

Crossing the Patriarchal Threshold in Indian Poetry by Women

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ABSTRACT: *In the dominating patriarchal power structure, the very act of writing poetry by women is an act of deconstruction of that patriarchal system to move towards emancipation. A significant development in Indian English poetry has been the emergence of woman poets. Recurring themes in many women writers are: rebellion and protest against male oppression, sex-role stereo typing, experiences singular to women and the consequent evolution of feminine consciousness. Their poetry surveys the crossing of the patriarchal threshold and the vast mass of chaos prevailing in the present day society. These modern poets are quite candid in articulating their sensual cravings and sexual experience; women are boldly vocal and confessional about crossing the threshold of patriarchy and sex. She must challenge the oppressive structure of patriarchal society.*

Keywords: Indian English Poetry, Women Writers

The restrictive behavioural pattern prescribed by this power structure had a limiting impact also on the discourse available to women in the past. But this closed scenario is fast changing. Indian writers in English have been writing in a climate of shift and change in the historical, political and cultural sense in a post colonial society. They have been attempting to recontextualize the post colonial response to the search for identity and loss of values. Women writers, in particular, appear concerned about issues such as female marginalization, social discrimination, sexual oppression and liberation from the socio-cultural restrictions of the past..

Simone de Beauvoir puts it correctly, "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women, within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid, economic and social foundations."

Women poetry by Indian English poets is a pulsating testimony to the historical subversions with an intense slant towards transparency and radicalism. This has happened due to the breaking out of the prescribed zones of patriarchy which M.H. Abrams defines in these words that the basic view is that western civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by father) that is, it is male-centered and controlled and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the

male hence as an 'other', or kind of non-man, by her lack of identifying the male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits that are presumed, in the patriarchal view. Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination.

It is in the writings of **Kamala Das** that the Indian-English poetry acquired for itself a real substantiality that matches equally with the creative contributions of the western confessionalists like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton of America. Her poetry contributes for the strong reactions and justifications for the most needful awakening of woman as a living entity in being- in- the world. She remained distraught and depressed facing sexual, social and poetic alienation because she stood out like a light-house and chose to rebel in a man-dominated world. The modern Indian-English poetry with all its aggressiveness and boldness begins and culminates in Kamala Das. Four decades ago, Kamala Das had urgently articulated "the muted whisper at the core of womanhood", expressing "the endless female hungers".

Kamala Das appeared on the poetic horizon like a gust of wind blowing away the wispy remnants of the by gone times. She confronted a male oriented world of sex and lust in her married life." He was obsessed with sex", she writes of her husband. If it was not sex, it was co-operative movement in India and both these bored me. Her personae no doubt are given to carnal hungers and suffer like tragic protagonists the catastrophe inflicted upon them by their own doing.

Eunice de Souza expresses her private fears, anxiety, anger, guilt, desires and hope. Her satires are notions of romantic love, marriage and children promoted by patriarchy. It will be seen how in poem after poem the trivialized women can hope for a full membership in the human race through revolt and defiance of patriarchal structures.

Bruce King states: "While it has no affiliations in politics, community, humanistic ideals, religion, it is feminist in its kind of awareness to female vision and affinities to the mode of other women poets rather than in a proclaimed commitment." To protest against their marginalized status and the social and sexual inequalities suffered by women in patriarchal society, they resort to "The rejection of the language by those in power created for the politics of patriarchy."

The poem 'Catholic Mother' is an ironic denouncement of the traditional role assigned to women as wife and mother, a role that relegates her effectively to the private sphere of sexual relations and family life and at the same time, discourage or excludes her from a public and an independent identity,

Pillar of the Church
Says the parish priest,
Lovely Catholic family
Says mother superior.⁷⁹

Eunice de Souza appears to substantiate Simone De Beauvoir's famous statement: "one is not born a woman: one becomes one."

