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Stylistic Interpretation of Poetry from Famous Women Poets across the World

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Abstract:

The stylistic analysis of women's emotions, desires, and resentments expressed in the poems chosen for this paper, help to understand the specific choices of sentence structures and vocabulary women poets make. Hence, one need not to look for external resources to understand the poet's sensibility. Their linguistic choices make the poems self-explanatory. Women writers have been enormously expressive and they have resorted to symbols, vivid imagery, and taken liberties with conventional English structures. Each one of them has a distinct poetic style, as reflected in their choice of vocabulary and other linguistic patterns. Women, irrespective of status, creed or color, from all parts of the world have exhibited an inclination towards poetic genre and a consistent literary output has resulted in innumerable lyrics and free verses.

Keywords: Feminist poetry, stylistic analysis, Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, Alice Walker, Sylvia Plath, Kamala Das.

Introduction: A Note on Feminism

"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat."

— **Rebecca Wes**

Feminism in literature has been increasingly engaging and thought provoking in all genres of literature from all ages and countries around the world. It has been viewed from various perspectives and it is realized that feminism has been the most poignant medium of voicing the concerns, impulses, emotions of the fair sex in the global society. The introductory quote is by Dame Rebecca West. She was a British author, journalist, literary critic, and travel writer. This statement by her catches attention when she becomes a mouthpiece of women in comparing herself with a doormat and showing a willingness to express her sentiments. This phenomenon forms the crux of literature by women.

The theory questions the age-old tradition of male dominance where female gender is subjected to much suppression in terms of self-expression, independence, or emancipation. The term 'women subjectivity' raises the question where a woman looks for her position and importance of her being. Literature from the women authors has been reflecting the mind and heart of women from different religion, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. When a woman seeks her position in society she undergoes a psychic process which includes numerous sentiments, moods, views, discerning and sensations. There is no denying the fact that women suffered and have been enduring a lot, and have sacrificed their happiness and yearnings to fulfill their duties towards family and society. This is the chief cause behind the response which women writers have received in terms of success in influencing the masses, because their readers find the reflection of their ordeal and can relate themselves more with feminist literature. Carol Iannone writes,

As feminist ideology would have it, the world presents a harsh and alien landscape to woman. Shaped against her grain by a tradition that has left her true identity out of account, she must articulate her very grievances in a language created by her oppressor. Inevitably, in the feminist view, literature itself mirrors this oppression. (Iannone, 83)

A consistent supply of literature by women is the proof of support it has acquired worldwide. Some recurring themes in feminist poetry include longing for self-expression, identity crisis, physical and intellectual liberation, subjugation, objectification, and call for justice. Women have started producing literature since they wished to be heard or establish an identity of their own. They started to move over the stereotypes imposed, and refused to remain or appear as shadows in literature produced by their male counterparts. Feminism in literature has come a long way and considers the societal pressures, creates awareness in women about their social, legal, and political inequality. An increasing number of women have expressed their dissatisfaction with gender relations and the plight of women in society. The existence of confessional poetry is a telling example of how women have overcome the taboos or inhibitions about physical desires, and have expressed themselves openly. It is interesting to note that women across the world share the same level of intensity of emotions and passion in self-expression and their collective voice echoes in the hollowness of the society of double standards. It lays bare the suffocating mindset which proclaims men as superior race.

Poetry has always been the most preferred form of expression of self. What characterizes or makes a feminist's poetry stand apart, is the element of awareness of what it is really like to be a woman. It is mandated to enter the skin of a woman to realize her psychic processes, her reactions, ponderings, or reflections over what she encounters in life circadian. Writing by women is not a new phenomenon in literature, but there has been a revolutionary change in the manner they speak against their marginalized status. A careful probe into the choice of words and structures reveals the depth which women impart to their poetry. From the most commonplace or mundane themes of relationships, marriage, motherhood to sensitive themes of sexuality, gender roles, position in society and even spirituality, feminist poetry highlights the

trajectory of multitudinous emotions in its development. The core of female sensibility has remained same across all geographic boundaries and time periods that are even centuries apart.

The following discussions considers selected poems of some prominent women writers, and is an attempt to understand how women poets have adopted or modified English structures, patterns, and lexis to express themselves most evocatively.

Discussion: Stylistic Analysis of the Selected Famous Women Writers' Poems

Maya Angelou's *Phenomenal Woman* verbalizes all that women in the world strive hard to pronounce. Monica Stark, in her review of the poem says, "Phenomenal Woman is an anthem of women's strength in their own womanhood" (Stark). In the following excerpts from the second stanza of this poem, Maya proudly utters that despite her ordinary stature, men have fallen for her. She admires and embraces the inherent feminine charm, which conquers all that men boast about themselves.

