

Pristine Femininity – Mamta Agarwal’s Poetry**Dr. V.V.B. Rama Rao, INDIA**

*Poetry read in eyes
 Heard in sighs
 Felt in touch
 Recited in smiles
 Sipped in quiet*

Mamta Agarwal published her first collection of poems *Rhythms of Life* (Tekson Book Shop, New Delhi) in 2008. It made a mark soon and in 2010 she published her second collection *Voices of autumn and other short poems*, Sampark, Calcutta, 1989. Mamta Agarwal is quite well known today even abroad in countries like the U.S., New Zealand and Romania. The third is *An Untold Story of a Pebble*, Global Fraternity of Poets, Gurgaon, 2013. Now she has carved a distinctive niche for herself in the recent and new Indian English poets.

Mamta’s very first collection has been very promising with a thought provoking poem *A Tribute to Motherhood*. It marks the beginning of a poet who can be justly acclaimed a motherly new feminist devoted as much to our native sensitivity with her love of nature, birds, flowers, rivers besides affectionate relationships, with parents, children, little infants and the grand daughter. She has a compassionate heart and values *aardrata*. The best of the litterateurs have always moved readers to tears and compassion. Oriental aestheticians believed compassion to be the most ennobling *rasa*. The Sanskrit poet of yore Bhavabhuti said ‘*eko rasah karuna Eva*’. *Karuna rasa* is the fountain head of *aardrata*, a term which defies translation. But ‘wetness’ of the heart describes it. A rough and ready rendering of the word ‘*aardrata*’ would be this ‘wetness’ referring to the surging of a feeling in the ‘*manas*’, heart-mind-desire.

*From the time
 of conception
 a mother
 nurtures like a gardener
 who plants a seed
 and tenderly
 watches it growing from a sapling to a tree
 Her heart has the width of the sky.
 (A Tribute to Motherhood pp-18-19)*

Love of the mother is love at its sublimity. She is the Sun and like a tree and humble like a river on the banks of which man has begun to build the earliest civilizations. The poet concludes that a mother encompasses the whole cosmos. Love of nature, flowers, butterflies and rivers are found in her poems. In the poem ‘*A perfect landing*’ the poet has a lovely trope.

A gaily painted butterfly hovers over

*A dainty flower, as a miniature helicopter
 Patiently waiting for a landing signal,
 The flower welcomes the timely arrival
 And guides it to its destination ...
 (A Perfect Landing p-6)*

The gliding is steady but the soaring of the poet is sure and quick. Looking outward gives rise to looking inwards shown in another poem:

*When I in torment feel compelled to crawl within
 Ever forgiving, You embrace and illumine
 The Divine light permeates my every cell
 And (I) feel safe at the altar where you dwell
 All I need is to sit at your feet
 And not get swept by these worldly treats.
 (A Prayer of Gratitude p- 7)*

An imaginative mind has a sharp a hearty social awareness too. The poet has her heart in the right place and she pleads for the safety of the tiger species:

*Every creature has a place in the scheme of things.
 It's sad today that the tiger tops the list of endangered species.
 I still remember the poem by Blake;
 Which I read in the seventh grade.
 The day is not far when those famous stripes
 Will just adorn the rags of designer lines.
 (Save the Tiger pp-164)*

The poem 'Jasmine Flower-seller' shows how the rich are pennywise and are even stingy. The poet muses about the poor boy whose flowers were thrown away when a lady in the car pushes him away while bargaining. The boy fell: the flowers were crushed in the shower which followed the drizzle. The thinking person's heart bleeds.

*The boy had perhaps
 Come from a distant village,
 To earn an honest wage.
 We spend thousands
 Over what we fancy on discount sales,
 Happy we have got
 A bargain.
 Why do we haggle
 Over pennies?
 (Jasmine Flower-seller pp-97-98)*

A poet is a creator. Words and images are element the poet adores and lives in. Her second collection *Voice of Autumn and other Short Poems*, Sampark, Calcutta, 2010 are just three liners. This collection stands testimony to the poet's felicity for vivid images. These short poems are remarkably brief and equally simple and straight forward. She herself calls them three-liners. Very rarely does she exceed this, her limit. The proof of the pudding is not in a label or a brand. In all there are more than a hundred fragrant flowers here which are a joy to the eye, the ear and the intellect. The notable common quality of all Mamta's poems is that they come home to the readers' business and bosoms, unveiling a glimmer here, a spark there and originality everywhere. Some poems stand out as revelations with memorable aphorisms

