

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.

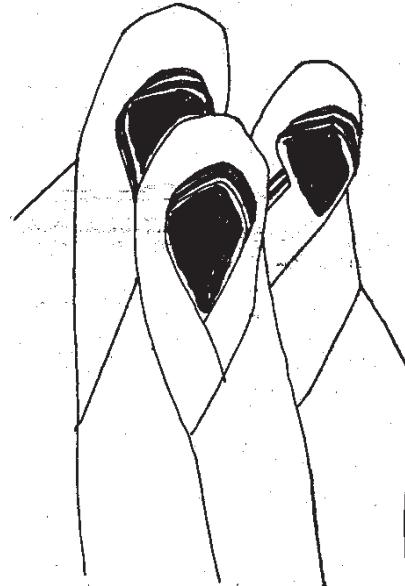
Be seen
marginally.
Without laughing much,
without speaking much,
without looking anyone
straight in the eye,

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)