

Emergence of Feminist Perspective in Recent Indian-English Woman Poets

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Indian women poets writing in English from Toru Dutt to Kamla Das and from Sarojini Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi reveal the mind-boggling variety of theme as well as style that poetry is capable of offering. In the last fifty years absorbing a variety of influences, dealing with a range of themes and generating diverse strati of poetic expression. Each one of them has tried to speak in a distinctly personal voice, yet they form a part of chorus, a collective voice asserting the autonomy of women. It needs to be remembered that poetry written by women need not be viewed only as feminist poetry. In fact the belief that one is a woman is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that is a man. However, literature by women tends to get marginalized because of the disparate tendencies of reception to their writings. In writing and particularly in writing poetry women are allotted personal but not public space, a private but not a political or rhetorical voice. Women poets have often raised their voice against social and cultural conventions that constrained their freedom and perpetrated a sort of institutional subjection of women. Women writers assert that the creation of a community of women is necessary antidote to the excess of individualism. They believe that women need to explore their collective consciousness and shared experience in order to transcend the fragmentation and isolation of their lives.

With regards to the new trends and techniques in women's poetry there is a remarkable movement connecting the domestic with the public spheres of work. Increased metropolitan activities, sophisticated life styles, globalization, urbanized influences of pop, disco and cafe culture, Anglo-Americanization and the public and convent education of the present generation of women poets have made their poetic language, chiseled, sharp, pithy and effortless. The deconstructive strategies of narrative and conceptual frames, along with the simultaneous assimilation of pan-Indian elements have made their poetry a formidable area of study and research. Other than the skillful use of standard poetic devices, the semiotic, symbolical and

metaphorical properties of language help to emphasize the feminist strategies of interrogation. The fissures and fragments of post-modern life are questioned and reflected in the highly experimental diction. The problems of sociological vis-à-vis literary politics, of gender inequities of marginalization and sub-humanization of women, of their social and artistic exclusion and of the dominant need for inclusion and democratization, all contribute towards the distinctive character of this poetry. For the first time, mapping out new terrains the poetry of such Indian women poets bring forth the suppressed desires, lust, sexuality and gestational experiences. This new poetry is new forms of new thematic concerns of contemporary issues has changed the course of human civilization as the country entered the new millennium.

As such, it does not remain isolated from the global trends and can be corroborated by the fact that it has incorporated itself the manifestations of the feminist movements that swept through Europe, America, Canada, and Australia since 1960s. At the same time in India appeared the poetry of Kamla Das , Eunice de Souza , Mamta Kalia, Tara Patel , Imtiaz Kalia, Gauri Deshpande , Suniti Namjoshi, Gauri Pant, Lakshmi Kannan, Vimla Rao, Meena Alexander, Margaret Chatterjee, Charmayne D'Souza , Mamta Kalia, Sujata Bhatt etc.

Tejdeep Menka Shivdasni and a few other women poets who not only totally upset the phallogocentric discourse of Indian English poetry by introducing in it a new array of thematic contents in new voices, but relate their experiences in their art from a broad spectrum of styles.

Kamla Das is one of pioneering post-independence Indian English poets who have contributed immensely to the growth and development of modern Indian English poetry. Her poetry could be divided into three categories-positive poems negative poems and poems about her grand mother and ancestral house, leaving aside of few poems of some minor observations. The love poems where she expresses her happiness and the poems where she expresses her resentment against unfulfilled love may be termed as positive and negative poems respectively.

"The Freaks" is a negative poem in which love turns to lust. The woman in the poem complains bitterly against the attitude of her man because there is no love between them and what keeps them together for a moment is the lust of the blood. The physical appearance of the man is repelling to the woman because his cheek is 'Sunstained', mouth 'a bark

cavern' and teeth 'uneven'. There is no love between them and as he puts his right hand on her knee, "they only wander, tripping/Idly over puddles of Desire". 'Desire' here is personified. It stands for lust-mere carnal desire devoid of warmth of love and affection. Thus, the Woman asks angrily :

*Can't this man with
Nimble finger tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers?*

What she wants is tenderness, heart correspondence and love beyond desire, which the man fails to fulfill as he is indifferent to her as a person. She knows that no outsider will rescue her as love is a matter between a man and a woman and exclusively a personal and private affair, thus she asks :

*Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love?*

The answer to this question is an implicit 'no'. The heart of the woman becomes empty and ironically it is filled up with 'Coiling Snakes of silence.....'. A snake that 'Coils in silence' will bite at the first opportunity and that is what she does when spits venom on the loveless life between a man and a woman. The imagery used here is appropriate to the context. The snake is an archetypal symbol of sex. When love becomes mere lust, the woman expresses her disgust. Because what she needs is tenderness both lovable and lasting resulting in their consummation of love. In desperation she concludes :

*I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.*

Kamala Das' Reminiscences of childhood at Nalapat House, her family home, are tinged with nostalgia as in "My Grand-mother's House" and "A Hot Noon in Malabar". Her Grand-mother and the ancestral house dominate quite a few memorable poems. The house is a symbol of rootedness and sense of belonging to a place, In "My Grand Mother's House", the poet recalls the house, where she once received love and the old woman (i.e. the Grand-mother) who loved her dearly. She is nostalgic about it and the memory of

the Grand-mother makes her pensive. The poem begins with a note of nostalgia :

*There is a house now far away where once
I received love..... the woman died.*

Following the death of the Grand-mother a great change comes over the house. In the words of the poet,

*The house withdrew into silence, Snakes moved
Among books I was then too young
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon.*

Through subtle imagery and figures of speech the poet brings out the changes in the house in the form of unused books and books that have been damaged due to lack of attention, which turned the blood of the poetic persona 'cold like the moon'. In almost a Wordsworthian vein she recalls the past to write poetry as 'the emotion recollected in tranquility'. Thus she writes :

*How often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows
Or just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair; pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie behind my
Bedroom door like a brooding
Dog..... You cannot believe, darling,
can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud and loved.*

Kamala Das deeply loved and admired her grandmother. In a different situation, Kamala Das laments over the death of her Grandmother and decline of her ancestral place. In 'Composition' Das writes :

*The only secrets I always
Withhold
Are that I am so alone
And that I miss my Grandmother.*

"A Hot Noon in Malabar" is another poem about her ancestral place. Here she recalls the activities of the people in a hot after noon. With all its peculiarities like 'beggars with whining voice', men coming 'from hills with parrots in a cage and fortune-cars', 'brown Kurava girls', 'bangles-sellers', 'strangers', and 'wildmen' coming to Malabar, the place fascinates her without

end. Staying away from Malabar is a kind of torture for her. The hot afternoon seems to bubble with activities like buying and selling of bangles, 'fortune-telling' by fortune tellers and giving arms to beggars. But the afternoon is not without its perils for 'stranger' and 'wildmen' visit the place. The poet puts it in its proper perspective in the following lines :

*Is this a noon for strangers with mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent ones who rarely speak
At all, so that when they speak, their voices
Run wild, like jungle-voice. Yes, this is
A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love.*

Betrayal in love and physical exploitation underline the agony of the woman expressed in "The Sunshine Cat". The poet describes the plight of a woman who has become a victim to the lust of many men. The poem, as usual with Kamala Das, begins abruptly with a conversational tone and colloquial speech rhythm. The opening lines almost read like news paper item imparting sensational news :

*They did this to her, the men who knew her,
the men/she loved, who loved her not enough, being
selfish/and a coward, the husband who neither loved
nor/used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and
the band/of cynics she turned to, clinging to
their chests where/new hair sprouted like great
winged moths, burrowing her/face into their
smells and their young lusts to forget.
To forget, oh, to forget*

The woman is complaining as it were, against male chauvinism but the remedy is out of her reach. They were kind only to be cruel when they "let her slide from pegs of sanity into/a bed made soft with tears." Her husband was the worst of the lot who confined her "to a room of books till she was cold and/half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men." This is one of the negative poems of Kamala Das in which the bitterness is loudly pronounced.

"The Invitation" is not easy to read, for here, a complex thought pattern has been infused into the loose structure and thereby demands a close study of the text. The beloved invites the sea to take her away or wipe out her bitter memory of being jilted in love. She, as it were, invokes the sea :

*Oh Sea, let me shrink or grow, slosh up,
Slide down, go your way.
I will go mine.*

The complaint against the lover is bitter and images chosen are appropriate to the context :

*He came to me between
Long conferences, a fish coming up
For air, and was warm in my arms
And inarticulate*

The lover is likened to fish coming up for fresh air and diving deep when the need is over. The image of sex and note of betrayal go together. Since 'the man is gone for good', it would be foolish to wait for him. But the memory lingers on and the pangs of separation abides. Thus she recalls :

*On the bed with him, the boundaries of
Paradise had shrunk to a mere
Six by two and afterwards, when we walked
Out together, they
Widened to hold the unknowing city the sea.*

