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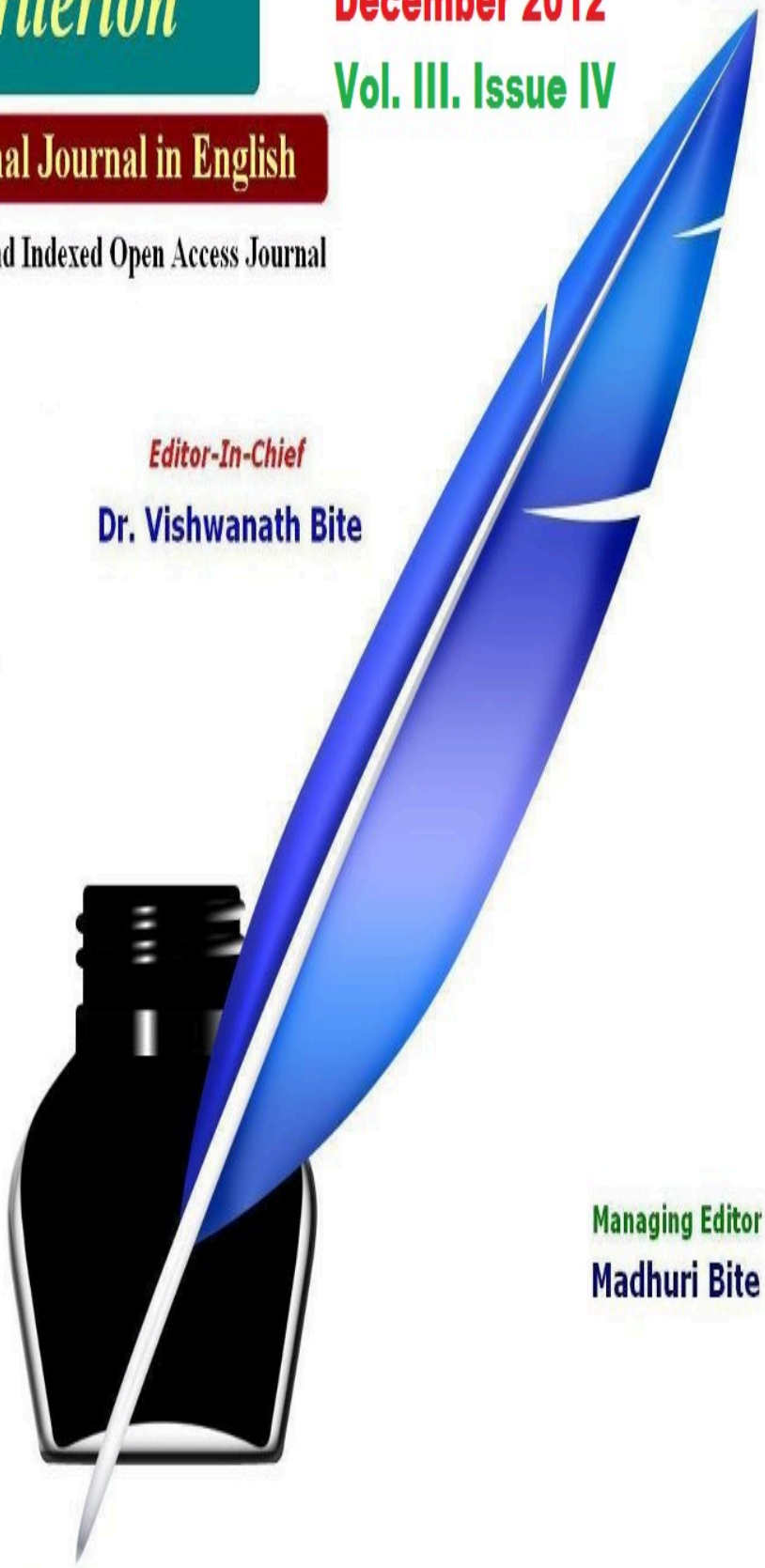

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Destabilizing the Typology: A Study of Some Contemporary Indian Women Poets in English in the Light of Postcolonial Theory