*Emotions are raw
We look for perfection
Overlooking our flaws.
(All of us have flaws, p.53)*

The collection is significantly called *Voices of Autumn*: In fact the poems are fruits of experience and cerebration, all ripe offering rewarding reading. Autumn is the season of ripeness and the reader experiences this feeling in several places:

*A collage of dry leaves,
Autumnal hues still alive
Fresh flowers fade, wilt. (p.97)*

Revelation, recognition and realization are valuable.

*Sitting at the feet
Of Buddha statue at dusk
Release, no issues... (p.79)*

Dusk, realization, harmony and the feeling of peace that passes understanding, what more could one wish for! Into a scenario where pretension and obfuscation are rampant, Mamta wishes to bring in a whiff of fragrant breeze. Affection, love, concern and fellow-feeling coalesce into one another to make luxurious warmth:

*His warm side ways glance,
Wrapped like an angora shawl-
Took the chill away... (p.8)*

Joy could never be joy without a measure of fun and humour. Tact sometimes lies in grinning and bearing things.

*Marooned driver says
Rain be damned, am hungry; what
Just water and jam (p57)*

Here is a pleasurable, easy reading, all the time illuminating too.

*Spring cleaning in April,
Wipe with rag, dust in attic
Off wedding album.
(April, p.43)*

An Untold Story of a Pebble is a collection of hundred and four poems. Polychromatic spectrum of experiences, pensive, humane, joyous, contemplative and philosophical, makes this collection very illuminating to the readers. The poet is a lover of nature, flowers, trees, rivers, seasons and grass. There is mysticism with philosophical ruminations. There are poems on almost seasons, spring, autumn, winter and monsoon. There are poems which look deep into the actuality – into the nature of tears in the human condition. There is realization and self-consolation leading to faith in the Supreme Being. With all these are coupled social awareness and the need for compassion to the suffering and the downtrodden women and children in our society. The most important and valuable is the quality of *nativism* in the poet's thought feeling and expression of the human condition as an Indian woman who does not forget *roti*-making with basic femininity.

First the real life sensitivity and the autobiographical element: The poet speaks of her own father and mother, her children and even her granddaughter as she speaks about flowers, birds and seasons. Here is poet's plenty with native femininity. The father's affection and concern are ever remembered:

*Child, it's late, are you awake?
I'll pull up my quilt and just fake.
He would walk away saying no hurry
It's bright and sunny don't worry.
... ..
At times, I wonder, did God
After making you, break the mould.
You treated us all ways at par.
Now girls are killed or live with scars.
(Man with a vision... pp64-66)*

The poet is painfully aware of the contemporary devilishness in killing females at the foetal stage. The poet shows her feeling that a mother is ever a mother.

*Mother, your little girl is all grown up now
Just because you showed her how.
Pray mother,
How did you always know
What to say?
Even today I can feel your presence
For mothers never leave*

They forever stay

In poems

They

Write on our soul.

(Mothers forever stay, pp75-76)

Mother-daughter relation and the ways of thinking in the contemporary reality is shown here in the huff of the daughter and the pain and understanding of the mother:

Is it worth bringing a child into the world, mother?

... ..

*'Every child comes with a message that God is not yet
Discouraged of man,' wrote Tagore, I can never forget
What more can I add to answer your question my daughter.
She looked at me, said, my little girl needs a sibling mother.*

*Then she walked towards the window, looking lost and sad
I saw a big blood stain on the seat of her white linen pants.
Child go change your clothes, they are stained and spoilt.
Are they, it seems nature took the decision out of our hands.
(A Question that begged for an answer... pp73-74)*

The poet remembered the season when both her daughter and son were born. It was spring. She remembered the delivery. Later the room was filled with bouquets and blossoms. The sister arranged the flowers in every vase.

Kids, spring had

Truly arrived

And stayed back

Forever with a

Gentle breeze...

