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REDEFINING 'NEW WOMAN': A SELECT STUDY OF INDIAN ENGLISH WOMEN POETS

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ABSTRACT

From the Buddhist *Therigatha* (collection of short poems by nuns) of the 6th century B.C to the contemporary times, women's poetic effluences have always constructed a counter culture narrative to the central discourse of patriarchy. Indian English women poetry is a rich corpus that has continuously intervened in social debates. It is a product as well as a carrier of women's experiences through different socio-political junctures. Result being, the epithet 'new woman' carries divergent connotations across time. The earliest generation of women poets wrote romantic poetry and tried to raise the consciousness of women towards their family and nation. The 'new woman' in the late nineteenth century epitomized confident, assertive and exuberant woman who resisted the essentialist notions of womanhood that promoted the need of being a dutiful wife and a self-negating mother. Contemporary women poets embody the 'new woman' of today's time who is globally travelled and multi-culturally exposed. The discussion of social concerns like caste, violence, communal massacre, regressive nationalism, Diaspora and shrinking humanity takes this poetic corpus much beyond feminism. The paper intends to trace the changing contours of the term 'new woman' in India via the change in the thematic interest in Indian English women poetry from Independence to the present times.

Keywords- Feminism, New woman, Public space, Socio-political, Women poetry

Introduction

It has become a commonplace today to describe an independent and self-assured woman as a 'new woman'. The tag 'new woman' is essentially used for an educated-modern woman but the fact that every woman who protested against discrimination was a new woman of her time is often overlooked. The term "New Woman" was first used by Sarah Grand, an Irish feminist in her article, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" in 1894. The 'new woman' phenomenon gained a considerable popularity in the nineteenth century and became the thematic interest of novelists and

academic focus of scholars. The new woman signified a woman who was critical of gender partiality and imposed regulations. Grand also encouraged women to participate in the nation-building process along with their male-counterparts. Every country and culture was directly or indirectly influenced by the waves of feminism and the 'new woman' concept. The reason was that the 'new woman' idea disturbed the fundamental patriarchal institutions by advocating women's equality.

Evolution in the Poetic Trajectory

India has been an ever evolving nation hence it can be called modern at every point in

history and also at none. We pride ourselves on a several millennia old civilization but voluntarily neglect the dismal paradoxes that govern the socio-political matrix of our country. The country whose freedom took birth in blood, professes non-violence as a principle moral tenet. India has established itself as a leading nuclear power but nearly six hundred million people have no access to electricity and forty percent of its total population is illiterate. On the one hand, Indian culture bequeaths the status of *devi* (goddess) to women and on the other, compels them to acclimatize themselves to the disciplinary regulations of deportment and speech. Despite constitutional provisions like equal opportunities in public places and prohibition of gender based discrimination, harassment against women is soaring at an alarming rate. It is this incongruity that forms the core of debate in women literature. Thus, to inspect the several connotations of the phrase 'new woman' in the Indian context, it is imperative to trace the evolutionary trajectory of the (un)changing dynamics of gender in our country and women's retaliation towards the oppression they suffer by the virtue of their birth.

The social milieu as it impinges upon the consciousness of women, aligns their perception and also effects their literary representations. Indian English women poetry chronicles the historical and cultural gradations of women's experiences through time and space and across various discursive spectrums. Over the years, it has evolved into a rich corpus that has increasingly intervened in social debates. In the process of negotiating with the dominant patriarchal discourses on gender, class, religion and literary aesthetics, women poetry displays a divergent movement from domestic to public, taboo to articulation, ideology to identity and national to global. Hence, while responding to the numerous social and political aspects of the system, women's sensibilities and orientation has undergone a paradigmatic shift. This in turn has led to a change in the definitional constructs of 'new woman'.

In the medieval era, women stagnated in social orthodoxy and their status was determined by their role in the family *vis-a-vis* their husbands. *Bhakti* poet-saints like Mirabai and Lal ded used

religion, the only public space available to them to challenge the gender stratification. Being a woman of the patriarchal Rajput community, Mirabai was expected to impose penance on herself after the death of her husband. On the contrary, she wandered in the company of vagrants, peasants and mystics and renounced all the social ties. The *Bhakti* poets construed their relationship with the almighty in terms of a lover, spouse and master. Edward White quotes the lines of Mira's song thus, "I took to keeping hermits' company/ Lost conventional modesty. My mother-in-law says/ I destroyed the family honor. I have ceased to care for people's opinions." Such assertion is certainly that of a new woman whose personal represents the political. These women converted temples into sites of cultural reform and became the agents of their own emancipation in the time when self-effacement was a desirable trait in women.

