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# Voices of Dissent in Sarita Jenamani's *Still We Sing: Claiming Identities of Women*

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### Abstract

*The history of patriarchal suppression on women is long, but only a few of them are unremittingly raising dissenting voice and claiming for their identities and freedom of self. Against this backdrop, the paper critically analyzes voices of dissent in the selected poems from Still We Sing: Voices on Violence Against Women, edited by Sarita Jenamani. The anthology is a collection of poems written by South Asian women poets as their experiences of patriarchal atrocities, subjugation, and self-asserting voices have been poignantly expressed. Patriarchy disseminates and authenticates its power through several social values and institutional structures. Therefore, to concentrate on women's predicaments and their consistent resistance against numerous patriarchal manacles, I have employed Michel Foucault's concept of power politics and Judith Butler and Kamla Bhasin's ideas of gender and body politics of normative heterosexuality for analysis.*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, normative heterosexuality, power politics, self-assertion, dissenting voice

### Introduction

South Asian women share the common pain and sufferings imposed by patriarchal social structure. In the past, they were connected by plights such as child marriage, the sati system, and miserable widowhood; today, they belong to the common ground of contemporary patriarchal brutality, where rape, murder, infanticide, and acid attacks have become more common. In such circumstances, many social critics and writers have started persistently raising issues pertaining to patriarchal values and the susceptibility of women. Austria-based Indian poet Sarita Jenamani has recently published an

anthology, *Still We Sing: Voices on Violence Against Women* (2020), that comprises the poems of 75 women poets from South Asian countries. The poems included in the anthology capture women's experiences of pain, suffering, woman-ness, and patriarchal atrocities, as well as their strong voices of resistance.

Among the multifarious issues the anthology has incorporated, I am particularly focused on the voices of dissent in the selected poems that explicate women's identity claims. I have chosen Sara Shagufta's "Woman and Salt," Usha Sherchan's "The Eternal Agony and the Declaration for Awareness," Richa Jain's "I Will Come As A Ghost," Lipika Das' "Coronated," and Seetha Ranjanees "Divorce" for critical analysis. The chosen poets are from Pakistan, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka, respectively. Even though they belong to different countries, South Asian women somehow share similar experiences. Shagufta unveils the austere socio-cultural chains that tie up foot, tongue and freedom of women; whereas, Jain and Ranjanees express their extreme anger against the exploitive system that belittle women's identity. Both Das and Sherchan speak out against the patriarchal social psychology that reduces women to mere flesh. Most of the poets concentrate on the structural oppression and violence against women when their existence and identity get obliterated. Moreover, they comprehensively exhibit strong resistance. Against this backdrop, the paper critically analyses dissenting voices in the chosen poems that intelligibly reify women's claim to identity.

Several feminist critics have claimed that patriarchal gender values have played a vital role in the subordination of women. I have employed Judith Butler and Kamla Bhasin's gender concept to examine women's situations depicted in the poems. I have also taken Michel Foucault's idea of power and institutional control to demonstrate how controlling bodies, especially women's bodies, has become the central mechanism of patriarchal rules and regulations imposed on them. The poems under study, as I will argue, persistently question such a system of patriarchal control and dominance; instead, the emergent voices in the poems express women poets' desire for self-identity.

## **Structural Manacle and Women's Suffering**

Sufferings of women connect with the patriarchal social system that reinforces gender binary. Patriarchy inculcates specific socio-cultural values that complement its rigidity. It begins with the gendering process that ultimately authenticates a hierarchy between male and female. Bhasin appropriately points out the socialisation process within the family and society that implants gender roles into the children, which she takes as "gender indoctrination" (13). Such socially validated norms and principle become compulsive frame for each member of the society to accept the gender hierarchy. There is a distinct male-female dichotomy that substantiates men's superior and women's subordinated positions. Moreover, in the South Asian context, patriarchal socio-cultural values have blended with religion and formed an authoritative institution that nobody dares to question. As Bhasin states, "Patriarchy is both a social structure and an ideology or a belief system according to which men are superior." Religions have played an important role in creating and perpetuating patriarchal ideology" (21). The patriarchal ideas imbued each social institution has proved lethal to women as they instigate their pain and sufferings.