*I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or
Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.*

The end-rhymes of *please*, *knees*, and *bees*, makes it a very pleasant piece to read. The tempo of these lines indicates the confidence (as the word *cool* suggests) with which she has defeated the age old male dominion and have made them *stand or / Fall down on their knees*. She highlights *Fall* with capitalization and by beginning a new line with it as compared to *stand*, which comes in between the line. This points towards her vehemence for the admirers of external form of a woman. She repeatedly draws attention emphatically towards her persona with active sentences like, *I walk into a room*, *I say*, and *I try*. She occupies the center, the core, with her prolific first person personal pronouns: *my eyes*, *my teeth*, *my waist*, *my feet*, *I'm*, *me*, *my back*, *my smile*, *my breast*, *my mystery*, *my style*. Nowhere she allows the room for male perspective. Perhaps with such repeated and emphatic declarations of her own superior status, she deliberately shuts her mental faculty for any thoughts about men to creep in. The choice of metaphor, *honey bees*, projects her perspective of male psychology, i.e. how men easily fall prey to woman's external appearance. It is interesting to note how she substantiates her arguments of self-assertion once with adverb *phenomenally* and subsequently with adjective *phenomenal*. She celebrates her womanly charm throughout, as she reiterates the power of her dazzling smile, glitter of eyes, curves of her body, and graceful movements. The preponderance of prepositional

phrases paint a picture of her: *flash of my teeth, swing of my waist, joy in my feet, arch of my back, sun of my smile, ride of my breasts.*

*I say,
It's the fire in my eyes
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing of my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me....
...I say
It's in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.*

Maya gives voice to all those dormant emotions which do not come to fore owing to inhibitions against a woman celebrating her mysterious powers which is potent to resist male dominion and defeat it too.

The name which immediately strikes, while talking of women poets is that of Emily Dickinson, who is heralded as the greatest woman poet in the English language. The theme of patriarchal dominance is all-pervading in her poems. The following excerpt from her poem *They shut me up in Prose* is a telling example of how creative voices of women are forcibly suppressed as they are not considered to be intellectual beings. Paula Bennett compares Elizabeth Oakes-Smith's the *free-bird* and Emily's *They shut me up in Prose*, and writes,

The attempt to shut her up in 'Prose' (the 'prose' life of duty-bound womanhood which gives rise to what Walker calls an 'aesthetic of silence'), is no more effective and no more 'wise' than trying to hold a bird in the pound. The brain remains free. It is physically and intellectually unimpeded and, therefore, the speaker cannot be 'stilled.' Her power to articulate remains her own. She does not abandon it nor does she submit it to prevailing cultural beliefs. (Bennett)

They shut me up in Prose –

As when a little Girl

They put me in the Closet –

Because they liked me “still” –

Significantly, the poet here mentions that she had been confined to the dreariness of *Prose*. The sophistication and the intellectual quotient which poetry reflects, was discouraged in her. Perhaps the patriarchal society feels threatened or insecure about any sign of erudition in a woman. The poet is the personification of her own voice, i.e. she speaks on behalf of her voice which has been trapped in the rigidity of prose. The recurring active sentences, *They shut me up in Prose*, *They put me in the Closet* and *they liked me “still”*, highlight the force applied in silencing her words of self-expression. She remains a passive recipient as the direct object, 'me' indicates, whose voice is silenced in various ways. The subject, *They*, are the indictments which she pronounces emphatically against her oppressors. Dickinson capitalizes *Prose*, *Girl*, and *Closet* at the end of her sentences. These words acquire thematic prominence. The lines revolve round the idea of a girl's expressiveness being put into closet metaphorically and subjecting her to the articulation in unimpressive prose. The last line of the excerpt is where this emotion reaches to its culmination as she discloses the reason behind her being trapped. The conjunction *Because*, connects all the cords as well as introduces in more potent assertion that 'stillness' is what is expected from women. The word *still*, being put in double inverted commas encompasses a host of emotions which every woman across the world, and of all ages would swear by. This stillness which the male gender appreciates silences all aches, yearnings, passions, and sensations of women.

Another excerpt from Emily's *I'm "wife"—I've finished that* addresses one more concern which aches woman in the modern society, i.e. the problem of being a single woman, who wishes to stay so, to enjoy the independence as spinsters. It also raises a potent question about woman's loss of identity after marriage:

This being comfort – then

That other kind – was pain –

But why compare?

