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Pensive Exemplar of Femininity: A Study of Indira's Latest Work

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Indira Babbellapati is an academic with a deeply sensitive thinking and powerful expression. Her first book *Echo* was published in 2003, second one *affair de Coeur* in 2009, the third *Vignettes of Sea* in 2010 and then came out *From the Biography of an Unknown Woman* in 2015.
Writing a critique of Indira's latest book is not a run of the mill affair. The work is about the many facets of woman's life, trials, and tribulations, feelings of pain and very rare sweet pleasures and infinite hues in deep feeling. Though the title says unknown woman, as the poet tells us in the beginning these are vignettes culled from the lives of many women she came across into very close mental proximity. There are a number of poems but none has been given a title. This is particularly significant since each poem is a wailing, a different breath, a different spasm and very little smiles of joyousness. Among these there are a few, just few, about faith devotion and happily forward-looking.

The experiences of umpteen women – now called fashionably, second sex – are recorded in this collection. Calling them (persons of) second sex is a travesty of justice. The poet's 'I' is the speaker's, the sufferer's 'I'. All these 'I's are the unfortunate birds whose wings are unmentionably maimed. One woman, many a woman and all in inexpressible pain are the speakers. The feelings given expression are facets of the essence and the multiplicity of the sad but helpless lot of those silent sufferers. The image of femininity is here in the poet's vision though not much in sight of all in the contemporary actuality right now:

Sky is her heart,
river is her desire,
sea, her passion,
fire, she breathes
and walks upon the earth,

She's the universal woman. (p.10)

This is another picture of femininity:

On a rugged and jagged,
hilly terrain
she stands as a lone tree,
in full bloom;
to bloom is her nature. (p.11)

She's the dark wave
she is the dark sea.(p.12)

Here is the picture of another woman as expressed in her biography:

If you chance,
to dive deep into the sea;
there you find her,
one among the many species,
that naturally survive,
at unfathomable depths. (p.14)

There is another whose age is left for anybody's guess as seen by the poet. A never to be asked question is that of a woman's age, according to our unwritten book of decorum.

She stands as a bystander
on the speeding highways of life
the passing vehicles
leaving her dizzy
... ...
A spectator for ever she remains. (p.17-18)

Some flowers are cherished as the most venerated. With her flair for talking about beauty and other aspects of women, the poet also considers the feminine is the handiwork of Mother Nature.

A *parijaatha* that flashes
In the silence of pre-dawn
a perfumed dawn

A *punnaga* that flashes
down to earth
meteor like (p.22)

Poetic epithets come with élan and grace to the blessed ones.

in her sob-weary

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

eyes is seen the quiescent sky
after a gushing rain. (p.23)

Our ethos conceives woman as the forgiver, as forgiving as Mother Earth: *kshamaya dharitri* is often made comparison.

'I may not be a victor
but i won't give up either...'
spoke her face
as I saw her walking
back to the shore
from where her son was seen
waving to her ... (p.26)

Here is another scenic description. The reason for one collapsing at the door after knocking on it is a visual. The cause for the collapse is understood by the intently imaginative female reader.

and on one middle of the night
the doorbell rang desperately,
When I answered, there I found
her collapsed at the door ...
The usual course followed. (p.27)

This submission of another woman makes the reader think with the heart in the right place. Death riding a chariot is a new idea though a king he is the hoary Yamadharma Raja.

the image of death
riding a chariot
always irked me
for never did it occur
as royal... (p.51)

Imbecility grows like a weed devilish and fatalism pervades. Real life tribulations lead anybody to fatalism and more so if one is of the second sex:

" ...."
All I do is accept
Accept what destiny doles out
And that's where lies
My courage, friend!"(p.52)

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

Fragile is her mettle itself:

“Why don’t we come to earth
with the warning:
FRAGILE ... HANDLE WITH CARE ...”(p.54

Her hopes and desires are not many. A loving smile acknowledging a hungry love with the submission “Love, let me not hunger!”:

All that I hoped for
Was to be treated
As human as possible
... ...
All that I hoped for
was a loving glance
that would bring me shine. (p.60)

Love-pangs are intimately and intensely personal, unique and always incomparable. Prosaically,they not curable, even slowly, like a nabbing toothache.

“each thinks none
can ever equate
one’s own sorrow” (p.67)

This statement of the speaker requires a slow and highly imaginative thinking, being highly adoring in the case of high poetry:

some are candles flickering against wind
they neither blow away nor give enough light (p.77)

Words of brick do not build anything concrete. The poet aims to make this speaker out-spoken rubbing pain into the understanding, sympathetic reader.