The sea seems to console her and offers a way out by saying 'End in me, cries the sea'. The woman (i.e the protagonist) of the poem to have entered into a dialogue with the sea by unveiling her heart and seeking consolation in order to get rid of this mental tension and physical separation. Thus, she recalls:

*All through that Summer's afternoons we lay
On bees, our limbs inert, cells expanding
Into throbbing suns. The heat had
Blotted our thoughts..... Please end this whiplash
of Memories, cries*

The woman being young, the waiting is still there for the lover to come. "I am still young/and need that man for construction and/Destruction", says the woman. With the rise and fall of tides in the sea, the passion of the woman rises and falls and the longing for the man becomes irresistible. Thus the poem ends with an invitation to the lover, justifying its title :

*The tides beat against the walls, they
Beat in childish.....*

Darling, forgive me, how long can one resist

Kamla Das's poetry reveals that the gap between the larger feminist consciousness of women whose issues were being voiced has reduced considerably. The colonial exotic has now redefined not only her sexuality but also created suitable alternatives.

Gauri Deshpande is a name that the critic and reader of Indian English poetry cannot bypass without leaving a conspicuous lacuna in his repertoire. The canon of her poetry so far includes three collections, namely, *Between Births* (1968), *Lost Love* (1970) and *Beyond the Slaughterhouse* (1972). The first collection *Between Births* opens seriously with the reflection on death for whom poet is waiting. The relationship is immediately defined in metaphor of a tardy lover, further strengthened in the concluding lines of the poem where a characteristically Indian allusion to the *saptapadi* (seven steps), the ritual that confirms a Hindu marriage, is used,

*And walk the seven steps,
With him that'll make him,
My ally* (p1)

Unlike an established poet like Kamla Das whose flights are usually circular, Gauri Deshpande's encounter with life is multipronged, subtle, restrained and mature, with a cultivated idiom, making her a more impressive and readable poet.

Margaret Chatterjee, a human poet, has five collections to her credit. They are; *The Spring and The Spectacle* [1967], *Towards the Sun* [1970], *The Sandalwood Tree* [1972], *The Sound Of Wings* [1978] and *The Rimless World* [1987]

Margaret's intensity of feelings evolves its own rhythm, which is beautiful. Poems based on her personal experience are her most moving poems. She has a complete grasp over various human, philosophic and political situations. In the poem entitled '15th August' the new Indian woman seeks to empower herself in the context of both patriarchy and imperialism. The female protagonist speaks

*'--- the pagent of the past,
Pushed us and left us,
Standing on the edge of opportunity,
With dreams in our heart*

Menka Shivadasni's poetry hold together a private world of chaotic emotions through its logical development and its strikingly imaginative icons. Her *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990) is a careful selection spanning twelve year's work. Shivadasni, a well-travelled journalist who worked for a year in Honkong, was one of the founding members of the Bombay Poetry Circle in 1986. In her poetry, she had anticipated many of the new characteristics of Bombay poetry as it would develop during the 1990s. Her poems can be broadly categorized under three types of skeptical attitudes which reveal the writer's preoccupation with pessimism. The first category deals with the relationship between man and God, the second, with the human predicament and the third with the women's condition. In all three cases the life has hit her so hard that the situation is desperate and pathetic and death seems to be the only escape from the generally disturbing experiences of life. Her horrors and temptations of living alone in a small flat, the anxieties of a single life which get complicated by being a woman, the sordid world of sex, drugs, broken relationship and the aftermath are portrayed in stark reality. She traces her own transition from a believer to an atheist in the very first poem of the collection, 'The Atheist's Confession. 'The poem starts with nostalgia of rosy faith in the "earth god" when she "ate Prasad only after a bath" is contrasted with a later stage when "gods no longer smiled when I prayed" because she had framed her cold logic that "They couldn't/They were of stone./"and eventually comes the final word that "God didn't exist." The writer's uncertainty regarding the existence of God is further evidenced in the poems 'Are You Three' and 'Somewhere on the Streets.' The tedious nature, the sheer monotony of the modern mechanized existence is described in 'Destination' where the daily commuter's journey in the second class railway compartment is between Church gate and insanity. Another poem 'Schoolgirl No More' displays the modern women's predicament that having spent a lifetime in acquiring bookish knowledge at school, "nothing measures up to what it should. "Geography taught her the vastness of space, history not to live in the past and English Literature "That I belong nowhere. Physics, Einstein and his theory of relativity taught her to hate everything including herself. So mere acquisition of knowledge is fruitless without its moderation through contact with wisdom, seems to be the leit motif of many of Shivadasni's poems.