In pre-independent India, women were denied basic education. The liberty to read and write was reserved for men. While men firmly established themselves in the literary realm, women festered in conventional roles. After a long struggle, Indian women poets gained visibility in the creative sphere through the poems of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. Proficient in English and writing skills at the time when women education was completely neglected, Dutt and Naidu epitomized the new woman. Dutt's poetic vision transcended the barriers of nation and gender by incorporating historical, mythical and classical themes while Naidu's poetry was primarily a depiction of the picturesque scenes of Indian life. In the scenario where high avenues of learning were accessible to only men, the creative endeavor of these poets marked the beginning of literary renaissance in the field of Indian women poetry. The romantic-idealist style of their poetry was suffused with personal aesthetics and linguistic stipulations but a nuanced depiction of social bigotry was somewhat absent in their poems. This prompted Eunice De Souza to comment, "Sarojini Naidu's confidently mindless versifying has little to teach to contemporary poets, and Toru Dutt did not live long enough to outgrow sentimental pastiche. . ." (1).

The bureaucratic structure of post-independent India assured the end of degenerate

practices like child marriage, *Sati*, female infanticide and *purdah* system. One of the salient attributes of women poetry composed during this time was a vehement uproar against the essentialist notions of womanhood. "On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism", Jonathan Culler says, "to read as a woman is to avoid reading as a man, to identify the specific defenses and distortions of male readings and provide correctives" (54). The new women poets wrote from a woman's perspective and were read from the same.

For a long time in history poetry composed by women was ridiculed as personal and therefore unworthy of attention. Being limited in terms of subject (love, nature, motherhood, God) and expression (sentimental, supplicatory) women poetry was regarded as nothing more than a poetic rendering of abstract emotions. The gender imbalance began to be bridged only after the 1960s when strong feminist voices in regional languages as well as English made their presence felt either through individual poetry collection and anthologies. English poetry by women in India was no more a fanciful indulgence but became a platform to address the lived reality of women. An iconoclast of her age, Kamla Das makes an untainted use of biological affairs of a woman's body, defiance being the major hallmark of her poetry. Demanding equality with men Das in the poem "An Introduction" says, "I am a sinner/ I am a saint. I am the beloved and the/ Betrayed/ I have no joys that are not yours, no/ Aches which are not yours/ I too call myself I" (59-61). Das was of the view that womanhood involves certain collective experiences which they, especially the Indian women refused to discuss in deference to social mores. She did not confine her misery to the silent seclusion of the private space but brought it out in the public to confront the unpleasantness of not only social but also personal relationships.

The female body has historically served as a site for voyeuristic pleasure and exploited as a receptacle of male desire. The sexuality of women is primarily bridled within the domains of monogamous procreativity as an open discussion about the carnal urges of women is considered inappropriate. Language is one of the most potent

tools that Das used to explicitly articulate her disapproval on the silences imposed on women's body. In the poem "The Looking Glass", Das's assertion "the musk of sweat between breasts/ The warm shock of menstrual blood" (21) shows how her language is free from all self-consciousness and propriety. Das was the new woman who ventured into the territory, unclaimed by women poets prior to her. Eunice de Souza aptly avows, Kamla Das "mapped out a terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms" (8). Das's unabashed treatment of themes like sex is something which was absent in the poetry by women before her. She embodies all the new women of the nineteenth century who felt the need to articulate their biological reality as a natural phenomenon and not something to be apologetic about.

After Kamla Das the legacy of revolt against patriarchy was carried forward by distinguished women poets like Gauri Deshpande, Eunice De Souza, Tara Patel and Mamta Kalia. These new women drew heavily upon their personal experiences and brought their female subjects to life by using a language that no longer depended on patriarchal definition of female subjectivity. They addressed a wide variety of 'forbidden' issues. De Souza's poems urge women to let go of their self-imposed circumscribing taboos of virtue, chastity, sex etc and resist the social prejudices that create a polarity between a woman's body and soul. Tara Patel uses a weary tone in her poems to project man-woman dissension and show the life of a physically and psychologically battered woman through powerful images. In her poems Patel encapsulates the labyrinthine of violence, physical tortures and emotional destitution that a woman has to endure. For example in the poem "Woman", she says, "A woman's life is a reaction/to the crack of a whip" (10). Mamta Kalia, on the other hand boldly records the drudgery and ordinariness of a woman's life. Her life she says to Eunice De Souza in an interview, "is packed with nothing but the "prosaic details" of "pending phone calls", "dirty linen", "a shaky mountain of books" and "a much needed hair wash" (51). She voices her displeasure over the obligation to fulfill the dreams of the patriarch of her family as, "You're not sure what