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Femininity is a social construct. The body polity of this construction of gendered identity positions women in some definitive roles in a male chauvinistic social reality. This imposed definitiveness of certain role play constructs the collective unconscious, in a way, that the *socially accepted* and *normative* behaviours on the part of the women, assume a sort of legitimacy. In India, this social construction is further reinforced by myths and religious doctrines which segregate women into a realm of customary duties and ideals to follow. In an Indian social reality, be it, a metropolitan, rich and educated one or a remote, poor and uneducated one, women are expected to perform the role of the chaste, subservient and unquestioning beings. But the paradox is that their relegation into an under-privileged state of existence is often camouflaged by the design of the male-dominated, patriarchal society. Certain parameters are set, as the most cherished ones, for women, because, they determine the supposed bench mark of *femininity*. Sometimes they are given elevation in the name of *sati* or something else. They are glorified, mythified and stereotyped. In Indian art, culture and literature they are represented in a very singular and most predictable way—either in a socially acceptable *feminine* way or in the vulgar and sensual version. But they are not considered to be normal human beings full of passion, desire and free will very much like their male counterparts. This has been perpetuated, historically, in the Indian social, religious and psychic reality. According to Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar :

> "Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well-defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifehood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women: by implication, these roles complete in themselves and women need not pursue any specialised discipline of knowledge, art or *profession*. The good woman is sweet, gentle, loving, caring and ever sacrificing. The mainstream concept of the role of a woman seems to be best described in the anonymous Sanskrit couplet: She(in relation to her husband) is like a mother while cooking and serving food, secretary while he is working, servant at his feet, courtesan in his bed and earth-like in forbearance."[1]

This stereotype portrayal of Indian women has been analysed, questioned, replaced and given newer dimensions, especially after the independence, due to the spreading of education, introduction of universal franchise, constitutional provisions for bringing equality, and of course, international women movement and globalization. These factors have given new shape and edge to the women consciousness. Modern women writers, artists and theorists have been moulding the *image* of Indian women in totality, touching upon all its aspects. They are bold in their utterance, wider in their perspective, more sensitive to the social reality; they are challenging, rebellious and yet sincere to their duties. In the Indian social reality, open talk about sex is supposed to be immoral, and hence, consciously avoided. And articulation of sexual desire from the women's point of view is even more unacceptable and disdaining. But the female writers in India make a consistent effort to break the taboos

and, come out with an unprecedented openness about sex and desire. Kamala Das, for example, is a pioneering figure in her robust and unabashed delineation of sexual matters in her poetry. Eunice de Souza, too, questions the patriarchal pattern of constructing femininity and, shows female desires in contrast to the social norm. Feminism and postcolonialism overlaps with each other in debunking this feminine myth. Both the approaches make an effort to destabilizing the patriarchal myth of masculine superiority. Leela Gandhi observes:

> "A productive area of collaboration between postcolonialism and feminism presents itself in the possibility of a combined offensive against the aggressive myth of both imperial and nationalist masculinity"[2]

In this paper, however, I shall focus on some contemporary Indian women poets who actually started writing in the 1990s. Most of them are academicians, and in their poetry they show a well informed sense of social reality as well as a poet's sensitive reaction to that. I shall try, by analyzing their poems, to show, how in their poems, this newer generation de-stereotype, de-myth and re-myth the representation of women in literature and, how they represent the female body. My analysis will include poets like Sampurna Chattarji, Smita Agarwal, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Marlyn Naronha, Rizio Raj, Revathy Gopal and Vijaya Singh.

Myth: Female & Femininity:

In Its lexical meaning 'myth' implies a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or *social customs*. According to M. H. Abrams:

> "...a myth is one story believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, *and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives."*[3]

If we analyze the definition, we find that a myth has certain characteristics—it is a story *not* true but *believed* to be true, it provides a 'rationale' for social customs and it 'sanctions' the 'rules' of man's conduct. As it is, myth plays a pivotal role in fostering the normative values in any particular cultural community, though these values are not necessarily true. The construction of gendered identity is shrouded in a host of myths. Women are conceived in relation to or more accurately, in binary opposition with men: men are strong, intelligent, active, and women are weak, dull and passive. But these distinctions are neither scientifically nor factually tenable; they are not based, purely, on physical or cerebral acumen, but on some *notions*.

