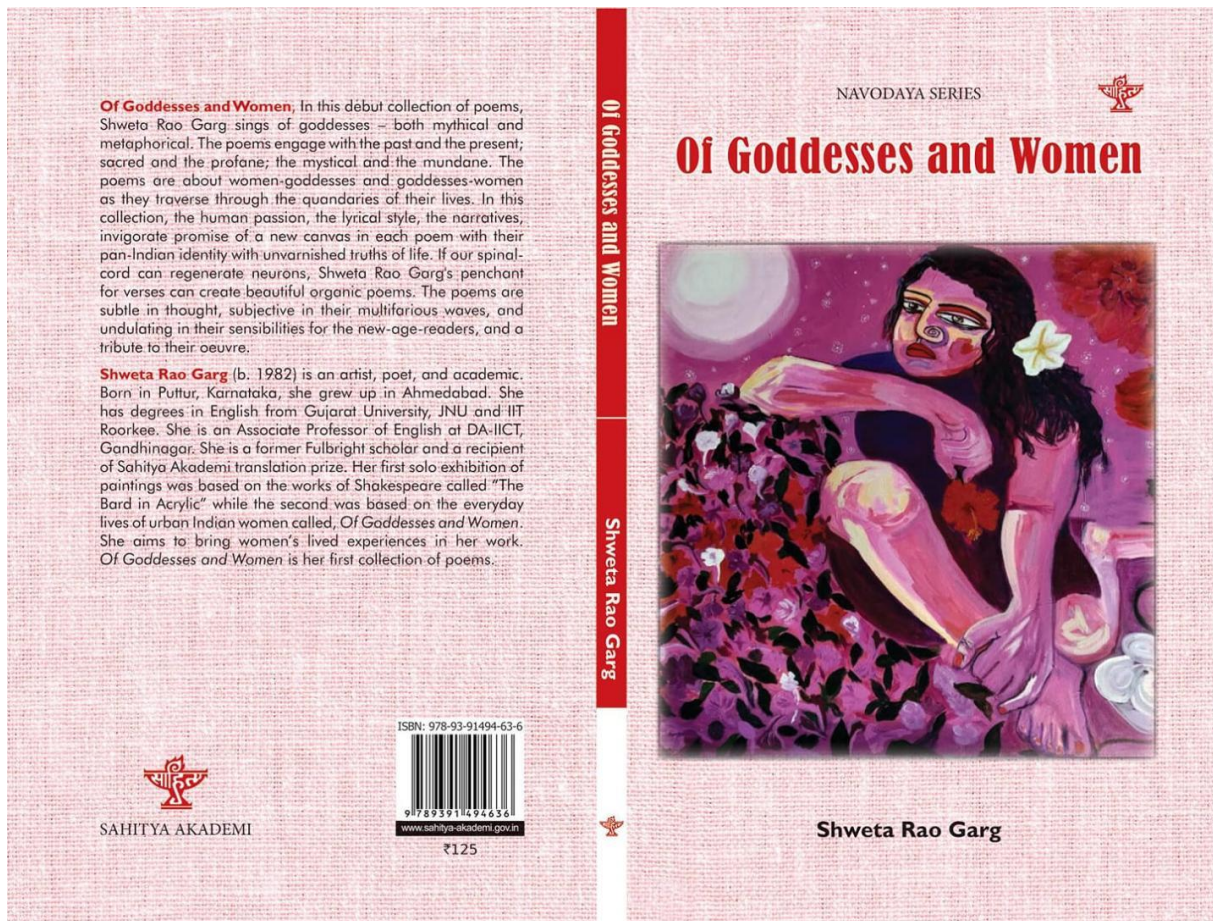


## BOOK REVIEW

### The Divine and the Ordinary in Shweta Rao Garg's Poetry

**Candice Louisa Daquin**

Poet, Editor, and Psychotherapist  
San Antonio, Texas  
[candicedaquin@gmail.com](mailto:candicedaquin@gmail.com)



**Book Title: *Of Goddesses and Women* by Shweta Rao Garg**

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I had the delight of getting to know Shweta's work through an anthology *The Kali Project*<sup>\*</sup>, that she submitted her work for. It was clear she was a talent to be reckoned with and had a unique, memorable voice. *The Kali Project* opened my eyes as a mixed-race woman living in the West, to the brilliance of Indian poets writing in English. I recall saying at the time Indian female poets wrote better in English than many native-English speakers. This is no small feat.

