
UNIT 2 LAKSHMI KANNAN AND INDIRA SANT: POEMS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

On completing this unit, you will understand the challenges in the life of India's first woman autobiographer, Rasha Sundari Devi whose courage and patience is the subject of Lakshmi Kannan's poem, 'Don't Wash'. You will also be able to see, through Indira Sant's poem 'Her Dream', how a widow in India feels unwanted because she does not have a husband to 'complete' her, and society thinks that she is therefore inferior and inauspicious. At the end of this unit you will see how society favours men and tries to keep women under control by denying them education and an equal status to men without whom they are made to feel like lesser beings.

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

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal system ensures that women are not allowed to participate fully in life activities and are forcibly circumscribed by the four walls of their home – and even more so, of the kitchen. In one of her interviews, Kannan tells us that she has 'always celebrated the struggle of the so-called "ordinary" women (and men)... as truly heroic in the way they strive to triumph over their endless struggles in life.' It is sad that even today across India, girls are not allowed to develop their talents and skills; they are only taught what is required to be deft homemakers.

2.2 LAKSHMI KANNAN AND RASHA SUNDARI DEBI

Lakshmi Kannan is a well-established Indian writer who writes on themes centred round women issues. Her subjects are mostly middle class women who rebel against limits imposed on them by society. Born in Mysore on 13 August 1947, Kannan is among the pioneering Indian feminists writing from first-hand observation and experience. She began writing in Tamil, and later in English as well. She has also done her own translations of her Tamil writings into English. Kannan writes under her Tamil pseudonym, Kaaveri something which reflects her fondness for the river, Kaaveri with which she has a strong spiritual connection. Her poems too reflect a lot of water and river images. She is a founding member, and member of the governing body of the Poetry Society of India and has had the distinction of being a jury-member for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Eurasia.

Let us now talk a little about Rasha Sundari Devi – the person to whom Kannan has dedicated her poem, “Don’t Wash”. Let me tell you that the nineteenth century India in which Rasha Sundari was born was a very exciting age where traditions were probed, questioned and re-written. This age is known as the age of the Bengal Renaissance and Reformism – a time when women’s right to education was campaigned for, and resistance to child marriage grew. During the 1800s, women were largely deprived of education as it was widely believed that if a girl became literate, her husband would die. This attitude towards women prevailed everywhere – among the rich households as well as the poor ones.

Rasha Sundari was born in 1810 in the remote village of Pabna in East Bengal. She had no memories of her father, Padmalochan Roy, who died when she was a small child. There was a *pathshala* in her father’s house which was managed by a missionary woman. Only boys were allowed to study here. Though she was not allowed to attend this school, Rasha Sundari somehow learnt some Bangla and Persian by being around in the school’s vicinity and overhearing what was being taught. Her childhood came to an abrupt end when she was married off at the tender age of twelve to a wealthy landlord, Nilmani Roy. You can only begin to imagine her childhood trauma of leaving the security of her parental home to live with strangers where she was expected to manage household chores!

Rasha Sundari Devi was a privileged high caste Hindu who was not expected to do anything other than look after her family’s interest and serve them. Her family after marriage was not ready to accept or accommodate her aspiration to education and Rasha Sundari’s life is motivational because she dared to educate herself in the face of overwhelming odds. Her life became extraordinary because of her courage to dream and realise it in the face of stiff opposition. She had hardly any leisure time but she managed to practise reading and writing even while working in the kitchen. She learnt with practically nothing – two sheets of written paper and charcoal. She later recorded her life’s incredible story in her much-celebrated autobiography, *Amar Jiban* – India’s first autobiography written by a woman.

Rasha Sundari’s husband and in-laws were religious-minded. Well, Rasha Sundari too had a religious bent of mind! It was her strong desire to read devotional works first hand that fuelled her resolution to become self-taught and, at the age of twenty five, she started teaching herself to read the alphabets. Learning a language is not easy, and learning it all by yourself when no one supports you

and you are pressed for time is even more tough. It was by accident that her husband left a copy of the *Chaitanya Bhagvata* in the kitchen. She quickly tore a page out of this book, and, armed with this page and a palm leaf which her son used for writing, she practised writing and taught herself the Bengali script. She also scribbled on kitchen walls with charcoal stubs used for lighting the fire, to improve her writing skills. She became a widow at the age of fifty nine, and subsequently started working on her autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, which has been praised for its simple and clear prose. *Amar Jiban* gives us an account of the contemporary village life and the position of women. It also makes us familiar with the writer's views on various subjects, and motivates us to understand how important it is to follow your dream and to take a stand in your life. Rasha Sundari Debi died when she was around eighty eight years old, leaving behind a legacy of inspiration and emancipation.

