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BOOK REVIEW

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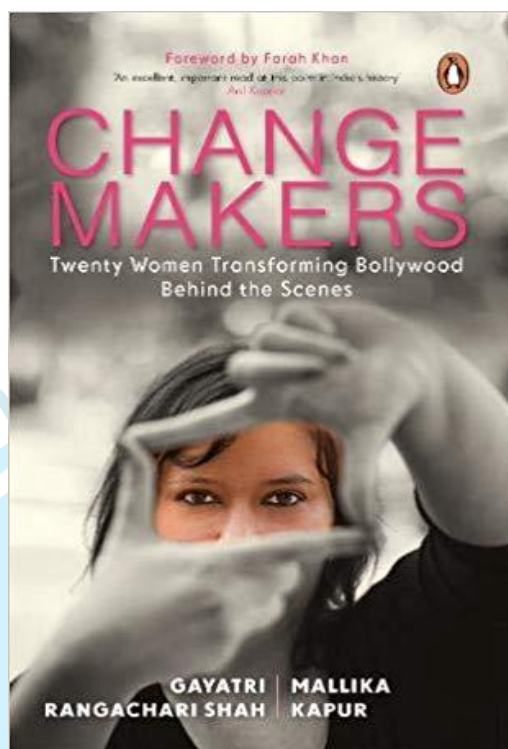
## Of Inspired and Inspiring Women

Changemakers: Twenty Women Transforming Bollywood Behind the Scenes

By Gayatri Rangachari Shah, Mallika Kapur

Reviewed by Ronica Wahi

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## Changemakers: Twenty Women Transforming Bollywood Behind the Scenes

By Gayatri Rangachari Shah, Mallika Kapur

First published: October 17, 2018, Penguin.

Edition reviewed: October 17, 2018, Penguin.

Pages: 299. Price: Rs.399/-

ISBN: 9780143441731

The *Introduction* to the book says, “While India has not yet had its #MeToo movement, it is encouraging to see more women speak out about harassment, whether it’s in the judiciary, in sports or in cinema...We hope it continues to fuel a growing confidence among the women of India, who are increasingly bolder, stronger and less afraid.” (p. xii) Happily, however, around the time that this book was getting published, India’s #MeToo movement started with Tanushree Dutta’s bold step. The book comes at the right moment – also in view of the start of the aforementioned movement, with the right objectives, and the right dose of inspiration!

*Changemakers: Twenty Women Transforming Bollywood Behind the Scenes* chronicles the lives of twenty remarkable women who represent the changing roles of women in the film industry and, to some extent, in the society. The achievements are striking in themselves and more strikingly so when juxtaposed against the limited role of women in the industry till not so long ago. Most readers would perhaps not know about any of these women, barring Kiran Rao, Anupama Chopra, and Geeta Kapur; and perhaps not much about the significance of the achievements of the women that they do know about.

Choosing women handling different aspects of film-making in India, and revealing their work-specific and other struggles, including gender-related ones, was certainly an ambitious project. The authors – Gayatri Rangachari Shah and Mallika Kapur – who are themselves accomplished and respected journalists – have fulfilled such ambition with flying colours. Farah Khan, a known figure and definitely a symbol of feminine achievement, is a great choice for the *Foreword* and she aptly sets the context. Research into who must make it to the list, research about the lives of the chosen women – including conducting multiple interviews for each piece – and research into other necessary aspects that help relate the twenty stories make this a worthwhile addition to the available works on Indian cinema.

Each story begins with an interesting or defining moment in its protagonist's life, and moves non-linearly, unfolding the protagonist's story bit by bit, layer by layer. This gradual unravelling keeps the reader engaged and curious to know about how the achiever charted her individual journey. Each narrative is peppered with delectable elements and anecdotes, and real-life struggles that find an instant connect with the reader. Some of the struggles have been gendered and, unfortunately, have instances which include witnessing or suffering violence. A common thread that runs through and ties the narratives together is the assertion of individual strength and talent. These women achievers and others assert that their gender has not been able to stop them from achieving their goals; rather for them, and for other women in the industry too, it is their talent – not their gender in any way – which has enabled them to progress. Many women in the industry are taking on other women to do jobs as part of their teams because they deserve it and not because they are women.

