



STUDY ON INDIAN ENGLISH WOMEN POETS

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Abstract

The critical approach to Naidu had undergone a complete reversal and her poetic voice was now found to be modern, feminist, nuanced and strategically postcolonial. The modern female poetic voices of the 1960s comprise those published from Calcutta, such as Gauri Deshpande, and those from Bombay such as Eunice de Souza and others, and those published in both India and abroad, such as Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Imtiaz Dharker. This thesis, traces representative voices from Toru Dutt to Smita Agarwal, from the nineteenth century to the present day, looking at their themes and their poetic styles and mapping both resonances and divergences. In the course of this exploration there emerge clear lines of development in the poetic negotiations of language, location, history and culture

Key words: India, English, Women, Modern Poets etc.

Introduction

Modern Indian English Poetry may be located as beginning post 1947. Until then this poetry followed a Victorian idiom in imagery and mood along with a sense of homeland that is today interpreted as a nascent nationalism. Derozio and Toru Dutt best represent what is known as the ‘early’ period of Indian English poetry in the nineteenth century, while Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu its later expression in the nationalist period of the twentieth century. The term ‘modern’ is applied to poets who began to publish in the 1950s. In the Introduction to Indian English Poetry Since 1950: an anthology, Vilas Sarang observes that, ‘modernity came to Indian English poetry as late as the fifties’, and that it appeared in the poetry of some Indian languages much earlier. Sarang cites as ‘modern’ the Marathi poetry of B.S. Mardhekar which appeared in the 1940s. (Sarang 4) According to Bruce King, ‘Modern Indian English-language poetry is one of the many ‘new literatures’ which began to emerge at the end of the Second World War after the end of colonialism’. King explains how this poetry did not share the nationalist commitments of earlier Indian English poetry, nor of the English poetry of Africa



and the Caribbean that was related to ‘the cultural movements which led to national independence’.

Toru Dutt (1856-1877) struggled to match the overwhelming shadow of European especially English poetry with native elements – at first native trees and flowers and later in the last days of her short life, explorations of Hindu mythology, to not only invent a new tradition of telling, as in ‘Sita’, but a new fire to counter colonial rule, in ‘Prahlad’ for instance. In ‘Savitri’ Toru Dutt was perhaps redefining the position and role of women in patriarchal society. Jharna Sanyal in her essay ‘Anthologies and Beyond: Indian Women’s Poetry in English’, refers to the ‘female tradition’ of the struggle to establish a personal, social, linguistic and political domain. Just as Toru Dutt in ‘A Mon Pere’ and ‘Sita’ was attempting to find her own space arising from the ‘anxiety of dislocation’, modern Indian women poets both at home and abroad are attempting to find their own space and voice, a continual search for the ‘mother’s race’. (Sanyal 197) Sanyal talks about these two poems by Toru Dutt as expressing a need to redefine her life in the perspective of her own roots.

Sarojini Naidu’s poetry was written between 1891 and 1927. (Paranjape, 2013, 171-175) The last collection to be published in her life time *The Broken Wing* (1917) reveals a sense of pain. The title poem ‘The Broken Wing’ refers to the land’s desolation as well as the poet’s personal sense of a poetic sensibility in crisis __

Shall spring that wakes mine ancient land again

Call to my wild suffering heart in vain?

Or fate’s blind arrows still the pulsing note Of my far-reaching frail unconquered throat?

Kamala Das a woman schooled largely at home, married early, writing first in Malayalam and then in English, a revolt in personal life leading to a new poetic voice in English __ there is no baggage of European influence to distance her from her locale. It is her immediate social and personal world that determines the tenor of her verse, rather than literary influences. And this feature sets her apart from most poets in her generation. Das reckoned with the indigenous at the personal as well as the political level. The interior landscape, a personal philosophical voice marks the work of many of Kamala Das’s male contemporaries. For Ezekiel, alienation



leads to a final recognition and embrace of home as a personal and locational space. In the concluding line of 'Enterprise' Ezekiel writes, 'Home is where we have to gather grace'.

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 15 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.

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)

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)

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. What de Souza means but does not state is the note of abjection in some of Patel's poems, as in the reiterating cry to a former lover/husband to please lunch with her for old times' sake, 'have lunch with me, /I'll pay the bill', in the poem 'Request' (Eunice de Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* 90-1) Patel is bypassed in almost every anthology after that. In fact de Souza had observed in 1997 that Patel, a journalist, does not even think of herself as a poet.

Imtiaz Dharker's - born in Pakistan in 1954, raised in Scotland, married to an Indian and living and working in both UK and India and then married to the Welsh poet Simon Powell. Dharker is a celebrated poet in the U.K. and her poetry expresses what another Indian poet Arundhati Subramaniam calls, 'an unabashed embrace of unsettlement and settlement'. In the section, 'Bombay: The Name of God' in *Postcards from God*, (1997) there is a poem titled 'Minority' where Dharker writes

I was born a foreigner.

I carried on from there

to become a foreigner everywhere. (157)

Melanie Silgado, also from a Goan Catholic background and born in 1956 has, like Charmayne D'Souza, a Masters in English Literature from Bombay University. Anthologized in *The Virago Book of Love Poetry* published in London, Silgado was not very widely known in India until de Souza's *Nine Indian Women Poets*. Eunice de Souza remarks in this anthology



that Silgado's poems are 'deeply emotional but never mawkish'. (27) Bruce King observes that Silgado, a student of Eunice de Souza, uses more imagery than de Souza, and for psychological effect. He cites the following lines from Silgado's poem, 'Family Photograph':

*The room descends
in awkward places. There's
a cramp stampede for my brain.
A release, and
my four – legged mind
is romping home.' (King 133)*

Sujata Bhatt appears in *Nine Indian Women Poets* with a rather critical assessment by Eunice de Souza, of her bi-lingual poems and concern with mother-tongue. The poems that are free of these qualities are the ones included in the collection. In Sudeep Sen's 2012 anthology, of the five poems by Bhatt, one poem, 'Truth is Mute' mentions 'mother tongue / father –tongue' and the matter of language. In Thayil's anthology overt treatment of the theme is bypassed in 28 favour of other poems. Language is a major concern in Bhatt's poetry not only because she has moved between languages during childhood but like many Indians she had three languages to begin with, only in her case it was not the usual English, Hindi and mother tongue, but Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi. From the age of five to eight, after learning English under pressure when the family moved to the USA, Bhatt returned to India and had to start anew learning the English that was spoken here. At twelve she went to the USA 'for good'. Bhatt's uncles were poets and writers in Gujarati and it was an early influence. At college in the USA Bhatt had studied Spanish and French, and learnt German after her marriage to a German fellow student. In an interview she states,

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. Growing 29 up in multiple locations, Allahabad, Khartoum, the U.K. returning to work in India, being uprooted several times creates nostalgia for the homeland which is often a reason for her to dismiss any sort of affiliation towards a geographical, cultural or political locus.

Conclusion

As in colonial India, in independent India too, the earliest women writing modern poetry in English, Kamala Das and Gauri Deshpande, have come from the upper class, where English was available along with the mother tongue. Kamala Das's personal trajectory, marriage in her early teens, and motherhood, deprived of the democratic pleasures and freedoms of college life, suffering the contingencies of a feudal aristocratic lineage, yet also having access to the advantages of that lineage, (early publication, early winning of the PEN prize) is marked by a sudden eruption in the 1960s, an assertive, interrogative voice, a break from her Malayalam writing, a break from prose, and, choosing English, choosing poetry, to articulate her new energy

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