2.3 THE TEXT – ‘DON’T WASH’

(For Rasha Sundari Debi)

No, don't.

Don't ever clean with water
the dark, **sooty** walls
of your kitchen, Rasha Sundari.
For the akshara you **scratched**
on the walls so **furtively**,
the akshara you tried to match
with the sounds you heard
They've quickened now, with life.
Even as you wash rice, fish, vegetables
even as you peel, cut, bake, stir and cook
the **thieving** letters on the wall will **take wings**.
They fly down to the palm leaf
you once stole from your son.
See how the letters move
in the eyes of the mind,
then leap over, back to the wall
from the page of Chaitanya Bhagavata
you tore from the book
when no one was looking.
You need no book, Rasha Sundari
no paper or pen either
you have the black, **smudgy** kitchen wall
for your magical **scribbles**
lines, ellipses, curves
all of them your secret codes for
a whole new world.

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2.4 UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

The poem, 'Don't Wash' is written by Lakshmi Kannan to honour and pay tribute to Rasha Sundari Debi's extraordinary spirit and grit: a woman who even risked her reputation in her determination not to take anything lying down. Rasha Sundari lived in a society where educated women were considered a bad omen. 'Don't Wash' helps us appreciate the intelligence, determination and daring with which Rasha Sundari embraced what was socially unacceptable and even sinful, to fulfil her dreams and live life on her own terms.

Kannan uses the image of *wash* as the poem's central metaphor. 'Wash' symbolises customs which are considered sacred and are not to be questioned. Water has an important significance in Hinduism where washing the place of worship, altar and statues of gods and goddesses is an integral part of religious ceremonies. In itself, water cleans filth. However, in the poem the poet persuades Rasha Sundari Debi to leave the walls of her kitchen unwashed so that whatever she may have scribbled on the wall remains intact and unerasable. The sooty writing on the walls underlines Rasha Sundari's hopes and becomes a marker of her identity. Not washing the walls is like saying that you should not change yourself because society expects you to be different: your uniqueness should not be washed off because it is what will make the world a better place where everyone – man or woman – will have a fair chance to realise their worth. The kitchen walls in Rasha Sundari's house, blackened with charcoal soot look dirty and the kitchen appears messy. But the poet insists that the walls are not to be washed as the *akshara* is written on them. If you think about it a little more, you'll realise that the written word – *akshara* – is considered sacred in Hinduism. The poem argues that the *akshara* continues to remain sacred and is not defiled just because it is written by a woman.

Activity 1

Why were women not allowed to read and write?

There was a superstition that the written word – *akshara* – would lose its sacredness and power if a woman wrote it. We are told that this writing on the wall has been done "furtively" - it is an act of secrecy. This secret and furtive act is not an act of cowardice but an effort which required commitment, guts and planning. To wash off the traces of this action would have smothered Rasha Sundari's inner self as it was this writing which had brought meaning to her mundane and routine life. The poet helps us appreciate the tremendous hard work and dedication that went into her learning as she did not neglect any work that she was expected to do.

Activity 2

Do you think what Rasha Sundari did was correct? Why?

Rasha Sundari painstakingly completed all her household chores – "wash rice, fish, vegetables... peel, cut, bake, stir and cook" – and alongside worked doubly hard to memorise the letters she regularly scribbled on the walls. Despite her tough schedule, she persisted in her efforts which helped her imagination and intellect expand – "take wings." With education, she could understand the complex world and express herself in different ways. She was like a bird with strong wings with which it could fly fearlessly.

Activity 3

Why did Rasha Sundari wish to get an education?

The poem has imaginative and complex descriptions written in a simple and clear language because of which we understand the the poem with ease and engage with difficult issues. We are provoked into re-thinking issues that we take for granted and to question religious customs that we practise every day without giving a second thought to how these customs underwrite and promote discrimination against women. By understanding Rash Sundari Debi's defiance and her dedication, planning and perseverance, we realise that social change and progress is only possible with belief in oneself, one's cause and and unrelenting commitment to it. A combination of intelligence and determination helped Rasha Sundari's fight against impossible odds. She had been able to tear merely a page from her husband's book, *Chaitanya Bhagwat*, and secretly keep with her only one of her son's palm leaves on which he practised writing. She constantly imagined and re-imagined words to re-create them. Even though she had a bare minimum, she taught herself to read and write - to eventually become an acclaimed writer whose life inspired many a woman to rise against social injustice. We unreservedly admire her daring to remain unwashed and unclean – blackened by the 'unholy' deed of learning to read and write.

