

BOOK REVIEW

Bhagyashree Varma's *Siesta: Poetic Vignettes of a Solitary Thinker as Memoir of the Self.*

Bookleaf, 2025

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.46>

Dr. Bhagyashree S. Varma, a multilingual poet, is recipient of Emily Dickinson Award for her book, *Siesta: Poetic Vignettes of a Solitary Thinker*. Currently, she is Associate Professor at the University of Mumbai and Editor of *Shodhawri*, University's *Research Quarterly*. Dr. Bhagyashree has authored and edited books on Amrita Pritam, Women Writers, Poetry and Translation. *Siesta* showcases a poet deeply entwined with emotional recollection, respect for family, and feminine reflection while being keenly aware of her position within a broader poetic tradition. Bhagyashree's voice — 'I'—soft, unwavering, intimate yet universal —combines the spiritual lyricism of India's ancient poetic tradition with the breathless confession of modern sensibility. Her poetry turns loneliness into a language of self-recognition and self-account, where each poem becomes an excerpt from the self, sitting in silence, waiting to be listened to. Brooding on small and great things becomes the part of her loud thinking and silent scribbling as if to erase the absurdity of loneliness while simultaneously verbalising solitude that becomes the meaning of each moment.

Indian English poetry, as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar claims in *Indian Writing in English*, has "flowered through the conflict between the individual and the community, the personal and national." From this perspective, *Siesta* reflects the ongoing negotiation between private emotion and collective identity that characterises much of Indian English writing. Thus, the book can be seen as both a lyrical diary and a cultural meditation—a dialogue of memory for meaning, as the poet transmutes her inner experiences into general reflections. Bhagyashree's verse helps maintain a tradition that runs from the early Romantic nationalism of Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu to the introspective modernism of Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and Meena Alexander. Her poems share the quiet grace of Naidu and the unvarnished candour of Das. The emotional terrain they traverse, is entirely hers: a place where spiritual depth coexists with the quotidian life. Meditative in tone and ethical in its clarity, the poetess here carries this lineage forward and, in doing so, enters into the moment of writing as self-examination and cultural memory, representing the unfolding consciousness of Indian women poets searching for that balance between faith, identity, and artistic freedom. True to Bruce King's observation that Indian poets "wanted to write of the self within experience rather than an imported ideal," Bhagyashree's poetry is a continuation of that inward gaze as her poems examine not the Indian soul through mythic spectacle, but the Indian soul in terms of the textures and intimacies of daily thought, love, faith, and solitude. As the Indian English poetry tends to be more personal

and intimate, Bhagyashree's *Siesta* chronicles the moods of the soul at rest and in revelation. The subtitle, *Poetic Vignettes of a Solitary Thinker*, succinctly describes her as a poet whose solitude is also creative enlightenment.

The present write up essays to read Bhagyashree Varma's *Siesta* as a poetic memoir that deals with the notion of self, solitariness, and spiritual contemplation against the backdrop of Indian English poetry. It seeks to examine Bhagyashree's attitude towards feminine consciousness, her linguistic sparseness as a model of simplicity, and where she stands in the spectrum of the evolution of Indian poetry. The approach of the present study is qualitative and interpretative, and it uses a close textual reading of the texts for framing *Siesta* as a foundation for further research on self-narratives, poetic memoirs, and contemporary Indian spirituality in verse.

In the Preface of *Siesta: Poetic Vignettes of a Solitary Thinker as Memoir of the Self*, Bhagyashree Varma confesses that "poetry is my connection to my spontaneity, to my childhood, my Babuji, who was always with me" even after he departed. This statement sets the mood for *Siesta*, a testament of remembrance and gratitude. Her poems are spontaneous utterances, memories of love and survival "recollected in tranquillity," yet steeped in the Indian familial ideal of 'connection' to memory, culture, and faith. Her diction is simple and direct, and her simplicity is impressive, embodying emotional and philosophical depths. The tone is confiding, intimate, and spiritual; it draws us down into the poet's inner world. In *If I Write*, she instructs:

And read like a bee
Not a butterfly
Read like a bee
And grab all sense
In emotions intense.

The metaphor advises readers to look for essence, not glance at surface, to draw meaning from the nectar of emotion instead of fluttering across it.

Bhagyashree's metaphors of flowers, mirrors, rivers, and dolls all have a symbolic weight grounded in Indian domestic and cultural life. Her poems strike a lovely balance between the inward and the overarching, between the personal and transcendent. Memory—specifically the memory of family and the manners imparted by parents—is the underlying theme of *Siesta*. Sacred intimacy between remembrance and reverence is best expressed in poems such, *My Babuji*, *Missing My Mother....!*, and *Bathing in the Ganges*. In *Bathing in the Ganges*, the mother figure merges with the holy river:

The holy river
Our Sacred Mother and nurse
Why are you worried my child.

