

Five Poems About Women

by Devi Prasad Mishra

1

*Women are not seen here.
They may have been ground into
flour or
may rise like the fragrance of mint
from the condiments.*

*They may be boiling like oil in which
the dish most needed by the family
is being cooked.*

*Chandeliers of domesticity
They may be hanging
in dark corners, watching
the masonry of the house
crumble to dust.*

*They may be odorous
as frying onions.
Like cockroaches,
They must be plunged
in something, somewhere
in the house.*

*They must be in the house, like
the mice of the house, where
can they go, if they leave the house?
Do have some tea
— it is they who have made it.*

2.

*Woman!
Do go behind the curtain.
These are men. If you must
come before them, glide past,
as a terror stricken mongoose
passes through the kitchen.*

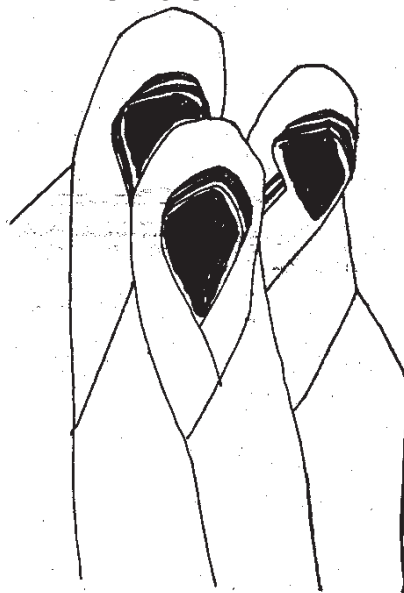
*Be seen
marginally.
Without laughing much,
without speaking much,
without looking anyone
straight in the eye,*

*Indicate your presence
by moving the curtain.*

3.

*You have given birth.
Now get up.
Shake off the smell
of garlic, of benzoin, oil,
mustard, salt and ointments,
the scent of the child.*

*All the days that you lay
in the birthchamber,
work was piling up in the house.*



*Get up quickly,
Wash your husband's underwear
and vest—
They have become grimy.*

*Get up, dress, and adorn yourself.
Cover your pain with a veil.
Get up, and close up your being
in the canisters of the house.*

*Thanks for the progeny.
But what is this you have done—
You have given birth to a girl!*

4.

*Embracing her, the women
kept sobbing; wailing
in the tones of grief
that are suited to death.*

*Theirs but to make cowdung cakes
and to weep,
and to send a daughter of the village
to a somewhat better sorrow.*

*They asked her nothing
about her husband.
Theirs but to weep
for a sister of the village
as one weeps at death.*

*They had nothing to teach
their friend from whom
they were parting;
Could not even wish her
at least one carefree
moment of love.*

5.

*Is it not a fault
in your lungs
that the wood smokes so much?*

*Is it not due to your weakness
that the house gets so dusty?*

*Is it not a fault in your cooking
that the food is so tasteless?*

*Is it not a fault in your housewifery
that when cutting something,
and thinking of something else,
you cut your finger?*

*(extracted from "Seven Poems
About Women", in **Hans**, November
1985, and translated from Hindi by
Ruth Vanita)*