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Poetry across Borders: Blending Passion, Pain and Protest

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Abstract:

Literature has always been the manifestation of diverse aspects of a society. It also acts as harbinger of change by offering the most vibrant space for initiating serious debates and discussions regarding the hegemonic structures of a society. This is particularly true in case of Poetry that has become an instrument in the hands of sensitive women writers to examine the multiple layers of marginalisations such power politics can impose on certain sections of the society in the name of caste, class and gender. The present article purports to revisit some significant poets like Meena Kandasamy from India, Kishwar Naheed from Pakistan and Banira Giri from Nepal to highlight the modes and the manner in which they have been grappling with the issues of repression and resistance in their respective societies thus blending passion, pain and protest in their poetry. Through such revisits efforts are also being made to establish a common platform among these poets across the borders with respect to their recording of reality around them are concerned and their ruminations about such realities. It is interesting to note that for these poets, poetry is not mere desire but a passionate endeavor to engage oneself in distinctly exploring various sorts of dominations directed either towards women or towards other subaltern sections. Poetry thus for them is real activism.

Keywords: hegemony, repression, resistance

In the recent years, literature, one of the most dynamic cultural productions of a society has emerged as the most powerful tool not only for voicing the subtle silences of the marginalized sections suppressed since many centuries but also for challenging the dominant hegemonic structures operating within a society. Literature, specifically in South Asia, for many writers, has indeed become a vibrant site for crucially examining the oppressions and annihilations, exploitation and humiliations meted out to certain sections of the land in the name of caste, class and gender. This becomes particularly evident in case of some of the women writers, especially the poets who are breaking the boundaries of conventional poetry to explore the intricacies of suppression and subjugation on one hand and on the other hand, for recording the pains and protests, resistance and resilience towards multiple kinds of social, cultural and political injustice and imbalances happening around them. Such response to the issues pertaining to the society around them has become the centre of women's writing in the recent years. The present article purports to revisit some significant poets like Meena Kandasamy from India, Kishwar Naheed from Pakistan and Banira Giri from Nepal to highlight the modes and the manner in which they have been grappling with the issues of repression and resistance in their respective societies thus blending passion, pain and protest in their poetry. Through such revisits efforts are also being made to establish a common platform among these sensitive poets across the borders with respect to their recording of reality around them are concerned and their ruminations about such realities. It is interesting to note that for these poets, poetry is not mere desire but a passionate endeavor to engage

oneself in distinctly exploring various sorts of domination directed either towards women or towards other subaltern sections. The very genre of poetry itself seems to be perfectly suited to blend pain and protest, passion and activism in an effective manner. 'Poetry's quality to manipulate metaphoricity and historicity add to its popularity for women' (Anantharam, p 205). Poetry thus for some of the women writers is real activism.

It is against such a backdrop that Meena Kandasamy, the young and versatile poet from Tamil Nadu assumes greater significance. Being described by K.Satchidanandan as "vibrant and most honest poems," Kandasamy's poetry provides a stark commentary on Indian caste system. She speaks for the muted silences of both the dalits and dalit women in her poetry. Stemmed out of historical wounds inflicted upon the dalits and dalit women, her poems in her poetry collections *Touch* (2006) and *Ms.Militancy* (2010) resonate with vitality and vibrancy, with a fine blend of assertion and aggression, criticism and minute analysis of casteism. She becomes the voice of protest as she objectively explores the ills of caste hierarchies and humiliations around her. In the process she highlights the kind of damages inflicted upon an individual's psyche by the so called age old customs and structures thus paving way for such an individual's social subjugations and economic exploitation. Issues in the society itself provide her ample opportunities to delve deeper into the power structures. 'Indian feminism derives its indigeneity from certain significant structural aspects of Indian society' (Lal, p 5).

Meena Kandasamy, activist and an actor, poet and a fiction writer is a young woman with multifaceted personality. Her poems are the clear manifestations of the helplessness and marginalization of the dalits and dalit women in Indian society. Her poetry condemns rigid restrictions and inhuman hierarchies of caste that reduces a fellow human being into an untouchable creature as is apparent in one of her short yet significant poetic pieces, *One -Eyed* wherein a Dalit girl child is brutally assaulted for "the taste of that touchable water". The entire incident with Dhanam, seeking water for "parched throat slaking thirst" is seen by the teacher as "rule breaking". Obviously such violation of the rule is a "potential threat" to the school. Naturally Dhanam, being an untouchable, pays a heavy price for touching the "touchable water". Meena Kandasamy examines the assault on the innocent psyche in the name of caste.

"dhanam sees a world torn in half.

her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,

the price for a taste of that touchable water."