Patriarchy strategically disseminates its hegemony through sociocultural norms and values. It assigns such duties and responsibilities to women that bind them within the household periphery. The structural manacle chains women's freedom and depletes their value, confirming them as docile and inactive creatures who exist just to satisfy men's carnal desire and to procreate. However, it is important to reflect on the fact that whatever perception has been established about women, that exhibits a solely patriarchal construct. Simon de Beauvoir has already refuted patriarchal gendering of women when she claims: "One is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one" (301). Naturally, children could never develop a specific gendered behaviour unless the family and society fed them such values. As patriarchal society train each child to adopt socio-cultural norms, during the process it successfully implants gender ideology within them. Judith Butler accepts Beauvoir's view partially, however, departs in some part and argues: "There is nothing in her account that guarantees that the 'one' who becomes a woman is necessarily female" (8). Butler's idea is sensitive

in relation to the issue of sexuality as it has already crossed the male-female gender binary. There exist myriads of sexualities apart from man and woman who are outlawed by patriarchal structure. Amid complex gender issues, Butler claims that the matrix of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality operates through repetition (145). Her opinion becomes more agreeable as each gendered body is assigned to perform their tasks in repetitive manners; therefore, gender turns into an act that they perform regularly. For instance, men and women have been performing their regular act since long that has validated gender roles designed by the patriarchal system. Moreover, there is no rationality behind gender hierarchy—men's superiority and women's inferiority—aside from the imposition of patriarchal codes.

Patriarchal supremacy is manifested through several social, cultural, and political bodies and gender relations. It plays a vital and decisive role in the hierarchical positioning of each member of society. In Foucault's term, it is "biopower" that subjugates and controls bodies (141). Needless to say, inside the system, women's bodies are highly dominated. Geoff Danaher et al., while analysing Foucault's biopower, explain it as a notion for controlling, analysing, regulating, and defining the human body and behaviour (63). The governing power has not only controlled and subjugated bodies but also spread rumors about specific bodies, namely, women's body as docile and inactive. It is an outcome of patriarchal normative heterosexuality that gives priority to men as strong, intelligent, and powerful beings, whereas it suppresses and exploits women as vulnerable and brittle creatures. In reality, submissiveness and docility of women are nothing more than a myth created by the patriarchal society. It is the whole regulatory system that controls and exploits the human mind and body—women's bodies are more under structural control. Consequently, women of South Asian region are meshed within patriarchal socio-cultural frame.

South Asian women have been consistently injured by patriarchal values, and they carry some scars and grievances within them. The existing social system seems reluctant to accept and acknowledge women's space; rather, it obliterates their identity and assimilates them with the existence of men. The Orthodox Hindu religion practised an inhuman sati system in the past that burned

many women alive with their dead husbands. Then, the issues of identity and existence of women were unthinkable areas, as they even could not make choice for living their life. More importantly, they had to prepare themselves to sit on pyre as satis; some lucky woman got chance to live as a widow, shaving head and draping white sarilife long. In Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak's term, they are "sexed subaltern subjects" (96). The condition of dalit (untouchable) or third-gender women is more vulnerable as they remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Undeniably, women are voiceless since their speech has been controlled by patriarchy. In this regard, Spivak postulates: "There is no space for which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (103). Overtly, women's space, language, and overall body and mind are under patriarchal control. They do not have their own language, self-identity, religion, or philosophy of life within this structure. Mary Daly accepts that women were silent in patriarchal language—just as religion had developed without a concept of the female subject, so had language (Tolan, 324). Women are complete outsiders in men's worlds where neither language nor religion have incorporated them; both are rather sharp as razors that just keep on chiselling down their existence.

Amidst tremendous sufferings caused by normative patriarchal structure, South Asian women have trodden a long and painful path. However, they have rekindled their hope and collected enough courage to speak out against patriarchal injustices and start claiming their self-identity. The following section critically analyses the dissenting voices of women that have become instrumental in claiming their identity in the selected poems.

