



---

## Women In Poetry - Gender Based Publishing

Nivedita N<sup>1</sup>

Independent Researcher, Freelance Editor and poet, Wisconsin USA

---

### Abstract

Women, since the *Bhakti* period, have been writing poetry influenced by their milieu. From classical poets to modern poets, women have reflected their emotions and reaction to the current socio-political state. Until the vociferous slogans on feminism, an often misunderstood term for gender power, the books on women have been pushed in the book racks. Yet, books by women are consumed slowly. However, with initiatives to make women's literature popular by publishing houses and other initiatives, literature on women is slowly gaining momentum. My paper focuses on the below mentioned aspects:

1. It explores the expression of women in poetry and how they have dealt with their understated issues in several books.
2. It will study initiatives and institutes that focus on gender-based literature like Zubaan, which primarily deals with women's literature and the projects they undertake to encourage people reading books on women and Anveshi, a research center for women's studies.

With an objective to research on women's poetry, its influence on our culture, this paper aims to study the initiatives taken to bring women's literature and its purpose into the mainstream.

**Keywords:** Women's poetry, publishing, women's studies, women's projects

---

### Women in Poetry

#### Introduction

A woman writes a poem in a manner similar to how she expresses love to her dear ones: honest and unconditional. Women write poetry to liberate themselves, to express themselves and, most importantly, to comment on the influence the gender reacts or suffers based on the geo-political scenario. As Nabaneeta Dev Sen asks, when they want to praise you, they say, "you write like a man," I don't like this; "like a man" means reaching towards a certain standard—a male standard which makes women less honest. If Nikki Giovanni, a black American poet writes to comment on the treatment of a black woman, then Rajathi Salma, a Tamil poet, in her poetry, gives voice to an ambitious girl behind the window bars in her town in Tamil Nadu. Despite their disparate geo-political scenarios, their words reflect the same angst. Thus, the first part of the paper explores women's poetry, which has been an outlet for repressed emotions in women. The paper aims to explore poetry written from the spectacle of perspective of a woman in comparison to a man and to explore the themes that a woman writes on and the effect of poetry on her life and on the society around.

#### *Bhakti Poetry and Women*

Poetry, like women's role in society, has been gaining momentum for its short, crisp verses that leave a powerful imagery. However, poetry written by a woman is different from poetry written by a man. Be it the *Bhakti* Period when poets like Tulsidas wrote in praise of the Lord Ram or to compose hymns or the male Alwars in the Tamil Nadu who composed verses for

---

<sup>1</sup> Mail ID: mailnivedita@gmail.com

the Lord Vishnu. But it was female poets like Akkamahadevi, the only female Alwar poet who fought the societal restrictions and married Lord Shiva's deity; Mirabai, the saint-poet who paid no heed to domestic restrictions and composed hymns to Lord Krishna; or Janabai who wrote about the restrictions she faced as a low-caste woman. While male poets have composed paeans for the gods, women poets have questioned the rules that are set by the society in the name of 'God'. Women sympathise with the pain of the mythological figures, be it Sita's anguish or Drupadi's anger. The melancholy is often penned in many poems. As SoyraBai asks in her verse, *Kaa Baa Udaas Maj Kele* (translated by Jerry Pinto and Neela Bhagwat):

*We will sit at your door  
Until we get what we ask for.  
With all the others you're sitting tight.  
Soyra says: Vittho, this is not just right*

*Bhakti* poets among women also include Jain and Buddhist nuns, who were once homeless or courtesans or married, and relish their new freedom. A few *Bhakti* poets complain about their husbands to the almighty, like Silabhatarika and Bhavadevi, in Sanskrit, write about how the love-making with their husbands has become uninteresting. Prakrit poems by women are so explicit in their sexual innuendos that even a modern poem cannot match. Women's versions of folktales offer a narrative from their point of view. As Velcheru Narayan Rao, who has translated many Telugu poems in English, observes, "women's version of Ramayana is a portrayal of 'complex joint family where life is filled with tension and fear, frustration and suspicion, as well as love, affection and tenderness.'"

### ***Society and Its Reflection in Women's Poetry***

Women's poetry is filled with angst, disappointment, fear, rage about the society and its rules. In their poems, Kamala Das writes about identity; Imtiaz Dharker writes about Purdah. Women in poetry seek solace and grieve in the personal space; Nirupama Dutt's poems reflect the attitude of people towards women who do not conform to societal norms. In her poem, *The Black Woman*, she writes:

*The dreams of a black woman  
are very fair;  
and her truth pitch dark.  
She is born with a pain  
to which no colour  
can be assigned.*

Rajathi Salma, a Tamil Poet, who found solace through poetry achieved the feat of joining the Tamil Nadu government when she gathered enough confidence to publish her poetry through magazines. After her marriage, she hid in toilets and wrote as much as she could on bits of paper. She started using the pen name, Salma. Whenever her mother visited her, she would smuggle her poems and give it to her father to post them to the editors. The panchayat elections in which she contested through the women's quota became a ticket for her freedom. Rajathi confesses that poetry had been her first medium of expression of freedom.

