

SUMITRA MUKERJI/Poem

[Author's Note: The following poem is partly based on hearsay reports about an alleged "true incident" concerning the rape and murder of a young, married Muslim woman by policemen in the city of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India, which occurred while I was living and working in that city during the late 1980s.

The young woman (called "Rameeza" in the hearsay reports, though her actual name was never clear) was visiting the city with her husband; the latter got into some altercation with a group of drunk policemen on Nampally Road; he was beaten up, the couple were dragged into a nearby police station, and the woman's body found in the neighboring public gardens the next morning. There was evidence of physical abuse and signs of struggle, indicating rape, on the woman's body. The husband was reported, in an FIR filed at the station, as "missing." Who filed the FIR was also unclear. So the incident, briefly mentioned in local news dailies at that time, went down as "hearsay" and "story" – though as we know, such "stories" are sadly common in everyday life.

I say "partly based" because the poem is about more than a story of rape and murder: it deals with themes, issues, thoughts, and feelings relating to womanhood, gender, and communal identities in my homeland, India; and the writer's burden of memory.]

RAMEEZA

Against this page
a woman's hair
the stench of blood
jagged fingernails gnawing
flesh from face, bone
stripped to sepulchrous smile
of lust encasing terror.
Childlike innocence prying
through her parted thighs,
jaw clenched with shame
so tight, it locks forever
the utterance that might release
her yearning from nightly bondage.

Disembodied nightmare
of my dream of desire.

No wonder words elide
the savage grasp of fingers
spurning complicity with the hand
that softly strokes my lover to rest.

I never knew you, Rameeza
but each time I walk out my door
and down the streets of Nampally
my steps swallow the dust of your bones.
They lie buried beneath these stones
consecrated by pavements where
lepers rot under lamp-posts.

I know you as I might know my blood
crawling darkly between my thighs
a stench of shame
to be thrown away
in clotted rags, each month.
I would not have such knowledge, Rameeza
our womanhood was not meant as garbage
for carrion crows to feed upon.

And so I dream of a young woman
with flowers in her hair;
her body is the freshness of dew
in the morning,
her smell the fragrance
of mountain air,
the glow from her eyes
sunlight on water.

She walks alone, unafraid.
And in her laughter, in her smile
lies the world's invitation
to enter her house
with grace.

*

Yet each time I walk out the door
and down the streets of Nampally,
I walk with women shrouded in black,
bound head to foot in layers
of a tradition
reminiscent of sackcloth, buried
in layers so deep,
you only see their eyes.
Only a flicker
of yearning
in dead eyes.

Together, our feet trample
the flowers from your hair
crush the fragrance of my dream
(to stale musk among withered pages)
while your assailants rise, disembodied,
a stench from beneath the pavements,
from beneath the shadow of your burkha.

From the shadow of the policeman's baton
waving law against Hyderabad's noon-day heat;
against your veils and drapes,
dripping with transgression.

Rise disembodied in the name of a father,
the command of a brother, the hold of a husband.
Whose tenets will presume to teach us
the lessons of proper womanhood
whose batons will claim to guard us
from our wayward desires
whose decrees will want
to wrap around our minds
like dark curtains shutting out
that glare of sunlight.
Rise, like that mirage mirroring lust
waving the baton of uniformed law
with will to bind.

*

Against those bonds
a dream of desire.

To see, touch, even embrace,
my sister beneath those wraps,
to speak with her openly,
not in a huddled whisper;
to share her daily tidings
and nightly yearnings
without shame or fear,
to run with her on these cobbled stones
to trip and fall, laughing,
like children playing together.

Against this dream
a crushed petal on the pavement

the terror in your dead eyes
mirrored in mine
so often
when I nightly stroke
my love to rest.

With what will, then, do I presume
to stamp a faint fragrance
into these withered pages?
With what name can I call out to you,
Rameeza,
Ameena, Zuhaida, Farida, Iftr, ...
to begin to know you
in the sunlight and freshness of morning
as I would know myself?

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