

### Three Exemplars of Sensitive Femininity

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Several centuries ago, the revered poet Bhartuhari portrayed pristine femininity thus:

*karyeshu dasi*  
*karaneshu mantrai*  
*roopesu lakshmi*  
*kshamaya dharitri*  
*bhojeshu maata*  
*sayanesu rambha*  
*satdharma nari*  
*kula dharmata patni*

The ideal role model of a woman in a good family has these traits. Culture can never be static like the water in the river. Things, conditions, attitudes change or get changed but the basic ethos of values remain ne plus ultra, farthest point attained or attainable. The mind-set and poetic imagination of women today tends towards the basic values. The three exemplars (there may be many besides these) are highly learned, English educated, holding or held high positions. Times have changed and attitudes have undergone changes owing to the *zeit geist*. In spite of the malady of the century, irrespective of the variable human condition these poets are exemplars, each in her own way. The three are arranged as per their life experience in terms of age.

Diaspora Indian English poet Usha Akella is an academic in her own right has been evincing interest in poetry caravans offering hundreds of poetry readings. She lives in the U.S. The quality of compassion we know as *aardrata* and *anukampa* her signature tune. She gets closer to the divine in her awakened and heightened sensibility reminding us of the scriptural asseveration *raso vai saha*. *Kali Dances*. *So Do I* is basically an autobiographical poem covering a period of time in which there were doubts, questions, musings, rebellious and unconventional feelings. The eye for intense observation and a faculty for highly individualized expression are in evidence everywhere. The poet quite understandably tries to give a wholesome unity to her poems in the volume and divides these into three sections. Section 1 is called *Ascending: Poems of Affirmation*. This affirmation placing implicit faith in Shakti (the female principle in the inseparable unity with Shiva) in and by itself is a great promise against the milieu of negation. Then this delineates an ascent too. The second is *Dances* suggesting vibrant movement and the third *So Do I* which has the end piece *Begging Bowl*. Kali (another name for Shakti) is omnipotent and all-pervading. She is not present only in Dakshineswar. Here Kali speaks to the persona hereinafter called the poet that she will coil back to Her when she realizes in her the undeniable element of the Supreme Being in the Upanishad *mahaavaakya*, Grand Declaration, 'Aham Brahmaasmi', I am the Brahman. Having said this, the poet looks back with her

remembrance of things past: the drawing room, where she happens to be the centre of handicrafts on display. The reader sees the poet emerging as an independent, spirited, hurt (for being seen only as a female) and sensitive INDIVIDUAL. The 'WE' are members in the poet's household who come under the poet's scalpel like scanner. She loses count of her 'no's – may be seventeen or thirty and concludes "I am still learning to be a woman". Nurtured on alien soils where personal feelings are respected and individualism is held in high esteem, where personal choices are absolutely unquestioned, the poet emerges as a new woman, self-respecting, assertive and vehemently independent. In *Step Out of the Fire*, she voices her disgust and anguish for the unfair deal to the fair sex:

*Oh! Indian woman in boundless freedom step out of the fire,  
It is said that you cast no shadows.  
( p16-17)*

The emancipated woman untwists and uncoils the three knots (of ceremonial wedlock) to emerge in effulgence.

In the poem *One Hears*, the poet lists the unsavoury reality of friends and relatives where dissembling and dissimulation are strikingly rampant.

... ..  
*And the phone rings and rings till it rings in your head  
and you lie awake expecting it to ring  
with fear of one more invitation to dinner  
one more relative's voice that hides venom  
and extends love because we have been taught  
to be bound by blood ad forgiveness  
( p.29).*

Double speak and double standards break norms of decency even at the level beyond the familial and inter-personal, at the national level. *Tatvam Asi: On India's Fifty years of Independence* is painful befuddlement: The poet is at a loss as to how to know her motherland, the Bharat that was. She wracks her brain as to how to unveil her face and how to piece out the puzzle that is India now. She is full of idiosyncrasies, inconsistencies, inequalities, paradoxes and irrationalities. The poet comes out of her bewilderment and decides:

*A timelessness that weaves through the chaos,  
That is the India that I shall sing of.  
(p.31)*

There is no point in singing of past glory that Bharat was. Flux and thirst have overtaken values and rectitude. Between professions and the practice falls the shadow. This when read in

conjunction with what she said about her mother in the poem *Departure*, in the long poem *NO* convinces the reader of the poet's authenticity and sincerity.