In the poem Safe-I Think, 'the human being is compared with a palm, tree, the coconuts of which are likened to the tears of human beings. The

coconuts are "wrenched" for profit. Despite thinking that it is safe for the next one hundred and fifty years the trees are surviving under the permanent fear of destruction. The modern man's threatened condition is reflected in the concluding lines that offer a comment on the ever-growing materialistic attitude of people who are simply not concerned with the life and feelings of others :

*.....Twenty four
ridges on a coconut tree are not
150 years, unless some bureaucrat
worried about his job, orders
me cut because I'm standing
in the middle where a building ought to be.*

The little of the volume Nirvana at ten rupees comes from the poem 'Loser, Lose, Addict'

*When you are happy, only cliché's
come to mind – the sky is blue,
grass is green, butterflies are free
then something happens, and solitary
as a murderer, you twist the knife
and stalk the streets, your brain
being crushed to powder like the contents
of vial of smack. Nirvana at ten rupees
is cheap, but the sky has a silver tinge
you could rather perceive as grey,
the butterflies are pinned, heads down,
their backs to the wall, like you.*

Highly metaphoric, at times almost surreal, her poems show a woman alienated from the expected conventions of social life, strongly aware of sexuality and mental unrest where her inner and outer life is at odds. In the above mentioned poem though Shivdasni apparently mocks at the heart of the volume lurks a similar wage for a paradise or a nirvana, something better than the anxieties, dishonesties, repression, false needs hypocrisy and basic ugliness of ordinary life.

The woman is still a 'football' who is kicked around, used and abused and when the man "scores his goals," he leaves her into the drain where it belongs once the game is over. She gets disturbed and angry at the

maltreatment meted out to her but is there anything that she can do to alleviate her miserable plight? Another woman poet who is aware of the discrimination of the genders in the society is Tejdeep. The alienation and marginalization as the inevitable fate of woman in patriarchy is portrayed by her in her volume of poems entitled **Five Feet Six** and a **Half Inches** (1977), abbreviated F.F. in the following extracts :

***It is always made solstice if they could
the sun would be spelled son (F ive.F eet Six.9)***

and again a woman is depicted as a one

***holding a bruised soul in six yards of
nylon (Five F.eet Six9)***

Gender typing is one of the frightening consequences of conformity to patriarchal norms. The poet significantly observes in a poem 'Visionary'.

***Visionaries at dawn do strange things
with a handful of flour or chalk (Five.Feet Six.28)***

because it is her attempt to hoodwink evil from strangers that

***with chalk and powder she must
attempt to hoodwink evil from under
a stranger's spell. (Five.FeetSix.29).***

The powerful subversion in "must attempt" makes it clear that the vitality hinted at the title is noticeable through its absence. In her case it is perhaps writing of poetry that provides the much needed healing and acts therapeutic :

***This has therapeutised my aches of
ferocious despair symbolized my
attempt to search for the broken
filament in a hundred watt bulb. (Five .Feet Six.17)***

In another powerful metaphor she reminisces and muses over the core of timeless wisdom and existential dilemma. Striving toward the process of self-actualization and recognition of the essential inherent self her poetic outburst speaks volumes :

***Time seals memories in trunks of
trees agitates pages in a diary..... time
erodes friendship burnishes new***

**friends..... time just does not leave it
squats on eyelids endlessly. (Five.Feet Six.p.35).**

Thought subjective and limited in scope, the works of Tejdeep compel the reader to take note of the underlying significant intent of her verse where she is trying to raise her lonely voice not only for herself but for many upcoming Tejdeeps to charter a new territory for themselves.

As an Indian English woman poet Mamta Kalia has left her mark in the field of Indian English Poetry. She got two collections of poems published from Writers Workshop, Calcutta. They are *Tribute to Papa and Other Poems* [1970] and *Poems 1978* [1979]. Mamta Kalia defines the phenomenon of the educated urban working women. In a poem entitled ``Compulsions`` the poet expresses her desire to defy social norms

`` I want to pick my nose
In a public place
I want to sit in my office chair
With my feet up.

