

Indian Poetry in English
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Lecture - 27
Menka Shivdasani

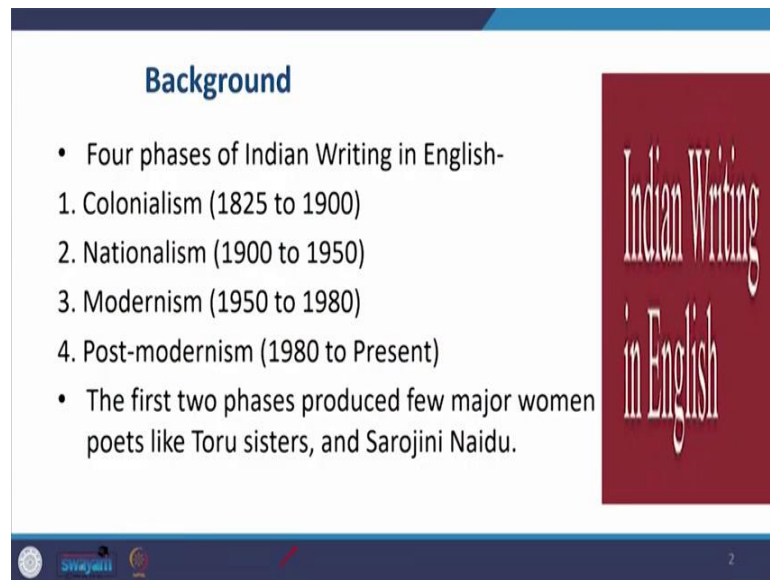
Good morning friends and welcome back once again to NPTEL online certification course on Indian Poetry in English. And I do hope you are enjoying these lectures by me. In the previous lecture we talked about a very significant, very important, very assertive women's voice that was of Tara Patel. And you might have realized how Tara Patel because of her only work that is *Single Woman* became very famous, since her voice was very assertive, very direct, very frank.

In this lecture we are going to take up another important major voice Menka Shivdasani. Dear friends, after Eunice de Souza's *Nine Indian Women Poets* there have been very few Indian anthologies where these voices have been included. And there are often as I have been saying, that there are many poets who actually have a lot of spark in them yet they have not been paid adequate attention by critics and scholars.

I am quite hopeful that in the days to come these poets will also deserve to be mentioned and to be included in some of the upcoming anthologies. So, this talk centers around Menka Shivdasani who even though being a woman poet is not confined only to women's question. There are other subjects also discussed. We find in Menka's world a sort of variety apart from her theme of women or women's treatment.

We shall also take up some of the poems by Menka Shivdasani who also like Tara Patel is a poet as well as a journalist. But before that let us have a look at the background and the bio of Menka Shivdasani. In the previous lecture also we talked about the four phases of Indian writing in English and since we are discussing the post-modernist phase this phase which produced, so many you know women's voices and especially some of the new voices fine like Tara Patel, Menka Shivdasani, Eunice de Souza etc.

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Background

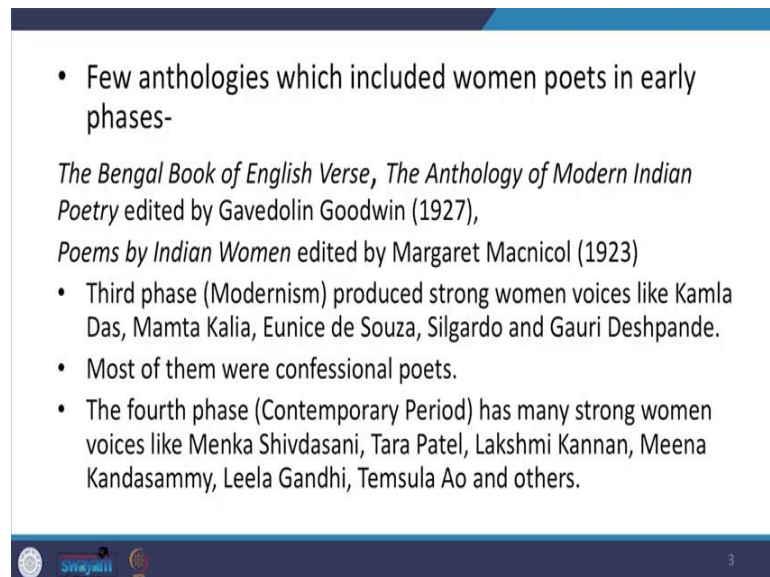
- Four phases of Indian Writing in English-
 1. Colonialism (1825 to 1900)
 2. Nationalism (1900 to 1950)
 3. Modernism (1950 to 1980)
 4. Post-modernism (1980 to Present)
- The first two phases produced few major women poets like Toru sisters, and Sarojini Naidu.

Indian Writing in English

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Because we remember that the first two phases had very few women writers and then as we progressed we also came across Kamala Das fine works. But during that time also there were some anthologies which also included women poets in the early phases, especially devoted to women's issues.

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- Few anthologies which included women poets in early phases-

The Bengal Book of English Verse, The Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry edited by Gavedolin Goodwin (1927),
Poems by Indian Women edited by Margaret Macnicol (1923)
- Third phase (Modernism) produced strong women voices like Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Silgado and Gauri Deshpande.
- Most of them were confessional poets.
- The fourth phase (Contemporary Period) has many strong women voices like Menka Shivdasani, Tara Patel, Lakshmi Kannan, Meena Kandasammy, Leela Gandhi, Temsula Ao and others.

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One such was the *Bengal Book of English Verse*- the anthology of Modern Indian Poetry which was edited by Gavedolin Goodwin and there were poems by Indian women, which is also edited by Margaret Macnicol .

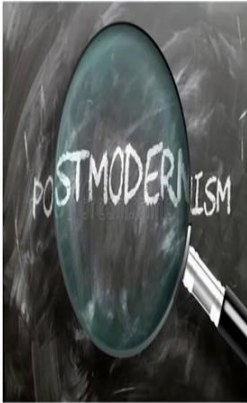
The third phase which mentioned Eunice de Souza, Silgado, and Gauri Deshpande---- majority of them were confessional poets, though to be very honest majority of women poets writing in English can be considered in the light of a sort of confession. So, they have a sort of autobiographical tone at times and the notes of confession also can be found in their works.

So, the fourth phase which is the contemporary period as we are facing today has got many strong women voices like Shivdasani, Patel, Lakshmi Kannan, Meena Kandasammy, Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai. So, we are going to discuss Menka Shivdasani who is a poet of the postmodern phase of Indian writing in English Indian writing in English.

