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Search for Identity in the Poetry of Modern Indo-English Women Poets

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Indian women poets like their counterparts in the world literature show their concern for the freedom of woman on a par with the freedom of man in the social, political and spiritual contexts. In their poetry, sometimes, it appears that they are a little too bold as poets. The boldness of women poets is natural when they look at inequality they have to suffer at the hands of men. Therefore, they constantly search for their identity as independent women.

Feminism in literature is an interpretative tool which tries to read literature from the woman's point of view. What is her point of view of looking at objects; how she tries to interpret the external objects in terms which are suitable to her ego in a language and manner which may be different from the objective expression of men folk. In certain cases, it may be an objective medium of expression interpreting life as it appears to her. The aesthetics of feminism, therefore involves a woman's effort to transform her experience in a literary form. She evolves certain strategies regarding usage of language, her struggle with it, how she represents herself in poetic experience, what is her motivation to write poetry; what is her experience in expressing her concept of beauty, truth, reality, imagination; and here emerges the role of today's woman in expressing herself through the medium of poetry wherein she wants her identity to be established. The question of identity is a very important factor in the poetry of modern Indo-English women poets. Time and again, woman can be heard in Indo-English Poetry, trying to break her identity-crisis. The poems of Imtiaz Dharker, Mamta Kalia and Charmyne D'souza are a fair good example. These women represent Muslim, Hindu and Christian classes of the Indian society respectively and are a symbol of entire Indian womanhood.

Muslim woman's predicament is depicted by Imtiaz Dharker in her book *Purdah*. 'Purdah' is a veil imposed by the Muslim society upon a woman so that her wails and cries remain hidden away from people at large and are confined to herself. Marriage is a contract in Muslim society, but the poet is pained to see Muslim women being "sold and bought" like commodities. She says:

They all have been sold and bought,
The girls I knew,
Unwilling virgins who had been taught,
Especially in their strangers' land, to bind
Their brightness tightly round,
Whatever they might wear

In the purdah of the mind¹

How women are being exploited in the Muslim society is evident in the following lines:

Night after virtuous night

You performed for them

They warmed your bed²

And the rebellion of a Muslim woman who is doomed to live as a wife without having been loved by her husband may be seen in the following lines:

Bought and sold, and worse,

Grown old. She married back home,

As good girls do,

In a flurry of red, the cousin—

Hers or mine, I cannot know---

Had annual babies, then rebelled at last.³

The ultimate fate of a Muslim woman is obvious in the following lines:

At last a sign, behind the veil of life;

Found another man, became another wife,

And sank, sank into the mould

Of her mother's flesh

And mind, begging approval from the rest.⁴

A Muslim girl named Naseem runs away with an English boy. She is “remembered among the dead” by her Muslim mother and her aunts. But the girl has no regrets because she is now out of ‘Purdah’ with her English lover who has given her full freedom, and it is the freedom of the body and soul that matters. She says:

Shaking your box to hear

How freedom rattles...

One coin one sound

This idea of a woman's freedom from the confines of Purdah is the hallmark of all the poems in *Purdah*. Imtiaz Dharker wants to suggest that marriage in Muslim society is a contract which is without love and affection and is therefore, likely to be broken. After the breaking of the contract, the condition of a Muslim girl is like that of a commodity being sold and bought for the sake of producing children of man. And if a

girl like Naseem breaks the veil of the Purdah to live in love with a non-Muslim, even if she is considered dead by her own relatives it does not matter. But within her own self, she is quite alive; alive to the question of liberty, freedom and emancipation.

Closely connected with the sense of freedom is modern woman's sense of freedom of the soul. Dharker is a pastmaster at this. She is something of a poet who takes delight in interpreting the world of men and women in spiritual terms. Her creative output in "*Postcards from God*" involves serious questions to mankind to remember God with reverence and gratitude and thus having a feeling of freedom of the soul. In the poem "Postcards from God-I", the poet says that God Himself has made this Universe a pleasant place to live-in. But man, with his wrong sense of dominance, and independence of action, has distorted and destroyed the plan of God. The poem depicts God's grouse against the modern man of civilization who has misunderstood the actual meaning of civilization. Man has imprisoned nature behind the barricades of civilization⁵. In "Postcards from God II" God's grouse against man of civilization is evident in the following lines:

"Was it an accident that I made you?

Do you know what pain it takes to shake existence out of the million leaves of creation."⁶

Imtiaz Dharker holds the conviction that God made the earth with all its moving and unmoving objects as a free poem. But man with his sense of transforming civilization into culture has destroyed the beauties of the world. Since he has done wrong to Nature, he cannot be at peace. True freedom of the mind and the soul comes with man's appreciation of God and His plans. Complete devotion to God's plans means true freedom for women.

Mamta Kalia, a Hindu by birth is also a champion of woman's sense of freedom. Her poem 'Tribute to Papa' from *Tribute to Papa and Other Poems* depicts a contrast between idealism and reality, past versus present, culture versus civilization. The poet Mamta Kalia's father belongs to the past while the poet belongs to the present. It is, but natural then that the poet who enjoys a sense of freedom in the materially successful world says:

"Who cares for you Papa

Who cares for your clean thought, clean words, clean teeth

Who wants to be an angel like you?