“I diligently built a solid world of
Frail-brick-words around
When winds of fear
Uproot me from
All possible directions

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

I cling to your torso
In this world
Of frail-brick-words... (p.84)

The filler-time, avocation, hope, joy and all is love and love only:

“After you left
It feels like an empty sky
This heart!

After you left
The familiar looks
Into the grotesque!

After you left
My heart seems remote
To myself! (p.87)

The speaker feels that the tale is always the same. The same ending is always at the end of the tale of the prince and princess. This is never true:

No story does ever with,
“... and they lived happily ever after,”

I thought, as I turned on the page ... (p.92)

Even love making is not always joyous. There are many, many moments the partners are together but the time is never joyously felt one. The moments of pain are deep. This speaker is in deep despair could have felt like this:

There’re times she had,
Her eyes completely closed:
She couldn’t bear to see,
The fading togetherness,
And togetherness reduced,
To a ritual.

There’re times she cringed,
When each of her limbs,
Was put to scrutiny,

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

As if observing a living organism,
Under a microscope. (p.99)

In this case the man's self-love and 'nobility' were tried to be displayed for the others around. The last line is the heartbreaker which makes the woman understand and come to this sickening conclusion

"With her

He said,
He married her,
Out of pity;
To save her,
From the other men;
And now he joined the other men.
"mind-
a rare species of
monkey with wings" (p.102)

Here is a wail that is never heard and not even imagined. The speaker details the situation in which most faithful wives eke their lives even in *Swachchabharat:*

I don't know anything!
All that I know was
That I should be by his side;
Every night before I slept,

He bought me clothes,
Of his choice;

He decided what to cook,
For dinners and lunches,

He chartered the children's lives.

Now,

How do I adjust his absence?
Tell me! Tell me!

She wailed. (p.104)

Read replacing ‘she’ with unbearably cruel word ‘widow’.

Glued to or chained helplessly, these marital musings of the hapless display the differences between the hubby and his wedded spouse. The praise is always one-sided as felt in this private musing:

... ...
When I plain speak.
It’s hypocrisy,
Even your hypocrisy
Is plain speaking.
You say you booze,
Because of me;
And when I ask you not to
I’m nobody to tell you!
Thus go on and on,
Her marital musings! (p.105)

The travails and tribulations always end in the woman’s walking to her bed to absorb *his* absence visible and these are the conditions she can never forget, not to speak of forgiving:

There are scars,
There’re hurts,
There ‘‘re silences
And indifference too. (p.108)

Here is another picture drawn by a woman of a “He’ and ‘She’ which is disgusting:

He carefully drew,
A circle around her feet,
And occupied,
The earth and the sky.

“After all,
How much space,
You really require, tell me.”
He said, occupying her sleeping body... (p.109)

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

In the use of fresh telling epithets the poet excels many: there are pins and pins galore and the description of 'boundaries' is fresh:

"In the pin-prick nights
my vulnerability
turns me into a pin cushion
on which the pin heads glimmer
as distant stars.

Within that 13 by 10 boundary
the dark mattress
and the not so soft pillow
bleed grudgingly ... (p. 114)

Taking refuge in dreams adds to new, or rather worth remembering tropes:
Opiate
Opinionated
His world moves,
Only on the axle,
Of hazy judgments,
And hasty conclusions.
A clear vision
Is a far sighted cry.
She takes her refuge,
In her dreams. (p.116)

A thoroughly distraught wife laments thus:

"Do you hear the rattling of bones
In the empty sack that gets moved about,
By the every day business of life?"
She questions intently.
....
(p.123)

The scenic view is more or less the uninspiring usual one:

"Looking through her window,
She saw the sun setting,
As usual behind the hillock,

As usual at the horizon,
As usual behind the patch of grass
As usual behind the rusty road,
As usual down into the sea.
And in the morning
The sun also rises,
At all the places it sets.

"The wheel of
Birth and death
That eternally turns ..."
She mused. (p.125)

This is a thought about a possible reason for the hapless wedding. Here is a misused key that leads to a helpless interlock. This is the hoarse wail which is not even heard.

"I locked my laughter and tears,
And handed the keys into his custody;
He unlocked as it pleased him,
Sometimes to see my tears,
Sometimes, my laughter."
"I lost the keys,
To both your laughter and tears,"
He declared one fine night.... (p126)

Very telling and striking word linking again. Shiva is the Lord of the Universe, besmeared with ash. Still He is the most worshipped and always with His divine consort, Devi Parvathi who is ever with Him.

