



Book Review

Arundhathi Subramaniam. *Women Who Wear Only Themselves.* Speaking Tiger, India, 2021

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Arundhathi Subramaniam—a poet, curator and author of twelve books including prose and poetry—has penned down the journeys of four women in her recent book *Women Who Wear Only Themselves: Conversations with Four Travelers on Sacred Journeys*. This book demystifies the unapologetic and extraordinary spiritual lives of these women by addressing questions pertaining to search of divinity, love and beauty. Beginning the book with the concept of thirst for the divine, the author deftly draws the reader towards the subtle arenas that constitute the essence of *bhakti*, and the esoteric relationship between the devotee and the deity. The author calls herself a ‘seasoned listener,’ and has aptly embarked on the task of recording the spiritual lifestyles of 1) Annapoorni amma, the naked saint, 2) Maa Karpoori, a young monk, 3) Balarishi, a nadhayogini, and 4) Lata Mani, an intellectual turned tantric practitioner.

For a seeker of seekers, Arundhathi, the thirst to comprehend the nuances of the spiritual path had never been sated by the male mystics. A possible lacuna existed and that would be assuaged by finding the voices of the female mystics. This served as one of the motivating factors for Arundhathi to craft life-stories of these four spiritual women. Arundhathi addresses them as a bunch of quiet women who radiate a blazing fire within themselves and are capable of kindling an energetic search drive within amateur seekers like the author herself. The notion of gender may sound inconsequential in *bhakti* tradition, yet for Subramaniam it becomes a point of central concern for understanding the different perspectives of ‘seeking/search’ within the realm of *bhakti*. The author defines the act of ‘seeking’ or ‘search’ as a valid form of desire. The recurrent

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tropes of hunger, thirst, craving and desire demystifies the intricacies in the relationship between the divine and the devotee. The devotee is not just content with worshipping god but wants to eat god, make love with god, argue with god and hurl cuss words at god. Undoubtedly, this destabilizes the existing perceived notion of a hierarchical relationship, and demonstrates the *bhakta's* strong desire to embody the divinity and become one with the divine—the process during which the two identities (of the *Bhakta* and the divine) become one.

As quiet unsung women, these female mystics of contemporary times demonstrate a lifestyle that stands in stark contrast to the yesteryear female mystics, who were drawn into a kind of pasteurization wherein they were turned into calendar images, and transmuted into temple figurines. The author admits that she was fascinated by the unusual quietness reflected in the demeanours of these women. The four chapters of the book, each chronicling a different journey, throw light on the existing spiritual ethos of South India. By bringing the lives of these women to the forefront, the author explicates the different shades and contours that exist within the Indian spiritual ecosystem. Though these women adhere to different spiritual outlooks, their uniform approach to the divine through the process of self-discovery, serves as an underlying feature that places them as fellow travellers in the mystical voyage. Subramaniam strings together the four stories of these individualistic women and presents it as a collective journey for the readers. Interspersing the text with relevant ancient *bhakti* poems, Subramaniam delves deep into the mindscapes of the women mystics. Further, Subramaniam's conversation elucidates how spiritual is woven into routine of these extraordinary women who emanate a disconcerting presence in the way they relate to their respective deities. The steadfast beliefs and inveterate identities of these mystics provide them with the confidence to "wear only themselves." For instance, a conversation with Annapoorni Amma reveals her strong palpable presence. Her refusal to wear clothes displays utter vulnerability which acts a thread of commonality between all four women. Lata Mani, a renowned academician and a Marxist-feminist turned towards the spiritual path after a terrible car accident. A spiritual journey entails acknowledging the unexplored

spaces within oneself. And, this misfortune paved the way for Lata Mani's inevitable journey of discovering her the profound within her 'self.'

The crafting of the 'self' involves cutting, sewing and stripping away the inessential. The process of stripping away is not easy especially when the unneeded segments refuse to fall off very easily and this is the moment where pain comes into play—the pain of shedding the false garb and embracing the trueness of selfhood. The same is illustrated via the design of book cover. The metaphor of clothing plays a significant role in the characterisation of the self. Moreover, it is the recurrent motif of clothing which involves the constant process of cutting, sewing and stripping which are nevertheless significant factors in understanding the 'self.' As every woman in the book recalls her divine journey, Arundhati unveils the joy, pain and struggle prominent in the path of inhabiting one's own 'self'. The author recounts the ever-present solitude of the pandemic, and how it pushed her towards serious reflection, on the conversations and interviews she had had with these four women. These moments of contemplation gave birth to an urgency that motivated Subramaniam to document these stories.

Meditating on the division of flesh and spirit Subramaniam addresses the pertinent questions that surround the notion of *bhakti*. It is through the integration of flesh and spirit that these women craft a unique path to reach the divine, striking a perfect balance between the two. Through this she also reflects on the diverse spiritual tradition of the country. As the chapters unfold, one can trace the budding intensity of the conversation unearthing the 'aliveness' of the self as these women cast the radiant presence in a demure manner. Untouched by the fear of missing out on any momentary ethereal pleasures, these women stand out for their pursuit, which is expansive nature and its purpose. By bringing alive the stories of the four women spiritual mystics *Women Who Wear Only Themselves* re-defines the dated doctrines of *bhakti*. Undoubtedly, the book is a welcome addition to the oeuvre of existing *bhakti* literature, and certainly garners a wide readership from both the seekers and non-seekers alike.