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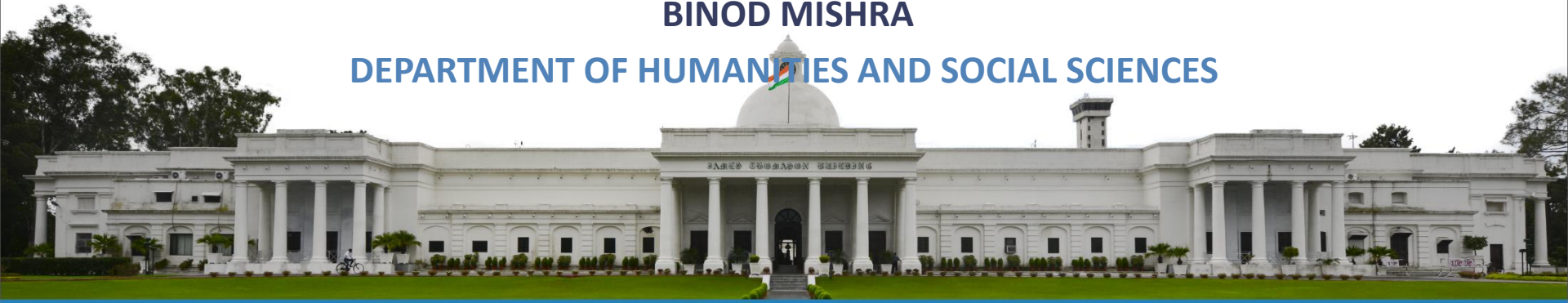
NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 27: Menka Shivdasani

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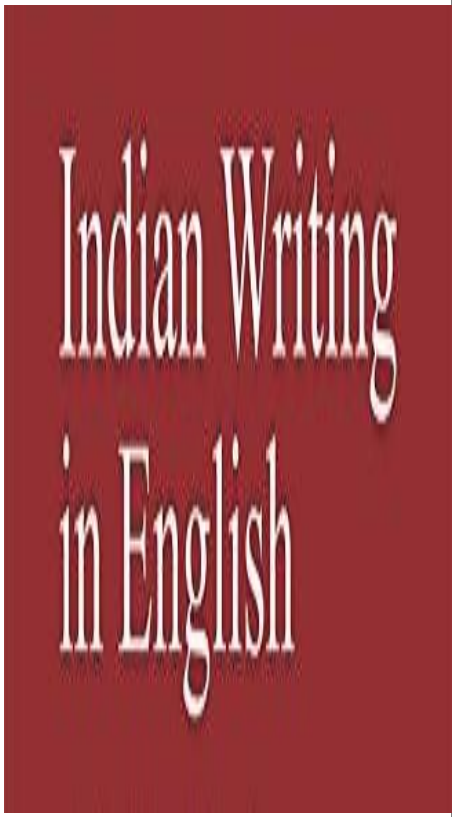


Background

- Four phases of Indian Writing in English-

1. Colonialism (1825 to 1900)
2. Nationalism (1900 to 1950)
3. Modernism (1950 to 1980)
4. Post-modernism (1980 to Present)

- The first two phases produced few major women poets like Toru sisters, and Sarojini Naidu.



- Few anthologies which included women poets in early phases-

The Bengal Book of English Verse, *The Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* edited by Gavedolin Goodwin (1927),

Poems by Indian Women edited by Margaret Macnicol (1923)

- Third phase (Modernism) produced strong women voices like Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Silgardo and Gauri Deshpande.
- Most of them were confessional poets.
- The fourth phase (Contemporary Period) has many strong women voices like Menka Shivdasani, Tara Patel, Lakshmi Kannan, Meena Kandasammy, Leela Gandhi, Temsula Ao and others.

