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The Fabric Rubric

There was once a North Indian state where sonographies were conducted to find out the sex of a fetus. The moment they knew it was female, it was aborted.

Twenty years later, under the soil of these village were its long-gone girls, and above it live grown men from proud families. But when they looked around, there was no girl to marry. I won't talk of love here.

So there was no girl to marry. And it was catastrophe at the door, and for these men a new practice was founded to purchase women for marriage from other parts of the country. There is a term for such women. They are called *molki*, where *mol* means price.

This is not even fiction. So here speculative writers might exhaust their dystopic imagination.

As a woman living in India, I have been obsessed about my body ever since I realized that before I had time to adjust to a first bra, I was molested on a street – that before we as women understand our moods through the 28 days to another menstruation cycle, before we understand our hormonal imbalances, our infertilities and pregnancies, our menopause, we are raped, gang-raped, trafficked, mutilated.

When are we left in peace with our bodies? Not from the moment they are detected on the ultrasound report. And this story is not India's alone. But since I can only talk of what I know...

When a male companion and I travel through the crowded Mumbai trains, the experience he has and that which I have can be very different. Each time. Every day. Molestation in populations of high densities is passé and not to be spoken about.

I have walked off crowded local buses if I felt too claustrophobic. *But what of the women who had no other modes of transportation?*

In every country, the status of women falls into gradations. Even in India with its 1.2 billion population, its size one-third that of United States, there are: a) women who are protected and privileged and might face covert forms of patriarchy, b) those that get by with the challenges of daily life and overt forms of patriarchy, and c) those that fall prey and are treated like property—or worse, poultry—as they are plucked from their houses and streets, violated, mutilated, and left to die. But these categories can interchange on any given day. The sense of safety and privilege is rather phantasmic.

As a writer—or maybe long before that—I have swung between two opposing inner compulsions. One of feeling high sensuality and desire, and the other of wanting respect, peace, and space for that very body, without being misunderstood. Many-a-times I have disembodied myself like a deliberate out-of-body experience and watched myself from a voyeur's or a man's point of view, and have then watched other women's bodies and the way they navigate through the blood of crowds, the fabric of society and its rules.

How much of my writing comes from that perspective, I do not know. How much of my female gaze stays inside and outside the frame of literature...

My poems have been more direct and angry. My stories play hide and seek, my characters becoming human shields behind direct conversations.

In India, we have had a long tradition of storytelling, portraying strong female characters amidst damsel-in-distress stereotypes. Even in our epic poem *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the strong-headed wife of five men, who secretly covets the sixth one – Karna. But she is stripped of nearly all her clothes in a court full of men after her five husbands lose a game of dice, in which she is staked. This being one of the driving reasons for the war of Kurukshetra.¹

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The reception of feminist literature is such that crusaders, believers, and activists will immediately pick a book up, but I am interested in the person who walks up to me after my poetry readings where I have read a love poem, a woman-oriented poem, and an anthropologically-lensed poem and clearly states that he didn't like the woman-oriented one.

I have found that many men are averse to 'women's literature.' And many women don't know what the big deal is about. They live in a bubble, and hence it is this reader and listener across the sections of class, occupation, and preoccupation that I am interested in. He, who might not treat his woman badly, but is bored by any further conversation about it. He, who every time a voice is raised for women will say, "*But don't women also rape?*" and "*Women also are evil,*" and "*Women also use the law to their advantage,*" and I say, "*That is certainly as bad when it happens, but let's talk statistics.*"

Or to the female reader who wonders what is this anger about, because she has taken her predecessors' hard-won battles for women's rights for granted. I think it then becomes the onus of literature to be fed to such readers like how spinach is fed to toddlers, mixed with something delicious with the TV on. Stories have to cross from fine literature to pulp fiction. Repetition and telling the story a hundred times—each time in a new way—becoming necessary, so every act of oppression is met with every act of imagination.

And in literature itself, we need to talk of the woman writer who submitted her manuscript and got rejected many times and then created a fake account, had a male pseudonym and immediately got calls from three agents. Or of those women writers who, wondering where other women writers had gone, tried declaring one year to literature by women only.

We still have to speak about all women in literature. For example: transwomen.

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And if you were wondering what the women in the crowded Mumbai buses were doing every day on their way to and from work, well... they were carrying open safety pins to sting that groping hand back as silently as it came for them.

With this, they first became women again, and then through literature, super-heroines, their safety pins becoming loaded laser guns in my imagination.

¹ *Mahabharata* has 100,000 shloka (each shloka is a couplet) in Sanskrit and is ten times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined.