



Stitching the Unruly Self: Fragment, Flux, and Feminist Becoming in Sunaina Jain's *The Patchwork Quilt*

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Abstract

Sunaina Jain's *The Patchwork Quilt* (2024) employs its titular metaphor to explore the fragmented female self amid patriarchal constraints. Through feminist existentialist frameworks (Beauvoir, Sartre), this review examines sixty poems across three sections that dramatize tensions between immanence and transcendence, bad faith and authenticity. From subversive celebrations of intellectual agency in "The Sexiest Thing about Me" to confrontations with menstrual taboo, child abuse, and communal violence, Jain stitches personal memory with collective trauma. While occasionally limited by formal predictability, the collection significantly contributes to contemporary Indian women's poetry, offering a resonant voice of resistance and resilient becoming.

Sunaina Jain's debut poetry collection, *The Patchwork Quilt*, published in 2024, emerges as a vibrant tapestry of introspection, emotion, and social commentary. Drawing from her background as an academic and avid reader, Jain weaves approximately sixty poems across three thematic sections: "The Warp and Woof of Self," "Love, Longing and Labyrinths," and "Knitting and Stitching the World." The title metaphor—a patchwork quilt—encapsulates the book's essence: disparate fragments of experience stitched together into a cohesive whole, reflecting the uneven, multifaceted nature of human existence. Jain's verse, often free-form and conversational, navigates personal identity, romantic entanglements, and broader societal maladies, all while resisting rigid rationalism in favor of emotional fluidity. This review examines the collection through a theoretical lens, primarily feminist existentialism, informed by thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, to explore how Jain's poetry interrogates the self as a perpetual becoming, constrained yet liberated by gender norms and social structures. While the collection shines in its raw authenticity and subversive undertones, it occasionally falters in formal innovation, relying on accessible but predictable imagery.

Jain's introduction sets the stage for a philosophical journey, describing her poems as "uninformed by reason and unencumbered by checks and balances." This echoes existentialist tenets, particularly Sartre's notion of existence preceding essence, where the self is not fixed but forged through choices amid absurdity. Yet, Jain infuses this with a feminist perspective, akin to de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which posits women as "the Other" in patriarchal societies, perpetually negotiating autonomy. The first section, "The Warp and Woof of Self," embodies this flux. The title poem, "The Patchwork Quilt," uses the quilt as a metaphor for friendship's opposing temperaments: one precise and linear, the other bohemian and free. Lines like "You looked for precision and detailing / I longed for creative freedom" highlight the tension between societal expectations and individual desires, a recurring motif. Here, feminist existentialism illuminates Jain's portrayal of the self as fragmented, pieced together like quilt scraps, resisting unification under normative gazes.

Poems such as "The Sexiest Thing about Me" and "Pinks and Blues" subvert traditional femininity. In the former, Jain declares, "The sexiest thing about me / is the way I drape my thoughts into words," shifting allure from physicality (pouts, curves) to intellectual agency. This aligns with de Beauvoir's critique of women as objects of the male gaze, reclaiming sexuality through creative expression. "Pinks and Blues" employs colour symbolism to challenge gender binaries: pink as



romantic yet bold, blending with blue to form purple—"magic, mystery or passion." Jain's speaker affirms, "But I am all Colours / and all Colours are Me," echoing existential authenticity—living freely beyond imposed roles. However, the section's existential undercurrents deepen in "Beyond the Broken Mirrors," where the speaker shatters reflective confines: "Beyond the broken mirrors / I shall stand whole! / Without any saviour." This evokes Sartre's "bad faith," the denial of freedom through self-deception, as the poem celebrates radical self-reliance, a feminist act of breaking patriarchal mirrors that distort women's identities.

The second section, "Love, Longing and Labyrinths," delves into romantic and familial bonds, labyrinthine in their complexity. Jain's existential lens reveals love as an ambiguous project, fraught with freedom and constraint. "To a Dream Daughter" laments an unfulfilled maternal bond, imagining shared stories and gardens: "How we would have created our own music / Our chords though discordant would have produced a symphony of their own." Drawing on de Beauvoir, this poem critiques how patriarchy limits women's reproductive choices, turning longing into existential anguish—the "what if" of unrealized potential. Food metaphors in "The Walking Kitchenette" and "You Smelt of Love" add sensory depth, portraying love as nourishing yet ephemeral. In the former, love deflates like "half-baked bread," symbolizing unfulfilled domestic roles; in the latter, scents evoke enduring affection amid loss, as in Alzheimer's haze: "You still smelt of love." These pieces resonate with existential themes of temporality and loss, where love's labyrinths mirror life's absurdity, yet offer fleeting authenticity.

"Grandma's Iron Chest" stands out, blending personal nostalgia with historical trauma, likely referencing India's Partition. Relics like a half-knitted sweater or yellowed rice grains evoke deferred dreams, aligning with post-colonial theory (e.g., Homi Bhabha's hybridity) to underscore fragmented identities. Jain's feminist existentialism here highlights women's silent inheritance of pain: "Stories - told, untold / Truths - hidden, revealed / Hearts- punctured / Yet sealed." The section culminates in "Reunion," celebrating separation's anniversary as life's renewal: "But a reunion with life!" This affirms existential freedom—choosing meaning amid void.

The final section, "Knitting and Stitching the World," shifts to socio-political critique, stitching personal threads into global fabrics. Jain's theoretical grounding shines in poems addressing violence, inequality, and resistance. "Dumb Charades in the Night" unveils child abuse through a pyjama party's revelations: "Some common uncles and friends / are exposed during / the act of pantomime / in the dead of night!" Employing feminist theory, this exposes patriarchal power dynamics, where silence veils trauma, echoing Audre Lorde's call to transform silence into action. Existentially, it questions authenticity in a world of facades.

"Blasphemy" critiques menstrual taboos: "It seemed to be the threshold / Not of our kitchen; but of the 'Forbidden'." Jain subverts de Beauvoir's "immanence," where women are confined to bodily cycles, asserting agency: "The confines no longer bind me / But the challenges stay!" Social Darwinism in "Not in my Name" lambasts mob lynchings: "The nation will be resurrected / like a Phoenix / through the ashes of the sinners." Here, Jain critiques ego-driven nationalism, aligning with Rumi's epigraph on excess as poison, blending existential absurdity with feminist resistance against "othering."

"Desecration" laments book burnings: "Burnt, blazed, razed, ransacked / or just dumped like garbage." This evokes Adorno's post-Holocaust reflections on culture's barbarism, with Jain's feminist lens highlighting knowledge suppression as patriarchal control. "Love Jihad" defends interfaith love: "Love is love! / Don't judge it or you will fail!" Challenging religious binaries, it embodies existential bad faith in societal norms.

Jain's strengths lie in accessible language and vivid metaphors, making complex theories relatable. Her use of colours (pinks, blues, purples) and nature (trees, rivers) symbolizes transformation, enriching existential themes. The collection's Indian context—Partition echoes, gender roles—adds post-colonial depth, resonating with Gayatri Spivak's subaltern voices.

Weaknesses include occasional didacticism, as in "Pyramid," where hierarchy critique feels overt: "See, I believe in altruism and equity; not the top to bottom approach." Formal variety is limited; more experimental structures could elevate impact. Some poems, like "Myopia," risk abstraction: "Dilation and dilution are the best means of survival."

Ultimately, *The Patchwork Quilt* is a compelling debut, theoretically robust in its feminist-existential exploration of self-becoming amid constraints. Jain stitches a quilt of resilience, urging readers to embrace flux. For scholars of contemporary Indian poetry, it offers rich terrain; for general readers, poignant reflections. In de Beauvoir's terms, Jain's work affirms: women are not born but become, patching their narratives against life's frayed edges.

Contributor's brief Bio-note



Dr. Parminder Singh, an IT Professional-turned-educator is a doctorate in English, and is a multilingual poet, translator and critic. He currently teaches English at Dev Samaj College for Women, Chandigarh and has published his debut poetry book titled *Echoes of Us: Poems of Love and Friendship*. (BookLeaf Publishing 2025). He received Jathedar G. S. Tohra Award for translation of a book titled *Appreciating Sikhism* into Punjabi.

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