

“WHEN A TRUTHFUL WOMAN SPEAKS, IT IS LIFE THAT IS SPEAKING”

A review essay by Sarojini Jayawickrama

Speaking for Myself: An Anthology of Asian Women's Writing, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Malashri Lal published by the Penguin Group, 2009, 557 pp.

Speaking for Myself, offers a wide spectrum of writings by women who are from places as far distant from each other as Azerbaijan and Sri Lanka. A prism which reflects the many facets of women's lives, it makes audible the voices of women as they lead their lives in diverse roles, not simply as mother, wife or daughter, the conventional roles which society assigns them, but as political activist, social reformer and educator. They express their very individualistic and innovative ideas, refusing to be constrained by the patriarchal norms and expectations under which they are compelled to live. The voice of the narrator in Tsuboi Sakai's "Umbrella on a Moonlit Night" (Japan, 55-68), seems to sum up the everyday experiences of many women, when reflecting on the monotonous tenor of her life and her friends: "We were housewives who for some twenty years had relied solely on our husband's pocketbooks. Like tame dogs, we had, without even knowing it, lost what little rebelliousness we once had. We were, in short, faithful wives who took comfort in being ordinary mothers." (55). Dissatisfied with their lives economically dependent on their husbands they bond together and meet regularly to share their joys and grief, forming a club 'the kind of club where we seemed to dominate our husbands once in a while.' These young women come together in an attempt to transcend the narrow confines of their mundane lives as 'faithful wives' and 'ordinary mothers'. But running through this 'rebellion' is the constant pressure of socio-cultural norms of behaviour and the tension between the women's desire for freedom from the demands of husband and children and their emotional ties to their families. This ambivalence characterizes many of the writings in the collection, imbuing them with a complexity that enhances their interest.

The selection of writings, short stories and poems are drawn from a heterogeneous fund of experience, cultural and socio-

political contexts marked by different ways of seeing and modes of articulation. In the editors' words they are 'not necessarily representative writings from different Asian countries', but 'hope that they will serve as a take-off point for further exploration.' (xx). Most of the writings are translations from the original Asian languages and the selection is of necessity limited by the paucity of English translations of Asian writings. A translation cannot always capture the nuances of the experiential and emotional content of a writer's psyche. To convey, not simply the bare bones of meaning but also the rich connotations of a word of one language in another, poses problems; the many layers of cultural content which imbues a word is often lost in translation. Yet, the translations here seem to have succeeded in capturing the essence of what the writer wants to convey as in the imagery in Fadwa Taqan's 'A Mountainous Journey' (Palestine); the stultifying psychological effect of the isolation from the outside world on herself is described in these terms: 'my femininity whimpering like a wounded animal in the cage finding no means of expression' or as in the translation of Rizia Rahman's 'Irina's Picture' (Bangladesh, 303-18), which uses the beautifully evocative metaphor "a world floating in milk froth" to etch a landscape enveloped in thick morning mist.

Shattering the stereotype

Rooted as these writings are in the cultural and social milieus that are the genesis for their creation, an understanding of the specific socio-political contexts from which they spring will no doubt enhance our understanding of the central experiences of the protagonists. In 'Melody in Dreams' (China, 17-35), a knowledge of the climate of harsh repression and the persecution of intellectuals during and after the 'Cultural Revolution' in China adds a further dimension to our perception of the strength of resolve and commitment to the cause of intellectual and personal freedom embodied in the nineteen year old Liang Xia. Defiant and daring she says, 'I don't want to hide anything from you...

As you know I'm not afraid of anything'. The image of woman presented by Zong Pu as dignified, courageous and complex shatters the stereotypical image of the Asian woman as passive and submissive. Liang Xia poignantly expresses her hope for the future, 'the dream of the people will be fulfilled. The reactionaries will be smashed. Historically this is inevitable', a hope Zong Pu would have shared. Zong Pu's narrative has a powerful impact for she writes from personal experience of the persecution of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution.

