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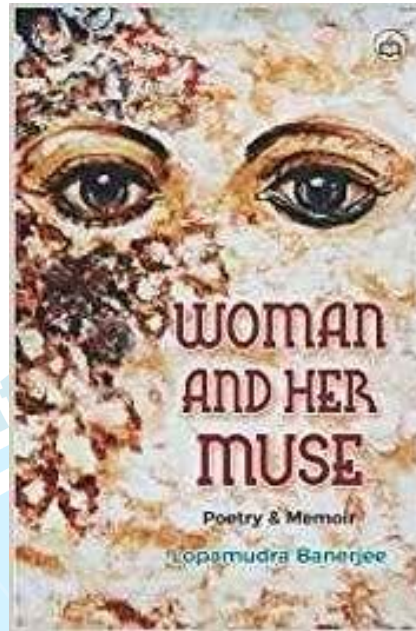
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A Freedom Song: a review of Lopamudra Banerjee's *Woman And Her Muse: Poetry & Memoir*

Sutanuka Ghosh Roy

*Woman and her Muse*

By Lopamudra Banerjee

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Authors Press, New Delhi, India.

The book expands the purview of poetry, fosters academic discussion and gives rise to a new direction in scholarly engagement. This volume of poetry presents quite a number of poems, grouped thematically into six sections. One of the brightest stars of contemporary Indian English poetry is Lopamudra Banerjee. Her memoir *Thwarted Escape: An Immigrant's Wayward Journey* and her debut poetry collection *Let the Night Sing* received honorary mentions in The Los Angeles Book Festival and New England Book Festival 2017 respectively. Her manuscript of *Thwarted Escape* has been First Place Category Winner at the Journey Awards 2014 hosted by Chanticleer Reviews and Media, USA. She also received The International Ruel Prize for Poetry in 2017 and The International Ruel Prize for translation in 2016 (for *The Broken Home*, her English translation of Tagore's novella), both instituted by The Significant League, a literary group. The short poems in this volume communicate the poet's profound freedom song to readers, filling them with a sense of peace. The poems are mostly

feminist in nature, the lyrics (whether in the first person voice or the third), flaring up like blazing torches in the dark. In this collection she writes not only about the different women she has come across in life, the female celebrities whom she silently adored, but also the spirited female protagonists in Tagore's stories and plays who mesmerize her.

The first poem, entitled "Forbidden: The Woman Who Writes in Verses" starts with a dramatic note.

It's surely one of those days when she bites her own lips
To taste that fertile blood,
Swirling down generations of feminine waste.
It's surely one of those nights
When the moonbeams of her breasts
Are a red, sticky glue taped
To the quirks of patriarchy yet again. (21).

In the preface, Lopamudra concedes,

"Being a woman, first and foremost, the uncontrollable sense of unrest between the stagnant, familial home and the one mammoth home, the universe outside spread out in bits and chunks of images, pictures, paintings is the prime reason I chose to pen this collection". In "Woman and Her Muse" which is self-explanatory in nature, (it is also the title of her collection), femininity erupts and she is quite unapologetic about it,

When she speaks poetry
Wordless walls stare
Invisible, foamy dreams. (23).

In "The Dark Girl's Song" the unnamed pangs and anger is symbolized, and becomes one, with the dark-skinned girl.

When you turned from a doll to a girl,
When they will let you wax and wane.
In the architecture of your flesh,
Being a dark girl, and a living human being. (29).

The poem "Marriage" resembles an incantation, asserting the essential freedom of a woman to be seen as a human being and not being confined to roles fixed by gender stereotypes.

It's the quiet before the windy day
A strange meditation, a pause, a conjecture (30).

Lopamudra's variety of style and content is evident in a piece like "Tillottama," where she utilizes delightfully sensuous metaphors to portray her own city Kolkata, (Kolkata, The poetry in Which I Breathe").

Tilottama, do you remember my thirst,

My hunger, my wounds?
 This awkward poem I leave you with,
 Has traced all my curves, my sagging truths.
 Like old lovers, we sat
 On the rusted banks of Princep Ghaat,
 It tried to navigate the turns and bends
 Of my surrendering body. (34)

In the poem “College Street” Lopamudra takes us to a journey in the nooks and crannies of Kolkata’s book hub, College street which is a heaven and haven of book lovers all over the world. She fervently writes,

“Can I call you the smoky breath, the tight clasp of a lover who possessed me like a ghost, sucked my bones and marrow, and ditched me in the suffocating by lanes, with my messy blood-stains?” (39).