### **Voice of Self Assertion**

The poems included in the anthology *Still We Sing* portray the structural victimisation of South Asian women and their wounds and sufferings that have been transferred from one generation to another. Just a critical look around could explore thousands of cases that narrate the tales of extreme violence against women. For instance, the grandmothers were burnt as slaves; mothers were domesticated and stranded inside the house boundary; whereas, the educated daughters' generation is always intimidated by the prestige of family and feels that they have to sacrifice their freedom. The

granddaughters, who are lucky to have been born, might get crushed by the lecherous desire of flesh-mongers like Nirvaya and Nirmala. The ones, who are inside the womb may get aborted after sex-determination. In this manner, women from every generation have been crushed by the patriarchal mechanism. However, South Asian women have started raising their voices in opposition to the authoritative and exploitative patriarchal system. It has become a weapon to break through the patriarchal coercion, dominance, and constant violation against them, which at the same time becomes a medium to claim their identity and freedom. For the detailed analysis, I have taken the poems of Sara Shagufta, Usha Sherchan, Richa Jain, Lipika Das, and Seetha Ranjane.

Patriarchal society strategically imposes its rules on women's bodies. It has gifted them a veil, a nail, and a house boundary in the name of honor. Pakistani poet Shagufta, in "Woman and Salt," vividly pictures the bitter reality of patriarchal ideology hidden behind honour and decency. The structure has pulled out a woman's tongue and quieted her for the prestige of family. It has silenced her and taken her voice away; it has veiled her and taken her eyesight; it has also controlled her body and mind and snatched away her freedom and existence. Patriarchy is a toxic social structure in which women have lost everything. Shagufta illustrates the real condition of women:

From house to footpath nothing belongs to us  
 Honour is just how we pass our life  
     Honour is the spear they brand us with  
     Our tongues are tied with honour  
 If the salt of our bodies is tasted one night  
 We are considered, for a whole life, as tasteless as bread (126)

She has used "salt" as a metaphor for women's sweat, labor, and hard work, which is never acknowledged by society. Each woman spills sweat and blood for the progress and prosperity of the family. However, despite her potentialities, she is taken as a subordinate being. Kumari Lama elucidates that the existing social mechanism persistently internalises specific patriarchal values, which prioritise and authenticate the subordination of women (6). Such structural biasness always pushes women to the margin, no matter she is the central figure to run her house. Shagufta's depiction of women's

condition is applicable to each South Asian family, where mostly women hold nothing in their hands. The children, the house, and the property—everything belongs to her husband. In fact, property is the last thing a woman desires in a society where saving herself becomes the first priority. Many daughters are not lucky enough to remain alive to get married and have children. In the name of family honor, many of them get bricked up behind the wall. The poet hints towards honour killing when she writes:

How many times was the wall of your house bricked up? (127)

Her question points toward the most sensitive issue pertaining to the right to live. Nonetheless, many orthodox families decide the life or death of their rebellious daughters. They become “unlivable” subjects (Butler, 3). Patriarchal structure decides whether the bodies are worth living or not. The family cannot bear the brunt of defamation, rather, they brick up their daughter in the wall. Women have no choice, voice, or freedom within patriarchal austerity. However, despite being chained by social rigidities, women hope for better days to come. For that, they have started raising their voice for freedom and justice. Shagufta resists the dominating patriarchal social order.

A battleground is my courage,  
My desire – a burning coal  
We were born with shrouds around our heads (127)

Women are empty-handed, so they have no fear of losing anything. They have accumulated courage in their hearts like burning coal to fight against hegemonic patriarchy. The poem has captured the resisting spirit of today’s women, who have spoken out against patriarchy to claim their own space and identity.

Several social critics have claimed that King Manu enforced rigid Brahmanic law on Hindu women through Manusmriti. He successfully executed the law around three thousand years ago that only authenticated religious domination over women. It is the same religious values that has been continuously strangling South Asian women till today. Mainly, religio-cultural values limit women’s space and obstruct their steps. As Jenamani argues, “This sort of structural violence is coordinated by social structure and institutions that deny complete freedom to an individual just on the basis of gender” (xv).

Undoubtedly, it is patriarchal institutional power that controls women's freedom. Nepali poet Usha Sherchan, in her poem "The Eternal Agony and the Declaration of Awareness," highlights the eternal sufferings of women; nonetheless, she concludes with the urge of women's awakening. She portrays how patriarchal society has diminished women's selves and made them mere puppets:

Deprived of voices even if having voices  
 -We have been lying down becoming land  
 -We have been tilled becoming field  
 -We have been tolerating as if we were the earth (195)

Sherchan symbolically presents a woman's body as "field," "earth," and "land" in her poem. Within rigid patriarchal framework, woman is no more than a piece of land where men could sow their seeds. Such a lethal perception validates a woman's existence only as a body. Hortense J. Spiller uses the term "pornotroping" (67) to denote a person or group who is reduced to mere flesh, which appropriately applies to women's position in patriarchal society. Patriarchy diminishes women's worth to mere flesh and denies their intellect.

