Excavation of Silenced Voices: (Re)visiting Menka Shivdasani’s Frazil through the Modern Feminist Discourse of Indian Writing in English

Rangnath Thakur
Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India

Binod Mishra
Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws

Part of the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Thakur, Rangnath and Mishra, Binod (2023) "Excavation of Silenced Voices: (Re)visiting Menka Shivdasani’s Frazil through the Modern Feminist Discourse of Indian Writing in English," Journal of International Women's Studies: Vol. 25: Iss. 5, Article 10.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss5/10

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts. This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.
Excavation of Silenced Voices: (Re)visiting Menka Shivdasani’s Frazil through the Modern Feminist Discourse of Indian Writing in English

By Rangnath Thakur¹ and Binod Mishra²

Abstract

The postmodernist phase of Indian English writing is characterized by the voices of many strong women expressing a feminist exploration of alternative discourses in women’s writing which are distinguished from the patriarchal framework of literary discourse. Along with Kamala Das, Meena Alexander, Imtiaz Dharkar, and Eunice de Souza, Menka Shivdasani is an active voice in contemporary Indian English poetry. Shivdasani is a prolific poet who has written poetry on various social, cultural, religious, and personal issues. Her four poetry collections include Nirvana at Ten Rupees (1990), Stet (2001), Safe House (2015), and Frazil (2018). Through her poetry, she has endeavored to deconstruct the constructed nature of women in patriarchal societies. However, in literary criticism, she has not been explored in detail; thus, Shivdasani deserves to be better known. She is truly an unsung voice in Indian English poetry because of her poetic excellence. The present paper will attempt to (re)visit Shivdasani’s work with particular reference to her recent poetry collection Frazil. The themes it depicts are women’s sensibilities, man–woman relationships, domesticity, myth, culture, religion, memory, loss, and the anxiety of city life. Therefore, the paper will analyze the thematic and structural aspects of her poetry, with assistance from the work of Menka Shivdasani, to move Shivdasani onto the center stage in the postmodernist phase of Indian writing in English.

Keywords: Silence, Women’s poetry, Gender, Poetry, Postmodernism, Menka Shivdasani, Indian literature

Introduction: Indian Poetry in English

Indian literature has a stupendous ancient past with the great oral and folkloric tradition, which has resulted in many celebrated works of literature. Even before writing on paper became a common practice, India had already produced great epics, like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, dramas like Abhijnanashankuntalam, Mrchakatika, Priyadarshika, and Ratnavali, critical books like Bharata’s Natya Sastra and Abhinavagupta’s Abhinavabharati, story collections like Panchatantra, and Jatakas, and great poetic books like Kalidas’ Kumarsambhavam and Meghadutam. Different genres of literature evolved during the ancient period of Indian literature, where religious and spiritual consciousness were the main deliberation points of ancient authors. Among these genres, poetry remained the most prominent genre, which was written not only in Sanskrit but later also in regional languages like Pali, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi. Women’s Writing in India: 600 B.C.

¹ Rangnath Thakur is a research scholar at the Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, India. He has completed his master’s degree from Banaras Hindu University and Post Graduate Diploma in Translation Studies from IGNOU. He is working in the area of postcolonial theory and Gandhian studies. His areas of interest include critical theories, Gandhian studies, Indian English writing, and European literature. Email Id: rangnath_t@hs.iitr.ac.in, rangnath1995@gmail.com

² Binod Mishra is a professor of English at IIT Roorkee who has served in various reputed institutions. He has published 24 books (18 edited and 6 authored) on various aspects of the English language and literature. He is also credited with two widely reviewed poetry collections: Silent Steps and Other Poems (2011) and Multiple Waves (2017). More than 50 of his papers have been published in reputed journals. He has received several prestigious awards in the field of literary studies. Email id: binod.mishra@hs.iitr.ac.in

³ All these pieces of literature were written in Sanskrit, which was the most prominent language of India at that period. Other languages which were also spoken in some parts of this land were Pali, Prakrit, and Tamil.
to the Present presents a comprehensive list of women writers who wrote in different Indian languages like Akkamahadevi and Sule Sankavva (Kannada); Janabai, Muktabari, Savitribai Phule (Marathi); Ratnabai and Gangasati (Gujarati); Mirabai, Mahadei Verma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (Hindi); and Chandrabati and Swarnakumari Devi (Bengali). Indian literature in all these languages took a different turn when India became a colony of Britain.

