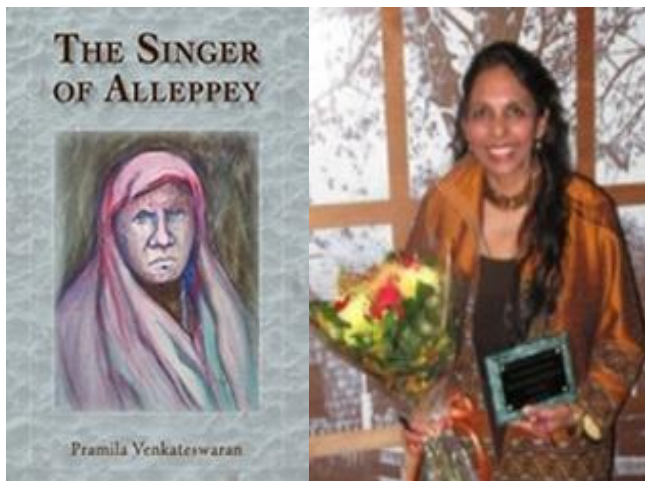


## Through the Poetic Lens Sitala and SHE

By Yogesh Patel

**Pramila Venkateswaran** was poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island from 2013 to 2015. She has already six collections of poems to her credit. In her latest outing, *The Singer of Alleppey*, she takes us on a passage through distressing feminist challenges. However, as the title suggests a singer emerges. In fact, it is a celebration of life with a footprint in violence. There is a play of stark disparities and juxtaposes brewing simultaneously in these poems. The poems are from a viewpoint of poet's paternal grandmother, Sitala. We are



*in the rain that's pouring perfume.*

In *Kummi Dance* Sitala sings: We are birds widening the sky of earth, feet flying. The earth turns into the sky under one's feet! Then there is a perfect husband others paint, but only she can see the demon coming: I see what they don't ...../his words that emerge from their mine. It saddens me often how humans do not choose their words wisely! Each word spoken is a mine. Each sentence is a minefield. However, there are normal routines in Sitala's life; watching boat races, finally giving birth to a son and watching the hypocrisy of men chanting Vedas by day and visiting mistresses by night. The 'Morning' section is about Sitala's son growing up. However, she has a final message for him. She tells him to spare her granddaughter the trappings and baggage her name carries.

*Son, don't let my grand-daughter carry my name,  
my past, religion, duty, customs, tribe, line,  
deaden her heart, play someone else's game,*

A public humiliation with a slap brings back what started in private to a new heightened reality. All she can do is to withdraw "into my tent of shame."

*Like love silenced by a train whistle,  
His slap among the jollity of the wedding hall*

Through Sitala's lens, Venkateswaran has not only allowed her to tell her view of her life, but also allowed the readers to look into her inner world to witness the shame, pain and joy to make own judgement on feminism in general.

made witness to a pain that is cast in the linguistic lyricism. The emerging contrast is extremely effective. The calm we experience in these poems has an anticipation of the imminent storm. The allegory here is of devastating chaos in life, but not a pandemonium in expression.

*A bird bangs itself against glass and falls.  
That's how I feel when he slaps my face.*

That's how an innocent girl is delivered into a violent drama as a woman.

*The hall spins, bride, groom, flowers,  
guests, husband. Then routine happens.*

The abrupt refrain before 'Then the routine happens' is very effective here. These simple words drop us into anticipation of violence. There is a dramatic interim question between the above two couplets:

*Do I have all the ingredients  
for the feast?*

This marriage, a new life, is not a metaphorical feast for Sitala. It is a slap. In fact, further on the narrator offers plain words: My marriage is dung. The book is divided into Night, Morning, Noon, Evening, Midnight, and Dawn to represent the cycles in Sitala's life. In the beginning, there is a separate standalone poem on its own. It prepares the backdrop of violence to come in other poems.

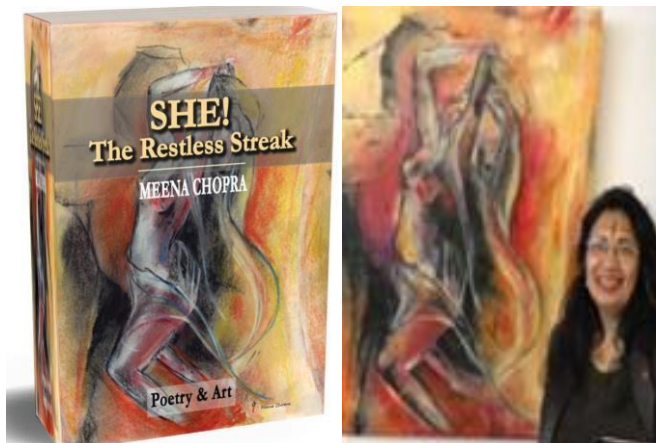
*How will they pick their paths  
through evil sown by ghosts?*

In art, when feminism is explored as an indirect narration or is celebrated without any imposed blind worshipping of a woman, the result is compelling. Many feminist writers and poets forget the primary requisite of art, and so fall in a trap of a plain or angry narrative. Both these collections reviewed here are beguiling.