Post-modern phase of Indian English Writing

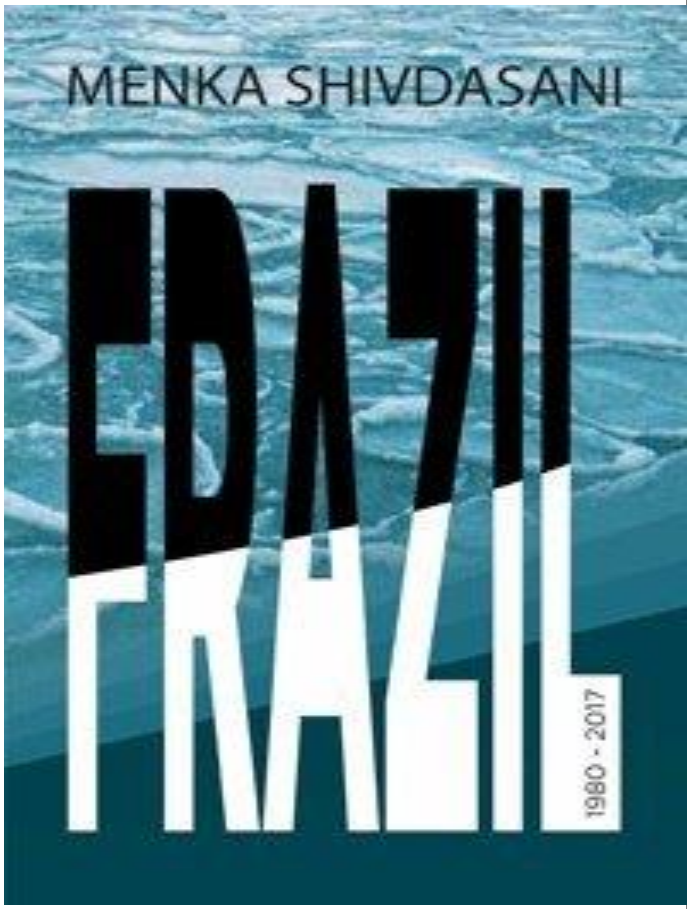
- Writers born after independence
- Personal emotions
- Complex linguistics experiments
- Native sensibility
- Alienation
- Pungent satire
- Attack on patriarchal structure of society
- Exploration of Indian myth from various angles

Menka Shivdasani's Poetic Oeuvre

- Born in 1961 in Bombay
- Pursuing her career both as poet and journalist.
- Worked for a year in Hong Kong.
- She has been influenced by Nissim Ezekiel and the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke.
- She was the founder member of **Poetry Circle** in Mumbai which was established in 1986.
- She edited an anthology of Indian poetry for www.bigbridge.org.
- She has also been the co-ordinator of the global movement **100 Thousand Poets for Change**.

Poetry Collections

- *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990)
- *Stet* (2001)
- *Safe House* (2015)
- *Frazil* (2018)
- Co-translator of *Freedom and Fissure*, an anthology of Sindhi partition poetry which was published by Sahitya Academy in 1998.
- Her poems have been translated into Marathi, Malyalam and Gujarati.



Nirvana at Ten Rupees

- ‘One of a very small number of books published in an edition of 500 under the supervision of Adil Jussawalla by Praxis.’ (King)
- Complexities of city life
- Autobiographical narrative

“ While her poetry alludes to a world of drugs, sex, bad food, broken relationships and sleepless nights, there is also wit, irony, knowingness, and a marvelous imagination. Shivdasani can use vulgar speech, make expressionist and confessional remarks, but the poetry is always highly imaged, clever, surprising, amusing and self-mocking.”

- (Bruce King)

“Lover, Loser, Addict”

When you are happy, only clichés
Come to mind– the sky is blue,
Grass is green, butterflies are free.
Then something happens, and solitary
As a murderer, you twist the knife
And stalk the streets, your brain
Being crushed to powder like the contents
Of a vial of smack. Nirvana at ten rupees
Is cheap, but the sky has a silvery tinge
You would rather perceive as grey,
The butterflies are pinned heads down,
Their backs to the wall, like you…

And the psychiatrist says good bye, leaves you
To pay the restaurant bill, and don’t forget his fees
Though he will not ask. The butterfly
No longer struggles, so you think all is well.

Then you realize it’s not fluttering any more
Because it’s dead. And you, big deal, they ripped you apart with the knife,
With the index finger, then they choked
The last breath with the handkerchief in your palm.

All the world is well, mythic lover;
The sky is blue; at least it looks that colour
From down here where the fires burn.

From “Spring Cleaning”

Carelessly draped on a hanger, I found an arm
Leaning bonily towards the perfumes;
In another corner, a dislocated knee.
Did you run away so fast, you broke your leg?
I wish you’d wipe that foolish
Toothless grin off your stupid face.
You needn’t be embarrassed about letting
Me down. Other men have too, and they
Didn’t disintegrate like you.

Frazil

- The word frazil means, ‘soft, needle-like ice on the top of lakes and rivers that are too turbulent to freeze’.
- The collection has 85 poems. It starts with Implosion and ends with Epilogue: A Crow Finds its Feet.
- Theme of memory, loss, love, desire, death, religion, and tradition.
- Also reflects her eco-critical concerns.

“Everywoman is an Island”

Beneath the hubbub of the kitchen
and the mountain of dishes,
is a dark brooding space that rises
above the sea, where the gulls
careen, and kites soar unseen
and the wild wind skims along.

This is a space that withstands
everything,
the waves slowly chipping its silences;
the chug of the motorboat
invades the rocky shores,
the occasional ship
runs aground.

And should tsunami churn
its way from the deep,
devouring everything in its wake,
the will fold herself,
tuck in the piece of earth,
and change the contours
of her geography.

“Returning to Emptiness”

Far beyond where bulldozers break
The mountains four hundred steps
Up a bare hillside, is a Shivalingam
That bleeds on touch.

The world gushes past in a broken pipe
Some of us fill water from the cracks,
Some of us sit, fat stones,
On rough –shod slopes.
Some of us are suspended in the sky.

