

**Toolika Rani's *A Wild Flower*, Sabre & Quill Publishers, New Delhi, 2024,  
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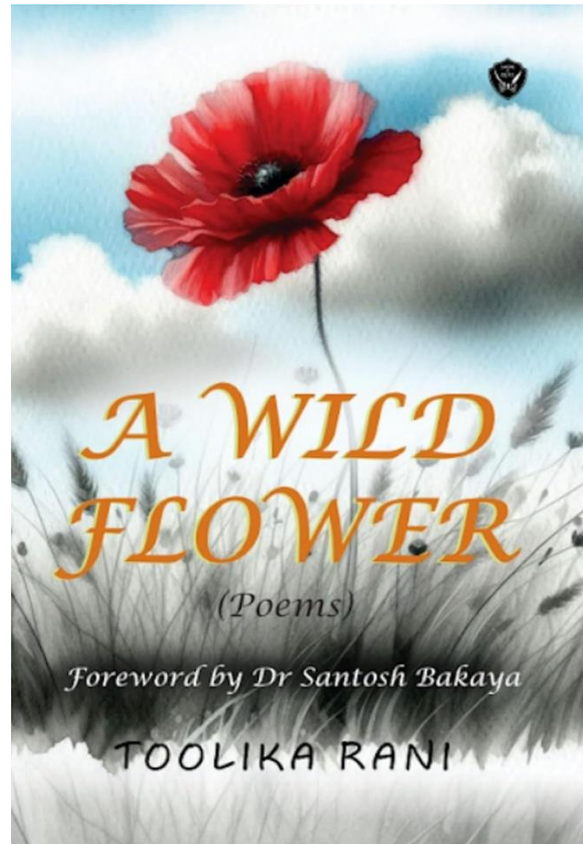
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(Squadron Leader (Dr.) Toolika Rani is an ex-Air Force Officer, internationally acclaimed mountaineer, Motivational Speaker (TEDx), G-20 Brand Ambassador for Uttar Pradesh (2023), academic, writer and poet. She has published seven books including *A Wild Flower* (2024). Her poems have been published in reputed journals, magazines and anthologies worldwide. She has edited an Anthology of Poems on the Himalayas as well. She is the recipient of nineteen prestigious awards including Sahitya Shree and Young Writer Award.

The collection 'A Wild Flower' consists of fifty poems which are exceptional in their scope and magnitude. Toolika's poetic canvas

is a fusion of love, longing, liberation/ freedom, darkness, war, human relation, plight of women, and what not. Her poetic fabric is decorated with simple and soothing phraseology and evocative imagery (mostly drawn from nature) having no space for cacophonous words. She preferably writes in free verse which is a reflection of her impulse for freedom and the release of her soul. However, some of her poems follow a particular rhyme scheme too. Her poems are the outpourings of her heart. When she describes a thing, one not only reads it, but feels it too.

The title 'A Wild Flower' excites our curiosity and it serves as an arch through which we can peep into the poet's world. The flower with its distinct 'fragrance' is wild 'never to be enslaved'.



Like 'Gulmohar', another flower that the poet deals with in the collection, it holds people in awe and they admire it from afar not daring to come near it. It is a blend of wildness and beauty which serves to remind one that beauty in its wild state is irresistibly beautiful. Toolika's poetic self dovetails well with the eponymous flower which she aptly refers to as “the kaleidoscope of nature”.

Toolika is a mountaineer whose passion for climbing entails her being on the move quite often. Therefore, she naturally draws her sustenance “From the endless sky/ And the oceans vast/From the lands unknown”. To her, the mountain peaks are heaven's stairs that form 'a bridge between the human and the/Divine'. She is happy that the mountains have, by and large, remained free from the corruptible human intervention.

The poem 'The Human Spirit', extols the wonderful capacity of the human spirit which can guide a man through “the harshest storms”. It can transform 'filth' into 'beauty'. It is fearless and, therefore, it affords one the courage to fight “devils and dictators”. The poet describes herself as an amalgam of “half-human, half-bird”- a being full of the desire for absolute freedom. She strongly wishes that human beings must enjoy freedom to bloom and grow and flow freely like the flowers, the trees, and the rivers respectively. No “shackles of mediocrity” should chain the human spirit that is neither “similar nor familiar” to anyone.

Toolika believes in the careful selection of words which must come filtered through the mind because they represent our emotions and ideas. In her poem 'Words', she states that only the best words chiseled and packed with 'knowledge', 'ideas' and wisdom should organise to form a body called poetry. In 'Let Them Flow Gently', she shows her preference for words that are not sudden like the shot of “an arrow” but are spontaneous like “the flow of water”. Words, she holds, are the most potent medium to mitigate our “emotional desolation”.

In the poems 'A Woman Like That' and 'A Woman's Desire', the poet delves deep into the psyche of both man and woman and compares their emotions and longings. According to her, while man longs for a woman's company to “douse the fire within”, woman beseeches her lover to bring for her “a bunch of mountain flowers” and “a string of twinkling stars”. For Toolika, man stands for the body, woman for the heart. And, together, they construct a whole. Toolika, being an ex-Air Force Officer, is alive to the futility of war. Therefore, she yearns for a future when peace can break out instead of war. In the poem 'Peace', she locates peace “in the space between/ The sun and the earth”. That is, peace is to be found in the lap of nature. In the poem 'Victory', the poet is pained to see the human world being caught up in the

“struggle for survival” and “the trust in humanity” being lost “in the echoes of bombs and rockets”.

The poet is an empathetic soul who cannot stand the sight of homeless animals moving here and there in search of a shelter. In the poems 'The Eyes on Man' and 'The Mermaid', the poet is agonized to see pigeons sitting on the electric wires, whales and mermaid writhing in and running out of hot and drying oceans, penguins struggling due to vanishing ice, lions disappearing with the disappearing jungles, and earthworms slithering on the concrete road. This earth, the poet believes, has space enough to accommodate all species. And human beings must not usurp the space given to other species by God for their own use only.

Being a woman herself, Toolika visualises a world where women can enjoy a respectable status and live a life of freedom. She is critical of the traditional concept of women that accords a secondary status to them in society. She believes that women are born as free as men. So they must live their life freely and fully. In the poem 'A Woman', she calls upon the modern women to “grow wings” and develop “very strong legs”. They should shake off “the load of generations” from their shoulders and move forward in life with “Gaiety in their/ Spirit”. Men must respect women as a human being if human civilization has to survive. Women deserve to be loved, respected and admired simply for what they are and what they do and achieve in their life. For Toolika, her mother is her real home, her only haven and heaven on earth. In the poem 'The Fairy Mother', she puts her on a very high pedestal. Her mother holds a very high 'stature' in her life. She is her very soul. Her “soft arms” cuddle her “like a baby”. She is grateful to God for blessing her with such an angelic mother ‘who had never bowed/ To surrender me to the cruel world”.

Toolika's poetry resonates and engages with the readers who find themselves in her shoes at several places in her poems. She soothes the readers with her cadences and saddens them with her concern about the plight of women and animals. Like a soothsayer, she prophesies that the happiness of mankind lies in peace and its progress in the progress of women. While reading her poems, one finds a reflection of one's soul in them. We wish to receive more such poetic gems from her.