
UNIT 3 NASEEM SHAFIAIE: POEMS

Structure:

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will understand and analyse the poems 'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' and 'Solitude for the Girl Child' by Naseem Shafiaie. By the end of the unit you will be able to relate to problems faced by girls and women in a male-centric society. You will also appreciate that resistance and dialogue, more than confrontation, can empower women. Some important issues and questions that will be discussed and resolved through this unit will relate to the position and treatment of women down the history, and in contemporary times. You will be able to answer questions related to the need for respect, appreciation and consideration toward girls and women who leave their home to go and live with strangers when they get married.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Written in simple and moving language, the poems appeal to their readers to let women be. The poems argue about the need to allow women and girl children to realise their potential and we are aware of a restrictive society where change can only come if we become aware of the pain our traditions cause. The poems make a strong statement that women are individuals in their own right who cannot be treated as puppets by their husbands. What makes a woman worthy of being celebrated is that she does not seek revenge and has the strength to walk out of a bad situation to create a more wholesome society where people are more kind and accommodating.

Naseem Shafiaie (1952-) is a contemporary Kashmiri poet who writes, among other things, about Kashmir, women from Kashmir and their perspective. She has a Masters degree in Kashmiri language and literature. In 1984 she joined the higher education department of Jammu and Kashmir Government, and has taught undergrads at the University of Kashmir. In 2011, she was honoured with the

prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her collection of poems, *Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection* (published in 2007). She is the first Kashmiri woman ever to have been bestowed this distinction. Her works have been translated into several languages including English, Italian, Korean, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi and Telugu. According to a blog, *Kashmir Forum*, Shafaie's poetry is "an expression of a woman's inner passion for self-esteem, and self-admiration... termed as 'Sun Passion' by Kshemendra, the 10th century writer from Kashmir." You will be interested to know that in the 1970s, Shafaie was the only woman poet to attend *mushairas* in Kashmir.

3.2 TEXT: 'NEITHER A SHADOW NOR A REFLECTION'

As always you once again came, standing
 at the door speechless. Only if I had been
 in possession of a few words would I decorate
 them on your lips and hear those **fiery** words you wish.
 unable to **decipher**, I feel the heat of your eyes.
 I knew for me you would certainly come,
 I felt the hope of your arrival and felt,
 that like a **gale** of spring, you would enter my heart, and
every particle of my life would get **rejuvenated**.
 But you stand still where the string was broken,
 You never guess how many forms you gave me,
 I, like Lalla, rose in the late hours of the night,
 and **lulled** you in my lap and woke you up.
 I, like Habba Khatoon, said you are the sky,
 I am your earth, you the **shelter** of my secrets,
 the garden belongs to you, come and enjoy it,
 what **rival** of mine **lured** you away?
Stay a while and **ponder**, didn't I sing:
 Ó love I shall **adorn** you under the cherry trees,
 Fasted I for you that you stay with me.
 My nights passed reciting holy verses for you.
 If like Krishna you wish and change your **guises**,
 If that Habba Khatoon decides and leaves you **midway**, what
 if she too feels hate, she is not to be **slayed**.
 Even if now you find some clue, come and stay a while,
 realise your fault, I shall know you have come for me; you
 come now, like a true Adam beside me.
 I shall be **assured** that you realised:
 I am neither a shadow, nor a reflection.
 (Translated from Kashmiri by Prof Indu Kilam)

3.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

While reading the poem you must have realised this is a love poem which is very different from the ones we generally read. In this poem, you hear the voice of a woman who loves her man with all her heart. She tells us throughout the poem how she has devoted her entire life to caring for her husband in every possible way. Whenever he needed her, she was there and she always adjusted to his ways. However, the subject of this love poem is not only this woman's love and dedication to her man. It also tells us the other side of the story – the man's attitude towards his beloved and how he returns her commitment and affection. You will agree with me that the poem shows us the politics of love in a man's world where women end up doing whatever is needed to make their man's life comfortable and happy, while men take their women for granted and gradually become indifferent towards them. The poet tells us in the opening words of the poem – "As always" – that this one-sidedness in a man-woman relationship is universal: it is to be found everywhere. The poem tries to make us understand that both - man and woman - can be equally happy if the man responds to a woman's love and care by being there for her when she needs him and by letting her be what she wishes to be, even helping her to express herself in ways she has never been allowed to by the male-centric society. I hope you can see for yourselves the significance of the poem's title – 'Neither a Shadow, Nor a Reflection'.