The ultimate for the sufferer is this: to think of myth and *mithya*, an oft resorted to the philosophical self-consolation:

In the privacy of dark nights,
In the *secrecy of stark day light*,
She offers herself,
At the altar of her desire,
For him.
The desire burns her into ashes.
... .
Doesn't Siva look handsome

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

Coated in a film of ash? (p.128)
(The italics in presentation are mine.)

"... me a myth
you a mithya
isn't all that between us
a simple naught?"(p.132)

The ultimate is an unfathomable disgust which come to an end only in loss of sanity:

"No place to grieve
No room for guilt
It's just the way
In this endless profession
And process of life... (p.136)

"A melody of immense depth
a melody that allays
my fears
my guilt
my shame
my tears
soaking them all
in the dust under
my seasoned feet
that I spring to you
in love, just for once ..." (p.140)

This is the way an educated woman thinks of suffering surrealistically:

A surrealistic shroud
spreads
in its innumerable folds ... (p.147)

The bird-cage trope is one about the journey of the wedded but discarded one:

will I ever move out of the cage
I confined myself to?

am I not habituated to the cage?
Isn't that simpler and easier way to live...
... .
this journey
this evolution" (p.149)

A call for love is this:

Come my love,
step into the sanctuary
to seek yourself and me
for us to find fulfilment
in each other's arms. (p.152)

This is how the consequence of a painful thought process:

"When body feels
As if standing by flames
Touching sky

When body feels
As if wound by a serpent
Spewing fire

Paralysed and helpless
I writhe and curl myself into
A helpless foetus. (p.155)

Here is another trope, drama, curtain, player and the curtain-boy. The hubby is an unapt curtain boy, just that who does not know how to be efficient:
"... ....
don't you see the stage's developing cracks?
the setting is getting ruined
the lines are getting broken
the actor's growing weary?
the greenroom floor is all smudged
with the colours of spent out emotions

o, curtain boy...
my curtain boy!" (p.164)

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

Remembrance of things past – 'lost childhood' joys

"who robbed us, dear friend?

can we retrieve those days of
spontaneous giggles
unfretted spirit
uninhibited expression...?" (p.165)

A plaint to mother, which makes the latter dumb struck with tears surging in the eyes:

"maa..."
"yes dear..."
"you say god is
everywhere and
in everyone"
"yes, dear ..."

"what do I do if god
comes to me as
a demon?" (p.167)

Poetry and pain, pain and poetry: in between is almost every housewife whose wails and tribulations are recorded with truth and concern:

"My pain dissolves into poetry
Each poem I write becoming
A part of my growing lexicon
Of growth, evolution and transformation
That helps me move towards
The unknown and uncharted paths
... ...
Each blink of pain,
A momentous journey
That gives me more confidence
To reach my final destination
With cheer and smile

Each wink of pain

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

I endure
Is a feather in my cap
That I celebrate" (pp172-3)

Heartfelt, deep, and very sincere sympathy for the unhappy woman makes this poet say:

"In being a stone
She found her fulfilment..."(p.174)

The diarist woman remembers seeing her own mother dropping a coin in the river while taking part in bidding adieu to her grand pa. Mother's worship of the Supreme Mother and the earthly mother, the river, lies in a single prayer for the blessings for everyone:
" ....

The reverse flow connects me to
My mother's life that I live
Through her anecdotes
From her childhood
Spent on the river-banks

How life flows
Connecting lives
As one single
Mighty river ..." (p.177)

Sri Venkateswara, the God of Seven Hills, is a deity for every Hindu in this country adoring *aarshadharama.*

Aapatbhandhava
Anaadharakshaka
Govinda..,
... .
Ther're no friends
There're no families
Each prayed single
As one stood facing the idol
For nth part of a wink
Turning the whole world
Into one orphanage...!" (p.179)

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

A dream of a middle class woman gets trampled upon, wails even the poet, and stomped over by the inevitability of routine lives. The speaker of the poems makes this statement with pitiable helplessness:

"We carry our bruises
Our lamentation at the routine death
Silently within to go about
Yet another day..." (p.182)

Extreme pain, disgust and utter helplessness makes one deny the existence of God:

".... ...."
Is god's presence
The same to all?
Do people rush to god
To be trapped within?
God was never a happy feeling
He even haunted me

Now
i don't even think of
nothing is more divine
than Time that makes
and unmakes me!" (p.187)

Only persons in incurable and excruciating pain would say this:

".... ....
the odds and ends of
our treasured emotions
will all be frozen with us
what we think as ours
will either be passed on
or discard with no attachment...(p190)

Here is the painful confession of one who despairs losing all hope altogether:

"No longer can I rise
Like the mythical bird
From the ashes

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

I'm reduced to.
... .
Let me confess,
I can no longer be the seed
You have sown with a fond hope
To reap a rich harvest..." (p.194)

Pain and helplessness may always not lead to utter despair alone. Sometimes they lead to faith, devotion and worshipfulness too.