Threads that bind

Despite the contextual diversity, strong threads bind them, weaving these writings from East to West Asia into an intricately patterned tapestry. The warp and weft of the fabric – affinities of belief, concerns, perspectives, a repertoire of myths and legends, traditions of storytelling, religions, even languages, for instance Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil and Sindhi are spoken in more than one country – web them. Existential questions that figure in the sensibilities of women, who are the protagonists in these writings, transcend the boundaries of cultural and geographical locations reaching out from specific contexts and find points of identification. The writings are often third person narratives, the protagonists all being women who resist becoming constructs of the patriarchal communities in which they live. They speak for themselves not being ventriloquized by others. They attempt to fashion their own subjectivity but at times their world view is filtered through the lens of patriarchy and they become 'accomplice[s] and ... consenting agent[s] of patriarchy, being ... [themselves] very much a product of patriarchal socialization.' (xxii).

The writings in the anthology are not organized thematically. Nor are they listed under different countries the editors not prescribing them as being representative of countries or even of individual writers. "We decided to let geographical boundaries collapse and just have clusters of countries clubbed together as East Asia" Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia and South East Asia" (xxvi), they say, setting out the rationale for the organization. But the grouping of writings under these different rubrics is not meant to deny or blur the 'differences present within each of the clusters'. A refreshing feature of the anthology is that the editors do not impose their viewpoint on the reader but lets the reader identify for her/himself the thematic threads that run through them and

the 'cultural co-ordinates within and across each of them'. An insightful Introduction gently nudges us in the direction of the salient issues addressed in these writings. A concise and useful biographical note on the writers, identify the main thrust of the writings. Assigning specific dates to them would have helped us to contextualise them better particularly when the writings are grounded in the personal lives of the writers as many of them are.

The women writers address a spectrum of issues which range from lesbianism, prostitution, terrorism, war, patriotism, motherhood and family relationships, interrogating cultural perceptions and attitudes to these issues which are deeply divisive and figure vitally in most cultures today. These are indeed existential and perennial. The writers reveal a deeply compassionate view of the marginalized woman, the lesbian, the prostitute, the sufferer from AIDS and leprosy, questioning concepts of morality and 'honour' and the double standards which emanate from a male-centred point of view, often too from women themselves who become 'consenting agents' of patriarchy nurtured and socialized by patriarchal institutions.

I have attempted to identify the overarching themes that run through many of these writings, discerning ways of seeing and emblematic motifs that occur in them. Constraints of space preclude the discussion of many of the writings. I hope through my discussion to stimulate an interest in further explorations of the anthology.

'Not to lure or seduce men'

The commodification of women is a distinct thread that runs through many of these writings. In 'My Sister' (217-25), the Cambodian writer Mey Son Suthary adopts a male persona, that of the brother. Through the dynamics of a close-knit family she explores women's social problems often generated by economic deprivation. Keo, the 'Elder Sister', who is animated by a sense of responsibility for her younger siblings, prostitutes herself so that she can finance their education. The predictable judgmental response of the brother, when he discovers that her job working for a 'foreign investment company' is simply a fiction she uses to mask her actual occupation as a bargirl, is critiqued perhaps rather overtly. His conventional attitude to a bar girl as one who degrades herself and brings shame on her family – 'I felt both betrayed and terribly insulted' – is contrasted with those

of the women of the family. In conveying the difference, Mey Son Sotheyary lets the dialogue between brother, sister and aunt, speak for itself subtly suggesting the contrast rather than overtly stating it. The younger sister is able to transcend conceptualising Keo as a bar girl. 'Whatever she does she's still our sister' (221), while the brother arrogantly asks her, "Are you good enough to be our sister?"

