

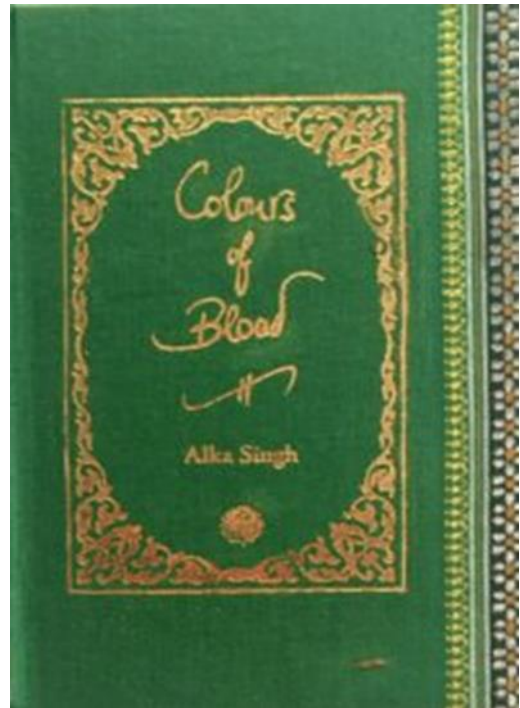
***Colours of Blood* by Alka Singh, Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2021, ISBN: 978-81-949985-9-4 (9788194998594), Price: Rs 150, Pages: 52.**

Reviewed by Omolola A Ladele
Associate Research Professor of English,
Department of English,
Lagos State University, Nigeria.
Email: blueeyemini@gmail.com

Colours of Blood by Alka Singh offers a critical new addition to the now growing field of Menstrual studies which intersects with various other disciplines including: Cultural, Women, Gender, and Literary Studies, Feminism, Psychology, Mental Health, and several other areas. From menarche to menopause; Singh affirms that menstruation matters and offers, in her recent collection of poems, the many colourations of women's menstrual cycle as it touches on various other aspects of their sexuality, femininity, identity, and humanity.

Although specifying and steeped in Hindu cultural artifacts, contexts, mores and norms, Singh's collection of poems connects thematically and culturally to the lived and life experiences of several women from the vast other regions of the global south; Africa, Asia the Pacific where poverty, superstition, stigmas and taboos are still rife in the twenty-first century.

Ordinarily, concealed and downplayed in the vast repertoire of literary texts by women writers of the global south, there is a paucity of public discourses on the subject of women's menstruation. This process of studied circumvention prevents viewing the possibilities of women's bodies, physiological details including menstrual cycles as potential sites for the empowerment of these countless women and girls. What we find is that all too often, words such as: "toxicity", "pollution", "uncleanness", "dangerous", "impurity" and other negative/obnoxious connotations are commonly associated with the natural occurrence of women's menstruation, thus precipitating negative attitudes and perpetuating the silences surrounding it.



In this collection of twenty-nine poems on the subject of women’s menstruation and its many ancillary subtopics, Singh creates a colourful pastiche of poems that expands and intensifies the subject. The themes are wide; ranging from the inanities of superstitions, to such other issues as the sense of communality, camaraderie and even security that flows from women’s menstruation. Her poems also touch on celebratory rites and events, sisterhoods that are formed on attaining puberty and these are delicately expressed in such poems as: “Shakti within”, “Chain”, as well as “And so it moved”. Sometimes, the poet is concerned with the problems of rape, and poverty and how this affects the ability to access sanitary napkins as captured in “She wraps around”. Such redefining complications profoundly affect the psyche of the girl in desperate need of such accessory and the poet captures this clearly in:

[t]he girl with blood oozing out.
A deep sigh within,
Just no way out.
Nature offers benevolence
When none stands there
Some parched strangled leaves
She wraps around. (52).

Exploring an imaginative genre that is inherently elliptical, the poet appears to give eloquence in the most lucid terms, on a subject that is typically deeply embedded and excluded from public purview because of its somewhat ‘miasmatic’ nature. And she appears to do this with such ease and empathy, not excluding her personal experiences from the universal experience of menstruating women. This creates a participatory effect as the poet, reader and the women she writes of are all connected and sucked into the blood orbit of these women’s menstrual cycles. Singh’s passion is conveyed powerfully as she experientially situates herself within the discourse in such poems as: “Chain”, “My red—myself”, “Blatant rouge on face”, as well as in her dedication: “to the woman in me, and in others”. Thus as she says in another poem, “Washing the hair” we are all bound in ‘cyclic togetherness’ (43).

Festivities, seclusions, rituals, rites of passage, an entire community of keening women/ sisterhood herald the first indication of attaining puberty and this theme weaves through the first few poems in Singh’s collection. Thus, beginning with “Menstruating the Miasma” and running through “The Red”, “Pratham Rajardarshan” and “Shakti within” the poet succinctly captures the many hues, sights and sounds; the contradictions, paradoxes and confusions that

come with young girls' first sight of menstrual blood. But perhaps more significant for me is that Singh opens the collection with a firm, strident and mature voice that is devoid of the falsetto that may be found in a debut work.

Although menstruation may ordinarily appear personal, intimate, private and individualized, - Colours of Blood-- is a complexly woven collection of poems that show that menstruation has public, cultural, economic, psychosocial and even cosmic resonances. For instance, the poem-- "Eclipse" offers a cosmic rationalisation for the exclusions of the young girls and women from public spaces; thus, surreptitiously, pointing to the universal embarrassment that the woman's body causes. As Singh herself remarks in the concluding part of her introduction to: The Colours of Blood—"the poems here analyse the body, the heart, the soul and the mind and psyche of the menstrual environment that speak on the history, culture and sociology of humankind" (11).

In carefully curated craft, Singh's Colours of Blood is also an attempt to deconstruct the discourse of silence, shame, embarrassment, and stigma that surround menstrual issues. To achieve this, Singh centralises the notion of the empowering capabilities of menstruation. This is succinctly articulated in: "The colours of blood" in which the poet declares that:

'The blood /begins the birth,/the blood/believes in soul' (37).

In her collection of poems, Singh is hopeful that when the menstrual cycle is celebrated rather than enshrined in negative socio-cultural taboos, there is the possibility it may inspire transformative attitudes toward it. The poet, therefore, stridently, calls for celebration of "the stain" in the poem, "Celebrate the stain". Singh's call for celebration is however, significantly different from the celebratory rites we saw in the few opening poems mentioned earlier in this article. Hers is a more deliberate, self-conscious call for strategic self-cognition; first form within

the bleeding woman! For Singh, this is an important step in the process of altering age-old negative perceptions, traditions and norms; in these poems, the poet shows ideological commitment to the cause of the women she writes about.