



Societal Awareness And Reform Through Poetry: A Study Of Menka Shivdasini's Safe House

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Introduction

Menka Shivdasini is a Mumbai based poet and journalist. Her poem collection Safe House abounds in references to the sad circumstances and limitations faced by women in contemporary society. By viewing first hand as a journalist she is able to reach numerous women in real life and assess their sufferings and circumstances that lead to their suffering and sometimes tragic end. The social evils that continue to follow women and that either suppress them in the bud or nip them from growing is the subject of several poems in this poem collection and these form the subject of the current study.

Biography:

Menka Shivdasani, started writing poetry at the young age of eight years. In that age, she had written about childhood concerns like pet dogs and sea around her home and strange people she had never met. Rajila Kirpalani, a freelance journalist convinced a news paper editor to publish her childhood poems in a children's corner.

At the age of sixteen, she was introduced to Nissim Ezekiel, who is often considered as the father of Modern Indian English poetry by many critics. He insisted and inculcated in her the need for poetic craft. He published some of her poems which gave her the opportunity to participate in poetry related programs. She co-founded 'Poetry Circle' in 1986 along with Nitin Mukadam and Akil Contractor. She belongs to the Sindhi community and hence often evinces the pain related to Indian partition in her poems. She has encouraged several young poets by conducting a poetry festival every year in Mumbai, since 2011 for the global movement of 100 Thousand Poets for Change. She explains her motivation for this as:

Of course these poems will not help them to change the world or make them better adults but I do hope that someday, they will look back on these poems and remind themselves of how they once believed that war is evil,

peace is necessary and it is important to speak up for what one believes in. it is a little optimistic. (Centre for Stories)

She firmly believes that writing poetry would help to bring out change in the world.

Some of her works are translations of Sindhi works along with Anju Makhija and Arjan Shad. She was the editor of *Its Freedom and Fissures* (1998) : An Anthology of Sindhi Partition Poetry published by Sahitya Academy, India in 2012. She has edited an anthology of women's writing for SPARROW, and two anthologies of contemporary Indian poetry for the American e-zine, www.bigbridge.org. She is also co-translator of 'Freedom and Fissures', an anthology of Sindhi Partition poetry. In 1986, she co-founded Poetry Circle in Mumbai. She has published three collections of poetry—'Nirvana at Ten Rupees', 'Stet' and 'Safe House'. She has edited an anthology of women's writing for SPARROW, and two anthologies of contemporary Indian poetry for the American e-zine, www.bigbridge.org. She is also co-translator of 'Freedom and Fissures', an anthology of Sindhi Partition poetry. She is careful about her poetic technique and sensitive in her collection of ideas and the content of her work. She writes about her need for solitude to compose poems as:

It can come from anywhere but now increasingly, I find I need long silences to pave the way for poetry. This is difficult in a city like Mumbai and I do not always have the opportunity.... The poem can happen anywhere, but as I said before, increasingly I need silent spaces. There was a time when I could write on the backs of bus tickets on long rides, and even on the palm of my hand when I did not have access of paper. (Centre for Stories)

The metamorphosis of an idea into a poem therefore goes through several stages of composition in her; originating as an idea and being stored on Evernotes on her phone which she would later on mail to herself and develop into wholesome poems. This shows her great passion for poetry. Being a journalist she had a chance to meet people with various experience which are expressed in her writing. Hence, her writings are realistic with feeling. Most of the persons were women so her poems are described as feminist as it pictures women's sufferings.

She received an International Literary award by Ethos Literary Journal and Hawakal Publishers for poetry in 2019. She has published her first poetry collection *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* in 1990 which was published by XAL Praxis Foundation. Following this, she published *Stet* in 2001 by Sampark, and by Paperwall *Safe House* in 2015 and *Frazil*. Her first work is said to be of various themes from the question of violence against women. In her *Stet*, she took another step towards her passion by describing the world of pain, loss and vitality. Pramod K. Nayar comments that Shivdasani is poet of loss and memory. She echoes the experience of many living in urban places. Bruce King comments that "Her poetry

holds together a private world of chaotic emotions through its logical development and its strikingly imaginative image.”