The consolidation of the British empire coincided with the evolution of Indian English literature, where many genres of literature took their formal shape. With the spread of colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, the proliferation of the English language became possible. English language and literature drew the attention of Indian writers and readers, who started to learn English and took an interest in studying English literature, art, and philosophy. In the domain of literature, during the late 19th century and early 20th century, India produced many excellent poets, novelists, and essayists whose writings exhibited Indian themes and Indian consciousness. Indian English writing developed its distinctive identity in the 20th century when writers and readers started to incorporate “Indianness” in their writings. They mastered the alien language and expressed the Indian psyche in this language. India’s writers and poets wrote in vernacular versions of English to create a hybrid space for the delineation of Indianness in English. In this way, Indian English literature established itself as an autonomous entity that could be easily distinguished from British English literature.

Poetry in English remained a dominant genre of Indian English literature since the arrival of English in India, but later, when fiction writing accelerated, poetry was marginalized within literary criticism. Indian English poetry is divided into three phases which may be termed Pre-independence, Post-independence, and Postmodernist (Kumar 21-22). They may also be called “the imitative phase, the assimilative phase, and the experimental phase” of Indian English poetry (Prashant 19). The very first phase of Indian English poetry was the period of the literary renaissance. The Indian poets were largely influenced by British Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and Lord Byron. They wrote about nature and the individual self, where the use of nature imagery was vitally prominent. Nevertheless, in the early 20th century, poetry writing in India took a different shift when poets like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, and Harindranath Chattopadhyay started to compose poetry in English. Aurobindo wrote the unmatchable epic Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol in 12 books; Ramesh Chandra Dutt translated the two great epics of India, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, into English; and Tagore became the first Indian recipient of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 for the English translation of his poetry collection, Gitanjali: Song Offerings, originally written in Bengali. Gitanjali is an interpretation of Tagore’s spiritual quest, where he establishes a relationship between his personal self and the divine. The second phase of Indian English poetry witnessed the influences of modernist British and American poets like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and W.H. Auden. It had the essential elements of modernism, and especially poets like Ramanujan, Parthasarathy, and Kolatkar display an “essentially modern sensibility, and mak[e] it play upon the Indian background” (Dutta 42). The final phase witnessed a shift in themes and styles in the 21st century, where a break from tradition and canon was registered. Thayil argues in his The Penguin Book of Indian Poets:

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, there had been a flowering, an uprising, and a new generation of poets who cared little about the usual poetry presses, who published poems on the Internet and rewrote the canon in their own performative or spoken or gender fluid image. (Thayil 2)

This phase of Indian English poetry displayed postmodernist tendencies, where some modernist voices continued to write, and many new voices emerged, and a paradigmatic shift was noticed in this genre of Indian English literature. Experimental poetry, impressionistic
poetry, Haiku poetry, and various other kinds of poetry came into existence. This was termed postmodern, for it showed a break from the past and poetry took on a regional flavor. Poets, especially women and diasporic poets, showed new writing styles to Indian readers. They questioned the heteronormative institutions of marriage, male-controlled social dogma, and the virtue of religion in different narrative forms.

In the course of analyzing the trajectory of Indian English literature, this paper traces the place of women poets in different phases. The paper further highlights how the modern feminist discourse of Indian English poetry has provided women poets a space to raise their voices against the oppression they have faced since time immemorial. Additionally, this paper provides a detailed analysis of modern feminist discourses in Indian English poetry, which further leads to situating Menka Shivdasani, a contemporary poet with a postmodern sensibility, on the central stage through her most recent poetry collection *Frazil*.