Patriarchal society has overshadowed the potentiality and intellectuality of women, as it highlights either the docility or the glamorous images of them. Nevertheless, such portrayal does not justify the inherent characteristics of women. In this regard, Sherchan has analysed the sufferings, plights, suppression, and entanglement of women and also pointed out their enormous capabilities. They have immense inner strength to cope with any situation that comes their way. They could use their innate power to subvert an unfavourable situation and claim their freedom. Concentrating on the ample strength of women, poet questions:

How long shall we sustain these agonies?  
 Awakening innumerable voices now  
 When shall we proclaim for awareness? (197)

The above questions exhibit the curiosity, dissatisfaction, and disagreement of the poet. It also points towards her rising consciousness. Sherchan, through her questions, urges flocks of women to come forward to claim their rights. They have reserved enough audacity to fight against violence, injustice, and disparity

caused by patriarchal structures. The poet discloses the importance of women's self-awareness for claiming their space.

Indian poet Richa Jain differs from Shagufta and Sherchan while expressing her boiling anger as her verse tellingly voices against patriarchal misdeeds. It seems her agony has already crossed its limit when she spews raging flames. Her poem "I Will Come As A Ghost" attacks the whole social system that has made women so vulnerable and threatens to take action against the system designers. Patriarchal structure has controlled women from their language to body through its norms and values. They remained silent and walked along the same path shown by their oppressors. They were incarcerated within household captivity, nailed by rules and regulations, for so long that they had almost forgotten themselves. These days, women have realised the exigency to tear asunder the veils of suppression to move ahead for self-assertion. Walter Johnson takes the liberal notion of selfhood and self-oriented action as agency (115). In the sense that contemporary women have agency to take action, as Jain has evoked and prepared herself for, she expresses her utmost anger towards oppressive society, which surely shakes its marrow.

I will come as a ghost  
The way  
little by little  
I die everyday (117)

The poem reveals the extremity of women's suffering as well as their aggression. Women have shed their existence bit by bit inside their kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms. Poet fore-fronts women's reality and side-by expresses her anger against the oppressive social structure. She shows her revengeful attitude and threatens the perpetrators. Moreover, the poet challenges masculine pride and calls for action right there.

To frighten you from yourself  
I will dwell in your semen  
I will come as a ghost  
...  
I will evolve; I am evolving (118)

The poet attacks masculinity, referring to "semen" that each man feels proud of. She turns quite intimidating towards patriarchy and its forebearers when she declares to come back to them through their

semen. It also symbolically indicates female foeticide, which is rampant in South Asian countries, as a result of giving high priority to a son as a family lineage carrier. In such circumstances, women have to go through several abortions while waiting for the baby boy. The whole process incorporates physical and psychological violence against women. Witnessing such misdeeds and disparities, Jain explodes with anger and challenges the inhumanly gender-biased patriarchal system.

South Asian women share common discriminatory social circumstances. They are connected through their tears and sufferings, and also through the common hope for freedom. They have reserved volcanic anger inside them. They need just a click to burst out, which will shake the rigid foundation of patriarchy. About the commonness of South Asian women, Aftab Husain opines, "One thing that unites this potpourri is riding the bubble with vigour and vitality and... hope for the future." (np). Women have kept a bundle of vigour just to unveil it at the right time. In fact, several rebellious women have already ignited resisting mettle of women. We can take rebellious Yogmaya of Nepal whose verses were powerful enough to threaten the Rana Rulers in the early twentieth century. Today's dissenting women are the descendants of revolting women from the past. Indian poet Lipika Das raises her resisting voice in her poem "Coronated." She rejects male supremacy as it only recognises women as flesh and therefore, invokes women for action.