The commodification of women is addressed not only by this Cambodian writer; the issue surfaces in many writings criss-crossing from one culture to another from Cambodia to Lebanon, as in "A Girl Called Apple" (508-11), or to Tibet in "Journal of the Grassland" (200-209). There is a strong sense of a need for a search for justice for these exploited women, labelled, prostitute, lesbian or even daughter of marriageable age (a salable commodity). It goes in tandem with an interrogation of social practices such as a father's prerogative to choose a marriage partner for his daughter, to withhold education from her or negotiate and barter with another man, a bride price in exchange for her. In 'Journal of the Grassland' even the women seem to be accepting not resisting these patriarchal practices but colluding in them, simply demanding a fair price for the young niece who is to be married to a man much older than her – 'If you are going to sell then sell right.'

Many of the writers explore the image of woman and of her sexuality. In 'Defiance of a Flower', Chiranan Pitprecha (Thailand, 282) renders a positive image of woman, not simply as a sex object, 'Her ply of ligaments is meant of heavy task/ Not for the craving of flimsy silk and damask,' but as one fired with aspiration, 'To search for new life.../ Not to lure or seduce men.' She is a complete human being, able to fulfil her potential and evolve a life of her own, 'Not to lean on others /... Not just to blossom and await admirers ...But to bloom and embrace/ The fertility of the land.'

Taslina Nasreen's poem 'Things Cheaply/ Had' (Bangladesh, 301) seems at first glance to present the woman who degrades herself, selling her body as cheap merchandise in exchange for material goods; 'If they get a jewel for their nose/ they lick feet for seventy days or so/a full three and a half months/ if it's a striped sari.'

But the last verse dramatically overturns this image. Its impact on the reader is one of shocked horror as the realization of the cost in physical abuse that these women suffer silently and submissively as cheap commodities for rich 'patrons', pierces the reader's consciousness. 'Even the mangy cur of the house barks now and then, /but over the mouths of battered women / there's a lock,/a golden lock.'

This is one of a pair of powerful poems in which Nasreen presents the woman exploited for her sexual appeal, in a compassionate and positive light. At the same time she draws a harsh and negative portrait of men. In 'Women Can't' (302) she makes a strong indictment of men who 'Touch a body of flesh/Without love'. 'Only animals and men can/ Touch a body of flesh/ Without love/ Women can't.'

The poems are provocative, shocking the reader, impelling her/him to interrogate the flaws in society that compel women to sell their bodies; the social critiquing is conveyed dramatically through the visual imagery.

Composite pictures

The portraits of women who emerge from these writings are not uni-dimensional. Women in their many roles, as mother, wife or daughter, in relationships to their husbands and children, other women, and to their fellow workers in the workplace, are etched. 'Motherhood' figures as the focus of many of the writings; as the editors reflect, this perhaps suggests its significance in many of the cultures and societies of Asia. It is not presented as sacrosanct, where the mother has to make a total submission of herself, to 'being' a mother. The mothers in these writings do find a space for themselves, resisting the social construct of the 'mother' as one who has to make a total submission of herself to 'motherhood'. Instead, as in 'Afagh Masud's 'Sparrows' (Azerbaijan, 435-45), the mother breaks away from the restrictive structures of family life, perhaps tearing herself reluctantly from the bonds that tie her to her daughter and husband, to fashion for herself her identity. Like Nora in Ibsen's 'A Doll's House', she shuts the door on her life of dreary domesticity and patriarchal controls taking flight like the sparrows. In 'Sparrows' as in many of her short stories Masud explores the psychological constraints in patriarchal cultures where women are slotted into roles and not expected to stray outside their confines. 'Sparrows' is related through the consciousness of the observant daughter whose attitude to the mother's attempts to free herself from her life through her writing, is ambivalent. There is no overt understanding or condemnation of the mother's 'flight'. Different writers explore the concept of motherhood conjuring up different pictures of the 'mother'. The ambivalence that characterizes some of them invests them with an intriguing complexity, for they reflect in their many ways the reality of 'being' a mother.