**Modern Feminist Discourse of Indian English Poetry**

In the different phases of Indian English poetry, there were few women poets, and the representation of women’s contribution was negligible. Before Indian women poets were recognized in the literary discourse, there were poets of English origin like Emma Roberts, Marie Leslie, Maria Nugent, and Mary Carshore, who wrote poetry about metropolitan culture. These poets delineated “the personal, the devotional, and the political. Like other colonial poets, women poets in India were from a metropolitan perspective, both distant from and belated with respect to the metropole” (Chaudhuri 64). Later we had voices from India like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. They were called Romantics; however, they were aware of women’s consciousness and the banalities of women’s existence in early 20th century India.

The next phase of Indian English poetry produced many distinctive women poets who resisted the constructed discourse of masculine hegemonic structure. As Banerjee notes, “In the aftermath of the Imperial Era, with the birth of independent postcolonial societies, Female poetic Writings have assumed a new literary significance of a novel brand of nationhood, liberalization, and democratization” (Banerjee 44). Poets like Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado, Meena Alexander, and Imtiaz Dharker established themselves as mainstream poets and brought women’s sensibility into the central discourse, which was previously ignored. Satchidanandan, in his “Of Many Indias: Alternative Nationhoods in Contemporary Indian Poetry,” argues:

> Another alternative nationhood being forged today is that of the women poets who consciously or unconsciously strive to subvert our phallocentric social order: revisionary myth-making, naked confession, the forging of counter-metaphors, the establishment of alternate semiotics of the body, uninhibited forays into the feminine psyche—all these seem to be on their national agenda. (Satchidanandan xxxii)

The creation of gender by society pushes women to the margin of social and political order. They are portrayed as the other of men in a world dominated by male hegemony.

The modern discourse of Indian feminism endeavors to challenge this hegemony and attempts to break with the old identities that were thrust on them by the authoritative social order. At the level of cultural studies and feminist reading of texts, a new kind of perspective has emerged that addresses the issues of Indian women. It addresses the problems of different social groups in different ways because the subordination of women in India includes “social structures and ideologies which vary considerably according to class, religion, caste and region” (Jackson 111). So, in modern discourse, “the meek and submissive heroines who were accepted as the standard women characters by their predecessors, are replaced by the bold heroines, having moral courage necessary for self-assertion” (Haldar 127). In addition to
addressing how unstable women’s positions are in society’s socio-political structure, feminist discourse also draws attention to the inner workings of the mind by illuminating an alternative path to discover women's consciousness. The postmodernist phase of Indian English Poetry became a phase of the realistic representation of women’s voices. The unapologetic voices of Tara Patel, Lakshmi Kannan, Melaine Silgardo, Ruth Vanita, Menka Shivdasani, Mamta Kalia, and Meena Kandasamy rebel against the oppressive patriarchal social order. These new poets “move away from radical modernist techniques. They are more concerned with the portrayal and assessment of their family background, their own lives and relations with others, and their immediate environment” (Dulai 188).

Menka Shivdasani: An Assertive Voice

Menka Shivdasani, a poet, journalist, editor, translator, and essayist, is a contemporary voice in the realm of Indian English poetry. She is an active voice who has constantly represented women’s consciousness through her many collections of poetry. Una Bose describes the diversity of her work: “Menka Shivdasani’s journalistic oeuvre, spanning four decades, cannot be pigeonholed into stifling boxes. Her stunning, inventive, thought-provoking, transportive poetry cannot be steamrolled into predictable genres. And her lucid, elegantly chiselled, stand-alone voice cannot be contained in a book or two” (Bose). Shivdasani was born in a Sindhi family in 1961 in Bombay, a city that produced poets like Jerry Pinto, Jeet Thayil, Vijay Nambisan, and Ranjit Hoskote, all contemporaries of Shivdasani. Her Sindhi family migrated from Pakistan during the partition of India, and the trauma of partition continued to assert its ghostly presence on her psyche. As she wrote herself, “The Partition of India was a truly traumatic time for the Sindhi community, with huge numbers of Sindhi Hindus being forced to migrate in the wake of the violence that followed” (Shivdasani, “A Feature”). Her youthful enthusiasm for poetry was only evident when she wrote poems, many of which were later published in local periodicals and newspapers like Bharat Jyoti and Free Press Journal. She later pursued her career as a journalist for South China Morning Post, where she came across many women who were sexually abused and tortured by men, and even a girl who had been raped by her own father. She authored eight books with another journalist Raju Kane, two of which were released in the presence of then-Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Bajpai.

