

BOOK REVIEW

Matriarch: Autobiography of an elephant

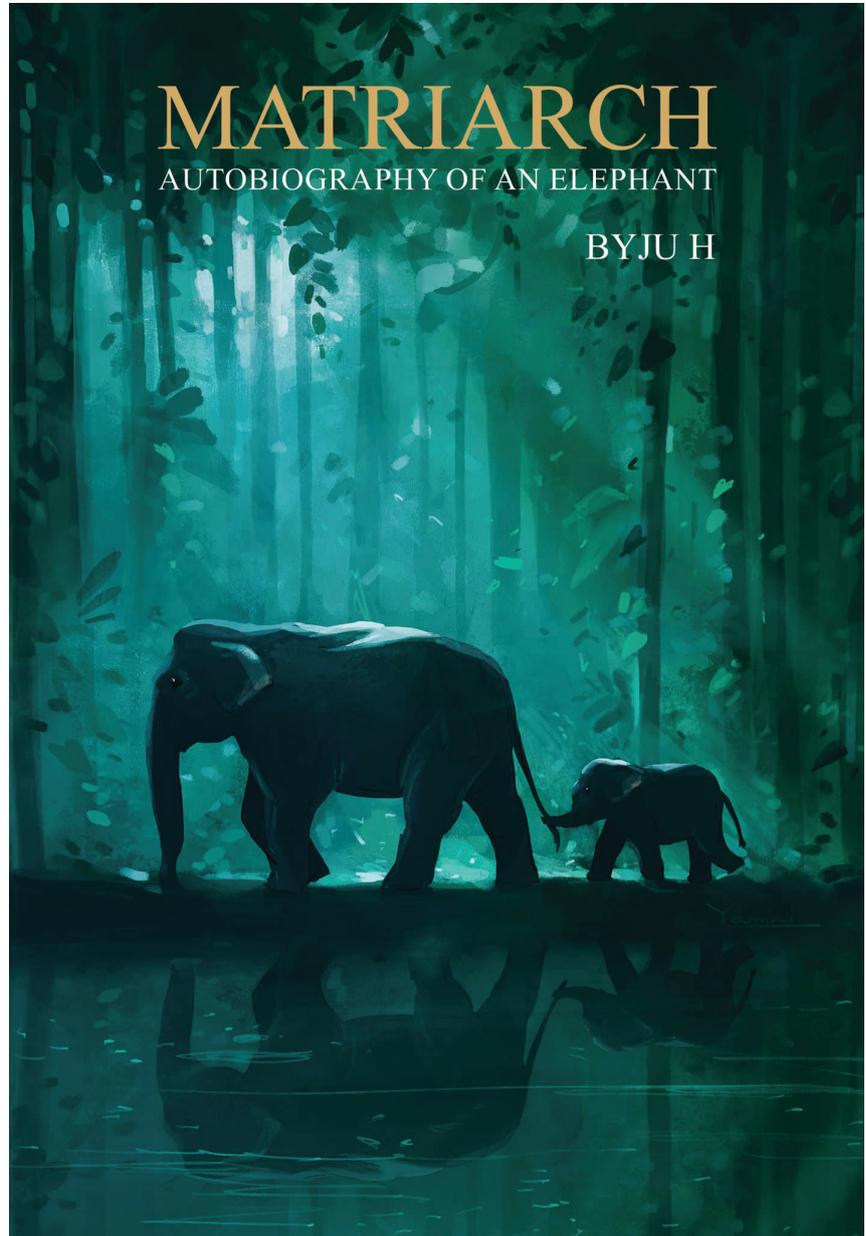
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"He stood still, and we could feel the electric current through his body. I tried to pull him away. The attempt was futile. His body sends many distress calls. Before he could succeed in pushing us through the fence, he collapsed. His trunk had fumes coming. The trunk had burn marks. The burning smell of the flesh was disturbing. The distress calls followed." - Banti, the Matriarch.

Banti is 55, a true mother, grandmother, and head of a family. They live in the vast scape of Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, more specifically around Masinagudi and Singara. She is friendly with her neighbours, especially with the wild Sundhari & family, and Bhama & the gang who live in the camp nearby. Banti has a friend named Siva; a forest man who is known to her from the time Siva was a young tribal boy.

Thanks to Banti, we are able to hear more about their family life, the arrangement within their family, their relationship with



other families, daily routines, food and landscape preferences, and emotions. Banti is old and wise, so, she knows how to tell her true story to the reader without boring. She does not need to invent any twists and turns as their life is

otherwise full of that, and hence no fabrication and imagination.

From her jubilant and all your landscape filled with joy and food, long migratory movements, peaceful living along with tribes in

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her younger days, she has seen everything. She narrates how they lost their landscape to dams and estates, buildings and cultivation, their regular and migratory paths to roads and obstructions.

She understands some of these, but not everything; she is confused between a gun-wielding doctor and a bandit. Why would one help and another kill using the same-looking weapon in hand? She is also confused about how humans behave differently towards them in the day and at the night. She empathizes with the behaviour of her young adult relatives when they come of age and their need to be aggressive.

Banti also opens a door on her love affair and how she longed to show her daughter to her father. Meanwhile, while she takes a rest, she lets her love Siddu talk to us and the errand boy Murthy to narrate their ordeal. I believe we live in a better world, in comparison. Banti and her sisters and others in the family passionately bring up the young and teach them how to grasp bamboos, bend, stand over them and feed on leaves.

Banti knows her neighbours in the camp well; she has a friend, Bhama, who sarcastically tells Banti that she is the Matriarch of the camp. The camp is not much of an ordeal nowadays according to the inmates, as before.

However, Banti is all agony and pains with the plenty of problems they have, and she feels, living in their own home is becoming stressful. From Jackfruit poisoning, electric fencing, bursting crackers, throwing fire, high beam lights, noisy traffic, and trenches, she has a long list to worry and negotiate, apart from handling their natural predators like Wild dog and Tiger from not attacking their young calves.

The book portrays the changes that happened in the landscape and the impact it created on their natural life over six or seven decades. This could be related to any other major elephant habitats anywhere in the country. The cover design and illustrations are also neatly done in tandem with the narration. This book is a brilliant effort in retrospection for conservationists to understand the changes that happened around

us through the past decades in a simple read.

Banti made me sad. She made me ashamed of what we did/do to them. She made me think. I need to stop her frequently from narrating, to take stock of what she said and ponder over it. She knows not everyone can be kind like her friend, Siva, the forest man, but she wants to live with us, co-exist with us. It is her and their rights as much as ours. She wants us to understand their needs, freedom, and movements. I told her, the best man to convey her story and feelings to the human is Byju. Byju obliged Banti and made a beautiful narration on her behalf. Byju feels he has to do so, expecting nothing in return from the largest existing land animals called Elephants!

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