

Paper cut out figures by Shyamala Rao

The task at hand was to write about persons that have made lasting and deep impressions on my personality. I have long accepted as a universally acknowledged fact that each of us is influenced, altered and changed by the people we encounter and the experiences we are subjected to. The effects may be obvious or subtle. The experiences contribute to who we become as adults and how we face our lives and conduct ourselves. In good times and bad, through success and failure, in public and in private, our past informs and shapes our present. I have conducted my life with the philosophy that if anyone wants to know what my past was like, all you have to do is to look at how I function in the present and you will glean all you need to know of what influenced me from the past. With this assignment I was venturing into the realm of my subconscious. I began to reopen old memories, re-examine my interactions and assign significance to some and explain how and why they were meaningful. Maybe relegate other cherished and closely held recollections to a lesser status. It was a little unsettling. Was this necessary? Would this journey into the past serve any purpose? Was it not better to let sleeping dogs lie?

I have believed and cherished Frank Sinatra's lines, "I did what I had to do, saw it through without exemption, I planned each chartered course, each careful step along the byway, and more, much more than this, I did it my way." I have tried to set my goals and work toward them in my own way. That said I have to acknowledge that my parents and the home environment had been conducive to reading extensively, expressing opinions freely, and learning to defend them vigorously. This was most influential in my development. I began to look outside the home for other significant influences. The first person who that came to mind was Auntie Gauba, the principal of a Montessori school "Shiv Niketan" in New Delhi. I was under her tutelage from age 8 to age 11.

I had been going to Holy Angels Convent school in Madras from January 1954 till December 1956 and had loved every day of it. I liked classes, the teachers, the other kids. It was all tremendous fun. I liked getting positive feedback and knew how to ingratiate myself with teachers and peers. I must admit I was rather a prig in those days. Then my family had moved to New Delhi. It was January 1957. I was 8 years old. Dad drove the family car up Curzon road and made a right turn into Hailey road. We approached 8 Hailey Road and Dad announced to my brother and me that we would be attending school there. He had chosen Shiv Niketan, a small private school run by Elizabeth Gauba.

Dad parked in the drive way of 8 Hailey Road and we got out and looked around. It was a huge mansion with a large perfectly manicured lawn in front. There were neatly shaped shrubs along the front of the house. There were several massive trees dotting the lawn. The setting looked grand and inviting. We climbed the stairs and entered a long corridor which ran along the entire front of the upstairs. To the left was a large living room with comfortable sofas, oriental rugs, clocks and figurines and pictures on the walls. It had an elegant, yet snug and comfortable feel. We were received by Auntie Gauba. It was evident that my father and Auntie Gauba had already met. Dad introduced

me to Aunty Gauba. She gave me a friendly hand shake and asked the usual questions adults asked of kids. She listened intently to my responses. I liked her. I was glad she was my new school principal. It was getting exciting, I now had a new school “Shiv Niketan” and a new Principal. Things in New Delhi were looking up. I had been bereft without a school to belong to, and had been feeling unmoored. Now I had a school to go to and a place to make new friends.

Aunty Gauba was about five foot seven, her silvery blond hair was pulled back into a bun and she was attired like any Indian woman, in a sari and blouse. When she moved her sari fluttered gaily behind her and the sweet fragrance of Chanel number five percolated the air. She was pleasant, warm and welcoming. She escorted me to my class room and there were two girls who would be my cohorts, Kiki and Dolly. The three of us had our classes together from that day on. My previous school had been a convent school, with 25 kids to a class, with monthly tests, marks, ranking in the class. My new school had none of that. No tests, no comparisons of scholastic achievements. In this school each student treated as unique and unrepeatable. It was a quite an adjustment for me. I missed the momentary feeling of superiority that came with being “first” in class; in tests and in ranks. It was confusing as to how to impress fellow students with this lack of structure. As an adult I can look back and see it was a good change for me. It broke the habit of preparing for tests, trying obsessively to get As and having the teacher set me up as the class standard. I was well on my way to becoming a disgusting showoff. “Shiv Niketan” freed me from this mind set. I could now read, at length, on any topic. My essays were corrected and graded on their own merit. There were books galore in each class room and the students could read any of the books and could take them home to finish. It was like being led to a wonderland of thoughts and ideas. Travel, adventure, history and biography, I was allowed to read any book in the school. I was enchanted. I came from a family of reading adults and this access to books in such profusion made me feel I had entered their world. It was a wonderful, magical and satisfying time in my life.

During the next few months, I found out, that Aunty Gauba was the founder of the school, “Shiv Niketan.” Elizabeth Gauba was a German transplant, she was married to a successful Indian businessman and their home was the same as the school, Number 8 Hailey Street. Aunty Gauba had married an Indian, had put down roots in New Delhi, embraced the clothes, the customs and language of her adopted country. She had founded the school, based on a modified Montessori system and classes were held for small groups of students and the older kids taught their younger peers some of the time. It was a school with a very small number of pupils, so each youngster got individualized attention and guidance. Aunty Gauba was my English teacher, my drama instructor and the one who held the keys to the magical world of drawing, painting, clay modeling and wood working. Every student in the school tried their hand at the creative arts and came out of the experience believing they could do anything, make anything.