Shivdasani has described various sufferings which were encountered by the women. Writing as a woman and writing about women are two distinct ways in which she explores the theme of women’s suffering. Not only women’s suffering, she also talks about the hidden society that restricts them. This article aims to analyse the representation of women’s sufferings in Menka Shivdasani’s poem collection titled *Safe House*. She speaks about her concern for women in an interview as:

My experience as a journalist writing about women’s issues when I was in my 20s certainly impacted several of my poems and I think it continues to do so today. I met several women who had suffered domestic abuse, and also spoke to parents of young brides who had been killed over dowry demands. The poems are not directly about these situations, but they have found their way into my work. My poems have been described as feminist and people have been surprised by the violence in them. Once, when I was concerned that I had not written for a long while, I put down a ‘blank’ line that could go anywhere—One day he said—and in 20 minutes I found I had written a poem. A critic used it to illustrate what he called ‘intimidacy’ in poetry by women—intimidating.

She has first hand knowledge of and insight into the faced by women due to their social situation. She has endeavoured to bring out their voices through her poetry. Speaking of them alone in poetry might not altogether bring about societal transformation but the poet does her part in chronicling the voices of the silent and suffering group of women. By doing so she aimed to bring about change as is her belief in poetry to bring about peace in the world.

Women as Prisoners of Patriarchy:

In Shivdasani’s view, women were imprisoned and narrowed within their homes. They are imprisoned by the invisible chains that tie them down through the patriarchal setting. They are alienated and isolated from the society which they belong to. Voicing their problems and feelings is Shivdasani’s way of registering protest against this. It was her observation by learning and interviewing various public lives. Being in home seems a boundary and getting out is a trespass when it comes to women. Her poems reflect the group of women who were longing to be free from the walls of the kitchen and to be one with society. In the poem “Bird Women”, the woman was allergic to the dingy room and the silence. Thus, she freed herself through the keyhole:

Stretching my legs
was a strain and breathing
was a whole new experience
breathing is still
a problem sometimes, - Bird Women (29-49)

These women who are relegated to kitchen work have been so accustomed to their limited space that even on coming out of it, the sudden availability of space is a constricting experience so that they cannot even breathe, Like birds who have long been in a cage, they forget how to fly in the open sky. Though, breathing is troublesome and stretching legs is a strain, she could find wings behind her back. For Shivdasani, women's freedom and happiness is incoming out into the world and mingling with it. In the opening of the poem, "Homemaker" she writes, "It's time to break the kitchen,/ take your fires elsewhere,/ watch time and space curl up,/ waft out through windows" (1-4). She makes a call to the women in the kitchens to come out. If only they will break out of their walls, all time and space would curl up and make way for them and they would know how vast this world is.

Change Through Registering Protest in Poetry:

Her poetry shows a genuine care for the human race. It talks about the society which is invisible and yet fashions the life of the people by trapping them in their situations. As she said, she has initiated the fire to burn and the result is up to the readers to act accordingly in order to bring a change in this society. Marginalizing people on the basis of riches, power and authority creates pain in people's lives. The basic root of these evil sufferings roots from the term 'discrimination' based on culture, race, and gender. Shivdasani has described how discrimination enters through gender.

To the poet women were like sun with the power to scorch but they are bound by men not to rise and shine as is seen in the poem, "Choices":

You were yellow once,
colour of sunshine
smell of fresh earth
plucked out
by the root, bottled
by busy hands. (5-11)

Woman was once in yellow color, just like the blazing sun. Here the color represents warmth, brightness, and good tidings. The smell of earth denotes her innocence and unspoiled tenderness. Like a plant plucked out of the happy earth transplanted into a narrow bottle, the woman after marriage is put in narrow and constricting circumstances. It hinders her growth and natural ability to shine like the sun. Here the word 'busy' means the working mankind. Women are confined to the kitchen and their sacrifice is not even acknowledged as it is believed to the norm that they have to follow. In the beginning of the poem, Shivdasani pictured the women as black, the yellowness fades off gradually. Here the life of women is allegorically explained through the mustard seed. Women are only speculated as a servant and she is not allowed to make a circle for herself.

