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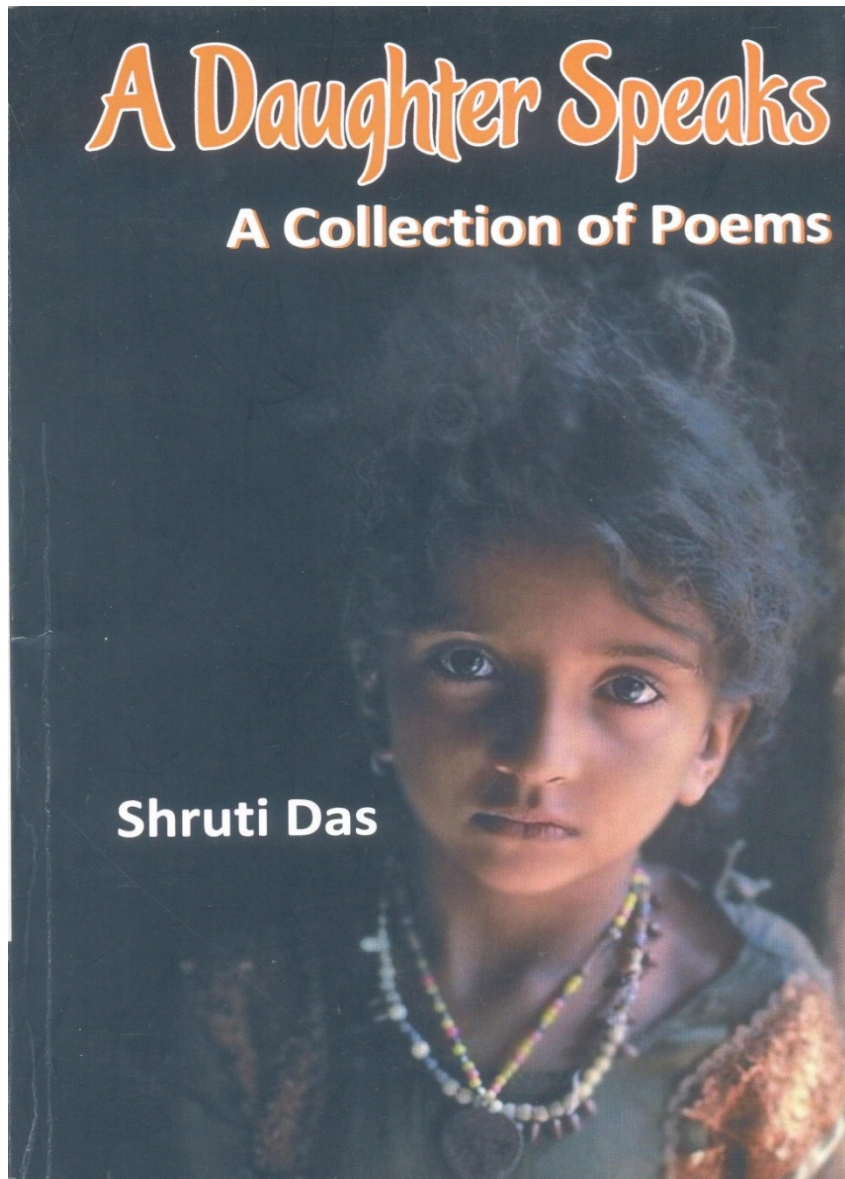
Author: Shruti Das

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Shruti Das's first collection of poems *A Daughter Speaks* comes as an aroma of vernal breeze with a refreshingly new idiom and the language of the marginalised--the women. When the daughter speaks, well-nigh powerful emotions rush forth with a torrential gush. Das has seen and experienced it all--the terror, brutality, deceit and the inhuman treatment perpetrated to that segment of the society. She has been a part of it all and spares no effort to sharpen her pen against the established social order. Not just the pen but her conscience too is the sentinel--a voice of the speechless masses, crying for the social justice.

The poet purports to establish reality and truth very candidly and forthrightly in her poems. Her poems reveal the vulnerability of the women's suppressed psychic terrors. The poems of this collection cover a broad spectrum of emotions. However, their sustained humanistic as well as empathetic engagement with the harrowing experiences of women in contemporary society spells out apprehension, terror and sadness prominently. Much of the poetry in this book bravely deals with the stark realities of modern life highlighting the unwarranted daily occurrences. Indeed, Das gives vent to some of her living memories and experiences, crying out against the unjust laws and long-established unjust social practices regulated by patriarchal hegemony.

The volume, *A Daughter Speaks* comprises 42 poems on a variety of themes-- misery, helplessness, hope, pain, exploitation, nostalgia, alienation and love. This collection will undoubtedly be a valuable contribution to the inventory of contemporary Indian English poetry. The collection begins with the signature poem "A Daughter Speaks", a thought provoking and heart-rending poem that depicts the pity and the shattered hopes of a poor and innocent rustic lass. It also captures the joys of her childhood which turn into a holocaust in her adolescence. The smile of her rosy lips transforms to tears in her 'hollowed eyes' (page, 15). She experiences physical and mental exploitation with a condensed heart. She too experiences the trials and tribulations, harrowing ordeals, and sorrow and suffering like dumb cattle. Even though her heart goes out to her she can hardly do anything about the casualty of her sexually-assaulted mother. But her utter helplessness in this crucial juncture is evident from the statement- "I heard the sound of your bones cracking. I am helpless." (Page, 15) She considers all such happenings a part of her life. She therefore, witnesses it with a bloody heart and wounded soul. This poem sets the tone and mood for this poetic journey with the images of 'mango blossoms', 'street alleys', 'deep shadows', 'shredded cloth', 'gust of wind,' recounting a parody of her own existence.

