

Classic Poetry Series

**Mallika Sengupta**  
**- poems -**

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# Mallika Sengupta(27 March 1960 - 28 May 2011)

Mallika Sengupta was a Bengali poet, feminist, and reader of Sociology from Kolkata, known for her "unapologetically political poetry".

## <b>Biography</b>

Mallika was born in Krishnanagar, a village in Nadia district, West Bengal, India. Sengupta is a proponent of an unapologetically political poetry and an important voice in contemporary Bengali literature. She began writing in 1981 and has since published eleven books of poetry, two novels and several essays, and edited an anthology of women's poetry from Bengal. She works as a lecturer of sociology in a Kolkata college where she is currently the head of her department. She is also the Poetry Editor of Sananda, the Bengali women's fortnightly (edited by Aparna Sen).

Sengupta has won numerous awards, including the Sukanto Puraskar (1998) from the Government of West Bengal, and a Junior Fellowship for Literature (1997 – 99) from the Department of Culture, Government of India. She has travelled to several poetry festivals, conferences and seminars in India, Sweden, Austria, USA and Bangladesh. English translations of her work have appeared in various anthologies. In addition to teaching, editing and writing, she has been actively involved with the cause of gender justice and other social issues. Along with other poets and artists, she has initiated Aloprithivi, a forum committed to raising consciousness among marginalized women and children through poetry, music and drama.

Sengupta has consistently refused to be squeamish about mixing her activism with her art. As she tells poet, critic and translator Sanjukta Dasgupta in the interview included in this edition, "Ideology ruins poetry, but not always. Rather every poet has to face this challenge at some period of her life... I think a good poet can always insert ideology into poetry without destroying aesthetic conditions."

Dasgupta describes her as 'an admirably alert, ardent and articulate person' for whom feminism 'is not just an academic issue' but 'a conviction and a challenge'. 'In her poetry, womanhood does not remain an interiorised awareness,' writes Dasgupta. 'It becomes an energetic protest against marginalisation, interrogating women's position in society as the oppressed other.'

In the poems included in this edition we hear the strong, unhesitant,

unambiguous voice of a writer with a message. One begins to understand why Dasgupta describes the poet as the Taslima Nasrin of West Bengal. The polemics here are quite clearly the poetics.

It would be easy to dismiss this poetry as strident, shrill and 'soapboxy', particularly if one values an aesthetic paradigm of obliquity and subtext. However, it is useful to remind oneself of the perennially fraught but vital presence of protest poetry in the literatures of the world. And on reading this extract from Kathamanabi, a long poem by Sengupta (translated by Vaijayanti Gupta), one begins to see yet again why the raised voice must sometimes replace the genteel murmur:

"I am "her" voice, recounting her tales,  
from the Vedic age to the 21st century.

The fire that has remained stifled in the ashes of history, smothered by time and age,

I am that woman - I speak of her.  
I read tears, I write fire,  
I live in infamy and consume its ashes.  
I endure violence, and still breathe fire.  
I live as long as this fire burns within me.

<b>Activism and Literary Themes</b>

Sengupta is also active in a number of protest and gender activism groups. Her fiery, combative tone, can be seen in many poems, e.g. "While teaching my son history":

"Man alone was both God and Goddess  
Man was both father and mother  
Both tune and flute  
Both penis and vagina  
As we have learnt from history."

often dealing with women's marginalized role in history:

"after the battle said chenghis khan  
the greatest pleasure of life,  
is in front of the vanquished enemy  
to sleep with his favourite wife."

Particularly evocative is her feminist rendition of the legend of Khanā, a medieval female poet whose tongue was allegedly cut off by her jealous husband:

"In Bengal in the Middle ages  
Lived a woman Khanaa, I sing her life  
The first Bengali woman poet  
Her tongue they severed with a knife  
Her speechless voice, "Khanaar Bachan"  
Still resonates in the hills and skies  
Only the poet by the name of Khanaa  
Bleeding she dies."

<b>Death</b>

A breast cancer survivor, she was under treatment since Oct. 2005. and passed away on 28th may, 2011 leaving her partner and college-age son behind.

# A Girl In Gujarat Genocide

Gujarat was a land of violet, red and green  
But colors deceived like lizards

People lived happily in Gandhi's country  
Within that harmony assassins nurtured their dreams

They plotted looting and rapes  
On a hot summer day fires exploded

Those who stayed close through joy and sorrow  
Violence stands between them like a wall of hell

A zealot in saffron takes out his sword  
And digs a fetus out of its mother's womb

[Translated by Catherine Fletcher with the poet]  
Rapists are sons. The raped are mothers.  
Religion hosts this banquet

The child whose papa is dead and mammy raped  
Finds no refuge in the relief camp, though Gujarat is her home

The girl with a broken dish in her hand  
Standing at the riot-relief camp's doorstep is Gujarat 's angel

Give her a piece of bread and a bit of hope  
Give her firm land beneath her feet.

