

Kaleidoscopic Image

by Kinnari Sutariya

My poem has no beginning, middle or end.
She contains pieces of broken colored glass
participating in abstract blurry patterns;
wants to make a kaleidoscopic image
and possibly some difference.
She speaks about
personal experience and observance
but not limited to self.

I wanted to study architecture.
My parents preferred me to
choose a college in the town we lived.
It would have been different, if I was a boy.
Good grooms look for educated girls.
To start college studies was encouraged
but pursuing a career was not.
When I was refusing to
marry a man, my marriage was arranged.
It was said that going to a good school
had gone to my head
and freedom was not given
to bring shame to the family.
This would not have been said
if I was a boy.

What defines illiteracy?
Is it only about the ability to read and write,
deprived opportunity?

I entered the U.S.A. as a newly married bride.
After a few days, I entered jail as a murderer:
first time away from a sheltered life,
interrogation by two white American men,
lack of fluent English and knowledge of law
made me feel illiterate
even though I had B.S. from India.

Amazing but true, in prison, I learned
more about women's issues and studies
by taking "Understanding Women" class.
Before that it was a mirage effect not in easy reach.
Women's studies are mostly offered as college courses.
They are real issues.
Shall it not start early at school level?

In India, for ages, Sarswati has been
worshipped as a goddess of knowledge.
Indira Gandhi became the first woman prime minister;
she took a high stand as a woman.
But the rate of illiterate women is still high today.
In Saudi Arabia, women are allowed to get an education
but, professional careers are limited to certain
care-giving areas only.

Afghanistan, Pakistan,
Bangladesh, South Africa...

Early-age marriages, children having children,
75-95% of household work and childcare
done by women, son preference over daughter
and much more affects women's education.
Problems are not limited to a few countries.
They are global.
They are women's.

For many women, literacy has influenced
their communication and standing voice,
and lead them towards better health and better life;
individually and collectively, it empowered them.
But gender oppression and inequality
causes women to be a major target of illiteracy —
scattering women as pieces of broken colored glass.
Women's depth is much more than separate pieces of
color.

Kinnari Sutariya was born and raised in India. Currently, she is incarcerated in Michigan, USA.