To understand these *notions* regarding women, we need to understand the difference between 'female' and 'femininity'. Female is a biological term whereas 'femininity' is a social construct. By 'feminine' patriarchy imposes certain characteristics and qualities (social and behavioural) upon women. A female can be as brave as a male, but 'femininity' mythifies the timidity of women. So, the general pattern of the thought process of the average people, regarding women, is shaped along this line. Biology is overlapped by mythology. Leela Dube's remark, in this context, is quite apt:

> "It should be kept in mind that gender differences that are culturally produced are, almost invariably, interpreted as being rooted in biology, 'as part of the natural order of things'. However, gender roles are conceived, enacted, and learnt within a complex of relationships".[4]

Thus, in any particular cultural community woman is rendered not only subservient or 'subaltern' but she is typified, stereotyped and patterned. This pattern is given mythic status by every sort of cultural production—oral, written, performing or ritualistic. The pattern is conceived to be a sacrosanct one; going against which is considered to be a crime. But, the changing social consciousness, makes the women writers and poets vocal against such prejudice. They challenge the representation of women, the notion about femininity, and expose the ill-motivated design of the patriarchy.

Female & the Family:

In Indian social environment woman is seen, primarily, as the most domesticated being; she is caught within a network of relationships. Her identity is constructed on the basis of her relationship to the male members of the society—a mother or a wife or a sister or a daughter. She herself is nothing. Simone de Beauvoir observes: "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being"[5]. It becomes obvious when we see that a widow is driven out of the family. There are laws to protect her, but quite practically, they remain inaccessible to a poor woman. So, family is the microcosm of the society and the societal norms. It provides a woman with the first lesson of her socialisation—to become a *feminine* being. In the familial space she is supposed to play certain roles.

Sampurna Chattarji revolts against this typical role of a woman in her poem, *Going Against the Grain*. In the poem she offers a glimpse of her mother's ceremonious effort to decorate the dish to be served to her father, the male head of the family. The poem starts with the minute description of the dish, and her mother's conscious effort to make it tidy and neat. The poet says:

> "No ordinary dish, this.
>
> A whorl of rings, ridged and
>
> rising in increasing radii."

As if, this dish is to be served not to any man but to a god. The poet projects, ironically, how a man in the patriarchal framework, enjoys the status of a semi-god. The 'offering' of the rice to the husband is a 'rite' to the wife:

> "a wet rising mound. Another
>
> unthinking rite, another blind offering
>
> to the god of *what's for dinner tonight*."

But the use of the adjectives like 'unthinking' and 'blind', and the intended insinuation on the part of the poet point to the conscious de-stereotyping effort which culminates in the final line:

> "I wasn't meant to do this, Ma, it goes against my grain."

As it is already mentioned, family works to socialise the women. But their socialisation is characteristically different from that of the men. Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar observe the discrimination:

> "Not only a girl is socialised into her future role, the process also distinguishes between son and daughter....For instance, girls are invariably entrusted with the duty of looking after the younger siblings, a task not allotted to boys. Girls must regularly assist in household chores even if they are working."[6]

The women are the inferior 'other' of the superior males: their duties and responsibilities are those which are not likely to be assigned to the men-folk. The binary opposition of the 'self' and the 'other' between man and woman is fostered and inculcated right from the beginning of socialisation. The arbitrariness in ascribing *superiority* (to males, to the European colonizers), is contested by both feminism and postcolonialism.

The women poets are very much conscious of this reality. But, what they do in their poems is to project an attitude which illustrates their disgust with this practice. Sometimes they are vocal in their denunciation, and sometimes they are deliberately low-toned and restrained. Rukmini Bhaya Nair's *Making Ends Meet* is such a poem where she narrates in a seemingly indifferent mood the plight of the women in making the ends meet. The poem starts in a spirit of statement, "This job is for the women". They prepare food and wait in the queues to have water from the wells. The poet shows their emaciated, depreciating state:

"In her, the serpent swallows

Its own tail, endlessly, and

the lovely gold of her laugh

trickles away, grey, stagnant."

Marlyn Naronha in her poems depicts the never-yielding spirit of the women. She rejects to accept the lot destined to women. In *Burning Question* she, after narrating the straw-like existence of women, invokes the spirit of fighting back, of standing up and putting up a resistance:

"Silently smouldering,

I'm searching the ashes

for the secret of that last straw

that broke the camel's back."

In *Being Woman* again, she reiterates on this theme of uprising of woman, showcases her determination to dispense with the domesticity, the 'shackles', the meaningless cycle of daily chores; registers her bold declaration of 're-arranging' her course of life:

"....I am not tired.