This is a return to emptiness,
Where salt pans breathe tales
Of long-past liberties,
Men smoke their pipe dreams silently;
Women wear rouge like blood in war.
Trains spurt into stations like lost love.

Out in the distance
I bleed on touch.
But why does the stone stay dry?

Themes of Shivdasani's Poetry

- Nature
- Sexuality, Man-woman relationship
- Native culture, Indian myth
- Alienation
- Women's marginalization
- Compulsion of love and marriage
- City-life

“Ramayana Revisited”

The television seeps through the wall
like yet another nightmare.
Somebody’s crying as usual, tomato ketchup
oozing past a knife. And here, something else
coagulates beneath my eyelash.

Nothing they taught me in the chemistry lab
prepared me for the iodine gas
raging purple as a sin in my gut,
some awful cure for a wound
that turned to air.
Sita, garish as a myth,
lacerates me as she wails
on the screen.

So much motion
trapped in a drawing room
cabinet. I rock on the chair,
remain exactly where I am,
see Sita get carried away
by the demon. Then,
it is time for lunch.



Later, the news comes on.
The child, emaciated, is no longer
even a headline. The reader turns
to the latest cricket score.

A bomb explodes inside my womb,
but I survive till Sunday comes again,
time for Sita to creep
back through the wall.

I slide the week behind me like grime,
or rather, like a snake sheds its skin,
swallow my past like a rabbit,
whole, undigested, and it shows
somewhere in the middle of my coil.

I want to stick my fangs into Sita,
but she vanishes just as I strike.

“Iron Woman”

Woman of iron, from an exploded star,
I embed myself in a crusty earth
that waits for the sun to rise.

My moment will come,
in meteors and mud, as I lie unseen
while the globe revolves.
You may burn me and blast me,
the furnace afire,
yet only free me
from compounds that bind.

Hammer me into sheets;
I am malleable too.
I will turn into a plough
and shake the earth.

Stretch me into wires,
ductile and delicate;
I will light up
the world in return.

I can stretch without breaking,
for I have been through the blaze,
freed from the meteorite
with lightning tongue.
You may melt me and mix me,
I emerge even purer,
magnetic and ready to strike –

Iron woman in her element.

Characteristic Hallmark

- **Devotion and Disillusionment**- In her famous poem *An Atheist's Confessions* she says, "At thirteen I believed in rose petals/ strewn at the earth god's feet/ Agarbatti aromas made me heavy/ And I ate *prasad* only after a bath."

Further she says, " God didn't exist, I said/ I was eighteen."

Lastly, "Twenty-two. I no longer worshipped / Myself or him./ I look at the sculptures in the pooja room/ and wonder- are the gods / finally beginning to smile again?"

- **Love and Loss**- In her *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, she writes,

"There is still an emptiness within me where my friend used to rest its head, and the leash feels strangely slack, except when my new companion tugs at me with the weight of his hand.

But of course, my new companion is not quite so faithful to me. He is a vet, you see, and there are so many traumatized creatures baying in this world. He helps them all, for a price, naturally, while I, under his expert care, pretend to be perfectly well."

Contd…

- **Women's quest for identity-** In her poetry a woman is not bound to any bondage. She just wants to fly in the open sky but this society does not allow. In her *School Girl No More*, she says, "I learned the mechanics / of bird-flying in Biology / but did not possess the wings".
- **Alienation**- The artificiality of contemporary life , especially city-life, has been portrayed by her at many places. In her poem *Paper Smiles*, she says-

  "I wait alone
  seeing silence fall
  on a painted wall."

- In an interview she once remarked, "In the haste and the mindset that a digital world implies, there are times when a writer must slow down ….."

Her Own Idea of Poetry

- ✓ If you want to write good poetry, first read good poetry.
- ✓ Pay attention to craft and to what may seem like little details.
- ✓ Be willing to revise, as many times as necessary.
- ✓ Let your work mature before you allow it to be published.
- ✓ Learn to value silence, so that you can hear the sound of your inner voice. Then stay faithful to it, and true to yourself.

Critical Assessment

- "Menka Shivdasan's poetry is both original and striking unusual, not just her tangential way of putting things across, but also how thought process and imagination run away with the poem and make it exciting. An experience is translated into another experience and then gets mixed with fancy in juice blender." (Keki N. Daruwalla)

- "Her poetry holds together a private world of chaotic emotions through its logical development and its strikingly imaginative images." (Bruce King)

- "But this 'womanhood' that she tries to seek is not easy to get only a series of experiences that not only harden just as carbon is subjected to various process to make what can be called a diamond but also awaken the inner to the realities in the mundane world" (K.V.Raghupati)

I look at the sculptures in the puja room

and wonder- are the gods

faintly beginning to smile again?”

(“The Atheist’s Confessions”)

Thank You

Works Consulted

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