Activity 4

How does Rasha Sundari practise reading and writing?

The last four lines of the poem draw a subtle inference that the written script is mysterious, full of "magical scribbles" that seem like a complex maze of geometrical shapes – "lines, ellipses, curves" – to the illiterate. Only by not washing off this mysterious writing can women gain entry into the world of knowledge – "a whole new world." The poem rises above the specific life of Rasha Sundari to encourage women universally to take social criticism headlong by not being afraid of what society can/will say. Only by risking their security can women live on equal terms where they too have access to reading and writing – "secret codes" to empowerment. 'Don't Wash' is a poem that asks us to look into social taboos and assess their worth – whatever is forbidden is perhaps forbidden not because it is unclean or evil but because it gives muscle to the masters who do not allow and do not want certain sections of society, like women, to gain power or a status that challenges their monopoly.

'Don't Wash' is a powerful poem which asks women to say no to social customs that expect women to wash themselves of their dreams and their individual identities. The poem pays tribute to Rasha Sundari Debi's extraordinary courage to listen to her heart and educate herself. When she practised writing on walls which became black and sooty, she took a huge risk because she could have been caught studying and punished severely for it. Lakshmi Kannan finds it very disturbing that society takes whatever it finds serviceable from the women – their ability to do hard work, and utility as homemakers and breadwinners, but do not acknowledge or encourage their individuality and dreams. A woman's personal traits, talent, inclination or acquisition is considered useless unless it provides material comfort to the family members. She believes that it is important for women to get a chance at social participation and decision making and stresses the need to question and engage with the idea of what is acceptable and who

decides what is correct. To help women rise, you have to challenge patriarchy and draw attention to injustices against women. People have to be persuaded to understand that women should have equal rights and privileges as men. We need to sponsor *transgression*, i.e. a breaking down of the boundaries of social correctness. In her works, Kannan insists that in India women and 'dalits' have been bracketed together and denied basic rights, like the right to recite the *Gayatri Mantra*. To live their lives to the fullest, women have to rebel and create their space where they can achieve their full potential.

While women in the West undertook to define feminist thinking and fight social prejudices against women, Asian women have had a tough time trying to rationalise and weed out traditional beliefs and practices that target and constrict women to roles that are pre-defined for them. Indian society is suspicious of change and the idea *modern* itself. Any activity that challenges tradition or provides an alternative to tradition is labelled offensive and shamelessly modern. Kannan's works stoke women's passion to re-discover themselves and assert their identities as individuals, not just gendered beings – beings who are only limited to their biological identities and gender, woman, nothing else. Through her poems, Kannan gives us examples of women who refused to be restricted by their gender. Like Rasha Sundari Devi, they followed their dream. Such women inspire us to have faith in ourselves and the courage to risk our reputation and comfort zone so that our tomorrow as well as the future of the coming generation of women is more just and happy.

2.5 INDIRA SANT

Indira Sant is an acclaimed Marathi poet who has written on diverse issues that concern women. She was born into a progressive Maharashtrian family as Indira Dikshit on January 4, 1914 in the small town, Tavandi in Belgaum District, Karnataka. Her childhood was spent in the rural areas of Southern Maharashtra, which provided her with a typical Indian sensibility that colours her various works. She attended Rajaram College in Kolhapur and Fergusson College in Pune. It was at the latter college that she met Narayan Sant, whom she married in 1936. Together, they published a collection of their poems, *Sahwas* in 1940. However, their married life was short-lived as Narayan Sant died within ten years of their marriage. Indira was grief-stricken and the poignancy of her tragic loss echoes throughout her works. Her determination and optimism saw her reach heights in her professional and creative life. A professor, she later became the principal of a teachers' training college in Belgaum and wrote twenty-five books during her lifetime. In 1984, she was honoured with the Sahitya Academy Award for her collection of poems, *Garbhareshmi* as well as many other prestigious awards like the Janasthan Award and the Maharashtra State Award. In 1975, the acclaimed poet Nissim Ezekiel translated her poems into English and published them as *Snake-skin and other poems of Indira Sant*. She passed away on 13 July, 2000.

2.6 'HER DREAM'

Her dream, like the dream of a dozen other women.

A **full plate**, deliciously full.

Places to go, things to do, morning and evening.