The maternal voice has a personal and mythic resonance—it echoes, Mother India herself, ancient, maternal, eternal. This kind of imagery links Bhagyashree's poetry with Tagore's devotional humanism and Naidu's cultural lyricism. Indeed, her maternal imagery is both endearing and builds a moral universe of love that implies the divine.

One of the strongest and unique aspects of Bhagyashree's poetry is feminine consciousness. But what she ends up being is not too angry, not too militant, instead understanding herself and others, writing about how feminism comes from a feeling of warmth and gentle dissent. In the poem, *Woman*, she lists and describes the largely unseen domestic chores performed by women—

Cleans the bathroom
with a drying mop...
Husbands spitting
children shitting

before taking back some respect with the closing line, establishing woman as not the marginalized servile element in man's life but the beautifying core of the very mundane living in this mutable yet tedious journey of life...

Without you, oh woman,
his world is rot...!

The poem mourns and celebrates with equal intensity, turning the everyday woman into a paragon. Thus, her feminist sensibility expands into mythic territory in *Exile*, where the story of *Siesta* becomes an allegory of women's endurance.

Woman survives in jungle
despite her guards
that look like thieves.

In entering exile, the poet claims ground where patriarchal myth is subverted: a form of resilience enacted, not a role of victim embraced. It resonates with what Rukmini Bhaya Nair has termed 'the new Indian discourse of selfhood' — a feminism that uncovers itself rather than into ideology and is marked by a kind of inner insurgency. The poem *Herstory* takes this critique of patriarchal history to a new level:

The rewriting of history
Requires women's blood,
Tears of raped women,
Thumbs of muted women...

These stances and assertions position Bhagyashree with feminist poets like Adrienne Rich and Imtiaz Dharker, the poets known for their woman-centric creativity. However, the poet is not protesting from a point of anger; rather she seems to fill in the emptiness with compassion, hope and faith. For her, woman is not in the race with man for any similarity or equality. Instead, the place of woman seems to be sublime and situated in duties and position where man probably struggles to reach. That element of spiritual feminism is what makes her different from other confessional poets. She does more than reclaim voice; she reclaims virtue; that compassion is power, perseverance, victory.

Faith, in Bhagyashree's poetry, is not doctrinal but humanistic. In *Peace or God?* she dissolves the boundaries between theology and morality:

God is love
When you ground Him,
God is compassion
When you share love....,
God is the creature you feed,
God is the feature you breed...

Here, God, in her view, is immanent and ethical — divinity is made to manifest through human action. Like Tagore and Kabir, it evinces spiritual inclusiveness. As Keki N.

Daruwalla said once, "The Indian poet still believes in the principle of moral order in the midst of turmoil." This belief is reflected in Bhagyashree's poems as she believes in kindness

and compassion.

Solitude is at the heart of Bhagyashree's poetic worldview. Her solitude is creative and redemptive. In *Is This Me?* she writes: "Alone but not lonely, / Caged but so free." This paradox constitutes the self on which meditation depends for its freedom within limits. The solitary thinker, far from being isolated, becomes awakened. Like Emily Dickinson, Bhagyashree turns inward to reveal the far. Her quest moves on from the universal to personal silence.

Her final poem, *Rolly-Polly Does Not Fall*, makes children's toy into a metaphor for resilience. In ". . . refused to die, / A warrior that refused to lie," the poet writes — asserting the eternal feminine principle of rebirth via suffering. It manifests what would become Bhagyashree's credo: that life bends but does not break, and poetry, like faith, serves to restore the balance.

In terms of style, it is seen that the poetess writes in free verse; the rhythms are fluid and mirror thought itself. Her syntax is conversational, her language accessible — though full of meaning. She frequently speaks to invisible addressees — readers, parents, teachers, even canonical poets. That dialogic form gives her verse a crackling urgency and cerebral closeness. In *Dear Mr. Eliot*, she writes to the modernist poet:

The world cannot end
With a whimper;
It bangs into continuity . . .

Her upending of Eliot's desolation is homage and riposte. She shows how to turn modernist despair into a feminine affirmation, an act that implies some kind of continuity where Eliot saw nothing but collapse. Bruce King's observation that contemporary Indian poets "take the English tradition only to rewrite [it] from their own cultural centre" succinctly describes Bhagyashree's *modus operandi*. Speaking to Eliot, Shakespeare, and Frost, she continues the global poetic conversation even as she asserts an Indian and womanly world-view. Going through *Siesta*, it is experienced that her social critique operates through irony in tone, or depiction of the facts with the gaze of indifferent eyes. In *Proud Masters*, she mocks moral pretension:

We are the proud masters of culture
We are the hollow masters of culture. . .

Likewise, the poem *Democratic* satirizes the corruption of political ideals:

A poet Cannot Change
By scribbling
Word by word
the manufactured
Nation of democratic rule. . .

