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Indo-English Women Poetry: A Journey from Feminism to Post-Feminism**Reshu Gupta**Assistant Professor
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Indo-English poetry began to be written and until rather recently continued to be written under the influence of the English romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron and even Walter Scott. The poetry of the period is marked by a highly subjective tone and uninhibited expression of personal feeling. Also, nature and its variegated scenes form a background, especially nature in its natural untamed manifestations. Witness for example these lines from Toru Dutt's (1856-1877) poem "Sindhu", where she presents a beautiful description of the sunset on an Indian lake:

Upon the glassy surface fell
The last beams of the day,
Like fiery darts, that lengthening swells,
As breezes wake and play
Osiers and willows and on the edge
And purple buds and red,
Leant down, - and, mid the pale greens edge
The louts raised its head
And softly, softly hour by hour
Light faded and a veil
Fell over tree, wave, and flower
On came the twilight pale(Dutt1986:90).

These romantic poets value spontaneity in thought and expression. Words and images were chosen to turn the familiar into a thing of beauty and tenderness. This early poetry is generally sentimental and sad. Indo-English poetry was first written by Kashiprasad Ghoshe (1809-1873) in 1830. He in 'The Shair and other Poems' shares the influence of Walter Scott while 'The Captive Ladie' (1849) by Miachel Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) is considered to be a long metrical romance written under the influence of Byron(Dwiedi 1980:10-18).

After the passing of the 'Dutt Era', Nobo Kissen Gosse (1837-1918) and Manmohan Ghose (1869-1924) continued the twin streams of ballad and lyric poetry. Nobo Kissen showed his craftsmanship in the handling of the ballad measure as in 'Daksha Yagna' in which story of Daksha's defeat by the hands of Siva is recounted. A new element enters in Indo-English poetry with the entry of Manmohan's brother Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) called the mystic element. His long narrative epic poem 'Savitri' published posthumously in one edition in 1954. Symbolically interpreted, 'Savitri' stands for man's highest hope that is the conquest of death and attainment of divinity.

A near contemporary, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is another mystic poet who also has a prominent place among Indo-English poets. He began by translating his own Bengali poems

into English. He translated one hundred and three poems under the title 'Gitanjali' (1913). The songs in Gitanjali are intensely personal and lyrical. The imagery is taken from nature as well as the mythology of Radha-Krishna in the search for the spirit. Other reflective poets who rose into prominence in this period were Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), the first two great precursors of contemporary Indian English woman poetry. Toru Dutt poetry reveals the subject of simplicity, love, nature, home, the Indian world of myths and legends. Sarojini Naidu or the Bharat Kokila enthusiastically participated in the freedom struggle of India, but in the poetry, she voiced against the desperate condition of women. Her poetry reflects the Indian fervour. Eunice de Souza points out:

She campaigned against 'Purdah'. Her poem 'Purdah' is imbued with nostalgia and exotic appeal.

As her life is a revolving dream
Of languid and sequestered ease (De Souza 1997:3).

The early poetry of beauty and tenderness is displaced by a kind of poetry that talked of life's bruises and blemishes. The poets get out of themselves and begin to dwell on the lot of the common man and on the need to hues- harsh as well as soft. Along with this new social realism also came psychological realism- "a high degree of fidelity in depicting the inner workings of the human mind, close analysis of thought and feeling, to represent the nature of personality and character (Cuddon 1979:557).

In India, women enjoyed high status and freedom of thought and expression in the pre-Vedic and the Vedic times such as Kaikeyi, Maitreyi, Gargi, and Sulabha. But in the post-Vedic period, the status of women started declining. Women were debauched by men. Women were kept under the control of men. There was hardly a voice of protest against the dominated society. Margret Macnicol expresses a little agony and irritation of this Kannada woman, Honnama against man's foolishly humiliation over woman. She says in "The value of woman": "The mother who brought them forth (blind fools), is she not a woman? Alas, why do short-sighted fool forth ridicule, crying, "Woman, woman" (Chavan 1984:7).

In a traditional set up in India, the birth of a son has been always an occasion for celebration but a girl child is considered to be an apprehension of the ensuing sufferings and misery for the family. Beauvoir (1908 – 1986) says:

"As a child a girl identifies herself with her father, then she becomes possessed with a feeling of inferiority with reference to the male and is faced with a dilemma; either to assert her independence and become virilized-which, with the underlying complex of inferiority induces a state of tension that threatens neurosis-or to find happy fulfilment in amorous submission" (beauvoir 1952:75).

In India, a woman is always considered as an embodiment of muted or not listened to. Women's identity is seen through her husband, she becomes an object for men's ownership and sexual gratification. In the nineteenth century, many social reforms like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Rama Bai Ranade (1862-1924), Pandita Rama Bai (1858-1922), and Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) etc. came forward to fight for the retrieval of women. They emphasized to curb the social evils like child marriage, the practice of sati, and female infanticide. They encouraged for the rights of women's education, equality, and freedom. Women also took part in their freedom struggle for example Lakshmi Bai (1835-1858); the

Queen of Jhansi is a blazing name. The Gandhian movement was also a stepping stone in the restoration of women's pride.

