

**On Reading Woman:
Preface to “Not a Muse”:
A World Poetry Anthology**
(eds. Kate Rogers & Viki Holmes)

by *Laksmi Pamuntjak*

*Not muses, exactly.
reminders
of what survives—
creation’s flames that glitter—
flare.*

One day in 2005, on the eve of the publication of my first collection of poetry, *Ellipsis* (Jakarta: KataKita, 2005), the Indonesian novelist Nukila Amal sent me a late blurb. Curiously, it was the first time I began to think of the possibility of my poetry being “feminine”.

Here is part of what she wrote:

“*Ellipsis* shows the workings of a feminine sensibility, a refined one at that, in exploring human (woman) being in her full spectrum: roles, relations, desires, wounds, memories.”

As there are poems in that collection that are about the male experience, written from a supposed male perspective, Amal’s observation was an eye-opener to me, because any poet, man or woman—*especially* woman—would always want to think of themselves as more various and multi-faceted than any generalisation, justified or otherwise, would allow.

It also pleased me to have the freedom to be thinking about what it means to be a woman. To be aware, as in a line from Chella Covington’s poem “Skin”, of “my own stomach slightly round/in union undulating”. To be plumbing, in other words, the depths of the feminine experience as something that is located in the body, sensed from within.

The joy proved to be a short-lived. In April 2006, I found myself marching with 6,000 people, mostly women, on the streets of Jakarta, in protest of a conservative Muslim, party-backed anti-obscenity bill. It was a peaceful, colorful carnival involving the diverse cultures of Indonesia, including other minority groups. But the threat was too frightening for words. If the bill was passed, women would be punished for the way they dress. Artistic expression would die. Literature would die. Indonesia's diverse cultures and traditions would be threatened.

What was incredible about the carnival was what it said about the women who made up its majority. It was a statement of, as well as a reflection on, their bodies and their *jouissance*. The bill's imposition of fines on "erotic" dancing, wearing 'sexy' clothes and writing "pornographic" text was taken as a direct violation of women's rights to their own bodies, and it was in that spirit that they took to wearing traditional attire or modern clothing emphasizing sensuality during the protest. What they offered was a theatre of contrasts: between the body and the law, freedom and control, festivity and rule. All of which was based on human freedom.

And yet, in this post-feminist twenty-first century, we often ask ourselves: Aren't the days of being jumpy at the very mention of the word 'female' or 'feminine' finally over, because women have gone through leaps and bounds to assert themselves as a subject, first and foremost, of which woman is only part? Hasn't the world seen so many women leaders lately, and mostly in so-called wobbly democracies: presidents in Chile, Liberia, the Philippines; prime ministers in Jamaica, Mozambique and New Zealand; a chancellor in Germany; a former president in Indonesia and a former prime minister in Bangladesh? Hasn't women's liberation gone to such amazing lengths that many modern-day feminists now even believe that the very concept of woman is a fiction, thus raising the possibility that the concept of women's oppression is finally obsolete and feminism's *raison d'être* has fallen away?

More pertinently: do we still need an anthology of women's writing? Does it not seem an endorsement to the great wound of gender-polarisation that women have fought so long and so hard to batter down?

On the basic level, the situation is still not much different than what Margaret Atwood elucidated, at great pains, in her 1998 introduction to the revised version of *Women Writers at Work*, which was part of the *Paris Review*'s high-profile series of interviews with writers. Because women writers are still perceived to be different from male writers; because the writing they do is also different and cannot be read in the same way. Because while male writers are unlikely to be confronted with the collective uneasiness of being grouped together according to gender, or to be asked to address themselves to the complexities of a male writer, women writers by essence "belong together". Because women are women, and never something else.

And on yet another basic level, it is not true that women are everywhere free. We need only to recall the sight of Shamsia, 17, lying in a hospital bed in Kabul with an eye damage and severe burns on the face. The fact that she and fourteen others were attacked by the Taliban for being caught studying is a wake-up call to the fact that what most women the world over have come to see as their God-given right is for others a reason to die. (The Taliban attack on the students and teachers took place in Kabul on November 25th 2008.)

In fact, two Afghan students did die in 2007: slayed by gunmen as they were walking outside a girls' school in central Logar province. And while Afghanistan has striven to improve access to education for girls since the Taliban's ouster in 2001, only two million girls attend school today, with many conservative families preferring to keep their girls at home. It is also a stern reminder that Taliban is not a regime; it is an 'ism', an ideology, a religion. It is everywhere in the world as the world has become increasingly divided into Religious Intolerance and The Rest of Us.

In the new century's dogfight between hope and failure, shock and relief, we also tend to forget those women writers who have questioned the status quo and gotten themselves mauled. No sooner had the cloud lifted on the shocking murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, than Unida Niyazova was incarcerated and tortured in Uzbekistan for covering the Andajan massacre and keeping subversive literature. Lydia Cacho Ribero, a journalist from Mexico, had to pay for all the cases of state corruption and

abuse she had uncovered with her freedom. Turkish novelists Elif Shafak and Ipek Calisar have undergone myriad repressions under the “Insult Law” for their works.