Who wants it?

You are an unsuccessful man Papa."⁷

The modern poet Mamta regrets that her papa could not smuggle 80,000 watches so that she could proudly boast that her father is in import-export business and could feel proud of him. Instead, he has been spending useless hours in praying at the temple. He wanted her daughter to be as great as Laxmi Bai. The poet says that: "these days I am seriously thinking of disowning you". She wants ironically to look down upon him as the lower division clerk in Accounts Section. Everything about him clashes with everything about the poet. The poem smacks of the theme of generation

gap. In the last stanza, there is sense of compromise. The father suspects that the daughter is having a love-affair with someone but he is shy to get it confirmed. What if her tummy starts showing gradually and “I refuse to have it curretted”. But she shows a sense of compromise when she says:

But I'll be careful Papa;

Or I know you will at once think of suicide.⁸

The poet herein enjoys a sense of freedom in a world which is successful in terms of having made money; no matter even by unfair means. She does not believe in praying at the temple, being great like Laxmi Bai. She discards the world of idealism in favour of living a life of stark reality. But, with all her sense of independence in the modern world, she cannot do away with everything in the past. Therefore, she makes a compromise towards the end of the poem. The poem is a perfect specimen of idealism vs. reality, past vs. present, culture vs. civilization, but ultimately compromise.

The third poet, Charmyne D'Souza is a Christian born Indian poet who also seeks for identity as an independent woman. Treatment of man-woman relationship is an essential constituent of feminism, which finds a prominent place in her poetry. D'Souza's poetry is replete with the idea that in the male-dominated society in India, a woman is not considered woman at all if she does not marry. She is considered as an animal, devoid of sense, “a sacrificial goat”, a “quadruped”, a creature with four feet (*The Rational Animal*) if she confines her physical charms and beauty to herself. Even God made a whore to satisfy the sexual whims of man. (*When God first made a whore*). And if she marries for success, her success is also not certain. “She must be prepared to attend to the funeral arrangements of her marriage” to “make the wedding veil” her “shroud”; or become a widow. (*Cattle-front*) God has given her a ‘front’ which is much like that of cattle, a difficult place for a woman to live. It is the ‘front’ which is “all that a woman has” and which is the cause of all her problems in a male dominated society. The fate of a woman is evident in the following lines:

And we,

Who like to think ourselves the rarer sex, agree'

Lightly barter our lives away,

Afraid to die alone one day.⁹

No one in the male world considers woman for love on equal terms. She has been “too long in search of someone” who actually loves her (*Me*). It is sad that a woman is praised not for her qualities of head and heart but for her physical charm. Even after her death, she is remembered for her physical contours – “unimportant details” (*Teeth-edged*). A woman is not considered a woman if she does not “make love” to “make babies” She is considered a “cheap woman” even if she has qualities of head and heart. And if she marries, bears “a son”, she is considered by man a partner to live with (*Missbegotten*)

For man, a woman who shows in her common standards of morality, suitable to men-folk is “virtuous” (*Assaulted woman*). The poem “Tear-mask” depicts a woman's total surrender of her female ego in the interest of living comfortably, peacefully with man as a husband. Every man is an ‘enemy’ of woman in the sense that he fulfills his

sexual hunger with her and then deserts her dissembling the love offered by her (*the enemy to come*). Man is so full of ego that in marriage, he feels his wife has mortgaged her mind to him. But she feels that she has lost her identity altogether in being considered as a married woman. She wants her identity back (*Absent-minded*). D'Souza feels that only that woman is successful who is an 'ordinary' girl with an 'extraordinary' "gift" of making herself less than what she is (*More or less*). Desouza feels that in the western world woman is considered only as an object of sex by man. Her frustration born out of man-woman relationship impels her to remember India, to go there to be marked as a woman tied with her husband by a scarlet sarree; taking seven rounds of the fire, wearing Mangalsutra which will be only removed after her death. (*Strange bed-fellows*). D'Souza's poetry of man-woman discord finds affirmation in the Indian sacrament of marriage.

D 'Souza's theme of death is mystical, much like that of the metaphysical poet, John Donne. She says:

Death holds no sting for me,
All it can carry is a coma in its tail,
And the promise of punctuality
With my fate.¹⁰

Donne's view of death is in line with the philosophy of *The Bhagvad Gita*. In Chapter- II of *The Bhagwad Gita*, Lord Krishna says:

Before their origin, O Bharata, all unmanifested creatures are manifested
and after their death, they again become unmanifested
What is the point then for anguish? (2.28)

Thus, Indian women poets like their counterparts in the world of literature show their concern for the freedom of woman on a par with the freedom of man in the social, political and spiritual contexts. In their poetry, sometimes, it appears that they are a little too bold as poets; but the boldness of woman poets is natural when they look at the inequality they have to suffer at the hands of men. Therefore, they have constantly to search for their self and identity.

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9. Charmyne D'souza *Next*,p.8
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