I'm "Wife"! Stop there!

Dickenson woefully admits that being married is being in comfort. It is that safety which comes as a prize for surrendering to the whims of the male domination. The demonstratives, *This* and *That* bring in the contrast between two kinds of lives, which she wishes to hold forth before her readers. She does not give any name to these two kinds and reveals the imposed muteness which underlies. These are the silenced voices which lurk behind a feminist's works. The connective, *then* stifles a sigh of vulnerability. Adjective *other* denotes all those aspects of life which are insignificant before the institution of marriage. For women, marriage is a compulsion and any other notions about life are considered as doomed to be painful. Eventually reasoning conquers the dreaming, as the realization dawns upon her that comparing the two kinds of lives is futile. The self-interrogation, *But why compare?* leads to the classic understanding of the fate a woman is supposed to endure. Significantly, the poet encloses the word *wife* in double inverted commas, a stylistic feature on which she usually resorts to accentuate a thought.

Emily often makes use of dashes to punctuate her flow of thoughts. In both these excerpts, after each thought she takes a pause, as if to ponder over making her next utterance impactful. These dashes appear as threads which bind her thoughts.

Patterns by Amy Lowell is a beautiful pen portrayal of the life of women in Victorian society. She projects a society in which women were expected to adhere to stringent decorum. The burden of affectations prevalent in society crush delicate emotions which a maiden cherishes while dreaming about her future with her husband and Amy repeats these words and phrases such as, *my stiff, brocaded gown, powdered hair and jeweled fan, My dress is richly figured, high-heeled, ribboned shoes, whale-bone and brocade*. These underpin her reflections over woman's restricted movements under social constrictions:

...For my passion/ Wars against the stiff brocade...

...Underneath my stiffened gown

Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin,

A basin in the midst of hedges grown

So thick, she cannot see her lover hiding,

But she guesses he is near,

And the sliding of the water

Seems the stroking of a dear

Hand upon her.

What is Summer in a fine brocaded gown!

I should like to see it lying in a heap upon the ground.

All the pink and silver crumpled up on the ground...

Amy shuffles between the first person, 'I' and third person 'she', and 'her' while projecting the outer and inner levels of a woman's consciousness, '*...Underneath my stiffened gown / Is the softness of a woman...*'. The two contrasting adjectives, *stiff* and *soft*, express the unease which direct other emotions in the poem. The already stiff gown grows stiffer, as the participle *stiffened* suggests. The sense of sophistication established by the brocade gown is further developed in *marble* basin. The hedges which have grown are *thick*, which restrict her view of the world beyond the boundaries set for her. The stiffness of brocade gown and the thickness of the hedges represent the constraints in a woman's life literally as well as metaphorically. The fondness with which she imagines her lover makes her feel him *near* and *dear*. The rhythmic pattern in *near/water/dear/her* conveys a moment's pleasure aroused by imagined nearness of the lover. The verbs, *seems* and *guesses* subtly convey her imagined world. This momentary pleasure succeeds the stark realization of the futility of her ostentatious lifestyle. The double modifiers, *fine* and *brocaded* for gown mock at the pretensions in summer heat. The *pink* and *silver* despite being associated with beauty of the gown, bring out the vainness of any kind of aristocracy for her. She wishes to discard her gown and see it as a worthless *heap*. This heap might also be suggestive of a heap of all her possessions. All her pink and silver colored belongings, associated with aristocracy should be discarded altogether. The auxiliary should in the sentence, *I should like to see it lying in a heap upon the ground* points towards the ideal conditions of her imagined world, which is far from being real in her current situation. The sensitive persona inside her *should like* to see her lavish life being ended but her conscious self has to endure the stiffness and thickness.

Poems of Alice Walker deal with the harsh realities of love. Her poem, *Did This Happen to Your Mother? / Did Your Sister Throw Up a Lot?* supports the argument. The following selections are very significant in this context:

I love a man who is not worth/my love. / Did this happen to your mother? / Did your grandmother/ wake up/ for no good reason/ in the middle of the night?... Did your sister throw up a lot? / Did your cousin complain/ of a painful knot/ in her back? / Did you/ aunt always/ seem to have something else/ troubling her mind?