The lone eight line poem comes at the end of section 3. It is necessary to quote it in entirety:

*Here I go again  
using my poetry as a begging bowl  
for you to toss in fame*

*in quarters of applause  
and pennies of nods  
and dimes in laughter*

*inside  
my heart is aching for Nirvana (p.58)*

Those who are familiar with the Buddha's begging bowl would surely connect this poem with that legend. By simple association, the Begging Bowl and Nirvana link us to Buddha.

Usha Akella's second collection of poems, *A Face that does not Bear the Footprints of the World*. is a sequel to the earlier collection *Kali Dances and so do I*. Expressed normally the title of the new book simply suggests a person in the making – a personality that is unfamiliar with the ways of the world or the world itself. This unfamiliarity is not a negative attribute or an uncomplimentary description. It refers to the pristine purity – a kind of *tabula rasa*. The first section opens with the poem *Beloved* and significantly it is called the first gong. It is a poem of joy and enthusiasm.

*The first time I heard your name  
It went down into the well of my being  
I knew it as I knew myself, the first gong  
That echoed me back into me (p.12)\*  
(\*Emphasis mine)*

An intense self-realization is triggered with a loud gong going deep into one's being. Flowers bloom on the plant in the soil of memory. This is bliss, ecstasy, the proximity to Him, the Lover, a Divine feeling.

The next step is the coalescing of the self into *paramatma*, the Supreme Being. The prayer is:

*Give the world your flesh, your ardor,  
Come back to me with what is mine. (p. 13)*

This 'me' is non-existent in real terms. Then, there comes the realization that there is no choice in the matter:

*For some souls a passing by is enough,  
Centuries dart forth and back in a glance,  
The universe shifts and is recreated again,  
The intellect is wiped out,  
Some souls are Love's playthings,  
They are desired to Love and accept the hardest tasks,  
There is no choice in the matter. (p.14)*

The coalescing is imminent, inevitable too. The 'face' the blank tablet – not merely *tabula rasa* - the erased tablet – is the pristine and the perfect as LOVE, Divinity. For the realized one there is no significance or value for intellect. Realization is only radiance.

*the intellect collapses,  
the words do not matter, not sense  
all that is right, and light and timeless becomes us,  
I learn to accept this magic as the law between us. (p.16)*

The reckoning is in terms of eons. The earth needs to refashion itself with Love as its inner strength. It is a process, possibly through passion and turbulence to understand ALL. The 'I' 'You' duality is transient, just a passing phase while heading towards coalescing, becoming LOVE.

Surrender is total self-effacement, the firm step towards coalescing with Absolute and genuine LOVE. Estrangement and lamentation are steps to go up the not too easy ladder of LOVE. The wife coalesces into the husband. The self-willed, spontaneous destruction of 'Egosense', 'myness', *ahamkara* voluntarily leads to bliss that surrender and self-effacement alone can yield.

The second section *Love is Sitting in the Corner in Tattered Clothes* is yearning for self-effacement. LOVE sits here in a corner in tattered clothes with no thought of herself, her appearance or joy in her mind. The scene in the poem *Love has forgotten herself* is suggestively laid in New York City. The poet comes up with her denunciations with vigour and verve. Concupiscence has overtaken civilization. Lasciviousness has come to be the order of modern living. There is a cryptic remark to conclude: *'love is the mask upon the mask upon the mask.* (p.38-39)

Things have turned out to be lustful or lust driven. It is all itch now, all eroticism and voluptuousness. The puerile manifestations of desire, lust and luxury lead to libertinism. It is all lech. This harlotry is ruinous. Usha's pen portraits of depravity are repulsive and are

photographic representations of the actuality around. In the third section there is descent in the tentacles night and degeneration in the loveless human. There is recklessness and depravity. Though things are as they are, *Love remains God's handmaiden calling Man to God.*(p.42) The thinking individual is befuddled:

*Why to live! Why to live!  
Love has fled! Love has fled! (p.44)*

The serpent has grown robust – become a python now rendering human incapable of movement or even thinking and so all the more despicable. Faith gets convulsions and one needs to go back to square one and traverse the path trodden all over again.

