

function with their own principles. This is true for Tahira and Andaleep as well because they are completely different from each other. But rather than portraying them as occupying two separate ends of a dichotomous relation, they are both shown to be borrowing elements of each other. For example, after her best friend and brother dies, Tahira finally starts to react. And Andaleep is shown to be vulnerable when it comes to matters of love.

It is interesting that Abbas chose to stick to much-explored themes for her novel. For example, placing her characters in Karachi is no coincidence. It is a city that has seen a lot of migrant influx and in the process has become a hotbed for all sorts of violence. For example, see the following paragraph from Saba Imtiaz's *Karachi, You're Killing Me!* –

He asks me why I'm in such a rush, and when I tell him I'm a journalist, he tells me about his nephew who was shot in broad daylight when a thug from an anti-Pashtun political party heard the Pashto song that was his phone's ringtone. (Imtiaz 2014, p. 18)

The underlying tone of the novel is simple, and in some cases, tending towards the rebellious. In language and in theme, it parallels the complexity that one finds in Fatima Bhutto's debut novel, *The Shadow of The Crescent Moon* (2013). Like Bhutto, Abbas chooses to narrate the personal and the political, resulting in a heady mix that can leave the reader shaken. But unlike Bhutto's cryptic syntax, Abbas opts for a simpler language, letting the narrative take control on its own.

The Empty Room is an engaging read that taps into several concerns at once—political instability and anarchy, sexual abuse and gender norms, to name a few. Minor flaws aside (it does seem fast-paced and unfinished at times), it is a brilliant exposition of the political trauma that Pakistan went through during the 1970s.

References

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Two Diaspora Feminist Poets With A Different Approach

Yogesh Patel

THE SINGER OF ALLEPPEY

By Pramila Venkateswaran
Shanti Arts Publishing, 2018, pp.114, \$15.95

SHE! THE RESTLESS STREAK

By Meena Chopra
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018, pp.104, CDN\$ 29.50

Pramila Venkateswaran is 'one of our finest diaspora poets', declares Keki Daruwala. This collection enhances that point. The poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island from 2013 to 2015, Venkateswaran has already six collections of poems to her credit. *The Singer of Alleppey* creates a viewpoint on feminism for the readers. It avoids all pitfalls of direct winging and rhetoric in the true discipline of art. However, through Sitala, her late paternal grandmother's eyes, mind and heart she leaves no doubt about her message on men's violence against women. The work is not prescriptive or judgemental, but as the title suggests a search for the joy and yogic harmony through a quest for songs. The joy is fragile. When the joy of enjoying the chiku juice is over:

all this despite living with a stone husband.

The uncompromising lyricism in the backdrop of violence creates a compelling narrative.

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

And that's how an innocent girl is delivered into a violent drama as a woman. It shocks and at times is painful to comprehend. In 'Letter to Sarojini', she dismantles the dream to highlight the reality.

*The things I love in your poems:
nightingales, peacocks, bangle sellers, bangles.
I have yet to see a nightingale here in my
corner of Kerala.*

*There is a peacock in the temple but it does
not dance, the bangle sellers are morose and
show the same dull colours. If only they
captured the hues of spring!*

*Why don't you write about our struggles in
our homes...?*

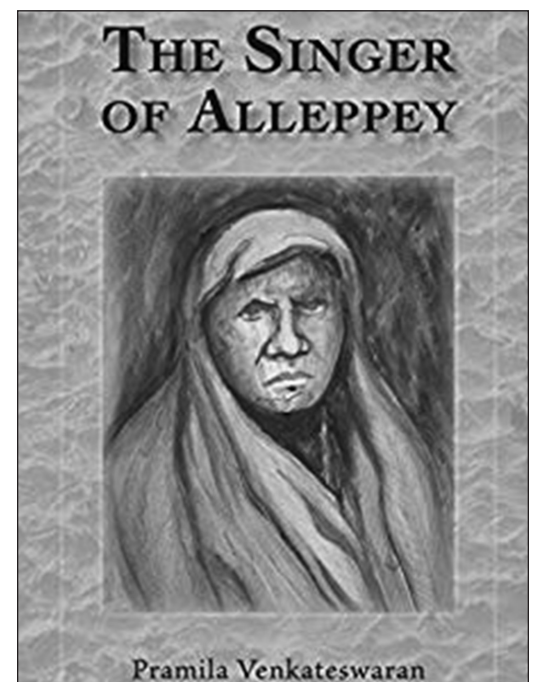
The book is divided into sections: Night, Morning, Noon, Evening, Midnight, and Dawn, in that order. A narrative follows the cycle as Sitala's life. However, there is a timeless poem on its own at the beginning of that timeline. It sets the fire that follows.

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

What is the mechanics of forgetting one's pain? Sitala finds the release in rain.

*I want to twirl around
in the rain that's pouring perfume.*

She dances: *We are birds widening the sky of earth, feet flying.* She knows the sky under her feet is surreal. There is a perfect husband others paint, but only she can see the demon: *I see what they don't...../his words that emerge from their mine.* It saddens me often how humans don't choose their words wisely! Each word spoken carelessly is a mine. Each sentence is a minefield. The night for this woman, with a girl hidden inside her, is long in the ambience of the bustle of humdrum things. She watches boat races, finally gives birth to a



son and watches the hypocrisy of men chanting Vedas by day and visiting mistresses by night. The Morning section explores motherhood. Nevertheless, Sitala tells her son to spare her grand-daughter the trappings and baggage her name carries.