Fadwa Tuqan who was one of the most influential poets in modern Palestinian poetry explores the psychological and intellectual sterility in the lives of women cloistered in the

harem, the women's wing of her father's house. 'The house was like a large coop filled with domestic birds, contented to peck the feed thrown to them without argument.' In an excerpt from her autobiographical writing 'A Mountainous Journey' (531-39) published in the anthology, she presents a graphic description of her life of isolation from the political and social currents of her country. The domineering figure of the father, who keeps her isolated, demands that she writes poetry on the political situation of Palestine – 'how could I wage war with my pen for political, ideological or national freedom?', she asks. The relationship between Tuqan and her father is marked by conflicting emotions 'I did not hate him, neither did I love him.' Contending with the desire to please him by writing the poetry he wants is a feeling of rebellion, and protest and a refusal to comply results. Tuqan presents the impact of the repressive, steellike hands of prohibition on a woman – her emotional and intellectual life is stultified and the springs of creativity dry up and she is no longer able to write poetry. There is a crisis. Isolated from life and experiencing a sense of complete alienation she loses contact with reality and attempts to take her own life. The death of her father liberates her, 'I entered into life drinking it in large drafts'. The lifting of the veil in Palestine in 1948, when women could divest themselves of the dress which covered them from head to toe that they had been forced to wear, completes her emancipation. She emerges out of the emotional desert which she had hitherto inhabited to explore and taste the reality of love which until then had been only an abstract concept.

Fadwa Tuqan's writing weaves together family dynamics, political and emotional maturation and liberation. The death of the father, the authority figure, prefigures the escape from the 'prison of the harem', a lifting of the veil and social, political and emotional liberation and Tuqan is able to voice her beliefs. 'The time has arrived for this daughter of life to speak and, when a truthful woman speaks, it is life that is speaking.'

'What kind of woman is that?'

In 'Giribala' (India, 323-40), Mahasweta Devi, a deeply committed social activist, whose 'Draupadi' many of us may have read, 'endorses the strength of a woman's affirmative right' (xxv) – a woman's right to take decisive action as to the trajectory of her life. In presenting Giribala's defiance of her community's disapproval of her action in leaving her husband, taking her children with her, Mahasweta Devi summons up in the reader's mind the iconic image of 'shakti', the emblem of feminist power. It is an image that resonates in the sensibility of Asian women and would strike a chord of empathy in them. It is the kind of emblematic

motif that crosses geographical boundaries and culturally links these stories from different Asian regions. They help to forge a picture of Asian women, who emerge from these writings; their contours are similar to each other but intriguingly different in their many-sidedness.

Mahasweta Devi presents the response of women in the community to Giribala's act of defiance, when she leaves her home of bamboo and thatched roof, the 'benefits' from the sale of her daughters by a pimp, with the silent connivance of her husband Aulchhand. Living within the parameters of patriarchal institutions, socialized by patriarchal culture, the women collude with the men in their disapproval of Giribala's action: 'Why leave your husband and go away? What kind of woman is that?' Irony tinged with humour characterizes Devi's narration. There is no overt condemnation of the no-good Aulchhand, or even of the pimp, Mohan. Her critique is not of individuals but of the patriarchal framework where the mindset towards the girl-child is expressed in the words, 'a girl's by fate discarded, lust if she is dead, lost if she is wed,' which echoes and re-echoes chant-like in 'Giribala' – a cynical view that equates marriage with death.

'Virtuous whores'

As much as iconic images are drawn upon to reinforce a woman's stances, cultural images from religious and mythic sources are challenged and subverted in some of the writings. In 'The Stigma' (India, 369-82), Sarami, the protagonist of Pratibha Ray's short story, exposes the hypocrisy of the women of the community, who while indulging in adulterous liaisons with men metaphorically clothe themselves in the virtuous vestments of Sita and Savitri, the iconic representations of chastity and fidelity in Hindu mythology. Sarami, a young and beautiful woman married to a much older man is compelled to live in the same house as her young brother-in-law and nephew who both make flirtatious and lecherous advances constantly having to repel 'their hungry looks, the suggestive gestures, the audacious flirtations.'