Section IV *There is a Seed* signifies the awareness of the seed along with the conviction that it sprouts. There is a doubt at first: “The seed has sprouted once, can it once more?” This leads to the flash:

*At this juncture one is not alone,  
one's agony is the signature of the human condition.(p.52)*

The poet becomes cerebral and slips into prose, the vehicle of thundering grand declarations like the *mahavakyas* in the Vedas. The swing from poetry to prose is revealing. Section V, the concluding one Anahata starts with an epiphany. The autobiographical element seen in many places acquires here the status of a revelation, some kind of a last word, a testament. After the humdrum details of the life of an average Indian woman, the poet avers:

*I am out of the closet –  
I've kept this secret too long,  
I am a God lover,  
That' all there has been, there is and will be. (p.58)*

Kali worship, Tantrism, Hinduism and Sufism all merge into a fabulous illumination culminating in bliss. Bhakti, devotion, self-surrender, compassionate concern, *aardrata* all fuse into LOVE, a conceptual entity crystallizing into an abstraction Man, Nature and the Divine. From *mooladhaara* to *anaahata* is an arduous journey. Once awakened, *kundalini shakti* attains the acme and ends up in *sahasraara kamala*, the lotus with a thousand petals, all because of LOVE and divine grace. This spiritual journey of the poet, an exemplar of femininity needs a map which the ardent aspirant has to chart himself with the guru's benediction.

Asha Viswas is a unique poet. She has three volumes of poetry: *Melting Memories* 1996, *Mortgaged Moorings* 2001 and *The Rainbow Cave and other poems*, 2011. Suffering, sadness and deep thought are basic aspects of feeling in femininity. Her poems are brief and imagistic in content and poetic quality. Compactness in expression is always an interesting and a powerful quality of being intriguing too. The collection under study has an Epigraph from the very great and powerful poet Ezra Pound.

*And if you ask how I regret that parting:  
It is like the flowers falling at spring's end  
Confused, whirled in a tangle.*

Asha is socially concerned with femininity. The epigraph in a way is her own assessment of her poetry. The title of the volume is indicative of the quality of her poetry in general. The mind is a cave, not a dungeon used by a sage for his meditation, contemplation or penance. It is not a cobweb ugly, flimsy and really dislike-provoking. It can have multiple colours of the rainbow. It is always a source of joy and rich fruitful insight and understanding of tears in the nature of things. Asha's poems are deeply sensitive and thought provoking.

The first poem 'The Living and the Dead' is on an intensely felt bereavement. The 'she' is the poet's mother. It is a lasting and continuous grief. The passage of twenty years does not lessen the pain of the loss. The death of ancestors does not leave such pain as the mother does and that is the reason for their photos being kept in a folder separately. The cause of demise is the hurry of the mother's lungs to leave. With the photo being slipped into the folder there is silence of the unsaid words which go on inflicting the pain of memories. Naming the disease is irrelevant for the poet since it does not give relief in any way. The heart throbs, pang and sorrow are vehemently expressed which no stylistic analysis would fully unveil. The loving is better understood in this short but completely structured and expressed feeling.

The duo of 'September Blues' and 'Autumnal Cry' is closely related in the similarity of the season with the speaker's mental state. In 'September Blues' the vocabulary includes despair, ravished, tears, washes, blood, tears, pants, corpses fall and insatiate hatred strikes with flames. Roses are crushed, sighs wind, heaps of thorns are all attributed to September and referred to blues. Such blues trigger imaginative expressions too. Autumnal Cry refers to the cold season. The segment of the sun in the windy skies disturbs dreams of musical wind instruments of humans. The cry conveys the unaccountability of the dead in the mixture of metal and flesh signifying the battle field. Even the flora is not spared:

*Blood smeared Death derides,  
Poisonous pollen drips  
Through her silent finger tips.<sup>(p.11)</sup>*

'Death' is a poem which underlines the poet's technique that comes not out for artificial design but from out of a gushing Brahamputra-like flood. The 'a's before waiting and between are artistically brought in. If said life is waiting between thought and its release would have been an insipid statement. The beginning is scintillating and what follows becomes is splendidly thoughtful. The rest of the poem becomes an unforgettable statement of felt truth unforgettably expressed:

*Death is a thought without being thought  
An unuttered word, a slip of tongue.*<sup>(p.14)</sup>

Maya is many apparent dualities, contradictions, paradoxes. This philosophical complexity in existence is ever worthy of contemplation. Not voluminous but brilliantly thought provoking, Asha's poetic output is compact and very brief. Putting feeling in such brevity must have taken a lot of time and effort. For this poet Imagism is a fertile imaginative device of figurative expression which contributes both to convey impression and electrify the reader. It comes in using figures of speech in different ways, visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory and abstract which demand high levels of imagination to tactfully convey messages and impressions with astounding brevity. Unless the poetry is highly sensitive and very well read this kind of expression cannot be easy or effortless. Ezra Pound is the one who devised the technique but later many, many poets used this.

The Void Within is about total emptiness. Boredom is a void. Pain is left and the courage to believe in life is lost. Here is a powerful expression of emptiness. Void is the vacuous interiority of space that is felt. This is left to one's own feeling of utter boredom and the blowing imagination. The holy river is the speaker of the poem The Ganges Grumbles. She feels that she is 'dragged'. She feels hurt and anguished that she is used like a refuse box to dump a rush of broken bones and the burden of prayers. The poet's genuine concern is that her words may stretch themselves as a curse if not paid heed to. Unfortunately the cleanser is believed to cleanse everything in everywhere.

There are some poems which are intensely mystic and philosophical. There is deep understanding in the idea and thought filled serious mind. The world is visible between birth and death only. Bodies participate in the realm of the inner 'I' and the world is woven in the fabric of bodies. An intensely mystical idea leads to this conclusion:

*The flesh is the 'I' linked  
to the river of life,  
the double of the Sun is the eye.* (p.28)

Cerebration, basically feminine, deep melancholy are at the back of these serious ideas expressed powerfully. Reason for Happiness is the realization of the path to happiness:

*Happiness happened only when  
I stopped seeking it, I sought  
For a reason of happiness.(p32)*

There are many philosophical poems in *The Rainbow Cave and other poems*. 'Apostasy' is one. It is a poem which is not from an apostate but from a genuinely devout person with faith and devotion too. The poet does not turn away from faith and belief in values coming down ages. A saint can see this. All shall be well and all manner of things, said St. Juliana of Norwich long ago. There is equanimity in the poem *Beyond Love and Hate*:

*Between blind love and blind hate  
There is a vast expanse of fear  
Till you dive deep to the centre of Self.(p.35)*

Feeling and thoughts related to places and sites are diverse sad, satisfying, happy or joyful. All are, as always, thought provoking whether they are of the poet or of the speaker. Raindrops at the Window and the sighing of the wind are a melody though without words. Shadow of a hand on walls dimly lit make the mind play tricks with the eyes. And then there is 'your':

*Soft breeze unfurls pages of past  
contours of your face  
suddenly look back at me.(p.40)*

Memories, dreams, fantasies, longing dawn, light and humming stars can be seen and felt in this mental luminosity. After Hope there is Peace, the poem is about peace and later of penury, and then of noisy vibration and finally of an angel of a lost paradise.

*It is a dream sobbing  
and floating in terrorized eye(p.48)*

The poem *Shivangi* is about a pathetic incident of middle class morality in a newborn babe with still a bleeding umbilical cord rudely cut and thrown away like refuse. Someone must have given the infant a name and decent burial shedding loving tears. A woman with the heart in the right place, with *manas*, can be seen here:

*No lark must have sung over her birth  
But when she opened her beady eyes  
The seven rays of creation danced with joy.(p.58)*

The greatest and mostly powerful among our *nava rasas* is *karuna*. Bhavabhuti, poet and an aesthete of yore went to the extent of declaring that compassion is the only *rasa*: *eko rasah karuNayeva*. Shivangi is one of the best poems in the earlier collection. Asha Viswas is a unique poet and in spite of its thin output her poetry would be adjudged the most memorable in the recent Indian English Poetry. She would acquire further fame being an exemplar without having popular feminist stance.