Neatly ironed clothes. A nicely **furnished** home.
Sometimes a play, sometimes a concert – with the best seats.
All the happiness in the world on a **meagre** income.
Laughter and teasing. Talk and **chatter**.
Her dream, like the dreams of a dozen other women.
But she woke up before the dream began.
And then she never fell asleep again.

2.7 UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

‘Her Dream’ is a moving poem in which the poet gives us a realistic picture of an Indian widow. You must have noticed how widows are often treated cruelly by society and even by other married women. Even if widows are not openly insulted, they are expected to wear dull colours, be humble – even self-effacing - not enjoy life or eat lavish food and have personal desires and dreams. At this point, it is a good idea to discuss whether it is possible to be alive and not have dreams. We are humans; dreaming, planning and hoping come naturally to us. We may face tragedies but that does not make us stop looking forward to good times. Don’t you agree that in your darkest moments you wish someone could comfort you and make you smile again? Yes, no one wants to be alone or to receive shabby treatment. Why are widows deliberately made to feel their pain over and over again? Yes, some pain is unavoidable because of the absence of a husband and his companionship. But to force it down a woman’s throat and to victimise her because she is a widow is shameful and unforgivable. If you look around, you will see how widows are not invited to festivals and ceremonies like marriages – their presence is considered inauspicious. It is as if they are responsible for their husband’s death. As a result, widows become disillusioned and stop dreaming.

‘Her Dream’ begins on a poignant note. It tells us that every woman has dreams and dreaming is not limited to married women alone. The unnamed woman in the poem represents a typical Indian widow whose identity is lost because her life and existence depends on her husband: without a husband, she loses her social status and is unable to partake of the simple joys of married life. The poet lists the widow’s everyday dreams which move us because of their simplicity, and the eventual realisation that these humdrum activities are no longer for her. Even before she could have started relaxing and daydreaming leisurely after her wedding, her happiness was smashed and her dreams came to nought. Unable to dream, she became restive and sleep lost its pleasure. Her life became a stretch of hopelessness where there was no rest or serenity. She became agitated and felt utter despair when she lost her husband whom she loved tremendously and who pampered her.

The woman’s desires were simple. She had always hoped for a married life where she would be on her toes, busy running everyday errands, and also be spoilt by her husband’s affection. The joys that she had always looked forward to are listed in the poem. Her first desire had always been to have a “full plate.” The phrase “full plate” suggests not only sufficient food to eat, but a life full of responsibilities, doing chores so that there is hardly any leisure time. The woman had always looked forward to this hectic married life because it would have made her immensely happy, just like a plate filled with delicious and mouth-

watering delicacies pleases the taste buds. The poem tugs at our heart with the realisation that this woman no longer finds happiness because these responsibilities are no longer special for her after her husband's death. She feels unwanted and vulnerable. Her pain intensifies when she sees a "dozen women" around her busy with their daily errands, running around happily – their plates "deliciously full." The lives of these women are a flurry of activity – they accompany their families on various trips and are ever alert, seeing to it that everything functions smoothly. They have no time to spare. Mornings and evenings alike keep them engaged with an endless list of "things to do." The poet tells us that women are central to their families. It is a woman who sees to it that every family member is well turned-out with neatly ironed clothes. This involvement with the family makes a woman's life meaningful. However, without a husband, a woman feels incomplete and gets no happiness in doing household chores for she does not have a husband who will appreciate her and make her feel special.

Activity 5

Why does the speaker wish for a "full plate"?

Married women keep their home spick and span, and the family members happy. A woman's home is "nicely furnished" because she takes complete care of everything while her husband contributes to her well-being. A woman's marital life is full of responsibilities that have their own pleasurable and light-hearted moments. The widow in the poem is no different from other women. She had always looked forward to spending quality time with her husband and enjoying his company and like any other young girl, had fancied the idea that her husband would escort her to some or the other event – "a play" or "a concert." She had pictured these moments of togetherness where her husband would go all out to make her feel special by booking the best seats for them so that they could relax and unwind, and enjoy the finest view possible. She had fantasised that life would be a beautiful journey of shared happiness and companionable moments. She had always anticipated a life where she would be indispensable to her man who would need her to take care of his day to day needs while he would make an effort to make her feel special by giving her comfort and a break from her routine. She believed that their togetherness would fill their lives with laughter and cheer and their happiness in being together would make problems like shortage of money, insignificant. The widow was convinced that she and her husband would tide through bad times because of their patience with each other and their shared love.

