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Art & Theatre

Poetry gets a ear

Muslim girls from Mumbra had a chance to learn to write poetry in a two-month workshop, which culminated into an evening where the girls performed their wordy creations

Priyanka Borpujari ★★★★★

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While the loud Azaan from the nearby mosque silenced the crowd of 50 women and few men inside the tiny hall in Kuria, the enthusiasm of the performing poetesses hung thick in the air. After all, it was the evening of **Bazm-e-Sukhan**, wherein 12 young otherwise-shy **Muslim girls from Mumbra** were standing before an encouraging audience of family, friends and well-wishers, as they performed **their own poetry** in various formats. The inspiration behind this activity, Iranian-American Spoken Word poet **Roxanna Azari**, stood cheering each of her students-turned-friends.



Girls performing their poetry at the event last Thursday in Mumbra (Pic: Priyanka Borpujari)

The evening, which happened to be last Thursday, was the culmination of a two-month poetry workshop with the girls, who are members of **Rehnuma**: a space for girls and women set up by Aawaaz-e-Niswaan in Mumbra, in 2003. As is known, Mumbra is a highly-conservative Muslim ghetto which was formed when Muslims fled the city following the 1992 riots. Most girls who visit the centre have dropped out of formal education system. The centre thus provides them a safe space to indulge in their passion for books and creative expression. The workshop was thus one of such initiatives and the evening saw the girls discuss issues of love, religion, feminism, conflict and identity, through their poetry.

According to Sabah Khan from Rehnuma who was coordinating the workshop, "We got the girls to read poetry by some of the well-known Urdu women poets and Urdu Progressive poets, and discussed that there were indeed different types of poetry that could be written. That's how the girls were able to understand how they could express their feelings not merely into words, but into lyrical poetry."

But it wasn't an easy task to get the workshop rolling. Firstly, it was the language gap between Roxanna and the girls. "Although we did have another girl who would translate all that I spoke, and I tried to talk to them also in Farsi, yet the most difficult task was to shake the girls out of their cocoon and self-belief that they couldn't speak up before an audience. The girls discussed among themselves issues that they wanted to talk about, like sexual violence or communalism. It was a difficult task to get the girls to write and perform group pieces together. Nevertheless, the end result was a fantastic performance," said Roxanna, whose conducted the workshop as part of her Watson Fellowship. Her fellowship proposal was to engage with Muslim girls and women through poetry workshops, and film the diversity of Muslim women's voices to alter the static perception of Muslim women in the West. In 2006, she was the winner of the Urban Word NYC Poetry Slam and New York Knicks Poetry Slam among 800 participants, and has performed at a number of venues, including universities.

But one of the key factors for the evening was the fact that the girls were talking about issues that they may not have faced themselves. Nasreen, a young poet for the evening, who plans to write poetry more regularly, said, "During one of the discussions, the issue of marital rape emerged and I found it quite disturbing. I am not married yet and I could not fathom that such a crime existed. I was awake for two nights before I could actually write something," she said. Another powerful performance was three poems by three girls on sexual violence, which was performed in the 'echo' format — each girl would say the first line of her poem one after the other, and significant lines of the three poems were all spoken at the same time, to create a reverberating effect. Understandably, the effect was disturbing but powerful enough to convey the magnitude of the spectre of sexual violence.

"One of the girls has been writing poetry about transgenders, and despite being from the US, I myself could not have imagined to pen such a poem. Surely, the hidden anger among the girls was palpable through their words, and their performances outshone all the rehearsals," said Roxanna. Perhaps the girls from Mumbra have finally found out that they too could get themselves heard.

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