

***Memory Keepers* by Payal Nagpal**

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Payal Nagpal is a well-known bibliographer who meticulously records the poetic output of others, but she remains reticent, almost diffident, about publicising her own poetry. There is nothing diffident about the poems in *Memory Keepers* (Signer, 2024), though. The voice that emerges is strong, articulate and assertive, both when it comes to expressing angst and anger about women's existence, and in raising concerns about injustices in the world at large. In "Black Holes" she declares: "I want to puncture the sky/ Reach out for the black holes/ Dig into their jelly walls/ Poke my finger into that gelatinous mass" (6). And she imagines the cosmic impact of this rebellious act: "Will it separate into fragments/ To release that glimmer/ Not merely a silver lining/ But a silvery strand of thought/ Seen like thunder in the sky?" (6). Like her earlier collection *In the Labyrinth*, Payal Nagpal's *Memory Keepers* belongs in the growing archive of writings by women who seek to reconstruct self and society through the power of words. I can think, for example, of Arundhati Subramaniam's anthology *Wild Women*, Lakshmi Kannan's *Nadistuti* and Basudhara Roy's *Blur of a Woman*. In Payal's poems, we encounter the fractured consciousness of women in a misogynistic society and the struggle for self-empowerment via the act of writing. This very act can be a challenge, for writing can be risky: "Scribbles hide dangerous truths/ Not easy to tell/ They wait all day, late evening included/ Lurking around corners, behind tall grass/ Surreptitious ..." (16).

Through tell-tale cracks in the walls of patriarchy, women's consciousness seeks escape to freedom and self-discovery, in search of a voice of their own. Some poems express an overt spirit of defiance, embracing a transgressive stance against social repression. In other poems though, the female persona chooses the strategy of disguise rather than overt self-assertion. The image of the patchwork quilt becomes of recurrent motif for her own fragmented self. "I want to be an imposter/ Who covers up her thoughts in drab blankets/

...The quilt has another side. It hides beneath a riot of colour .../ I won't have it their way/ I retain the knotty weave/ So I literally hide my true colours" (5).

The poetic persona, the 'I' who speaks in these poems, sometimes evinces an acute sense of loneliness. But at other moments, the singular female self merges and becomes indistinguishable from the collective 'we': "Does my loneliness speak to yours?/ ... I look for my loneliness to speak to your silent self" ("Tug of Twisted Rope", 59). Empathy, a sense of history and a feeling of solidarity with other disempowered women and society's 'Others' act as bridges across social, political, temporal and geographical divides. Poems like "I am Palestine" and "Afghan Refugee" belong in this category, for they use contemporary history to comment on broader issues of human hatred, injustice and cruelty.

Payal's poetry juxtaposes stark realism with surreal scenarios, bringing out the ruptures and discontinuities between inner and outer realities. In some poems, the woman's self withdraws from the oppressive outer world into intense, vibrantly coloured inner spaces of the mind. In others, writing becomes an act of defiance in the face of stifling domestic routines, social expectations and unequal relationships. Memory and desire, displacing the rule of reason, provide the signposts that mark new avenues of self-exploration. "Peel the Walls" expresses the pull of desire:

I want to conceal  
My dark desires  
And then once in a while  
To see them swirl  
Touch them  
Rekindle flashes of youth      (67)

In “Trawler”, the woman “remains the veritable trawler/ Each night she picks up the memory mesh/ Collects disjointed snippets of the past” (79). Even memories have colours in this poem.

The collection is divided into four parts: “Wandering Women”, “Unhinged”, “Reminiscences” and “Sieve”. The personal tone of the poems in the first part give way to more general themes in the second. Part 3, “Reminiscences”, draws on memory and desire, while the final part, “Sieve”, as its very title suggests, seems to distil from lived experiences some of the central insights gained during the poet’s journey. From the generally dark vision of the earlier poems, we can trace a progression towards hope the desire for new beginning. The final poem, “Another Chance” presents the protagonist, a woman who after her numbing experiences is again able to feel through all her senses: “She heard sounds now/ She could feel her own body/ She could see/ With renewed eyesight/ She could smell things around her/ Life had given her another chance” (82). In this process of psychological and emotional revival, the woman’s body plays a vital role.

The poems make their statement through sharp use of imagery. The repressive aspects of the institution of marriage, for instance, are articulated through the image of the haldi-stained kitchen towel in “*Haldi Soot*” (65). Likewise, in “*Oasis*” (9), the jewelled rope round the woman’s neck offers a powerful figurative image for the indirect ways in which men control women without overtly appearing to do so. Particularly striking is Payal’s use of flowers and their colour. “Violet” acquires a special resonance with psychological and emotional associations. The very first poem is called “Violet Wanderer”. Another section opens with the statement: “On this side/ the roses/ are red/ and violets blue/ assuming pattern/ On the other/ Violet is black/ and roses/ aubergine” (25) Images related to sewing and quilting recur in the poems, as do images related to writing in ink.

While the human world often appears dark in these poems, the natural world sometimes offers a refreshing positive counterpoint. In Amber, we hear a lyrical note: “Have you ever seen/ how the beams of the sun sparkle?/ They rush to caress/ The grey clouds .../ And the grey hues stick to the smoky yellow/ In a new whirlwind romance” (45). At rare moments, an intuitive, spiritual note enters her inner world. Reflecting on the waters of Chashme Shahi he says: “I wait mystically in gardens outside/ Drawing from this age-old wealth. My supple entity of being” (68)

Payal’s poetic style relies on intense compression and the power of suggestion. Lines are often fragmented, incomplete phrases expressing women’s often fractured sense of identity. Occasionally, the poems acquire bilingual overtones. Words like “*akhada*”, “*nun chai*”, “*kassi*”, “*tasla*” and “*chillai kalan*” (bitter cold in Kashmir) nestle comfortably within the English lines, asserting the cultural rootedness of the poems while the different languages also enhance our sense of a transnational sensibility that overrides geographical barriers. For in Payal Nagpal’s world, “Trespassing is vital” (28), “Borders can be incestuous” (28), and “People move over/ One to other/ Through porosity supreme/ Of crossing over” (“Incestuous Border”, 29). It is in this belief in human possibilities that the poems find their final note of hope, the hope for a new beginning, for “Another Chance.”