During this time of her career, she was influenced by the well-known Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel with whom she remained in contact until his demise. He used to read her poems and gave suggestions which she still acknowledges. Ezekiel himself says, “I’ve always found her prose as well as poetry impressive in its maturity, not only promising and lively but with distinctive, carefully thought-out ideas” (qtd. in Shivdasani, Frazil, 131). She was also influenced by the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. These influences compelled her to rethink her journalistic career.

In 1986, she played a crucial role in the establishment of the Poetry Circle in Mumbai along with R. Raja Rao, Marilyn Naronha, Charmyne D’Souza, Prabhanjan Mishra, and T.R. Roy. Very soon, her first book of poetry, Nirvana at Ten Rupees, came in 1990, published by XAL Praxis, and edited by the renowned poet Adil Jussawalla. The collection examines the issues and contradictions encountered by a woman in her twenties, from her life as a student to that of a young professional. The young poetess speaks in protest against the social and cultural norms that stifle the imagination of an angry and dissatisfied soul. Bruce King describes this early collection as “one of the best first books of poetry to appear during the 1990s…They show the progress of a young woman from a student through the early stages of a career to a mother” (313). Her second poetry collection Stet came in 2001, while her third collection of poetry, Safe House, was published in 2015 by Paperwall Media. Manohar Shetty describes this third collection, Safe House, as “a book which presents a woman’s perspective from various
angles: alternately tender and savage, caring and reckless, defiant and mellow” (qtd. in Shivdasani, *Frazil* 134).

Apart from being an excellent poet, she is also an editor and translator. She is the co-translator of *Freedom and Fissure*, an anthology of Sindhi Partition poetry published by Sahitya Akademi in 1998. It describes the horror of partition that led to the massacre of millions of people. The traumatic memory of such incidents does not fade; instead, it survives in subsequent generations. The anthology presents the pain, suffering, and trauma of partition, which leads the current generation to understand the experience of mobility, displacement, and relocation of our ancestors. In the words of Menka Shivdasani, “The collection included work by writers who had lived through the brutal fracturing of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan, a traumatic event in which millions died, or lost their families and ancestral homes” (Shivdasani, “For Many Poets”). As an editor, she edited two anthologies for the American e-zine *Big Bridge*. These anthologies include poems of modern Indian English poets from different parts of the country. She also edited an anthology on women’s writing, *If the Roof Leaks, Let it Leak*, for SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women). Her poetic output continued, and she organized annual poetry festivals for the global movement 100 Thousand Poets for Change. All these efforts were made by her to create a stage for the new generation of poets who can fulfill their ambition in a male-dominated literary world. As Boukhroufa-Trijaud has noted of Shivdasani, “The community of poets she has contributed to build is moving on and the baton has been handed over to younger poets like Arundhati Subramaniam or Sampurna Chatterjee” (Boukhroufa-Trijaud, para 36).

Her poetic talent has been recognized both in India and in foreign lands, and she has been included in many reputed anthologies of poetry, where she has been celebrated for her original artistic work. Although she has suffered from the politics behind the inclusion of poets in an anthology, some anthologies could not ignore her maverick poetic genius. She was included in anthologies like *Both Sides of Sky: Post-Independence Poetry in English* (National Book Trust), *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, and *Poetry Review* (London). *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, edited by Sudeep Sen, included five poems of Shivdasani, namely “For Wole Soyinka,” “Departures,” “Bird Woman,” “Home-maker,” and “Mindspace.” Jeet Thayil, in his popular anthology of Indian English poetry *60 Indian Poets*, included four poems by Shivdasani. One of her poems, “The Atheist’s Confessions,” was included in *Indian English Literature: An Anthology*, a textbook of the bachelor’s degree course at the University of Mumbai. She recaptures every experience that she went through during her evolution from childhood to adulthood. Her poems present extensive personal reflections on the predicament of being a woman.

