

*Silent Letters*

(An Anthology of English Poems by Seema Jain)

**A Review**

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Seema Jain's anthology of poems *Silent Letters* is an eclectic and balanced mix of thought and feeling – a deep thoughtful insight into myriad issues tempered with a heartwarming empathy. Her eponymous poem titled 'Silent Letters' shines a light on all those who "hover in the background"-- be it "a hapless woman," "a small boy at a wayside dhaba," an expectant mother forced to go for female foeticide, the silent tears of parents condemned to "a life of neglect, want and apathy in their twilight years" or the members of the third gender community. In other words, the poet brings to light the people who are made to lead, silent uneventful, subterranean lives, whose 'otherness' is scoffed at, either unaccepted or totally ignored. The salience of this idea is a strong undercurrent in this collection of poems. The poet wants to "resist" the wrong done to them. She envisions a world where none feels caged and "none is condemned to a deadening silence." She looks forward to a subaltern assertion in the context of their everyday precarious experience as is reflected in the following lines of her poem "Silent Letters":

If only they could gather courage  
Resist the wrong and  
Speak up for righteousness ( p.24)

She yearns for a world without social inequalities, where no voice goes unheard, where everyone is "ungagged." If this entails a radical re-ordering of the societal structures, then be it so.

Seema Jain emerges as a poet of protest when she deals with the trials, tribulations and travails of being a woman, as is evident from her poems titled 'The Sprouting Seed,' 'The Casting Couch' and

‘Slap.’ In these poems, a stark version of reality in all its ugly nakedness confronts us. It does not repel us, but nudges us to be awake, to be alive to and register the nuances of the complex interplay of human relationships and interactions within a social system. Not that the poet is not affected by the confining social constructs that women have to confront. Whenever the pain of women gnaws at her heart, she disappears into ‘The Hidden Oases’ in the recesses of her heart and rejuvenates herself with “gurgling gushing guffawing springs,” “chirping birds and frolicking swings” and “music, laughter and jubilant dancing.”

Here one of her poems ‘Why My Lord! The Duchess to the Duke’ based on Robert Browning’s iconic dramatic monologue ‘My Last Duchess’ deserves a special mention. Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ epitomizes a dominant patriarchal discourse wherein a woman’s existence is inside a panopticon. And in that constraining space, she is constantly disciplined and controlled, watched and also most easily judged. But in Seema Jain’s literary appropriation of this poem titled ‘Why My Lord! The Duchess to the Duke,’ the Duchess with her courageous “Adieu! My Lord!” gives a classic jolt not only to the Duke but also to the patriarchy that defines him. The Duchess not only demythologizes the male concept of a woman but also declares it loud and clear that the essentialism of being born a biological female will no longer limit or obstruct the exercise of her free will or the incidence of that biology will no longer militate against her sense of self worth. The Duchess dominated over and eventually slain in Browning’s poem is seen as an enraged woman in Seema Jain’s poem who speaks out here against the injustice meted out to her and dares the Duke openly:

My Lord! Had you been man enough  
You could have at least talked to me  
But then, for that you needed to regard me  
As a human being and not a mere artifact (p. 27)

In Seema Jain’s adaptation of this well-known poem, narrated from the Duchess’ point of view, the Duchess shakes not only the Duke’s sense of exceptionalism and haughtiness but also the sense of entitlement he thinks his title entails. Here we clearly hear an unmistakable and timeless resonance of Nora Torvald’s classic slamming of the door on her husband’s face in *A Doll’s House* written by the great feminist Henrik Ibsen in December 1879. Nora dares her husband and asserts her identity as she flounces out of the door into the falling snow outside, leaving her husband Torvald open-mouthed in disbelief. In Browning’s poem written in 1842, the Duchess is slain before she opens her mouth whereas Nora earns poetic justice for herself. And the Duchess in Seema Jain’s poem, before she bids adieu to the Duke confidently declares:

I'm sure one day justice will prevail  
And posterity will judge your true avail. (p. 27)

Seema Jain in this poem through the alchemy of words has beautifully and creatively transformed the classical dramatic monologue of Browning and through this literary appropriation has opened up this celebrated monologue to different interpretations and newer meanings.