Have you ever thought of becoming your own shadow and reflection instead of remaining a shadow to others and someone else's reflection? Shadows and reflections have no independent existence. They are empty forms which merely follow and repeat the movements of the body. If you think about shadows and reflections, you will be able to see that shadows have no colour – they are black, whereas reflections have colour. Yet, both – shadows and reflection – cannot do anything on their own. The surface where they appear remains blank till something or somebody comes on the scene. Shadows and reflections are lifeless and their actions are never theirs. What would you like to be? Surely not a shadow and a reflection!

My guess is that all of us would want to be independent people with a fair chance to live and act the way we want to. The poem's title, 'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' conveys a similar desire – the hope to be a person with an identity and not merely another's shadow with no identity, dreams or ambitions. The woman in this poem asserts that she is a woman, a living being, not a lifeless reflection. And because she is animate, she is not to be shamed and treated with disrespect. This poem is an assertion of a woman's self-respect where she asks her man to be "beside" her. The woman reminds her man that she has been with him whenever he needed her, and that he should never ever abandon her even when the patriarchal society tries to silence her honest dreams and forbids her from talking about her pain and sorrow.

Activity 1

Write down your own thoughts on what you feel is the subject of the poem.

We have tried to understand the title of the poem. You must have realised by now that the title also indicates the theme, which is about a woman's protest at not

getting a fair deal from her man despite her being there for him whenever and in whatsoever capacity required. The poem's subject is the subjugation of a woman by patriarchy, and the woman's courage to raise her voice against the injustices done to her. What makes this poem unique is that while relating her sufferings and asking for a just treatment, the woman stresses that men complement women and they should be with each other, not against each other. The poem suggests that women should stand up against men's cruelty and indifference, and help them understand where they have gone wrong. Naseem Shafaie "re-imagines the whole relationship of male and female based on mutual love, self-respect and dignity."

The poet makes references to various religious and mythological figures. Why do you think she does this? Well, if you read the poem closely, you will see that the poem does not focus on any particular community; it tries to make the readers realise that women experience abuse and neglect globally. And, because societies are largely patriarchal/ male-dominated, don't you think the poet is trying to tell us that patriarchy needs to be checked? Women are capable of bringing in social equality and justice by refusing to accept ill-treatment silently. "If that Habba Khatoon decides and leaves you midway... she is not to be slayed" is a powerful statement that supports women who, refusing to compromise on their self-respect, walk out of bitter relationships. Slaying suggests extreme violence and the poet insists that violence can never improve relationships. Men and women can live together only when a man supports and respects his woman "like a true Adam" – the first human created by God– who never left his woman and always stood by her even when she made a wrong decision. The poet tries to make her readers understand that if you love someone, you do not make them feel guilty, but help them get over their mistakes and lead wholesome lives.

Activity 2

Against whom does the speaker plan a protest? What is the strategy?

The poem has an intense tone. It begins with a rather exasperated and desperate woman who complains to her man that he keeps coming back to her but remains "speechless". We feel her sense of betrayal, for conversation happens only among friends who have common ground; by being incommunicative, she and her husband become near strangers. The woman tries to analyse her man's strange behaviour and concludes that he does not speak to her because he cannot understand her. She tells us that her vocabulary is limited and she does not "possess" the simplest of words through which she can make him understand her feelings and share her passion. The woman says that if she could begin to even speak about her own desire, her man would grow closer to her and share his "fiery words" of pleasure, which would enrich their relationship. You can easily imagine how much better this would be from their present where the man "stands still" and "speechless" and his woman is "unable to decipher" his passion.

Activity 3

What is the woman "unable to decipher?" Why?

The poem celebrates and affirms a woman's faith in her man. She longs for him to come to her as she feels incomplete without him: "I felt the hope of your arrival...every particle of my life would get rejuvenated." With him she is filled

with optimism and an enthusiasm for life. However, when he does not treat her as a companion, a sense of worthlessness overcomes her— she is reduced to a musical instrument with broken strings that has neither beauty nor melody. The poet goes on to use mythological legends to portray how women have stood by their men through bad and good times down the ages.

Why do you think the poet refers to mythology? Why do you think the woman's dialogue with her man suddenly gets so complicated? What is the poet getting at? Well, you are right if you think she is trying to make the readers understand that a woman is emotional, passionate, dependable and strong, and that her belief in *mankind* has the power to inspire confidence in not only her man but in the entire society to treat their women folk with respect. All the women who are mentioned had the courage to move on when their husbands could not love them and treat them respectfully. We are made to think about complex issues like morality and society's expectations. Are we dealing with something that is more than just the subject, love? Let us explore the poem a little further.

