

Khunte

Women's Reality, Woman's Poetry

By Ramanika Gupta

Available from Navlekhan Prakashan,
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HERE is one of the best collections of feminist poetry that we have seen – ironic without cynicism, enthused but self-questioning, simple yet aware of complexity. *Khunte* concentrates on the moment of breaking away – the moment when a woman publicly states her opting out from this society which she has not made, and in so doing, begins to define herself and her struggle. Most of the poems are structured around this double movement – first, they document women's life as it has been, as she has suffered it, and then with a triumphant "But now..." (*par ab*) swing into her refusal to accept and endure any longer.

Perhaps Ramanika's most brilliant achievement is her re-interpretation of myth from women's point of view. She points out that the "glorious culture of our nation" and of every nation has been nothing but a long saga of degradation for women :

Ever – New Corpse

*My Hindustan,
listen now to the reading
of woman's purana.
Woman's refusal
wakens man's rage;
till she submits
he is on the boil,
burning to consume her, destroy her.
And woman's acceptance ?
It is but the echo of men's
boisterous laughter
in their get-togethers;
it becomes a joke
for a drunken evening,
scattered in the smirks
of boon companions.
Woman burns in the fire
of men's desires*



—Ruth

*again and again,
like an ever-new corpse –
yes, this is woman's purana,
My Hindustan !*

It is a real joy to see this superbly ironic scalpel applied to the *swayamvar** custom with its pretension to offering women a "free choice" – which is only the choice between dependence on one man or on another. The book begins with this poem :

I Will Crush The Wedding Garland

*In this huge hall
you sit
on many thrones,
with many faces,
waiting for the wedding garland.
you have put up signboards
at every exit,*

* The *swayamvar* was a ceremony in which the Rajput princess was allowed to "choose" her bridegroom. Her father invited a number of eligible young princes and she was brought to the hall and asked to put the wedding garland round the neck of any one of them. The famous warrior Prithviraj had a feud with the father of Sanjukta so he was not invited to her *swayamvar*. He disguised himself as a statue and stood at the hall gates. Sanjukta is supposed to have put the garland round the statue which sprang to life and carried her away.

saying,
 “Women are forbidden to go out without permission.”
 Conditioning stands on guard
 dressed in the many uniforms of culture,
 grasping the sharp swords of tradition.
 And I,
 dressed up, decorated,
 have been brought into this closed, exitless hall.
 The garland has been put into my hands,
 the garland which I must
 put around the neck
 of any one man.
 I am not allowed
 to go back
 without putting on the garland.
 You will not tolerate
 my refusal,
 and my “choice”
 is imprisoned in the laws made by you.
 I will have to put on you the garland
 because the exits are closed for me
 and outside too
 Prithviraj stands ready,
 On guard – to carry me away.
 Spare to me at least
 my right to say no,
 let me at least
 build my own basis for choice.
 But you –
 you who have so many faces,
 you who make so many masks,
 design so many farces,
 mould so many relationships –
 you paint on the canvas of your culture
 only one picture –
 that of my surrender,
 not of my refusal.
 And today
 I have decided to refuse,
 I have vowed to return the wedding garland,
 I have resolved to say no.
 So
 remove those watchmen of yours
 from the doors
 For if you do not
 I will tear off your masks,
 scratch your faces,
 wrench those stitched smiles from your lips,
 uproot the destiny graven on your brows,
 snatch from your hands the rods of pride
 and smash the mirrors of honour shining in your eyes.
 I will break the standard of glory and reputation

hidden in your aspirations.
 Yes, I will tear to pieces
 your wolfish stares,
 I will knock down your watchmen
 and crush the wedding garland
 on any one in your decked-up queues,
 because in this system
 I do not have the right
 to choose.

The poet looks at the religion, history, literature of patriarchal society and shows how the glorification of women has been geared towards our further enslavement. In *Adam's Rib*, she says:
 ... History found in me
 Helen's beauty,
 Cleopatra's form,
 Rati's delicacy,
 Anarkali's maidenhood,
 Ahalya's patience –
 such beauty weighted in my favour
 tipped the scales down –
 down so low
 that to lift them again
 one would have to take the aid
 of some man or other!...

Ramanika's anger pours forth with no attempt at inhibition or false humility but one is continually amazed by the forceful and creative channeling of the anger.

The physical images through which her struggle is conveyed are those of determined onward movement, a steady pacing rather than the escape of a hunted creature. The woman protagonist faces up to the oppressor's whole arsenal, and responds with that determined negation which is in itself the most positive assertion:

Refused

*I desired to move forward.
 He told me to hold his hand.
 I refused.
 Then he showered on me
 Blow upon blow.
 I stumbled, fell,
 rose and went ahead.
 He stepped forward, blocked my away.
 Slowly, gently, I put his hand aside
 and went ahead.
 He drew back his hands,
 slapped me across the face.
 I looked at him,
 tear ion my eyes
 and walked on,
 alone.
 He was unable to withstand my freedom,
 He wanted to lock me in his arms.*

*He wove a web of love and kisses,
 Threw it over me
 so that in those folds
 my soul should spend its life,
 helplessly fluttering
 and die, suffocated, enmeshed.
 But I survived this onslaught too,
 I emerged from the maze.
 Then he pushed me into sinking sands,
 Showered me with accusations,
 thinking I would accept defeat
 at his hands,
 his maleness,
 his worldwide supremacy.
 But I refused,
 I refused,
 I refused.*