Walker introduces her poem with some poignant questions which draw immediate attention from those who have undergone the same plight as hers. Women have been victims of much mental and physical abuse which is generally ignored or their cries remain unheard for obvious reasons. She hints at violence against women. The poet's thoughts follow the pattern of run-on-line stanza form. The past tense in the lines invokes memories which were buried deep down inside long time back. Walker brings in generations of sufferings and intends to knock the doors of women's consciousness which deliberately does not let their woes come to the fore. The

noun phrase, “my love”, phrasal verb, “wake up” and prepositional phrases, “for no good reason/ in the middle of the night”, are crammed with implications which fit into various contexts and each of them is capable of telling a new tale of familiarity. Women of the world will find parallels to their own story of love, waking up from a nightmare in the middle of the night, or being unsure of their identity and conditions for no good reason.

...I thought love would adapt itself/ to my needs. / But needs grow too fast;/ they come up like weeds. / Through cracks in the conversation. / Through silences in the dark./ Through everything you thought/ was concrete.

Interestingly, the poet wishes that *love* should adjust to the circumstances. Woman is provided with no choices to cherish the pleasures of it according to her own wishes. She is expected to get accustomed to the people and situations quashing her own desires. When Walker says “my needs” she mocks at the conditions in which the natural instinct of love has been governed by logic of societal norms. The rhyming of “needs” and “weeds” is a reflection uttered with gritted teeth. Poet says, like weeds “my needs” are un-called for. Just like weeds are uprooted owing to their fast and abundant growth, her needs too are destined to meet the same doom. The three consecutive, dependent clauses introduced with the preposition “through” ring in the ears like banging of the doors of cognizance.

Take following extract from Walker’s *Gift* records her reflections on her complicated love life. She holds forth a question that why can’t relationships be mutually-beneficial. She narrates how one person earns all the benefits and the other is fooled in giving wholeheartedly. The selfish lover simply takes all that is offered without offering anything in return. Walker repeats the word ‘soul’, making it a key word. Soul being chosen as an object to gift, retained and then crushed has several implications. The uniqueness in choosing soul, an abstraction, as the subject of the poem could be taken as poet’s belief in love of transcendental measures:

He said: Here is my soul/ I did not want his soul/ but I am a Southerner/ and very polite. /I took it lightly/ as it was offered. But did not/ chain it down. /I loved it and tended/ it. I would hand it back/ as good as new. /He said: How dare you want/ my soul! Give it back! /How greedy you are! /It is a trait/ I had not noticed/ before! /I said: But your soul/ never left you. It was only/ a heavy thought from/ your childhood/ passed to me for safekeeping. /But he never believed me. /Until the end /he called me possessive/ and held his soul/ so tightly/ it shrank/ to fit his hand.

The poet uses personal pronoun ‘I’ and ‘me’ ten times during this short communication. This conveys a tone of allegation on her lover and yearning to justify her own argument. The title she chose for her poem is ironical. The feeling associated with the word ‘gift’ is of happiness and gratitude, but neither the receiver is contented nor the giver has any feeling of acknowledgement.

Secondly, the independent assertive sentence, *It was only a heavy thought from your childhood passed to me for safekeeping*, questions the purpose of gifting. The word ‘safekeeping’ means protection, charge, care, security, or custody and it contradicts the purpose of gifting something to someone. The poet’s sentences about herself end with periods, are short and have a self-effacing tone: *I am a Southerner/ and very polite. I took it lightly/ as it was offered. But did not/ chain it down. I loved it and tended it. I would hand it back as good as new.* Whereas, her lover’s sentences are exclamatory, intended at accusation: *He said: How dare you want my soul! Give it back! How greedy you are!*

The confessional poetry by Sylvia Plath is startling due to its candidness. Her *Daddy* needs a special mention here in which she holds her dictator father responsible for all the traumatic experiences she had throughout her life. Her repeated suicide attempts were triggered by her father’s dominance and an unhappy married life. In this poem, she also voices her desire to kill her father. The “black shoe” which she mentions here represents how she was intimidated by her father. The title and the repeated verb phrase to introduce the poem clearly indicates that it is addressed to her father who opposed all her wishes. She was reduced to the state of a foot which is kept enclosed in a black shoe, which is not granted any free movement of its own. The metaphors of black shoe and foot become the epitome of the plight which women writers have talked about through various channels. She was kept “poor” and “white”, two adjectives, indicating feeble and chaste respectively. Father’s domineering nature barred her breathing or sneezing too, not literally but of course it implies the trepidation of her father:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

The phenomenon of confessional poetry attains extraordinary measures in the poetry of Kamala Das. Kamala Das’s poetry transcended all those precincts voicing which were blasphemy in Indian society. She talked acquiescently about male dominance and Indian orthodox society. She writes in *A man is a season*:

You let me use my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You late me sing in empty shrines, you late your wife
Seek ecstasy in others’ arms.