I have the spirit still, to fly out

and shout with the wind

that roars at my shut windows,

to pillow-fight with clouds

and re-arrange the stars."

Female and Politics:

The domain of politics is hegemonized by the males, the patriarchal values. Politics is a shrewd power game in which women are supposed to be not befitting. The ideologies about politics are unabashedly male-biased. Politicians are believed to be iron-men, courageous, intelligent, judicious and formidable. There are no scarcity of heroes in the fields of politics and war in any community. They have become legends in the cultural history of their own community. They are praised, revered and worshipped, but we never speak about the women around them, who have supported them unconditionally, and consequently undergone loss and pain. This heroism is a myth in itself. Rizio Raj attacks, in her poems this myth that politicians should be bereft of any feminine quality. In her poem, *Indian Eunuchs* she draws on Gandhi and exposes the cunningness with which he is held as the 'Father of the Nation', though in reality, his activities and ideologies are more akin to so-called *feminine* gestures. He believed in non-violence, in fasts; he urged people to spin *charka*. He is, according to the poet, 'our last *ardhanareeswara*'. The poet says:

"Then you came, bare visionary,

resisting aggression with womanly fasts,

singing hermaphroditic non-violence."

Then, she makes the ironical observation:

"We had been warriors, heedless of amity

Your motherly prayers tempered a fretful age;

our symbols cunningly called you *father*."

The nationalist discourse, strategically, hush up the womanly gestures or effeminacy (?) of the national heroes; masculinity is held up instead. The colonial enterprise of the European powers drew its ideological sustenance from the sexual motif. Asish Nandy brilliantly writes:

> "Colonialism, too, was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes and the philosophy of life which they represented. It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolised the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity."[7]

The In another poem of her, *Purdah*, she depicts, quite sensitively, how wars inflict inhuman torture and disgrace upon women. The poignancy of the poem brings before us the bare truth of war and partition. In time of such crisis women are targeted most; they are disgraced, tortured and raped. A woman's body is 'a piece of land' to be conquered :

"We have known it well—

women are apt witnesses

to the baffling birth of nations.

Nothing equals women's bodies

as domains of nation's dignity;

they are easily expunged

in symbolic acts of revenge."

The poem incorporates the incident of Mukhtar Mai, a rape victim of Meerwala, Pakistan. She was gang-raped as an act of honour revenge for her brother's alleged illicit sexual relationship with a girl belonging to a different clan. Instead of committing suicide, which is customary after such incident, she defiantly fought against the crime and took the case before the court. She is the symbol of the resolute, defiant and changing woman. She shows the courage to turn her disgrace into an act of rising and protesting. The poet wants more and more such women to throw the veil of myth:

"Suns, suns, suns

to lift our veil of myth!"

Female and Religiosity:

In most cases, it is religiosity or the derivatives from religious thoughts that configures the status of women in a social community. The religious leaders enjoy enormous power in dictating the *rules* that women should follow, and become the epitome of patriarchal authority to safeguard the image of women. It is needless to say that in every religion, the dogmatism falls heavily upon women, and segregates them from the men-folk. In India, religiosity, especially in the Hindu tradition, is equated to austerity, and women are often seen to be a menace to deflect men from their high vision of attaining the knowledge about God and creation. The stories of *apsaras,* deployed to break meditations of the *rishis* are actually meant to portray the two different domains of existence that categorise men and women—men are to achieve 'immortality' while women are terrestrial. The pattern is not very different in other religions, too.

The poets like Smita Agarwal, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Revathy Gopal criticise, in their poems, this one-sided, archetypal portrayal. They accept the fact of womanhood in all its essences. They do not deny their female sensibilities and desires. They, rather, from their own perspective, look at the myth of religious austerity and show the fallacy of it. They offer a different understanding to the religious myths. Smita Agarwal's *Lopamudra* and Revathy Gopal's *Yashodhara* take the legendary figures of Lopamudra and Yashodhara to criticise the asceticism of Agastya and Siddhartha (later to become Buddha), respectively. The high strand of spirituality that these seers attained came at the cost of their negligence to their wives; Agastya did not pay attention to the physical need of his wife, and Siddhartha left Yashodhara with a little child. Lopamudra asks:

"Really, old man! Is asceticism

the only path to immortality?"