If the violence is always at the elbow, the beauty of poetry is also not far.

*I want to twirl around*

**Meena Chopra** approaches feminism through abstract art. Her sense of colour and their perfectly balanced contrast evoke the sensual reality of a feminine shape. The poems that sit opposite each plate in the book extend the meaning of that painting. Through which she speaks a volume. These are the entwining shapes of a woman formed with clouds of colours and shades. They reach out to something spiritual to find a self-definition that forms a meaning for what Chopra defines as 'SHE'. The key clue of these poems and artworks is in the subtitle of the



book: 'The Restless Streak'. Chopra has explained this SHE vividly as 'the everlasting stark female element of the entire universe, with all light and shadows, joys and pains./SHE is the "effect" constantly in search of its "cause", the cosmic existence as well as liberation'. Her poems are therefore also abstract and very little to do with the physical reality. Chopra's deliberate use of "SHE" in capital letters has a deeper meaning too. This is not the "She" with the ego of one capital letter but "SHE" in capitals letters and thus the energy within in equal tension. There are poems known as ekphrastic poems. For those who are unfamiliar, an ekphrastic poem describes or interprets an object, sculpture or a painting vividly. Chopra's book

creates an impression of such undertaking, but these are not ekphrastic poems. Many poems here, in fact, can sit with other paintings in the book. Each one is almost stand-alone in nature but wanting to take meaning from other paintings in the book. These

poems are highly influenced by what is known in Hindi literature as Chhayavaad. Vinay Dharwadker, a scholar, explains in The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry he edited with A K Ramanujan, it is “a poetry of intimate moods and obscure desires, a lyrical nature of poetry, an other-worldly poetry of love and longing for divine, a confessional poetry of despair and anguish.” You will not generally see such poetry in English literature. Chopra defies the trend and offers this work as any self-assured artist who finds her medium of expression would.

The following lines are a good example:

A sketch  
Etched  
On her body and flesh  
Rhymed  
An oceanic silence.

The following beautiful lines again substantiate Vinay Dharwadker’s observations about Chhayavaad.

She inhales sun and moon  
In the midst of trivial time

However, Chopra never fully unshackles ‘SHE’ from the earthly bounds: after all, majority of her paintings have created an impression of ‘SHE’ as a figure!

Is it the smell of the earth  
that she eats?

Notice that smell has no solid form yet it is related to eating which involves solid forms!

The best way to capture what happens in this collection is through these lines:

Word took on wings  
Soaring down the valley  
The blank flat pages  
Flying away

Overall, this collection is more a joy, a celebration, a real feast for the eyes due to abstract art plates, and when you land in a text, a fling to nowhere where everything is energy!



***In February/May 2019, Yogesh Patel’s work will appear in coveted journals The London Magazines and Shearsman. In April 2019, he will receive the Poet-of-Honour by Matwaala Literary Festival NY hosted at Hunter College NY. A***

***recipient of many awards and widely published internationally, Yogesh Patel is a poet from the UK. A former editor of Skylark, he currently runs Word Masala Foundation and Skylark Publications UK to promote the diaspora poets. By profession, he is an optometrist and an accountant.***

## DELHI TRAIN STATION

By Cyril Dabydeen

At the Delhi train station,  
hurly burly, with busyness  
everywhere.

From the West I am--  
furious about losing my luggage.  
Gone where? *What’s done* –

Distraught I am, as I raise  
my voice, crying out  
to the harassed porters.

Poor, pathetic India!  
To another, and another,  
I shout out more words,

Curse words, *damn!*  
Oh, English I am with  
my pukka ways, d’you know?

When this man, raggedy,  
with soft, alluring eyes,  
approaches me...a woman.

A sadhu, with a long beard,  
and at once I feel--  
a warm breath come

From this holy man blowing  
at me, gently, and a shiver  
runs down my spine.

Believe me, what seems to  
come from a far place, and  
where else I will never know.

A stranger spirit indeed,  
with the busyness gone--  
just like that, what I feel

In my heart and lungs--  
as this man tells me about  
with a smile...like how I

Never felt before in the East--  
a finger at his lips, and yes,  
trains going by.