

MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: A STUDY OF POLYPHONIC VOICES OF WOMEN POETS

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The modern era has seen the emergence of new gender neutral anthologies of Indian English poetry such as Eunice de Souza's *Early Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology* (2005) and *Both Sides of the Sky: Post Independence Indian Poetry in English* (2008), Jeet Thayil's *60 Indian Poets* and *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008) and most recently Sudeep Sen's *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry* (2012). Amidst all these anthologies a historical reckoning of women's poetry from the nineteenth century to the present times was getting deferred. As many new women's voices appeared in Sen's 2012 anthology it was necessary, to map the women's voices that had emerged from the 1960s. For the women poets, modernism meant something quite different from the literary modernism of Eliot and Auden. It meant a reconfiguration of identity in postcolonial terms. In this they were inextricably linked to the concerns of their colonial as well as their nationalist predecessors such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu respectively. The modern female poetic voices of comprise Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Gauri Deshpande, Tara Patel, Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia and Smita Agarwal. This paper traces representative voices from Kamala Das to Smita Agarwal

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The Modern Indian Women's Poetry strikes a different note. It examines the home, the world, and the language of the senses from a woman's perspective. Women's poetry records intimate feelings, personal observations and the search for space within the fabric of society and tradition. Eunice De Souza observes, in her introduction to *Nine Indian Women Poets* (1997) coincides with those of women poets of Vedic times, and of Buddhist nuns and Bhakti poets female dissent against family, love, class, caste, and gender hierarchies in the Therigatha poems of the Buddhist nuns, the Vedic hymns voicing the inadequacies of relationships and the need for sexual fulfillment, the women Bhakta poets (1-6).

The poetry of Kamala Das marks the beginning of modern Indian English poetry by women. One may begin with her poem of self-definition; "An Introduction" Das dismantles some of the pressing concerns of the male Indian English Poets. Kamala Das differs from the male poets whose poetry did not touch on the real life around them as they explored their interiorized journeys and struggles. Das speaks of communal violence, poverty, the language issue of the sixties and corruption in the public sphere. In the poetry of Ezekiel there is often found an aloofness regarding family that the poet consciously struggles against, either by reminding himself that 'Home is where we have to gather grace', as in "Enterprise" (Parthasarathy, 30), or, as in "Marriage Poem", a prayer to

... let the quieter passion come

To every lover, till
The nuptial pattern is secure
Though you are still. (Ezekiel, 46)

Or else, by holding his silence about the cynical truth about marriage at weddings, as in the poem “Marriage” in *The Unfinished Man* (1960)

Then suddenly the mark of Cain
Began to show on her and me.
Why should I ruin the mystery
By harping on the suffering rest,
Myself a frequent wedding guest? (Ezekiel 124)

Kamala Das’s poetry on marriage is in sharp contrast to Ezekiel’s resigned philosophical tone. It expresses the torment and anguish of dysfunctional conjugality in powerful and bold language that, in a way, indicates women’s greater investment in marriage. The idealization of woman as mother as in Ezekiel’s canonical poem, “The Night of the Scorpion” (Parthasarthy 31) is almost absent in women’s poetry although there are expressions of often fraught, and sometimes nostalgic, mother-daughter interactions. In poems by men the attachment to the mother at times clouds the man’s perception of his wife. In Kamala Das it is the grandmother who is remembered, missed, and sought as part of a lost childhood. Yet even this grandmother colludes in covering up the suicide of the family’s pregnant maid, Nani in the poem “Nani” in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*.

Eunice de Souza for instance derives from but also moves away from Kamala Das. Modern Indian English poetry by women has addressed the issue of borders in multiple ways. Das critiques borders between languages in ‘An Introduction’ and between religions in ‘The Inheritance’. For other Indian English Women Poets-born and raised in India but within a hybridised racial identity — ‘Anglo-Indians’ and persons of mixed Portuguese descent — and a multilingual, multicultural social identity, divisions of caste, religion and race constitute a different grid. Indian English poetry by women is marked by recognition of the many bloods in one’s veins and a simultaneous dismissal of such markers of identity for women who in any case are bearers of children but not bearers of bloodlines. Thus in the poem “de Souza Prabhu” in the collection *A Necklace of Skulls*, Eunice De Souza writes:

No, I’m not going to
Delve deep down and discover
I’m really de Souza Prabhu
Even if Prabhu was no fool
and got the best of both worlds.
(Catholic Brahmin!
I can hear his fat chuckle still.)
No matter that
My name is Greek
My surname Portuguese
My language alien.

There are ways
of belonging.

I belong with the lame ducks. (26)

The language and theme of this poetry is subversive. It mocks all orthodoxies – of history, philosophy, language, faith, of governments and families. It also underlines that ‘Indianness’ is ‘not a singular or exhaustive identity’. (Khilnani 2004, 175)

Her poems express rebellion against codes of propriety of diction for women, codes of living for women. For De Souza it was a task which was a step ahead of Kamala Das for she simply shook free all traditionalist dictums. Where Kamala Das is confessional, hurt and angry, Eunice De Souza is critical and analytical. Kamala Das’s poetic persona examines her life, needs and desires in the context of society, relations and family. Eunice De Souza rises above a personal voice to a critically distanced one. Hers is not the voice of protest, rage, or anguish, but a dry tone, at times satirical.

Mamta Kalia, also born in 1940, is a bilingual poet, writing in English and Hindi. She exposes the falsities surrounding a woman’s life such as the dictum that the ultimate satisfaction for a woman lies in self-sacrifice and within the family. The poet expresses with blatant honesty how relationships can be a cause of disillusionment. The life the woman believed was her own, the relationships that may have kept her happy, were all a sham. In “Sunday Song” in Tribute to Papa, she notes:

In reality

all our friends were your friends,
all our ideas your ideas
all our projects your projects. (24)

Mamta Kalia subverts the identities imposed on Indian woman, mother, wife and all fixed notions of propriety of feelings and emotions. The fluctuations of emotions which are so natural for a human being are not considered proper for a woman who must put up a show of happiness and satisfaction at all times so as not to disturb the family and social equilibrium. In “After Eight Years of Marriage” in Poems 78, Kalia remarks:

I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once
And struggled hard from hurting myself.

That it wasn’t easy to be happy in a family of twelve. (Kalia 26)

Gauri Deshpande born in 1942, writing in Marathi and English, reexamines the norms regarding women. Keki N. Daruwalla observes that, Anchored in the world around her, Gauri Deshpande’s poetry deals with the minutiae of everyday life, the coming of a lover, the death of a puppy, ingratitude of children. Everything is grist to her mill, from the city with its greasy caress and harsh endearments to a landscape. (Daruwalla 44)

Deshpande’s poems show women in pain and anguish. In the poem, “The Eclipse”

in Lost Love,
she is filled with gloom:
from the good fortune
of smiles and caresses

we move into the inexplicable
unintelligible dark
of sorrow, delay, departure, suspicion... (19)

Physical love is a transitory experience that soon evaporates, she writes in “Poems on a Lost Love” in *Lost Love* (1970):

When you left me lying. . .
I hated the cold air
drying my sweat on your hands
and driving my thought
from your tired thigh... (22)

The woman however is rational and she is determined not to be bogged down by heartaches as she exclaims in “Poems in Winter” in *Between Births*:

When the vast barrenness of your presence
Confronts me
I feel your absence fruitful . . . In you personified were all
My loves unreachable. (23)

Tara Patel’s poetry expresses a sense of alienation, frustration, and search for identity in an urban milieu. Born in 1949 and employed as a journalist, Patel’s poetry, according to her first anthologist Eunice de Souza, expresses, ‘a weariness so extreme that at times it sounds almost posthumous’. (Eunice de Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* 89) She also notes that the emotions expressed are such that feminists would not approve. Patel’s poem “Woman” in *Single Woman* states,

A woman’s life is a reaction
to the crack of the whip.
She learns to dodge it as it whistles
around her
but sometimes it lands on the thick.
distorted welt of her memory. (9)

Meena Alexander lived in Allahabad till the age of five after which the family moved to Sudan where she studied English and French. The poet completed her doctoral studies in England and taught in India at the Universities of Delhi and Hyderabad. Later she moved to New York. The numerous migrations and the intersections of various cultures, religions, geographical territories nurtured in the poet a diversity of thoughts, feelings, influences, poetic forms and a deep consciousness of the inner and outer realities. The various uprootings, migrations, influences created for the poet new reckonings.

Alexander’s poems resound with the names of places of the world and span global histories as in the poem “Gold Horizon” in *Illiterate Hearts*.

Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri
Khartoum, Nottingham, New Delhi
Hyderabad, New York

the piecework of sanitystiching
them into a single
coruscating geography (49)

The personal voice becomes always a public voice. Her sense of being in the world, even when in a particular place, has to do not only with her migratory childhood and her diaspora identity but also, as she explains in an interview with May Joseph, with being a meteorologist's daughter who learnt from him at an early age, the flow of air currents and the flow of water currents. ('Indian Ocean Flows' Web)

Smita Agarwal's poetic practice may be sensed from her definition of poetry: 'a poem performs a civilizing function, answering not only a human need for emotional expression, but for rational control as well'. One aspect of this 'civilising' function indicates a progression from overt emotionalism. In the poem 'At Forty' in the volume *Wish-granting Words* she writes: 'At forty she finds out how redundant emotion / is in the living of life'. From the tears over a dead pet at nine, heartbreak at sixteen, she reaches thirty-three when 'her marriage is nosediving', and,

... Her children are
fractious. Colleagues are vicious. Her car
breaks down very often.

Agarwal writes of the Indian woman poet in a remarkable poem "Sarojini Naidu and She" in *Wish Granting Words* where the modern woman poet is 'Shocked at the sodden similarities of lives with separate histories', how both she and Sarojini Naidu

flip... for men much older; ignoring
ground reality,
Wishing to compose poetry, as if the hilarity
Of the first choice isn't enough to have
them labelled hip. (14)

Thus, for women writing in English in India, Virginia Woolf's thesis, *In A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf (1929) as she had adopted the device of multiple voices to discuss the links between women and literature. As a speaking subject women in patriarchy have had to reconstruct the self in order to speak effectively, of the woman writer contending with patriarchal intervention may be found in the poetic negotiations of these discussed women poets in the present paper

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