

Silence Speaks



This summer's greatest book discovery, says Shekhar Deshpande, is Indian women writing.

When silence speaks, it shatters both the world that has gotten used to silence and the life that finds power and comfort in speech, vocality and forced physical presence. When women wrote, they cracked the code of a patriarchal grammar of speech. Their lives, their bodies and their experience claimed that part of our conversation and thinking that was used to proceeding without them. The easily discovered dozen or so books by women writers in any respectable bookstore speak the story of the silence that has come closer to our ears.

And yet, the editors of *Women Writing in India*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita warn in their brilliant introduction to the first volume that there is nothing mystic about this energy of women claiming language. That expression, as much as every other social expression, is affected by relations of power and is tainted by the dominance of gender, race and class. Thus, in their collection, they don't claim, unlike some American feminists, any glossy universal condition. They are aware that women are defined

by their gender as much as by their class and race. That emphatic position alone marks the two monumental volumes published by the Feminist Press as a major event. The collection in these volumes is not informed merely by the identification of authors as women. The editors have taken trouble to give voice to attempts of rebellion, conditions of oppression and efforts of women who did something to affect the world in which we live in today. The collections are unique in that they speak of women's struggles and not simply their status as women.

The achievements of these two volumes are manifold. They bring together the writings of women from all over India, both chronologically and regionally in presentable manner. It is a single most important collection that will not only promote scholarship, but alter the perception in our public debate that women's literature is marginal at best and "typically" womanish at worst. Secondly, the anthology brings forward some women writers whose work has been suppressed for a number of

reasons. In their panoramic survey of Indian women's work in many languages, the editors were looking for someone like Mirabai, Sarojini Naidu, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, and Mrinal Pande, who are known to some degree within their own linguistic reach. Then there are several writers who are unknown in their own regions as well as to literary historians beyond the boundaries of their region. Among them, the prostitute poet of the 12th century from Kannada ("In my harlot's trade"), whose only surviving poem toward the end of a number of works by women who would be identified otherwise as "ancient," part of the folklore rather than recorded history. The Telegu poet Muddupalani's erotic "Radhika Santwanam" ("Appeasing Radhika") may have been suppressed, the editors suggest partially because of the association of the subject matter with the gender of the writer.

The third major achievement of a collection like this is that it sheds important light on India's social and cultural history. In Volume II, the reader comes across Hamsa Wadkar's *Sangate Aika* to confront the multi-level history of performing arts, and women's place vis-a-vis the male power structure, the status of women performers and the shape of lower middle class family politics in Maharashtra. Similarly, Savitribai Phule's letter to Jyotiba Phule in Volume I, asking her husband to sensitively share the opening up of caste and class divisions to gender issues as well. The editors' preference in choosing her letter over her poetry is an insightful one, from which all readers will benefit in understanding women's role in social struggles. A. Jayaprabha and Vimala's poems about the forces that construct identity of women

make the issues of struggle at once contemporary and culturally specific.

The final major achievement of these two volumes is for feminism and women's literary politics. The editors state their aims explicitly: that they include those writers who have made a fight out of writing and that their act of writing was caused by conditions of social struggle and as a result their writing participates in the act of reclaiming place for women. One does not judge such work by what it omits, but rather where it cuts; not by its stature as a hall of fame for women writers, but as a path as yet uncharted for the necessary movement to claim their own voice in the culture. Anita Desai's lament in *The New York Review of Books* (March 3, 1994) that this work driven by a political agenda has missed some great mainstream writers, does not hold much merit since such an omission does not devalue an intentionally interventionist collection like this. That may be a harsh position to take, but the efficacy of such an enterprise must be measured by the number of alarms it causes in the heart of a complacent, sleeping culture.

Such a gap is filled somewhat by another collection, published before the Tharu-Lalita volumes discussed above. *Truth Tales* is a collection of stories written by contemporary women in India. Mrinal Pande, Ismat Chughtai, and Mahasweta Devi are "repeat" writers from the two volumes discussed above, but the book retains its importance in giving us a picture of women writers working at the moment of "postcolonialism" in India. The form of short stories is

employed here as a short-hand for a universal condition; fundamental problems of existence and social relations seem to be compressed as metaphors or parables.

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's *Real and Imagined Women*, written in academic style, for an academic (primarily U.S.) audience from an Indian university is a complex book for reasons that goes beyond its own process of realization. Although she does not speak of "literary" world per se, what she says about a number of interesting issues (recent incidents on Sati, representation of Sati on television, Indira Gandhi etc.) is quite relevant to the women's literature books. Rajan understands the dilemma that Tharu and Lalita face in constructing a literary history when there isn't one acknowledged by the mainstream culture. Meena Alexander also speaks of how women "work at the edge of chaos,"

because they know how to hold the world together. What is instructive in all of this conceptual maze is that women have to fight on two levels, one for their ordinary and out-of-ordinary lives where they face the power of men, communities and nations and the other for representation of their identity. It seems somehow (and we know it too well) that for men the problem of representation is easy and that their lives are least contestatory on the level of gender. Such attempts to uncover the lives and works of women, despite all the theoretical and critical problems they bring up, must end up unsettling the world. Post-colonial or not, such small quarrels must look petty for a woman who had a lifetime of struggle ahead of her before anyone could turn an ear and open an eye.

The sheer joy of representation is also evident in the collection by the Women of South Asian

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Editors Women Writing in India Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early 20th Century (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York 1991).