*Frazil: Excavation of Silenced Voices*

*Frazil* is the most recent collection from Menka Shivdasani. Published in 2018 and winning the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize in the Poetry category in 2019, the collection “presents a ‘spatial’ view of Menka’s poetry, right from her earliest poems in the 1980s to her recent ones written by 2018” (Kaur 16). About this collection, Boukhroufa-Trijaud says, “those clusters of poems are like pieces of ice floating on the turbulent sea of her poetic work, unable to assemble into a solid and consistent whole despite her to do so, thus remaining fragments that dates can nevertheless organize and give coherence to” (para 21). It has been divided into three parts. The first part, after “An Introduction,” has ten new poems, while the second part includes poems from 2000 to 2015. Many poems in this part have been taken from her previous

---

4 This is an international organization (started in 2011) established to promote arts, especially poetry and other literary arts. Shivdasani is the Mumbai coordinator of this organization.

5 This anthology included many women voices like Kamala Das, Imtiaz Dharker, Mamta Kalia, Arundhati Subramaniam, and Mamang Dai. This was edited by Eunice de Souza, a prolific Indian woman poet.
collections, like *Stet* and *Safe House*. The final part of the collection has thirty-three poems in total, along with a prose piece, “The Price of Potatoes.” Keki Daruwalla, a famous Indian poet, describes this collection on the back cover of *Frazil*:

An experience is translated into another experience and then gets mixed with fancy in a juice blender. Chopping lettuce, she’ll be assailed by visions—burning bride, politician, a ‘wounded Hiroshima’, and finally a finger-chopping Nazi. A poem about separation will end with her handling ‘alien porcelain’ at a tea party. For over three decades the excitement she brings to her fine poetry has never deserted her (*Frazil*).

The collection starts with the poem “Implosion,” which suggests something collapsing violently inside the poet’s soul and mind. The opening lines of the poem suggest the ways through which a woman is silenced in the authoritarian phallogocentric world of social hierarchy, but even in that condition, she wants to raise her voice. In “Implosion,” the poet writes:

> When you have much to say  
> but choose the padlocked door  
> and feel the grating of rusted keys  
> upon your tongue, the levers  
> click and move, though no one knows. (*Frazil*, lines 1-5)

This poem uses images like “rusted keys,” “bombed-out walls,” “soot,” and “padlocked door[s]” which give readers a surrealistic feeling about the existence of women in society. These images suggest the limited social roles assigned to women where they cannot think beyond the confined space. These confined spaces symbolize the shackles of patriarchy that have been instrumental in limiting women’s social roles. Moreover, the poem reveals the social perspective towards women where feminine desire is suppressed in order to establish male hegemony.

Her social satire about the loss of human values continues in the poem “How to Kill a Rat,” when she says, “Beheading comes easy these days, / but not with rats” (2-3). For the narrator, it is easy to kill goodness, but embracing it is difficult for the modern human. Another poem, “Bees,” in the very first part of the collection, concludes with the feeling of homelessness and alienation of city life where the queen bee is “wondering where her home disappeared” (18). It reflects the postmodern tendency of Shivdasani’s poetry, where she delineates the rupture, fragments, fissure, and estrangement of the age (Kumar 22). Through her creative expressions, she records the ambition of city life and its unfulfilled desires and aspirations. The title poem of the collection, “Frazil,” presents a contradictory analogy between illusion and reality. Every hope that a woman gathers disappears in a short span of time because the constrained nature of the social order does not allow her to think beyond that contrived space. The first part ends with the poem “Kites,” where a woman has been compared with a “nasty” kite, the same kite which has been labeled “flimsy,” “fragile,” and “decorative.” It sarcastically presents the social status of women as they are expected to surrender before the dominant structure of power. The poem concludes: “You will only be left / with a stinging hand/ and an empty space above” (20-22). It reflects that the cords of the kite, which symbolize the wings of freedom ready to fly, are cut by the cruel games of a patriarchal society. The lack of agency remains central to her delineation of the precarious condition of women.

