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Minimalism in Modern Indian English Poetry: A Study

Dr. Agnes Nirmala. J., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Eunice de Souza

Courtesy: <https://www.firstpost.com/living/eunice-de-souzas-learn-from-the-almond-leaf-proves-again-her-importance-as-a-poet-3039412.html>

Abstract

This paper attempts to study one of the unique features of Modern Indian English Poetry called 'Minimalism' belonging to 20th century poetry. Modern Indian English Poetry was also called as 'New Poetry' as it varied from the early British Poetry in content and style. This paper examines in detail the history of Indian English Poetry, by comparing and contrasting various phases of poetry belonging to 1850 to 1900, moving towards the modern poetry which started after 1900. It highlights the significance of Minimalism and discusses in detail the fine aspects of it, which makes it a unique feature of modern poetry stand above the rest.

Indian English Poetry and Minimalism

Indian English Poetry, one of the oldest genres of Indian English Literature, has undergone many interesting changes and modern poetry explored new identity for modern India. The themes focused on different aspects like man-woman relationship, Indian sensibility, Quest

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for identity and Cultural values. As such, there was a great change in style of writing and concept delivery and one such change is the feature of Minimalism.

Minimalism is a significant phenomenon in Indian English Poetry, which was specifically used after the 80's and widely used after 1990s. It contained in itself various elements, that made the modern poetry so unique in style and writing.

Some elements of Minimalism are narration of experience, pointed vision, brevity of economy of expression, penetrating communication and multiplicity of meaning. Minimalist poems convey their meaning with few words, are reductive in their approach but have a strong appeal with their rich diction and intense meaning. These elements of Minimalism were used by some notable poets of 20th century

Focus of This Paper - Eunice de Souza

This paper analyses some of the poems of Eunice de Souza, who is a forerunner of Minimalist poetry and one of the greatest poets of modern poetry. She invariably used it in all her poems, effectively and created a style of writing, followed by others. Eunice holds a Masters Degree from Marquette University, Wisconsin USA and a Doctoral Degree from the University of Mumbai and was a Professor and Head for over 25 years at St. Xavier's College, in the Department of English. She is not only a poet but has also been involved in theater as an actor and director, has written for leading newspapers, usually as a fierce literary critic.

Indian Poetry

Indian English poetry is one of the oldest genres in Indian English Literature. It was Henry Derozio, with his publication of his poems in 1827, who initiated the emergence of poetic creation in English by Indians and in 1830 the story of Indian poetry began with Kashi Prasad Ghose. Though it did not have a tradition of its own it has survived for nearly two centuries and has its own distinct identity. It had a language of its own with different styles and varied themes depending on the author's milieu, interest in social affairs related to national concern and personal approach. The strength of Indian poetry is this complex nature which has carved for itself a special place in world poetry and has won global appreciation.

The Indian poetry in English has gone through many changes from 1901 to 1947, before independence and continued to grow after independence up to the present day. The pre-independence poets include Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu. Notable 20th century poets of the post-independence era include Kamala Das, Eunice De Souza, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, A.K. Ramanujan and Gieve Patel. There are hundreds of poets who follow suit, notable among them are Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Lakshmi Kannan and Suniti Namjoshi. The Indian poetry in English started creating its own identity in the 1950s. The poetry from the 1960s began to focus on politics, displacement, identity and psyche of the Indian men and women. In the early 1960s, Indian poetry focused on the realities pertaining to personal identity in familial ties, the poetry produced in the late 60s and early 70s was more experimental in nature which was satirical on issues relating to culture and society.

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The poetry belonging to 1850 to 1900, can be called as the ‘imitative poetry’ as it imitated the British Romantic and Victorian poetry. The next phase started after 1900 till 1947, where the poetry of Indian English poets moved from imitation to ‘self-expression of destiny’ and a sense of crisis, in the wake of fight for freedom and this can be called as ‘assimilative poetry’. Assimilative in the sense, that it projected the conflict of the nation with its cultural and political turmoil to attain freedom from British. The Indian poetry in English became more experimental both in terms of content and style after Independence. The poetry after Independence in 1947 can be called the ‘experimental poetry’, as it experiments with new ideas, with a change in attitude toward age long culture and disbeliefs. It talks of the man-woman relationship without any prejudice and deals with stunning reality.

A unique feature of Indian poetry is its frankness, narrating the experience of the poets, while discussing a problem. “Post- independence poetry in English is a poetry of revolt and experimentation and innovation” (Pandey, 2004).