But spirituality and asceticism are not synonymous. Mannoj Das observes: "The truth is, spirituality teaches detachment and not asceticism"[8].

Rukmini Bhaya Nair's *Kali* is 'a bold re-working of the myth' of the goddess Kali where she is de-mytified by the poet; she is a woman, a lonely woman. She is driven mad by her loneliness. She does not want the 'god' Shiva but someone mortal as her companion:

"Kali desires a mortal, whose day

begins with her, ends at nightfall

in her arms, a man who will die

without her, whose love is fallible

but secure, she wants to be held

like a warm creature, not a fable."

Female and Desire:

Indian society and consciousness is most vigilant, restricting, suppressing and hostile to the mention of sexuality in an unequivocal way. Sex is seen immoral, and hence, should not be talked about openly. But, sex is a natural biological fact that can be neither contrived nor concealed. Still, speaking of or expressing this physical desire, especially by women, is not sanctioned by the society. The popular image of women in Indian society is that of a *sati*. Gayatri chakrovorty Spivak is of the opinion that though the word *sat*i derives from the word 'sat', the two words have two different significations. Whereas 'sat' (meaning honest) is gender-less, 'sati' is loaded with gender-fixity. It automatically brings to our mind the image of a woman who is loyal to her husband. This stereotyping, renders women devoid of human passions. Even if sex or desire is talked, it is talked from the male point of view. Women are merely the passive counterparts in matters relating to sex.

But the new generation of writers and artists cast off this mythic spell, this idolatry image of *good* women. They are vocal and bold in expressing the desires of women, their passions and physicality. These poets posit woman body and desire in two broad perspectives—in the mythic terrain, and in the contemporary contexts. As far as the mythic and legendary context is concerned, they portray the figures from myths and legends to show the bodily desire of the women. Smita Agarwal's *Lopamudra,* Revaty Gopal's *Yoshadhara-II*, Rukmini Bhaya's *Gargi's Silence* are few examples of this category. Lopamudra castigates her husband Agastya for maintaining celibacy. The poet brings out the restlessness and voluptuous desire of her:

"I want you most

When you take on those vows of celibacy.

Austerities make you lean and glum,

but my breasts swell...the nipples itch...

and the-two-little-fish-in-a-cow's-hoof-pond, throb."

This frank attitude, boldness and the expression of desire with clear reference to sexual organs, mark the effort of de-stereotyping the image of women. The poets set their poems in contemporary contexts, too, to give expression to the bodily desire of women. In the poems of Anjum Hasan, Vijaya Singh and Revathy Gopal, we see how they have come with long strides to an unequivocal expression of desire. But that has come quite naturally, in the logical demand of their subject, and not in a vulgar way. As woman physicality and desire are natural, so, they are expressed quite naturally in their poems, without any inhibition. Vijaya Singh's *Hermit Body, Poem: Edited and Unedited*, Anjum Hasan's *Coming of Age In a Convent School*, *The Pregnant Woman*, *Afternoon in the Beauty Parlour* and Revathy Gopal's *Family Secrets* are some of the poems that speak openly about women's desire. Vijaya Singh shows, in *Poem: Edited and Unedited*, how 'dreams and desires' are edited from a poem to make it publicly accommodated:

"A poem after all is a public utterance
and some things must be excluded
not just from the poem but
from memory itself
lest they show up
surreptitiously.
Dreams and desires
must be edited too
in order to be accommodated"

Revathy Gopal in *Family Secrets*, speaks of the women desire that is never uttered. Within the family, women are not supposed to speak of their love:

"We are women who deal with words
and their many meanings
but we never speak of the affliction
of love."

The disguised sarcasm in these lines, actually, demonstrates the poet's effort to dismantle the typology. In Anjum Hasan's *Afternoon in the Beauty Parlour* we get a vivid picture of a beauty parlour where women are free to 'exchange the hot, whispered secrets of sex'. 'The vulgar, aching need to be beautiful' is what draws women to the 'small salon' in the afternoon. The poet's artistic detachment and objective description intensify her intensity to portray the bodily desires of women.

So, it can be concluded, safely saying, that the myth and typology in the representation of Indian women has been contested by the women writers who subvert the myth, type and the socially acceptable version of womanhood. Their works draws our attention not only to the gendered subalterniety but also to the radical responses to and the critique of the patriarchal colonialism.

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