---

6 All subsequent references are to poems within *Frazil*. 

https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss5/10
The next segment starts with the poem “Tea Party,” which is an illustration of a relationship between a man and a woman. In the current world, the relationship between men and women has significantly changed. The poem shows the alienation, despair, and passiveness in modern relationships. The growth of the poet’s mind is another defining characteristic of this collection, and it is evident when the poet starts to portray women’s anger and assertiveness. She asserts that they are not merely submissive and subjugated creatures; rather, they can change the whole social setup if they show their self-determination. In the concluding lines of the poem “The Woman Who Speaks to Milk Pots,” the woman expresses her anger when she says, “I shall turn the heat up, / put the lid on, / Watch me” (22-24). She discovers the fractured self of womanhood through her delineation of the fragmented space that has been inflicted on women for ages. Further, she recognizes the internal strength of a woman in the poem “Iron Woman.” Even the worst kind of oppression she has to face will embolden her to come out of that oppression stronger and stronger, and that strength will be enough to survive in this oppressive world. She accepts all the tortures and pains inflicted upon her, but that acceptance has an element of rejection and revolt. The lines of the poem rightly testify:

You may melt me and mix me,
I emerge even purer,
Magnetic and ready to strike—
Ironwoman, in her element (12-15).

Her “iron woman” represents that kind of woman, who, rather than surrendering, asserts her ability to subvert the social order. She can now forge her own path, which will lead her to assert her distinct experience as a woman in the coercive social system.

The highly repressive gendered codes compel women to surrender before religious practices where they are subdued in the name of rituals and social customs, and in this domain, they cannot express their individual selves outside of performed codes of gender. Shivdasani shows resistance to the traditional social forces, where she endeavors to challenge the traditional mindset. The poem “The Atheist’s Confessions” unravels the inherent structures created in order to limit women’s access to the outer world. It depicts in painstaking detail the evolution of a woman from childhood to adulthood, where she is taught to perform womanhood in a certain way. Shivdasani elaborates on this when she evokes her growing relationship with God from the age of thirteen to twenty-two. Her perception of God and religion changed when she understood the codes of performativity. In the beginning, the narrator says:

At thirteen I believed in rose petals
strewn at the earth-god’s feet.
Agarbatti7 aromas made me heady
and I ate prasad8 only after a bath. (1-4)

This devotion to divinity, however, takes a different turn when she wishes to be free from religious acts. It became a hurdle in achieving her selfhood, and thus she at “Twenty -two…… no longer worship/ myself, or him” (26-27). She wants to liberate herself from the oppressive social conventions, but for this, she has to become the other. Boukhroufa-Trijaud argues that “Declaring herself an atheist in the Indian context of religiosity makes her a radical outsider impossible to situate in the very hierarchized society” (Boukhroufa-Trijaud, para 24). Even

---

7 Agarbattis are incense sticks that are lit up in prayer or worship in Indian homes to show devotion.
8 Prasad is a devotional offering that is distributed among devotees after every worship. The worshipers believe that it contains the blessings of a god or goddess.
then, Shivdasani envisions a dynamic social order where women can assert their multiplicity of identity.

The final part starts with the poem “Crystal,” where the poet mocks the world around her when she says, “Today, only another diamond / can cut me” (12-13). She endeavors to establish her identity, but the social dogmas have stood between the narrator and her yearning for freedom. Culture, tradition, religion, and customs collectively create a social order where women have to surrender their agency without recognizing their individuality. “Hinges” presents the plight of a woman under an authoritative framework. Their whole existence is based on dependency and submission to men, yet there is no compatibility and consanguinity between the two partners. This vulnerability of existence causes all the oppression which the woman has to face. A relationship should be equal in degree and motif, but here one is always dominant while another is marginalized and muted. The question of a woman’s body also comes in when she says, “Now I’m building another body for myself” (12). Further, the complexity of life is not taught in a classroom; rather, the experiences of life give a different sort of understanding of the world. This difference between classroom teaching and real-life experiences shows the gap between teaching methods and real-life challenges. In the poem “Schoolgirl No More,” she writes, “I realized everything was relative, / including my hatred for Einstein, / and myself” (21-23). Here she rejects Einstein, the scientist who propounded the theory of relativity, because his theory does not help her to recognize her identity amidst an unjust social order.