The reality of her life pains the widow as her life is strikingly different from her cherished daydreams. Hers is a cold and lonely world where she has no companion to share her troubles with or to make her feel treasured. She had visualised a husband who would love her dearly and see to it that she had everything she needed, and a lifestyle that would make her feel the significance she held for him. She had never imagined a life without her husband where mindless chatter and shared laughter would be missing. With her husband's death, she is left with shattered dreams and wistful longing. There is only desolation and nostalgia for her. Her marital life was short-lived and now seems like an impossible beautiful dream. With her husband's death, she was jolted into a harsh reality where she realised that the dreams she had shared with "a dozen other women" would never

come true. Her life was now so steeped in sorrow that “she never fell asleep again” and forgot her troubles: her dreams were ruined and relaxation became impossible.

The poem moves us with its simplicity and honesty of emotions. We feel for the woman whose dreams are like every other woman’s, but who now faces a life where her dreams remain sheer dreams, without a shred of possibility of their ever coming true. All the promising, beautiful moments that could have been possible with a husband now remain beyond her. She knows that now her life will be lonely where she will have to survive on a “meagre income” without a companion who would have seen to it that she always had a plush life with a “nicely furnished home” and regular visits to performances to relax and unwind. Her life appears quite meaningless to her because she feels left out in the cold without a husband needing her to complement his life and make it smooth by taking care of his routine needs. The poem expresses a widowed woman’s deep anguish at a life where responsibilities would continue unabated but love and companionship would be absent – a life of utter loneliness and hard work where shared laughter and talk would always be missing.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

The two poems read in this unit highlight two different aspects of women’s lives in India in the not so distant past – illiteracy and widowhood.

‘Don’t Wash’ is a powerful poem which asks women to say no to social customs that expect women to wash themselves of their dreams and their individual identities. The poem pays tribute to Rasha Sundari Debi’s extraordinary courage to listen to her heart and educate herself. Rasha Sundari practised writing on walls which became black and sooty. She took a huge risk by not washing the walls because she could have been caught studying and punished severely for it.

The speaker in the poem, ‘Her Dream’ is a widow who had always had simple dreams of being happy with her husband, looking after him and getting spoilt by him. There was nothing extraordinary about her dreams, except that when she lost her husband these dreams became impossible to realise and filled her life with immense grief. She had always looked forward to a happily busy life where she would have had to iron clothes, tidy the house and plan visits to plays and concerts. She had dreamt that her life would be full of caring for her family and loving her husband who in turn would also make her feel special by laughing with her and teasing her. It would be a beautiful life where relationships would matter and money would be secondary.

2.9 GLOSSARY

chatter	:	gossip, small talk
ellipses (plural of ellipsis)	:	three dots “...” in a sentence which show continuation of thought and mystery
full plate	:	a busy schedule
furnished	:	equipped with furniture
furtively	:	secretly

meagre	: not enough
scratched	: written hurriedly
scribbles	: untidy writing
smudgy	: dirty
sooty	: greyish black
take wings	: fly/ be free from confinement
thieving	: stolen
quickenened with life	: became meaningful/ came alive

2.10 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Women were not allowed to read and write because it was believed that if a woman was educated, she would bring bad luck and death to her family.

Activity 2: Rasha Sundari practises reading and writing furtively. It is correct because everyone has a right to education, which is denied to women because of baseless superstitions that educated women are a curse on their families.

Activity 3: Rasha Sundari was a very imaginative and intelligent woman who was curious about the world. She could only “fly” with the wings of education to gain access to this knowledge which was barred to women.

Activity 4: She tore out a page from her husband’s book, *Chaitanya Bhagwat* and took a palm leaf from her son’s book. She read and re-read the page from *Chaitanya Bhagwat* and imagined the words in different combinations. She practised writing on her son’s palm leaf and the walls of the kitchen where she prepared food and washed utensils.

Activity 5: The phrase “full plate” suggests a life which is full of activities that keep going on and on. The widow who feels she has no one to take care of or someone to make her feel special finds that everything is now meaningless.

2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What is it that Lakshmi Kannan does not want to be washed? Why?
- 2) Why are the kitchen walls sooty, black and smudgy?
- 3) Why are the letters described as “thieving” and “taking wings”?
- 4) What would you say is the central idea of the poem, ‘Don’t Wash’?
- 5) What is the dream in the poem ‘Her Dream’? What happens to it?
- 6) What does the speaker in ‘Her Dream’ want her deliciously full plate to contain?
- 7) In what ways does the woman in ‘Her Dream’ feel that her dreams are unfulfilled?
- 8) Explain the line, “she woke up before the dream began./ And then she never fell asleep again”.

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