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Post-modern phase of Indian English Writing

- Writers born after independence.
- Personal emotions
- Complex linguistics experiments
- Native sensibility
- Alienation
- Pungent satire
- Attack on patriarchal structure of society
- Exploration of Indian myth from various angles



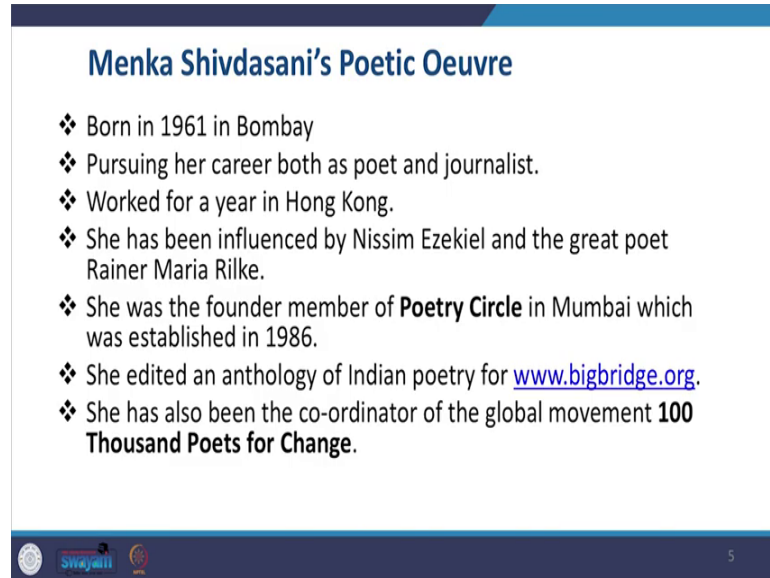
The slide features a magnifying glass over a chalkboard with the word 'POSTMODERNISM' written on it. The slide also includes a footer with logos for 'swayam' and a small number '4'.

Now, these writers who were born after independence actually with independence they also got a sort of freedom. The freedom of speech, they also got their feministic grievances listened to. And then what they started, not only did they start talking of their own rights, but they also started talking of their linguistic expression very independently. There can be found a sort of native sensibility and then time and again one can find a sort of irony then satiric treatment in many of the poems.

And the patriarchal structure of the society is in the background and as we come further we find that the feminist cries were over and now there came to be a different sort of

voice and these voices were the voices of the body, the voices of the soul the voices of existential anguish and many more.

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Menka Shivdasani's Poetic Oeuvre

- ❖ Born in 1961 in Bombay
- ❖ Pursuing her career both as poet and journalist.
- ❖ Worked for a year in Hong Kong.
- ❖ She has been influenced by Nissim Ezekiel and the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke.
- ❖ She was the founder member of **Poetry Circle** in Mumbai which was established in 1986.
- ❖ She edited an anthology of Indian poetry for www.bigbridge.org.
- ❖ She has also been the co-ordinator of the global movement **100 Thousand Poets for Change**.

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So, Menka Shivdasani can be considered to be one of the Bombay poets because she was one of the founding members of poetry circle fine, which was established in 1986 and that is how she came to be associated with the literary figures of those times. Out of which many of them like Nissim Ezekiel got very much influenced by Menka Shivdasani's writings.

And we can find the sort of challenge that Menka offers in her works. They actually even though Menka has not been that was the fairest and has not been writing so much, but yet whatever she has written that actually are having an ocean of gems-- an ocean of thoughts.

So, Menka still pursues her career both as a poet and as a journalist, she had been to work for a year in Hong Kong and her influences of Ezekiel in her poetry and then Rilke. Rainer Maria Rilke can be found in her poems, she also edited an anthology of Indian poetry for [www. bigbridge. org](http://www.bigbridge.org).

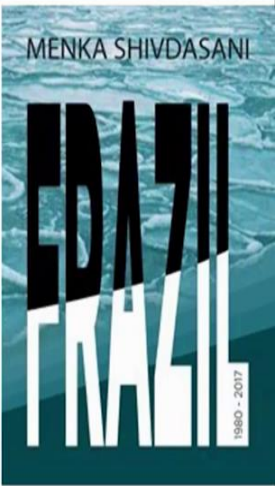
She has been the coordinator of global movement of 100 Thousand Poets for Change, Menka is still writing. And we can also delve deep in her poetic oeuvres. She has four collections to her credit and it was in 1990.

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Poetry Collections

- ❑ *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990)
- ❑ *Stet* (2001)
- ❑ *Safe House* (2015)
- ❑ *Frazil* (2018)

- Co-translator of *Freedom and Fissure*, an anthology of Sindhi partition poetry which was published by Sahitya Academy in 1998.
- Her poems have been translated into Marathi, Malayalam and Gujarati.

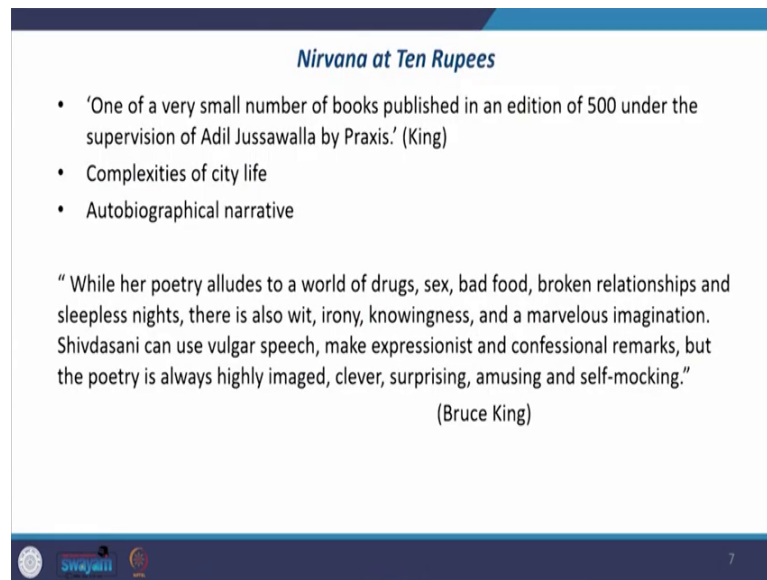


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Because in the previous lecture as I had mentioned that 90s saw a new generation of poets who had a lot of commitment towards not only their theme, but also towards their craft and it was at this time that Menka came up with *Nirvana at Ten Rupees*. If you have a look at Menka's titles you can find that they are very symbolic, ironic also at times. Then in 2001 came *Stet* and then in 2015 came *Safe House*. So, you can find the gaps between her works. And her latest work is *Frazil*. *Frazil* which came out in the year 2018.

Menka has been a co-translator of *Freedom and Fissure* which is an anthology of Sindhi partition poetry, published by Sahitya Academy in 1998. Menka's poems have also been translated into some other languages namely Marathi, Malayalam and Gujarati. Now we can also have a look at her poetic ventures and what she tells in her poems.

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Nirvana at Ten Rupees

- 'One of a very small number of books published in an edition of 500 under the supervision of Adil Jussawalla by Praxis.' (King)
- Complexities of city life
- Autobiographical narrative

"While her poetry alludes to a world of drugs, sex, bad food, broken relationships and sleepless nights, there is also wit, irony, knowingness, and a marvelous imagination. Shivdasani can use vulgar speech, make expressionist and confessional remarks, but the poetry is always highly imaged, clever, surprising, amusing and self-mocking."

(Bruce King)

For the first time when this *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* came this became very popular because if we take a note or a comment by Bruce king who says. That this *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* was one of a very small number of books published in an edition of 500 under the supervision of Adil Jussawalla by Praxis.

You all know the name of Adil Jussawalla we also had a talk on Adil Jussawalla's world and Jussawalla's home was actually a home to so many poets where they are continued to be discussions fine talks interviews and you know exchanges of poems and all.

In Menka Shivdasani's world we can find a sort of urban poetry and depiction of urban life which has got all sorts of complexities. We can find in Menka's works the urban filth, power cuts, bugs human relationships, and the hurry and worry of a city life. There are times when we can find because Menka had started writing at a very small age when she was a school girl.

And at that time also she had started you know scribbling poems. So, there are autobiographical tones also found and many of her poems can be considered to be autobiographical narratives. It is not surprising to see what Bruce king talks about Menka Shivdasani, when he comments like--- "While her poetry alludes to a world of drugs, sex, bad food, broken relationships and sleepless nights.

