

ANTHOLOGY OF FEMINIST POETRY

Afshan D'Souza Lodhi: Turn my tongue

Afshan D'souza-Lodhi



“Most of my poetry explored desire: to love, be loved and belong. The pieces are mainly told from a female perspective, and question the gender given to particular acts, objects and idea. *Burning dupaattas* and *white weddings*, *white funerals* play around with the idea of a female killer. What would drive a woman to kill. In the same way that Valerie Solanas’s SCUM talks of cutting up men, the protagonists in these poems do just that”.

“In *black marigolds*, a piece with multiple characters and perspectives, the gender neutralness of their names and the way in which hindi names double as verbs and nouns, pushes the boundaries of what gender and sexuality actually is. My choice to not have capital letters for the names, here is a decision to not give names importance, but to also understand that names can be aptonyms, i.e. they are synonymous with the identity of the person. *Her name* is a piece that looks at grotesque women that are ‘unnatural’ and ruin things as they walk. The piece is in direct opposition to ‘beautiful princesses’ in fairy tales. Kanta is as much part of nature as any other woman, but her own relationship with it is being challenged”.

“*Anonymous was a woman* plays with the idea of women’s voices, especially those that have been silenced in the past. It asks to what extent are women allowed to have a voice, is it only if they are anonymous? The piece plays with the Arabic word awrah which is a form of nakedness ascribed to a woman’s voice. The word, only every associated with a woman’s voice also gives birth to the word aurat which means woman. Women should be silent, for if they are not, then they are naked. This is as much a resistance poem as it is a poem about the idea of nakedness in its many forms”.

burning dupattas

he said he liked it
 rough
so the next day you
bought handcuffs.
she did the same but
lost them before she could
use them
she'd been taught
pigs are haraam
it doesn't stop her from
sleeping with them
or is that dogs
she asked him to show her
how to use dupattas
instead of cuffs, cuffs
cut into his skin, dupattas
cut into her honour
she lied her way
through his pants on
his shirt - but kept his
shoes on
he wasn't dead from
the waist down nor neck
up so took pictures of her
in empty bathtubs fully clothed
naked minds, long exposure
stopped her from
being able to reveal her
skin to him
you left the ashen remains
of the dupatta clinging
to his hands when you left

white weddings, white funerals

when Deepika walked in
she intended to do nothing more
than tell her this was over. loving
married people was something
her mother had warned her
 against doing
and somehow she still managed to
 do it anyway.
she was ready to wash
the henna from her hands.
standing over the sink
 washing and washing,

certain this wasn't going
to be a replica of a Shakespeare.
she used a pen, only
because it was the closest thing. maybe
it was a nod to the one-too-many times
she'd heard that pen and sword quote.
She, was bored now.
weddings are:
long, blood-covered winding sheets,
 relatives whose names you can't remember,
funerals.
white to mark
innocence and white to
mark death. whiteness forced
into and onto brown faces.
then crying as the body is taken
 away.
she had married him
 first, pretending.

black marigolds

- chaandani
 chaandani
- did it rain?
- stay.
- the rain took your shape.
- it didn't rain.
 stay. please.
she told him maybe,
to herself counted 8 reasons
 not to.
and then his ada strolled in.
8 reasons not to
turned to one reason to stay.
ada was classy -
but even the moon has craters.
the type who probably had
a möbius strip between her legs
 dated the brazilian instead.
she was
 a worldly woman knowing about
dawn and dusk and
everything that came between.
though ada had a preference for moonlight,
she ignored chaandani, went straight to
give kiran a line.
- light doesn't bend, and you, kiran, are extremely kinky
she walked round to chaandani
looked her up and down
assessing

then playfully slapped her with
a lady's glove.
- what about you, chanda, are you bent?
she elongated the name and
let it roll around her mouth.
chandaani returned the gaze
- I reflect off what's given to me.
lights now turned on
chandaani played with his ada.
stood gracefully.
- your ada is really something, isn't she, kiran?
shame she's always looking for a new dawn.
kiran was pissed
exited left, followed by her,
bare.
- Is that true, ada? are you?
- I guess.
kiran left.
leaving them staring up
into the sky looking
for dead birds.

