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**Search for Identity and Self in Indian Poetry in English
by Women Writers**

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Search for Identity among Indian Women Poets Writing through English

The focus of this paper is on the search for identity among the Indian women poets who write poetry employing English as their medium of expression. Since Toru Dutt (1856-77), the first Indian women to write poetry in English, women have come a long way. They stand apart from Indian men who write poetry in English, by emphasizing their feminine identities in so many creative ways.

Apart from the expression of a uniquely and powerfully realized feminine sensibility and quest for self and identity, what distinguishes these women writers from the contemporary male poet is their realistic attitude to life, sex and lust, and their frank autobiographical, vivid, candid and bold expression of such issues. The poetic self in such 'New Poetry' concerns itself with capturing the moments of intense experience of the private life with all its uniqueness and immediacy.

Different Approaches to Exploring Self

There have been different approaches to explore self within Indian philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions: the Vedic approach was dynamic with focus on things outside the self such as rituals, as it celebrated man's relationship with nature, cosmos, earth, sky, etc. The Upanishad approach was more inward and introspective. Another approach was devotional which postulated itself in relation to God/god and then to humankind.

The 'search for self' in Indian religious and philosophical tradition becomes a major concern for the sages through meditation. For ordinary mortals, it progresses as a dialectic in terms of various relationships of man, woman and God/god. The women poets of the Bhakti movement set examples of search for women's identity within Indian spiritual tradition. Their devotion to God/god oftentimes took the motif of Lover and the loved and thus brought in intimate relations between man and woman as part of the identity process.

Issues before Sensitive Contemporary Indian Women Poets

The sensitive contemporary woman poet, today, is affected not only by the complete metamorphosis of transformation of her existence but by the very concept of her century's long suppressed feminine personality. As a result she has traversed the long journey eventually to find a distinctive voice of selfhood.

The indigenous contributing factors of such women poets have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the western civilizational developments, the Indian freedom struggle, Indian constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women. Indian women were/are caught in the flux of tradition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past. So, to overcome the traditional barriers to

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express freely in all walks of life constitutes the crux of feminism in Indian literature. In literary terms, this pursuit precipitates a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. In critical practice, it boils down to scrutinizing empathetically the plight of women characters at the receiving end of human interaction.

Indian women poets writing through the medium of English in recent years have worked consciously to create new Indian poetry in English, nourishing themselves, while at the same time asserting their individuality and expressing their sentiments and views about life.

Three Concentric Circles

In short, their poetry exhibits three concentric circles of the self in relation to society, self in relation to history with family as the core unit, and self in relation to itself, its own self propelled emotions and feelings. These poets display a different open attitude. The subjects which were taboo earlier now are openly expressed in their lines. They do not emulate, they express their thoughts, their feelings, their fears and insecurities. The reflections and deliberations come from within and they are the end product of how life has treated them, their trials, tribulations, struggles and ultimate victories.

Preference for a Confessional Mode

The Indian women poets demonstrate their love for the intensely personal confessional mode. With certain amount of attraction for the feminist views, they are all actively writing poetry. However, while their attempt is to explore the 'self' and identity in depth, most of them could only scratch the surface. There are several distinct poets who work out their projects differently.

Kamala Das and Sarojini Naidu: Nature and Stark Reality around Us



Kamala Das, picture taken from

<http://libzine.wordpress.com/2008/01/27/my-sons-teacher-by-kamala-das/>

Kamala Das is a natural poet, not a semi-skilled craftsman trying to construct poetic artifacts. Kamala Das is an investigator of the impulses. One who is obsessed with the flow of inner experience? The poet had succeeded in writing delightful poetry and has gained the applause of the people who once showered on her the venom of negative criticism. It is with extreme sincerity that she yearns for her quest for identity. It appears in the songs of a heart that longs for sexual satisfaction in the recollections of the purity and playfulness of the childhood, in the broken womanhood, in the love of the grandmother, in the cruelty and hypocrisy of men, in the painful realization of failing youth and approaching old age and in the despair of old age itself.

While her quest for identity makes her a confessional poet, many of her poems express deep sympathy for the suffering; her poems initiate the fusion of herself with the surrounding.

While Sarojini Naidu exposes her personal experience, Kamala Das is a thorough investigator of the intensely personal experience. Under the influence of the English Romantics, Naidu traces her identity in Nature, writing about its “beauteous forms”. Kamala Das attempts to explore the quest for self and identity, the stark realities within and around her.

Disappointment, Disengagement and Life

Disappointment haunts the poetry of Kamala Das despite her passion for direct expression and her revolt against male domination of the female in a voice of protest. The poem acts as a metaphor of her mental state. Her sense of non-fulfillment and alienation is projected in another poem as follows:

The heart,
An empty cistern, writing
Through long hours, fill it
With coiling snakes of silence... (The Freaks)

The centre of her poetry, therefore, is ‘the self’ reflecting her life and anguish, longings and frustrations, ecstasy and loneliness, making her art transcend the self. Under the circumstances her poetry defines the realities and conflicts of her mind and self.

