



Research Paper

Voices across Borders: An Exploration of Veils, Halos & Shackles

Dr. Nithya Mariam John,

Assistant Professor, Department of English, BCM College, Kottayam
Correspondence to Dr. Nithya Mariam John

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The anthology titled *Veils, Halos & Shackles: International Poetry on the Oppression and Empowerment of Women* is par excel than many of the contemporary norms of women's poetry collections with its open commitment to the sense of justice and honesty of voices. This is made explicit in the authors' notes which accompany each poem which throw light on the conception and implication of the verses. The contexts never limit the possibilities of meanings, rather open our eyes to the stories which accompany each muse; poetic voices which declare to the world that women are still unequal in the eyes of social standards which augment hierarchies.

The editors, Charles Adès Fishman and Smita Sahay make it clear in the Dedication page that the work is to the "Memory of Jyoti Singh Pandey, Nadia Anjuman and the uncountable number of other women and girls who have been victims of gender violence and to Malala Yousafzai, whose leadership and courage have inspired millions and for all of our daughters". The statement encompasses the dead and the alive united by their ontology of being women. The poems in the compilation are also bound together by the same principles of existence- the being of womanhood. The editors also mention in the Preface that the anthology was built up in the wake of rape and murder of Jyothi in Delhi in December 2012 (xxvii). More than 250 poems by 180 poets unveil silences centring on gender violence, acid attacks, incest, victim-blaming, rape and much more. Scanning the poems, one finds similarities in the patterns of violence, which are only different with respect to the particularity of cultural contexts. One also opens eyes to the different forms of abuse women encounter each day, all over the world. They are individual experiences, yet shared on a global space.

The poems open before our eyes the raw emotions women feel when assaulted inside and outside their homes. Jim Pascaul Agustin's "Perhaps to Senegal to Listen to Ismael Lo?" is about the dilemma faced by an abused wife who wishes to murder husband in order to escape the conjugal strife. This same sentiment is shared by the persona in Joel Allegretti's "The Marital Hygiene Poem": "The bruise on the left cheekbone was the last straw/ Purple-black and stark, as if Denny had surgically implanted a plum" (6). These feelings which desire the murder of their partners is mutual, yet particular since Allegretti explicitly tries to break the stereotypical abusive husband who is often imagined to be uneducated or not one who has climbed the ladders of the executive world.

Many of the poems point fingers at the fundamentalist religious authorities who augment abuse by declaring marriage as sacred. For example, Ameera Arjane's "Marriage is a Mosque" is about a religious leader who doesn't listen to the woes of a wife who is complaining about an abusive husband, rather tries to exhort her to master 'sabr' (patience) and not to tear down the walls of marriage. Marriage is decreed to be holy and her husband is proclaimed by the leader as "a good man, he just can't control himself" (13). He continues, "He is a good man, he has a degree, his family has no scandal" (13). The empty cupboards, the youngest child who is taken to the psychologist and the mirror onto which he smashed her face testify otherwise. Sampurna Chatterji in her "All the Goddesses" gives the picture of a woman who drowns herself in the goddesses Kali, Lakshmi and Durga and sense the "black moods", "a river of desire" and the freedom one enjoys when raising weapons at the right time (79). Liana Joy Christensen in her note to "Entering the Lazarus House" says that it is easy to demonize certain religions for having the monopoly on oppression of women, but often we elide the fact that the issues are longstanding part of humankind problems faced by humankind in all cultures (85). Linda Pastan's note on her poem "On Violence Against Women" says that she has always been "obsessed by Adam and Eve and their Garden" (360). Her poem rightly points out how the blame still rests upon the woman: "continues toxic down the ages" (359). Steven Sher's "My Daughter at Three asks if God is a he" is an eye opener to how children imagine God or how the social circumstances paint the image of the deity in their minds

even before rational thoughts bloom. The poem ends so: "At five, my daughter thought that even God- no male of males,/no greybeard savior-/cannot decide what sex to be/ or how to spare/ the heart its pain" (436).