The gift of reading Indian poetry in a language I am fluent in, is how much I as the reader learn from such writing. Like many outsiders, I find India and her history, absolutely fascinating, and that includes her Goddesses and the modern Indian woman. Shweta Rao Garg has brought these Goddesses to life once more in this beautiful collection. As the writer of her foreword notes: "Shweta Rao Garg found in Hindu mythology, facts to ponder and dwell upon." (x) For the outsider, who appreciates the richness and depth of Indian history and mythology, this is to be cherished.

I confess I was surprised at the length of the foreword, surely the longest I have read to date in a book of poetry. I understand why such an illuminating review of the book was included, but to some extent it spoils the pleasure of reading it for yourself. I recommend for this reason, to read the poems in the book first and then read the foreword. I know that's a little unconventional but it will allow you to experience the poems for yourself and then compare your experience with —Navamalati Chakraborty's foreword.

Personally, I am a great fan of longer poetry, which many writers apologize for, when they send me books. I think there is a lot to be found in a longer poem, which is not to preclude the value of any length, as surely, it's not the marker of a good poem. In a longer poem however, you can find an entire story and this especially lends itself well to stories of mythology, faith and Goddesses. It was one reason I liked Shweta Rao Garg's writing for *The Kali Project* and I found myself enjoying what I could learn and savor from Shweta's observations and detailing of the Goddesses.

Another aspect of poetry I am particularly drawn to, that Shweta excels in, is ending a poem softly and with gentle but piercing observation. If you imagine reading a poem out loud

and then at the end of a journey through the eyes of the poet and subject, you are given something very small to focus on, it is an unintended poetic technique that balances the grandeur of the storytelling with something seemingly unimportant, that actually evokes the entire theme.

A classic example of this can be found in the first poem, "At the Hidimba Temple":

I turned around to take a last look

At the shrine surrounded by pines,

Unassuming, aloof,

Blocking the sun.

I comfort myself to see my own footprints

Stubby, small blot on the velvety snow. (2)

Navamalati Chakraborty has done a thorough and detailed job of highlighting the strongest work in this collection, so I will not belabor the point or repeat this. Suffice to say, the delicacy of writing where you are able to almost 'conduct' poetry as you would music, and make it swell and rise, and then fall softly, is quite an art and not something all can do. Shweta's ability to convey an understanding of history and myth alongside her way with language, is exceptional and memorable.

*Of Goddesses and Women* is hard to define as it is far more than one genre but its all encompassing theme is that of appreciation for women in all their incantations. I find this especially valuable, given how many women's voices have been historically muted. Shweta is the kind of modern Indian woman you hope to read, for her unfiltered recounting of the dilemma of being a woman in a world of objectification and historic oppression: "May you give me a few lines that I / May speak with another woman / May we not speak about the man / Who moves your story forward." ("Filmy Prayers", 62) There is an ocean of hope in these revelations as well as a sorrow in divining their truth. When paired with reflections on Indian's Goddesses, I see a merging of the mythology of women with the reality of women that reinforces the feminine and empowers women throughout the world. We have all some part of this journey, and Shweta has a way to gift that universal message through her gentle battle cry;

I don't resent my breast

Nor do I wish to shed them

My womb enshrines not your lust

But my poems

I stay immune to your gaze

Defiant, impenetrable," ("Akka", 8)

Another accomplishment that stood out for me was Shweta's ability with English. I don't say this patronizingly but as one who learned English as a second-language also. It is not easy to get the nuance right and even with some of the best Indian poets, there are many times a line or two won't sound quite the way it would be said by a native speaker. That's not always a bad thing, it can in fact be a delightful variation that imbues an Indian essence into the language. I found with *Of Goddesses and Women* Shweta was able to imbue her Indian essence whilst mastering the language flawlessly.