"lamp bestows
Prosperity, wealth of wisdom
salutations!

lamp dispels
darkness of mind and space
salutations!

lamp vies with
stormy winds sustaining hope
salutations!

lamp you lighted
morphs me into light of bliss
salutation!(p.200)

Insomnia perennial is the fate of the one with wings maimed:

I, like
a dry river-bed
Fail to squeeze out
Even a single drop
To quench my thirst for sleep. (p.204)

A possible action strategy;

"treat hurt
with tenderness
lo, it becomes love

embrace hurt
that it can
never hurt! (p205)

Tears of women are not because of the weakness of a woman:

'whoe ever said
tears spell a woman weak? (p.209)

A slam on the door hurting ...

"The door didn't slam
on my face; the process's
prolonged, inch after inch ...
....
The slammed door made
no noise or did it remain
shut forever; that would be
a better option. It remains
ajar as and when it pleases

I keep looking into
I keep looking beyond
Remaining behind the door" (p.213)

The Ganges, called with deep reverence *Gangaamaa*, is mother beloved for all. One woman says this:

"Ganga flowed within me
Through me!

... .
Decades of flow
Didn't seem to change anything!
Everything's just the same;
The canals and the river and the Goddess
Only the hills look a tad arid
The sky continues to cling to the hills
But the tears of a personal sorrow

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

Now flow into the sea" (p'217)

A relationship that was short-lived was misnamed "LOVE":

"What connects
You to me
I asked
Smile, you replied
And went away
Smile, froze midway" (pp225-6)

Darkness is awesome for another woman:

'standing under a glowing light
I looked around 'all things bright
I looked around 'all things bright
and beautiful' till the darkness
from within submerged the light;

fear of darkness loomed large'...(p.233)

The abject surrender and submission is spoken with powerful tropes indicative of total helplessness:

"axe me
I care not

trample on me
see how i spring back

but

touch me tenderly
i curl into myself
as the touch-me-not" (p.235)

This is the usual, average, submissive, surrender of a woman in *la condition humaine* in this hoary and ever proud domain of *arsha dharma*:

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

“i stand in supplication to
the ruthless chemistry
that proclaims me
a woman!”

woman that I am..(p.241)

Scintillating expressions are linked with very strong and suggestive tropes:

“widening craters
cringing hearts
hollow spaces
drained dreams
irksome whispers
abortive promises
shallow smiles
whipping words
fuming emotions
tell me,
what else
in an average life?” (p.247-8)

There is hope celestial too if only of one in a million or trillion:

I know one day, you’re sure
to come to stroll on my shores and find me as
a monument of waiting
and rest your hand on
my head and fill
my vacant eyes with sparkles eternal..” (p.252)

This appears to be the summing up of the poet’s well-understood condition of the second sex:

Myriad are the colours of her emotions,
Endless are her tears and smiles,
Her fears and her insecurities
That she hides under a facade of smiles
She may not make any difference;
To the earth she touches for a brief stint
But she does make much difference,

ISSN: 2278-4012, Volume:5, Issue:4, October 2016

To a woman's life at all times.

I thank this woman,
For speaking through me
I salute this woman,
For all that she holds and contains... (p.255-56)

Things have been changing very fast in Indian English poetry with various sub-genres if we can term these so: Dalit Poetry, Nature and Imaginative poetry, Metrical Poetry (*Metverse Muse*) Feminist Poetry and the fast evolving poetry of Femininity. The literary milieu is acquiring new shades and new stances. Education, employment and imaginative creativity have been bringing in many writers and more importantly poets into the fore. Women's voices have been getting their due recognition and new appreciation with aplomb. Poetry has been acquiring sociological dimensions with new slants, tenors and heart-throb realism. Motherly good Earth's forgiveness and tolerance to ill-treatment and the harrowing sufferings of women undergoing pitiless heartlessness, and a kind of sombre masochism are the subjects of the poetry of femininity. Poet Indira performed the electrifying and edifying function of the educated, employed, forward looking and responsible urban woman in understanding and expressing sympathy for women, now called fashionably second sex in preference to the earlier appellation, fair sex. Her stance is the upright fervour to awaken and improve male sensibility.

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