There is an indisputable feminist ring not only in this poem but in Seema Jain's other woman-centric poems as well. Her poem "Slap" articulates the pain of women, victims of psychological violence, that often goes unnoticed in comparison to the physical acts of violence:

Some slaps fall on the face  
And are visible...  
Some others... invisible slaps  
Fall Imperceptibly  
On the soul

The wounds deadlier deeper  
Take years to heal  
But the imperceptible scars  
Always remain. (p. 35)

In the following lines of her poem "Casting Couch," like a roving and sensitive camera eye, the couch itself describes what sordid realities it stands a witness to:

If I had a tongue in my every screw  
I would shock you with the tales I knew  
I am that camera eye no one fears  
People often unclot their secrets here.

The poet pitches for a level playing field for men and women. She is optimistic that patriarchal mindsets which are like icebergs will thaw one day, for thaw they must, as is reflected in the following lines from her poem "The Icebergs:"

But as thousands of  
Small sparrows together  
Can cover the whole sky with their wings  
And alter the direction of winds  
Mountains can likewise be moved  
Skies conquered  
If there is fire in the heart  
And iron in the soul. (p. 32)

In some other poems of the collection, the poet Seema Jain observes and comments upon some of the harsh ugly and bitter truths of our day-to-day realities. The poem “Leaders” mounts a scathing attack upon the selfish, power hungry and bigoted clan of leaders:

The power brokers coining every day  
New narratives of deceit and falsehood  
For the consumption of the blinkered masses  
Worship demons in the name of God  
Demonise all other Gods but theirs  
Reaping rich harvests through hate and poison (p. 44)

The poem “A Tribute to all Poets” beautifully comments upon the role and relevance of poets at all times:

Poets of the world rejoice!  
You the conscience keepers of mankind  
The flag bearers of finer human values  
Of empathy brotherhood love and peace  
The moral custodians of this world (p. 83)

The section titled **Corona Times** brings out the pain and suffering of the young and the old alike during the contemporary global spread of corona virus. “The Unbidden Adieu” brings out the unpalatable and ugly reality of the shifting paradigms of human relationships when people can’t even bid adieu or accord due dignity to their near ones who have died due to the disease:

Such is the dread of contagion it creates  
With Covid-19 one forfeits even one's last rites  
No family member, no relative can even see the face  
Of their loved one whom they held so dear once (p.99)

The poet highlights the crisis of thousands of migrant labourers forced to return to their homes during the sudden lockdown amidst the pandemic:

The buildings they erected brick by brick  
Did not offer them shelter  
The fields they ploughed and grew crops in  
Failed to allay their hunger ("Migrants" p. 93)

The poem "The New Race of Warriors" salutes the front line workers who have emerged as warriors in this changed battlefield while her poem "Nature's Balance" highlights how the pandemic might be nature's way of reclaiming its space for its other creatures appropriated by man in his greed and acquisitiveness:

Thank you Nature for correcting the balance  
And for allowing us to claim our space  
How does it feel Man in your quarantined zoo  
Wake up or there's more in store for you!! (p.95)

In the present corona times where darkness, desolation, death and decay march hand in hand with forces of evil & divisiveness, the poet's faith and belief for a better tomorrow comfortingly endures like a little earthen lamp lit in a hut and the resolve of that little lamp:

I will light thousands of lamps like my tiny self  
Which in turn will illumine many millions more.....  
But together we know we can dispel darkness  
And make hope and light reign supreme.  
And bring joy and cheer on everyone's face  
( "The Storm and the Earthen Lamp" pp. 79-80)

In short, in this anthology of poems, the poet through her evocative verses, which are devoid of all ostentation and high-flown jargon, showcases a happy co-mingling of the typical and the topical. The humour and the cutting-edge satire on politics in a poem like ‘The Defamation Suit’ lives in the mind long after we have put down the book. Her urban and urbane content makes us hear the silence of the lambs, the muffled sobs and sighs of the lives less lived and marginalized. And this is what makes this collection immensely readable.