

## The feminist poets of Mumbra (India)

Monday 5 March 2012, by [WAJIHUDDIN Mohammed](#) (Date first published: 4 March 2012).

In a modest flat off a dusty lane in the Muslim-majority town of Mumbra, a group of young girls is sitting in a semi-circle. Before they entered the apartment, they were all covered with the black veil, the unofficial dress code of any conservative Muslim mohalla in the subcontinent. But now, faces kissed by the sunlight, they await their turn at something equally liberating: poetry.

The young poets, initiated into the art two years ago, are gearing up to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8 with yet another poetry recitation session. Emotions-some raw, others mature beyond their tender years-flow as the girls' words become banners of dissent. Their poems protest the many inequalities that women face-female foeticide, financial dependence on men, unrequited love and the curses of divorce and widowhood.

The group came into being after Iranian-American poet Roxy Azari conducted a two-month-long poetry workshop for the young women in 2010. Azari, then on a Watson Fellowship, toured seven countries to engage young Muslim women and train them to express themselves through poetry. Her first stop was the 27-year-old Mumbai-based advocacy group Awaz-e-Niswan.

"Three days a week, Roxy would visit Awaz-e-Niswan's Rahnuma Library at Mumbra and discuss socio-political issues with us. Then she would ask us to pen our feelings," recalls Saba Khan who coordinated the poetry workshop. Both Awaz-e-Niswan and Rehnuma Library basically counsel and educate women on their rights, and the poetry sessions held now are an adjunct of the same philosophy-a desire to be free from the oppression of men.

Azari, famous for her slam poetry performances, left after the workshop for other destinations and better things, but she definitely ignited the dormant poet in a dozen or so young women. Each member of the group penned several poems, which are now part of a collection appropriately and evocatively titled Bebaak Qalam (Frank Pen). Three of them-Neha Ansari, Rabia Siddiqui and Faiza Shaikh-collaborated on an imaginative poem titled Agar Main Mard Hoti (If I were A Man) which portrays the many things men take for granted. For instance: "Agar main mard hoti/Subah der tak soti/Raat ghar der se aati (If I were a man/I would sleep late into the morning/ Come home late at night). And the poem perhaps expresses a collective feeling when it declares:"If I were a man/I would change the attitude of all men)."Siddiqui, who studies at SNT Women's College, Juhu, says that before she joined the workshop she never realised her poetic talent."I would occasionally read Ghalib and Faiz, but the workshop emboldened me not just to write poems but even continue my education,"says Siddiqui, who adds that her brother did not want her to study beyond Std 12, but her husband is"quite supportive"."I am restless if I don't write for a few days. I feel good after I have penned a few lines," she says.

Evidently, poetry-writing provides a catharsis to these girls who otherwise have limited avenues to vent their suppressed feelings. They may not take out morchas in the streets but their poems hold aloft banners of protest. Fauzia Qureishi, by far the most accomplished in this young, bubbly group, has many poems to her credit, but the one about zindan (prison) and azm (ambition) clearly shines through the collection. The long poem talks about almost everything that a girl from a conservative Indian Muslim family has to face-early marriage, the threat of triple talaq, the gruelling work at home and the restrictions put in her path. "It is not just my story alone, but my protest on behalf of

all the women who are suppressed and oppressed in a male-dominated society,” says the bespectacled Qureishi, quoting a couplet: "Kab tak kisi ki milkiyat main maani jaaon/ Ek mard ki pehchan se kyon jaani jaaon (For how long am I going to be considered a property/Why should I be identified with the identity of a man?).

Mumbra may seem like an unlikely centre for feminist poetry but these young women are taking it there.

**Mohammed Wajihuddin**

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**P.S.**

\* The Times of India, TNN | Mar 4, 2012, 12.36AM IST:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/The-feminist-poets-of-Mumbra/articleshow/12127842.cms>