

Poetry
Professor S.P Dhanavel
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Rukmini Bhaya Nair

(Refer Slide Time: 0:14)

Rukmini Bhaya Nair (1952-)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Rukmini Bhaya Nair
- Two Poems
- "Reprisal"
- "Margins, Mainstream"
- Analysis



Hello friends, we have come to the last lecture of our course on poetry, of course we will have some panel discussion that will come after this. But as far as poems and poets are concerned this is the last lecture. And we have chosen a poet called Rukmini Bhaya Nair. First, we will see the historical and literary context, see the life of Rukmini Bhaya Nair, read two of her poems, analyze them and then offer our conclusions.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:44)

Historical and Literary Context



- Women's struggles in the Postcolonial Indian context
- Cases of women's insecurity across the country
- Male writers in English: poets and others
- Post-independent Indian modern poetic tradition
- Pioneers: Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das
- Influence of feminist poets like Plath, Sexton, and Rich
- From reserved expression to open forms of acknowledgment of women's experiences
- The body politics of poetry in India: mothering, wifely duties, objectification, and stereotyping
- Women writers from all walks of life, including academics



Let us see the historical and literary context. We have had a number of women struggles in the postcolonial context in our country. We also have a number of cases of women's insecurity across the country, now and then repeatedly cases of women's problems arise particularly with reference to raping of women, violence against women. We have male writers in English, we have poets and also other writers in novel in short story and other art forms after independence.

We have also built up, establish a poetic tradition, we have looked at the pioneers Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. We also briefly referred to the influence of feminist poets like Plath, Sexton, and Adrienne Rich when we discussed feminist poetry, and also, we referred to Kamala Das's poetry. We have moved, that is our writers have moved from reserved expression to open forms of acknowledgement of women's experiences.

Ours is, we have to admit a traditional society but our women have learned to express themselves over a period of time. The body politics of poetry by women in India referred to mothering, wifely duties, objectification, and stereotyping. We have women writers from all walks of life, including academics. The poet we have chosen is from the academic field.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:20)

Rukmini Bhaya Nair (1952-)



- A (retired) professor of linguistics at IIT Delhi
- A poet, a novelist, and a critic
- Widely travelled and published
- Volumes of Poetry
 - The Hyoid Bone* (1992)
 - Yellow Hibiscus* (2004)
- Published by Penguin India
- **Reason for writing:** "to discover the limits of language"



Rukmini Bhaya Nair is a living poet, she was born in 1952, she studied linguistics and became a professor of linguistics at IIT Delhi. She also has written novels and critical works. She is a widely traveled writer and academist. She has also published both academic and creative works. The 2 volumes which are well known are 'The Hyoid Bone' and 'Yellow Hibiscus.' Very interestingly, she has a reason for writing; to discover the limits of language; actually, to find out the limits of our own expressive ability; that is what most of us try to do.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:06)

Two Poems



- **"Reprisal"**
- A 14 line poem in what looks like three quatrains.
- It explores the possibility of revenge against the oppressors of women
- **"Margins, Mainstream"**
- A 16 line poem in four stanzas
- It questions the dichotomy to unravel the oppressive patriarchal language, especially punctuation marks and poetic conventions.
- It dreams of a new language suitable for women.
- Both poems are from *Yellow Hibiscus* (2004)
- <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/2999/au/0/0/Rukmini-Bhaya-Nair/Five-Uneasy-Pieces/en/tit>



We have two poems for discussion, one is called “Reprisal,” another is called “Margins, Mainstream.” The first poem ‘Reprisal’ is a 14-line poem in what looks like three quatrains. It explores the possibility of revenge against the oppressors of women. We also have the second poem ‘Margins, Mainstream;’ it is a 16-lines poem in four stanzas. It questions the dichotomy to reveal the oppressive patriarchal language, especially punctuation marks and poetic conventions.

It dreams of a new language suitable for women like Adrienne Rich did; both poems are from ‘Yellow Hibiscus’ publish in 2004. These poems can be found in one website for which we have given the reference poetryinternational.org.


(Refer Slide Time: 3:57)

“Reprisal”

I, who have never known
Violence, see at nights
This – the moon-thugs
Finishing off a woman.

Mostly she is eyes
Minus the other marks
That make up a face. And
Her sari, winding red, tears
Audibly.

5



First let us see the poem ‘Reprisal.’

I, who have never known
Violence, see at nights
This - the moon - thugs
Finishing off a woman.

Mostly she is eyes
Minus the other marks

5

That make up a face. And
Her sari, winding red, tears
Audibly.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:18)

“Reprisal”- II



All my childhood, I slept
With a knife tucked under
Two pillows, for safety.
And that crescent still glistens

10

Maleficent.



