



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

***Kala Pani* by Monica Mody**

(Book Review)

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Monica Mody, in her poetic-play, *Kala Pani*¹, combines issues of sexuality with environmental concerns. Mody creates a dystopia, and shows us a new politics with a world which is in tatters. Linking content with form, the text too is in tatters and comprises of stories within stories, dialogues without any apparent connection to each other, official reports, advertisements, word-play, a parody of footnotes in academia, and a meaningless string of completely disconnected names. Six world travellers have been selected by the new world government on the basis of their skill in photography, sound recording and so on, but also on the basis of possessing love and hope. Even their “humability quotient” is measured. These world travellers are given strict and rigorous training where everything from their anxiety levels to their dreams are put under twenty four hour surveillance. Cameras and eyes follow them everywhere. Trained narratologists who believe that no-one can tell a story better than them are appointed as their instructors. When these stories began to become out of hand, the government bans all stories. Different versions of stories are not allowed. These signs seem to point towards a government, hypothetically in the future, which has strayed from its purpose and has become dictatorial, as a result of which, surveillance is at its most extreme. The world travellers become ill with these stories and want to break out of them. By the end of their training, they have lost all desire to visit the places they once wanted to.

The new world government, which appears to be displeased with the world travellers for some reason, has cut off their supply to vital essentials termed as “multivitamins” and has stranded them under a tree for more than a year, bereft of their visas. To pass their time here, the world travellers start spinning their own stories, which are gloriously inconsistent with each other and seem to be totally unlike the stories of the narratologists. They make a story about two women, Sameshape and Othershape, who could be lesbian lovers or sisters or friends, confidantes, co-conspirators. Mody shows us two lesbians who are separated by force. As they seem to own laptops and order pizzas, it seems as if the lesbians in *Kala Pani*

¹Mody, Monica. *Kala Pani*, 1913 Press, 2013.



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are upper-middle class. It is unclear whether they each lived in a jug of milk and a jug of ink, or whether they lived on two separate boats, sometimes together on one boat if they became lonely, whether they were found in a deserted junkyard kissing each other, or whether they lived halfway across the world from each other and were not allowed to talk to each other except for ten seconds after every seven hours through a webcam. Even being allowed to see each other through the webcam was something they had got after much pleading, cajoling and begging. We could see Sameshape and Othershape as being the same women, or perhaps different women in each of these narratives, all of which seem to draw upon themes of loneliness and isolation, and which consist of everything in patches, in tatters, broken and “chopped up”. Even dialogues and conversations between Sameshape and Othershape are in tatters. One of them, in fact, sells precious possessions and even parts of her body in order to get pizza to eat. This too serves to give us a sense of nihilism, as if there is no purpose left in life anymore. One of them slashes her wrist. People ignore it. The cynics, writes Mody, were getting tired of this messy, broken world where they were constantly cleaning up “somebody’s skin, somebody’s bones, somebody’s sleeves, somebody’s vomit, somebody’s tears, somebody’s rage, somebody’s blind spots etcetera”. The world travellers make Sameshape and Othershape into public sensations and their story is broadcast throughout the world.

Everything one can imagine is alive and personified in this text, stories are live, conversations are alive, so are trees and so is a lentil bean. The lentil bean lives in a cage but manages to break free of it. Described as a woman, the lentil bean is shown to attend a party. The lentil bean is also a part of the stories being spun by the world travellers. Dressed in sexless and genderless clothes, wearing a pyjama, the lentil bean is shown to attend the party where it tries on all possible kinds of clothes from frocks, denim, leather, lipstick, bellbottoms, military uniforms, to a page-worth more of various types of clothes of various styles and periods. Ultimately, a team of vigilantes of the new government turns up at the party where every legume dressed scantily or in revealing clothes or naked is glowered at, pushed, pulled, boxed, and slapped while the vigilantes hold up a batch of “modest tailoring”. Some of the legume beans protested. By now, the lentil bean was excited about moving back



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to its cage once more. Here is an arbitrary, upside down world where one prefers the safety, security and boredom of the cage as compared to the world outside.