Well, shadows and reflections are inversions: they are not only lifeless but altered – left becomes right and right becomes left. The poem suggests that this is a natural phenomenon. However, the man-woman relationship is a social phenomenon created by tradition and patriarchy. We can bring positive change by becoming more aware of the consequences of our actions. The best way forward is to generate awareness of how gender imbalances make women feel insecure, vulnerable and threatened. It is but natural that men will feel guilt and seek forgiveness, which the female voice in the poem says must be forthcoming: “realise your fault... I shall be assured that you realised:/ I am neither a shadow, nor a reflection.” Revenge is not a solution for it cannot undo injustices. To be given her space, freedom and identity is a woman's right. She should not let herself be reduced to a lifeless and drab reflection which follows her man's instructions and is not allowed to have hopes and dreams of her own. Lalla, Habba Khatoon and Eve – the much celebrated women in the poem – were not only dedicated to their men but had strong identities of their own. They were with their men in different avatars – as a mother or seductress or as a devotee or guide. Their strong individuality and faith in the power of love is legendary.

Lalla and Habba Khatoon were from Kashmir. The two of them had much in common even though Lalla was from the fourteenth century and Habba Khatoon lived in the seventeenth century. Both were married when they were just twelve or thirteen. Their husbands and in-laws treated them badly because of which they walked out of their marriage. Lalla became an ascetic who raised her voice against the wrongs committed by the ruling Brahmanical classes. Though she was a Kashmiri Pundit, she spread her revolutionary ideas by writing poetry in the Kashmiri language, not the elitist Sanskrit which was the symbol of the upper classes. Lalla challenged the authority of Sanskrit in the 1400s by composing Vakh in the local language. She inspired the peasants and the common man to such an extent that she has since been venerated by Muslims and Hindus alike.

Habba Khatoon was a beautiful and gifted child who composed sensitive poems and sang beautifully. Her original name was ‘Zoon,’ which is Kashmiri for moon. Her exceptional beauty attracted Yousuf Shah Chak who became her second husband and went on to be the last independent ruler of Kashmir during the Mughal era. It is believed that Zoon was his inspiration. She was widowed following a long tragic separation from him when he did not listen to her advice

to not accept the Mughal emperor, Akbar's invitation to visit Delhi. Akbar betrayed Yousuf's trust and imprisoned him till he died. Habba Khatoon was so heartbroken that she left her home, wandering from place to place, composing and singing sad soulful songs. Habba Khatoon was the last Queen of Kashmir who gave excellent advice to the king. She was also an accomplished poet who composed *Lol*, the first ever Kashmiri lyrics. She stirred the Kashmiri imagination greatly—a hill named after her testifies to her legacy.

Lalla and Habba Khatoon were women whose love-life was not all smooth. Their greatness lies in their refusal to accept defeat. They were strong and creative individuals who composed outstanding poetry which helped the local Kashmiri language to evolve and made people aware of social ills and the necessity of a just attitude towards women. Lalla created a new form of devotional and philosophic poetry – *Vakh*, while Habba Khatoon created lyric poetry, *Lol*. Eve is a mytho-religious figure who took an independent but incorrect decision to eat the forbidden fruit of Paradise. Her disobedience resulted in her and Adam being expelled from Paradise where life was extremely comfortable, to Earth, where life was very tough. Eve was a companion to God's first human creation, Adam. She took a bold decision to eat the forbidden fruit of Paradise because of which she and Adam were thrown out of Paradise to Earth where they faced innumerable problems. However, despite her rashness, Eve is celebrated because she remained loyal to her husband and never left him.

Activity 4

What makes the women from the myths exemplary?

'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' is an assertion of every woman's right to be like Krishna and behave as the situation requires for a woman is a thinking and feeling person, not just a lifeless image. The poet punctures the romantic image of an idealised beautiful woman by showing us women who are capable of anger and of overcoming it. All the three women are truly exemplary because they inspire other women to never accept defeat, to be courageous and to contribute to the betterment of society so that there is equality and justice. Their positive contribution to society is their hallmark.

'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' is a poem which describes the trauma faced by independent-minded women down the history and across religions. The poem tells us that a woman has enormous patience and courage because of which she is able to take care of her husband and also fight for him in adversity. A woman's selflessness should not be abused and lead to her victimisation. The poem gives us examples of courageous and strong women who were taken for granted and exploited, but who refused to take this unjust treatment silently. These women not only rebelled against their partners but also contributed to making a more just society. They have become legends and are universally celebrated.