There are Indian English women poets who write well but, for several reasons do not publish their work extensively. The published output may be limited but the effort and accomplishment of many does not always get the attention it deserves. Chandramoni Narayanaswamy deserves both attention and acclaim for many reasons. Poets like her do not rush into print till something happens to sprout the poetic imagination and enthrall them to express themselves if only sporadically. It is a matter of personality that makes one to rush to print or wait long for emotions and feelings to crystallize. Women usually do not express feelings and emotions in print as men do. That is reason for the comparative paucity of Indian English poetry by women.

In her “*Unseen Abode and Other Poems*” Chandramoni Narayanaswamy has made statements in her Confession at the beginning of the volume which can be taken as her profession about her thinking and action: ‘I have always regarded poetry as the language of *silent sufferings*, the angst of one’s *heart bursting out with or without words*. ... If poetry can express itself without sadness it cannot exist without mysticism: that *tenuous bond between the creation and the creator* which can be felt but not seen: which is distinct as the rainbow but equally illusive to the touch. That is the force which inspired me to compose these poems. Added to this is the *depth of my own experiences* over the years of my existence, my little joys and larger sorrows, my desires and delusions and above all my *quest to know about my surrenders and myself*. The poems anthologized reflect my inner being.’ (The emphasis here and elsewhere in the poems quoted is mine.)

Chandramoni’s poetry is pensive and melancholic. Without rancour, this basic stance is one of deep sadness:

*Tears swelling drop by drop,  
sorrow laid layer upon layer  
by dumb sufferings not all my own,  
but witnessed by eyes  
too proud to weep  
and stored in memory  
too strong to forget<sup>(p.11)</sup>*

She describes this as a perennial hot spring, unseen, unknown, and unfathomable wherein the poet in her lives. This is a clue to her feeling in many of the poems. This is a

condition in which the poet looks out, looks within and looks intensively. This is the poet's basic imaginative stance. There is only one who is called the loved one – God. God is loved deeply and intensely and He is known to be the cause. The speaker is large-hearted and wise with forbearance, the quality of the soft-thinking and the devout. Ratiocination is part of devotion in some.

'Good-bye to Heaven' is a decision to do something meaningful, some work or service. All play and no work makes *manas*, the heart-mind, dull and dissatisfied. For work heaven is not the place:

*all I do is sing His praises  
whose mercy brought me here<sup>(p.17)</sup>.*

The poem 'On His Sixtieth Birthday' is a song in prayer and also a remembrance. The "He" is mercurial and saintly but never at peace. The speaker does not obey her earthly lord and turns her face away from duty. The speaker does no wrong and prays:

*Forgive my error, if so it was  
and keep him safe.<sup>(p.20)</sup>*

'You' is a lovely little poem just in three into three – nine lines about the vanished 'You'. Memories sweet and memories which have been soul-satisfying of this 'You' sustained the speaker coming flying down the times:

*When you first thought of  
you were the hidden treasure  
to be searched and unearthed  
.....  
When you vanished  
you were the sweet dream  
wiped out by wakefulness.<sup>(p.24)</sup>*

The poem 'Heritage' is a memory of the parents, father and mother. Her father is a bibliophile, a scholar, a lover of poetry and music.

*But more precious than all these  
and priceless beyond words,  
the heritage which I treasure most  
is your better half  
whom you bequeathed to my care  
when I was still in the cradle<sup>(p.27)</sup>*

It is worth noting that the poet has dedicated this, her first collection, to her grandmother and the later, the second, to her mother. This reveals apart from many other things, the close blood bond down the generations. After all memories and our love and understanding of our forefathers are always energizing, promoting kindness and compassion. Small is beautiful and the shorter and stronger the image, the more exhilarating it would be remaining longer in the imagination of people.

The poet is an ardent devotee of the goddess 'Durga'. Considered by all of us Ma, Mother, She is the speaker of the poem teaching us all, all that is to be learnt, practiced and performed. She thirsts not for blood and is angry when dumb animals are beheaded:

*Had you sacrificed the evil in you  
you would have offered  
real pooja to me  
and I would have showered  
my blessing on you.  
But you choose to rouse my wrath  
by taking an innocent life.<sup>(p.54)</sup>*

The poet is full of compassion for the hungry and the downtrodden. People eating just leaves and tuber to keep them alive in Kalahandi . The poems on poverty rmake her feminine heart throb with anguish. There are poems on the rickshaw puller, the rag-picker the poor boy too.