In another poem, "Departure", she writes about the passion of women through an incident. The woman is at hand to a voyage, therefore while packing her baggage, her clothes fit into the suitcase but her books do not. People think of woman as only meant to be conspicuous to fashion and make up, here in this poem Shivdasani exposed a woman who is very passionate and unknown to the world. When society disregards women's talent, it was like a phoenix with flying wings called as a chicken. They are restricted inside the kitchen and prevented from entering the society. Thus, their talents were buried alive. In another poem "Visitor", she evokes a pitiable image of a busy housewife who is sacrificing her passion for the above patriarchal society and she relates her experience. When suffering the limitations of patriarchy, she is unable to express who she really is. A woman was visited by a poem, like how Meena Alexander was once visited in her poem, "Muse". She neglected it and there lie two reasons, firstly she was forced to forget her real identity and secondly, she is now for others not for herself that is, the limitation over her geographical movement. She was busy in the kitchen to cook the breakfast, then the lunch followed by the dinner. Still the poem waited to be noticed by her, but by being a busy she failed to grasp the rare poem that was hovering around her. She writes:

Last night, a poem hovered
on the edge of the sofa....
and I knew
it was time
to find my face again....
But the poem
stood me up again,
and the make-up
began to streak
across my face.
I did not go
looking for him,
not that night,
or ever again. (1-6)

The poem comes and goes as a visitor and she fails to acknowledge it as her own. This above excerpt from the poem "Visitor" is an example for an acceptance of alienation. The creative spirit of the woman is suppressed and she is compelled to lose her identity. Her self-effacement is compelled upon her in the name of duty. They would not accept any kind of opposition to the male dominating society but the agony they suffer inside their heart is more painful than the other. Agony of their hearts is explained in the poem, "One Thousand Years" as a deep sea full of secrets.

Diving beneath the intangible
Shipwreck of the heart....
You will come across broken

pots and pans....
The sea has kept its secrets
for a thousand years. (1-9)

They are strong enough to hold the agony inside their heart like unsolved puzzles. They are like diving birds swooping on the undulating waves to survive no matter how big the waves are. She also says that women have the ability to bear all the evil against her. The patience cannot be longer enough to hold on. Once the times come, she will be at the height to fight for her freedom as evinced in these lines from "The Clinging Vine" as "Put her in cold storage./ Let the grey metallic doors/ shut upon her. She will / taste good when the time is right." (1-4). Women need chance to prove themselves, which is denied in this society. They should not be the isolated island without being taken into account. They too have some valuable resources. As Iyer says they are like dancing girls pressing their face on the glass window of the dancing hall, eagerly waiting to be invited inside.

Women During the Partition

Shivdasini was much concerned with the pain and turmoil that arose during the partition of India. Before independence during the partition, the one who suffered the most was women. The following excerpt from the poem 'Sepia Tome' clearly manifests the situation of women during the partition:

Across the Partition
people dream of the corner
they once knew....
One woman had too much life in her,
Kicking, breathing, in this silken tomb.
So they took a gun and stuck it up,
shot the baby in her womb. (1-13)

And the early view of agony continued with various modifications through the poem 'Veils' as:

The first veil was when
The country split,
A woman held apart
And sliced,
Crushed under the weight
Of muscle, bone,
And the evil smile. (1-7)