The Tibetan poet and author Tsering Woeser is now unemployed after her two web logs were forcefully shut down and her movements severely curtailed. In China, Zeng Jinyan, a human rights activist and Internet writer, has been under house arrest since December 2007 for inciting subversion, a fate she shares with her colleague, the activist and political dissenter Li Jianhong. The recent attack on Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen highlights security concerns that writers in general and women writers in particular face from fundamentalist forces of all hues.

We often forget that women’s experience comes as much from where they are on the globe, and how this relates to material social practices and the power relations which structure them. When we consider the above stories we realize that in many parts of the world where women have no voice, no discourse, no place from which to speak, defining the ‘feminine’ is a luxury that cannot be corralled into the collective.

This is not to say, of course, that against a backdrop so stained poetry has not continued to fulfill its utmost duty: that of making us feel alive, elevated. The poems that make up this anthology have risen to this challenge, and not just through the small truths they illumine on what holds the solitary self together and what blows it apart, what makes a woman and what undoes her; but also through the many wonderful ways they have coaxed meaning from language, as though there were hitherto unknown tones.

They distil as well as enlarge women’s affairs—relationships that sour, spouses who betray, children who rage and storm, bodies that cave in to age—in a culture that so often radicalises ordinary human experience and describes the colours of corrosion in the flat, one-dimensional language of dysfunction. Like women, these poems are vulnerable and resilient; malleable and intractable; healthy and hurt. They create, desire, nourish and love. They fight, defy, fail and hate. They age.

“I am a poet”, says April Bulmer in “The Waist of the Moon”, “I sing the ghosts of family.”

Being ‘woman’, however, we are often called on to say something as *a woman*. And this, according to Hélène Cixous, is “the greatest, most fabulous, most marvelous trap of our epoch”. It is a trap that makes it hard, for one thing, to come across a poem about a woman, written by a male poet, which is so accurate in its insights, that weren’t it for his name under the title you would think it is by a woman. But no man can ever talk about how it feels inside a female body, how it feels to be a mother.

And yet, Cixous goes on to admit that there is no theory to this. There cannot be. “Let’s just say,” she writes, “I believe I’m a woman only because, from time to time, I have experiences that belong to that universe – and the two greatest experiences are childbirth and dischildbirth.”

At the same time, while woman and mother do go together, mothers are the first to admit that motherhood isn’t a singular experience as myth often makes out of it. We hear it in Joan Hewitt’s “Triangle”, on coping with teenaged children: “I know that what they send/is a necessary gift,/a triangle of silences,/cold steel and symmetry/I slip over my wrist.” And in Antoinette Brim’s “We are Bread”: “We have been scored for easy breaking/so we offer ourselves.”

Nor does it, along with marital love, lesbian love, or any kind of love, constitute the entirety of the feminine experience. As Cixous says, “We fall in love, we fall into the jaws of fire. We can’t escape.” Women have always understood this, as well as the fact that love—and the secret fear that gives it fire—goes back a long way, to an ancient time. So while a woman in her loving sees the wolf all the time—after all, she is no Red Riding Hood—she thinks to herself, “in the dark forest recesses/I leave a flesh trail for wolf.” (Kate Marshall Flaherty, “Wolf Cry”).

Many women poets have resorted to re-reading classical mythology precisely because it holds powerful lessons about the ambiguity of Woman: that there exists a woman who is not a woman and yet who is a woman. There is the

difficulty of thinking, in *The Mahabharata*, which Srikandi kills Bhishma? Which Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon? Which Helen is it who watches Troy burn, the one who loathes or secretly loves her own beauty?

For aren't these our daily experiences too: the vacillation, the doubts, the lack of definition? Aren't relativity and ambiguity supposed to lie at the core of human values, meanings and purposes, so that a woman who says to herself, "I need substance/the use of my own mind/my own hands/to hold me together" (Kathleen Kenny, "The Operator") may also be the same person who "flapped in fear, and something sweeter" (Vivien Jones, "The Virgin Mermaid")? Isn't the fact that we as human beings are never the "one" thing, that we are, always, subjects in process, one of the conditions of poetry?

In 1978, when Diane di Prima published her collection of poetry, *Loba*, it was described as a visionary epic quest for the reintegration of the feminine: the 'great female counterpart to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.' *Loba* herself is the archetype of the wolf goddess, and the poet has borrowed from many mythologies to create her own numinous myth of this female godhead. "Where in the twentieth century Woman has liberated herself from the pedestal upon which she has been 'set up', mostly by men, this work enthrones her again, only this time it is done by herself," writes Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a male poet—and not inaccurately.