“In the Bride Market” too, the poet delineates the unspeakable misery of a bride and her pathetic display of dignity, a dignity that is sold in the market by the butcher-like father in a critical situation unknown to many of us. The position of women in this modern male-dominated society is very stifling and critical. As a speechless slave she witnesses her being sold to the lustful buyer. The agony emanating from the helpless surrender of a bride is graphically captured by the poet. The hatred and the anguished heart of the poet aches over the ‘age old agony’ (page, 17) of the impoverished woman. She has seen from close quarters the way she is brutalized and desecrated. Even though the poet’s protest against all such brutal acts is rather drowned in poetic delineation, she manages to activate the need for protest in the reader. The most wide-ranging and forceful theme of the collection, however, centers on women and sexuality, confirming her as a feminist.

What is fascinating about Das is her presentation of the saddest thoughts of the underprivileged which probably make her poems sweeter. P B Shelley has the similar opinion, “our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought”.

In “A Grief”, the poet speaks about the passing of a ninety years old lady which seems to be the poet’s personal loss. Shruti Das deals with more personal issues: memories of her mother which is a beautiful contemplation on loss. By displaying her personal loss she, perhaps, generalizes the decay of physical ecstasy and wisdom along with it. This is a poem about the aches and pains of aging and process of death and decay. The oriental sensibility and consciousness of the poet is well understood from the fact that a typical Indian ritual like the funeral procession has been dealt with all details. The poet laments:

The fire purifying they say,
Only burns, burns and burns.
Puppy fat and dry bones,
and wisdom of ninety years.

She further writes:

A grief resonant in the mantras
... dropping down at times
to collect the empty desires of
hungry children quarreling
over coins flung for salvation....

(Page 22-23)

Similar discontentment and disapproval against the existing socio-moral order has been portrayed with care and concern by the poet. Her “Leadless Eyes” speaks a remorseful story of starvation involving an insolvent individual who frantically searches for food in a stinking place like municipality dustbin. Witnessing such sights is really agonizing. On the contrary the mockery of humanly brutes is clear. The lines evoke powerful feelings and emotions.

My skeleton hangs on the racks
of the boutique. You buy pleasure
with money and crush
my dead bones for better yield....

(Page-34)

In “Ah, Hiroshima!” the poet illustrates the terrible devastation of human civilization in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by nuclear holocaust in the 2nd world war. The poet is scared of scientific development and its ill effects and therefore, desires to flight back to the primitive age in quest of primitive peace. In a sense, this is the idea of romantic escape, an escape into the world of peace.

Alienation, an attribute of modernism predominates the poems of Das. As she says in “The Lonely Peepal”- “Amidst a crowd of mustard flowers she stands alone; aloof”. (Page-26) In *Trust* we find the same isolation in different form where the poet’s trust melts, friendship withers like autumnal leaf. “Indian Spouse,” throws light on how the woman has eternally suffered seclusion in the face of discrimination and prejudice. The lines ‘she walked alone’, in the first stanza; ‘she walks alone’, in the 2nd, ‘she will walk alone’ in the 3rd stanza demonstrate solitude and isolation of a distressed woman who fights against all odds of her life to survive.

The mental strength and stamina to proclaim war against the psycho-moral degeneration is evident in this poem.

By no stretch of imagination can the poet be labelled a pessimist, as some people tend to do. She envisions, covertly though, the possibility of a brighter world. In “The Lonely Peepal” her optimism is reflected:

She waits with hope
Like *Sakuntala*.
Bulbuls and woodpeckers peck on her.

She waits with patience for the Kingfisher
To get her lover's ring
And salvation
From the deep belly of an
Unknown fish.

(Page – 26)

The very last poem of the collection “Hope” is a specimen of optimism. The lines:

Gazing at yesterday, I saw
The huge orb of nascent sun
Rosy with promises and the first touch of dawn;
A new tomorrow that awaits us....

(Page – 67)

gives an impression that the poet is not a sadist who sees the cynical side of life but a dreamer who could foresee a better world tomorrow. Some of the poems of this collection are autobiographical in nature. “To Mother”, “Twilight”, “Visiting Van Gogh” are highly autobiographical and bear certain resemblance to Kamala Das's poetry. Her personal feelings and experiences are evenly poised in these poems.

Shruti Das's poems are stunning, not simply because of their powerful subject, but for the simple day to day images such as sun, moon, evening, dark, night, cloud, teddy bear, and adolescence, making such uncanny impact. Her range of study and sharpness of wit are overtly visible when she cites the characters like ‘Sakuntala’ and ‘Cleopatra’, great characters of two great classical authors Kalidas and Shakespeare. Indeed, most logical and exact use of the poetic diction and the appropriate words chosen in this debut collection establish her maturity as a poet. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the poems. This collection of poems will undoubtedly touch the readers' sentiment and win their approbation.