her name

when you drop sticks into a pond
the frogs swim away from their spawn
faster than the trees fall
from allowing
that last bird to
call its lover
Kanta came from a place near a pond,
was using sticks to prod the other children
when the falling branch of cypress
narrowly missed her head.
she was alive,
no less alive than she had been
when she left home that morning;
alive nonetheless.
but no.
Kanta would never
disturb the countryside again.
that is, until she was older.
she stood underneath
the cousin of the tree
that once tried to kill her
as she coyly called her lover.
he wouldn't come.
and in a fit of rage
more trees fell.
not of their own accord or
because of birds and their lovers.

but because her own lover
 left her unsatisfied.
 the trees soon learnt
 that Kanta was trouble.
 when she walked through
 the woods
 they cowered in her footsteps.
 frogs found other ponds and
 the fields,
 they became bare.
 all that was left
 was a single rose
 growing so close to a wall
 one would think it was trying to prove something.
 Kanta tried to pick
 the white rose
 but in doing so
 pricked her finger.
 and so
 kanta was given her name.

anonymous was a woman

anonymous was a woman who
 wrote romance only in stories
 because living them and watching
 love die was too hard.
 she never knew what it was like to
 turn heads, to be the object of
 someone's desires and that's why
 she wrote love stories on her body.
 hoping that lovers would fall in
 love with them and in turn her.
 she doubted herself, but her
 stories, her words that spoke of
 true love, she trusted them
 more than she trusted
 her own skin.
 no one wants to be walking
 propaganda for censorship
 maybe that's why she did it.
 anonymous, a woman, she
 kept it that way. waiting
 for the ink to dry, she
 shed her clothing.
 the words on her skin, a
 sign of survival marred with
 possibilities and excitement,
 Mashallah, they speak
 volumes.
 her father had told her

that the female voice is awrah.
but even anonymous words
can change the world.

Mother Tongue

my mothers mother tongue is Konkani
but she uses my fathers language at home.
we have to
because having multilingual arguments in the house
would confuse M I five and
well, we're just too kind for that.
so instead we speak Urdu:
a language of love the language of poets
but all my mother ever hears are
the butchered slang words
young boys sling at each other
on the bus.
my mother's mother tongue is Konkani but outside
the house she use english
good forbid anyone thinks she's a freshie.
she's learnt to not roll
her rrs and use only,
only sparingly but still
she gets asked:
where is your accent from?
hears cheap imitations of a voice
she's tried so hard to shake on
tv and film
and it reminds her of what she sounds like
to the rest of them.
my mothers mother tongue is Konkani
but sometimes she speaks Hindi
like when we're out shopping
talking about the guy who just queue jumped in front of us.
She smiles when she speaks it.
head up. proud.
brings her closer to home.
but then, she has to revert back
to the language of the colonisers
to finish the sale and
suddenly her head lowers.
my mother's mother tongue is Konkani
but the only time she ever speaks it
is over the phone to
her mother on
Sunday mornings.
I watch her struggle sometimes
as she tries to remember the word for
fruit but instead
replaces it with english or Urdu. She blames it

on her growing age.
 I know she's forgotten.
 mujhe mai che bas Konkani
 so should mine be.
 I dread the day my grandmother passes for
 I'm afraid my mother will lose her tongue.
 she won't speak with proudness or
 chat back with slickness.
 and my mothers tongue,
 will feel foreign in her mouth.

In the name of my mother, the most kind, sometimes merciful but almost always gracious

our mothers taught us to love / taught us to love unconditionally / when a man / breaks glass tables / while
 showing you his nostrils / you pick up the glass / cover your hands in bandages later / make sure you don't
 shake when you bring him tea.
 We are the girls who lived. daughters who live past their first day are wrapped in izzat and shame and still
 they wonder why
 the girls grow up wearing guilt and marrying men who
 break glass tables [not glass ceilings].
 they make her wear red on her wedding day
 so that when she bleeds it doesn't show.
 gold adorns her wrists so that when she cooks
 she's reminded of the burning.
 But the red dress protects her lack of virginity
 and the gold, she counts that and keeps it close to her heart an escape route.

