

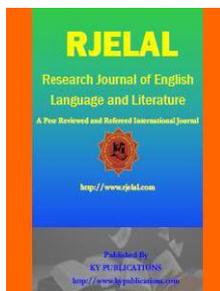


## CONFESSIONS OF INDIAN POETESS IN MODERN TIMES

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### ABSTRACT

The anxiety of identity and despair are the features of modern literature. Confessional poetry which is intensely personal and highly subjective is a branch of modern poetry. The twentieth century witnesses a plethora of Indian writers that flooded the literary scene. One of the fast developing genres of Indian literature is poetry. The study of Indian English poetry is incomplete without the study of women poets. In the poetry of Indian women poets of modern age, their silences speak more and better than the words do. The women poets in the post-independence India emphasise their feminine sensibilities vis-à-vis search for identity in a unique and creative way. Apart from the expression of self and identity, their poetry captures the moments of intense experiences of private life with all its uniqueness and immediacy. The confessional mode of their poetry seems to have therapeutic value as their poetry mirrors the realities of their life – anguish, frustration, longings, and loneliness, making their art transcends the self. The present paper attempts to highlight the confessional note in the poetry of modern Indian women poets like Kamala Das, Sunita Jain, MamtaKalia, Anuradha Shrivastava, Monika Varma, GauriDeshpande, Tara Patel, Imtiaz Dharker, Eunice de Souza, etc. who have shown how writing while being subversive can be emancipating.

**Key Words:** Confessional, feminine sensibilities, subjectivity.

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### INTRODUCTION

Confessional poetry is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s and is associated with several poets who redefined American poetry in the '50s and '60s, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and W. D. Snodgrass. Confessional poetry is a division of contemporary poetry. Vividly self-revelatory verses, confessional poetry are expressions of personality and never an

escape from it. Confessional poetry thus translates autobiographical facts as there is overtone of struggle, improvisation and resistance. Many Indian women poets too have written their poetry in confessional mode revealing their personal experiences of their shattered life. They find in their writings a medium to express their pent-up feelings. They have expressed their feelings and emotion without inhibition in their works. A woman's life is a dehumanizing and humiliating experience in a

patriarchal society. Kamala Das and many other women poets of India manifest such experiences in their poetry in manifold forms of authenticity, candour, boldness, ebullient frankness, vehement assertion, sadness etc.

Indian women poets in English have come a long way since pre-independence period with the emergence of Toru Dutt (1856-77) – the first Indian woman poet writing in English-- who represented extensively the Indian tradition in her poetry. Then comes 'the Nightingale of India' Sarojini Naidu (1879-1940) – who has been the most prominent woman poet of the colonial India. Some other women poets who are noteworthy are Susi P. David, Zeb-un-Nisa Hamiduallah, Savita Devi, Sister Lalita, etc. Modern Indian women poets in English, viz., Kamala Das, Sunita Jain, MamtaKalia, Anuradha Shrivastava, Monika Varma, Gauri Deshpande, Tara Patel, Imtiaz Dharker, Eunice de Souza, etc. have portrayed the real picture of Indian women and have a strong subversive approach in order to give vent to their feelings and thoughts, dreams and aspirations, urges and urgencies, pains and peeves, agonies and anguishes so as to liberate them from the labyrinth they have long been encaged in.

Among the modern Indian women poets kamala Das is the harbinger of a new dawn for women writers where they have found a distinctive voice of selfhood and individuality. Kamala Das is one of the most significant voices of modern Indian English poetry. Influenced by American poetry Kamala Das' poetry is usually written in confessional style. She writes about herself in confessional mode like Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath. A perceptive change has come to Indian English poetry with the writings of Kamala Das who is quite open and frank about her feelings and declares, "I too call myself I". K. Dinesh Singh points out:

"The modernism and feminism of Indian women poets begin with Kamala Das who broke away with the romantic-idealist tradition of the pre-independence women poets and rendered a realistic and concrete portrayal of life-experience, particularly in the ambit of man-

woman relationship (Feminism and Postfeminism: 58).

Generally, a sense of eternal torture is a motive behind confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is often called "the poetry of suffering" (130) as reviewed by Rosenthal in his *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II*. The torture and suffering lead to protest – the protest against the injustices and the persecution to which the women have always been subjected. In almost all the poems of Kamala Das, there is a note of suppressed anger, which is but quite natural. Subjective and autobiographical in nature, her poems let the readers peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche on the one hand and complex nature of the feminine sensibility on the other. The suffering of woman, according to Das, is as old as the hills and has been felt across time. Kamala Das and other women poets of India writing in English choose to write in the confessional mode to get away their sufferings and which seems to have healing effects on their psyche. Kamala Das declares in one of her *Anamalai Poems*:

If I had not learnt to write how would  
I have written away my loneliness  
Or grief? Garnering them within my  
heart  
Would have grown heavy as a vault,  
one that  
Only death might open, a release then  
I would not be able to feel or sense.