All my childhood, I slept
With a knife tucked under
Two pillows, for safety.
And that crescent still glistens.

10

Maleficent.”

(Refer Slide Time: 4:29)

Thematic Contrast



- Violence and Silence
- Woman and Man
- Self and Body
- Laughter and Tear
- Childhood and Adulthood
- Security and Insecurity
- Beneficent and Maleficent
- The theme of reprisal, retaliation, revenge, anger
- A poem of statement about a woman's anger about violence against women



Let us see the Thematic Contrast. It is simple poem but then we have many contrasting ideas violence and silence, woman and man, self and body, laughter and tear (cry), childhood and adulthood, security and insecurity, beneficent and maleficent. The theme of reprisal, retaliation, revenge and anger all these ideas are found in this poem. This is more of a poem of statement about a women's anger about violence against women.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:04)

Theme



- Reprisal: retaliation, revenge, giving back more than that is received
- Women are sexually attacked by moon-thugs
- The speaker has a 'crescent' knife for safety
- Reprisal is a re-vision of perspectives on women, men, and moon imagery in literature



Let us spend some more time on the Theme on Reprisal. It refers to retaliation, revenge, giving back more than that is received. Women are sexually attacked by moon thugs. And that is why

the poet, that is the speaker has a crescent knife for safety under her pillow. Reprisal actually is again a revision of perspective on women, men and moon imagery in literature. Moon is considered to be very soft pleasant used in the context of romantic love between a man and a woman. But a poet like Rukmini Bhaya Nair and others who are attracted or oppressed by men, they have a new understanding or a different understanding of the moon.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:52)

Poetic Devices



- Imagery
- Violence against women
- Mutilated body
- Winding red
- Tearing sari
- Audible tears
- Knife under pillows
- Glistening knife
- Alliteration: Minus the other marks (6)



We said this is a poem of statement; we do not have many poetic devices but certainly we find images that is why, we call all of them imagery, except the last one alliteration ‘minus other marks.’ We have the images of violence against women, mutilated body, winding red, tearing sari, audible tears, knife under pillows, glistening knife. Which are actually evocative; we can really see, imagine, see such pictures.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:23)

Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Form:** Free verse but with a restraint ('sonnet')
- **Rhyme:** No obvious rhymes
- **Rhythm:** iamb, trochee, spondee
- **Meter:** Polymetrical: Lines ranging from 4 to 7 syllables
- **Caesura, Enjambment, and End-Stopped Line:**

All my | childhood, | I slept 
With a knife | tucked under 
Two pi | llows, for | safety.
And that | crescent | still glistens 

Maleficent.

- **trochee:** childhood; **iamb:** I slept; **spondee:** two pi
- **anapest:** with a knife; **dactyl:** tucked under



Let us look at Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter in this poem. It is a free verse but then it has some kind of restraint in the form of a sonnet, though it is not a traditional sonnet. We do not have obvious rhymes in this poem; when it comes to the rhythm, we find that the rhythmic pattern may be found in iamb, trochee, spondee and the metrical pattern is polymetrical, because the lines vary from 4 to 7 syllables. We have caesura, enjambment, and end-stopped line in this poem.

Let us see the example that we have.

“All my childhood I slept
With a knife tucked under
Two pillows for safety
And that crescent still glistens
Maleficent.”

Trochee, example is ‘childhood,’ iamb ‘I slept,’ for spondee, we have this example ‘two pi,’ Pi- here is the first syllable from pillows and then we have anapest ‘with a knife and dactyl tucked under.’ In the case of anapest, the stress falls on knife and in the case of dactyl, the stress falls on tucked.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:36)

Diction and Syntax



- The poetic lines have 4 to 7 syllables.
- Most are short lines
- Embedded "that" clause in all three stanzas
- A complex problem but a simple solution
- The revengeful feeling is strong but clear and steady
- The rhythm is steady and focused.
- A question: Is revenge a solution?
- The problem: How long can women remain silent?



Let us see the Diction and Syntax in this poem. We have 4 to 7 syllables in the poetic lines in the poem. Most lines are very short. And we have the embedded 'that clause' in all three stanzas in the poem. This poem deals with the complex problem but gives a simple solution of revenge. The revengeful feeling is strong but clear and steady. The rhythm is steady and also focused. The question is, is revenge a solution? As a reader, we may ask the poet or the speaker may give a solution like revenge.