Shivdasini stands up for bordering women in particular region without considering them in account as a social or living being. She finds her result as failure. The excerpt from the poem, "For Wole Soyinka" as "my plastic world lies/ liquid at my feet/ and no battles are won" expresses the frustration she felt over her breakdown. The reason for saying that no battle won means the current situation which never changed slightly. It is explained again in the same poem, "Veil". The first evil happened in the ancient time, second in the critical state where

saving own life is considered as important, but the third evil is said to be in modern era. The people just snap a shot and took video with no dare to pick up the suffering women. The following passage may serve to illustrate:

they held her down again,
this women born
of country blood,
and they whipped her
on the streets
so no one dared
to take her by the hand.
Instead, they took
A video of the veiled
and battered face. (24-32)

This expedited the fire in the heart of women who is none other than another victim suffering. Men cannot hold for too long without the help of women. She reflects the tragedy that happens in the life of women she met in her lifetime through her poems. By portraying the life style, she indirectly pinned that they were alienated and estranged in the society where they are living. Her poetry is a vast gallery of women's agony and alienation.

Women's Latent Power

Shivdasani explains the latent power of women through her poems. She names women as "Bird Women" to show her freedom, "Iron Women" to show off her power, "The Clinging Vine", to show off her fruitful life. Her advice for the women is to come out of their ghetto to show their power to society, so that they might be a part of it. They were estranged which hurts more than being with burdens of society. Previously it was said that they have to sustain certain discursive pathways to be entangled with social order. Again they challenge this cruel world to test their potential in order to be recognized. This is briefly written in a short poem, "Iron Women":

Women of iron, from an exploded star,
I embed myself in a crusty earth
That waits for the sun to rise.
Hammer me into sheets
Stretch me into wires.....
I expand without breaking,
You may melt and mix me,
I emerge even purer,
Magnetic and ready to strike-
Iron woman, in her element. (1-15)

Throughout history, women have received less opportunity than men in most cultures. "The book is a volume of much daring anchored by a personalised
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woman's point of view" (Sen). They start to live as an empowerment of the family with which they want to chain themselves than to expose to the society. Their sacrificing is designed and displayed through the poem, "Everywoman is an Island" where the women was neglected and confined to solidarity. Thus, she is considered as an island, and the people as an occasional ship. She is amidst the 'hubbub of kitchen' but she happily accepts it and even contours her geography. She writes in "Everywoman is an Island":

Beneath the hubbub of the kitchen
and the mountain of dishes....
she will fold in on herself,
tuck in her piece of earth
and change the contours
of her geography. (1-6)

These lines beautifully explain the love of a mother who is also a house wife who digs the suffering inside herself and flowers to beautify others life. Even she is ready to confine herself in the boundary of others, she wishes for someone to share her worries. This can be seen in the poem 'The Women Who Speaks to Milk Pots'. She converses with a milk pot. Though she was condemning herself from standing against male dominated society, sometimes her emotions were stirred up by the limitless torture which were conveyed indirectly to the milk,

I am simmering too,
padding about
with cottonball claws
I'm on edge now; about
to overflow. Don't sit
so self contained,
snow-white and cold. (5-24)

Though people did not talk about their marginalization or alienation, they actually have to be cared for in a humane manner. Being calm does not mean that they are not feeling wounded. Shivdasani stands for the women all over the world, whoever is alienated or underestimated as a 'weak soul'. Sen remarks "It is a volume of much daring anchored by a personalised woman's point of view."

Summation

In her interview, she told that she was fond of writing poems and reading books even in her travels, it was briefly explained in a short poem with deep integrating meaning that is

The clothes are never a problem,
neatly folded. . . .
It's the books that get unwieldy,
falling off the suitcase. – Departure (1-8)

While others prefer appearance and outfit, paradoxically she found books as her real identity and elegance. She attained this uppermost stage by her endless hard

work. Being a house wife, she found that igniting her drive towards her dreams is a difficult road. Menka Shivdasini endeavours to voice the thoughts of the women who are relegated to their roles under the patriarchal order. She chooses not to measure the impact of her poetic campaign but to rather continue with her work of educating the masses against the problems faced by women in even modern contemporary society.

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