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## Gauri Deshpande's between Births: Unravelling Poetic Sensibility

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A poem is a composite art symbol and is a signature of aesthetic competent. Gauri Deshpande excels in her poetic creativity and the fabric of sensibility that she articulates is not only significant but is also innovative. The enduring quality of her poetry is not only a sum total of past heritage but is also referential, expressive and connotative. Gauri Deshpande is a name that the critic and the reader of Indian English Poetry cannot by-pass without leaving a conspicuous lacuna in his repertoire. As for her post of prestige in the tradition of the genre, she is, no doubt, with Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das, comfortably bolstered up by the merit and the body of work that she has to her name. The structural manipulation of a poem is equally interesting and the canon of her English Poetry so far includes three collections, namely, *Between Births* (1968), *Lost Love* (1970), and *Beyond The Slaughter House* (1972) with a total of eighty poem, presumably and hopefully excluding the ones not published and not anthologised so far, depict the female psyche as well as the imagery with which her primary concerns are underlined. To mark out the singular feature of each of these collections, separate slots are assigned to each.

*Between Births* was published in 1968 and has twenty-six poems. The first poem *Death* explores the heart of the beloved who is impatiently waiting for her "a tardy lover for surrender". The beloved knows that love is a route to death – death of freedom, death of individuality and death of one's peculiar whims but still she is determined for the holy seven steps that will "Make him/my ally"(18-19). Unlike feminist poets like Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande believes that love is conjugality, bliss, togetherness as says "Slipping on this death"(9). In the succeeding canto of the poem the "frantic effort" to reach out to ones lover is still maintained. The female and the feminine are juxtaposed. The female is defined in terms of role that of a wife, of a mother and above all that of a human being whereas feminine in terms of love, tenderness, affection, generosity and sacrifice which is innate and inherent in Indian tradition. The negation of oneself is also suggested by expressions like "Here's where you've brought me, my meager brown path/This is the end" (34-5). The willingness to merge ones identity with the domesticity at large is suggested with noticeable modesty and equal amount of humanity:

My brother who held my hand at every bend,  
My lover about whose neck I must fall now  
Must fall on my shadow, end this duality now. (31-3)

In the third canto the woman in the poet recollects all that it longed for. The commitment of a woman to her expansive social realm has reduced her personal demands to a decipher. The longings are conveyed through the cycles of seasons, where she feels sorry for the poor summer that has disappeared so early and the quick winter that interrupt her with a shocking suddenness. Nevertheless she reconciles to her fate and re-assures her weary self that the self now accepted is her real self and the glorified self would never merge with her real existence and that death would end the two selves when she becomes the same brown path. The pangs of *Lost Love* is romanticised in the fourth canto where she debates her walk through "long and windsome streets" to her final union with her lover. There is a sense of resignation and a note of despair

denoted through “a starred black sky” and the poet questions her own memory about the cognition of a goal recognising the steps of her lover.

A strong vein of sexuality is equally noticeable in Gauri Deshpande’s poetry- a trait that she shares with Kamala Das. For example in last the stanza of the poem she recollects the infatuations and the carnal pleasure she enjoyed as play of sexuality. The poem also defines the intensity of passionate love which makes a soul weary even after the elapse of ages. The search of the lover is the angst of the soul where by the lonely heart, “return to beg for the sanctuary/not of love only of your arms.”(71-2).

The Hangman Awaits resonates with the after math of sexuality. The beloved is afraid of social harassment and is deadly afraid of social ostracization. The noose frightens her as nightmare and she ventures into terrifying regions of fear and shame. The fear of noose haunts her like a cruel passion and she feels murder chasing her day after day. The feminine soul imagines her ugly fate and she fears public laughter every midnight. The soul is so agonized that it visualizes horrid images:

That’s one murder too many.  
So night in night out  
I can see the noose wait  
but fear to tremble,  
as I may quake the house.  
(19-23)

The poem details the venture of a soul, which is none other but a ‘reflexive subject’. The soul wallows in self-pity and the poem details an intellectual compassion through objectifying the nagging sorrow. Nevertheless the poem intellectually delineates the problems of female community at large.