Imtiaz Dharker herself suggests in a poem entitled 'The Word' that patriarchal power structure is changing:

It is pure power,
This may change the world...
And I the keeper, with my
Small signs and codes (P. 58)

Therefore, Imtiaz Dharker's anthology *Purdah and Other Poems* is an attempt to expand the margins assigned to woman, to move from the periphery and attempt to become "the keeper (s)" of the world, even though the process may be attained through "small signs and codes". In the words of A.K. Tiwari: "The Purdah is an instrument of masculine effort to keep low the spirit of independence in women... The conformance to the norms of the purdah restricts and limits the roles of women, keeping them within the confines of a *Jenana* apartment and keeps their status low".

Mamta Kalita in relation to the conventional idea of Indian women expresses herself very freely. Her first book of poems in English- *Tribute to Papa* is a good initiative of crossing the patriarchal threshold. She displays a unique social consciousness in her verse. *Tribute to Papa*

suggests a gap between generations. The daughter does not realize that the act of disowning a father may lead to social confusion and disorder. One is reminded here of the Pope who rightly said:

We think of our fathers fools so wise we grow
Our wiser sons no doubt will think of us so.⁹⁰
(*Tribute to Papa and Other Poems*), P.10.

Mamta is a poet of feminine desires, hopes, fears and loneliness. She is essentially a poet of love.

Lakshmi Kannan's *The Glow and The Grey* has a remarkable capacity to express Indian feminine sensibility. She is a woman first, well aware of her emotions, psyche and place in a male dominated society. Yet she is ready to break the conventional set up. The 'I' in her poetry stands for every woman's struggle.

Charmayne often writes about crossing the patriarchal threshold and the insecurity and anxiety of life 'A Maiden's Prayer' anxiously contrasts real desires with the supposed peace of a night alone "without a man". Hugging a pillow the maiden desires what she lacks; "Security / from the vagaries for love / can only offer me / its own cares". The idea of the male is desirable for a time as is sex and security then it is time to move on

Tara Patel envisions the conflict between man and woman in its extreme form, and develops the discourse of the persecuted woman with eloquent imagistic effects in her poem entitled 'Woman':

A woman's life is a reaction
To the crack of a whip

As an instance of the various forms of feminisms Tara Patel's poetry offers a rewarding reading experience.

Melanie Silgado lays bare the arrogant attitude of Hindu male towards women which is largely prevalent in Indian society. Her poem 'Looking Through French Photographer's Portrayal of Rajasthan'.... Exposes this feudal arrogance.

I am here on one side
And the turbaned men are standing on the other side
Unaccustomed to watching someone take aim at their heads.

(1993 a: 43)

As a woman poet **Sujata Bhatt** exposes the ill treatment of woman in a male dominated society where a woman has hardly any say. Bhatt's 'Udaylee' reveals the traumatic experiences of an upper cast Hindu woman during her menstruation period. A menstruating woman is treated like an "untouchable". She is kept isolated, though perhaps allowed to read and write letters.

Her exceptionally wide range of references enables her to present characters as diverse as a young

Indian girl during the partition and an old Spanish woman working in her field.

In **Menka Shivdasani's** works there is a more subtle reference to the woman's predicament. The picture presented of the man-woman relationship is as bleak as the other aspects of life that 'This Game You Play' refers to the bad-treatment of woman at the hands of the man and the poet asks whether she is hurt and kicked around as football. Although the woman is disturbed and angry at the maltreatment meted out to her there is nothing that she can do.

Gauri Deshpande is also crossing the threshold of patriarchy in candid and confessional way with no inhibitions on her part. Gauri Deshpande is at her best when she expresses feminine feeling:

Sometimes you want to talk
About love and despair
And the ungratefulness of children
(The Female of the Species)

While showing the crossing of the patriarchal threshold by Indian women they are more vocal about their marital life and love experience. And their approach is subjective and direct that shows how deeply women perceive their existence in the bonds of marriage.

Women seem to be looking for the missing link between physical and emotional fulfillment. It is unprecedented in the Indian poetic tradition that women (Such as Kamala Das) have expressed freely and frankly their carnal/sexual urges and experiences. The marginalized woman can only hope for a full membership in the human race through revolt and defiance of the politics of patriarchy. There is a need to "transcend self" despite the ridicule and humiliation the creative, independent w of isolation". women must forge a sisterhood based on the commonality of women's experiences.

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