1.5 generation

1.1 last night I cried / my dad came home / and told me an uncle had shouted at him for letting his
 daughter wear dresses / I cried / not because of the inherent sexism / the male gaze that will never let up
 in our community / but because when I imagined having a conversation / with this uncle, in Urdu / I
 couldn't / I got half way through telling him / what respect really meant / when I forgot the word for gaze /
 I couldn't come up with the equivalent / in Hindi or Urdu / and my mother tongue bit itself / I am able to
 engage and interrogate certain ideas / in English but basic words / and emotions are still stuck / in my
 mother tongue / I cried because / even in my fantasies / I couldn't win / an argument against my / sexist
 uncles

1.2 it has been too long since / I stood side by side with my mother / in the kitchen to cook / writing down /
 recipes to dishes / to remember them / for when I'm older / she switches them up when she tells them to
 me / adds extra tomatoes and yoghurt and / halves the spices / she knows something I don't / the more /
 years I spend / apart from her / the less spice my tongue will be able to hold / as desi words / no longer fill
 my mouth / so will desi tastes vanish / from my palate / I plate my food now with extra spices / an attempt
 to try and get used to the / feeling of mirch and pain / on my tongue / a feeling that will grow / to become
 more familiar as I move closer and closer to -

1.3 my body is one with the beats / of the tabla / but my ears / can no longer / take the high-pitched tones /

of the singers / the sur stops / at me. / sa / re ga ma / pa / dha ne sa / came before / do re me / but I only know the raags that feature / in the top 10. I've listened to remixes of remixes / until all I can I hear / are the dj / dj / dj / dj / dj wale babu mera gana chala do / but still rejoice when Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's jaaniaaa / sends shivers down my spine / I start the song again / my lips opening as if Nusrat's voice is my own / but still / even with his voice / guiding mine / I miss / the beat and start / the next line too early / my body / moves a half beat off the tabla / I pretend I'm listening in / double time / double time

1.4 women do not fit into saris / saris are made for whole women / one-point-zero women / for those of us that are 1.4 women / the yards don't stretch enough / to make the right amount of pleats / to fall and grace curves / when we walk / the gap between our blouses and our skirts / is bigger than the space between the ground and our falls / but not greater / than the rift between our histories and us. / 1.4 of us won't remember / to pin the pallu / before we count the pleats / we will fold the threaded sari in on itself / and buy sari-inspired jackets / with labels that cost us more than a flight ticket back / 'home' / I buy bangles from Amazon / because I'm too ashamed / to walk into a high street shop and ask the uncle for chudiyaa / and pronounce it wrong / my wrists may have been made / for the constant clanging of glass / against glass / but smashing the patriarchy / makes me bleed / I bleed vermilion: sindoor / recognise it not from my relatives / but from daily dramas on Zee TV and Sony / as the pseudo-shock from the cliffhanger ending / of that last episode / hits / my sari threatens to undo itself / expose my pale skin.

1.5 generation immigrant / I am not wholly / 2nd generation / assimilated / somewhat accepted into a / community / I am / 'too young when you came here to be 1st gen,' / but / 'still foreign enough to have a "home" you should go back to,' / I'm not enough / point 5 of me is in another country / - constantly / point 5 of me is struggling to / turn my tongue in ways I used to / point 5 of me cries / at the thought of my children / not being able to hold private / conversations in public / point 5 of me orders lemon and herb instead of extra hot / point 5 of me cannot hold a duppatta straight / point 5 of me forgets if this song was an original or a remix / point 5 of me will never remember what channel kyunki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi came on / point 5 of me / point 5 of me / point 5 of me / point 5 of me / turns to the whole of me and questions her identity / 1.5 of me sits on the borders and laughs back / one foot in each country / weight distributed so not to weigh anyone down / I take your spices / and mother tongue / and sequins and / raags and raise you as a / proud immigrant.



Afshan D'souza-Lodhi

Afshan D'souza-Lodhi is the Editor in Chief of The Common Sense Network. She is an award-winning writer of plays and poetry, and was recently commissioned to write and direct a short film for Channel 4. She has completed residencies at Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester Literature Festival and has worked with Tamasha Theatre Company and Paul Burston's Polari. Afshan also has an essay featured in the bestseller collection *Its Not About The Burqa*. As well as her own writing, Afshan is keen to develop other younger and emerging artists and sits on the boards of Manchester Literature Festival and Brighter Sound.