Marriage*

Mouhssine Ennaimi with Rekha Kalindi; 125 Pages; Hardbound

New Delhi: Vikings by Penguin Books India; 2015

ISBN: 978-0-670-08854-6; Rs. 299.00

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The reviewer is an MPhil from Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit. Her areas of interest are diaspora literature of Indian immigrant writers and Indian writing in English. She has presented and published many papers. Recently, she submitted her PhD thesis on the novels and the study of Indian immigrant writers.

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The book *The Strength to Say No: One Girl's Fight against Forced Marriage* has been translated from French to English by Sarah Lawson who was born in Indiana in 1943. The book has been co-written by the collaboration of Rekha Kalindi, and Mouhssine Ennaimi, a French Journalist and a distinguished correspondent for Radio France, who has been working in India for the last five years. The book is published by Penguin that acquired international fame on social media. Ennaimi, in *Hindustan Times*, states: "Generations end up duplicating the mistakes of the past because it is easier to follow than to innovate... we need more people like Rekha to make a difference and to start thinking out side of the box, no matter how challenging the cost is socially." The book highlights the struggle of a village girl who inspires other youngsters of all over the world. The poor village girl Rekha Kalindi refused to get married at the age of 11 and since she was brutally starved and beaten by her mother for several days.

As an ambitious girl Kalindi becomes a role model for other girls to follow her footsteps while standing against child marriage. When she was in 10th standard Rekha dreamt to become a nurse in her life. But in her remote village Purulia, Bengal she helped her family by rolling handmade cigarettes. At the age of 11, she observed the life of little girls as well as her friends to go a line with their in-laws. The poor girls are supposed to be treated as slaves by their mother-in-laws. Rekha's parents found a suitable husband for her and took away her idea of schooling out of their stark poverty and starvation. The mother says to Rekha: "... waste of time at school when we have nothing to eat" (78). Rekha firmly announced the tragic experiences of her village life to the world and explained the ill-effects of child marriage. Thus, she insulted her parents and family in front of whole patriarchal society. The book discusses: "... in no time they will be the laughing stock of the whole village, the whole region and perhaps even of all of Bengal" (69). Meanwhile, many of the village children are inspired by Rekha's words and acquired the strength to say no to the tradition bound patriarchal norms.

In Indian educational system, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the female literacy was comparatively very lower rather than male literacy. The education for women is strictly prohibited and since most of them learned the household chores. In the book Rekha points out: "if I refused, it is because I know that their choice is not theirs but that of the community, which wishes to see each little girl go to her in-law family as soon as possible, often for economic reasons" (109). During British education a slight change came out of this concept and female education turned to be ancillary. Anyhow, widely accepted social norms and customs of India on the marriage of girls at an early age,

limited the girls' school-going for several years. William Adam states: "A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the minority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriages become a widow" (Forbes, 84). According to him the Hindu traditions and customs insist woman to pursue and depend their life under the shackles of fathers, then husbands and finally sons. The rituals are performed for the long life of their husbands and for the family of their in-laws. In such an Indian context, the book discusses the pathetic experiences and the struggle of a poor village girl in Bengal to go to school to get basic education.

The book is written in biographical style and even the layman can easily grasp the contents. In Rekha's village, the girl is being born as a burden. As an intelligent child Rekha was well aware of the consequences of forced marriages of girls at her age in the rural village. With strong determination, perseverance and courage she campaigned for the rights of young girls. She won world wide recognition later, and becomes the recipient of India's National Bravery Award held in 2010. The mode of writing against patriarchal social realities, which is still prevalent in Indian rural villages, received universal applause.

I realize that the book inspires the girls who still are the victims of such evils in our patriarchal society. The memoir, *The Strength to Say No*, delineates the valiant efforts of Rekha Kalindi who becomes the mirror image of a woman at the age of 11. In an interview, in *Hindustan Times*, she hopefully states: "... it will take time to change, but there will be more and more girls who will raise their voice against it. My uncle's daughters, for instance, have refused to get married until they complete their education. Thanks to television and news papers, people today are more aware of social ills like child marriage, and they understand that it is wrong." I believe Rekha's words and her voice echoes many poor children who are still suffering by such social evils. The book highlights the experiences of powerful mind of a young girl who struggled against the oppressions and inspired other girls to fight for justice.

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