There is also wit, irony, knowingness and a marvelous imagination. Menka is a matured poet and we find that Menka takes the dig, Menka depicts the contemporary situations by clothing them in the web of her worlds with the help of metaphors at times he becomes very witty at times we can find how she hides meaning, but at the same time she is quite conscious of what actually she wants to say.

Shivdasani, at times, can use vulgar speech as King says, make expressionist and confessional remarks. There are at times you know one can find a sort of confessional remark in many of her poems. But the poet is a poet because a poet actually takes the help of a persona, but the poetry is always highly amazed there are lots of images fine.

So, it is Menka's world is rich in imagery, clever, surprising, amusing and self -mocking at times there are self- denials also. Self-abnegation just like Keats we can find a note of self-annihilation at times, which the poet actually tries to yearn for. Because the world that the poet actually lives in is not a world to live in.

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Lover, Loser, Addict

When you are happy, only clichés
 Come to mind— the sky is blue,
 Grass is green, butterflies are free.
 Then something happens, and solitary
 As a murderer, you twist the knife
 And stalk the streets, your brain
 Being crushed to powder like the contents
 Of avial of smack. Nirvana at ten rupees
is cheap, but the sky has a silvery tinge
You would rather perceive as grey,
The butterflies are pinned heads down,
Their backs to the wall, like you...

Then you realize it's not fluttering any more,
 Because it's dead. And you, big deal, they ripped
 you apart with the knife,
 With the index finger, then they choked
 The last breath with the handkerchief in your palm.

All the world is well, mythic lover;
 The sky is blue; at least it looks that colour
 From down here where the fires burn.

And the psychiatrist says good bye, leaves you
To pay the restaurant bill, and don't forget his fees
 Though he will not ask. The butterfly
No longer struggles, so you think all is well.

Now, if we can take one of the poems from our very first anthology entitled *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* where the poet actually talks about even though the poet talks about the disappointment and the dejection and in love. And then she also finds and then she also writes how when one has been cheated in love, the world actually becomes quite unaffected.

It is for the individual self to understand how she or he has been treated, so let us take the lines of these poems. The poem begins with I will not read the complete poem, but I will take up some of the lines because I have some many more poems also to discuss.

“When you are happy only clichés
come to mind the sky is blue,
grass is green, butterflies are free....”

Whenever all of us are young the world appears to be a very beautiful place. No complexities, there is a freedom butterflies are free. “Then something happens and solitary/ as a murderer you twist the knife/ and stalk the streets/ your brain being/ crushed to powder like the contents/ of a vial of a smack Nirvana at ten rupees/ is cheap.”

So, the poet actually tries to show how when you come across a situation when you find that the world is not in tune with you. Something has happened which you are not going to accept then there comes thoughts of envy, thoughts of weariness, thoughts of boredom. You, at times, want to take an extreme step and then she says in a very dig like manner.

“Nirvana at ten rupees/ is cheap, but the sky has a silvery tinge,/ you would rather perceive as grey./ The butterflies are pinned heads down/ their backs to the like wall like you...” So, as we start growing, when we are in our youthful days the world appears to be a very happy place to live in, but with growing times all our freedoms like the freedom of the butterfly. So, we are just like butterflies. She takes here butterfly as a metaphor. So, the butterflies are pinned heads down their backs to the wall like you, so there goes a change.

“And the psychiatrist says goodbye leaves you/ to pay the restaurant bill and do not forget his fees/ though he will not ask, the butterfly/ no longer struggles. So, you think all is well.” So, here she talks about the helplessness of somebody who actually is in a state of becoming mad and she looks for love, she looks for sympathy, she looks for compassion, she looks for something that can actually help her get out of it and the psychiatrist who can be a lover you know.

So, the psychiatrist where does the psychiatrist meet? Not in his clinic fine, but then in a restaurant. And you know to pay the restaurant bill and only the victim pays the bill and the fees you do not forget. And then finally, 'you realize it is not fluttering anymore.'

Finally, you submit yourself 'because it is dead and you big deal they ripped/ you apart with the knife/ with the index finger then they choked/ the last breath with the handkerchief in your palm.' So, how love can be at times sort of illusion and once you are cheated, deceived in love you want to take the extreme step and you want to find ways as to how to recover,

But then where you try to find a sort of remedy and finally, you come to realize no this was not the way and what happens is the last breath with the handkerchief in your palm they choked you and the last three lines are very important you know. What happens to somebody in need somebody in crisis, somebody in a predicament, somebody in a difficult situation fine. And then the world goes agog—"all the world is well mythic lover/ the sky is blue, at least it looks that colour/ from down here where the fires burn."

Now, 'the fires burn' can have different connotations. This can be the bodily fire, this can be the fire of the funeral, but then the world to the world everything appears to be quite ordinary everything appears to be quite routine. All the world is well mythic lover, so love was simply a sort of myth, love was simply a sort of illusion you are actually exploited.

"And then finally, you are gone,/ but then that realization comes too long. So, Nirvana at ten rupees is cheap,/ but the sky has a silvery tinge /you would rather perceive as grey/ the butterflies are pinned heads down /their backs to the wall."

So, one poem after another we find that Menka Shivdasani as a woman poet actually talks about not only becoming an object, not only becoming. Many times people feel that they are sheltered yet they are unsheltered and they simply become a sort of commodity especially if they are women, they are simply exploited and thrown like anything and one can see the fire still burning and the world still going on well.

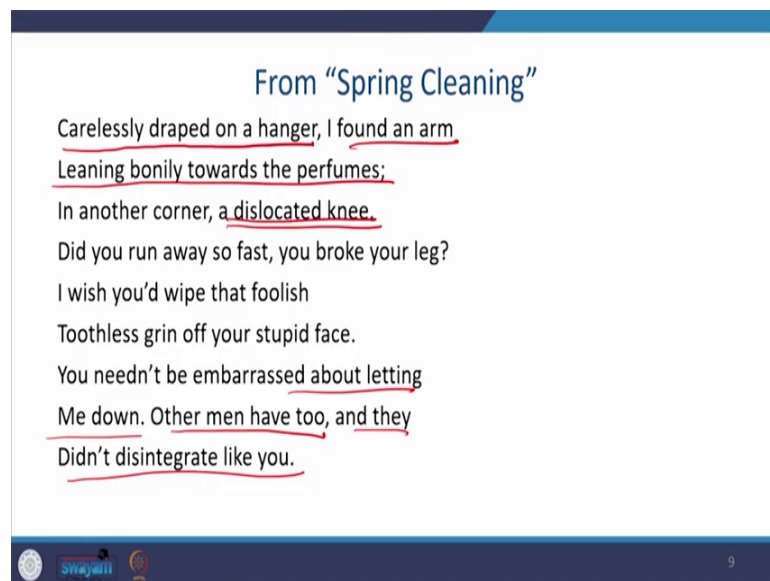
But then in some of the poems also we can find a sort of alienation, we can find a sort of you know, how the poet actually tries to see a sort of parallelism a sort of analogy even in the things around her. While living life in a solitary apartment, living life in a metro

city where loneliness alone is waiting and the loneliness can be shared only with the objects of the house.

Because humans are actually yearning for humans' companionship, a woman is waiting for a man's companionship in a world where there are no companions. In a world where there are no true lovers in a world where there are only pretext and pretension in a world. Where to think of to be reminded of John Keats 'where to think of to be is full of sorrow, /where youth grows pale.

