

“Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk” by Nabanita Kanungo

The poem "Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk" by Nabanita Kanungo paints a poignant picture of a woman's journey through time, memory, and profound loss, intertwined with the speaker's own story.

1. Summary:

The poem opens with a woman returning, not to her original home, but "elsewhere," carrying the weight of past expectations and a future that feels uncertain, symbolized by a "pail of trials". Her youth has faded, and she now exists under a "blazing canopy of yellow addresses and compensations," suggesting official documents or perhaps records of loss and recompense, all seen from "the other side of a divided sky". This hints at division, displacement, or a profound shift in her world.

She is depicted pausing to catch her breath, in a setting where "trees and everything turn black against a dying sun," which evokes a sense of decay or an ending. The poem then broadens its scope to include the passage of time, as "silhouettes" pass, dust rises, and the "swell of tides" moves on, leading to "age's curve". There's a mention of "Her Krishna" and a song that has outlived her, suggesting a spiritual or cultural essence that endures beyond physical presence.

The poem concludes with striking imagery: "Her thighs still smell of milk and her bosom, of blood". These powerful lines bring forth themes of motherhood, life, and also violence or sacrifice. The speaker reflects on why they feel compelled to "dredge the music out of her fluids," implying a painful revisiting of this woman's past. Ultimately, the woman has "seeped down the stony cracks of my story," indicating that her experiences, perhaps traumatic, have become a fundamental and unyielding part of the speaker's own narrative.

2. Critical Appreciation:

The poem "Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk" by Nabanita Kanungo is a **deeply evocative exploration of memory, loss, and the enduring impact of a woman's life**, particularly in the face of hardship.

- **Themes of Loss and Change:** The poem powerfully conveys a sense of **lost youth** and a life that has taken an unexpected, perhaps tragic, turn. The imagery of a "divided sky" and "yellow addresses and compensations" subtly suggests a world marked by **dislocation, bureaucracy, or the aftermath of conflict**, where human experiences are reduced to official papers.
- **The Passage of Time:** The poem masterfully depicts the relentless march of time, from youthful innocence ("leaves once red with youth") to the inevitable "age's curve". The "dying sun" and "trees turn black" further emphasize a sense of decline or ending.
- **Profound Imagery of the Female Body:** The lines "Her thighs still smell of milk and her bosom, of blood" are central to the poem's power. They are intensely symbolic, representing **motherhood, nourishment, and life-giving** (milk), contrasted starkly with **violence, sacrifice, or death** (blood). This juxtaposition creates a powerful and unsettling image of a woman who has endured profound experiences.
- **Intertwined Narratives:** The speaker's reflection, "Why do I want to dredge the music out of her fluids? Now when she has seeped down the stony cracks of my story,"

highlights the **personal and indelible connection** between the woman's experiences and the speaker's own identity. Her story is not just observed; it has become foundational to the speaker's existence, like "stony cracks" that shape a landscape.

- **Echoes of Shared Experience:** While not directly stated in the first poem, the themes of violence against women, motherhood, and profound loss resonate with the companion poem, "A Map of Ruins". The image of a child tugging at a "dead nipple" when a woman is "killed her at the border" in "A Map of Ruins" provides a stark context that can deepen the understanding of the "blood" and "milk" imagery in "Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk". Together, the sources suggest a broader narrative of the devastating impact of societal upheaval or conflict on women's lives.
- **Emotional Tone:** The poem carries a **melancholy and reflective tone**, tinged with a sense of **grief and solemnity**. It invites the reader to contemplate the weight of the past and the enduring marks it leaves.

3. Gender-based Violence on Women during Partition:

Nabanita Kanungo's poem, "Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk," offers a **profound and poignant insight into gender-based violence during the Partition of India**, specifically through the experiences of women. The poem's imagery directly highlights the unique and devastating impact of such conflicts on female bodies and lives.

- **Targeted Violence Against Women's Bodies:** The poem opens with a woman returning "elsewhere" with a "pail of tears," under a "divided sky". This sets a scene of displacement and hardship, hinting at the tumultuous events of Partition. The sources clarify that during conflicts like Partition, women face **"specific forms of violence targeted mainly at their sexuality,"** including rape, mutilation, and abduction. The "trauma undergone by women victims of such violence is of a specific character".
- **The Unsettling Juxtaposition of Life and Violence:** The most striking lines, "Her thighs still smell of milk and her bosom, of blood," are central to understanding the gendered violence depicted.
 - **"Milk"** universally symbolizes **motherhood, nourishment, and life-giving**. In the context of the poem, it evokes the inherent life and reproductive capacity of women.
 - **"Blood"** sharply contrasts with this, signifying **violence, sacrifice, or death**. The powerful image of milk and blood together symbolizes how women's life-giving essence was tragically intertwined with immense suffering and violence during Partition. This reflects the reality where women were often subjected to extreme brutality that attacked their very being, their ability to nurture, and their physical integrity.
- **The "Unspeakability" of Trauma:** The speaker asks, "Why do I want to dredge the music out of her fluids?" This question points to the immense difficulty, and even pain, in recalling and articulating these traumatic experiences. Women's Partition narratives were often marked by a "double layer of unspeakability". This includes "traumatic amnesia"—the victim's inability to remember horrific experiences—and the fear that

their stories of violation would bring "personal and national dishonour". The poem, through the speaker's desire to "dredge the music," implies an effort to break this silence and bring these painful truths to light.

- **Inherited Trauma and Lingering Impact:** The poem concludes with the powerful statement that the woman's experiences have "seeped down the stony cracks of my story". This indicates that the trauma and displacement faced by women during Partition are not isolated events but have become an **indelible and foundational part of the speaker's own narrative**. For writers like Nabanita Kanungo, whose ancestors were displaced during Partition, the "displacement of her ancestors... continues to hold crucial significance in her life and poetry". Her poems, including "Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk", "poignantly communicate the trauma experienced specifically by women victims of Partition".
- **A Broader Regional Context:** While focusing on the woman's personal ordeal, the poem also implicitly connects to the larger, often overlooked, history of Partition violence in regions like Northeast India. This means the poem not only universalizes the gendered impact of conflict but also specifically contributes to narratives from areas that have been "largely ignored in Partition scholarship".