Discussion

Minimalism

The emergence of minimalism in Indian English Poetry is a significant phenomenon of the 1990’s (Singh, 2004). Minimalism can be defined as the economy of words with intense feelings. The varied range of thematic concerns, experimentation, imaginative impact and the deployment of short lyrics are some of the interesting aspects of this kind of poetry. Minimalist poems convey their meaning with few words, are reductive in their approach, depend on suggestion rather than on detail, but have a strong appeal with their rich diction which possesses intense meaning. This kind of writing was specifically used after the 80’s.

The poet Eunice, taken up for studies invariably use minimalism in her poems to convey their meaning. The themes presented by her, through the minimal hard-hitting titles and statements are given either at the beginning or at the end of their poems. The poems further delight or disturb the reader through the pictorial quality presented through the minimal images such as bird, rain, stone, mongrel, monkey, snakes etc., The images of mongrel, monkey and snake refer to the dumb animals which are misused for making money and sometimes the imagery is subtle. While they make the reader laugh at the pranks of mongrel or snake, they also make the reader cry at their doomed life, curled inside their baskets. She talks of her own experiences, in the first-person narrative and the experiences which she witnesses, in the second and the third person narrative. She brings alive these incidents she has witnessed, in the poems right in front of the eyes of the readers and affects the reader, through these minimal images as stated by Singh.

The minimalist elements are used to analyse the study. Minimalist poems have a strong appeal with their rich diction with minimal diction and images. The poet Eunice de Souza use minimal diction and minimal images.

Characteristics of Minimalism

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Kanwar Dinesh Singh in his book *New Explorations in Indian English Poetry* lists the following features of minimalist poems:

1. Instantaneity of experience
2. Centripetal observation
3. Pointed vision
4. Brevity and economy of expression
5. Penetrating communication
6. Epigrammatic effect
7. Subtlety of imagery
8. Strokes of suggestion
9. Multiplicity of meaning

Instantaneity of experience refers to an observation, feeling, perception, thought, a mood of a moment which is captivated and articulated in as few words as possible (Singh, 2004). Pointed vision implies that the poem is focused on a particular image or thought. The words used are few in number and the effect is therefore epigrammatic. It is subtle and rich in suggestion rather than in detail. Such images are evocative and convey numerous meanings. It must not however be misunderstood, that minimalist poems are necessarily short. Krishna Rayan's comments cited by Kanwar Dinesh Singh are significant in qualifying the feature of brevity.

Minimalism, however, is less a matter of length than of individual use of language, consisting in exploiting the possibilities of either a rich density or a pregnant spareness of utterance. (Rayan 1994. Cited in Kanwar Dinesh Singh, p.104)

So, a minimalist poem uses language in a particular way. It is not the actual length of the poem that matters. It is more the reductive nature of the syntax that exploits the various connotations that constitutes the effect of the minimalist poem.

Minimalism in the Poetry of Eunice De Souza

Eunice De Souza is particularly a minimalist, and this special attribute places her in a special position among other post-independence women poets. In 'Defining Indianness' Eunice De Souza in conversation with Surya Nath Pandey said "poetry must have resonance" as Hemingway said of his statements. "The statement must be the tip of the iceberg. We must sense what lies beneath them." In keeping with this, her poems have minimal verbal utterance and hence they are quintessentially highly concentrated and need an in-depth study. Her style is witty and colloquial which makes her poetry peculiar. "Even this poem has forty-eight words too many" says de Souza with typical severity in the poem, 'It's time to find a place' in which there are fewer words than that. (Her words carry an air of ease and unsentimental élan-but that does mean her poetry excludes the elements of love, hurt, or joy. Sen, Sudeep. Rev. of *A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems*. *World Lit Today* 84.2 (Mar - Apr 2010): 74.

Song of Innocence

Eunice De Souza's poem *Song of Innocence* begins with a childlike innocence. It sounds like a nursery rhyme.

*Who made you?
God made me.
Why did he make you?
To know him, to love him
to be happy with him forever
in this world and the next*

Although the poem is written almost entirely with monosyllabic words to echo the diction of the nursery rhyme, and although the question answer format of the poem is epigrammatic in style, the meanings suggested by the lines are many. The first line "Who made you?" is a question posed to womankind. The answer is a terse three-word statement "God made me." The answer brings to the reader's mind numerous allusions and associations, starting from the Biblical story of the Genesis which tells the tale of how God made Adam and then Eve from Adam's rib. The interrogator might be the man who always considers her the "other", made by God but not as an equal to him but as a derivative from his own body. To him, the woman's answer is that, the same God who made him also made her. The myth of Adam's rib is conspicuously omitted from the answer. The interrogator might be the woman herself, who is questioning herself, attempting to find her own antecedents. In establishing that she too originates from the same God, she assures herself of the validity of her credentials for having her own unique and individual identity, independent of the man. Yet another allusion that the title of the poem and the question and answer bring to mind, is the twin poems on the Lamb and the Tyger. In the second poem William Blake asks the semantically loaded question "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" This then adds another dimension to the exchange. The very different natures of man and woman make the interrogator wonder who made the woman. Her reply is an affirmation that her maker is the same as that of the man.