My very best memories at “Shiv Niketan” were the daily readings from books, chosen by Aunty Gauba. Students in a fairly wide age range, 7 to 12 would sit on the oriental rugs in Aunty Gauba’s living room. She would sit in one of the comfortable sofas and would read aloud to her audience. She was a wonderful actress and would adopt a different voice and accent for each character. It was like being in a one person theatre

production. The very first book I listened to was Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." I was eight years old, loved stories of good against evil, rich against poor, and the more melodramatic the better. This book with its definitions of good Christian conduct, the condemnation of slavery, the obvious appeal to emotionality was mesmerizing for me. I became a devout abolitionist, a confirmed believer in Christian values and trusted that the good and the deserving would ultimately triumph. The reading sessions lasted one hour each day. Aunty Gauba provided "audio book readings" before such things existed. I fell in love with reading, literature, poetry and drama. Aunty Gauba introduced me to Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, stories from Egypt, Babylon, Mesopotamia, Persia and India. It broadened my horizons and made me a citizen of the world. What a great gift to give a young girl, not that I had any idea of the import of what I was being exposed to. At the time all I knew was this was my school and I was having a good time. I was with Aunty Gauba at "Shiv Niketan" for four years. Aunty Gauba, a German by birth and transplanted to India, inspired me to believe a person could live anywhere, get completely totally immersed in the culture and customs and be happy, productive and successful. She awakened me to the miracle of words, language, drama, and art. She handed those wondrous gifts to each and every one of her students. .

It did not strike me back then to learn very much more about Aunty Gauba. I knew she was from Germany and had been in India during the Second World War while India was still under British rule. So what happened to Aunty Gauba during the War? Was she interred as some of the Germans in India were or was she allowed to be free? What about her family back in Germany? How had they fared during the War? Did she have children of her own? Or were her students the children she didn't have? Was that why she was unfailingly kind and supportive? I never thought to ask. I didn't ever see her lose her temper with any of her pupils. I thought she was a person of a very even disposition. Much later I learned that she could be mercurial. She had been a close friend of Indira Gandhi until they fell out after a major argument. According to Indira Gandhi's biographer Aunty Gauba had actually slapped Indira Gandhi during this argument. Possibly she was the only person in the world who had dared to lay a hand on the only daughter of Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of India at that time and a person who would one day be the Prime Minister of India of India herself. I am still in shock over this bit of history. Apparently Shiv Niketan was considered an elite school that Indira Gandhi's sons had attended before they went to boarding school. Elizabeth Gauba was part of the highest echelons of New Delhi society. I didn't know any of this until many years later. There are still a lot of facets of Aunty Gauba's life and her personality I know nothing about. To me she was my teacher and she made a tremendous impact on my life by living her life with grace and elegance and by opening up whole new vistas to

I have been puzzling over the limited knowledge I have of so many aspects of her life. I began pondering as to whether all of our interactions with others are so limited. It seems to me we have intense relationships that have a lot of significance and meaning at the time, but how well do we know the "other?" I am beginning to believe that all of us relate to one other as "paper cut out figures." I had four years with Aunty Gauba. Four years during which I had loved her, learned from her but only knew a little about the facets of her life that I was witness to and nothing at all about the other aspects of her life.

She was colorful, vivid, interesting and exciting to me but the depth was so very limited. Not that she was not a three dimensional figure to me. Of course she was that, but only to a paper thin depth. It brings to mind a quote from EM Forster in which he says, "We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy." Yes that "approximate" knowledge of Aunty Gauba has been sufficient to influence my perception of self, of literature and art. Many of the choices made subsequently, in my life, have been influenced by her role modeling. Especially the choice of becoming a transplant in a land distant from my own and immersing myself in the culture, customs and values of the chosen home. It has been so rewarding and joyous, thanks to Aunty Gauba. She was from Germany and made her home in India and I, came from India and made my home in the US .

After four marvelous years at "Shiv Niketan" I was moved to a convent school at the Middle School level. My tenure with Aunty Gauba's benevolent, caring guidance was over. I was placed in the more structured, disciplined, and somewhat unimaginative system that is the hallmark of convent school education in India. I did carry with me happy memories of "Shiv Niketan." Aunty Gauba's "paper cut out figure" has accompanied me all through my life. Each one of us is in possession numerous "paper cut out figures" from the past. These figures flourish in the nooks and crannies of our minds. They continue to inform and influence our lives in a myriad ways. In my case, without a doubt, of all the "paper cut out figures" I own, Aunty Gauba is the most flamboyant and memorable.