



## The next best dark lady of science

Suddenly the size of the known universe had expanded in a single leap by a greater amount than it had in centuries! Its character had changed, too, as had almost everything else.

- Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing* (2012), p. 8.

Pardon me. I look as if I am making tangible grading of scientists. *Au contraire* it's just a revelation of my ignorance. Read on.

To resume from our last stop of the editorial, the genre pervades, as I read Krauss' new book (opening quote). I cannot help but wonder why this other woman is so obscure, nay, hidden from the league of extraordinary science celebrities. Of course if you think that Big Bang is a cheap ideology of some zealots, or just so story at best. There is absolutely nothing to be excited about. But then general opinion would be divided on the subject and you would certainly end up with a minority.

Edwin Hubble is no stranger to those who have a slightest fascination on astronomy. In fact he was the most towering giant of man who was denied Nobel Prize purely on policy grounds [astronomy – be surprised – was not considered a part of physics back then]. It is by modern standard hard to fathom any scientist of such stature to have been deprived of one of the most deserving discoveries in the annals of humankind, or of the universe itself.

Anyway, the maxim 'Behind every successful man is a woman' rings true for Hubble. Let's raise hands if we ever heard, even in fleeting memory, of Henrietta Swan Leavitt? I would count none, or very few indeed.

For a start she has nothing to do with *Black Swan*. Don't laugh yet. If I tell who she precisely was you might laugh your head off [but no suicidal pact intended]. Well, she was a 'computer'. Now you can titter, but I warrant you it's no joke. Since 1893 she was

employed as, yes, 'computer' [Mac or Microsoft were unheard of in the days] at the prestigious Harvard College Observatory, purely for her academic excellence. Her job was the equivalent of contemporary data analysis. Further irony. Women, of any kind, were restricted to operate the main telescope! Therefore her position was as far as female of any species could possibly attain in astronomy.

But the great tidings was, she was extraordinarily brilliant. I am no physicist, so let me evade the jargons in the interest of those who side with me. She was the first genius to decipher the true meaning of the expanding universe purely in terms of physical formulation. Our universe suddenly became enormously vast and is irrevocably growing. The later and much heralded Hubble's discoveries were all based on Leavitt's law and interpretations of the data.

Irony of ironies, her name was proposed at the Nobel Foundation for the 1926 Nobel Prize in Physics. But when her personal information was requested, a reply from her colleague said that she kicked the bucket four years earlier. Her name was blotted out from the list of contenders, and thus from most of our recognition.

I surmise that the immortal Shakespeare would have sincerely adored her. His surreal statement, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,' was vindicated to a grotesque reality.

**K. Lalchandama**