And as the lines go further: where youth grows pale/ palsy sakes a few sad grey leaden eye despairs/ where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes/ or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow." So, in another poem entitled from "Spring Cleaning", we can find how when the persona of the poem looks a hanger and the persona here actually tries to see a sort of similarity and the lines go like this.

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"Carelessly draped on a hanger I found an arm/ leaning bonily towards the perfumes/ in another corner a dislocated knee,/. A dislocated knee' see the metaphor. "Did you run away so fast, you broke your leg?" So, in a world where when you walk you have to understand how do you walk and the poet there is in a sort of self interrogation.

The persona asks a question to herself alone and says did you run away so fast you broke your leg? I wish you would wipe that foolish toothless grin off your stupid face, you need not be embarrassed about letting me down.

So, when she looks at the hanger, she finds a sort of self compassion fine. And then you need not be embarrassed about letting me down other men have to and they did not disintegrate like you. So, these actually clothed in a very subtle way, but they tell a lot about the love that was broken.

A failure in love other men have too and they did not disintegrate like you. You actually ran so fast that you broke your leg. You know if you run fast there are chances of accident whether it be life whether it be in the house, whether it be on the road, whether it be an relationships and that is what she says. “Carelessly draped on a hanger”, so there is a sort of self sympathy a sort of self confession a sort of self compassion rather.

Now, one of the very important books entitled *Frazil* which came out in the year 2018 and which some way or the other I managed to get it. So, this Frazil also has some of the poems as the poet herself told me from her earlier collection and titled *Nirvana at Ten Rupees*. Now you might be curious enough to know what actually does Frazil mean.

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Frazil

- The word frazil means, 'soft, needle-like ice on the top of lakes and rivers that are too turbulent to freeze'.
- The collection has 85 poems. It starts with Implosion and ends with Epilogue: A Crow Finds its Feet.
- Theme of memory, loss, love, desire, death, religion, and tradition.
- Also reflects her eco-critical concerns.

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The word ‘frazil’ actually means soft needle-like ice on the top of lakes and rivers that are too turbulent to freeze. Now, there is a sort of poetic implication here on this word

Frazil soft needle like ice. So, there is ice--- needle like ice on the top of lakes and rivers that are too turbulent to freeze, so emotions being coagulated. On the top of lakes and these emotions have been you know a part of the collection entitled *Frazil* where one can find not only the poems of love, but also the poems about life the poems about other objects in and around the poet. The poems about anxiety, the poems about the nothingness the meaninglessness of life and the poem also about the loose ends of life to be bound to be brought together.

This collection entitled *Frazil* has got 85 poems and the collection begins with Implosion it is actually the name of the poem and it ends with “Epilogue; A Crow Finds its Feet.” Again, very beautifully the poet has tried to clothe or hide her own feelings, but through one poem after another in the entire collection the poetess has tried to depict the entirety of man which does not remain.

Always and every now and then still, but there are movements. The movements which are at times stunted, the movements which are at times still, the movements which at times want to break free, the movements which want to burst out. There is actually themes of memory loss, love, desire, death, religion and tradition.

And the entire volume you can also find some poems which also depict the silences, about the spaces that a person finds around himself or herself. There are poems also which reflect the poet’s eco critical concerns, you know, in many of the poems you can find how the poet likens her own horizon to the sky.

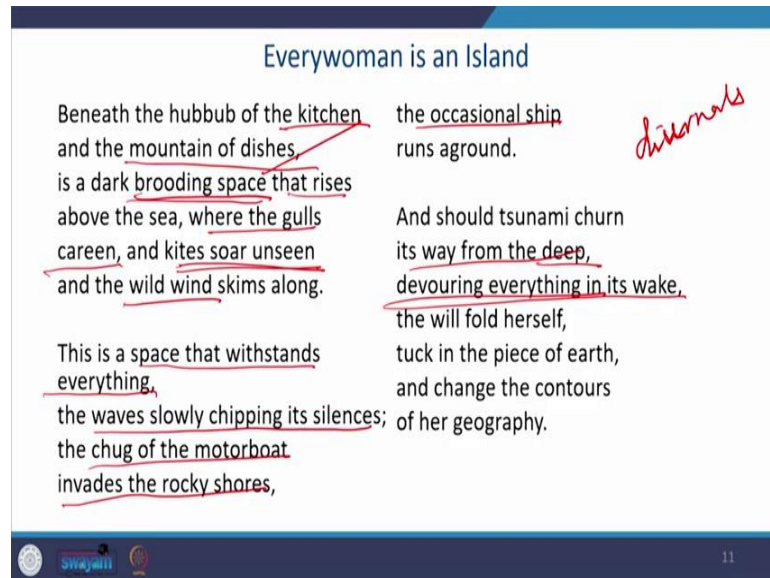
The poet also at times shows, how there are cracks, how there are mountains, how the mountains are being broken, how the nature also is receiving lots of impediments because of the power crazy nature of man; who wants to win everything in whatever possible way. But then who does think about the destruction of nature at the hands of man.

Now, there is one poem which actually I cannot resist my temptation to recite and to discuss with you. The poem is entitled “Every Woman is an Island”. This may be a reply to the saying every man or no man is an island.

So, where the poetess says every woman is an island. And when we look at this poem you will find the sort of philosophy, the sort of everyday routine under which the lady’s

own identity is sandwiched or suppressed, repressed and the joy simply heaves a cry fine. A cry for relief to come out of the dungeons, of darkness to come out of the four walls where a woman's life is restricted and where as I remember the other day when we were talking about Lakshmi Kannan's one of the poems where she says Rassundari Devi, do not erase the akshara on the wall. Let us read this poem as well.

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“Beneath the hubbub of the kitchen,”

The moment we mention the word kitchen naturally we talk about the domesticity that a woman most of the time is confined to. So, “beneath the hubbub of the kitchen/ and the mountain of dishes...” So, the diurnals everyday diurnals that they are suppose to be busy with everyday diurnals, my dear friend.

You know every now and then you know cooking, washing, cleaning fine. We have we are also reminded of the fact ‘cook, clean and fit in’ you know. But now the lady says— ‘a mountain of dishes is a dark brooding space’ fine, you might be thinking that women are thinking about their own identity.

But then they simply find their identity and they find their space where only in the kitchen a brooding space this is an uninterrupted space, where the woman gets some time to think of her own self, to think of her own fate, to think of her own everyday duties.

Where she simply is supposed to provide everyone with the food for thought except the food for thought being denied to herself.

“A dark brooding space that rises/ above the sea where the gulls,/ careen and kites soar unseen,/ so imagination. So, even the woman who is actually confined to the four walls of the kitchen fine. And then despite being among all the sorts of colors and smells what she actually imagines of is the ‘kite soaring unseen and the wild wind skims along.’ So, she has her own space also where she can think uninterrupted.

Here, there is no dominance of people, here simply there is a space that she has carved for herself or even she has been fated to for herself. “This is a space that withstands everything....” This space actually stops everything, “the waves slowly chipping its silences./ And the waves the waves of emotion the waves of thought the waves of you know choices the waves of being free the waves like that of a butterfly, you know the emotions like that of a butterfly wave slowly chipping its silences.