A further jaunt of a further spell
Of freedom. And I shall some day see
Here is your nest of familiar scorn. (I Share Some Day)

The disengagement had also led to the disastrous dissociation with “the self” to the extent of becoming strangers to themselves with the attendant crisis of identity.

Perceptive Changes to Indian English Poetry

A perceptive change has come to Indian English poetry in the writings of Kamala Das who declares, “I too call myself I”. But this has not been always so. Earlier she had a feeling of subordinated self, at best playing a second fiddle to the whims of her husband:

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Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason to all your
Questions I mumbled in coherent replies.

(The Old Playhouse)

Brilliant Spots in the Confessional Stream

In Gauri's poems, one finds relationship between men and women described in so many ways: love that men and women are subjected to, sensibility characteristic of the feminine world, inner quest or self search and identity, memories and experience of loneliness, loss and the pain consequent to it, etc.

Unlike its stylized images as a bringer of new life, the rain in Gauri Deshpande's poetry is often a reminder of loss and a witness to alienation, as in 'In absentia':

The rain that here falls on my home
There hisses on your huddled head.

In this poem, we find an assertive strength. The strength lies within the bones of poems when the poet writes with quiet rage and sincerity.

Quest for Self

Quest for self is also one of the preoccupations of Mukta Sambrani whose "The Woman in This Room Isn't" is perhaps the latest work of the school of the woman poets of the Bombay circle.

Menka Shivdasani's volume of poetry entitled *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* contains a collection of poems ranging over a period of ten years. Helplessness in the face of unending hazards to the woman's life is reflected in some of Shivdasani's poems. In a few poems like 'A Reason to live', 'Today be Fairy Tale', 'This Game You Play,' she describes the woman's situation directly.

Mamta Kalia is almost as subjective as Kamala Das in her free and frequent use of 'I', the assertive self rather becomes more fluent.

A Brigade of Women Poets

In her quest for self and identity, Kamala Das was joined after a few hesitations by Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza, Gauri Deshpande and a whole generation of younger poets to establish an image of woman totally unencumbered by the conventional falsifying colours. This was not a personal matter but whole generation's pangs of birth, not an individualistic attitudinizing, but a painful transformation coming over feminine consciousness.

To fight for the dignity and true emancipation of women is the most difficult task especially because it involves values and attitudes that are deep-rooted not only in the minds of men but also in the consciousness of women. The concept of freedom of women in practice is

grossly vulgarized throwing up extremely grotesque and distorted forms of “freedom” in a “transitional society combining the worst of both worlds”.

Mamta Kalia’s poems on love, marriage, family life and society are noticeable for freshness, irony, wit and satire, but most of all, for her feminist concerns. She impresses us by her sharp intellectual quality and she also imparts autobiographical flavour to her poetry. She exposes ruthlessly the contemporary chaotic and anarchic condition in Indian society.

Lakshmi Kannan belongs to the first generation of Indian writers born into freedom. The milieu into which she moved was the new and rapidly expanding scene of free India’s women intellectuals. Her account of the lamentation of dogs is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ‘Solitary Reaper,’ while the conversational tone employed in some pieces - “honey rifled from who knows what hive” - is direct and immediate. The earth is described as a “wicked witch with a slipped disc.”

Sujata Bhatt fondly recollects different facets of earthly life in her poetry. Myth, folklore, traditional belief, social and political consciousness jostle with each other in her poetry. While Sujata has written poems concerning the position of women in society, and her expression of female sexuality might be feminist, the lives of women, gender conflict and the relations between the sexes are not central to her work.

Dharker’s domains may be broadly identified as: gender and female sexuality, religion; post-colonialist, exile and race; poverty or economic class and language.

Some women poets like Lila Ray and Monika Verma have been active since the fifties but it was Kamala Das who drew the public attention towards the contemporary women poets. Thwarted desires, the frustrations of living in a male dominated world, sex, and, of course, love are commoner themes. Contemporary situations find more frequent mention in their poems. The viewpoint becomes more feminine; a distinctive tone setting off their work from the rest of Indo-Anglian poetry.

To conclude

The identity of Indian English verse has changed today as new themes of intimate experiences of love, marriage, sexuality and family relationships as well as the larger social experiences related to the world they live in have been ushered. Women are confessional, disclosing their feelings, emotions and intimate experiences quite boldly and candidly. Women value not only love, beauty, relationships, emotion, devotion and tender feelings but want to cross the patriarchal threshold in order to define themselves.

Modern Indian women poets in English seem to have found a catharsis or mental satisfaction through their literary expression. In ‘My Hour of Discontent’, Mamta Kalia tells that in poetry she finds some kind of emancipation from her inner turmoil: “In my hour of discontent/I neither shout nor rant / I simply fill ink in my pen / and spill it with intent”. Thus, poetry-writing becomes a weapon in the hands of Indian women writers to fight against oppression. After all, they are the direct inheritors of the tradition of *Kali*, the all powerful fierce goddess.

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