Sexuality for women is still a hush-hush issue. A woman also suffers from the longing of love as her counterpart but is forced to suppress her urge and suffer from want of love in total privateness. The problem of not expressing ones love in open as a male counterpart does, a woman suffers, get subjected to social disparity. Such problems are interestingly defined by Gauri Deshpande in her poetic verses. The nature of such a problem can be substantiated as the ultimate subject of a creative objective. Kaufmanns essay Feminisms brings this idea full circle when she states:

Writing about your self does not liberate you. It just shows how ingrained the ideology of freedom through self-expression in our thinking. (1102)

The sense of guilt that Gauri Deshpande subtly hints is the public private dichotomy related to sex. The dichotomy of a woman in Gauri Deshpande calls for a bargain in love with a male in order to realise the glory of womanhood but the social dictates, suppresses her urge and names shame as a filthy urge. The psyche of a woman therefore gets interestingly represented as a generalised notion in the body of the text.

‘Thinking Disgustedly’ is a widely appreciated poem of Gauri Deshpande. The poem is dramatic in essence for it celebrates a situational irony to attack the self-centered sexual perspective of the male society. Here the wide gap between the male and the female in the approach to love is interestingly suggested. The poet once again recalls how she escorted a blind man with “Pale blue eyes”(6), “dark lashes”(7), and “beauty in his eyes”(10) across the street. The dragging was done with a force “A fury” and “with rage”(15). The poet was thanked gropingly for the same but her beauty was not realised through her touch which was offensive to her woman images and

the feminine self in her was lost in despair. The poem intelligibly elaborates what Yusula L Guim speaks in one of her essays:

The essential gesture of the father tongue is not reasoning, but distance- making a gap, a space, between the subject or self and the object or other. .... The father tongue is spoken from above. It goes one way. No answer is expected or heard. The mother tongue, spoken or written, expects an answer. Its conversation, a word the root of which means 'turning tongue'. The mother tongue is language not as mere communication, but as relation, relationship. It connects .... Its power is not in dividing but in binding."(1107)

The poem projects male dominance in terms of gender identity where a woman is deprived of 'a core identity' that a man continues to enjoy from ages and still wants to retain it as a prized trophy. Gauri Deshpande attempts to debate the ambiguity and division related to gender roles in the sphere of life at large whether it be the psychological, biological, economic or social realms. The Female Of The Species maintain the spirit of the poem Thinking Disgustedly. The poem marks the distinction between a male and a female gaze in measuring the life lead in togetherness. For a woman life constructed with love is separate and is a reconstruction of two selves as symmetry of two genders. Femininity is not merely an emotion but is also architecturing of one's emotion and one's perception. To a woman her life and family is not merely the history of domesticity but an assertion of the best in her. It is a unified representation of the harmonious utility of two genders striving for core identity. The memory of love and family or sexuality is a metaphysical sensibility. Gauri Deshpande therefore depicts how a woman relates to another woman when she introspects her domestic privileges. The process of depersonalising herself as making an object entity is the manifestation of 'waste' for creative togetherness. Her urge of expansion and collective recognition makes an eager learner and a quick repentant. For this a woman commonly relates her heart to another woman may be a mother or a daughter or a friend or, a woman passer-by. A man commonly keeps away from such bettering sessions and therefore shows no interest and involvement even if a woman catches hold of a man for such urging. Therefore a woman eagerly identifies with her daughter or mother or a woman at large. 'Adrienne Rich' describes this process as "revisioning". Commonly men keep away from this process, as they attach no representative value to it. The poem is written in conversational tone and is specifically a woman's discourse with a woman. The ungratefulness of children is commonly the key topic and a woman finds a male a poor hearer to such tales of agony and despair.

Virtue Too details the harassment a woman undergoes in the name of sexual ideology. It is because of ambivalent ideological perspective that Gauri Deshpande describes virtues as "Stinging rewards". The woman in Gauri Deshpande is suppressed under the pressure of virtue and is forced to wear a garb of comeliness, which she unwantingly surrenders too. She has no hesitation to admit that virtues are no baton to deviating souls. The hypocrisy of the so called righteous would stuns a soul and she wonders when the real face would emerge and what would bring equal rules for man and woman. No matter what is the social set up, the patriarchal hierarchy has spoiled the sanctity of the righteous world:

But to tell the truth I haven't got  
the strength to let anyone else see  
how sleepugly faces can be  
with the aid of virtue.