“The chug of the motor boat invading the rocky shores”, is she not becoming day- by-day a sort of rocking shore, a sort of rigid rugged shore where all sorts of these emotions meet where all sorts of these emotions come. And they actually get themselves hurt becoming everyday rigid. The occasional ship, where is that occasional ship, where comes that movement where comes that freedom runs aground.

“And should tsunami churn,” Now the last stanza is very painful and here in her own world of imaginations confined by the four walls of the kitchen. And by several smells, then she supposes if tsunami should come once in a while, why should she not be a part of that tsunami to be swept away with the currents of the tsunami and from the deep devouring everything look at the beauty, the musicality. “Deep devouring everything in its wake.”

She will fold herself ‘tuck in the piece of earth/ and change the contours of her geography.’ Can she not get an occasion where if the tsunami comes, she may once again take she may once again be swept? And when she says she may be swept, just like a piece of earth. And we are actually you know reminded too, there can be references to Sita who goes underground and with the plough then there came Sita.

So, why can't she debunk? Why cannot she get herself debunked with the currents of tsunami? In order to retell herself, in order to reformulate her own existence, in order to redefine her own self, in order to rediscover herself; every woman is an island. So, they remain an island only and all around there are emotions, waves all sorts of things, but she stands there like an island.

So, how beautiful. We can have some more poems and can find the sort of beauty and the benignity and the depth of feelings. The sort of authentic meaning that the persona in this poem is actually longing for. But then unlike Tara Patel, Menka Shivdasani is not confined only to women's issues see also thinks about other concerns of life.

Of course, there are anxieties-- there are isolations, there are longings for love, but then there are also lessons of life. Where there are things which one is unable to settle finally, comes across a sort of disillusionment and finds that life is nothing but an empty dream. And finally, we can find a sort of return and return to emptiness.

In this return to emptiness the poet may appear to be a bit philosophic, the poet may appear to have the notion of the Herbertian philosophy.

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Returning to Emptiness

Far beyond where bulldozers break
The mountains four hundred steps
Up a bare hillside, is a shivalingam
That bleeds on touch.

The world gushes past in a broken pipe
Some of us fill water from the cracks,
Some of us sit, fat stones,
On rough-shod slopes.
Some of us are suspended in the sky.

This is a return to emptiness,
Where salt pans breathe tales
Of long-past liberties,
Men smoke their pipe dreams silently,
Women wear rouge like blood in war,
Trains spurt into stations like lost love.

Out in the distance
I bleed on touch.
But why does the stone stay dry?

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And then the poet says—"Far beyond where bulldozers break,/ the mountains four hundred steps/ up a bare hillside is a shivalingum/ that bleeds on touch." Now, here the poet actually talks about how we have actually been following up a sort of tradition, a

tradition of worshipping gods, but at the same time with the advance of civilization with the new progressive ways of the world.

What is happening you know a sort of commodification of everything is taking place and in this blind race of progress. “The bulldozers break/ the mountains for four hundred steps/ and then there is a god. So, god appears to be I mean the shivalingum appears to be now a thing of neglect because humans are striving towards or striving for a sort of progress.

“The world gushes past in a broken pipe/ some of us fill water from the cracks,/. The poet also in a way brings about the contemporary scenario where everyone if they find a sort of break, if this find a sort of crack; they want to make hay while the sun shines. Everyone is waiting for an opportunity; everyone is actually trying to find out some ways to get/ fill water from the cracks.

I mean water has also become a sort of impossibility because as men we are breaking mountains, as men we are in our blind craze for progress and prosperity. We are harming our nature and then where from the water can come. The water and the water here, I mean, there is a pun here also. People are filling water from the cracks also. “Some of us sit, fat stones /on rough shod slopes, /some of us are suspended in the sky.”

So, we start thinking. There is a sort of philosophical tinge here that while some people are trying to take advantage of the situation, try to take advantage of situation that has been created in a contemporary world. There are also people who actually are very indifferent and they simply look towards the sky, they feel themselves suspended in the sky.

“There is a return to emptiness/ where salt, pans, breathe, tales/ of long past liberties. / Men smoke their pipes men smoke their pipe dreams silently/ and women wear rouge like blood in war,/ trains spurt into stations like lost love.” It appears as if we have lost our destinations, we are actually trying to upset our past-- the past that we are so proud of.

Actually this can also be interpreted in a different way as in the blind race for progress. Are we really also thinking about the sustainability? Not at all. Perhaps there is a return to emptiness where salt, pans, breathe, tales; of long past liberties men smoke their pipe

dreams silently. And women wear rouge like blood in war rouge like blood in war.” See the use of simile here.

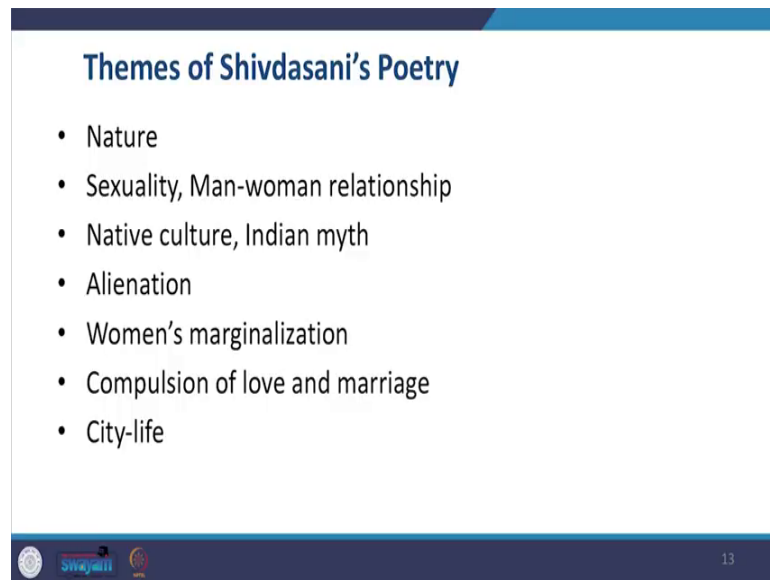
So, as if they are prepared for a different sort of revolt and then the trains spurt into stations like lost love. I mean the movements, the aims the destinations appear to be like lost love. And then towards the end what the poet says is an eye- opener, ‘out in the distance/ I bleed on touch.’

But why does the stone stay dry, why when all these things are taking place how when man is in actually in a fight against nature why these stones, why these mountains keep mum when we are trying to make when we are trying to destroy all that we were so proud of.

So, there is actually a conflict between tradition and talent, there is a conflict between tradition and modernity, there is actually a clash between two sorts of people. One who is always trying to take advantage of the situation and the other who actually becomes very philosophic. And appears to see himself as one suspended in the sky on rough shod, rough shod slopes.

So, returning to emptiness is a different sort of poem and this can be interpreted in a variety of ways, it can be read from the point of view of a sort of ecological study, a sort of eco critical one. It can also be thought of as a sort of philosophic poem which actually in a way talks about the contemporary scenario, where everyone is trying to make hay while the sun shines.

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We can also find the themes of Shivdasani's poetry which actually have been disseminated in different forms, where Shivdasani talks about nature. She also talks about sexuality and the man woman relationships, she is also in some of the poems you can find where she talks about human relationships and she also goes back to Indian myth where she talks about Sita.

She also talks about our scriptures--- Ramayana, she also talks about love and marriage and disillusionment and she also talks about the complexities of city life which is full of filth, which is full of power cuts, which is full of bugs, which is full of noises, which is full of silences.