Incest and child abuse are dealt seriously in poems of Chris Fradkin, Roberta Beary, Ned Balbo and Meg Eden. "Irish Twins" (Beary) opens with a statement which captures the shattered lives of many children, "We are as still as the dead" (41). Yolanda Arroyo-Pizzaro in her "Raza Poem" narrates her experience as Afro Puerto Rican girl and victim of racism at school: "Yolanda, you are an African/ you are so black/ so ugly black/ so bembetrueno/ big lips thunder/ big hip hurricane" (18). Terri Muss' "Father's Secret Drawer" is on how a father secretly abuses his daughter: At night, his teeth gleam/ a mouth of stars above me,/ his fingernails smooth/as glass- they stroke/ my skin, white as pork" (299). Adele Jones in her "Severed" adopts the child's perspective of Female Genital Mutilation: And no one/ did anything/g to stop it/ So she crouches and rocks/ while blood drips from her wounds/ into the dirt at her feet" (218). Poems, for many of these survivors, are not mere words penned down during leisure time, but an outlet to heal themselves and share with the world that nobody is alone in suffering.

The brutal side of rape is clearly shown in Francine Witte's "The Girl in the Garbage": "11's old and already done/ Raped all the way to old lady./So many fingers and tongues on her/ it would take lifetimes to undo" (511). Sharon Coleman's poems are painful narrations of rape stories of her own and others. In "I Never Called it Rape", she says, "It is his/ Thirty-six-year-old/ Genitals in my/ Fourteen-year-old/ Body/ And it hurts" (89). Breindel Lieba Kasher's "The Rabbi Speaks" is one written on a very much personal note. She mentions in her author's note that the poem was written after her youngest daughter was raped. The lines simply slap the brutal faces of inhumane acts: "The rabbi speaking said:/ Look what happens / to our daughters/who do not/keep the Sabbath/ And that is how he/ Justified the rape/ In our village/ Everyone kept silent" (221). Such traditions and belief systems are mocked at by Priyanka Kalpit in her short and crisp poem "Tumor". She says that the society treats the "malignant tumor of tradition" very "slowly and steadily/ till it ripens/ and explodes" (220).

The persistent mood throughout the poems is rightly captured by Helen Bar-Lev in her "Why Should the Sun Shine?": " He needs no excuses/ to be abusive/it's as natural/ as the hair he wears/ as the skin he's in/ Aggression brings out the best in him/ shows the world/ he's masculine" (37). Jennifer A. Powers in "Thank You" satirically thanks the opponent male in her relationships, and implores him not to believe that she has been made weak by the assaults: I want to thank you for teaching me the brutality of you, for preparing me for other monstrosities...I want to thank you for my freedom. I want to thank you for making me arrive at me" (368). The review would be left incomplete without mentioning two poems one should not miss out during the perusal of the anthology- Karen Alkalay- Gut's "Panties" and Nadia Anjuman's "Silenced". Alkalay-Gut says that the poem was originally intended to be printed directly on panties, as she has always felt that "underwear is a lot of wasted space that could be used for poetry" (5). The poem is about a girl who pulls down her panties to see "if they were stained, if he had really/ made it inside me with all that struggle/ all the blows and writhings, all the pains...the little game of the rapist" (4). Anjuman's poem is left unprinted because the permission to use her poem was denied by her publishers. But the age when she died (25 years old) and the title of the poem are enough to speak out violence. Her first collection of poems came out despite the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Veils, Halos & Shackles is an eye opener to the commonality of atrocities committed against women all over the globe. Yet they are individual and particular expressions too, since those come from diverse cultural contexts. Even when the subtitle of the collection says "empowerment", it is the oppression of women which stands etched in memory after the perusal. From basic necessities of life to greater luxuries of livelihood, women remain the second sex, even in 21st C. In spite of feminism having gained a noteworthy position among the other threads of theory and practice, the collection of poems open our eyes to the abuses women endure in their day to day practical life. Let it be war or peace, love or hatred, women's bodies and minds are at stake. The verses point finger at the so called institutions of society including religion, schools and family for closing eyes on the larger section of the marginalised. Such a poetic endeavour would be one of its kind, if the readers augment their pledge to make the world a better place to live in. If somebody ruled by the misogynist idea of victimising the victim can confess, as K. Satchidanandan in his "That Stone" says "I the sinner/ stand naked with the murderers", then the work can claim to have hit the mark.

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