3.4 TEXT: 'SOLITUDE - FOR THE GIRL CHILD'

Gently **rouse** her, calling in tones soft,
Lest she should with loudness be **jarred**.
 Full asleep is she, her eyes half open,
 Such beauty in blameless purity makes me afraid,

Verily the smuggling case of my bosom is she
 And the honour of her father's **tilted cap**.
 A daughter she is, a **houri** of paradise;
 Once she leaves home, it will be for ever.
 When some day in distant parts she **dwells**
 Where what the people be like! I know not,
 Will they awaken her on gentle, **mellow** sounds?
 Or, will they, I **misgive**, snatch her sleep away?
 (Translated from Kashmiri by G.L.Labru)

3.5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

'Solitude - for the Girl Child' is a touching lyric, musical and full of startling images. It is a mother's prayer for her daughter. The mother feels her heart ripping at the thought that her child will have to one day live with and among unfamiliar people who may not value her uniqueness. You know for sure that all parents treasure their children. Have you noticed how protective they are towards their girl child and wondered why it is so? Let's ask ourselves what makes parents, especially mothers worry over their girls. Don't you think it has to do with the way women are brought up and treated? Well, think again if you disagree! Mothers want their children to never have bad experiences. But a mother in traditional Indian society feels helpless when her daughter gets married as after her marriage, the daughter becomes part of her husband's family where her parents can only be visitors. The mother in the poem is agitated by the thought that her daughter may receive indifferent treatment in her marital home where lack of love and concern would make her restless and sleepless. The poem expresses a mother's overwhelming sorrow for her precious daughter's uncertain future where she could forever remain deprived of tender, loving care. The poem's title is her desperate desire to let her daughter be herself. The word *solitude* conveys a sense of comfort where a person is not disturbed but comfortable and happy with his/her identity. *Girl-child* suggests a pre-puberty girlhood, which is significant since once the child grows into a young girl, society will not leave her alone. The mother wants her daughter to have a carefree childhood without any tension because she is afraid that her life could be chaotic in the future.

The poem is composed as a prayer to all those who care to hear. Do you see how beautifully the poem begins? "Gently rouse her" tells us that the girl-child is fast asleep. We are asked to *gently* awaken her. The poet deliberately uses the word *rouse* as it is not only a synonym for awaken, but suggests awareness. The poem uses the image of a sleeping girl-child to portray innocence but who will sooner than later be made aware of the real world where kindness and consideration for a young girl is much wanting. The mother knows that her girl-child is just a child: completely trusting. She sleeps without a care, "her eyes half open." The "half open" eyes create a picture of a child who is full of energy and curiosity, and like every other child, wary of unfamiliar faces. The girl's attractive looks and innocent nature worry the mother even though she knows that the girl has done nothing wrong – is pure and *blameless*. Why? The next stanza subtly leads us to the answer after we are made to understand the society in which the family lives and their social status/ standing. The mother confesses that their daughter is her husband's pride just like a cap or turban or *pagdi* is the symbol of a clan's

honour. The entire clan is insulted if the *pagdi* is handled casually. Similarly, the father feels very strongly about his daughter's dignity, and the slightest possibility that his daughter may be disrespected upsets him. The poet describes the mother's heart as a box or a chest that has cracks. Like the stored objects in a cracked box are not completely safe, the mother's emotions are vulnerable because her heart – her case – has cracks of concern that her daughter may be abused. Worry keeps “smuggling” into her heart – consciously or subconsciously she remains anxious about her daughter and what can happen to her.

Activity 5

Why does the mother say “Gently rouse her”?

The child is her father's pride and a product of his upbringing – she is the one who will now be the upholder of his values. She has to live her life with consideration to the family's traditions without breaking down the social structure.

The daughter is extremely attractive. She is described as an “*hour*” – a girl so beautiful that she seems to be a gift of paradise on earth. This worries the mother because the girl would sooner or later have a string of admirers. The thought that she could leave home to live among unfamiliar people who may admire her makes her jittery. The mother becomes extremely anxious thinking of what will happen to her daughter who in her parental home has always slept undisturbed and only been spoken to softly. There is a strong possibility that the people she goes on to live with could have a lifestyle and attitudes very different from theirs – people who are loud and disrespectful to women. The poem ends on an agitated note with the mother voicing her greatest fear that her daughter may lose her peace of mind completely and never ever sleep again.