These poems reveal Bhagyashree's awareness of societal decay, yet her tone remains compassionate. Thus, it can be claimed that her satire aims to awaken conscience, not to condemn. She writes as a moral witness rather than as a political activist. Her poetic heart aches to see the decline and yet she seems to hold hands with optimistic vision of romantic philosopher poets like Robert Browning in believing "God is in his heaven and all is right with the world."

In *Siesta*, it has been reflected that the poetess has come back to the idea of gratitude, kinship, and moral fortitude. *Tribute to My Teacher*, *Sisterhood*, and *Gyan* pay homage to the persons who influenced her life and values. The grandmother in *Gyan* offers the simplest, and also

somehow deepest, age-old feminine wit and wisdom:

You only need your mother
to be with you forever . . .

This intergenerational continuity associates Bhagyashree's verse in the context of oral tradition with wisdom of domestic Indian culture. Memory ceases to be a flight backward and becomes instead an ethical bridge between generations. The grandmother is not mere storyteller in entertaining way but an angel-like sheltering voice and support for a growing girl child.

In comparison with her contemporaries, Bhagyashree's poetry is marked less by experimentation and more by emotional integrity. Her poetry is distinctive: Kamala Das ventured into female sexuality as an avenue to liberation, Eunice de Souza seemed to draw equally from irony to expose patriarchy, and Meena Alexander studied the experiences of diaspora and displacement. But Bhagyashree has internalized her battle, much as solitude is turned into a sanctuary. Her feminism is of the spirit rather than the flesh, her protest moral rather than political. As in Rukmini Bhaya Nair's comment: "The modern Indian woman poet is not fighting freedom from but freedom to," finds apt illustration in the poetry of Bhagyashree. In this way, *Siesta* is a testament to the beauty of being able to feel, forgive, and turn pain into something that can reveal the creativity of the sufferer. Pain becomes the source of gain in the sense of romantic thinker's idea which is similar to Keats' Negative capability.

In brief, *Siesta* is like a piece of autobiography in verse—a poetic memoir of self. The sub title of the book is symbolic of a kind of restful break or pause in time—a symbolic stillness from the anxiety and babble of life today. Every mosaic in the poetic composition is an awakening, a taut line drawn between silence and murmur. The sweetness of power nap in *Siesta* and the freshness of short relief from the mundane tedious noon is a philosophical blend that only a poet, a thinking mind can relish. This poetry, thus, converts isolation into song, reflection into conversation, and memory into insight.

In the overall context, it is found that Bhagyashree's work fulfils what Iyengar once said was the "spiritual mission of Indian literature — to transmute experience into illumination." In a time when poetry tends to buckle under cynicism, Bhagyashree makes it the conduit of pathos and rumination. Therefore, in a critical perception, it can be labelled: *Siesta* is not merely a book of poems; rather, it stands as an account of the life within us, a quiet affirmation that poetry can still have the power to heal. In all these poems, her voice seems free and disciplined, thoughtful and incandescent. Her lines bridge the distance between personal anguish and collective expectation, as if one cannot escape the empathy. Readers naturally feel the echoes of her lines in their inner mind. What the poet can bring for her empathetic readers is merely the reminder that solitude does mean emptiness; it can mean filling or fulfilling part of their very existence. Nothing we recall is as pure a memory as what's offered in a poem. In her final injunction — "Be your own light, / Be your own mirror" (Poem: *Freedom*)— the poetess delivers both an artistic and a spiritual manifesto: Indeed, a story of selfhood, a memoir of the inner voice, and a gentle celebration of what it means to be human, in verse.

In short, Bhagyashree's *Siesta: Poetic Vignettes of a Solitary Thinker* is a brilliant crossroad of solitude, spirituality, and self-expression. She has turned mundane events into metaphors of survival, and through her self-exploring quest, she reminds the reader that even in a broken epoch, poetry can still be a refuge of compassion and moral insight. Her poems carry forward the Indian English poetry tradition but also recharge it with moral and emotional compass,

reminding the reader that the personal can indeed be the place where universal significance is generated.

Besides, *Siesta* is a poetic memoir that reminds us of the feminine struggle for selfhood in a way that is devoid of disobedience; a gentler act of defiance through softness, reflection, and kindness. Bhagyashree's work, in this regard, is part of a move away from traditional Indian poetry with self-reflection that is not narcissism, but a way of ethically connecting to the world. Thus, the collection of poetry is consequential not just in the contribution it makes to its immediate readership; it hints at a future where poetry may return to its meditative role, initiating a procession of poets towards the sacredness of the inner life against the cacophony of the contemporary. With these potencies of memory, morality, and mysticism, Bhagyashree Varma has not merely classified the Indian verse to sprout and grow till one cannot help bursting out into the expressions. Her poetry continues to breathe, mend, and shine in this poetic odyssey.