Love and sexual cravings are the persistent themes of Indian women writers since the time of the Vedas but with Kamala Das poetry made a departure from the early romanticism as they are much more realistic, frank, and bold. As a confessional poet, Kamala Das, truthfully and courageously expresses her inner self. It is of course the sexual frankness of Kamala Das that shocks and amuses the general readers and critics equally. As a womenpoet she expresses her personal emotional experiences without any inhibition which are generally taboos in a patriarchal society like India. Kamala Das believes in total immersion in love and thus emphasizes in Simone de Beauvoir words, "profound self-abandonment":

Gift him all that makes you woman, the  
scent of  
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the  
breasts  
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all  
your Endless female hungers (The Looking  
Glass)

Though she advocates the complete surrender in  
love but she complains the “mere appetite without  
any feelings of intimacy” from the male  
counterparts. The denial of perfect union leads  
dissatisfaction and frustration in her life. She  
believes in liberating the self from the shackles of  
do’s and don’ts and so plainly she admits:

So free am I, so gloriously free,  
Free from three petty things –  
From mortar, from pestle and  
From my twisted lord.

Kamala Das’ fictional autobiography, *My Story*  
reveals that her poems are indeed an intense study  
of her personal traumas and tribulationsthat she  
experienced in an insensitive, largely man-made  
world. However, her poems are not just confessions  
but the vigorous voicing of her female identity. Her  
feminine self is a combination of the need for  
domestic security and the desire for independence:

That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my peace,  
And even death nowhere else but here in  
My betrayer’s arms. (“A Relationship”)

The woman in Kamala Das seems to struggle  
between passion and tradition. In search of true love  
she wants to break the chains around her and refuse  
to be domesticated. The poems like “An  
Introduction” dramatize her aching disappointments  
where she rebels the passive role that a woman is  
forced to play in a traditional and tabooed society:

....Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, theycried. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers.

This shows how patriarchy tries to mould her  
according to the norms but she rejects all  
categories. Not only she refuses to be categorised  
but also she defies her womanliness that patriarchy  
has turned into a curse:

...I wore a shirt and my

Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short  
and ignored  
My womanliness.

She shows her restlessness with woman’s passive  
acceptance of servility and so she reveals a deep  
disgust for her own body. To transcend bodily  
limitations sometimes makes her seek escape  
through identification with the world:

...I met a man, loved him. Call  
Him not by any name, he is every man  
Who wants a woman, just as I am  
every  
Woman who seeks love. In him ...the  
hungry taste  
Of rivers in me...the oceans’ tireless  
Waiting....

The confessional elements in most of the modern  
Indian poetry in English by women poets perform  
the function of catharsis as they give vent to their  
suppressed feelings. These elements are reflected in  
their writings in manifold forms as they write about  
their sexual needs and longing for love, mutual  
respect, betrayal, loneliness, motherhood, assertion  
of identity and about their body. The confessional  
note is evident in the poetry of Sunita Jain also who  
never hesitates saying:

Let me love you  
As a tree loves  
With all its flower tips on fire  
Without embracing (“Silences”)

There are poets like Tara Patel besides Das and Jain  
who do voice their longing for love and  
companionship that never meets its due  
satisfaction. Her poem entitled ‘Mother’ represents  
this sorrowful condition of woman in the following  
lines:

You married at the right time  
If not to the right man.  
You were the lucky daughter  
Who went abroad, ...  
I dare say your discovery of sex was  
not wonderful.  
After the mandatory children  
And regret over four daughters,  
You got your son.  
Sex must have ended with your son.  
With relief you turned to Ram

And Krishna –Fancying yourself to be  
Sita and Radha...

In Tara Patel's writings there is a vehement rejection of the old traditional womanhood. In Tara Patel's metaphor "the new Indian woman's predicament rises from the fact that she has moved out of square one" (Ram: 2012, 168). Here 'square one' signifies the life of her forebears, that is, the home of her mother. Tara Patel through her poetry not only expresses her inner feelings but also she projects herself as a feminist poetic voice who asks for a dignified place of honour and respect:

I cannot live like you, mother,  
Maintain the status quo.  
I've moved out of square one. (ibid)

Simon de Beauvoir, the eminent feminist writer, believes that love for women is religion. She wants the lover to represent the essence of manhood and says,

the act of love requires of women self-abandonment: she bathes in a passive languor: with closed eyes, anonymous, lost, she feels as if borne by waves, swept away in a storm, shrouded in darkness: darkness of the flesh, of the grave. Annihilated, she becomes one with whole, her ego is abolished...her body is no longer an object: it is a hymn, a flame.