The poem is a mother's desperate hope that her child always has a calm and peaceful life – solitude - even when she lives away from her parents with her husband and his family. I think you can understand that each one of us has a personal space where we can do things we like and be the way we want to be. We are carefree at home. Once we leave home, we are expected to shoulder responsibilities which sometimes break us. No one wants to be alone, but no one deserves to be taken for granted or ill-treated either. Married girls are usually expected to be uncomplaining even while doing backbreaking chores. You will agree with me that the poem ends on a note which is harsh and troubling, but realistic: a girl's innocence and attractiveness can get her a suitor but cannot guarantee her solitude and keep her safe from abuse.

In ‘Solitude - for the Girl Child’ we come across a mother's overwhelming concern for her daughter who is still to become a woman. The mother worries that her little girl who is at present full of life, spontaneity and happiness will soon be forced by society to follow suffocating customary practices. These customs will require the child to marry and become an obedient and unquestioning wife and daughter in law who will have no choice but to do what her in-laws ask her to do. The mother prays that her daughter will be looked after in her husband's home which will be in a strange land with unfamiliar customs. This poem grieves over the inescapable loss of the girl's spontaneity, freedom and carefree ways.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have read about a woman's courage to rise above her sad situation and contribute positively to society, which leads to her society celebrating her as a legend that continues to inspire people down the ages. She underscores her uniqueness by saying that no matter how comfortable and plush her life is and can be, she will never become a doormat because she is not a dark lifeless shadow or a colourful but emotionless image which has no self, and comes into existence only to replicate and duplicate someone. The woman says that she will not let anyone disrespect her or take her for granted because she is an individual with feelings and thought. She offers examples of much loved and devoted wives from earlier recorded times before her man so that he understands love, not persecution and revenge and thus help create a strong relationship.

You have also heard a mother's prayer for her daughter as she grows up in a traditional and orthodox society which does not allow freedom of expression and action to its women. The mother hopes that her daughter gets married into a family that accommodates her bubbly nature. These poems have helped you become aware of customary practices that are regressive with regard to women and need to be changed so that we can have a just society where women can express their individualities and be the person they want to be.

3.7 GLOSSARY

adorn	: decorate
assured	: become certain about/ not be doubtful of
decipher	: make sense of
dwells	: lives
fiery	: full of energy and high-spirited
gale	: strong breeze
guise	: appearance
hour	: a pure and extremely beautiful girl
jarred	: very much disturbed
midway	: middle of the journey
lest	: otherwise
lulled	: put to sleep
lured	: attracted by wrong means
mellow	: soft and subtle
misgive	: be afraid of
every particle	: smallest part
ponder	: think deeply
rejuvenated	: filled with life once again
rival	: enemy
rouse	: awaken

shelter	: a place where you are safe
slayed	: killed with violence by a sword or a sharp weapon
solitude	: to be peacefully all by yourself
stay a while	: stop for some more time
tilted cap	: a metaphor for someone who is different from others and is lovable
verily	: in truth

3.8 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: The poem's subject is a woman's strong refusal to be reduced to a nobody by a male-centric, patriarchal society. The female voice in the poem symbolises every oppressed woman's protest.

Activity 2: The speaker in the poem is a woman who plans a protest against people, especially men in a patriarchal society, who treat their women with disrespect. Her strategy is to reform such men through persuasion and insistence, not revenge and violent retaliation.

Activity 3: The woman is "unable to decipher" why her man stands silently at the door with passion in his eyes. She does not understand his silence and his intense, "fiery" passion because she has neither been taught her man's language nor permitted to express her passion.

Activity 4: The women from the myths are exemplary because of their strong personalities who lived life on their terms, never compromising their dignity. They had the courage to listen to their heart, follow their dreams and create a fair and just society.

Activity 5: The mother wants her girl-child to be treated with gentleness and wants her daughter to be woken up tenderly as she is still a child and who might, all too soon be among strangers who will not treat her so considerately.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Why does the speaker in the first poem want to be "in possession of a few words"? What does she want to decorate?
- 2) What does the speaker mean when she says, "every particle of my life would get rejuvenated"?
- 3) Who stands "still where the strings was broken"? Why?
- 4) Why "if she too feels hate, she is not to be slayed"?
- 5) How can women be empowered, according to the poet?
- 6) Why does the mother ask everyone to speak in "tones soft"?
- 7) Why is the girl-child special? What is needed for her?
- 8) Explain the line, "Such beauty in blameless purity makes me afraid".
- 9) What can happen to the girl-child "When some day in distant parts she dwells"?

3.10 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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