'Spring' is a poem of joy after poems like 'The Roaring Sky', 'Rain', 'Monsoon' which convey sadness and sorrow. Spring is described as intoxication for the young, comfort for the old and pleasure for all. The poet honours the 'Drooping Deodar' as the ascetic of the forest:

*Majestic and tall  
aspiring heavenwards  
with single-minded devotion.<sup>(p.74)</sup>*

Towards the end of the collection there are four poems about the sad lot of women like *devadasis*, unfortunate ones widowed early and humiliated for the rest of life. The truth is said in the poem, 'It is a Man's World'. Widowed women's plight is shown with great compassion in the poem 'The Unsung Martyr' for she was called Alakshmi. For no fault of hers she is ill-treated life long. The martyr is honoured and sung but his wife meaningfully called Sukanya (driven to drown herself) is brought home not draped in the tricolour as her husband was but differently.

*but in her own sari*

*dripping muddy water*  
*A single lotus floating in the pond*  
*Where she found her last refuge.*<sup>(p.81)</sup>

‘Aparajita’ is about a little girl deceived, duped and molested but she behaves like an ideal, loving woman with the heart in the right place.

“*Sunflower and Other Nature Poems*” is the second collection of twenty-five sweet poems, sweet because they stem from love and affection, two concepts sweet in and by themselves. By way of an introduction in *A Flashback* the poet wrote: “Nature has always been a book to me; sometimes a picture book to be gazed at in sheer pleasure; at other times as the mood turned pensive or thoughtful, a book of philosophy to comprehend which a century is not enough. ...I started reading that book as a child sitting on the eastern verandah of our house in the evening and spent hours trying to decode mysteries. ... No book gave me the same thrill as sky-gazing in monsoon with the moon and the stars buried under the clouds. Given the chance I would indulge in that pastime even now ...”<sup>25</sup> The child like quality of being imaginative and contemplative with a deep love of nature is evident in the poet’s poems in the second collection. Love wins all: love is the ambrosia that sustains the universe. Love of Nature is closely related to Love of God. Pantheism is theism basically and nature love is nature worship.

The very first poem ‘*Sunflower*’ reveals the poet’s childlike outspoken feeling:

*I yearn turn and burn*  
*Ever since I was born*  
*Only to be spurned at every turn.*  
*Why did He create*  
*And ordain me to exist*  
*As helplessness incarnate?*<sup>(p.1)</sup>

Nature is God and God is nature. The poet with the milk of human kindness and compassion in her is a child, always pensive, thoughtful and loving, loving both nature and god. For her everything in nature is lovely and everything of Him and about Him is lovely and everything is a blessing devoutly to be wished. ‘*Grass Seeds*’, ‘*Laughing waterfall*’, ‘*The River*’ and the ‘*Stone*’ are all titles of her poems and also the manifestations of God for her. The cactus and poppy are equally lovable by the one who knows love. Flowers and books of verses are equally fascinating.

Many of the poems read like fables and most reveal the poet’s earnestness in observation and analysis leading to valid, impressive conclusions. We live in an age of decadence in all walks of life: even Nature has come to be helpless. But the poet, though melancholic, does not lose faith. She has faith in goodness. A strong streak of devotion runs in

all her poems. The recurrent themes are very easy to identify tree, leaf, flower, thorn, *champa*, bird, a crow, sunflower, lotus, seed, pool, to cite a few, all nature-related. Most of these could be treated as the favourite symbols/metaphors of the poet. *Salagram*, *bilva patra* etc are brought in artistically and convincingly to buttress her themes and expression.

'*The Queen of Many Hearts*' is about a flower, the lotus again. The concluding lines of the poem read like devotional poetry:

*When the heart embedded in coarse flesh  
Expands and rises high like the lotus  
That too will reach out to Him above  
And reign over many other hearts. (p.21)*

'*The Garden Queen*' is also about a flower reminding us of Torulata Dutt's poem Lotus. Here three flowers vie for supremacy, the Dahlia, the Gladiolus and the Chrysanthemum for their respective traits, size, multi-colour and the colour of gold.

Wrote Som Ranchan: 'Chandramoni Narayanaswamy is a spiritual poet in the true sense she surrenders to pain and suffering unlike Job who runs inwardly against his suffering.'<sup>6</sup>

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