The simile, “like coins”, is of supreme significance. She was ill treated by her husband as well as her female desires were cruelly suppressed. Hence, she confesses how she was drawn towards mating with “shadows” i.e. those whom she never cared to look at even. Her youthful body was the price she paid for this as if it were coins.

Excerpt *The Prophecy of Sand* by Aurore Severo, needs special mention here. She voiced her views about equality with men and at the same time celebrated the inherent beauty of womanhood. She reflected upon the finest details of life and admitted the political, religious, and cultural idiosyncrasies which make life difficult for the fair sex.

Men, they say

Dominators

Slayers

Conquerors

In the lines above, *they* refer to women who have been pronouncing men as their oppressors. She uses three strong nouns, *Dominators*, *Slayers*, and *Conquerors* and places them emphatically in three lines. In the following lines, she goes on to explain how men have treated women supported by rules, norms, and laws of culture and religion.

We have been subjugated by their culture and rules

The norms and the religions of masculine fools

The laws and the clowns

The passive sentence, ‘We have been...’ expresses women as passive recipients of subjugation in male dominion. She addresses masculine gender as fools and calls their laws as clownish. Such bold utterances deserve applause for their brazenness. The plural form, *religions* intends to express the entire range of rules and regulation which have been devised for women on the pretext of religion. The end-rhyme of ‘rules’, ‘fools’ and ‘clowns’ adds to the mocking tone in which she pronounces men fools and clowns.

The world one day will evolve

We who have the curves and seductive smiles

Are we not filled inside with the same DNA? so they say...

Give us books and untie our bonds

We shall rise up, making empires strong

Mock not my dashing eyes

Discount not, my luscious thighs
I shall dance your dance into the night
Have no doubt; I shall be your queen
When we are embraced, for who we are
Do you not see? We shall gleam like the stars in the night
Genders, colors, nations too
Leave them sitting in old church pews
Philosophers, doctors, engineers of creation
We shall be side by side, working with you
So smile and behold the new golden age...

The consonance *world one day* appears intentional as the poet brings in *adverb one day* in between, instead of saying: *world will evolve on day*. This highlights her poetic sensibility with which she modifies the structure putting forth her opinion strongly. The noun phrases *the Curves, seductive smiles, dashing eyes, luscious thighs* portray womanly charm candidly, earmarking them as weapons to rise against all dominations. Instead of a straightforward statement, *We have the curves and seductive smiles and are filled inside with the same DNA*, the poet opts for an interrogative relative clause. This enables her to put across her exhortation to women more poignantly. Her question to women follows a statement which she prefers to leave incomplete with ellipses, a blank which she wants fellow women to fill in with their own voices. The imperative sentences which follow appear like loud outcry, challenging men to free women and have the privileges of education. The verb phrases, *Mock not, Discount not, and have no doubt* are very powerful assertions to warn men against demeaning women. The future tense structures, *We shall rise up, I shall dance your dance, I shall be your queen, We shall gleam like the stars, We shall be side by side* very movingly voice the poet's wishful thinking of emerging as queen against all odds and attaining an equal status with men. This becomes even more intense as she attaches a tag question, '*Do you not see?*'. The noun phrase, '*old church pews*' signifies orthodox mindset which potently encompasses the entire system which administers discriminations based on *Genders, colors, and nations*. She invokes the *new golden age*. The double adjectives modifying 'age' indicate a hopeful looking forward to the new era of *Equality*.

Conclusion

It is interesting to see how these women despite belonging to different geographies and time periods echo the same sensibility in different words. They have been constant victims of the prevalent orthodox attitude towards them and of male domination. Feminist poetry gives vent to woman's grievances. The stylistic analysis of women's emotions, desires, and resentments

expressed in these poems helps to understand the specific choices of sentence structures and vocabulary women poets make. Hence, one need to look for external resources to understand the poet's sensibility. These voices are self explanatory. Women of all ages and nationality have been subjected to and confronting similar situations. For some, the conditions are unbearable and they have accepted or surrendered to the situation, whereas, some revolt against them and exhibit the guts to protest. Hence, their expression of self is manifold. It is sometimes a pen portrayal of situations as a mute spectator, sometimes reacting and seeking vengeance, sometimes rising and acting against such situations or treatment and sometimes turning inwards and producing confessional poetry. In all these forms women strive to establish their identity as well as protest by holding forth a placard against male domination.

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