

Manifold forms of culture-based unkindness and cruelty

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People who do not have a public voice often still make themselves heard in private groups and small circles. Many of them do this through poetry and other forms of expression. No matter the size of the audience, the individual poet and writer finds fulfillment in the very expression of an issue important to her. There is a need to tell, regardless of whether or not an audience is there to listen.

This telling is not the same as that of an accomplished artist who is aware of his audience. He is likely to know why he is doing what he does; he may be trying to entertain or educate or both. Those who write without expecting an audience however, do so because of a need to tell whatever they feel so strongly about. The writings in this volume of *Ethics in Action* mostly belong to this category, written by people who feel a strong sense of injustice and who want to register a protest even it is not going to be heard by anybody. Not only does this writing then represent the sigh of the oppressed, it also represents that aspect of human dignity which even when suppressed to the utmost, still needs to protest.

Take the case of a girl who records her painful thoughts about being treated by her father as someone of no significance, while her brother is showered with demonstrations of love, in *I am a girl*:

*My father says: "She does not belong to us,
She is a daughter, a shadow who is with us for a fleeting time only."
My mother says that when I go to sleep at night,
And wander carelessly in the wonderful world of dreams,
My father comes and fondles my head
Smiling softly to himself.*

*How I wish that one such day I wake up
To see and feel my father's love.*

Or a woman's painful memory of genital mutilation in *The Cut* by Maryam Sheikh Abdi, which describes how older women pretend to be strong while mechanically participating in this horrendous act of cruelty against womanhood and a little child.

*Obediently, I sat between the legs of the woman
who would hold my upper abdomen,
and each of the other four women grasped my legs and hands.
I was stretched apart and each limb firmly held.
And under the shade of a tree...
the cutter begun her work...
the pain... is so vivid to this day,
decades after it was done.
God, it was awful!*

This poem is not just about revealing a horrible ritual forced upon women in certain cultures; it is a poem of defiance. A woman speaks out about what she is supposed to keep quiet, what she should accept with resignation as a virtuous woman. She cries out loud so that all can hear the vulgarity and inhumanity that goes on in the name of culture. When the oppressed creature acquires the capacity to break the silence and expresses what is not expected to be expressed, it is defiance. In the face of such defiance oppression is challenged; this is the moment the seed is

broken to give way to a new life. The poet is engaged in this creativity, directed towards causing shock and even pain so that conscience buried under the ashes can rise again. *Women* by Frederico Mayor is about a new song of a woman to see things differently. “*Woman, Your eyes Saw the world in another way.*” It calls for women to have no other masters and to live equal and free, “*as companions.*”

Other poems look at social practices that undermine women. Sue Silvermaria writes of how religious sanctions subject women to brutality:

*Before the flogging they buried me to my waist in mud
One hundred times and one, they beat me with a cane
Because I was wearing a burqa
the mullah was spared the sight of my blood.*

Similarly, Sita Agarwal writes about the treatment of women under in Hinduism, from dowry related cruelty to female infanticide:

After 50 years of Independence, cases of female infanticide, sati, dowry-related murders and crimes against women are on the increase, and in many cases are at their highest levels seen since the birth of the Indian Republic. I soon realized that the reason is that Indian feminism has not tackled the core of the evil, but has only squabbled about superficial aspects of the problem. Western feminism was merely transplanted onto the subcontinent, and like many plants, had been unable to thrive in its new environment. It is only by tackling the root of the problem that this plant can grow. I hope that this book shall enlighten all Indian women as to the true reasons for the abject state of subjugation we are in.

The experience of women living in cultures that design various schemes to deny them their humanity is common to many others throughout this volume. Various essays and poetry on Dalits and caste discrimination share the same theme of a denial of humanity, as do poems by Mahmoud Darwish.

In one poem a father confronted with racial violence steps out of his car that has been set alight by a mob, takes his two children in his arms and walks back into the burning car to be burned alive together. This is the ultimate protest of a human being trapped in the insanity of his society, who does not want his children to be left to relive the trauma of their parents being burned alive. The type of violence that exists today places many people in such circumstances.

All the writings in this volume demonstrate a state of injustice that is legitimized. The injustices narrated are not accidents or rare occurrences; they are the routine of a perverse society.

Any creative writing within such a society would necessarily have to deal with this actuality. For this reason, the writers in this volume have moved away from any romantic or nationalist perspectives. Rather, humanity is at the center of their concern. In fact, justice and humanity are manifested in these writings as two sides of the same reality. A society that denies justice cannot be romanticized simply because it is ‘our society’. In fact, such a society is not and cannot be our society. It can only appear to be ours through propaganda and the creation of the ‘other’ (whether in colour, gender, race or language). In these writings, the only ‘others’ recognized are those who deny justice. Everyone else is embraced as ‘ours’. Poverty and other forms of deprivation do not serve to exclude; rather, they offer greater reason to be included as ‘ours’. Humanity is no exclusive group.

This volume of *Ethics in Action* is a compilation of poetry, prose and pictures taken from past issues of the Asian Human Rights Commission's *Human Rights and Culture* newsletter (<http://www.ahrchk.net/pub/mainfile.php/hrculture/>).

The newsletter publishes various cultural expressions based on the pivotal theme of justice, the search for which is at the very essence of being human. Human beings are part of nature and part of each other. Perhaps the lines of John Donne are most relevant: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind."

Contemporary mass culture promotes violence and destruction. There are those who are opposed to mass culture and want to reclaim the best traditions of human culture within which justice remains a core issue. The newsletter provides space for those who wish to share their creative initiatives.