(12-5)

One can discern a strain of anger in Gauri Deshpande's poetry at the social and moral attitudes of the society towards woman in general. Gauri Deshpande echoes what Simone D Beauvoir once stated:

One is not born a woman; one become one. ... The situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where aman compels her to assume the status of the other. The marginalised, trivialised woman subjected to the politics of patriarchy is a woman full of intensities of a throbbing heart and a palpitating soul. (The Second Sex, 197)

A Sentimental Journey illustrates the essence of an emotional soul. The emotional contours are wonderfully described in terms of epithets and similes. On entering her maiden house she remembers young youthful life and the childhood home fitted around her like a garment in which she immediately slides down to fathom a world of unlamented remembered moments. The father image to same measure reciprocated with intensity of love. He also gave a glance of “fleetingly, smiling remembrance” (10)

The poet still wondering at the identity of her vibrating heart wonders that togetherness would amount to. The female subjectivity is here projected not only buoyant but also adventurous. The poet still remains afraid and hurries to enjoy the pleasure of the bond which qualitatively she is not sure of. 'A Sentimental Journey' is a memory whereby quintences of masculinity is explored on parallel terms to that of a woman.

On the same levels The Habit is structured and in a way it complements what A Sentimental Journey beholds. Women are upheld as the arch mother figure traditionally 'A Seeta' or 'A Savitri' but men at large enjoy the liberty of being a human animal but surprisingly they are not subjected to exploitation for their contrives. 'The Habit' dramatises the theme through a situational study. The poet lost her puppy dog and cried her heart out at the brutality of the fate. The poet was consoled for the same and was assured that the phase would soon be over. Surprisingly the poet could swim from one rude shock of fate to another with equally tranquil a mind as was expected of her:

I lost an arm  
A friend, a child, a shade  
And they were right  
I got over it  
I got used to it.  
(9-13)

A woman with her growing age becomes immune to her own subjective self, a state of psyche that Queenie Leavis's Fiction And The Reading Public describes as:

If a woman is taken up with a house all day, she doesn't want tales about married problems or misunderstood wives she knows enough about these already; can't be bothered with dialect after a day's work, and historical novels aren't alive enough. What she enjoys is something that is possible but outside her own experiences .... (195)

The sight of a male coming towards her fills her with a sense of incompatibility and she wonders how she would carve out a solitary space for herself because the society has shaped her in another directed -social- role.

The need for romance is a no-no territory and a woman is forced to shed her utopian desire to settle back in the culturally devaluated sphere of family and men lead society. The resignation of a woman is treated with no compassion and no salutations are paid to her high valued sacrifice.

The self-lacerating woman is a bloody image to her own community but not to male counterpart. The self negation of a woman is here put in such simple words that the pain is no way shadowed on the surface and the under current of the pain can only be reached out to proper slot that is objective female:

Now when I see him crossing a street  
to my coming swiftly  
How am I going to get used to him  
It's the first time  
And in had no time.  
(15-9)

The Guest is a poem of disharmony and of discord in married life. The poem is a picture of deep-rooted gloom and helplessness, which is the fate of a woman since ages. The poem is a crisp note on how a lady surrenders herself in order to make a home for a man but in return a man leaves her "empty, barren and bereft". The poem is not only charged with emotions but also consist of a transparent display of a private relationship between a man and a woman. The theme of gender exploitation is once again what Adrienne rich says, "Language is a map of our failures as well as our misery and discontentment". The cruelty perpetuated by male centered man is defined as "Harsh eyes ate into the decay of my dreams" (6). It also talks about how a man remains aloof to the other that he subjugates. His attitude is that of lovelessness and his disharmony is murderous to a woman whose selfless surrender amounts to nothing but pain a long wait and self-pity.

In the succeeding poem The Air Feels the poet breathes an air of loveliness and romanticises the presence of her beloved in her memory and looks around for his presence. The poet said that the nearness of her lover is a messmerising experience and an intense desire for his proximity gnaws her soul when he is not there. The waiting of the woman in love is a wonderful expression of femininity.