greatness is/ you want me to be great" (8). In the poem "After Eight Years of Marriage", she muses over the recurrent question of her parents, "They asked, 'Are you happy, tell us?' Swallowing her resentment she answers, "And in between sobs, I nodded yes" (37). Her poems like "Self Pity", "Sunday Song" and "Compulsions" are replete with the mundane tedium of household and monotony of everyday life of a woman. Kalia's poems mainly chronicle the distasteful reality of women who do not have any autonomy over their fate and body.

To be a woman and a poet in India presents many women poets with a dilemma between their social and artistic identity. As Nishat Haider encapsulates, "that split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced of much women poetry" (23). The nineteenth century women poets recorded the desires of a woman and were mainly concerned with fighting for social changes that would liberate them from patriarchal subjugation. As these women poets majorly dealt with the theme of patriarchy, women poetry was stereotyped as feminist poetry and accused of being narrow and sentimental. Bruce King complains they were so preoccupied in writing about "their own agonizing predicament" that they did not "worry about various social problems that confront human society" (147). The reason was that the public sphere, comprising of social and political issues was under the exclusive monopoly of men while women wielded authority only in domestic matters. However, the globetrotting and trans-culturally exposed women poets of the twentieth century crossed the domestic threshold to write poetry on wide ranging socio-cultural, political and economic issues. Not only gender bias but their poetry is born out of contradictions and fissures created from their multi-cultural heritage in a world contesting for power. The atrocities they have to encounter due to being from a minority group also become a contributing factor to their poems.

Akshaya Kumar remarks, "Indian woman poets of 1990s step into the outer domain of the contemporary politics marred by rhetoric of civilization clash, global terrorism, retrogressive nationalism and communal genocides" (315). The discussion of social concerns like communal carnage,

caste discrimination, nationality, market forces, urgency to re-configure the traditional literary perspectives and writing patterns, sense of alienation felt by the Diaspora, sharp increase in cases of molestation on the professional front takes this poetic corpus much beyond the unilateral feminist axis.

Often described as the undaunted rebel, Imtiaz Dharker in the poem titled "Open" writes, "Strange for someone as secretive/ As me, I don't mind/ I am opening up the public spaces/ I am opening up the public spaces/ There are no intruders/ they own this place as much as you/ as much as me" (64). In a recent interview Dharker confides, "In a world that seems to be splitting itself into narrower national and religious groups, sects, castes, sub-castes, we can go on excluding the other until we come down to a minority of one" (41). She exhibits her Islamic minority-identity as much as her universal faith in being an affirmed human citizen of the world. In the poem "They'll Say: 'She must be from Another Country'", Dharker says:

When I can't comprehend
why they are burning books
or slashing paintings
When they can't bear to look
at god's own nakedness . . .
they just smile and say,
'She must be
From another country. (12-13)

Talking about cultural displacement and gender politics, her poems are a celebration of self in every sense of word. Despite her own poetic journey starting from behind the veil, Dharker has moved into larger and globalised landscape of the metropolitan world and represents the new woman of today.

The poems of Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Chitra Banarjee predominantly summarize the anxiety faced by an individual after crossing the geographical boundaries of her country. Alexander's claim, "My body/ part water/part rock/is searching for heaven" (44) can be read as the struggle of a woman in a patriarchal society who is swinging between her identity defined by her culture and her aspirations. At the same time, it is also a statement of alienation felt by the Diaspora in a distant land. In

occasional poems these women poets use nature not for its beauty but as symbols of past and ironies in the modern society. For example Sujata Bhatt has the tendency to use the symbol of rivers more for cultural purposes than natural. Apart from the concern of Diaspora, Bhatt's female subjects repeatedly raise their voice against the practices of female foeticide, rape and honor killing. Moving accounts of children rape have become common today, in the poem "Straight through the Heart", the feelings of the child is shrouded in layers of silence, Bhatt talks of her alienation as:

Straight through the heart, she knew she
would be shot
She knew too much for a girl of eight.
She knew she was being raped, and she
knew
That if she spoke, if she spoke out and
named that sin,
She would be killed. (37)

Suniti Namjoshi's volume of poetry *Poems* (1967) brings her poetic fervor to the forefront. She challenges the social conventions that inhibit the sexual freedom of women. Most of her poems are marked with ironic perceptions which according to some border on cynicism. At some time the discussion of women sexuality was a taboo but being the new woman of the twenty first century, Namjoshi's poems indulge with themes like alternate sexuality and homosexuality.