What remains  
 When your flower-like body  
 your dreams and tears/get insulted  
 Rebellious only join/the procession (64)

Das reveals her radical self when she declares disobedience to patriarchal authority. She cannot tolerate hegemonic heterosexual ideologies that have only harmed women. It has closed myriad paths for women and bound them within a so-called secure house boundary. Women were overwhelmed by the love, care, and security provided by their men; however, it did not last long. They realised it was a patriarchal trap to enslave and exploit them. As Alice Pechriggl argues, "... female body imaginary which has been and still instrumentalised nearly exclusively for the representation of male institution – is detached from real women" (104). The patriarchy has

never presented and appreciated the true selves of women; rather, it has misrepresented and commodified them. Poet urges to raise collective voice to demand for own space and freedom.

Destroying the termite hill of pain  
Coronate the time  
And metamorphose yourself  
Into a free butterfly (65)

It is necessary to break invisible fences that restricts women from enjoying their freedom. Das wishes to create a special bond of women to celebrate womanhood.

The patriarchal blade has slashed every woman in South Asia and left them with injuries. It has torn their existence into innumerable pieces. More importantly, the discriminatory system has bruised and battered their egos and dumped them in the corner. They are taken as the containers to carry semen and fetus. Sri Lankan poet Seetha Ranjane depicts the bitterness of misrepresenting women's bodies in her poem "Divorce."

This body which I thought  
I could get pleasure as I pleased  
See how it became a tool  
...  
See how it turned into  
A foetus-making machine/for others! (132)

A woman has no freedom to use her body as she wishes since it has already been marked with patriarchal coding. Neither she could taste bodily pleasure at her wish nor could deny at her dislikes. Motherhood is believed to be a blessing; it could be true if she has rights to her body. Otherwise, motherhood glory could be no more than a powerful patriarchal strategy to tame women. After all, we are in a society where there is no proper power balance. Tony Purvis's interpretation of Foucault's idea seems quite relevant in this situation. He argues: "Sexuality concerns the operation of power in human relationships as much as it governs the production of a personal identity" (435). Gender oppression connects to power relation between man and woman. Certainly, a man holds more socio-economic power than a woman, so he could execute it on her. However, it is time for them to wipe their tears and demand their fair share. They have to slam and disown patriarchal authority, which has

only exploited them. Ranjanees challenges patriarchal rigidity and raises her dissenting voice.

I tore the authorising certificate  
 that empowers the phallus unto eternity  
 that stamps insults on my vaginal passage  
 From now on, the crown  
 Entwined with the phallus is disowned  
 Yet, my vagina is free (132)

The poet has made a bold statement against coercive patriarchal authority and disowns phallogocentric power. Phallic autocracy has always enjoyed vagina, however, it has unremittingly exploited women using the same organ. Vagina has always remained at the center of women's name and defame; therefore the poet uses it as a vehicle to free her entangled self. She roars with rage against patriarchal normative austerity and declares the freedom of her vagina. In fact, every individual has a right to their body, and women are reasonable enough to claim their rights and freedom.

## Conclusion

South Asian society treasures glorious tradition, family bonding, appreciable cultural heritage, and influential eastern philosophy; however, it also incorporates the dishonourable continuation of violence against women. Proliferating women's suffering has been directly tied to the patriarchal structural values that our society has embraced for so long. Women have become the most vulnerable targets of patriarchal rigidities and atrocious heteronormativity. They are denied their freedom, silenced, and incarcerated within domestic boundaries. Nonetheless, surpassing myriads of unfavorable social circumstances, women have audaciously walked along the thorny paths and resisted against the oppressive system. In this context, the paper has critically analysed the voices of dissent that claim for the existence and identity of women in the selected poems from Jenamani's *Still We Sing*.

The patriarchal society has commodified women and diminished them to flesh. The men-centric suppressive system has always sidelined women and branded them as mere pleasurable objects. They are seen no more than vaginas and foetus holding incubators. Moreover, they are immensely exploited and deprived of personal

space and freedom. Nevertheless, women have started raising their voices against dominating patriarchal structures. South Asian women poets have questioned the authority, like Sherchan and Shagufta have done. Similarly, Jain and Das have threatened patriarchal oppressors, disowned phallic validation, and voiced for equality and freedom. Ranjanees has even declared that her vagina is free. Therefore, the chosen poems are powerful enough to articulate resistance against patriarchal normativity. The poets have raised dissenting voices for women's identity and liberation.

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