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Illusion versus Reality: A Study of Indian English Women Poetry

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Abstract

Freedom is perhaps the prerequisite for human life to flourish. In India women are confined to kitchens and are deprived of their freedom. To express their wrath against patriarchy, many women these days are moving outside cultural and disciplinary boundaries and are defying the traditional role of woman as a dutiful wife, mother or daughter. They are trying to break the walls of silence that habitually surround them. But the social pressures which mould their very thinking make them non-communicative about their real needs and desires. As a result there arises a contradiction in speech and behaviour making them sometimes submissive and sometimes harsh. The same is the case with contemporary Indian women poets taken up for study in the paper. The poetry written by contemporary Indian women poets are generally considered to be revealing the growth of feminine poetic consciousness on one hand and on the other hand the changing position of women in Indian society. Race, ethnicity and

sexual identity, are the major tools of the poet with which she attacks and writes back against the established canon. The present paper would undertake a cumulative study to present a comprehensive picture of an idealised world and how is it different from real.

Keywords

Illusion; Reality; Indian English Women Poets.

Freedom is perhaps the prerequisite for human life to flourish. In India women are confined to kitchens and are deprived of their freedom. To express their wrath against patriarchy, many women these days are moving outside cultural and disciplinary boundaries and are defying the traditional role of woman as a dutiful wife, mother or daughter. They are trying to break the walls of silence that habitually surround them. But the social pressures which mould their very thinking make them non-communicative about their real needs and desires. As a result there arises a contradiction in speech and behavior making them sometimes submissive and sometimes harsh. The same is the case with contemporary Indian women poets taken up for study in the paper. The poetry written by contemporary Indian women poets are generally considered to be revealing the growth of feminine poetic consciousness on one hand and on the other hand the changing position of women in Indian society. Race, ethnicity and sexual identity, are the major tools of the poet with which she attacks and writes back against the established canon. The present paper would undertake a cumulative study to present a comprehensive picture of an idealised world and how is it different from real.

Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) were the first two great predecessors of contemporary Indo-Anglian women poets. Toru Dutt renders authenticity to the Indian English verse with her innovative style, representing extensively the Indian tradition in a foreign language. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1940) popularly known as the –Nightingale of India, has been the

most prominent woman poet of the colonial period who has won great acclaim in India and abroad. She was conscious of the woman's predicament which she has voiced in quite a few poems. Her poems reveal her —ambiguous attitude. Eunice de Souza points out that her poem “is imbued with nostalgia and exotic appeal. Her life is a revolving dream of languid and sequestered ease” (De Souza 3). She feels concerned for the desperate condition of widows, but, at the same time, in her maudlin voice, she seems to be endorsing the practice of “Sati” (Indian practice of burning the widows alive in the funeral pyre of their husbands, outlawed by the British colonizers).

The post-1947 era, that is the period after India gained independence, is marked by the country's search for her own identity as a new-born nation in the modern world. This search for identity is also reflected as one of the remarkable features of literature produced by contemporary Indian writers. P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao, in a somewhat brash Introduction of *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1958) declare that “the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu. They emphasize — the need for the private voice, especially because — we live in an age that tends so easily to demonstrations of mass-approval and hysteria” (Quoted in Naik, *History* 193). The same is the case with the Indo-Anglian women poets of the post-independence period. They have little in common with the earlier generation of Indian women writing sentimental and romantic poetry in English in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The poetry of these new poets is born out of their intense experience as women. They —have articulated as overtly and boldly as male poets. Their poetry had taken for its theme various Indian subjects from legend, folklore, to contemporary Indian situations. Greater realities, analytical approach and greater awareness marked their poetry. The canvas became wide and interests more varied. Thus the real flowering of their genius came in the post-independence era.

There is a remarkable shift in the poems of contemporary Indian women poets from eulogizing and spiritualizing love to a more mundane acceptance of sexuality and the physical needs of women. These poets have discovered their

own voices and developed their sensibilities. Their poetry expresses the desire of woman to get away from the ties that have restricted her, since time immemorial. Some women poets, in particular, have made worthwhile attempts at mapping out new terrains as human beings and also as creative writers.

In India, a woman is considered to be an embodiment of sacrifice and silent suffering. She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful, and devoted to her husband and his family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. Rukmini Nair explains it follows:

A woman is a thing apart
She is bracketed off, a
Comma, semi-colon, at most
A lower-case letter, lost. (Margins, ma(i)nstream 1-4)

These attitudes exemplify the belief that woman should not have any right of her own; that she has only duties in relation to man. Kamala Das also articulates the plight and predicament of woman whom she considers doomed to live in an intensely man-made world:

Dress in saree, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. ("An Introduction" 45-48)

In a patriarchal society, the birth of a female child is traditionally less welcomed than that of the male. Being born a boy is itself a privilege. Girls arrive in the world as undesirable creatures and the life-long battle against their formidable foe, i.e., their sex begins, as Eunice de Souza expresses in her "de Souza Prabhu" where she puts herself in the category of "lame ducks". In "One Man's Poetry" she says: As I grew up/I longed only to laugh easily. /All that emerged was a nervous whinny. (25-29)