*Son, don't let my grand-daughter carry my name,
my past, religion, duty, customs, tribe, line,*

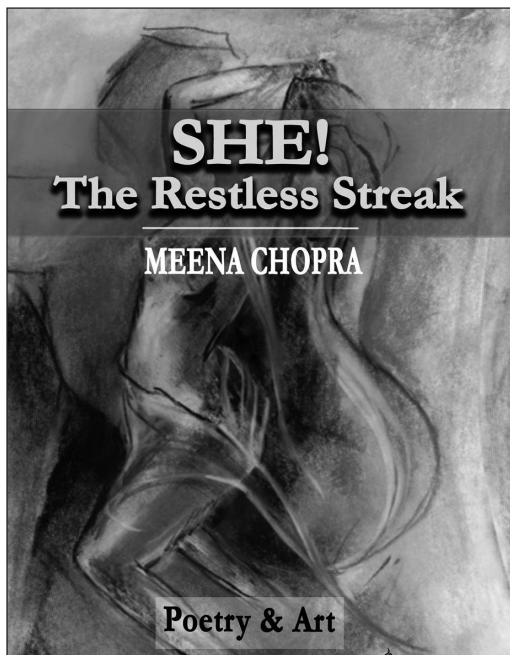
deaden her heart, play someone else's game,

Found everywhere, cow dung was once an integral part of rural life. I have lived during school holidays with my grandmother in a house maintained with the cow dung! Hence, it is nostalgic to find songs about them in this book. It also allows Venkateswaran to experiment with language with many repetitions of

thathi thi thai thom thom thom

Dung Song lists all things 'dung'—shitty—in Sitala's marriage. She can't sing about it, 'with husband glaring', so, goes for the safe thing: *I am going to sing about the product of Krishna's favourite beast, I will sing about cow dung.* There is also a separate serving of a Cow Dung Cakes. Humour makes humans more human, and so it does Sitala. In conclusion, Venkateswaran has created a swaying collection of feminist poems from a unique perspective.

Meena Chopra is not in any quarrel with men. A true feminist, she approaches her work through an astonishing abstract art. In the crowded scene of loud feminist poets, she is a feminist who wants to celebrate the inner soul and capture the beauty of the female



body. Every poem is accompanied by a sensual painting that is abstract to leap out of the mundane in search of ascension to nature. Her sense of colour and their perfectly balanced contrast evoke the sensual reality of a feminine shape that attempts to materialize in words as poems. These are the entwining shapes of a woman forming from clouds of colours and shades with only the hints of borders or lines. They are attempting to say something about the spiritual, female dimension. Poems and the paintings together represent an uncluttered universe of self-definition that is 'SHE'. One may get the impression that they

are ekphrastic poems. However, the poems are able to sit easily with some other paintings in the collection too. Therefore, these are not ekphrastic poems in any true sense. This condition arises because they do not latch onto anything mundane in the paintings. In other words, they are part of the whole 'SHE' that arises in this collection, not just a descriptive part of a particular painting or text.

As the poems can stand alone on their own as proven at Chopra's reading events, they possess a refined expression of what Chopra calls 'SHE'. One is reminded of Juan Jimenez's poetics about the artistic purity. This tradition has no room in the current poetical trends prevailing in the West. English poetry is far too much preoccupied with the everyday twaddle and such poems have no space spared. However, strangely, it is an acceptable current in Hindi literature under *Chhayavad*. Vinay Dharwadker, a scholar, explains in *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* he edited with A K Ramanujan: 'This movement rejected the poetics and politics of *adarshavad* and produced a poetry of intimate moods and obscure desires, a lyrical nature of poetry, an other-worldly poetry of love and longing for the divine, a confessional poetry of despair and anguish.' My bet is that this is where most critics in the West and in English literature will drastically fail in understanding this collection.

The key clue to 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.' Therefore, her poems are not engaged with any dull daily happenings. The abstract means abstract, they are singing without any limitations of lines! This is not the 'She' with 'he' etched in the word. The form used is *SHE*, all capitals. All its energy balanced in equal tensions. Everything else silenced.

A sketch

Etched

On her body and flesh

Rhymed

An oceanic silence.

Shadows come from the solid objects, the harsh outer realities. Plunged in her inner world, she finds another reality.

Coiled shadows

The dream sequence

Besieged the far future

SHE rises above the trivial time and engulfs moon and sun to re-energize herself

She inhales sun and moon

In the midst of trivial time

Chopra never unshackles *SHE* from her earthly bounds.

*Is it the smell of the earth
that she eats?*

SHE is often a digital shape, when Chopra is working with the digital canvas there are dangers of losing her work if not saved in time. One wrong stroke of a button and the virtual *SHE* is erased! That is how transient *SHE* is!

All erased

With one harsh note

An invisible stroke

Effacing the memory stick.

Note the word 'effacing', it is not about 'erasing'! What a marvellous brushstroke! Hence, the poet fittingly conjures

Was that

The brush of tainted time?

I learnt here that there is poetry in even a mistake!

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!

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

Book News

Book News

Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks by Sumita Mukherjee focuses on the different geographical spaces in which Indian women were operating from the 1910s until 1950, and shows how they, campaigning for suffrage, positioned themselves within an imperial system and invoked various identities, whether regional, national, imperial, or international, in the context of debates about the vote.

Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 284,
GBP 19.99

Chup: Breaking the Silence About India's Women by social scientist Deepa Narayan is a rigorously researched book, based on 600 detailed interviews with women and some men across India's metros. The author identifies seven key habits that may dominate women's everyday lives, despite their education, success, financial status and family background and which mean only one thing—that Indian women are trained to habitually delete themselves. Shocking, troubling and revolutionary, *Chup* will hold a mirror to yourself—and you may not like what you see.

Juggernaut, 2018, pp. 320, ₹699.00