Mallika Sengupta

# Insignia Of Blood

Man, I've never raised my arms against you

Slitting the hair-parting the day you drew the insignia of blood  
I felt pain, I didn't tell you

On dry soil no rose blooms, no peacock dances  
Yet digging the sandy terrain we drew water  
With son on the lap have watched glow-worms, pointed out Orion.

We know earth is woman, the sky primal man  
Then why have you chained my arms?  
Why didn't you let me see the sun for a thousand years?

Don't insult the earth that holds you  
Man, I've never raised my arms against you.

Man, I've never raised my arms against you.

[Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta]

Mallika Sengupta

# Khanaa's Song

Listen o listen:

Hark this tale of Khanaa

In Bengal in the Middle Ages

Lived a woman Khanaa, I sing her life

The first Bengali woman poet

Her tongue they severed with a knife

Her speechless voice, 'Khanar Bachan'

Still resonates in the hills and skies

Only the poet by the name of Khanaa

Bleeding she dies.

[Translated by Amitabha Mukherjee]

Not: Khanaa (Bengali: ???) was an Indian poetess and legendary astrologist, who composed in medieval Bengali between the ninth and 12th centuries AD.

Mallika Sengupta

# Tell Us Marx

She who spun rhymes, wove blankets  
The Dravidian woman who sowed wheat  
In the Aryan man's fields, reared his kids  
If she isn't worker, then what is work?

Tell us, Marx, who is a worker who isn't  
New industrial workers with monthly wages  
Are they the only ones who work?  
Slum life is the Industrial Age's gift  
To the worker's housewife

She draws water, mops floors, cooks food  
After daily grind at night  
She beats her son and weeps  
She too isn't worker?

Then tell us, Marx, what is work!  
Since housework is unpaid labour, will women simply  
Sit at home and cook for the revolutionary  
And comrade he is alone who wields hammer and sickle!  
Such injustice does not become You

If ever there is a revolution  
There will be heaven on earth  
Classless, stateless, in that enlightened world  
Tell us, Marx

Will women then become the handmaidens of revolution?

[Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta]

Mallika Sengupta

# The Girl On The Sunlit Road

As the shadows of Minto Park shifted  
They too moved away from the sun's heat,  
The two creatures who had left the dreadful house  
Two storm-tossed birds - daughter and mother.

What took place in the night's darkness? Outrage! Outrage!  
Incessant violence would tear up the woman  
While the eyes of the mute girl streamed,  
She watched nightlong, nightlong, blood trickling down  
Her mother's bruises.  
The nightly eyewitness from a neighbouring window  
Flared. Slamming his window shut he says, 'I want privacy, privacy.'

Window cries out, 'Why are you beating your wife?'  
'My goat, whether I slaughter it, head or bum foremost  
That's my business,' the man said.  
This is termed privacy My Lord.  
If one human being kills another  
You will keep quiet!  
Where's the human being! That's the man's wife.

The Police Officer turns philosopher-  
'Resolve your domestic conflicts at home  
If your husband hits you a little  
Why do you rush to the police station? Go, go devote yourself to the family.'

'They'll kill my mother,'  
The girl wept at her maternal grandmother's feet,  
Her granddaughter's face made the old woman's heart tremble.  
Her sense of duty is relentless - throughout the ages she has learned  
A woman's real space is her husband's home  
'You have to return whatever the agony.'

Where will the woman go with her young daughter?  
Today a friend's house, tomorrow another's,  
But day after tomorrow  
The day, day after?

Mother and daughter sit in Minto Park,

Clasping her mother the girl cries uncontrollably  
'I shall not return to that man.'  
To the daughter and mother who have escaped from home  
Home is a black hole,  
Her vagina would be ripped from incessant brutality  
Yet the man's fury never seemed to abate,  
'No I will return no more'  
Holding her daughter fast  
The woman walked down the sunlit road.

[Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta]

Mallika Sengupta

# The Husband's Black Hands

The moment she tucks in the mosquito net and goes  
to bed, her husband's black hands fumble after  
the snakes and frogs of her body: 'You're hurting me!  
Let go!' In anger, those black hands twist her breasts.  
He says, 'Listen here, Sweta, don't be coy.  
If ever I find even the evening star  
gesturing to you, or making eyes,  
I'll see that you fall into a hellish pit.'  
Sweta's white thighs swing back and forth in space  
clinging to the back, her husband's black back.

[Translated by Carolyne Wright and Paramita Banerjee]

Mallika Sengupta

# Tongue

The drumroll of centuries —  
our hearts beat  
with hopes and fears.  
Blood. Battles. Poisoned air:  
is this our fate?  
Or will the new century transcend hate?

New generations, changing tastes  
salt and pepper and sour and sweet  
the melting pot makes culture paste  
will Bangla still be heard on the street?

In this world thermo-nuclear bound  
in the onslaught of Euro, Dollar and Pound  
will Bangla hold up?  
Our way of life, the way we speak  
do we change it all because we're weak?

While we are poor,  
and our faults are countless  
our love for Bangla  
is surely timeless ?

[Translated by Amitabha Mukerjee]

Mallika Sengupta