But we also have the responsibility to raise a question is revenge a solution? It is actually a complex problem but then, we also have to see the other perspective the other view point. That is exactly the function of poetry to make us feel empathetic to the sufferings of others. We have to ask this question or understand the problem how long can women remain silent. How long will they take on all the pains, violence that are inflicted on them.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:45)

Overall Impression



- The speaker is an observer and a participant in a patriarchal society unleashing violence against women.
- The violent image of a woman being assaulted and left in a pool of blood provokes the speaker to protect herself and avenge the crime.
- The speaker attempts in a subtle way to revise the thought process of representing women as soft in association with moon which the poet turns against the thugs with her crescent knife.
- Perhaps, this poem on reprisal is a poetic revenge and caution too.



To give an overall impression of this poem, the speaker is an observer and a participant in a patriarchal society, unleashing violence against women. The violent image of a woman being assaulted and left in a pool of blood provokes the speaker to protect herself and avenge the crime.

The speaker attempts in a subtle way to revise the thought process of representing women as soft in association with moon which the poet turns against the thugs with her crescent knife. Perhaps this poem on reprisal is a poetic revenge and caution too. We all readers have to see the other point of view.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:28)

Margins, Mainstream – I and II



A woman is a thing apart.
She is bracketed off, a
Comma, semi-colon, at most
A lower-case letter, lost. 4

In the literate circus
She is just a striptease
Artist, but when she speaks
Her poems bite, ferocious. 8



Now, we are moving to the second poem ‘Margins, Mainstream.’ It has 4 stanzas, first we have the 2 stanzas, then we will look at the next 2 stanzas.

“A woman is a thing apart.

She is bracketed off, a

Comma, semi colon, at most

A lower-case letter, lost. 4

In the literate circus

She is just a striptease

Artist, but when she speaks

Her poems bite, ferocious. 8

(Refer Slide Time: 10:00)

Margins, Mainstream – III and IV



Rhyme and shape, primitive

Beasts, come tamed to her

Endangered species, they

Recognize her desperation. 12

She wants, she badly wants

Not a fresh lover, strongman

Or clown, but a new language

In which to hold her own. 16



Poem: A woman is a thing apart to hold her own.

Rhyme and shape, primitive

Beasts, come tamed to her

Endangered species, they

Recognize her desperation. 12

She wants, she badly wants

Not a fresh lover, strongman

Or clown, but a new language

In which to hold her own. 16

The whole poem is something like this; a woman is a thing apart to hold her own. The first line of the poem and the last phrase in the poem, we can make one sentence, 'a woman is a thing apart to hold her own.' She is not a woman as we have normally thought about, the new woman we see in the post liberalized economy is a thing apart to hold her own.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:48)

Thematic Contrast



- Margin and Mainstream in the title
- Man and Woman
- Patriarchal language and Matriarchal experience
- The speaker uses the patriarchal language against it.
- **Even punctuation marks are oppressive.**
- A striptease artist (entertaining) and a poet (biting)
- She vs they
- Her need – a new language vs Their need – “lust”
- Old and new language



Let us see the Thematic Contrast. Obviously in the title we have margin and mainstream, man and woman, Patriarchal language and matriarchal experience. The speaker uses the patriarchal language against it. Even punctuation marks are oppressive for the poet; A striptease artist, entertaining artist and a poet, that is a biting ferocious poet. She and they are contrasted. Her need is a new language, their need is lust or power. Old and new language we have the contrast.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:28)

Poetic Devices



- **Reification:** opposite of personification
“A woman is **a thing** apart.”
- **Metaphor:** a woman is a punctuation mark.
- **Metaphor:** striptease artist and poet
- **Metaphor:** literate circus; she is a ferocious lioness
- **Revisionary thought:** her need is not a lover but a new language
- **Self-aware poem:** linguistic and poetic devices
Punctuation marks and rhyme and shape




Let us see some of the Poetic Devices in this poem. Reification is a term opposite of personification; a woman is a thing apart when something is objectified that is called reification. We have a metaphor in considering a woman as a punctuation mark. We also have a metaphor in striptease artist and poet and another metaphor we have in literate circus, she is a ferocious lioness. Then we have a revisionary thought in her need is not a lover but a new language.

A woman is expected always to have a man as a support for her in a patriarchal society but in the new society women look for a new language not men to support them. This is then a self-aware poem, it is aware of its own linguistics and poetic devices; there is a special emphasis on punctuation marks and rhyme and shape of the entire poem.


