

*My Page in Ginibi's Book*

**Maria Preethi Srinivasan**

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A classic is generally described as a work that one returns to time and again. The classic in this sense may even be a classic passage, line or page: something that one loves to read again and again. The return to a work (passage, line or page) is not always compelled by the aesthetic: the compulsion could arise from something very personal. It could very well be the case that the lines/words/ideas compel the reader to 'return' because they have struck a chord in him/her. For me that 'chord' was the story of how Ruby Langford Ginibi became a writer.

*Don't Take Your Love to Town* is a narrative that throbs with the feelings of an Aboriginal woman who accepted life as it came to her: she loved life – she rode every crest and worked her way out of every low trough. Her journey through life was 'eventful' –an honourable woman *picaro* she was indeed: her adventurous life teemed with places, people and happenings. She had beautiful and nurturing relationships with women friends and easily succumbed to romantic men who promised love but couldn't care for fidelity, who made children but didn't want responsibility. She loved her children (nine of them) and they loved her in return. She worked hard for them but found it hard (with some of them) to keep them out of trouble.

*Don't Take Your Love To Town* is, as she states in her own words (in the Acknowledgements), "a true life story of an Aboriginal woman's struggle to raise a family of nine children in a society divided between black and white culture in Australia" (n.page). In the midst of her anxieties as a single mother, she found solace in writing. She lets her readers into those quiet and self-fulfilling moments - "At night when the kids were asleep I started to write, and that made me feel happy. I entered a NADOQ (National Aborigines Day Observance Quest) writing competition. The subject was what you would like to become. And I wrote about doctoring. A while later I received notification that I'd won the quest" (Langford 109).

Time and again Ginibi's narrative makes recourse to the fact that writing her life story was crucial to coping with her struggles in life. It was indeed fortuitous that Ginibi's personal need to write and the activism around rights for Aboriginal people was synchronous. In *Don't Take You're your Love to Town* she recounts, "I heard about the Aboriginal Progressive Association [APA] and I decided to go to the meetings. Charlie Perkins was there...We elected Charlie Perkins spokesman...I was elected editor for our newspaper *Churringa* (meaning message stick).

Ever since school and the long stories I'd wanted to do some writing, so I was happy" (Langford 115). Ginibi had through this circumstance been set on the path to fulfil her destiny as a writer.

Reflections on this passage suggest that the 'power of expression' doesn't actually drop from the sky. The 'power of expression' is certainly the outcome of a process or maybe several processes. Ginibi's meeting with the APA and subsequent involvement is one part of that process. Similarly her informal education at Tranby College only boosted and bolstered what she had acquired through her association with the APA. She had, through the Aboriginal grapevine come to know of Tranby, the Aboriginal College in Glebe (Sydney). Here she watched many video presentations on Aboriginal issues and she recorded the transforming effect they had on her when she wrote

I watched 'Surviving Culture', and felt the powerful feeling you get in a room of educated Aboriginals. One thing surprised me – the number of white people there – teachers, students, church people – all interested in the betterment of our culture and our people....It opened my eyes to a lot of things not spoken about in books....These things had a strong effect on me and showed me how most books in white culture have so little value. What is an autobiography compared to a dreaming track? ....The pen is mightier than the sword but the finger in the sand is mightier than that, in its own way. (Langford 255)

To me Ruby Langford Ginibi is not only a 'powerful writer', but one who was empowered to write. The story behind the writing of *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is the story of her empowerment. I did not have the privilege of meeting her. But her writing spoke to me. I had read a number of Aboriginal women's autobiographies when I was considering enrolment in a PhD program at the University of Madras. I was at that stage in life when I was getting along famously with women colleagues (at the Department of English, Queen Mary's College, Chennai) who were much older than me (they ranged between fifteen to twenty five years older than myself). I somehow preferred their company to those of my own age. There was so much to learn from what they shared and I drew strength for my own journey by being in their company. This inclination extended to the books I chose to read and one such book that gave me strength was Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. A poem - "Women's Writing" - that I wrote recently I dedicate to Ruby Langford Ginibi

#### Women's Writing

I thank God for the women who've been open  
I've found myself through many of them  
I also wish  
The men wouldn't read what we write  
(Especially, the women-stalking type)  
Sometimes I wish that if they did  
It would be an eye-opener  
To the strength and beauty  
Of their mothers

Sisters  
Wives  
And  
Daughters.

I look back with regret to a moment when I could have shaken hands with Ruby Langford Ginibi. That missed opportunity was in the year 2006 when I had just arrived in Sydney. I had been awarded a fellowship, the Endeavour Asia Award, to pursue a one year program as visiting scholar at UNSW. Here I had met Kim Johnston who was working with Gleebooks. She told me about the Sydney Writers Festival and when I got there she took me up to where Ginibi was signing books and motioned for me to go up and introduce myself. Ginibi was too engrossed in what she was doing and I couldn't bring myself to go up to her and talk to her. Something within me said, "No, not now. It might look like you're being too pushy".

I have known Ruby only through her work. My spirit responded with a resounding "yes, of course" when I heard Ruby say in an interview "writing that book [*Don't Take Your Love to Town*] took the pressures off me and put them on the page" ('Australian Biography'). At the same time all the Aboriginal life writings that I read nudged me to reflect on the number of untold stories: oppressors and the mechanism of oppression ensure that silence reigns in the camp of the oppressed. It occurred to me that it took some degree of 'empowerment' to articulate that experience of living on the fringes of society. Through my research I tried to get to the bottom of the story, behind the story, that is, the story of how Aboriginal women writers like Ruby Langford Ginibi 'gained a voice'. It often seems to me (from my own experience of writing, as well) that though a writer may look for words, in reality it is the words which find the writer and give him/her that much needed feeling of liberation that comes through self-expression. I believe that the words found Ruby before she found them.

To her memory, I dedicate these lines

**Words**  
Words have wings  
They're always on the move  
They make it their business  
To travel back and forth  
Between sexes  
Between races  
Words are out of business  
Without these spaces  
They steal upon the stricken soul  
And rob her of her rage  
By carrying it on their shoulders  
And laying it on the page.

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**Maria Preethi Srinivasan** is an Assistant Professor in English at Queen Mary's College, Chennai, India. She has submitted her doctoral thesis and is awaiting the award of the degree from the University of Madras. Her proposal for a doctoral research on a transnational study of Australian Aboriginal and Indian Dalit and Adivasi women's life writings secured for her the Endeavour Award for the year 2006, sponsored by DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training), Government of Australia. Under the aegis of the award she was a visiting scholar at the School English, Media and Performance Studies, UNSW, Sydney, till October 2007. Maria has presented five papers on Australian Studies at international conferences held in India. Three of them have been published following which she got to be published in *Aboriginal History* of ANU (Australian National University) and *Southerly*. She has also chosen to work simultaneously on a visual presentation (a documentary film) of her doctoral research project titled "Australian Aboriginal and Indian Dalit and Adivasi Women's Life Writings as Sagas of Empowerment". For this project she received an Australia India Council Fellowship for 2008. She also has a strong inclination towards expressing herself through poetry and hopes to bring out a collection someday.