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## EXPRESSING THE MYRIAD VOICES OF HER SELF: THE POETRY OF MINI BABU

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### Abstract

Dr Mini Babu is an outstanding voice among the new crop of women poets from Kerala. Ever since her first publication in 2019, she has been consistent in her creative pursuits, bringing out more collections in the consecutive years. The recurring themes of her poetry are the Self, Memory, Empathy and the Journey of life, both spiritual and otherwise. Her poems are conduits for the strong impressions that have been created in her mind by everyday life. That the mundane could be a fertile subject for lingering thoughts and pithy metaphors can be clearly exemplified using Mini Babu's poems from her collection Kaleidoscope. At the same time the poet delves into her spiritual sojourns in her second collection titled Shorelines. One can also find poems that speak about migrancy, exile and borders in this volume. Her work, Memory Cells, as the title indicates plays with the impressions time has left on her. All her poems, as observed by Dr P. Radhika, have a common thread of empathy, which is the "dominant quality of the composite narrator of the ...poems". This is clearly seen in some of the poems in Shorelines where she speaks for the marginalized. The paper attempts to look at the methods and techniques the poet adopts to weave these layers of thoughts inside her into her work.

**Keywords:** Memory, Multiple Voices, Marginalized, Migrancy.

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Often one comes across in Mini's poetry, vignettes that stand as testimony to her fine observation of people and life around her. These impressions are, as Eliot would agree, stored in her mind to be retrieved during a creative moment and crystallised in beautiful images. Freud compared the writer's retrieval of his/her own past to create art with an archaeologist who digs up artefacts from the past. He felt that in such unearthings, the artists often saw refractions of their pasts. Though the refractions often tamper with the original, they are fabulous treasure troves that holds the possibility of infinite creation. In *There Could be a Room Within*, the poet feels "a mad delight" at the sight of a dilapidated urban house replete with unlatched doors and creepers and a wooded garden and would run into the ruins hoping to find relics from the past that once lit some ancient lives only to imagine her own self in the future in that forlorn space.

Mini very successfully delves into her memories to construct new narratives of her Self. She says that all women intrinsically bear the memories of all womanhood that went before her. In the poem *Every Woman is Every Other Woman*, she says that:

Women walk on memories of exile  
Of deportation from one country to the next....  
.....It is a procession of memory (Memory Cells)

Women are also related across centuries as the wind testifies in *Against the Rawness of a Woman's Soul*, "And by habit, every woman, across centuries, states the wind, "Lick their lips to taste salt".

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She continues to express her belief in the unifying spirit of the universe in the lines, “every drop of water, prides itself in its oceanic bloodline, uninformed that a single cell holds a body in itself”.

Each time you read poetry  
Or don't read poetry  
The memories of read ones stay....

*My Grandmother's Bath* is such a moment that seems to have taken shape out of her several moments with her grandmother. The poet refracts the moment in her mind, distances herself from it and goes on to reconstruct it in her poem decades later. One can say that it is a typical Wordsworthian approach to writing poetry. The birth of the poem is predicted in the original incident: “she knew, one day I would lose myself there, I would unhinge a memory Decades from then.” (18) Another striking image that she picks from her past is that of her mother who always wanted to be a musician but settled for a home makers life.

Next time you see her cooking,  
Sweeping or washing clothes  
Do not give in to the ordinary,  
She may be performing to an  
Unusual volume of spectators somewhere.

Mini also refers to the burden of memories in the poem *Nowhere*, in which she shares her desire to leave behind all memories and embark on a journey to nowhere. She won't reply if anyone asks her anything for,  
I am returning from nowhere,  
Erased of all memory cells.

The marginalised or those who are deemed as outsiders or those who live on the fringes of society also feature repetitively in Mini's poetry. In the Indian context this would comprise women, the lower castes and most of the unorganised sector of our society. *Debts to the Dead* speaks about a fruit seller who used to bid mangoes at her home. The event happens during the covid lockdown, a time when the mainstream too was hard-pressed to run their daily lives. She worries about the plight of the fruitseller who seems to have passed away without claiming the fruits for which he had paid partially. She wonders how debts to the dead are returned not just in terms of money but the debt of emotions and love that we have received from them.

Of all the marginalised that she has come across, the state of the migrant 'plain-faced' seems to have seeped in deep into her sensitive mind. Rizio Yohannan, in the introduction to *Shorelines* says that Mini Babu is a 'poet with the soul of a refugee'. In *Refugees*, she describes their unending journey whose destination is as humble as a day. She never rebels against the situations that surrounds her. She is compared to a 'traveler witnessing the sights around with an empathetic gaze'. She refers to them in her poem *Migrancy*,

There are people who,  
Others, by no means care about  
Yet, they keep running,  
Making pleasant interferences to certify  
Their presence.

Even then the universe  
Furnishes a place for an ant  
Or a butterfly or a crab and  
One does not snaffle the other's place.

The poet even apologises for the state her village is in, in the poem *The Day I became my Village*. Her sense of guilt is so heavy that she apologises for the troubles caused by others and opines that "There are times when people are their brother's keepers". She is able to accept the flaws around and offer her own means to navigate through the indifferent world and pragmatically affirms that "One must have the soul of a refugee.....to perceive all unending walks leads nowhere outside the earth."

Indian women writers are mostly troubled by the problems that arise due to the patriarchal nature of our society. It is very rarely that one comes across a writer who is at peace with her existence amidst the chaos of the world. It isn't that Mini Babu is unaware or doesn't acknowledge the existence of such issues but that her problems lie elsewhere. The problems of the Self, her agony in accepting the unfairness surrounding us and a sense of accountability towards the society are entrenched in her writings. She negotiates by taking each vicissitude as a step ahead in the journey of life with calm acceptance. While doing that she is also very careful not to tread on another's feet as mentioned in *And We Sat Across the Table*,  
And we walked together, on different paths,  
Careful not to step over, one another's foot.

We can see how she is able to refract the various conflicts that are in her mind, life and the society in her unique quiet way, without ruffling any feathers. The messages are conveyed clearly and deftly using words and images that create an indelible impression on the reader's mind urging them to accept her arguments without any hesitation. This could be because the poet is able to present the most relatable elements in our lives in the most relatable manner.

### **Bibliography**

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