Imtiaz Dharker, with her social and cultural growth and lived experiences spanning three countries -- Pakistan, England and India -- has shown her subtle artistry in exposing the Purdah System in her title poems. Her poems in *Purdah* give a more graphic delineation of the Muslim tradition and marks a shift towards resistance in which she forcefully expresses her serious humanistic and feministic concerns. Purdah is considered a protection against undesirable, vulgar and vile looks of staring people. But Dharker considers it as a symbol of alienation and isolation from the outside world. It is a wall between the woman and the world. She generalises the predicament of women and puts it as follows:

There are so many of me.  
I have met them, meet them every day,  
Recognise their shadows on the streets.  
I know their past and future  
In the cautious way

They place their feet". (Purdah II)

Dharker shows how women are oppressed because of masculine domination and destruction. Her feminine concern is reflected in her poem *Honour killing* when she says:

At last I'm taking off this coat,  
this black coat of a country  
that I swore for years was mine,  
....this black veil of a faith  
that made me faithless  
to myself,  
that tied my mouth,  
gave my god a devil's face,  
and muffled my own voice.

Man-woman relations are never absolute nor are they one-way, rather they are reciprocal. This reciprocity is verbalised throughout in women's poetry in English. Mamta Kalia's poems express her feminist concern as well as expose ruthlessly the contemporary chaotic and pathetic condition of women in Indian society. She admits that being a wife means losing one's identity. She laments saying that:

I no longer feel I'm Mamta Kalia  
I'm Kamla  
Or Vimla  
Or Kanta or Shanta.  
(Anonymous)

Mamta Kalia is conscious of her identity and to depict it she adopts the tradition on the one hand as an individual and raises her voice against the oppression of women on the other. She voices the real and living experiences in their naked form asserting her own identity. She gets some kind of emancipation from her inner turmoil while writing:

In my hour of discontent  
I neither shout nor rant  
I simply fill ink in my pen  
And spill it with intent.  
(My Hour of Discontent)

There is a vast range of humiliating experiences and feminine emotions reflected in the confessional poetry of Indian women poets of modern age – of the pangs of a girl growing up, about the first arousal of sexuality in a growing girl, about married life, about childbirth, about adultery, and about the void that comes from the non-fulfilment of their

yearnings. Though a woman is a free and autonomous being like all creature but the social system is such that it underlines the position of women as 'other' which results in identity crisis. If either of the two – man and woman – is deprived of real status then naturally what arises is the crisis of identity. Thus, Monika Varma writes:

Give me space  
Space not to exist  
But live. (*Give Me Space*)

Monika Varma is identified amongst the Indian women poets writing in English because of her unique expressions as well as ideology. She looks man-woman relationship in a positive and broad way. She attempts in all her writings for sustaining harmony and mutual understanding to that of repugnant relationship.

Since the women do share many common experiences so through the subjectivity and confessional note the women poets clearly objectify the common experiences of every woman. Eunice De Souza says:

Sometimes you want to talk  
About love and despair  
And the ungratefulness of children  
A man is no use, whatever then  
You want then your mother  
Or sister  
Or the girl with whom you went through school...  
You know...that you've spoken  
(*The Female of the Species*)

A very strange but common tendency in Indian milieu is the preference for the male child as exhibited in Adrienne Rich terms "horizontal hostility". De Souza's anguish on her parents' preference for male is well reflected in the following lines:

I heard it said  
My parents wanted a boy.  
I've done my best to qualify,  
I hid the bloodstains  
On my clothes  
And let my breast sag.

Gauri Deshpande endeavours to depict the idiosyncratic traits of woman and compares it to those of man:

A woman learns to love a little  
A man who praises her hair  
And reads her poems and knows  
How to elicit than special moan  
With kisses; loves a little any man.

Deshpande strongly feels that "a woman has to compromise and adapt to the circumstances she is situated in, and for that reason she is compelled to have developed the 'habit of pain' and the grit of surviving in a milieu that is meaningless" (Singh: 2004 78).

#### Conclusion

In the modern Indian women poetry there is no reservation or moral inhibition when they make confession of experiences either as a wife or as a beloved, either as a mother or as a daughter/daughter-in-law. This is undoubtedly the transformation of the traditional woman into the modern woman. In the writings of Indian women poets the subjective feelings become predominant while advocating their selfhood and expressing their sensitivity towards unfavourable milieu which reduces them to battered souls. The anguish of woman is more because of her inferior position in family and society. The solution of the primordial issue of gender bias needs to be synthesised wherein there is no clash of rights and duties, ego and esteem, preference and position, love and lust, but an abode of harmony and peace, equality and humanity. In fact, modern Indian women poets through their confessional mode of writing have been able to articulate a harmonious relationship in all dimensions – physical, mental, spiritual, and social. Needless to say, the endeavours the Indian women poets make is towards attaining harmony, peace, and happiness in life.

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