Dhanam, for the doctor who attends her is just one more "medical emergency" while for the hungry media she becomes a sensational "headline and a photofeature". The injustice meted out to a dalit girl pops up again in *Shame*, the poem that appears in her first poetry collection *Touch*. Meena kandasamy recounts how a sixteen year old dalit girl's rape is dismissed just as "commonplace" matter with the criminals being protected by their caste identities that serve as "classic shield" while the victim is left with no choice except to take up the,

"Bravely, in search of
a definite solution,
and an elusive purification,
she takes the tests of fire—
the ancient medicine for shame.

Alas, her death
is an irrevocable side-effect.”

It is interesting to note that Meena kandasamy’s poetry is not limited to female experiences but rather she speaks for the entire community that has been cornered by the dominant sections of the society. The poems in *Touch*, not only highlights the pathetic plight of the dalits caught in the web of caste but also questions the meaningless distinction between the touchables and untouchables as it becomes evident in one of her powerful poems, *Advaita: The ultimate question*,

“Non	Dualism
Atman	Self
Brahman	God
Are	Equal
And	Same.
So	I
Untouchable	Outcast
Am	God.
Will	You
Ever	Agree?”

The sacred scriptures and preaching of the Brahmins cannot answer her sarcastic question. Therefore, she dares to leave the question unanswered to underline the fact that despite the talks about Atman, Brahman and Advaita, the practice of untouchability exists and persists even to this day. When Atman and Brahman are equal and same, the distinction between Upper castes and outcastes sounds absurd. The technical novelties she introduces with regard to the form of poetry perfectly seem to suit her rebellious spirit,

“One	More
Final	Question
Can	My
Untouchable	Atman
And	Your
Brahmin	Atman
Ever	Be”

One
?

The title poem *Touch* is again directly addressed to the people of Upper caste. A Brahmin might have known “every knowledgeable thing” about touch. However, what he will “never” know is

“that touch—the taboo
to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was a paraphernalia of
undeserving hate.”

Meena Kandasamy continues to rebel through her poem, *Aggression* which also serves as a warning that if the past mistakes towards the oppressed are not rectified, the “silence that waits” still goes unheard, and “dreams explode”, there will be a “revolution.” Therefore she considers,

“Most of the time:

Aggression is the best kind of trouble-shooting.”

Beneath the sheet of anxieties there is hope as she asserts in yet another powerfully crafted poem, *We will rebuild Worlds* wherein she again raises her voice against multiple discrimination based on caste and gender. There is a condemnation of mental scars inflicted in the name of caste hierarchies both on dalits as well as dalit women and at the same time there is also a celebration of growing consciousness to change the mindsets,

“We will rebuild/ worlds from shattered glass/ and
remnants of holocausts”

The urgency and honesty that Meena Kandasamy expresses in her poems once again underlines her response and reactions towards the realities around her as she perceives. This is aptly the reason for Kamla Das’s remark in forward to *Touch*,

“Once again after long years of search I came into contact with the power of honest poetry when I was reading Meena Kandasamy's anthology of verse.”

The trauma of being the victims of caste annihilation and ceaseless customs, be it dalit or a woman, the assertive responses to such repressions mark the essence of Meena Kandasamy’s poem. It is such concerns blended with passion, pain and protest Meena Kandasamy voices with the intention of envisioning a better future wherein equality is maintained and human dignity is honoured. Her conversation with Ujjwal Jana is a clear indication of her concern towards the very society of which she is an integral part,

“If people understand that caste exists in the mind and nowhere else, all its cruel physical manifestations, like segregation and untouchability, can be erased. And I think it is in the hands of writers to make people think about it. Writers have the power of the written word, and they can plead with people to unite for a change.” (Jana, p 7)

If Meena Kandasamy becomes the manifestation of dalit and dalit women’s concerns in India, Kishwar Naheed becomes the voice of protest against gender imbalance through her poetry in Pakistan. Poetry thus for both Meena and Naheed does not simply carry aesthetic value rather becomes a pivotal instrument to look at the errors of the society. Born in India in 1940 but migrated to Pakistan during partition, Kishwar Naheed, an iconoclastic poet and a social activist has always been at the forefront as far as women’s issues in her society are concerned. Her intentions thereby is to offer her own resistance to the process of “level women down too”. In one of her much anthologized poems *The Grass is really like me* - originally written in Urdu and translated to English by Rukhsana Ahmed- she draws an intriguing and innovative analogy between grass and herself. She uses the metaphor to represent women. Naheed’s message is crystal clear; whatever may be the tactics adopted by patriarchy to uproot a woman, she will rise again and again unbeaten and undaunted in her spirits. The mood becomes visible in the very first lines,

“The grass is also like me
it has to unfurl underfoot to fulfil itself”

By “getting soaked”, a woman, similar to grass will gain nothing except a “scorching sense of shame” and “heat of emotion”. The efforts of the gardener to “mow” down the raised grass is compared to the politics of male dominated society manifested in many ways to level down the women. However, these efforts turn futile as no one can curb,

“... neither the earth’s nor woman’s
desire to manifest life dies.”