Now, let us take a different note which I found in the poems of Shivdasani and this poem is entitled *Ramayana Revisited*. This is actually a poem which the poet appears to have written while she might have watched the Ramayana on the television. Once upon a time it was very famous and it had actually stirred the minds not only of adults, but also of children. And then once again we appear to have the feelings of reverence, once again for our old deities, for our old gods and goddesses and incarnations.

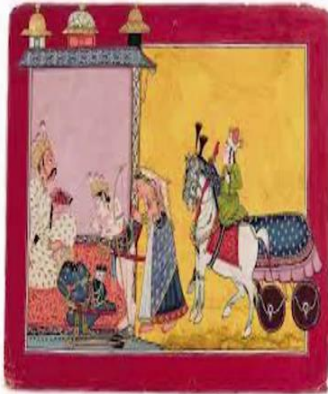
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"Ramayana Revisited"

The television seeps through the wall
like yet another nightmare.
Somebody's crying as usual, tomato ketchup
oozing past a knife. And here, something else
coagulates beneath my eyelash.

Nothing they taught me in the chemistry lab
prepared me for the iodine gas
raging purple as a sin in my gut,
some awful cure for a wound
that turned to air.
Sita, garish as a myth,
lacerates me as she wails
on the screen.

So much motion
trapped in a drawing room
cabinet. I rock on the chair,
remain exactly where I am,
see Sita get carried away
by the demon. Then,
it is time for lunch.



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So, the poem goes like this---- “The television seeps through the wall/ like yet another nightmare./ somebody is crying as usual tomato ketchup/ oozing past a knife. And here something else/ coagulates beneath my eyelash.../Nothing they taught me in the chemistry lab/ prepared me for the iodine gas/ raging purple as a sin in my gut,/ some awful cure for a wound/ that turned to air/ Sita garish as a myth/ lacerates me as she wails/ on the screen.” So now, there is actually a dig at the way knowledge is being garnered, knowledge is being gathered.

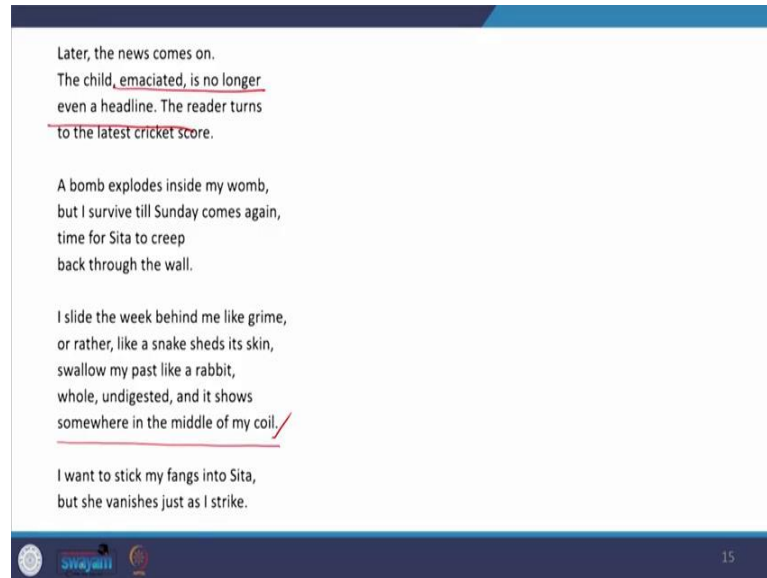
And she talks about how the modern knowledge has told us about all sorts of arms and ammunitions and warfares, but then as a woman I simply think of Sita as a myth and she also relates it to the contemporary situation. That what if Sita were in the present day context what could have happened to Sita, because in and around the city and wherever she goes because she is a freelance journalist and in her travels she might have come across several situations. And she says--- “So much motion/ trapped in a drawing room.

This in this small drawing room I find a lot of motion drawing room ‘cabinet. I rock on the chair/ remain exactly where I am/ see Sita get carried away/ by the demon. Then/ it is time for lunch.” So now, there is another dig that why do we talk about you know on the one hand we are talking about the scriptures we are talking about the sacredness, we are talking about the the sanctimoniousness.

And at the same time we find Sita being carried away by the demon. So, in our scriptures also we had this, but the poet compares it to the present day world order to the present

day situation. And then it is lunch time, it is lunch time. So, Sita you know there was a time when there were several episodes and I think on that day when Sita was carried away by the demon it was at that time that it was actually the time for the lunch.

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And then again she continues, later the news comes on look at now. Suddenly the poet, from this scripture comes out and she has a look at the television and the news and says later the news comes on – ‘the child emaciated is no longer even a headline.’

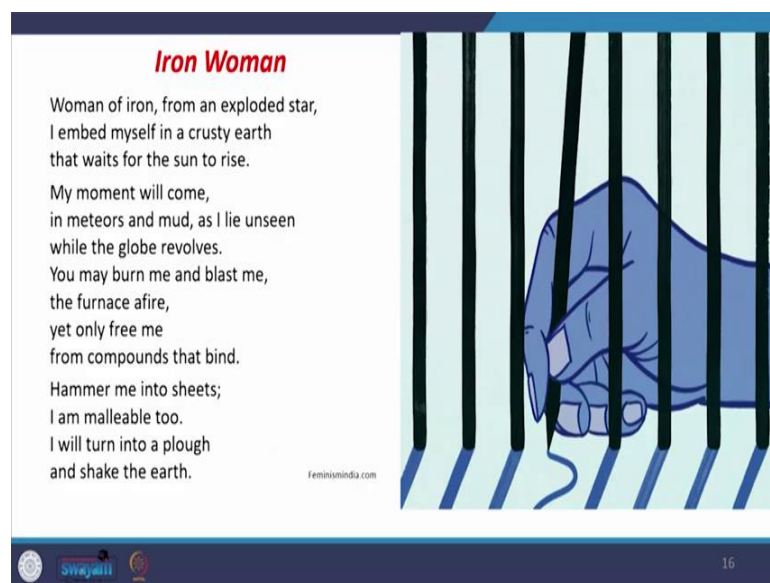
The reader turns/ to the latest cricket score’. How suddenly you know; the events, the moments, the consequences, the happenings of the world, fine. The child emaciated is no longer even a headline, but suddenly you know there is a change and then there is a sort of revelry. Why? Because the reader turns to the latest cricket score a bomb explodes inside my womb, but I survive till Sunday comes again.

There is a question, because you know Sita being carried away by the demon and I was thinking of what will happen now. But I will have ‘to wait for Sunday,/ time for Sita to creep/ back through the wall. Time for Sita to creep back through the wall/ I slide the week behind me like grime/ or rather like a snake sheds its skin/ swallow my past like a rabbit/ whole undigested and it shows/ somewhere in the middle of my coil./ I want to stick my fangs into Sita,/ but she vanishes just as I strike.’”

So, my curiosity when on the one hand I see Sita who was a deity and Sita was taken away by the demon. And then I look at this world-- how the world I mean she actually tries to create a sort of analogy. And then she says—Sita being carried away by the demon, but then the world is all you know full of rejoicing and even the reader actually talks about the cricket news and my curiosity continues.

And you know I think of all the present day mishaps that is taking place in the world and then I want to stick my fangs into Sita, like Sita I have coiled, you know. Somewhere in the middle of my coil I want to stick my fangs into Sita- why did Sita not revolt, Sita is a myth. Sita is the question that requires so many answers, I want to stick my fangs into Sita, but she vanishes just as I strike and the poet leaves the poem open for all sorts of interpretations.