(Refer Slide Time: 12:34)

Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Form:** Free verse but with a good shape in quatrains
- **Rhyme:** No obvious rhymes
- **Rhythm:** Line lengths, 6 to 8 syllables
- **Meter:** iambic trimeter and tetrameter
- **Caesura, Enjambment, and End-Stopped Line:**

In the | liter | ate cir | cus >
 She is | just a | striptease >
Artist, | but when | she speaks >
 Her po | ems bite, | fero | cious.
- **Trochee:** Artist, lamb: she speaks



When we come to Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter, we can see that this is a free verse with a good shape in quatrains. There is no obvious rhyme in this poem. And when we look at rhythm, we see that the line length varies from 6 to 8 syllables as we have 6 syllables and 8 syllables referring to trimeter and tetrameter with a dominance of this iambic, we can say that this poem is in the form of **iambic trimeter and tetrameter**.

We also have caesura, enjambment, and end-stopped line in this extract that we have quoted here;

“In the literate circus

She is just a striptease

Artist, but when she speaks

Her poems bite ferocious.”

Trochee has this example of ‘artist’ with the first syllable being stressed and iamb in ‘she speaks.’ The second syllable is stressed in she speaks.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:36)

Diction and Syntax



- Largely mono and disyllabic words
- Significant polysyllabic words:
Bracketed, semicolon, ferocious, primitive,
endangered, recognize, desperation
- Declarative and compound and complex sentences
- Smooth and clear rhythm toward a new language
- “A woman is a thing apart to hold her own”



Let us pay attention to Diction and Syntax of this poem to understand it little more. The whole poem is largely in mono and disyllabic words. We have certain polysyllabic words as well like bracketed, semicolon, ferocious, primitive, endangered, recognize, desperation. We also have declarative and compound and complex sentences in this short poem. It is a smooth and clear rhythm that we have in this poem representing or referring to a new language. That we can see in this sentence with ellipses “a woman is a thing apart ... to hold her own.”

(Refer Slide Time: 14:19)

Overall Impression



- Both "Reprisal" and "Margins, Mainstream" deal with a woman speaker's experiences and needs in a patriarchal society.
- Personal security by retaliation is a strategy.
- Personal idiom by language is another strategy.
- An interrogational and revisionary approach to women's experience can help her find her own.
- Both poems offer a radical feminist's perspectives on physical and emotional security of women.



Let us see the Overall Impression now. Both reprisal and margins, mainstream deal with a woman speaker's experiences and needs in a patriarchal society. Personal security by retaliation is a strategy suggested by the speaker. The speaker also suggests another strategy through personal idiom which can be used to protect one's experiences in language in poetry.

An interrogational and revisionary approach to women's experience can help the speaker find her own self, find her own language, find her own society, find her own safety. Both poems offer a radical feminist's perspectives on physical and emotional security of women in our society.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:12)

Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Rukmini Bhaya Nair
- Two Poems
- "Reprisal"
- "Margins, Mainstream"
- Analysis
- "I am just a silly woman in silly bourgeois clothes."
- from Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poem "Cockroach"



To give a summary of our discussion on Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poems that we have discussed, we saw the historical and literary context focusing on violence against women in our country and also the kind of male poetic tradition and female poetic tradition that have been built after this 1947, that is independent India. We looked at two poems, 'Reprisal' suggesting revenge and then 'Margins, Mainstream' suggesting the unequal relationship between men and women in our society.

We have analyzed these poems linguistically, rhetorically, poetically and then we have come to the end of it with a quotation from Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poem called "Cockroach." She says at the end "I am just a silly woman in silly bourgeois clothes." It's perhaps a kind of admission of a woman's writing. Many poets after expressing their anger, angst, all kinds of feelings against the society, they finally feel helpless.

What is that they have achieved? This is the question; this is very prominent in many poets including Jayanta Mahapatra. What is the use of my spending 40, 50 years of writing poems? What have I done in the society? nothing remarkable only words, only poems. What could they do to society? that kind of helplessness is excruciating for poets. But then, they have no other way.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:53)

References



Dasgupta Sanjukta. 2005. "Review of *Yellow Hibiscus* by Rukmini Bhaya Nair," *Indian Literature*, 49 (5): 210-214

Mishra, Pankaj. 1994. "Fruitful Ambivalences"[Review of *The Hyoid Bone* by Rukmini Bhaya Nair], *Indian Literature*, 37 (5): 191-193

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya. 2002. "The Testament of the Tenth Muse: Toward a Feminist Sensibility," In *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch: The Idea of Indifference*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 201-224.



Here are some references. We have a review of this 'Yellow Hibiscus' in Indian literature that can be of some help other writings also can help as to understand this poet and her poems. We do not have many references for this poet and it is our responsibility to read poems by our own poets and write good articles on them and create a body of scholarship and criticism for Indian poetry. I welcome you to this great project. Thank you.