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Editors Women Writing in India Volume II: The 20th Century (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1993).

The Women of South Asian Descent Collective, Editors Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993).

Kali for Women, Editors Truth Tales: Contemporary Stories by Women Writers of India (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990).

Anjana Appachana, Incantations and Other Stories (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

Susham Bedi, The Fire Sacrifice (Havan), Heinemann Asian Writers Series (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

Shaukat Osman, Janani, Heinemann Asian Writers Series (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

Altaf Fatima The One Who Did Not Ask, Heinemann Asian Writers Series (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

Ameena Meer, Bombay Talkie (New York: High Risk Books, 1994).

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Diaspora in the United States. All other complications aside, the critics and readers must reserve some space (and a heartfelt of it) to simply register the arrival of someone who has been denied entry. *Our Feet Walk the Sky* is a pleasant surprise in an already joyous event of women's books. Written as diary entries, deliberate memoirs, poems, letters, short stories, reviews, critiques, etc., the collection represents women from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The editors (this is a truly collective effort) sought work from an exhaustive diversity of women in the United States.

The microscopic view of everyday life, of the problems that immigrant families face in the country and

the depth of their involvement in their surroundings are all features intended to take you closer to their hearts and minds. The collection is astonishingly eloquent, refreshing, insightful, and rather depressing at the same time. Women who arrive here, either with their husbands, their fathers, or on the short end of the immigration officer's generosity share the burden of their history which they seem to pack in the air in between goods in their suitcases. The social climate, for all its pompous affirmation of individual rights and freedoms allows such oppression to continue within the walls of pre-fab homes.

Their fight seems multiplied at least two-fold, with their stagnant and orthodox past and with the supposedly progressive outdoors where they carry their skin and gender without any protection. Vulnerability multiplied.

The anthology is divided in shorter subject areas. which are meant only to divide up what seems like a continuous narrative of

women's experiences. Along with sharpness of suffering, these writers keep their wit handy and effective. Rupal Singhvi's "Of Course, Kumbhakarna Was Not A Woman," will wake up men from slumber with a humor that goes to the heart of their complacency. In a section called, "She will not be shamed," women explore and affirm their sexual identities, reaffirming their freedom in conditions far less conducive than what one can imagine.

For *Little India* readers, this will be a special summer gift, one of the best books they can buy for themselves and for others. You will see mirrors where you didn't expect before.

Another major event for readers interested in books on India or by Indian writers is the new Asian Writers Series published by Heinemann Publishers. Presented in attractive paperback formats, the series has already published Susham Bedi's *The Fire Sacrifice* and Pakistani writer Altaf Fatima's *The*

One Who Did Not Ask. Bedi's *The Fire Sacrifice* and Ammena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (High Risk Books) will be of special interest to our readers as these two novels portray lives of immigrants in the United States. *The Fire Sacrifice* is a story of a young, sensuous widow who has to live life in the midst of a New York Indian family that is preoccupied with its rituals of existence. These rituals encompass the pretension of being "Indian," and embracing of being "American." Written in a dry, but speedy style, the story is an example of an emerging genre of immigrant stories of culture clash.

Bombay Talkie moves into the echelons of the upper class Indians, whose morals and values are hard to distinguish from their Western counterparts. If you read this as a parody of the idea of upper class, the novel works well. It is good, quick "summer" read, not likely to leave much aftertaste. Sabah, almost all-American girl of Indian parents is blessed with an uncle

who is a film star in India. She returns to India to get caught in a web of relationships that show how the upper class culture has been enticed by the "mores of the West," including homosexuality, which becomes a way of acting out one's desires, rather than addressing one's fundamental sexuality. Characters are rather flat, without the dimension of real life and history. A little bit of reading the anthologies by women writers will be helpful as an immediate antidote to the novel.

Finally, we came across a collection of stories by Anjana Appachana, whose fame is attributed to the story, "Her Mother" which appeared in *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women*, Edited by Lakshmi Holmstrom (Published by Rupa and Co., Bombay, 1991). Her publisher, Rutgers University Press is promoting her as "an important new young voice from India. *Incantations* is a

India

Minal Hajratwala

I see your remnants scattered
throughout the white man's land

he has melted your wealth
into his
and claimed it as his own creation

he has left your nations
colonized chaotic
impoverished

he is the richer
for your existence
you are weaker for his

he has stained your rivers
with the blood of your children
and washed away their souls

he has raped your worshippers
made heathens of your pious
made chutney of your goddesses

he has proclaimed you undeveloped
neglecting your civilization
ages more ancient than his

and mother India
still
do you forgive?

— From: *Our Feet Walk the Sky* © 1993

collection of stories which focus on in-depth character development of familial people who seem to be on the threshold of unwanted but cautious changes in their lives. In "Bahu," she meditates on the status of a marital relationship, made out of dreams not unlike those in Hindi films. Yet, when the imperatives of her own desires seem compelling, she is content to see the light in the eyes of her in-laws fade away. In "Sharmaji" and "Sharmaji and the Diwali Sweets," she draws a sketch of a middle class office clerk whose poems are as shy and eloquent as his outlook on life. He seems at ease with the discomforts of transitions.

Taken together, these books by and about women make up a single important event of this summer's discovery and survey of books. There is no doubt that these are not signs of a rare surprise, but firm footsteps of the age and time to come.