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Iron Woman

Woman of iron, from an exploded star,
I embed myself in a crusty earth
that waits for the sun to rise.

My moment will come,
in meteors and mud, as I lie unseen
while the globe revolves.
You may burn me and blast me,
the furnace afire,
yet only free me
from compounds that bind.

Hammer me into sheets;
I am malleable too.
I will turn into a plough
and shake the earth.

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But then through her poems, the poet actually wants to say that a lady or a woman can also be an iron woman and in this poem when she talks about. Because every now and then she has been talking about the flaming fire. There is actually a zeal, there is a strength and in this poem entitled “Iron Woman.”She says-- Woman of iron, I mean she talks about the importance the power.

And then she says, perhaps you do not know my limitations, perhaps you do not understand my worth, perhaps you do not know my flexibility, perhaps you do not understand my usefulness, perhaps you do not understand my significance. I can expand;

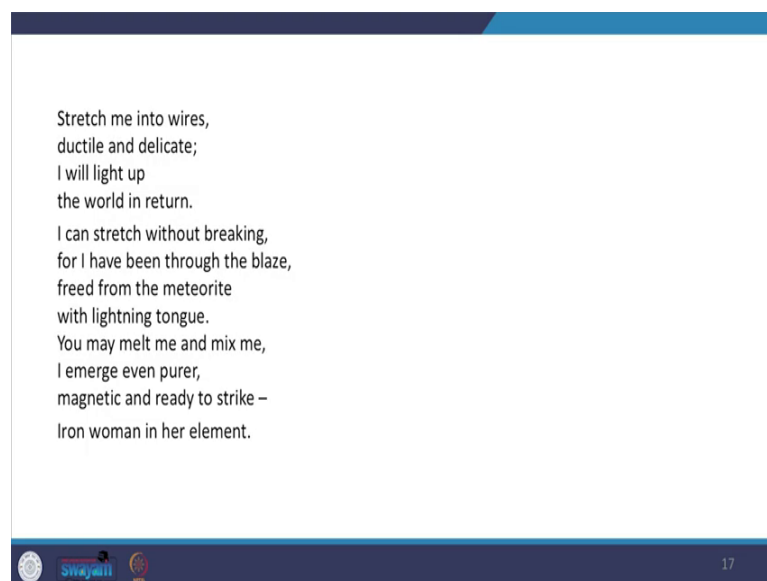
however, hard you hammer me out I can expand myself. So, let us read the lines of the poem, so that you can yourself try to find out the meaning.

“Woman of iron from an exploded star/ I embed myself in a crusty earth/ that waits for the sun to rise./ My moment will come/ in meteors and mud as I lie unseen,/. How long can I remain cold, how long can I remain under this crusty earth. “While the globe revolves/ you may burn me and blast me/ the furnace of fire/ yet only free me/ from compounds that bind./ There will come a time when you will free me from your bonds fine, from the sort of prison house that you have created around me and then she says- ‘hammer me into sheets/ I am malleable too.’

You have not seen my malleability, you have not seen my flexibility. You have not seen my quality of expansion, ‘I will turn into a plough/ and shake the earth.’ Once again like Sita I will come out of it. Whatever you do, fine, if you really want to relegate me to the backyards, you really want to burn me fine.

So, the poet has got so many questions and the poet actually tricks the weapon of a poem. And says that I am an iron woman, hammer me into sheets I am malleable too I will turn into a plough and shake the earth I have that power. So, why do you negate my power why do you underestimate my power.

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Stretch me into wires,
ductile and delicate;
I will light up
the world in return.

I can stretch without breaking,
for I have been through the blaze,
freed from the meteorite
with lightning tongue.

You may melt me and mix me,
I emerge even purer,
magnetic and ready to strike –
Iron woman in her element.

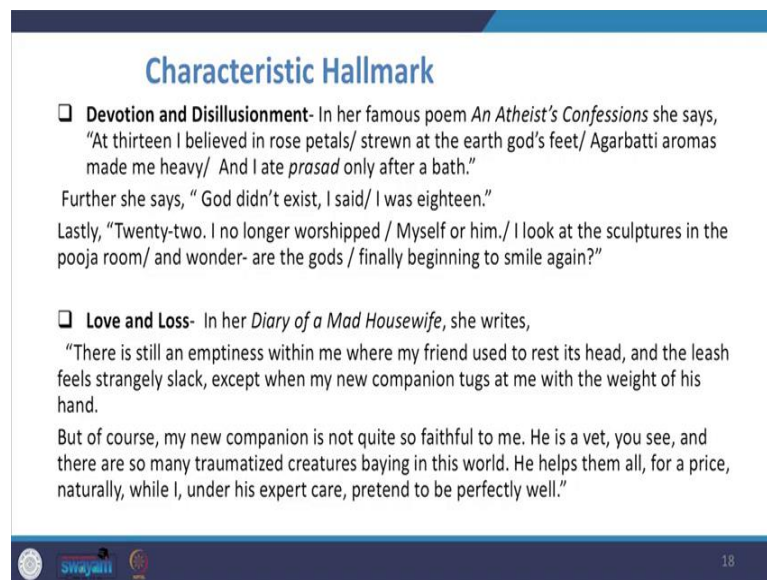
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And then she says, ‘stretch me into wires and ductile and delicate/ I will light up look at the words light up/ the world in return. / Have you seen these sort of rays, have you seen the sort of light that I possess.

“I can stretch without breaking, /for I have been through the blaze,/ freed from the meteorite/ with lightening tongue/ you may melt me and mix me/ I emerge even purer/ magnetic and ready to strike/ iron woman in her element.” Perhaps you do not understand within my layers, how power lies, what a sort of power is there within me. You actually have to whatever you do despite all sorts of operations.

Despite all sorts of persecutions bent upon me I will always come victorious, I will always come triumphant, I will always come as a winner you perhaps have not realized, but that day will come. This is actually a call for a change and this is also a call for people to realize the worth of a woman, there will be a new civilization, there will be a new dawn on earth. We can continue unraveling the joys in the world of Menka Shivdasani.

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Characteristic Hallmark

- ❑ **Devotion and Disillusionment-** In her famous poem *An Atheist's Confessions* she says, "At thirteen I believed in rose petals/ strewn at the earth god's feet/ Agarbatti aromas made me heavy/ And I ate *prasad* only after a bath."
Further she says, " God didn't exist, I said/ I was eighteen."
Lastly, "Twenty-two. I no longer worshipped / Myself or him./ I look at the sculptures in the puja room/ and wonder- are the gods / finally beginning to smile again?"
- ❑ **Love and Loss-** In her *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, she writes, "There is still an emptiness within me where my friend used to rest its head, and the leash feels strangely slack, except when my new companion tugs at me with the weight of his hand.
But of course, my new companion is not quite so faithful to me. He is a vet, you see, and there are so many traumatized creatures baying in this world. He helps them all, for a price, naturally, while I, under his expert care, pretend to be perfectly well."

But we can take some characteristic hallmarks of our poetry, in a very short way devotion and disillusionment they are working in majority of the poems. As I have been saying that Menka had been writing poems since she was a school girl and in those poems one may not find that much of maturity, but then that was of a growing poet.

But then she says— “At thirteen I believed in rose petals/ strewn at the earth god’s feet/
Agarbatti aromas made me heavy/ And I ate prasad only after a bath.”

