

Till Lockdown Do Us Part

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SOFT ANIMAL

By Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan

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Amidst the looming Ides of March 2020, Mallika Rao realizes she doesn't like her husband anymore. Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's *Soft Animal* opens with this quiet statement of fact. As the Corona virus develops into a crisis of unprecedented proportions, Mallika finds herself locked in this realization. Through the course of this fictional memoir, Mallika trudges her way across lockdown limbo to finally face impending life decisions.

Soft Animal falls in the zone of Lockdown Literature or as *The New Yorker* called it 'The Literature of Cabin Fever'.¹ The works of this canon address the whole range of lockdown experience—from the complex challenges it threw before institutions to the acute psychological pressure it exerted on individuals and relationships. From RWA farmans to senior citizens, Tali-Thali to house helps, *Soft Animal* addresses multiple aspects of lockdown. Mallika Rao, the narrator of this novel observes herself as well as those around her with a keen yet detached eye. Mallika's voice in the early chapters sounds remote, disconnected, and somewhat dispassionate; it reflects a state of mental stupor—a conscious effort on the part of the narrator to turn off her mind. The narrative encompasses Mallika's journey from this state to facing up the inevitable.

Soft Animal is Madhavan's eighth book. Her first work, *You are Here* was published in 2008. The author is also known for her blog, 'Compulsive Confessions'. Mallika of *Soft Animal* comes from a long line of female characters styled by Madhavan. Be it *Layla the Ordinary* or Noor Khan Rai of *Split*, Satyavati of *The One who Swam with the Fishes*, or Arshi of *You are Here*, female characters of various age groups and time frames have figured in Madhavan's works. Mallika belongs to the privileged class and her worldview, as well as her concerns, can sound

languorous in the beginning of the book. But as the narrative progresses, layers of perceived normalcy fall off, and the reader becomes privy to the acute suffocation in her life.

Madhavan also brings up the many predicaments of apartment life in metropolitan cities, particularly in the face of situations like

pandemics. Isolation, pet problems, and the clash of the collective with the individual, are among the issues that come up during the narrative. Mallika, who is trapped in the caustic landscape of her own mind, takes to visiting a retired Brigadier who lives all by himself. The writer allows the two characters some moments of relief in each other's company. At this point, families become conspicuous by their absence. Would things have been better for Mallika and Mukund (her husband) if they had been in lockdown with their families?

The Indian family can be a valuable organic support system for young couples. But the institution comes with its baggage, which millennials like Mallika and Mukund repulse. Then again, the institution can act blind to all that it demands of its women. Chores, which are a constant irritant for Mallika are an example of this. She cooks, cleans, serves, washes, shops, walks the dog and does all the sundry jobs as Mukund buries himself in his laptop. What cuts her up is not that he doesn't participate but that he doesn't acknowledge. Strangely, in this she echoes the pain of all mothers, homemakers and carers. Like so many other women, earning or not, Mallika likes cooking and chooses to let go of a full time house help. But she hates the idea of getting trapped in a gender role: 'I think of myself as a feminist, but sometimes against my own will, I can feel myself slipping into a gender role, as easy as wearing a pink smocked frock and telling people I can't enter the kitchen when I have my period' (p. 44).

The reader meets Mukund in what is essentially Mallika's mind. At this point in her life, Mallika can see no redeeming qualities in him and is not sure she was ever in love with him. Mukund is self-absorbed and self-obsessed. He plays for an audience and it seems to Mallika that everything he does—from hanging



1 Frazier, Ian. 'The Literature of Cabin Fever'. Newyorker.com, April 4, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/04/11/the-literature-of-cabin-fever>. Accessed 16 July 2023.