The partition of India was one of the most cataclysmic events in the history of the world. Accompanied by a large demographic displacement and genocidal violence, the ramification of partition can be felt up to the present day. Though today the communal riots are triggered by political-ideological position yet they cause a huge physical, material and psychological damage to the common people. The women poets weave in a number of issues like gender, fundamentalism and nationalism to problematize the issue of communalism. Anup Beniwal and Amrita Mehta opine, "The creative response from women poets is not merely a gendered response to escalating violence in the contemporary world and its devastating toll on women; but is multifocal, complex and nuanced." Contemporary women poets like Rukmini Bhaya

Nair and Seeme Qasim respond to the issue of communal violence both as a poet and a woman. There is a difference between the way a male and a female poet responds to such events. A male gaze captures the perceptible reality i.e. the political reason behind the riots and loss in terms of lives and money while the female casts a different glance on the event. Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* writes "In a patriarchal society each woman is perceived as a mother or a potential mother. Within the confines of motherhood her sexuality is accepted and legitimized but a raped or abducted mother is equal to motherhood defiled" (38). Nair's *The Ayodhya Cantos* and Qasim's recording of the brutal persecution of the Muslims in the Gujrat riots (2002) foreground the communal animosity of the present day India we live in. The women were the worst victims of the communal violence that followed the Babri mosque demolition.

One can barely overlook the deeply entrenched caste system that has always acted as a catalyst to aggravate the discrimination against women in our country. Endogamy, concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution' and denial to access educational resources are the most potent weapon used by the upper caste to perpetuate untouchability and secondary status of women. Meena Kandasamy hailed as first Indian woman writer, writing Dalit poetry in English deals with the issues of caste bias and gender inequality with a candid precision. She is of the view, "You don't have to be a Dalit- by being a woman the caste is in you" In the poem "Narration" she vehemently condemns the hypocrisy of the Indian society towards dalits as "I will weep to you about/ My landlord, and with/ My mature gestures/ You will understand/ The torn sari, disheveled hair/ Stifled cries and meek submission/ I was not an untouchable then" (42).

Conclusion

Indian English poetry by women can be seen as an attempt at self revelation through which women poets try to respond to the changing facets of social life in India. Nishat Haider rightly remarks "Indian English poetry by women, frequently written with passion and wit that sparkles across the differences of time and space, reflects their basis in women's lived experiences" (7). Engaging with the

social, political and economic aspects of the public space, Indian women poetry become an innovative and ideological amalgam of the old and the new. Women have moved away as chroniclers of domesticity to etch public domain with an understanding that is inclusive, complex and activist at the same time. In this process, the definition of 'new woman' also keeps on changing and adding a fresh layer of meaning to the term. Though today, women have more freedom in comparison to the earlier times, the contradiction is widespread. Despite the constitutional safeguards, women are subjected to discrimination in the public and professional fronts. Unequal pay, lack of voice in political matters and under-representation are some factors that check the overall development of the new woman today. The condition of women in the rural and developing areas is even more alarming as they have to struggle to procure facilities that are crucial to basic survival. Indian women poetry makes a conscious effort to encompass within its fold a departure from representation to self-presentation and from homogenization to understanding of the heterogeneity of Indian culture from women's standpoint. Like other literary genres that engage with the concerns peculiar to women, Indian English women poetry traces the changes in the position of women in the society. It also extensively documents the need to see women as individuals and not binary opposites to men. An awareness of the self, fueled by the insights gained from literary movements like postcolonialism, deconstruction and feminism has certainly led to the creation of new woman in the academic space. However, sexism does not end by simply theorizing that gender is a social construct. It is important that awareness about women's legal rights and safety is raised so that there is no discrepancy between what the 'new woman' stands for in theory and practice.

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