She is also not opposed to the uses of Indian words. She talks about a tradition. But later on, she says when she looks at the world that how when we are child. When we are child we do not know the complexities and the realities of this world, but then later she says, “God did not exist, I said I was eighteen.” Once I become young the world for me will change. I will have to face numerous gauges that go on dripping me and dripping me those the blazes fine.

Lastly, “Twenty-two. I no longer worshipped / Myself or him./ I look at the sculptures in the pooja room/ and wonder- are the gods / finally beginning to smile again?” And she also puts a question to this man-made world, man-made god.

And she says as I grow twenty two I simply look at these sculptures that talk of high ideals. And perhaps there is a reference to so many women being actually maltreated at the hands of men and then she says and I wonder are the gods finally, beginning to smile again.

God has become so powerless when all sorts of atrocities are hyped upon women. And then she also talks about love and loss in her Diary of a Mad House what Menka writes is actually a very important she says. “There is still an emptiness within me where my friend used to rest its head and the leash feels strangely slack, except when my new companion tugs at me with the weight of his hand.”


But of course, “my new companion is not quite so faithful to me, he is a vet you see. And there are so many traumatized creatures being in this world. He helps them all for a price naturally while I under his expert care pretends to be perfectly well.” So, this actually he talks about the various sorts of love and loss and then how love is not permanent rather how love changes in this world of today.

And every changed lover is not the same. Everyone has got his or her own privileges. And they have always been able to see that women are treated in a very quite different way and they have been treated as a thing, as a sort of commodity.

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- ❑ **Women's quest for identity-** In her poetry a woman is not bound to any bondage. She just wants to fly in the open sky but this society does not allow. In her *School Girl No More*, she says, "I learned the mechanics / of bird-flying in Biology / but did not possess the wings".
- ❑ **Alienation-** The artificiality of contemporary life , especially city-life, has been portrayed by her at many places. In her poem *Paper Smiles*, she says-
"I wait alone
seeing silence fall
on a painted wall."
- ❑ In an interview she once remarked, "In the haste and the mindset that a digital world implies, there are times when a writer must slow down"

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Menka also talks about the identity quest or search for identity where in one poem she says in her "School Girl, No More", she says- "I learned the mechanics of/ bird -flying in Biology, /but did not possess the wings."

So, she mocks at there is a sort of self mocking attitude with this poet who says that the lessons that, I learnt in my schools and colleges about bird flying in biology, but then I could not take wings, I think freedom was not allowed, choice was not allowed. There is alienation in one poem or the other you will find, I wait alone seeing silence fall on a painted wall fine.

Actually she has herself admitted in one of her interviews that in the haste and mindset that a digital world implies, there are times when a writer must slow down. And that is why Menka does not write so frequently as other writers or other poets about her poetic craft or creation, she says that a poet should try to observe silence and try to understand the value of silence. So, that one can hear the sound of one's inner voice.

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Her Own Idea of Poetry

- ✓ If you want to write good poetry, first read good poetry.
- ✓ Pay attention to craft and to what may seem like little details.
- ✓ Be willing to revise, as many times as necessary.
- ✓ Let your work mature before you allow it to be published.
- ✓ Learn to value silence, so that you can hear the sound of your inner voice.

Then stay faithful to it, and true to yourself.

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For good poetry what she says and advises is, ‘in order to write good poetry one should read good poetry.’ And she also is in favor of not writing quickly, but let the ideas sink let the feeling sink. So, that they can take a birth in a better way.

Having discussed, some of the poems of Menka Shivdasani. Because my intention here is to familiarize the readers with the beautiful works of Menka Shivdasani and I think that Menka Shivdasani in the days to come and the years to come will get adequate attention of poets and critics. Because it was only in a few anthologies that she has been included, but then there have been very beautiful comments about her poetic craft.

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Critical Assessment

- “Menka Shivdasan’s poetry is both original and striking unusual, not just her tangential way of putting things across, but also how thought process and imagination run away with the poem and make it exciting. An experience is translated into another experience and then gets mixed with fancy in juice blender.” (Keki. Daruwalla)
- “Her poetry holds together a private world of chaotic emotions through its logical development and its strikingly imaginative images.” (Bruce King)
- “But this ‘womanhood’ that she tries to seek is not easy to get only a series of experiences that not only harden just as carbon is subjected to various process to make what can be called a diamond but also awaken the inner to the realities in the mundane world” (K.V.Raghupati)

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Keki and Daruwalla says- “Menka Shivdasani’s poetry is both original and striking’ though it appears to be unusual ‘not just her tangential way of putting things across, but also how thought process and imagination run away with the poem and make it exciting. An experience is translated into another experience and then gets mixed up with fancy in juice blender.”

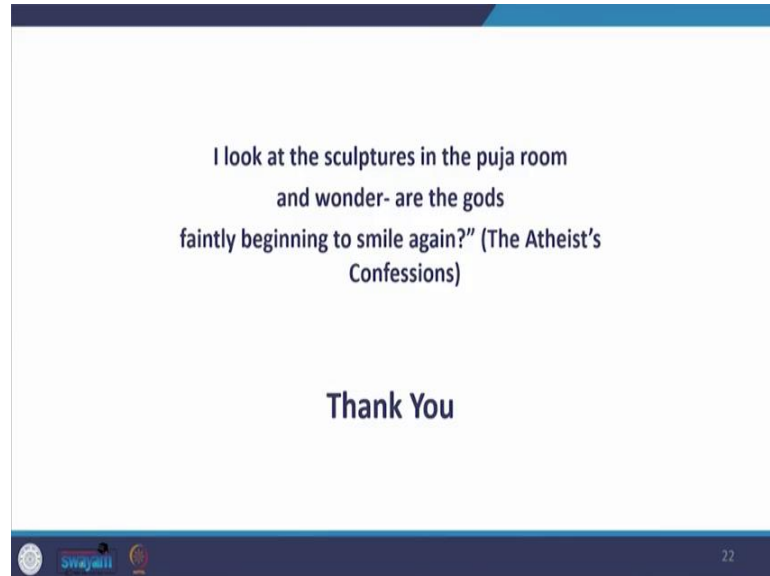
“Her poetry holds together a private world of chaotic emotions, through its logical development and strikingly imaginative images”, rightly as Bruce king said. And K. V. Raghupati one of the famous critics of the contemporary poetry says, but what he says we can have a look at it. “But this womanhood that she tries to seek is not easy to get only a series of experiences that only harden just as carbon is subjected to various process to make what can be called a diamond, but also awaken the inner to the realities in the mundane world.”

My dear friends, in this mundane world poetry actually requires listeners. Poetry requires people who could lend their voices to it, poetry requires patient ears. Poetry requires patient thoughts because unless and until we give patient thoughts to a poem we cannot enjoy, we cannot extract the joys of a poem.

So, having discussed some of the poetic gems of Menka Shivdasani the time has come now to wind up, but it would not be a better way to wind up this talk by taking some

lines from Menka Shivdasani's one of the poems "The Atheist's Confessions", where she says.

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"I look at the sculptures in the puja room/ and wonder- are the gods faintly beginning to smile again?" This is a world where our traditions say that god exists, but if god exists why there are incidents which we do not approve of.

If god exists how can there be cruelties coming to us, ruining us, in various forms, in various manifestations. Are we not living in a world where god has also become a mute spectator, but then god should at times or the other smile even though faintly, violently, subtly. And with this let us come to the end of this talk.

Thank you very much. Have a nice day.