The modern women poets consciously and candidly protest against the conflict of gender and mirror the changing position of women in the modern Indian society. By 1947, the Indo-English poetry had acquired a new horizon and even respectability towards Indian women. There was a further strengthening of the modern trend in the years that followed independence. The main figures associated with this period are Kamala Das (1934-2009), Gauri Deshpande (1942-2003). Their poetry divulges the complexities of man-women relationship, identity crisis, and female urges boldly. As Chavan says:

“It is more realistic, direct, intense and explorative than men” (Chavan 1984:113). The poetry of these poets expresses the strong urge to develop their own voices. The post-independence women poets worked consciously to assert their individuality through their writings. They reveal frustrations and tensions towards the patriarchal structure. As Rashmi Bajaj observes:

“The canvas became wide and interests more varied. Thus the real flowering of their genius came in the post-independence era” (Bajaj 1996:16).

It was the influence of westernization or the women's liberation movement of 1960 that women dare to pronounce her words with special heed. Feminism as a movement began with the work of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” (1792) which manifests women's rights of equality in social, political, cultural, and educational field. Later John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) in “The Subjugation of Women” (1869) and Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) in “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” (1845) focused and wrote about the struggle for women's roles and achievements.

An important precursor in the movement of feminism was Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). She wrote “A Room of One's Own (1929)” which was recognized as a classic document. She questioned the norms of patriarchal society, dominated by men, which have hindered or prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) in “The Second Sex” (1949) observes:

“In the mouth of a man the epithet ‘female’ has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature, on the contrary, he is proud in it when someone says to him, ‘He is a male!’” (Beauvoir 1952:35). Beauvoir believes that women is not feminine by natural “feminine” characteristics, but because of a persistent process of social tradition. In the late 1960s, the feminist movement in Europe and America turned critical in nature and became an important subject to protest against the injustice done to women. It began with Betty Friedan (1921-2006) “The Feminine Mystique (1963). She asserts:

“For women, as for man, the need for self-fulfilment – autonomy, self – realization, independence, individuality, and self-actualization – is as important as the sexual need” (Friedan 1971:282).

Mary Ellmann in “Thinking About Women” (1968) discusses about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men. Kate Millett's (1934) “Sexual Politics” (1970) examines the mechanism that express and enforce the relations of power in society, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar “The Mad Women in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteenth century Imagination” (1979).

Elaine Showalter (1941) coined the term “Gynocriticism”, which concerns itself with developing a specific female framework for dealing with works written by women as the producer of textual meaning. French feminist, Helene Cixous (1937) posits the existence of “feminist writing” (Ecriture-feminine) which has its source in the mother, in the stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male centered verbal language. N.Krishnaswamy, Johan Varghese, and Sunita Mishra puts:

“There is a conscious and concentrated attempt towards (re)presenting biological differences , (re)valuating women’s experience, (re)thinking the canons of text, discourse and language, (re)reading the (re)presentations of the conscious and the unconscious, (re)cognizing the socio-cultural economic and political conditions in the society. The content includes various fields like ‘the history ,styles, themes , genres and the structures of writing by women , the psychoanalysis of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or collective female career and the evolution of laws of a female tradition.”(N.Krishnaswamy, Varghese, and Mishra 2001:77).

Thus the concept of feminism sums up with the question of male dominated society, prejudices and assumption of man over female, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations for women writers. After the sixties, there was the divide among feminists. Feminism splits into several “ism” such as Marxist feminism, lesbian feminism black feminism, bourgeois feminism and radical feminism. The whole concept of feminist movement is divided into three different waves. The first wave feminism has been the political phenomenon, focused on women's rights. The second wave feminism dealt with the patriarchal and the oppressive society aggressively criticizes the male domination. The third wave feminism relates to the context of gender discrimination. The fourth wave feminism maybe called as “post-feminism”.

Post-feminism is an ongoing phase of transition from feminism. Post-feminism puts emphasis on women’s individuality, identity, equality, and independence. It resolves the problem of gender discrimination and projects the mutual understanding of the relationship between man and woman. In the context of poetry, the term post-feminism was first time used by Carol Rumens (1944) in her anthology named as “Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-feminist Poetry 1964 -84”(Carol Rumens 1985: 64).

She states that the post-feminist writers differ from the writers of the pre - independence era. There is no marginalization in the verses of post-feminist writers. In the introduction to the anthology, Rumens writes:

“Those writers concerned with the stern art of poetry as an end in it have tended to be swamped by the noisy amateurs proclaiming that women, too have a voice. This anthology is different from its predecessors in that the poems proclaim only themselves. These women poets have a voice, and the right to be heard, goes without saying” (Rumens 1964-85:15).

The poetry of post feminist Indian women writers discovers the depth and nature of the quest for their feminine sensibility and identity in their poetry. As their works are a true and faithful transcript of their own mind, they enable us to enter behind the curtain of their experiences and see the modulations of the innermost recesses of their pulsating personality and of Indian women.

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