Lopamudra’s poem “ Prinsep Ghat” reminds the readers that ghats, crucial in an age of water transport, as well as a religion and way of Kolkatan life that laid great access to the river Ganga. The third section prepares the readers for a “Bon Voyage” the poems here are snapshots of the poet’s observations, and are unfettered by geographical boundaries. She writes about Lake Missouri, Kerala, Yosemite national Park, Northern California, Texas, Florida, Qutub Minar New Delhi and others. The next section, “Portrait of A Woman As The Artist” details events which closely correspond with those of Lopamudra’s own observations of life. She writes with a feisty conviction that her Portrait would be an autobiographical poetry collection, “turning her life into poetry.” Women from various fields are both the protagonist of the poetry collection, as well as the persona (Latin, meaning “mask”) behind which Lopamudra paints her fictional “portrait” of the “artist” and of the “woman.”. She writes,

She was a diva, some joie de vivre, after all,
 Floating around their wondrous, impalpable wants (The Diva Sings Again,86)

In “Celebrating the Woman in Art”, the author selected a technique to emphasize how the life of an artist differs from that of others who share her world.

Your ‘helluva woman’
 For once, dip your ink in fading sepia
 And craft me like a fluid, sexless dribble,
 Like a ferocious black flood. (91).

In “When the Body is a Female”, inspired by a sculpture of a bare-breasted female of the Renaissance period, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, the reader learns through the particular experiences of the poet, how a woman perceives her surroundings, as well as her views on faith, family, and country, and how these perceptions often conflict with those prescribed for her by society. As a result, the woman feels distanced from the world. Unfortunately, this feeling of distance and detachment is misconstrued by others. Thus the woman, already feeling isolated, is increasingly aware of a certain growing, painful social alienation.

“It is the time of the girl”.

The pinpricks of the mammary glands,
The breasts, flat, underdeveloped, or round enough?
Bouncing, or firmer, and controlled?
Some days you come out like an evening raga,
Light brown, full, buoyant. (94).

In a series of poetic vignettes, montages and prose-poems, inspired by acclaimed doyenne of naturalistic and spiritual painting from Uttarakhand, Monica Talukdar, -- The Durga Series, that the poet is at her best. These short poems becomes symbolic of a woman's (Durga, the Goddess, Durga the woman), beauty, strength and independence and wakes up the readers from a stupor.

Have you seen the tattered girl flopping down on the festering ruins
Looking frantically for lost crumbs of food?
That, my dear, is my Durga, her trishul, her trident blown to ashes,
Mingling in her soiled, chirped off fingernails. (Durga, Where Art Thou? 139)

When Lopamudra suddenly understands "the essential nature of a thing" after reading the poetry of Maya Angelou — whether it is the understanding of a person, an idea, a word, or a situation — she has a moment of profound revelation. James Joyce called these moments epiphanies, some of Lopamudra's earliest epiphanies come from her acute sensory awareness and are recorded through masterful use of imagery,

Oh woman, you didn't hum your songs for nothing
Songs that seep into your cutting edge of a childhood
Bathed with succulent tales and the chocolate dripping
From Momma's pie. Somewhere in the tales of girlhood
Smells
And the shamelessness of growing, you might have picked up
Your vast, silver galaxy, the recipe of your unapologetic
Womanhood. (For Maya Angelou and The Caged Bird that Sings) (124)

In *Woman And Her Muse*, Lopamudra thus has clearly established that she will not be Sisyphus in her act of breaking the yardstick. It is this in which the "breaking out" element is most demonstrative. The poet, the woman, stands independent and free from social expectations and norms and is the one who emerges as more interesting and appealing because she is different and also indifferent, she is a phenomenal poet.

BIO-NOTE

Sutanuka Ghosh Roy is Assistant Professor in Tarakeswar Degree College, University of Burdwan, West Bengal. She is currently engaged in active research and her areas of interest include Eighteenth Century literature, Indian English literature, Canadian Studies, Post-colonial Literature, Australian Studies, Dalit Literature, Gender Studies etc. She has published widely and presented papers at National and International Seminars. She is a regular contributor of research articles and papers to anthologies, national and international journals of repute. She is also the editor of the journal, IJLL (ISSN 2278-9170).

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