I Wanted to Weep reflects the pain and suffering. It is a woman's desperate efforts to hold to a relationship that has gone awry. The void in relationship makes a woman cry but then a woman has little role in re-making a life or reconstituting a relationship. Her fate remains in the hands of her predator. The poem expresses the abysses in sex harmony, which is discontentment in the congenial climax of love. A woman is subjected to only passive reception of sexual love but is deprived of the authority to express her sexual urge. A woman is trained in suppressing her sexual desire and the word 'sex' is a taboo to her, therefore should not be spoken with loudness. Such a state of a woman is described by Gilman Parking in her book The Home as:

The man needs the wife and has her; needs the world and has it. The woman needs the husband, and has him; needs the world, and there is the husband instead. She stands between her and the world with the best of intentions, doubtless but a poor substitute for full human life. (263)

Poems in Winter is a long poem spread to the length of three cantos. The poem is all about the disappointments in love and the rejection of the essence of a woman as a living being. The poem is subjective and the poet speaks the anguish of her rusted heart in the autumn of life. The poet calls her life. The poet calls her day "chapped and wintry" (6) and looks with complete disappointment at the piles of sawdust on image concretizing vast barrenness within her. The satiety is love makes the presence of the lover an unbearable confrontation and the absence there by of the lover is measured rewarding and "fruitful". The poet then recoils to those yearning which are not only unknown but also unseen. She also thinks about her love and her desire, which stands, unreached and unrealised. The image of her child after her father does not abridge



the vacuum created between the two. The barrenness does not allow any seed of love to germinate and the poet remains depressed and disheartened at the absence of belongingness;

No for there you are, close enough to kiss  
With only this vast  
Barrenness of your presence

(44-6)

The feminine ideology of individualism along with that of gender is elaborately portrayed in order to exemplify the psyche and the fate of the marginalised. This self-representation penetrates the complicating perspectives related to woman as a section of the social whole. The discourse of male commanding voice is vibrant all over the length of the poem and the personal tale takes a colour of impersonal reference where by the narrative become a common woman in her predicament. The woman sexuality unlike that of a male has different parameters, to a man the pleasure is natural and display of masculinity where is to a woman it is extension of oneself both as a giver and receiver. To her sexuality is substantially complex and settle so much so that a man can not fathoms its depth. Sigmund Freud states:

women's sexual potential as...the beginnings of the sexual life of a girl child are so "obscure" so "faded with time", that one would have to dig down very deep indeed to discover beneath the traces of this civilization of this history the vestiges of a more archaic civilization that might give some due to a woman's sexuality. (Feminisms, 364)

The regressive emotional behaviour of her partner in a way punished. The poet has cocooned herself remotely from sexual arena of her husband. Here sexuality does not mean satisfaction of carnal pleasure but there is enough that can substitute as amorous resources. Luce Irigaray complements female sexuality as:

But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we remain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body and geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences more complex more subtle than is commonly imagined . . .(Feminisms, 372)

Lost love reveals Gauri Deshpande's discourse of desire, which in a few verses appears as carnal pleasure. The subtle elevated love that characterised *Between Births* as surrender and submission now takes a colour of body demand – the irrepressible urge to accommodate the demands of the other party. Here the feminine urge for realisation of self through body is made explicit and sexuality in terms of reciprocity is well defined. The poems are written with striking candour and here and there the echoes of Kamala Das may be traced. Kamala Das believes that a woman has every right to explore herself with haunting sentiments and the articulation of it is no shame, for a woman is as sensitive to life or rather much more sensitive to life than her male counterpart. The non-traditional aspect of sex as a taboo is denounced which is a post modernist approach to social problems and issues. An echo of what Beheroze Sheraff the poet artist declares:

we need to stop seeing each other through man's eyes and language...we have to have a different woman's voice. (Trends And Techniques In Indian English Poetry By Woman Of The Post Independence Era, 76)

Kamala Das and Gauri Deshpande stand unlike each other in their attitude to sex. Gauri Deshpande holds sex to decorum and defines it as sublime realisation where as to Kamala Das it is a normal urge that demands regular satiety as in the case of man folk. To Kamala Das sex is a road to spirituality but for Gauri Deshpande love leads to spirituality but for spirituality sex is not

mandatory. What makes the two women stand face to face is their candidness with which they explore the functioning of a feminine soul and a psyche in the sway of sexual urge.

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