

TITLE: The Katha Chest
AUTHOR: Radhiah Chowdhury
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READER: Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin

SYNOPSIS

Six-year-old Asiya loves to go to Nanu's house. Best among all of Nanu's treasures is the big old chest filled with quilts that tell the stories of the women in Asiya's family.

A beautifully woven tale about the bonds of love, culture and memory.

AUTHOR NOTE

In Bangladesh, where my mother grew up, kathas are light quilts used in every household. The art of making a katha is a special skill. Fashioned from layers of cotton saris so old as to have become unwearable, kathas tell their stories in the fabric itself, the stories of the everyday lives of the women who wore those saris and then painstakingly stitched them together to give comfort to their households.

ILLUSTRATOR NOTE

Growing up in Kolkata, my mother's cupboard of saris was always under lock and key. On the occasions that this cupboard was opened, my excitement knew no bounds! A hundred stories all wrapped within the pleats of these gorgeous textiles lay before me. *The Katha Chest* resonated with me for the same reasons. Each pattern created for the aunts' quilts is inspired by Radhiah's family saris as well as my own. The past spreads are inspired by the Bengali folk art called Pattachitra- cloth paintings with simple colours, bold lines and intricate details.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

The Katha Chest is fundamentally about the rich, varied, important stories of the women in my family, and migrant communities in general. I wanted to tell some of these stories while also encouraging readers to think of the multitude of other family stories and histories that are just waiting to be explored.

‘I think there is a general impression that the histories of women of colour and Muslim women are a monolith of quiet, repressed, traumatic experiences. I know just from my own family’s history that nothing could be farther from the truth. And my family experience is typical, not unique. I remember playing with my cousins as a little girl in Bangladesh, being completely unaware of the significance of the people and places around me. As I grew up, I learned more of my family history, and it made those memories of my childhood so much deeper and richer than I could have imagined at the time. And the most important, recurring feature in that history was the experiences of the women, through colonial occupation, civil war and reconstruction, living complex, varied lives, raising families and maintaining households as chaos brewed all around them. *The Katha Chest* is my way of celebrating and commemorating the stories of these women and countless others like them. There are a few male characters who appear in the illustrations, but they are not centred at all; the focus is very much solely on the women who are the heart of a family.

‘As second-generation migrants, I know there’s a sense of loss amongst my elders and peers that the next generation will lose the stories that make up our family history, but we’re never quite sure how to preserve those memories. I think this reflects the anxiety of migrant families from the developing world, that they have cut loose direct ties to their past in order to provide their children with a future, so family history becomes all about the tension of careful storytelling designed to preserve heritage without tying it with the trauma that led to migration.

‘Lavanya captures that tension so beautifully in her illustrations with the balance between her dynamic, animated artwork in the modern-day spreads, and the more stylised, static Pattachitra style of the historical spreads. And the fact that she’s used an art style so significant in our shared South Asian heritage makes my heart sing! What an absolutely gorgeous way to represent the art and culture of the Indian subcontinent. My most favourite thing about the way this book has come together is how Lavanya has woven together the common strands between my Bangladeshi Muslim heritage and her West Bengali Hindu heritage in this amazing artwork, quite literally using the textiles of our respective families to tell the story. I could not have thought of a better way to represent the essence of the book.’

Radhiah Chowdhury

AUTHOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Radhiah Chowdhury grew up in country NSW at the mercy of a highly enthusiastic children's librarian. She has been an avid lover of books ever since. She has edited books for children at Scholastic Australia, Allen & Unwin and Giramondo, and is currently a commissioning editor and audio producer for children and adults at Penguin Random House Australia. This has all been part of a crafty plan to make sure she is surrounded by books in all formats at all times. Radhiah's debut picture book, *Jumble*, was published by Omnibus Books in 2019. She is passionate about stories that reflect all the magnificent, different facets and experiences of our community, and has been an advocate for representative publishing in her work as both an editor and an author. She lives in southwest Sydney, where she recreationally grows mutant potted plants, and is currently outnumbered by her cats. They love books, too!

ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lavanya Naidu is an animator, designer and award-winning children's book illustrator, born and raised in Kolkata, India. She has illustrated for numerous children's books. Her work has most recently been featured at the Asian Festival of Children's Content as a selection for their Digital Gallery 2020. Lavanya now resides in Melbourne and is currently working as Head of Design on the second season of the ABC kids animated series - *The Strange Chores*. In her spare time, she enjoys making and collecting dinosaur models.

EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY

- Before opening the book show the cover illustration and run your fingers over the title as you read it out loud. Prompt responses from students by asking questions such as:
 - [Pointing to the chest in the illustration] What is a chest and what sort of things might people store in them? [Students may mention pirates and treasure which will enable you to talk about chests as objects in which valuable things are stored.]
 - What sort of treasure do you think the young girl here has found in the chest? [Students with South Asian heritage may understand the concept of kathas so it would be wonderful if they could be encouraged to explain it to the class. However, if students don't know or are shy, explain that kathas are light quilts made from the cotton of old saris or special dresses worn by women in countries such as India and Bangladesh.]
 - How do you think finding the kathas in the chest makes the girl feel?
 - Why do you think she feels this way?

- Do you want to discover more about kathas in the story?

Before opening the book explain to the class that they discovered quite a lot of information from the cover image alone and that the story they are about to read will feature some pages with illustrations and no words. Emphasise that the pages without words are very special and require students to look extra closely to discover the interesting stories within.

- Open the book and read the first three double-page spreads but stop before going any further and point to the medal that Asiya is holding. Ask students if they can think of sad times when people might receive a medal and discuss the idea that Boro Khala's husband could have gone to war. Turn the page slowly and encourage students to explain in their own words what they think might be happening in each of the panels. Point out that the images of guns and flags point to fighting in a war but try to keep the focus on the story of Boro Khala looking after her family while her husband was away. Point out that the sari that Boro Khala is wearing in each panel is now the katha that Asiya found in the chest in the previous spread.

Now turn the page and read the next double-page spread, stopping to talk about why Mejo Khala's fingers might always be stained with bright colours. Turn the page and let students explore her transformation from a child who loves drawing in the first panel to a woman who creates beautiful paintings and prints, stopping to talk about her time as a student activist. Before turning the page point out that the sari that Mejo Khala is wearing now is the katha Asiya was exploring in the previous double-page-spread.

Continue to Shejo Khala's story and talk about what the four panels tell us about her. Discuss her love of both reading and her little daughter in the first two panels but you may need to explain to young students the significance of the third panel where her daughter's ghost is rising from her deathbed. Ask students if they can tell who the children around Shejo Khala might be in the final panel if they are not her children. Before turning the page point out that the sari Shejo Khala is wearing is the same as the katha in the previous spread.

Continue in this fashion until the end of the book.

- Once finished, close the book and talk about it being Asiya's family history because it tells the story of her many aunts, cousins, mother and grandmother (as well as a little about her uncles). Encourage students to find out more about their own family

history. Ask very young students to bring in photos of members of their family and create simple family trees in class. Slightly older students can build upon the family tree idea by including names, dates of birth, birthplaces and marriages, while mid-to-later primary students can be given homework to interview parents, uncles, aunts and grandparents to include even more interesting details on the family tree.

- Return to the opening spread and study Nanu's house. Ask students if the house provides any clues about which country Nanu and Asiya are living in as the story opens. [Hint: both the exterior and interior of the house is very Australian.] Discuss how families migrate to Australia from other parts of the world and how this has made Australia a rich and varied culture. Ask younger students where their family has come from and some of the traditions – like kathas – they treasure. Encourage a class discussion around the different clothes, food and religious festivals that students have experienced. Older students can extend this discussion with ideas about why families might decide to migrate and why, in particular, Asiya's family might have decided to come to Australia. Be aware that some students might find this discussion traumatic because of their own experience.