In the meantime, the new world government has given orders for curators to examine and study all bittersweet trees and all their properties, and how they can be moistened and uprooted to be replanted in a huge museum sort of place where they can preserve the trees for future generations. The absurdity of this zeal to preserve everything, even if one destroys it in the process, is clear to the reader. This zeal for conserving bittersweet trees too goes awry, just as the very intention behind democracy, government and stories has been overturned, and the bittersweet trees come to be seen as a threat as they do not conform to the norms they are supposed to adhere to, and are therefore supposed to be cut, stripped, and hacked. An ideologue comes proclaiming that they would no longer allow the bittersweet trees to arrive with an enchanted crowd behind him, repeating his words. Each marked tree is surveilled by a camera. Finally, the last tree in the war is the tree under which the world travellers are standing. The tree hosts a bird's nest, a snake, a moon, an "expressive" ant, a vampire spirit and a retired hunter. Millions of "squirrel-shaped blubs" come closer and form weapons with their pulped fury. The crowd carries pistols, guns, rifles, tanks, steamrollers and the like.

Mody now takes us into a full six pages of wordplay revolving around ducks. Although this section begins with the voicing of desire and longing for the other, which is presumably between Sameshape and Othershape, soon turns into a discussion on ducks. Mody plays around with words such as a duck knows, and a duck wants. A duck knows what it wants. A knowing duck wants. A wanting duck knows. And so on. She tells us all the things a duck can do; a duck can fuck, can tell off other ducks, can say they feel fucked up or duck from saying it, etcetera. Later we find duck cookery; ducks being cooked and eaten up as duck dishes. Mody also makes a reference to the practice of foiegras employed in industrial farming of ducks. This discourse on ducks makes one feel that Mody is trying to humanise the ducks just as she humanises the trees and the lentil bean and the expressive ant. Mody is trying to point towards the "aliveness" of all living beings who can think, feel, and do a number of activities. We can see the themes of feminism and environmentalism being linked in the text.



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Efforts are on, under the new world government, for constant surveillance of gender roles, sexualities, modes of dressing, as well as for the destruction of trees. By now, Sameshape and Othershape seem to have become Sameshape Jaan and Othershape Jaan. These lovers are all dressed in wedding clothes and are about to marry. Sameshape Jaan and Othershape Jaan seem to have leaped out of the travellers' stories and now stand beside them under the tree. Sameshape Jaan and Othershape Jaan give us a string of meaningless names which could perhaps be interpreted as names of people in the audience witnessing their wedding. Ultimately, Sameshape Jaan and Othershape Jaan become part of the audience, voyeurs like us readers, who witness the six world travellers being killed and being led to six separate graves. Burnt flesh, popped eyeballs, bones and teeth are covered with charcoal and ashes. One wonders how long Sameshape Jaan and Othershape Jaan would be allowed to live in a world where all trees and all of the world travellers have already been killed. The name of the text *Kala Pani*, literally meaning Black Water, refers to the colonial prison in the Andaman and Nicobar islands built by the British. "Kala Pani" could refer to the deaths of the six world travellers, or to the loneliness and isolation which is an integral part of the text and which is experienced by Sameshape and Othershape, and also by the lentil bean in the cage, the last tree left standing in the war, and by the world travellers themselves who have had all connection with the world cut off, being stranded under a tree for more than a year.

Women have, by and large, not been seen as subjects of desire themselves in our culture but rather as objects desired by the male subject. Women subjects actively expressing their own desires are perhaps not shown anywhere better than in Monica Mody's poetic play, *Kala Pani*, a cross-genre experiment practising what perhaps can be called as the opposite of fetishizing. In *Kala Pani*, the two women, Sameshape and Othershape, who could be either sisters or lesbians, are entirely disembodied. There are no bodies, no accessories and no external trappings. Sameshape and Othershape, in fact, are shown as no more than desiring voices. Here it is only the desire of female sexuality that is expressed and experienced by the reader.