'The Stigma' is mainly a thirdperson narrative, shot through with interpolations from Sarami's consciousness presented in a stream of consciousness technique. Ray's powerful short story uncovers the double standards vis-à-vis men and women, the repressive effect of cultural images as they impact on women's lives, subliminally monitoring their behaviour in a relentless fashion, and the cultural practices endorsed by society such as the dowry system which regulates marriage and the belief in horoscopes and the effect of the stars and

planets on people's lives. These are familiar practices in most Asian cultures. They all connive to absolve men of blame, making the woman the 'guilty party' for all misfortunes, even for miscarriages: 'they were no reflection on Rahn Tiadi's masculinity. Yes, yes Sarani was squarely to blame'. The pressure to live up to the ideal of perfect womanhood embodied in Sita and Savitri, repressing her sexual desires, 'a flaming snake of desire slithering inside her entrails', inflamed by the proximity of the young men, Sarani has to 'dam the surging tide of desire', which then manifests itself in a psychosomatic hysteria. The cultural conditioning, her own conscience and the threat of the community discovering her infidelity prevent her from 'whoring around to her heart's content.'

Ray presents the onset of the hysteria dramatically: 'Just as the molten fire in the womb of the earth sometimes flames and breaks free, spitting smoke, lava and ash ... so too the repressed sexual desires smouldering within Sarani would sometimes erupt like a volcano.' The women of the community guess what underlies her hysteria and condemn Sarani, 'She's dying for you-know-what, the bitch, the immoral bitch.' When they mete out the same ostracism to another young woman married to an old man, Sarani, now an old woman, challenges them to swear 'on the heads of your husbands and sons that 'not a single dirty thought ever flitted across your minds.' Her challenge rings out in strident tones to 'all you Sitas, all you Savitris, all you virtuous whores.' The oxymoron is intensely effective, the phrase underscores the hypocrisy of the women with their 'dirty little secrets', etching it indelibly in our consciousness.

Sarani's final act is to gently wipe 'the stains of the stigma' from the young wife's forehead. The 'stigma' she erases is the red tilak traced on the forehead of a young Hindu woman on marriage to indicate her status as a wife. Pratibha Ray's play on the word 'stigma' subverts the sacrosanct power of the red tilak. It is seen as the external manifestation of the controlling power of patriarchy. Wiping it away Sarani symbolically frees the young woman from the chains that bind her to her old husband. Ray provokes us to question the meanings of the words 'stigma' and 'sin.' We ourselves ask the question posed at the end of the story, 'but could she be rid of a stigma for a sin she had never committed in the first place?'

Icons and alter egos

Thematic strands cross over from one country to another and through images weld cultures into a shared world of

perceptions. The iconic image of Sita resonates in the psyche of the Asian woman, particularly in South Asia and South East Asia. Leika S Chudori's 'Purification of Sita' (Indonesia, 242-48) plays with the legend from the *Ramayana*, using it as a trigger to expose the double standards in a culture, particularly as they impact on a woman's life. Chudori's narrative technique is to conflate the story of Sita in the Indian epic with that of the young Asian woman living in Canada. The narrative seamlessly slips from the consciousness of Sita to that of the young woman; the contours of Sita's story is at times indistinguishable from that of her modern-day alter ego. Aeons of time separate the two, yet both have to prove their 'purity' to a patriarchal authority—Sita abducted by the demon god Ravana to her husband Rama, and the young woman to her fiancé separated from her for four years.

The narrative technique and the mirroring of images underscore the parallels between the two. The searing heat of the flames Sita braves to immolate herself is replicated in the relentless heat of the Canadian summer. An image of Rama, the reincarnation of the Great King Vishnu, alternates with that of her fiancé until his face imperceptibly begins to resemble that of the Great King. Through these devices Chudori reinforces her point that a woman's situation has not changed significantly from time immemorial to the present day. A man seems able to continue to justify his infidelity with the arrogant assertion 'But I'm a man', with a man's prerogative, 'complete freedom to give free rein to our desires.' At the end of the story the young woman muses as to what would have happened if Sita had questioned her husband about his fidelity, an opportunity she was never given. The same question arises in our minds provoking us to question the double standards of morality in society, an issue Chudori focusses on in many of her writings.