Sujata Bhatt born in India and educated in the United States, now living in Germany has been shaped by cross-cultural experiences as reflected in her three collections : ***Brunizem*** (1988) which won the Commonwealth Poetry prize (Asian Section), ***Monkey Shadows*** (1991) won a poetry Book Society Recommendation and her third anthology the ***The Stinkin Roe*** (1997) is the recent book with a selection from the first three books introduced by one new poem, the title poem. Rajana Ash in ***The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*** describes Sujata's poetry as "the anguish of immigrants when they start lose their first language," and she comments approvingly on the poet's attempt use Gujarati line interspersed with English ones" onomatopoeia effect, and because for her certain subjects cannot be described in English." In fact, her bi-lingual poem explore the conflict of the self fragmented between different cultures. One can argue that incomprehensibility thus created is poet's deliberate design to draw the reader into her own sense of otherness in order to experience a predicament which allows only a peripheral existence. At the beginning of 'Search For My Tongue,' an eight page poem, the Gujarati sentences are translated quite literally into English. As the poem progresses the Gujarati lines remain flat, prosaic and closed, while the English sentences that flow become longer and

richer, spinning off associations and graphically building on them so that they work quite independently of the Gujarati original.

Bhatt seems to be obsessed with the question of language, which she looks at from different points of view at different times. Aware of the limitations of language, she confesses :

***The bets story, of course
is the one you can't write
you won't write
it's something that you can only live
in your heart
not on paper.***

Bhatt's recent work evinces her growing interest in the character sketch and its more evolved form, the dramatic monologue. Her exceptionally wide range of reference enables her to present characters as diverse as a young Indian girl during the partition and an old Spanish woman working in her field. The monologues are more numerous; a swimmer in New England, the snake-catcher; the artist in Dublin; Jane addressing Tarzen; and even Hannibal's personal elephant Surus talking to its master. What is generally missing however, is the under current of irony which constitutes the chief strength of Browning's dramatic monologues. By the large her poems do not seem to develop from social or personal relations; they are poems of the self experience and self definition. The title poem of ***Point No Point*** begins :

***Why name a place Point No Point?
Does it mean we are nowhere.
When we reach it?
Does it mean that we lose our sense
of meaning, or sense of direction
when we stop at Point No Point?***

In many other places, almost the same urge of exploring the implications of dislocations and tensions of living in an alien land get evident as in the poem 'The One Who Goes Away' from the book *The Stinking Rose* where she is searching for a place in order to keep her soul from wondering.

***Sometimes I'm asked if
I were searching for a place
that can keep my soul***

***from wondering
a place where I can stay
without wanting to leave.***

This poem concludes tritely with :

***I am the one
who always goes
away with my home
which can only stay inside
in my blood – my home
which does not fit with any geography.***

Moving between countries and cultures, Bhatt is concerned with the construction of the self and its relationship with memory, history and identity. While honouring the importance of her heritage, she also seems to be striving to discover who she is; she fosters both the values of her birthplace and her Western self-confidence, but at the same time she reveals her sense of alienation in the environment of the country of her domicile. The poems, therefore, in general are marked by the twin metaphors of loss and recovery. While the loss is real in terms of spatial and temporal distance from the motherland, the recovery can only be imaginary – or at best aesthetic. It is indeed remarkable that Sujata Bhatt has not only the right idiom at her command but also a native mode to express a new consciousness. Meena Alexander's 'A House Of a Thousand Doors' for instance is an Indian woman living in United States. She often hears voices of the village women she left behind. During her birthing pains in New York these women come in dream to deliver her. In a moment of this primeval pain, all barriers collapse and women come together in mutual sympathy, understanding and concern. Suniti Namjoshi directly addresses the need to legitimize lesbianism and argues that a woman's love for a woman is both natural and quite ancient. She complains that books, stories and society all collude in propagating the myths of compulsory heterosexuality and in all these versions men love women and women love men, and men ride off and have all sorts of adventures while women stay at home. In a number of poems included in her collections Jackass and the Lady and Blue Donkey Fables Namjoshi celebrates lesbian eroticism.

These and many more recent women poets bring out the conflict of gender through the Indian female psyche in its interaction and correlation

with the male psyche. Written in a personal and confessional style, their poetry acts as a social document because they themselves are victims and agents of social change. In the twilight zone in which the creative mind dwells, there is a natural feminine ability to turn inwards, to accept intuition and tenderness as values long with the gentle sensitivity to one's natural environment and to the latent communications among human beings which mobilize the feelings and imageries and bring forth the new feminine voices creating new terrains. Female bonding in literature has thus taken a variety of forms, the agenda being common, women need to come together and call into question all the diverse strategies of patriarchy.

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