The most significant line here is "In this world and the next." Women have always been promised happiness in the world after as a compensation for their suffering in this world. But here, the poet says that, happiness in this world is as much her birthright as it is a man's. Again, the interrogator might be a woman who is trying to ascertain the purpose of her own existence. Then the answer is, that she has not been made to serve others, but to be happy. It could be read as a woman's voice assuring herself that she need not feel guilty for pursuing happiness for herself as that is a god given gift.

The poet has evidently exploited the suggestive power language to the fullest possible extent in this minimalist poem. There is a remarkable economy of words, none of which are wasted on sentimental outbursts or lengthy explanations. The apparently simple and succinct exchanges mask a complex dialogue on the origin, place and purpose of women's lives. In this poem, the distinctive image of the emancipated woman is seen.

Monsoon Journey

In the poem *Monsoon Journey*, she insists that self-pity or sympathy from others does not emancipate a woman but only brings isolation.

*Grace fills empty spaces
Where there is a void to receive it.
It is grace itself
which makes this void.
We are on the brink*

The poet makes use of words with multiple associations without elaborating on the details. The word “grace” in the Christian language refers to God’s kindness or mercy. Seen from this perspective God’s mercy is double edged, for it was God who created the world and all in it, including the women (which was highlighted in *Song of Innocence*). So, it is God’s mercy that is responsible for the void or emptiness in the life of all humans. It appears as if the poet is questioning traditional notions of faith and prayer.

The word “void” refers to emptiness or lack of identity, lack of purpose which characterize our lives. The fact that this is a shared fate is signified by the line “We are on the brink”.

In the poem *Pilgrim*, the poet mentions the inner voyage she undertakes like a pilgrim, to know and face the hidden realities of the life. The natural image of a rock is used for God.

*God rock, I’m a pilgrim
God rock, I’m a pilgrim
Tell me-
Where does the heart find rest?*

In the first line she addresses God as “God rock”. The word ‘rock’ has many connotations and the poet uses this multiplicity of meanings to create an ambivalent image of the man, woman, of faith and of traditional beliefs. The rock signifies solidity and dependability. So, it is a metaphor that bears out the traditional faith, that God is dependable. But the rock is also inhuman, mute and unmoved by pleas or prayers. This also contributes to the ambivalence of the poet persona’s attitude to God and faith. The phrase “Tell me” is an appeal to a God who speaks to his devotees. But it is also an appeal that could fall on deaf ears. The question “Where does the heart find rest?” is a poignant question posed by a restless heart, who is troubled all through the life and who has little to look forward to.

Conclusion

The poetry of the selected poet, which influenced the making of Modern Indian Poetry in the 20th century, highlights the interactions between individual identity and society in the historical context, especially in the context of gender issues. Her poetry articulates the poets’ impatience with social prejudices and their desire for a free, happy life. The voice is in the first

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person and in the second and third person. It also brings into focus male hegemony from the feminine perspective. Many of her poems are autobiographical in nature, confessing her personal experience. They speak openly of their love, relationships, unfulfilled desires and agonizing experiences of disappointed love in marriage. But in all the poems, there is a gradual movement from the subjective to the objective, identifying similar experiences of other women, highlighting the male – female politics and the inequality inherent in man-woman relationship and the unjust treatment of women which are the recurrent themes of all the poems. So, they articulate their awareness of conventional stereotyping before moving towards independence. Hence, all her poems are written with involvement which gives an authentic poetic experience. Her poems do not appeal to women readers alone, but also arouse the awareness of intelligent men who could identify with the sufferings of the sub - ordinated women with empathy.

The analysis of her poems reveals the courage that these women poets had, when it was a taboo for women to speak of their personal lives. The use of the first person (self-awareness in the ‘self’) and objective criticism is typical of these poets’ writing. “You” and “we” in her poetic lines signify the collective consciousness, shared experiences and the warmth towards the readers. Written in a personal and confessional style, post-Independence poetry has marked the beginning of the march towards social change and modernization. Although they speak in a distinctively personal voice, her poetry represents their collective consciousness. They speak out against segregation and rebel against established traditions of society. Their poetry cuts across multiple traditions and practices and challenges the social constructions of a gender biased society.

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