One gets here the feel of how women fight back – not with jerky aggressiveness but with the non-violent strength which is most terrifying to those whose ultimate weapon is brute force. One is reminded of women in the national movement and in Chipko. These poems startle with their insight, their alertness to various dangers, especially the one most insidious to women – the laying down of limits for us by the oppressor group. Ramanika points out that however expansive the limits may be, if we allow ourselves to be told “thus far and no further”, we are trapped in the same dependence from which we are struggling to break out:

*... wherever I go, I draw back,
 shadows wrap round me,
 shadows of darkness, of light,
 which become boundaries
 though they be
 unreached, untouched,
 near and yet far,
 magnetic, rainbow hued,
 though they hold in themselves
 the universe...
 they encircle me,
 inhibit my pace
 because I am woman,
 for centuries I have been stopping,
 limiting, encircling, myself...
 but now
 I have leaped across the limits,
 have cut away, flung away
 that veil of boundaries
 which kept wrapping itself around me
 since birth,
 since the beginning –
 I tore off that armour
 though in the process
 my body too bled... (I Am Woman)*

Ramanika has the knack of crystallizing her argument in one forceful image, for example the whole question of sympathetic men’s participation in women’s organizations is matter-of-factly answered thus:

*... You
 talk of women’s freedom
 so loudly, so forcefully
 that her voice is drowned.
 You do not listen to her –
 you only keep on and on
 with your own version... (Ardhanarishwar)*

She uses the Taj as a symbol of male-dominated structures which, however attractive they may appear, are based in exploitation:

*Do not think I am Mumtaz
 and build a Tajmahal.
 The blood of the poor
 will turn white,
 their sweat run down those walls
 and their labour leap to death
 from those minarets...*

Another poem alerts us to the danger of women-created structures falling into the same patterns. The strategy she suggests through the image of breaking and re-making nests, not allowing accumulation, is one that all women’s movements have found most effective – the organization which is continually in flux and builds power by diffusing it:

I Break

*Like the weaver bird
 I make nests
 and light them up
 with many fireflies
 but when
 layers of mud
 begin to settle on them,
 rising
 palace-like,
 then I break them up
 because they begin to stink
 of exploitation.*

While most of her poems end in presentness, in what she is and does, some of them document painful and ongoing inner battles such as the battle to get out of suffocating relationships which have become a habit:

*... Moving away from you
 I think,
 Now I’m saved, I’m free,
 but soon enough
 the bars attract me,
 the doors draw me back
 and I am enclosed
 in your close embrace,*

am imprisoned.
 I put on myself
 the chains of security,
 forget that freedom.
 And then again
 I lean towards the distances,
 restless to escape suffocation,
 but like a wing-cut pigeon,
 next moment, under your watchful eyes,
 flutter and fall still.
 Ah but one day, one day
 My wings will grow again. (Prison)

Ramanika does not express the need for togetherness with other women. Her poems are in the tradition of solitary soul-making. She does assert herself as a political being :

...I
 I am myself –
 A political consciousness,
 an economic necessity,
 an intellectual indispensability,
 a natural inevitability.
 I am a human being,
 Not that Parvati
 Who turned and fled
 From the arena... (Ardhanarishwar)

but her need for comradeship is repeatedly frustrated by men who see in her only a body:
 ... I move far away from you,
 throw off your glances,
 stand separate.
 Because I cannot consider myself
 a morsel for anybody... (Ardhanarishwar)

She records her moment of weariness with moving honesty:

Mirror

I looked into the mirror –
 the shade,
 glancing at my tired face,
 laughed.
 In sheer panic
 I turned the mirror round –
 What if by some chance
 I were to take note of
 My own tiredness ?
 and also her defiant readiness to die alone:
 ...I will not bow down –
 What if I have to swing on the gallows
 at a young age, like Rohila ?
 Like Joan of Arc.
 I will climb the pyre
 and burn alive
 for the re-establishment of my values... (Adam's Rib)

One misses any suggestion that the struggle could be

strengthened through a reaching out to other women – the undifferentiated “I” does represent all womanhood but not sisterhood.

As women we have always been encouraged to suggest, hint, understate. Too often women’s poetry is in the vein of longing, hope, dream. Ramanika’s style is one of statement and battle cry – reflecting the uncompromising content. However, in one short lyric, she permits herself song. This poem affirms that our struggle is *the* struggle of tomorrow – that the forces of health and life are with us. Not just hope but a serene sureness infuses her rhythm here – the sureness that women, the most oppressed, are also potentially the most joyful, free, creative:

...Small bird, you fly
 to touch the sky's fringe,
 Distances shrink, watch your flight,
 are amazed.
 Yes, your wings are strong
 but the wind too blows with you.
 Today the sun is with you,
 today the stars are with you... (Woman-Strength)

Ramanika has a keen sense of women’s unfolding history and of how each struggle, though it may seem to end in defeat, is an irrevocable step forward because, by having taken place, it starts something, destroys a silence;

Nails

There I was,
 standing on the doorstep of restrictions,
 having sprung across time's threshold.
 I began
 to pull out one by one
 the nails of the forbidden
 from those old hinges of tradition.
 Creaking helplessly,
 the door began to give way.
 Cracks appeared.
 I peered through.
 There they were – standing with hands outspread.
 Startled,
 I shrank into myself,
 hastily gathered up the nails
 and tried to push them back.
 Ah, but those centuries-old nails
 having once been pulled out,
 refused to stick
 into the doors.
 Time has elapsed, you see –
 Custom had crumbled.

In her preface, Ramanika says: “Reality is the only truth, truth the only poetry.” Women’s reality has been stifled throughout history, women poets have died before birth, poetry has been mutilated. Ramanika’s is one of the voice in the wilderness – a call to many more women to undertake that expression of our real desires, needs, actions, which is art.

— Ruth Vanita