(Spring stayed back, pp. 62-63)

In our country nowadays a son is the apple of the eye for many a mother as well as our poet. When in pain, agony and angst the poet says

*Do we live in chains and prisons of our own making?
Does it have to do with events beyond control; destiny?
Aware of his fractured psyche, calmly told his brother Theo;
One lesson I have learnt is not ever complain for sure.*

My eyes drifted to dying ambers, just when my son asked me;

*Would you like me to add more logs; came out of my reverie.
We walked on the gravel path towards the lodge in silence.
(Sitting by bonfire pp113-114)*

Next is the granddaughter for the poet: the bliss giving one for the granny. While talking about a lady bird in grass:

*Dear, God has eyes for details,
Whether it's a creature big or small
You know, He loves them all.
She nodded and shook her pigtails.*

*Intrigued I searched in the internet.
Found myths and beliefs abound
Held in high esteem, all round the globe.
By then Anika had named it – Miss Perfect!
(A ladybird in grass, pp39-40)*

There is another poem about the granddaughter Anika. The poet could not fly to keep her promise on metal wings for the granddaughter's birthday.

*Taking seeds out for doves,
Nodded my head, love
When you turn nine, I'll surely come,
And we shall have loads of fun.*

*Happy birthday, Anika dear
This is the most wonderful day of the year.
(Anika turns nine, pp153-54)*

The poet talks about her son again while she is in house arrest in a cold winter.

*On a Sunday morn, I began to ponder
As I adjusted my ear muffs
Sent by my son, who is settled in Netherlands,
With instructions, don't try too many adventures –
This winter is harsh,
Please mother.*

.... ..

*I shivered, yet had no inclination to go home
For I
Feel a kinship with translucent fog-winter's bleak cape;
For nature despite its capricious moods
At times unkind in its severity
Is no tyrant, it doesn't enforce house arrest*

You have a choice.
(House arrest, pp. 206-207)

Among the poems dealing with intensely deep personal experiences and feelings with autobiographical element there is a very long poem dealing with sorrow, pain, discomfiture not new in human predicament. What is of utmost importance is to have understanding and empathy for the rational, humanistic problems faced by almost all. The speaker of the poem (not always the poet but it is so here) goes to the Moghal monument with a friend, a genteel gentleman. Asked a question, she opens up her heart:

AS I spoke of my conflicting emotions,
Misgivings, knots in tangles emotions,
How tempted I felt to break free
Of boundaries
Drawn by me ...

Our eyes met
It was already twilight;
Sky seemed lonely
At that hour.
Your reassuring voice
Settled me, and rest
Was taken care of by
What I saw in your eyes.

Reassured and relieved she goes on

It takes all kinds of people
To make the world.
I said, let's be fair, even in some myths
Women didn't silently put up with
Indifference, domineering family members.

.... ..
In the morning
While sipping tea,
Felt helpless
To see a pigeon
Not letting
A laughing dove
Near a tray of bird seeds,
On my terrace

*I put a fistful
in a bowl
and kept in another corner;
A few hours later
What I saw made me smile
It worked*

*Not for long
(At dusk in December, pp.108-12)*

The behaviour of the doves, the solution by the kind forward looking act and the result of jouissance in the speaker, though for a while, are amusing. This poem reveals the poet's deep thoughtfulness even amidst personally unsettling moments when in the doldrums.

The poet is compassionate – *aardrata* is her mind set. There are a couple of poems on small children, one selling cold water bottles on the road at a traffic signal and another a flagellant scourging and bleeding to win a little charity for his living.

*I am the sole bread winner, as my father died in a cyclone.
Who can quarrel with what he ordains and wills?
I don't have the luxury or the time to sit and mourn,
Live in the past, or sit back and rest, when a wee bit ill.*

*Stoically stood up, and ran after the screeching cars.
Waving bottles in the air: please buy one for the road.
He should be in school. I thought watching from afar.
He learns all the things on the road ... no time he had all sold.
(A tryst with fate, p.36)*

The therapist who tells her that scourging is a way of getting livelihood in Mumbai tells her:

*"Here is your prescription.
Read the instructions.
Stay calm,
Soon you will be exorcised,
I promise."*

*... ..
"So long next time."
(So long next time, p.28)*

There are poems on seasons, autumn, winter, spring and monsoon.