As a daughter, Mamta Kalia is haunted by the father figure. Father in her case becomes a symbol of male-dominance. Women like this relationship as this is the only male relationship which provides protection and affection without the

physical in it. It is disliked as father is the first dominating male in life and a representative of the patriarchal society. In her poem “A Tribute to Papa” Mamta Kalia pays a different kind of tribute to her father, stating that her ideas and values clash with those of her father’s: “Everything about you clashes with nearly /everything about me” (25-26). The mutual disillusionment has grown so much that she even thinks of “disowning” her father and his sacredness. Thus, the dichotomous attitude which continues to operate throughout a woman’s life starts right in her parents’ home. The contemporary poets show no respect or gratitude for their mother too. The relationship does not seem to be very pleasant, close or satisfactory. Eunice de Souza in her “Forgive Me, Mother” confesses that in dreams, she hacks her mother.

The dichotomous attitude thus begins early in life and lasts throughout a woman’s existence. She is continuously reminded of her femininity. Lakshmi Kannan was instructed:

No. Don’t run
 don’t take long strides
 don’t raise voice be a woman,
 be moderate in everything. (“An Omen”)

Sujatha Modayil says that she was happy at twelve that she had become a woman but as she grew up she realized the male dominance and superiority:

Hold your breath now, girls,
 The game is nearly over The power and glory, our’s
 For ever and ever. (“The Little Madams”)

This secondary status becomes more obvious as a girl grows up. She is prevented from developing her own individuality. She is constantly reminded that she is destined for man and the one who gets the most masculine attention is the luckiest one. Entire rearing and gearing up of a girl is male-oriented and her salvation lies in marriage. Parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts—all condition her for this destiny right from her childhood. Sujata Bhatt in her poem “Light” expresses this tragic fate of being a daughter:

When I was seventeen
My grandmother said “Get her married
before the light
goes out of her face”. (“Light” 1-4)

Intiaz Dharkar’s Fatimah, a muslim girl, elopes with an English boy to free herself from the shackles of the closed world but it turns out to be only an exchange of masters:

And there you are with your English boy
Who was going to set you free,
Trying to smile and be accepted,
Always on your knees. (*Purdah and Other Poems*)

Thus, marriage for a girl means only an exchange of masters—first it is the parents who control, now there will be husband. As Simone de Beauvoir observes:

There is unanimous agreement that getting a husband—or in some cases a ‘protector’—is for her the most important of undertakings...She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future, not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master. (De Beauvoir 352)

Marriage does not turn out to be a companionship or equality for a woman; rather it is a trap which negates her rights to individuality, independence and self-realization.

A woman on the other hand is virtually reduced to the status of a maid. Mamta Kalia complains of the effect of being a housewife on her individuality and seems to be frustrated and dissatisfied:

I, no longer feel I’m Mamta Kalia
I am Kamla
Or Vimla
Or Kanta or Shanta. (“Anonymous” 1-4)

Joint family is a great crusher of a woman's happiness. Mamta Kalia also feels the disparaging influence of this system as she says:

I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once
And struggle hard from hurting myself.
That it wasn't easy to be happy in a family of twelve. ("After Eight
Years of My Marriage" 15-17)

Throughout history, women have been appropriated as sexual objects, Karl Marx says, "*Marriage...is incontestably a form of exclusive private property* (Qtd. in Mitchell 110)" and this is echoed by Gauri Deshpande who expresses about this position of a woman in marriage in her poem "Man and Woman":

That she could with such ease
be enslaved by your skilful hands
beggar's heart and from himalayan heights
condescend to warm your bed
stiffen your manhood
and bear your spawn. (Qtd. in Barbuddhe 267)

Margaret Chatterjee reveals the same painful experience of a woman when a man leaves after having gratified his sexual appetite:

Loving quickly he
Turned his back,
while soundlessly
She wept
Into the night. ("Scars")

Man looks upon sex as a means of self-gratification and sensual pleasure whereas woman relates it to the emotional fulfilment and meaning in life. Sex seems to a woman a mere dry activity that leaves her unsatisfied.

The lack of emotional content in man-woman relationship has been the cause of frustration in Kamala Das also. Lovemaking to Kamala Das is a painful union with only a remote hope of discovering something meaningful. Kamala Das describes her experiences in "Convicts":

That was the only kind of love,
 This hacking at each other's parts
 Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
 At noon. (*The Descendants* 26)

Suniti Namjoshi's poetry, too, shows her disillusionment with love. She seems to be so much disgusted with the physical in love that she talks always of sex in a satirical tone. In her "Benefits" she says, "Together we'll make / many bastards (8-9)" While reading her, A.N. Dwivedi said, she "seems to be engulfed with a deep sense of horror and disgust in the matter of love and sex" (Dwivedi 208). Moreover, a woman is considered to be an instrument for continuing her husband's family. The pressure of maternity for a son's birth is usually faced by a woman.

The issues taken up by the poets are transnationally applicable and acceptable. The hidden realities are termed by the hegemonic society as illusion which women poets try to portray as real. In doing so, poets have crossed patriarchal boundaries and appear as 'new woman'.

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