Naheed scorns the “endeavors” of the society to normalize the peripheral position of women. What she offers in the poem is a complete subversion. The aggressive assertion and opposition to repressive customs and traditions continues in her another well known poem, *I am not that woman* wherein she asserts,

“....my voice cannot be smothered by stones,”

Society has always undermined and underestimated the strength of a woman and this she wants the readers to “remember” always. She might be the one whom the patriarchy has “crushed with the weight of custom and tradition”, bought and sold in the name of chastity, married off to get rid of the burden and treated as a commodity traded by men; but she re-emerges and resurfaces like “light cannot be hidden in darkness”. Society cannot smother her fragrance through the chains of restrictions. She denies vehemently to be commodified and declares herself free,

“Now it is time for me to flower free.”

In fact it is these notions that make her “also a controversial woman, and her views, literary works, and personality evoke a whole range of positive, negative and ambivalent reactions from the public” (Haeri, p 230).

Whether India, Pakistan or Nepal, women poets have been considering poetry as a subtle site to showcase the insensitivity and indifference of dominant power politics in assigning passive roles for women. “In the poem after poem by South Asian women poets in the subcontinent as well as the women poets of the South Asian diaspora, the images of the female body draw attention to women’s subaltern status in South Asian culture” (Wong, p 12). Simultaneously, the poems also become interesting instruments offering corrections to such faulty societal structures and the mindset generating from it. Banira Giri, considered being one of the most authentic voices from Nepal and the first Nepali woman to be awarded PhD from Tribhuvan University, in one of her poems *Woman* examines different and extreme attitudes of men towards a woman ranging from the most revered one to the most stereotypical. Banira Giri who writes in Nepali, uses the framework of ‘Blind men and the Elephant story’ to narrate such attitudes prevalent in her society about women. Her description is quite terse with a woman standing at the crossroads in her “primordial form” and surrounded by a group of blind men ready to explore and discover her nature. The man who first strokes her hair calls her the Ganga flowing from Shiva’s head while another man stroking her hands calls her the lotus of Saraswati’s hands. While the men feeling the touch of thighs and lips subsequently make an announcement that the woman is the banana trunk and a “ripe raspberry.” The images as well as perceived notions are juxtaposed with the woman’s boon of motherhood

being described as Mt.Kailas. Banira Giri then offers a sudden change in male perception of female body with a man discovering the “half-secret place of creation” and vehemently dismissing all other descriptions but reducing her to a “vile hole,

“No, listen to me!
Woman is nothing but a vile hole!”

The beauty of the poem however gets completed with one more man, who touches the “brimming eyes” of the woman and cries out,

“You stupid fools!
Woman is not just a vile hole,
She is also Lake baikal, Lake Ural
She is also Lake Gosainkunda, Lake Mansarovar.”

(*Woman*, Translator from Nepali Ann Hunksins)

The poem mirrors multiple moods of men towards women in any society where woman is worshipped or commodified, glorified or dismissed as inactive participants of hegemonic power. Banira continues the usage of imageries in one more powerful poem *Wound* - translated from Nepali to English by Wayne Amtzis and Banira Giri- to present the psychological wounds and scars inflicted by rape. The wound is not merely a physical mark and a symbol of violation of the dignity of female body thus becoming a bitter reminder of that violation but rather becomes the source of strength. The strength lies in her assertive cry of “you'll tire, not me!”

“Wound! Maul and smother me
Lick with your slathering flames
Your force converted
for I'm hardened to it”

Man might conquer the physical body of a woman but he cannot claim the mind and spirit of the woman. The physical oppression induced by the man is overshadowed with the mental revolt by the woman. The poem through explicit depiction of physical violation makes implicit suggestions about psychological victory,

“But it is surely so, violator
Violation! tearing your ears, listen
Your armory will be emptied --I will not
your armory will be emptied --I will not”

The beauty of Banira Giri's poems discussed lies in her very attempts to break the stereotypes and giving expressions to the silent voices.

The three women across the borders thus give voice through their nuanced poetry to the subtle silences of their societies. Meena Kandasamy takes strong stances against caste dominations and its imprints on the psychology of dalits as well as dalit women, while Kishwar Naheed assertively speaks about women rising like a phoenix to make their mark. Banira Giri, on the other hand, uses poetry to record various mindsets of men. What bind these poets are their common concerns and activist zeal that becomes conspicuous in every literary mosaic they create. The result is the production of powerful and provocative poetry

that immediately arrests the attention of the sensitive readers across various cultures and traditions.

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