The spatial politics that underlie women’s limited space in the kitchen problematize their independent existence, and in that restricted setting, women’s desire for freedom ebbs. While comparing the two poets Menka Shivdasani and Anne Carson in her essay “The Space of the Kitchen and the Alienation of the Women-Writer,” Gitanjali Roy argues:

The very exercise of the woman alone in the kitchen, preparing an untimely meal for herself, connotes both a dispossession and a consideration of solitude. In both poems, solitude links the poetic voice to the action within the text. The silence of the kitchen becomes an extension of the poet’s relationship with the space and the writing of it. Shivdasani writes from the perspective of a figure familiar with the kitchen—“the housewife poet.” (Roy, 33, emphasis added)

The kitchen becomes a spatial site for women who have to perform all their chores in that limited space. This is the space where they imagine, see visions, and show creativity. This space has many connotative layers since it portrays the whole existence of women or housewives. The kitchen space in Shivdasani’s poems has a metaphoric meaning, where this space is both imprisonment and freedom. Shivdasani shows her compassion and empathy with the women for whom kitchen space is both a return and reconciliation. Shivdasani’s poem “Why Rabbits Never Sleep at Night” illustrates the spatial (dis)ability of women. The lines say:

Chop, chop,” he said, and as the slices fell,
still smiling, hacked the prisoner’s finger off,
two actually with the words, “Chop, chop,”
and another smile (26-29)

She presents herself as a poet of middle-class women who have been confined to the kitchen, where they cut themselves off from the world with the knives they carry in the kitchen. But in her poem “Everywoman Is an Island,” there is a cry for freedom within those four walls when she writes:
Beneath the hubbub of the kitchen
and the mountain of dishes,
is a dark brooding space that rises
above the sea, where the gulls
careen, and kites soar unseen
and the wild wind skims along (1-6)

Poems like “Lover, Loser, Addict,” “Stet,” and “Spring-Cleaning” further explore the violation of the female body and female sexuality. The negation of freedom is not limited to kitchen space only, but the male-dominated social order also negates the consent of a woman. She brings to light the disappointment of relationships in modern times, where there is a lack of mutual respect and mutual values; instead, a relationship with a man demands the erasure of a woman’s agency. In the poem “Spring-Cleaning,” she says, “You needn’t be embarrassed about letting / me down. Other men have too, and they / didn’t disintegrate like you” (14-16).

Women have circumscribed choices that lead them to live marginalized lives in the dominant framework. Shivdasani, throughout the collection, shows her strong views about the oppression of women. The collection ends with the poem “Blood Stain” (although it has two prose sections as well), but the journey of the poet is not finished. In the penultimate poem of the collection “Unfinished Journeys,” she celebrates the “fecund circularity of time” when she says:

There are too many unfinished journeys left,
too many tangled ends.
In the hush of this familiar space
as the spiders crawl out
I must pick up my bags,
scratch off the scabs,
begin the journey again (44-50).

The poet finds optimism despite the travails of everyday life. She believes in continuity. Words like “tangled,” “hush,” “spider,” and “scratch off” adequately reflect the poet’s existential search. For her, womanhood is not merely an act to be performed for social conventions; rather, it has the potential to reclaim equal space for women in the patriarchal social order.

In the epilogue of the collection, “A Crow Finds its Feet,” she deals with the condition of women when they grow old. When women in their forties or fifties interact with young people in their twenties, they experience different sorts of emotions. Because neither side is willing to adopt the other’s way of life, the gap between old and young becomes evident. Through the “Epilogue,” she ironically portrays her own self, which has become entangled in many fragments and contradictions.