Storytelling and bonding

We have seen mythic figures subliminally empowering and constraining a woman's life. Empowering too is the tradition of storytelling which exists in many cultures. Stories become the conduit through which women bond with each other sharing experiences. The articulation of experiences of suffering has a cathartic effect. The Tibetan writer Geyang unfolds an 'Old Nun Tells Her Story' (186-99), demonstrating the efficacy of storytelling in activating a process of selfdefinition and selfknowledge thereby shoring up a woman's sense of self. The nun relates her story with great restraint and dignity. Strikingly evident is the equanimity with which she faces the vicissitudes in her life uncomplainingly, even a faint demur is not audible.

Geyang's portrayal of the nun is characterized by understatement. There is no intrusive narrative voice. The nun speaks for herself and we listen. The woman who emerges from the cameo-like nuanced portrayal is not a malleable victim, which at first she seems to be, controlled by her mother, the regime of the convent and later after marriage by a resentful sister-in-law. Disciplined in a life of austerity, prayer and meditation from the age of eight, she has to metamorphose herself into a girl of marriageable age and a noblewoman upon marriage to a man twenty years older. The transition is not easy. 'I realized that the life I'd led in the convent had been so remote from anything my family had experienced that I could probably not be like them again.'

Geyang lets the nun's voice trace the significant events of her chequered life dispassionately. After marriage, maturing and developing, becoming a wife and mother and then a widow, she faces the death of her husband and financial deprivation with fortitude. She returns to the convent, living again in a community of women, her natural habitat and the life she chooses of her own free will. Reestablishing rapport with her convent sisters many of whom are still alive, she shares her life's story with them: 'We tell each other the stories of our lives and everything we've suffered becomes something beautiful.' The women of the convent experience a sense of empowerment in articulating and sharing with each other the stories of their suffering.

Underlying this strength is self-reflection that punctuates the nun's narrative. It initiates a process of self-knowledge equipping her with the capacity to grapple with the problems she has to face: 'From what I endured in those days ... I learned that the most beautiful thing in life is not splendour and luxury ... or occupying a position of power wherever you go, but the self-assurance that come from having to overcome obstacles, step by step, through your own perseverance.' A worldview permeated by the Buddhist philosophical teachings that she has imbibed from childhood informs the nun's response to the cataclysmic changes in her life. An understanding of the transience of life that underpins Buddhism helps her to cope with them. It is a concept familiar to many South Asian and South East Asian readers, one of those threads that bind these writings creating a shared world of belief among readers as well as empathy between readers and the protagonist narrator. A quietly confident assertion stemming from the insights she has gained from her life concludes her story: 'I realize now that the

tumultuous life of a human being is no more than a passing flash of light against the timelessness of nature.'

There is no photographic memory of a life steeped in a culture and faith unfamiliar to her. Jean Arasanayagam gathers the fragments of her mother-in-law's life from storytelling. The relationship between her mother-in-law and herself is a subject Arasanayagam often engages with in her poetry and short stories. It is one presented as being fraught with tension and even hostility. In another poem simply titled 'My Mother-in-Law' (*Women, All women*, 1999), Arasanayagam sees herself as seen by her husband's family 'as the usurper whose reign/ Unacknowledged was soon forgotten'. The mood in 'Wedding Photographs' (Sri Lanka, 418-20) is different; she does not speak of her non-acceptance by her mother-in-law - 'Yes she chose not to know me' (from 'My Mother-in-law').