As Black Lives Matter dons the garb of a social movement with the killings of many African American people, Nikki Giovanni's poetry plays an important role in voicing a woman who is black. Her poems are prominent even today. Though the flame of Afro-American rights and prejudice is more than three hundred years old, Nikki Giovanni wraps them up in the contemporary situation of her times. In her poem *Atrocities*, Nikki writes,

*at a time when one president one Nobel prize winner  
one president brother four to six white students  
dozens of Black students and various hippies  
would be corralled maimed and killed*

### ***Domestic Poetry***

Domestic poetry has gained prominence over the years but female poets have raised their voice against domestic abuse in their poems over decades. Women poets have slowly but steadily raised their voices against the transition and culture which are patriarchal. A woman is asked to shoulder the burden of domestic bliss, irrespective of her personal choice. As Osho writes in his book, *The Book of Woman* "In the past man has persuaded women that they are pure beings, angels....She is divine. Man has put woman on a high pedestal; that was his trick to control woman. ... And, naturally when the woman was put on the pedestal, she thought she was something divine."

As a girl turns into a woman, she becomes responsible at the turn of a year. In the Indian context, wife adopts a man as her husband and tends to him. If they are of similar age, why should she be more weary and allowed no respite? This divinity that the woman is subjected to is to take advantage of her and her perfection that has been sought after.

But it takes a poet to voice this discrepancy. Be it Sylvia Plath in her confessional poems or Tara Patel who writes about the weariness of being a women. One of the most powerful domestic poems is *After Eight years of Marriage* by Mamata Kalia,

*I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once  
And struggled hard from hurting myself.  
That it wasn't easy to be happy in a family of twelve.  
But they were looking at my two sons,  
hopping along like young goats.*

### **Gender-based Publishing**

#### ***Introduction***

While the commercial press as a general rule seeks profitable ventures, certain institutes and a few publishing houses have borne the onus of bringing out a woman's voice. Kali and Zubaan are two publishing units that focus on women's publishing as a voice that is inclusive and charters women's progress along with focusing on the women's social issues in several parts of our country. Anveshi, a center for research on women's literature, encourages translation and dialogue about the less-spoken about women's issues. The second and the last part of the paper studies the progress and the efforts of initiatives to bring women's literature into mainstream publishing.

#### ***Marginalized voices***

Kali, a feminist publishing house, founded by Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia, have recorded the transition of a woman's role in India since the 80s. Their books and projects have encouraged women to talk about themselves. They have encouraged voices from the marginalized sector to be heard. One of their most ambitious projects was a book titled *Shareer ki Jankaari (About the Body)*. The book is written by 75 women from the villages of Rajasthan. The women had taken the onus of selling the copies. Canvassing in their village, they pre-sold 1800 copies and over the years, they have sold more than 70,000 copies. Urvashi Butalia, in an interview with the Livemint says, "*I am aware that by publishing in English, from Delhi, we are constrained by class, language, location, and so on. But we have made a conscious effort to bring in the voices of marginalized women.*"

After 40 years, when the publishing house Kali split, Urvashi founded Zubaan and continued to publish stories of several women's issues and archive several women author interviews over the decades. The journey has not been smooth, yet they battled with the big publishing

houses and continued to publish feminist voices. With the rise of the feminist movement, the publishing house made an impact too.

One of Zubaan's published books, *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Halder, was a bestseller. The book chronicles the life of a domestic servant. Halder had worked for many years as a domestic help and she wrote between rounds of sweeping, cleaning and making tea. The book has transcended the Indian rigid urban class has encouraged Baby Halder to move out of her life as a domestic help. She is currently working in Mumbai as a hostel supervisor. The book helped her move out of poverty, helped her educate her children.

### ***Other Published Books and Projects***

Zubaan remains at the forefront of Indian Women's movement. From stories on rape, marital abuse, young women's guidance to learning her body, the publishing house has edited and published a wide variety of subjects.

The books published by Zubaan range from academics to fiction to nonfiction to literature for children. If *The Power to Forgive and Other Stories* by Avino Kueri, about women raped in Nagaland, talks about redemption and forgiveness; then the *Fence* by Ila Arab, and translated by Rina Kothari, follows the journey of a woman in the face of violence, communal tensions, and reconciling her loyalties with her friends and family. A series of non-fiction books were published as a result of a project called The Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia research project which was coordinated by Zubaan and supported by the International Development Research Centre. The book is a six country volume – namely, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and two on India comprising of more than fifty research papers and two book-length studies that detail the histories of sexual violence and the systemic, institutional, societal, individual and community structures that work together to perpetuate impunity for perpetrators. Other books in this series are: *A Strange Place, A Difficult Transition* among other titles.

