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Wild Women: Seekers, Protagonists and Goddesses in Sacred Indian Poetry

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H. S. Komalesha

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BOOK REVIEW

Wild Women: Seekers, Protagonists and Goddesses in Sacred Indian Poetry, by Arundhathi Subramaniam, London, Ebury Press/Penguin Random House, 2024, 492 pp., \$29.07 (hb), ISBN: 9780143464907

What is it about poetry that draws us to it in our moments of fragility and transformation? Why do words in poetry offer a sense of sanctuary, a quiet refuge, where we can gather the fragments of ourselves when life feels untethered and overwhelming? How do poems—etched in personal pain or collective longing—transcend time to become sources of hope, resilience, and renewal? The book *Wild Women: Seekers, Protagonists, and Goddesses in Sacred Indian Poetry*, edited by Arundhathi Subramaniam, explores these questions with luminous depth. This anthology invites readers to a world where poetry and spirituality converge, illuminating the enduring power of verse as both a mirror to the self and a bridge to something larger. By resurrecting the voices of mystic women poets and archetypal feminine figures, Subramaniam reveals how these texts are not merely relics of devotion but also profound companions in our quest for healing, self-discovery, and liberation. The collection brings together a polyphony of voices—each distinct yet united by a shared wildness, an untamed quality that defies easy categorization. These poets, who lived across centuries, turned to verse as a way of confronting pain, transcending boundaries, asserting self, and reclaiming power. Subramaniam situates their works as more than expressions of personal longing or spiritual devotion; they are acts of resistance against societal constraints and vehicles for personal transformation. Her collection and analysis frame these poems as living dialogues—conversations across time that resonate with contemporary struggles over identity, gender, and belonging. Divided into three sections, the book offers a fresh lens on the idea of what constitutes a “wild woman,” and traces her through the fearless voices of mystic poets, the imagined figures in sacred narratives, and the archetypal goddesses who embody both defiance and devotion, creation and destruction.

The first section of the anthology introduces mystic women poets who embraced poetry as a means of survival and defiance. It brings together the voices of over 50 women poets spanning centuries—from the ancient verses of the *Therigatha* (4th century BCE) and the lyrical mysticism of 6th-century Vidya and Ammaiyar, through the bold 12th-century *vachana* poets such as Akka Mahadevi and Kalavve, the evocative works of 13th-century Janabai, the spiritual depth of 14th-century Lal Ded, the devotional intensity of 16th-century Mirabai, to the resilience of Rupa Bhavani (17th–18th century), and the reflective modernity of 20th-century Indira Devi—showcasing a vibrant interplay of diverse language-cultures across India, including but not limited to Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, and Odia. Subramaniam’s introduction highlights this theme: These poems “invite us to wear the body—playfully, inventively, consciously. They invite us to revel in the masquerade—the party where everyone knows that masks aren’t meant to be taken seriously, that bodies are always worn provisionally and that no mirror is ultimately

*Editor’s Note: The Journal of Poetry Therapy includes reviews of books of interest to poetry therapists. Of special interest are thematic poetry anthologies that deal with personal issues and experiences, as well as books about any aspect of the therapeutic use of literature and writing. Please note, however, that chapbooks and self-published poetry books will not be considered. To be considered for review, books should be sent to: Karen vanMeenen, MA, CAPF, Book Review Editor, Journal of Poetry Therapy, 38 Cloverland Drive, Rochester, NY, 14610, USA. E-mail: naptpublications@yahoo.com

needed to know oneself" (10). For these poets, the body was both a vessel and a metaphor—a tool for reclaiming agency and expressing their deepest truths.

Akka Mahadevi, who played a major role in the twelfth-century Vachana movement, for instance, rejected societal norms by embracing nudity as an assertion of spiritual freedom. Her verses pulsate with defiance and longing:

People/Male and female,
Blush when a cloth covering their shame
Comes loose.
When the lord of lives/Lives drowned without a face
In the world, how can you be modest
When all the world is the eye of the lord (93–94)

In these lines, vulnerability transforms into a profound source of strength, and longing becomes a bridge to spiritual liberation. The poem dissolves conventional notions of modesty, inviting us to confront our fragility as a form of divine transparency. Here, the act of uncovering is not one of exposure but of truth—an embrace of the self as inseparable from the gaze of the divine. This dynamic tension between fragility and power, between loss and transcendence, permeates much of the poetry in this section. These women redefine resilience not as a static state of invulnerability but as a fluid, evolving interplay of resistance and surrender—a courageous journey toward wholeness.