As the poem progresses there is a sense of a truce between the two of them. The sharp corners of their relationship have been blunted. 'The threads of the mother-in-law's life are delicately woven into a portrait of a woman given in marriage as a child bride, at sixteen to a man twenty years older. She has now been widowed and says 'part of my life too/ Perished on his pyre.' Through the conversation between them a sense of companionship develops between the two women. They have both aged and mellowed. 'We sit face to face, musing over each other's/ Lives, thinking of gnarled feet stepping over the stumbles... /... of our spent lives, of ago and passing time.'

The younger woman listens as the mother-in-law's tale unravels. It has been a life deeply rooted in traditional cultural practices and her Hindu faith. Memory embedded in story telling seems to create empathy and understanding, perhaps giving the younger woman an understanding of why the mother-in-law resented the intrusion into her life of a woman of a different ethnicity and faith. There is no overt comment in Arasanayagam's poem; the mother-in-law's story speaks for itself, and encapsulated in it is a life that the poet presents in words evocative and luminous.

Woman as truth-teller

Ratna Sarumpaet, herself a political activist, opens a window on the world of a woman activist-woman in the public domain in 'Marsinah Accused' (Sumatra, 161-76). Imprisoned for participating in a pro-democracy meeting in Jakarta in the last days of the Suharto regime, Sarumpaet's writing is rooted in personal experience which gives dramatic

immediacy to the excerpt from 'Marsinah Accuses' published in the anthology. It engages with the fate of a woman activist killed for demanding higher wages for a fellow worker in a factory. Familiar as they are with the suppression of freedom and protest and the victimization of dissidents, Asian readers can empathize strongly with Marsinah for whose murder no one has been held accountable. The contextual framework for the play is that Marsinah wishes to return to Earth to avenge her death and demand justice for herself and others who may have to confront a similar fate: 'my death is a symbol of your death, a symbol of the death of a generation, of the death of all hope for change...'. At a performance to be held in conjunction with the launch of a book about her, she intends to remind the audience that no one has been brought to justice for her murder.

Sarumpaet's play is tremendously moving. When it opens on a darkened stage, the spectral figure of Marsinah rises from a platform in the cemetery and addresses the audience, recounting the torture she suffered at the hands of her persecutors. As a woman she is subjected to the kind of brutal punishment that could only be meted out to a woman, 'I was silenced – not just with a shawl, but with torture, rape, the vicious and secret plunder of my body.' The only figure on the stage is that of Marsinah. Except for the whispered sounds of people reading from the Koran and the music from a traditional Javanese song, we hear only her voice. Voices from the past intrude on Marsinah's consciousness as her monologic voice recapitulates the past. They link past and present, and stimulate in Marsinah's memory the trauma of the past, releasing in her psyche a gamut of emotions – tension, anxiety, defiance, sadness and anger. In impassioned tones she denounces all the institutions of state that colluded in her murder. Defiantly she refuses to be intimidated: "They try to harm me but I will not be afraid and I will not stop! I will stand in their midst and I will face them down! Yes my executioners..."

Through the voice of the dead Marsinah, Sarumpaet lays bare the brutal assault on individual rights, the subversion of all state institutions and the breakdown of law and order, which were endemic in Sumatra in the last days of the dictatorial Suharto regime. Marsinah's turn-telling voice indicts the country as 'A corrupt land, a people for whom power is everything, a nation where the exercise of power justifies everything'. Marsinah's accusation is levelled at society itself. The guilt for her killing must be borne by everyone, 'You allowed my life to be taken from me.' She calls on everyone to avenge her death, 'Don't let my death be for nothing.' In their silence, society has colluded in her

killing and the withholding of justice from her, as we all do when we turn aside and ignore the erasure of rights in our own societies. Sarumpaet's writing focusses not only on the past in Sumatra but addresses issues which are vitally significant in today's world, tainted so often with the same flaws.