Also young adult fiction like *My Little Body* talks about how girls should take care of their bodies. Zubaan has partnered with Penguin to leverage their marketing wing. When feminist books that focus on atrocities on women around the world reach our table, we grow more aware. While television news does give us information; we go through a process of entering the victim's mind through the narrative and create empathy and a well-balanced view of the world.

### ***Anveshi, Women's Center for Research***

Anveshi, a research center for women's studies works on a broad spectrum for awareness of issues. Formed by a team of researchers and writers, Anveshi facilitates dialogue and dissent through various media. They translate books of Telugu writers, they work along researchers to explore the lives of women under various scenarios. Their online research paper, *Urmila Conducts*, was to create a platform to speak about the hardships of women bus conductors in our country, to sensitize people on the role of women conductors and the hardships they face, daily. From translating important Indian regional works to writing about self-help groups, women farmers, Anveshi writes on a plethora of subjects.

Such research centers facilitate the much needed dialogue required to delve into women's issues, not only on the peripheral level but viewing it from a deeper context. From Dalits and Minorities, Healthcare, Education, Legal theories and Public Outreach, are a few subjects that Anveshi focusses on. Their work on Dalit Literature is being funded by the Hivos Netherlands, Sir Ratan Tata Trust, and the JRD Tata Trust. with focus on various aspects of Dalit Literature: Dalits and Women Panchayat, Dalits and Christians, Introducing the debate

on Dalit Studies, Banamati, a practice in Telangana, the Micro Practice of Caste in Telangana among others. With the ongoing debate in the university about Dalits, this series is important to initiate further discussions and to introduce the common man to the various sides of a Dalit Literature.

Their book, *Nallapodu*, is a path breaking book that has invited discussions on Dalits. Furthermore, books like *Friends in School, Not in the Village*--A tale about Sreelatha and Suvarna who are close friends in school but cannot be friends in the village as their castes are not easily forgotten; and *Textbook*, the story of Saheer who cannot find any Muslim name in his Malayalam textbook, encourage dialogue among the younger citizens of our country about caste and religion. Anveshi also hosts films, panels and workshops on different subjects to disseminate knowledge. In a time when books are still thriving despite the proliferation of other media like television, radio and the Internet, it is important that a woman's rights, her life and her role in a society is studied and her books are written and read by both men and women.

### Conclusion

The paper concludes with the observation that women's poetry is personal, doesn't use rules or restrictions (thus many women write in free verse), and questions the society we live in. While all humans need intimacy and independence, women prefer the former and men, the latter, in their poetry. The publishing houses for women have been under turbulence but with the rising of the feminist's movement in India, they have been a reference for literature, uniting voices, speaking about issues and engaging the public in dialogue.

### REFERENCES

1. Ed. Annie Zaidi, *Unbound – 2000 years of Women's Writing* (Aleph, 2016)
2. Ed. Eunice De Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* (Oxford University Press, 1997)
3. Ed. Arlene RK Zaid, *In their Own Voices*, (Penguin, 1993)
4. Nikki Giovanni, *My House* (William Morrow and Company, 1972)
5. Osho, *Book of Woman*, (Penguin, 2014)
6. Krishna Warriar, *Salma, the Poet who Braved*, (2013), Reader's Digest India,
7. Devayani Prasad & Anusha Sundar (July 12 2016), *Urmila Conducts*, Retrieved from: <http://www.anveshi.org.in/report-on-woman-and-labour-in-the-streets-of-hyderabad-by-devayani-prasad-anusha-sundar/>
8. Somak Ghoshal, *Urvashi Butalia | I want to prove that feminist publishing can survive commercially*, (June 14, 2013) Retrieved from: <http://www.livemint.com/Companies/595QfEIEltDLfuvgnqTiOI/Urvashi-Butalia--I-want-to-prove-that-feminist-publishing-c.html>
9. Nilanjana S. Roy, *Turning the Page for Feminism* (Sep 30, 2015) Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/women-make-change/2015/09/turning-page-feminism-150929082242674.html>

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nivedita is an independent researcher, a written word poet, and a freelance Editor. An erstwhile freelance journalist for publications like The Hindu, Wow! Magazine, she worked at Thomson Reuters for six years before moving to Wisconsin. Anthologized in magazines and short story collections, her first poetry book, *Writing by the Window*, was released in February 2015 and her second poetry collection, *Aerogramme and other poems*, was released in May 2016. Her story titled *At the Miller's Park* is soon to be published in the forthcoming, Milwaukee Writers Circle Anthology.