Nature's splendour and its contradictions,

Hold me captive, compel on reflection!
Why contemplate on moods and impressions ...
Leave it open to interpretations!
(Autumnal, hues, silk weaves.... p.85)

Monsoon is described thus:

At first clouds assemble,
Looking ominous enough
Behind closed doors,
Emerge
Pronounce the manifesto;

Women scurry
Pull off laundry

Kids peel out
Sheets from
School diaries
To make paper boats

Hail rain!
(Ode to monsoon, pp53-54)

The poet loves the Ganges as she loves, admires and adores the nativist tradition.

I stood at the banks
Of mother Ganges in Hardwar,

I lit the wick and incense stick

It was a trip
Long overdue
To say final goodbye
To my ma and dad,
For I was not with them
When they breathed their last.
(On the banks of the river, pp50-50)

Some of the poems are mystic and philosophical.

Scattered by the broken string, bent to pick the beads:
You stood with some in cupped hands, did you my thoughts read?

.... ..

*I forgot about my rosary, as we stepped in the avenue.
 Your nearness and fragrant air blurred the view.
 Careful not to crush the blossoms, lying on the grass,
 We strolled hand in hand, exchanging a glance.
 (A golden shower, my rosary, p.19)*

The poet goes into a deeply contemplative mood at times:

*A sheaf of papers got swept with the breeze,
 Like kites my poems took flight with ease

 Is there anything new about my thoughts?

 Whatever makes me feel they are very unique?
 Aren't they intrinsic part of being, felt intrigued?
 (As the ink begins to run, p.22)*

There are musings:

*April and wasteland,
 Can one really say it in this same breath ...
 Of all months, you alone epitomize life, its waywardness.
 (April musings in autumn, p.30)*

Philosophical musings mark the poet as some one unique:

*Opportunity, a problem in disguise
 Some hold the dice in fist tight
 Some aim for six
 With prayer on lips
 Some say pass.

 Yet, the dice needs to be rolled
 To breathe, dream
 And stay alive.
 Life is just a board game!
 (Rolling the dice, p.31)*

Mere musing wouldn't be enough. Action is necessary and immediate action may be needed urgently.

*Yet, to save the plant, we need to go back to the basics,
 Each one plant a tree, it's time we made a beginning
 And left the rest to nature's intelligence, patience;
 We owe it to the planet, strip off veil of ignorance.
 (Jungle Safari at Corbett, pp45-46)*

Remembrances haunt from time to time, now and then. The poem 'In the open courtyard' is remembrances of things past. The long autobiographical poem is a fast moving film roll and eminently readable. The last lines are sensible advice.

*Yearn for
Those unforgettable days
In the open courtyard
(In the open courtyard, p.79)*

Deep thought, continued musings and philosophical bent of mind make one relieved of pain, sorrow, disgust and a kind of depression. Self-consolation is the best at times. Here is what the poet says with conviction strengthened within her:

*If you are weary
Treat yourself
Take break
Go for a hike
Or, simply walk.
There is no harm
In slipping into bed*

Rest

*Rest assured
Love, will find you,
And you*

*Yourself.
(I said to love, p.151-52)*

The thought processes in the imaginative mind roam around and fly high as in this poem:

*Is it telepathy
A soul connect
Benevolence of Divinity
Planetary arrangement
Celestial synchronicity
Architectural design?
All I know
I feel, as I lie supine
We have affinity,
That defies logic.*

(Moon beams, p.163-65)

Sometimes words unsaid sound, sweet and mellifluous, remain revelations a while later.

*When the full moon frames
Itself in my panes
We converse, I have an epiphany
Just like a forlorn night sky
I shall get by, come what may
In my life, till my soul is set free
From its mortal ties
And am no longer
Supposed to keep
Coming and going.*

Keep coming and going

Keep coming and

(A snow flake melts in my palm, pp156-57)

Here is poet's plenty and this cannot be the end - not certainly – surely there is another climb – another summit for the fulfillment for this poet's pensive mind and soft, kindly heart.

Page numbers refer to the texts:

Agarwal Mamta, *Rhythms of Life*, Tekson Book Shop, New Delhi, 2008

Agarwal Mamta, *Voice of Autumn and other poems*, Sampark, Cacutta, 2010

Agarwal Mamta, *An Untold Story of a Pebble*, Global Fraternity of Poets, Gurgaon, 2013.