The stories are a reflection of these women's attitudes towards life – they have dared to dream big and to boldly chase those dreams! Not only has their presence changed the dynamics of the traditionally male-dominated industry but it also has brought in new hues and a new degree of professionalism to the art of film-making. Within the narratives are woven achievements of other women associated with the industry as well, marking this book as an important document that brings forth the contributions of many unsung doers. Diligence, perseverance, passion, and courage define these women. While they do not adhere to the accepted and expected roles of women within the industry, they are proud women, who are happily performing their 'womanly' roles within their families. This fact makes it easier for readers to become inspired to dream big, knowing that it is indeed possible to bravely chase unique goals without totally compromising on the family aspect.

Fortunately and importantly, these women have had men encouraging and supporting them – and this is a really positive thing, not because women cannot achieve without the help of men in some way but because the right (and rightfully deserved) endorsement and encouragement from men in a male-dominated industry and society do help alter perspectives, particularly when such endorsements and encouragement

come from men who hold sway. It is heartening to see big names in the industry championing the accomplishments of these women, and this points to the fact that there is hope for the future. Moreover, many of these women have had the good fortune of having encouragement from male members of their own families.

To their great credit, these women have grasped the encouragement and opportunities with gusto, - and fought for opportunities when there were none to reach where they are today. If some have broken traditions and have been flag-bearers in their fields, some have fought for rights. Charu Khurana, for example, fought against a decades-old ban that denied women opportunities to become make-up artists. So, these women have also opened doors for many others – and not always women alone.

Hope is one great factor making this book remarkable. Undeniably, each story carries a glimmer of hope for women – and men too - who want to make a mark in the specific fields within the industry. Identifiable aspirations, motivations, and struggles are sure to give the impetus to others to follow their hearts' desires! There is inspiration to be fearless – to follow what one believes in, regardless of whether it is the untrodden path or not. For example, Hetal Dedhia has chosen to be a gaffer, regardless of whether women aspire for such roles, and Priya Seth has chosen to be a cinematographer, proving that when women are determined, they can carry heavy equipment and perform technically complex shoots. Women have chosen to be stunt artists even though the widely-held perception is that a woman with bodily scars may find it hard to get married. There are only twelve women out of a total of 581 stunt artists registered with the *Movie Stunt Artist Association*.

One of these women stunt artists is Geeta Tandon, whose story is especially inspirational. Her profession is risky, and Geeta is rightly dubbed a daredevil by the media. Her journey is a testimony to this. Despite having no place to go to, she escaped a horrible marriage after suffering years of sexual abuse, taking her children along and starting life afresh. Her story is an account that tells women to be bold enough to fight for themselves and their self-respect. That aspect of respect for oneself and for other women is strong in this book – for the casting director Shanoo Sharma, for instance, a woman sending inappropriate pictures in her portfolio was distasteful; Sharma's clear message to the woman was that this was not what she needed to do.

Each story has lessons to give, and is an insight into individual struggles and ways of coping with those struggles. The authors and the women whose stories are narrated are sure to motivate many young women to challenge themselves. Besides, it offers other things to learn – for example, it provides insights about some aspects of the industry loved by crores of people and about life in general; additionally, it is fascinating to discover new dimensions about loved songs and films. For those aspiring to make it into the film industry, there are some helpful cues as well.

Each story begins and progresses differently, retaining that same quality of gradual revelation. Each story speaks to the reader. The language is lucid – recreating the journeys in a story-like fashion and demonstrating how the authors themselves are gifted artists. An arresting cover design by Neelima P Aryan and beautiful pictures of the twenty women by Vijay Bedi add to the overall appeal of the book.

For those looking for a source of inspiration to excel, be it in the film industry or any other domain, this book is a must. To many, it can give some useful formulae, such as

the one that the producer Guneet Monga, whose story finds a place here, talks about. She talks of faith in the divine and says,

“I attribute it to the simple *funda* of asking the universe, and it shall be done...I have been able to do a lot because I have been fearless in asking.” (p. 35)



Ronica Wahi completed her MA in English from the University of Delhi in 2014. She dedicated the next three years to furthering her capacities in language in the role of a Creative Writer with the firm Experts' Global. Here, she was engaged in a variety of writing and editing tasks, and also in content development for GMAT prep. She received awards for her good quality work during this corporate experience, including the award Ms. Meticulous. Owing to her inclination towards different aspects of culture, she completed a course in Art Appreciation from the National Museum Institute, New Delhi in 2015, and started her training in the classical Indian dance form of Kathak in October 2015. She started writing book reviews in December 2017. She won the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize book review contest, June 2018 for her review of *The Tree with a Thousand Apples* by Sanchit Gupta. She has also been learning Spanish from Instituto Cervantes since November 2017.

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