



The Invisible Canvas

Kalyani Adusumilli

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The introspective novel The Invisible Canvas follows a woman as she uses therapy to come into her own.

In Kalyani Adusumilli's intricate novel *The Invisible Canvas*, a South Asian American woman's emotional breakdown leads to healing and personal rediscovery.

An attorney and epidemiologist, Jansi lives in Houston with her husband and two sons. One afternoon, she is informed by the police that her elderly father was "driving erratically," miles from home. Indeed, following his treatment for a brain tumor, he has been experiencing disorientation and memory issues. But Jansi's mother reacts to the incident with irrational aggravation, suggesting that if Jansi visited more often, her father wouldn't "wander."

Though Jansi's relationship with her mother was always strained, this accusation causes a "quiet tether of control" to snap. Overburdened by work, domestic matters, aging parents, and the recent deaths of her sister and a beloved aunt, Jansi also struggles with fragmented recollections of childhood sexual molestation. Her mother's comment releases a surge of repressed anguish; Jansi later overdoses on wine and antidepressants. Afterward, she feels shame and regret, hoping to be released from the hospital with minimal followup. But her doctors advise that she will need to spend a month at a mental health facility, undergoing therapy and other treatment.

Jansi is an engaging heroine, both perceptive and creative. Living within a framework of Indian cultural and social expectations, she feels both grounded and oppressed, worrying about the "stigma surrounding therapy in the Indian community." Still, as she navigates her mental health program, she also explores her repressed emotions and aspirations. Her internal conflicts lead to sustained tension.

The characterizations are complex on the whole: Jansi's husband, Dev, tries to balance his career ambitions with his earnest commitment to his wife and family. Jansi's often distant and critical mother, Padma, admits to a youthful passion for art and shows fleeting vulnerability during a return visit to India. But when Jansi reveals that she was sexually abused by her cousin, Padma replies that such "things happen" and that the cousin will face his eventual "karma." And in one of the book's most touching moments, Jansi's boisterous mother-in-law surprises her with a cup of tea and the empathetic observation "Women carry too much. No choice, ah? Just keep going."

Instances of redundancy arise during Jansi's therapy sessions, as her doctor addresses personal boundaries, "journeys," and "unpacking" emotions. But when Jansi begins her recovery journal, her diary entries proffer evolving insights. She also reconnects with her love of writing, leading to a gratifying conclusion that's one more "step toward reclaiming her life."

About the pressures of cultural and gender obligation within the Indian community, the engrossing novel *The Invisible Canvas* follows a woman's integrated personal emergence.

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