The British writer and feminist, Caroline Criado-Perez, who was given the Human Rights Campaigner of the Year Award in 2013, has in a new book, *Invisible Women*, put together case studies and research papers to show the hidden ways in which women are forgotten. As if in answer to her observations, an anthology of Asian women’s writing, *Speaking for Myself*, has been edited by Sukrita Paul and Malashri Lal on the initiative of India International Centre. It has an erudite introduction from Kapila Vatsyayan. Intriguingly, the editors “showcase” the book as a challenge to the “stereotypical image of women in Asia”.


Last night I dreamt
I kissed you in a way
That I am not allowed to.

It goes on to say,

Last night I dreamt
we kissed. Eurydice, the Mediterranean
could take you/, throw you to the other
shore/ the carcass of a cuttlefish./ Don’t
look back./ Waking exiles us/ all over
again.

Teaching in the U.K., the Yiddish poet Zeina Hashem Beck writes,

We
are exiled wanderers/ London in Paris.

Israeli poets, wanderers they may be, but ‘exiled’ they are not any more.

Verbal tsunamis

With all the migration and displacement taking place in Syria, poetry is bound to erupt. Fadwa Suleiman, the Syrian poet, writes of a Palestinian activist, *Her face is an olive grove in Haifa /on her lips, the smile of the first daisy opening*. Then she proceeds to talk of the first tent pitched for refugees, and the first orange dried out by bullets. The poem ends with the overwhelming question, What victory there for us, what victory for them?

Zeina Hashem Beck from Lebanon in a poem ‘For Syria, September 2015’ tells us that a 13-year-old boy Kinan says,

We don't want to stay in Europe, just stop the war.

Another Lebanese poet, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, says of her children,

they will learn addition from the corpses piled on the sidewalks.

Moving from West Asia we come to old favourites, Jean Arasanayagam from Sri Lanka, Kishwar Naheed’s poem on Sohni crossing the Chenab for her tryst. There is even a story by Zahida Hina translated by Faiz Ahmad Faiz.

Some catty Indian writers, quite a lot of us are catty, have told me that Taslima Nasrin is a fine activist but an ordinary writer. Both her poems here are among the best, and hit you in the gut. One must compliment Sukrita Paul for the selections. But a mean critic like me will not let go of an opportunity.

Take Paul’s own poem, ‘Laila’s Call’. It begins turbidly: If only you could come out/ step out of your mystical yearnings; then we have walk out of your longings/ And geography bind you. This is ready association – dusk and dawn, night and day, heat and cold, space and time. Poets cannot be careless with words they use. A line later she comes up with space and time! The poem ends in hyperbole: Your poems are the gurgling waves of the ocean/ leaping to reach the skies. English is a vehicle for understatements, not verbal tsunamis. Anuradha Vijayakrishnan is a banker in Dubai and has come out with her debut book, *The Who-Am-I Bird*. (The titles of poetry books are getting more and more weird.)

In the house of sorrow, the first smell is of incense,
one thin coil winding
silver-eyed ash dripping endlessly
into a silver-grey boat placed
at the doorstep.

Sasha Parmasad is a good poet with fine sensibilities, but poetry on matters only connected with the spirit is a tough call.

‘What victory there for us’

Women poets talk of migration, displacement, and mystical yearnings

Keki N. Daruwalla is a poet and novelist.