In 'Dead-end' (India, 351-65) Ajeet Cour questions the concept of 'extremist'. The narrative voice is that of a young girl who gives refuge to an eighteen-year-old boy, suspected of being an extremist, on the run from the police who are on his trail. In reply to her question of whether he is an extremist, he answers 'Extremist? Is it some kind of extraordinary species of mankind hibi?' We see him through her eyes as the initial response of fear created in her mind by the word extremist is replaced by compassion, 'I felt like a mother protecting her wounded son. A flood of tenderness heaved gently in my breast', a feeling that transcends restrictive definitions. Her compassion is not diluted, even when she realizes that he could be a member of the gang who had killed a much loved brother. The effect of the information about his suspected involvement in the killing is immensely disturbing to the young girl and presented vividly, 'the words hit my ears like a thunderbolt. Like a whirlwind they engulfed me and I stood frozen near the door. I could hear the mad rush of my blood racing through my veins.' The murdered brother and the 'extremist' are the same age, almost indistinguishable from each other. They even have similar bullet wounds. The mother's desperate plea when she hears the gunshot that is fired at the 'extremist', mistaking the intended victim of the gunshot for the son she has lost – 'Don't kill him. Don't kill my Kewal. Don't kill my little one... he is my only son.' – underscores the tragedy of the needless loss of a young life. Ajeet Cour does not interpolate comment or criticism into the narrative. It speaks for itself through the voiced consciousness of the young girl and raises questions in the reader's mind about rigid definitions which compartmentalize people, and of the justice meted out with a bullet to those suspected of extremism without confirming their guilt.

Conclusion

Many of the women who are the protagonists in these writings are compassionate beings, thinking for themselves and speaking for themselves. Very often they are disadvantaged, mired in poverty, leading mundane lives, trapped in an existence that does not afford them any opportunities for advancement. Despite this, the women who emerge from this background are courageous, feisty and

defiant, and challenge in their own inimitable way the patriarchal dispensation that pins them down to a gender identity from which they try to free themselves. They do not always succeed but they sometimes do, reenvisioning their lives bravely tracing their paths that will take them into as yet uncharted territory as do Giribala and the mother in 'Sparrows'.

They see their societies and cultures through eyes not veiled by social conventions and received ways of seeing. They discern the chinks in the armour of moral righteousness – 'the black and white morality', to use Kamala Wijeratne's discerning phrase in 'Death by Drowning' (Sri Lanka, 425-31) – and interrogate the accepted norms of behaviour and belief. These powerless women empower themselves through their strength of belief and principle, even challenging the might of powerful states as does the young Li Xiang.

Speaking for Myself is a selection of writings compiled with sensitivity which affords the reader a rich sampling of the writings of Asian women. Its defining feature is its refusal to impose an editorial viewpoint on the reader. The women speak for themselves, articulating their nuanced experiences of need, protest, suffering and the rare moments of happiness. We are afforded a glimpse into their lives as we discern the subtextual threads that run through their writings, and indeed their lives. Although often addressing culturally specific issues the writings reach out beyond Asian readers as we see the deeper dimensions and wider relevance of these questions. They create a redefinition of female selfhood, overturning the image of Asian woman as a construct of patriarchy, not passive and submissive, but strong, energetic and dynamic. The Pakistani poet Kishwar Naheed encapsulates this idea poetically in 'Who Am I?' (384), rebelling against the shackles that attempt to suppress her: 'I am the one you hid beneath/the weight of traditions' and emerging fearless and free. 'For you never knew/that light can never fear pitch darkness.' ■

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I'M A DOG (a true story)

I'm a dog
not so rare
a mongrel with mange
No care no fair
I wander around
nose to the ground
eyes full of sight
ears full of sound

This neighbourhood
is a creepy place
walls are high
locks are great
servants are fat
thin ladies bake
cops asleep
thieves awake

Then came the day
the timing was right
knife held to a child
No fight no flight
a mother's fear
a woman's fear
the thief had a hard-on
I had a beer

Too late to bark
end of the game
took a mother's shame
to keep the hostage safe
nobody asked
So I didn't tell
thief had no name
had a face, had a smell

by Zymurgy