The phallocentrism of poetic language must be countered with an alternative structure that allows women writers to express their individual selves. Women’s creativity and language have always been on the margin, but Shivdasani, like Kamla Das, Eunice De Souza, and Sujata Bhatt, understands the performative aspect of language and thus attempts to express herself in a different tone which is appropriate for the expression of women’s concerns. In the review of Menka Shivdasani’s first collection, Nirvana at Ten Rupees, K. Narayanan Chandran says, “rhythm once built [is] seldom allowed to topple; the syntax, mostly mimetic, is almost always hardy; no rhyme for rhyme’s sake, no jolting lines or abnormal breaks; in fact, nothing that militates against the natural plainness many readers prefer to see pursued in poetry” (581). These features of Shivdasani’s poetry continue through her recent collection Frazil. Her simple and lucid style does not stop her from expressing women’s most complex emotions and
experiences. Her diction and syntax give special meaning and effects, while her imagery is the defining characteristic of all her collections. Her use of domestic imagery presents the authentic portrayal of women’s experience. In the poem “Ramayana Revisited,” she says:

The television seeps through the wall
like yet another nightmare.
Somebody’s crying as usual, tomato ketchup
oozing past a knife (1-4).

She creates visual pictures in the mind of the readers through her vivid presentation of the everyday life of an ordinary woman, no matter which part of the world she lives in. The elements of explicitness and universalism mark her poetic output. About Frazil, Kaur rightly remarks, “The power of this kind of poetry, which is frazil–turbulent, resistant, stubborn, creative, solid, and yet fluid–leaves one gasping and has an other-worldly feel, keeping you grounded on terra rima, at the same time, because of tangible, raw almost domestic, mundane realities” (Kaur 17). Shivdasani adopts straightforward and ordinary language to express women’s collective consciousness. We find an evolution in her style of expression. Earlier, she expressed anger, but later she became more indirect and subtle as she chose to use silence as a tool of resistance against male-dominated language.

Conclusion

Thus, social hierarchy created in the authoritative and regressive discourse functions both at the level of coercion and consent. It necessitates the development of various strategies to achieve an alternative space in which equal space for women can be imagined. Shivdasani presents an empowering alternative, even though it leads her to face personal hardships. Her poetry is the product of tensions resulting from the variety of situations she went through. In her poetry, we find both active and passive resistance, sometimes through silence only, against the subordinate nature of women in society. The collection Frazil is an exploration of the muted and marginalized voice of a woman in a dominant social framework. Most of the poems of Shivdasani have female voices who not only assert their identity but also challenge the imposed traditional roles, such as mother, daughter, wife, or sister. Through her poems, she has also challenged the philosophical and religious positions that compel women to surrender their space and authority. She argues that the dominant males of the society construct language, religion, culture, and identity. Poetry, for her, is a medium to convey every experience, and thus through poetry, she not only addresses women’s issues but extends her themes to the other social, political, religious, and cultural aspects of contemporary society where an open discussion of women’s agency can become possible.

Shivdasani transmits women’s experiences through her articulation of the displaced position of women, where we find an element of reconciliation. She synchronizes the past and present and encourages readers to deliberate upon the plight of women both in the inner and outer world. Shivdasani uses her poetic expressions to explore the personal self in order to reach the collective consciousness of all women about whom she continuously writes on various platforms. The unique texture of her poetic voice enables her to determine women’s victimization in the current social strata and unveil the repressed feelings and desires of women that are silenced. She does not talk about one identity; rather, she explores multiple identities. Her continual involvement with poetry at a personal and collective level helped many poets from different parts of the world to reach global readers. As a woman poet, she has paved the way for the women poets of the next generation who can find inspiration in her works to break the shackles of patriarchy. She is still carrying on her unending quest for the negotiation of her own independent self in the social
hegemony created by men, yet her nonconformist approach towards the literary canon makes her a true representative of the aspirations of contemporary women.

Works Cited
Kaur, Charanjeet. “No Small Talk This…” *SPARROW*, SNL 38, 2019, pp. 16-17.
Shivdasani, Menka. “A Feature on Contemporary Sindhi Literature in Muse India.”
www.academia.edu, May 2014,
https://www.academia.edu/4098693/A_feature_on_contemporary_Sindhi_Literature_i
n_Muse_India?auto=download
---. “For Many Poets in a Mega City like Mumbai, Writing Poetry Is not a Peaceful Activity.”
http://www.poetspath.com/Scholarship_Project/shivda.html,
---. Frazil, Poetrywala, 2018.