She is essentially a wordsmith with that adroit nimbleness of a true writer, able to flow words in ways someone plays the piano or harp or violin. I find reading her poetry in my head, I am moving in time to the cadence of her wordplay and it impresses me time and time again how clever she is at rendering this through words. An American (since neither of us are) might say Shweta Rao Garg is damn clever and they wouldn't be wrong:

I wish I can slip an envelope

With a stash of poems

In your aged leather purse

If you are out of cash

You can read out a verse

And complete the transaction. ("Packets of Poem", 74).

There is such a cleverness but it's a really romantic kind of cleverness, not a self-satisfied kind, so you feel an openness and warmth with her wordplay. This is exactly what stood out to

me when I first read Shweta's work and I'm so glad she's put this gift to good use in this homage to Goddesses and women, what better subject! I do not feel qualified to comment on the more cerebral aspects of the book in relation to mythology but my knowledge of and appreciation for India, its incredible women and Goddesses, was dramatically increased.

I read a lot of American poetry as part of my job but it is a true delight to read modern Indian poets, especially female. As a life-long feminist I am invigorated by the insightfulness, talent and depth of Indian female writers, not least their poets who transport me to India and help me experience both the beauty and horrors of India. I think that marriage of extremes is illustrated so well by Shweta Rao Garg who intuitively understands the layers beneath what is obvious. In many ways she has succeeded effortlessly in marrying Indian myth and history with the rest of the world, demonstrating the alacrity and vast knowledge of India's women; "These were not the flat / Pink roses adorning Plath's walls. / My Morning Song / Was sung by thousands of marigolds." ("Arrival", 25). What a barren world it would be without these powerful, unapologetic voices, claiming their over-due place within the literary cannon and improving it vastly.

There are frankly some books that are a joy to review. *Of Goddesses and Women* is definitely one of those books. I could easily write pages on my enjoyment, appreciation and respect for Shweta Rao Garg's work here. She pierces the obvious with such intensity it leaves me shaking my head in wonder with a little envy and a ton of respect. There is something very edible about Shweta's choice of words, and the alacrity of her deeper understanding of what makes us tick. It is both funny, prescient and slightly horrifying, which I think is the truest language of a poet worth reading:

i am about eating  
cola and corn  
in the dark multiplexes of freudian complexes  
i am about clumsy, lumpy, fleshy labyrinth  
  
about skin patterned with moles, freckles  
about broken tooth, decays, flying dentures  
about vision flawed and ensuing adventures. ("The Body Ordinary", 49)

\**The Kali Project: Invoking the Goddess Within* Ed. Candice Louisa Daquin and Megha Sood. Indie Blue Publishing, 2021. An anthology of poetry representing Indian women's poetry and art.

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**BIO- NOTE**

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Candice Louisa Daquin is a Psychotherapist and Senior Editor Indie Blu(e) Publishing. She is the Writer-in-Residence, at *Borderless Journal* and Poetry Editor at *The Pine Cone Review*. She is the author of *Tainted by the Same Counterfeit* (Finishing Line Press, 2022). She is of Sephardi French/Egyptian descent. Born in Europe, Daquin worked in publishing for the US Embassy before immigrating to America to become a Psychotherapist, where she has continued writing and editing whilst practicing as a therapist. She began working with Indie Blu(e) upon inception and is a Senior Editor in the company. Daquin has worked at Jewish Community Centers and Rape Crisis Centers both in Texas and Ontario, Canada. Her area of specialization is adults sexually abused as children. Prior to publishing her own poetry collections, Daquin wrote for the poetry periodical *Rattle* and *The Northern Poetry Review*.