The second section shifts focus to women as protagonists in works written by men, presenting them, in the process, as complex symbols of strength, desire, and transformation. Through the lens of poets such as Basavanna, Jayadeva, Kabir, and Shah Abdul Latif, women are portrayed not as static archetypes but as dynamic, multidimensional forces. Hence, women in these poems are actors, speakers, and doers who take center stage and exhibit remarkable agency. More often than not, the male poets in this section "invoke female characters or channel the female voice or declare their longing to experience the condition of femininity" (275). Consider this poem by Basavanna:

Look here, dear fellow:
I wear these men's clothes/only for you
Sometimes, I am man,/Sometimes, I am woman.
O lord of the meeting rivers,
I'll make war for you
But, I'll be your devotee's bride (287)

Here, the poet dissolves the boundaries of gender identity to express a profound spiritual devotion where the speaker's fluidity—sometimes man, sometimes woman—illustrates the transcendence of binary roles in the realm of spiritual experience. By "wearing these men's clothes only for you," the speaker suggests that external identities are mere performances, adopted for worldly navigation but ultimately inconsequential in the divine relationship. Basavanna's invocation of femininity as a spiritual state offers a powerful reimagining of gender, suggesting that the condition of femininity is not limited to biological identity but represents a deeper, archetypal capacity for openness, nurturance, and divine union. Through such verses, the male poets in this section channel the feminine not merely as a metaphor but as a transformative experience, offering a vision of spirituality that invites the breaking of barriers—gendered, societal, and personal—in the quest for liberation.

The final section of the anthology focuses on the Goddess, exploring her many avatars as nurturer, protector, destroyer, and liberator—and, as Subramaniam aptly notes, an apt way to celebrate her is "to sing her many names ... as a garland of goddess appellations": Devi, Durga, Mahakali, Amba, Yogamaya, Kali, Parashakti, Linga Bhairavi, etc. (351). Poems in this

section are not merely devotional in tone but are esoteric in nature as they understand the mechanics of the inner journey of life. Hence, poems such as the “Devi Mahatmyam” and the “Soundarya Lahari” offered in this section celebrate her fluidity and multiplicity, presenting the Goddess as a source of boundless vitality. Subramaniam’s commentary brings out the intimacy of these texts, showing how they invite readers into a relationship with the divine that is both personal and transformative. These poems, in brief, prove that they are not distant relics; instead, they can act as companions for anyone seeking solace or strength.

Subramaniam’s approach to translation deserves special attention for its role in making these voices accessible. Translation, she reminds us, is more than a linguistic exercise; it is an act of restoration. By bringing these works into new languages and contexts, translation becomes a bridge between past and present, allowing their healing energy to resonate anew. While acknowledging the inherent limitations of translation, Subramaniam celebrates it as a dynamic process that preserves the vitality of the original voices. The polyphonic nature of the anthology is amplified by these translations, which bring together diverse linguistic traditions, cultural contexts, and poetic styles of India. The book creates a sense of continuity across centuries, and connects readers to a lineage of women who use poetry to navigate their inner and outer worlds. In this way, translation itself becomes a therapeutic act—an effort to keep alive voices that might otherwise be forgotten, ensuring that their capacity to inspire and console remains intact.

One of the most remarkable aspects of *Wild Women* is its refusal to simplify or sanitize its subjects. Subramaniam allows contradictions to remain, recognizing that these complexities are what make the poetry so compelling. She resists the temptation to pigeonhole these women as mere rebels or mystics, instead presenting them as individuals navigating the tensions between devotion and defiance, fragility and strength. This nuanced approach ensures that the book is as much about the present as it is about the past. Subramaniam writes with an awareness of how these voices intersect with contemporary debates on gender, caste, and power. By framing their struggles and triumphs within a broader context, she invites readers to see these women as interlocutors in their own lives, and offers wisdom and courage for the challenges we face today.

Wild Women is a powerful reminder of poetry’s capacity to heal and transform. It reveals how sacred poetry, far from being static or distant, is deeply rooted in life’s most pressing questions—about identity, freedom, resilience, and connection. Subramaniam’s exploration of these voices is both scholarly and deeply personal, thus creating a work that speaks to the head and the heart. For those seeking poetry as a source of strength, this anthology offers a rich and varied collection of voices that have stood the test of time. It invites us to reclaim the wildness within ourselves, to find solace and strength in words that continue to sing, challenge, and heal. As Subramaniam writes, these poems remind us “to smell the danger again. Not just for their sake, but for ours too” (12). In doing so, they guide us toward a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

H. S. Komalesha

Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur

 komalesha@hss.iitkgp.ac.in  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-0101-9083>

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