It is not this anthology's intention, I think, to merely echo the above sentiment ("The new She takes her first step/thinks for Herself," so goes the first line of Patricia Wellingham-Jones' "The First Bone of Woman"); rather, it seeks to subvert the entire foundation of the traditional male gaze as propounded by Robert Graves: "As a Muse, you need a poet, as a poet I need a Muse." Erica Jong, true to form, settles the quandary for us: "If the muse is grounded, I will make him fly, & if he falls, I will catch him in my arms until he flies with me again." ("The Muse Who Came to Stay")

The anthology even proceeds to turn what Graves goes on to say—"The poet is obliged to love whatever happens"—on its head, by letting the poet, ie. the female poet, love. Including inappropriate love, impossible love, the love of fear, the fear of love, the fear to love. Because that is what

a woman does. A woman is not the source and function of love, she is the Lover.

And true to the imperatives of the modern woman, this Lover, as in Andréa Jarmai's "Leda", can be both playfully circumspect ("He says he's a god though you can't be sure he's lying"), and curiously playful ("And you play along too, why would you not, after all his trouble and after all you love the feel of his wings around you"). It can be the shamelessly lascivious subject in Kristina Rae Colon's "Rough Sex" ("I am a holy sacrilege/red and raw and gasping") or the seething spurned lover in Jane Knechtel's "Bank of Ireland" ("Not quid or pints/Just something that felt less transacted:/I wanted your cock as a gift.") It can be out-and-out expert as in Celia Lisset Alvarez's "Seduction" ("How could he not find me/exotic? My name stuck to/his tongue like thirst") or downright callous, as in the serial dater in Jeanann Verlee's "Arson" ("When I told him I loved him, it was a lie") even when we all know that the true *femme fatale* would rather die than fake an orgasm.

It's not that the poets in this anthology have no antecedents. It's not that there is no whiff of Plath in Sridala Swami's "cunt", or in some of the self-mocking astringencies of Jeanann Verlee's "Lone Girl" ("I'm no victim/just a mouth drawn/ in the shape of an accident pussy/shaped like fool"). Yet, always, there is a sense that love is shot through permanently with a sense of loss. Jeanette Winterson once asked: "Why is the measure of love loss?" It is also what Cixous means by the word "dischildbirth": "the experience of mourning – when we lose someone we love, our dad, our mentor, our lover, I believe we always lose the child."

While love hurts it is also a bit about being lost, about crying "look for me I'm hidden I'm lost find me." Women understand this too, this greatest paradox, without necessarily seeing it as losing the battle: "Afterwards, I opened a can of lager/and toasted the loss of what I had/taken to be my freedom." (Gol McAdam, "The Wedding"). Women accept a great many things, from being a stranger in one's own skin in Chella Covington's "Hegemony" ("to be exile/under her own skin/coloured without knowing she was occupied") to being her worst enemy in Erica Jong's "The Deaths of the Goddesses" ("It is self against self, dagger to dagger, blood of her blood, blood of her daughter, blood of her mother, her menses, her

own, all pooled together, one crimson sea.”) From being the contented, childless woman in Kate Bernadette Benedict’s “A Woman, Childless by Choice” (“I walk in plenitude, as women do”) to Eileen R. Tabios’ enchanting, unforgettable Rosa in “Dark Freedom”, who smiles at her scars and “sets herself *free*

So what does it mean to see life through a woman’s eyes? Is it a simple matter of using certain telling metaphors to illuminate experiences only available to women? Such as “Rain will pierce me like thorns/I’ll have a steam veil” or “Water, you are a lace wedding gown/I slip over my head.” (Pascale Petit, “What the Water Gave Me”).

Poetry lies somewhere between nostalgia and hope, and a poem of Luisa Igloria entitled “La Americana” struck me at once for its quiet, wistful lyricism and the cross-cultural experience at its core. It is clear, as all aesthetic experience is, that Igloria’s relationship with Rembrandt’s celebrated painting is an intensely personal one. Yet the fact that the girl on the canvas reminds her of a pale-browed girl who used to do odd jobs at her childhood home, and of the insult she used to suffer from the men in the neighborhood, speaks volumes of shared human experience and the intersection between the universal and the unique.

Outside the body’s personal experience, empathy for another’s suffering is often sufficiently rendered in one line, as in Fatima Naoot’s “The Village Idiot”: “I need to weep.” As in: we all need to weep.

In the end, what seems to resound on these pages is the need to, in the glorious words of Luisa Igloria, “steal an hour”—the need to claim one’s own space. Whether in the flush of youth or the riptide of age, in obedience or rebellion, in rapture or in hell, what causes the heart to leap and hope to swell is the chance, like the married woman in Davi Walders’ “Afternoon in the Garden”, to snatch time for herself, when her husband is asleep, to watch the river “leap and rush”, and to dream of “a sky filled with sapphire and alizarin light.”

In the end, all poetry is about desire, about a sort of looking beyond the “here and now” where presence is a stand-in for absence. It is always about some undefinable pain and yearning which language cannot quite name but can only hint at, which makes poetry the ultimate paradox, a space where one can talk of life and death, love and hatred, light and darkness, in one breath, just as every beginning is a repetition. The women in this anthology have encompassed much that experience can provide. And that they have is pretty damn wonderful.

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