

Book Review

A Review of Shweta Mishra's *What is a Woman: This is Trash. Leave It*

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Shweta Mishra, *What is a Woman: This is Trash. Leave It*. Authorspress, Delhi. 2016.
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Living in a world where academicians use subtle language to be politely dismissive of issues, it is a wonderful experience to read a work where the writer does not mince her words, avoid clichés and honestly and bluntly speaks her mind.

This is Shweta Mishra's maiden venture into creative writing. The book under review consists of chapters in the form of letters written to God, each letter further followed by writer's reflection on various issues. While reading this book, I was instantly reminded of Afro-American Alice Walker's epistolary womanist novel *The Colour Purple* where the central character Celie writes letters to God. The blurb tells us that a lecturer by profession Shweta has done her doctoral work on African American women writers. She dedicates this book to "all the girls raped, prostitutes, to every woman who has ever suffered lustful male gaze, and to every man who has understood the meaning of true love and has with true devotion and honesty loved a woman in his life."

It is an interesting book in terms of form. It is a mesh of various forms of writing and is not meant to please. Anticipating the criticism that she might face while playing with the form of the book, she defends herself by telling the readers in the foreword that the "Prose, verse, dialogues and letters, I flow into all forms of writing to get myself across, and to vent all, in whichever form, it soothes and suits me most. This work is a collage of different forms of writing. This enriches the text. I indulge more into natural outbursts that guide my pen and that push me; and less into artificial and superimposed design of the brain."

In the introduction she touches upon the notion of verbal abuse prevalent in the Indian society that take recourse to women's private parts as the focal point. Shweta has something very interesting to talk about this,

I learnt that if one has to de mean a man use slangs that are associated with women. There are verbal abuses, that refer to women's private organs, her vagina

particularly. . .The world makes our vaginas ordinary or extraordinary. Ordinary when they rape us extraordinary when they have to bring disgrace to a man. (17).

She is aware of the flak that the views might invite and she repeatedly lays emphasis on the subversive quality of her work, “So women of my kind and mind are a threat to the society. They are not wild women. They are evil women with evil minds, rather scary. They are ominous, dreadful, fit to be burnt alive.” (19)

It is the honest renderings of her thoughts that is the strength of the book. There is not a single page in the book where the readers are not served anger. She is not in the favour of the cliché that “men will be men” attitude. “In nine chapters I erupt that which has distressed, depressed and disturbed me most.” She is aware that this work can be or could be declared as “just-another addition” to the huge corpus of feminist writing. The book opens with a section titled “Just a Thought” where she makes a plea for compulsory self-defence training for school girls across the world. The author has also provided the readers with well written end notes. She is a passionate and an angry woman. Her anger is conspicuous enough. She does not mince her words. She does not bombard her readers with complex literary jargon and theories. There are frank references to her life. The book is remarkable for its major interventions in the areas of gender related violence and discrimination.

The book is divided into nine chapters with very interesting titles; each chapter offers a critique of the gender atrocities women face everywhere. It is her passion for the subject that inspires her to engage so intensely and critically with contemporary society and its hypocrisy.

The second chapter titled “Rapes are harmful. Do not get raped. Avoid them,” touches upon the taboo topic of rape. The culture of victim blaming gets emphasised, “Girls should be careful about what they are wearing.” (24). The chapter consists of a moving poem about a school girl getting raped. Shweta speaks in first person aligning herself with the victims of gender related violence and this adds to the passion and zeal that she feels for the topic under discussion. The ruthlessness of the society towards a victim of rape is something that bothers the writer as she says towards the end of the chapter, “If a woman dares to fight for justice, she is harassed and belittled by police authorities, lawyers and judges, doctors, family, relatives and neighbours.” (35) The chapter ends with a thought provoking question, “Women and girls raped: Are these Goddesses of Power: *Shakti, Durga or Kali?*”

The third chapter “Let Her Be A Prostitute By Choice. Not Force. And Respect Her.” Prostitute becomes a symbol of commodification of women. The chapter begins with a touching poem about human trafficking. Quoting a famous Bollywood song, “*Tu cheez badi hai mast mast,*” she goes into the nuances of the word “cheez”, roughly translated as “object”. With subtle humour and blunt sarcasm she puts forward an argument of respecting prostitution. She says, “Why does this world not appraise whores for indulging in so exhausting and self-giving a task. . .These women are ‘supra-entrepreneurs’.”

The fourth chapter, "Who is a 'Man'" is a take on the very clichéd statement that "Men will be men" to bring home a point that "all men behave, act, react, comment, gesture, joke about women's private parts and all men think alike when it comes to women." The chapter consists of four fictional conversations between characters who are given generic names like, Mr. R, Student, Miss A, Mr. G, Mr. T, First boy, Second Boy, etc. Shweta tries to decipher what constitutes masculinity. What makes this book very interesting is that it is interspersed with instances of writer's own life experiences.

The fifth and the sixth chapter are a critique of the institution of marriage that reduces women to a position where they only learn to comply and adjust. Shweta asks a very pertinent question, "So long as there is the need to empower are they empowered? So long as there is the scope for women empowerment are they strong?" (80)

The writer further delves into the issues of authority exerted by men in the next two chapters. Shweta also speaks against the culture of victim blaming "If a girl remains out of the house in odd hours, she would definitely be raped. It's justified. Bound to happen thing. Such mishaps are her doing. Who is to be blamed? Men are nowhere in the scene. This food for thought is served on a platter by the patriarchal world and everybody is supposed to gobble it up." (110)

In the last chapter titled "I Love Myself" she says "I, WHO IS NOT JUST A BODY, am also made up of mind and soul. Though there are several other meaningful layers to my being, body is what is counted." The last portion of the book comprises of a long poem where she says that she loves her body and her mind.

There are few instances of typographical sloppiness that could have been avoided. Take for instance the following lines: ". . . how well they separate their legs . . ." (p.44) "Avoid risk and live life to the lees." (48) "They world en-cashes weaknesses." (110)

Moreover, one cannot help but feel that it is too ambitious and idealist on her part to assume that if human beings connect with their inner selves there would not be violence, "If they connect with the inner self, there would not be violence. We would not be "hu'man" beings. We would rather be 'sensitive' beings, 'discerning souls.'"

Undoubtedly this is a book written to imagine a better world; but she is a brave writer deserves applause. I enjoyed reading every bit of it and would congratulate her for her courage to fully lay bare her views with such honesty.

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