



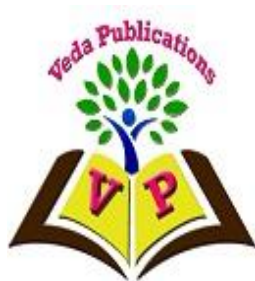
PANORA OF SELF AND LOVE : A STUDY OF POST-COLONIAL INDIAN WOMEN FICTION WRITERS

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ABSTRACT



The post- independence scenario presents a better indulgence of Indian women writers, who have carved an abiding niche in English poetry, through their wonderful creations. The main themes and characteristics of the poetry by women help us to analyse how and why Kamala Das and others like her emerge as feminist poets. The general family background of these women poets is typical. Almost all of them belong to highly modern, educated and urban families. They are convent educated and qualified. They are different from the traditional pattern of Indian womanhood. They are not flexible to adjust to the old way of family life. They can't tolerate forced adjustment, compromise and submissiveness. This creates a natural tension. They rebel against the conventional role of women in society and struggle to assert their new identity. Stimulating Indian feminine progress 'from tradition to modernity' is the key phrase here, which is the end result of the poetry of these writers. They achieve this end result by expressing a Variety of new tensions encountered by them. Thus, the very first characteristic feature of their poetry that strikes the reader is that they are invariably confessional accounts, with a touching narration of their own self from within. Love, as exchanged between the self and the man in her life, is the most important theme used by any feminist woman poet, while coming out with her confessions. Prominent among contemporary love poets are Sujatha Modayil, Margaret Chatterjee, Gauri Deshpande, Lalitha Venkateswaran, Roshan Alkazi, Lila Ray, Mamta Kalia, Monika Varma and so on. It is Kamala Das who begins a new trend in love poetry. Many of her poems depict her fulfillment of love experience.

Keywords: *Indian famine sensibility, forced adjustment, compromise and submissiveness and conventional role of women.*



Sujatha Modayil describes that pure love fills her heart with unlimited joy and satisfaction in two lines poem on *A Song of Joy*. These poets describe love in various moods invariably extend towards man-woman relationship and the sexual tensions thereof. Eventually, they utilise sexual and erotic imageries also. They depict the theme of love and sex in a convincing manner. This attitude is developed because of the change in outlook on sex and love. All along, the image of an Indian woman has been the one that is sanctified by our spiritual heritage. This legacy came through religious works, mythology and folklore, which carefully avoid mentioning the significance of sex in the life of a woman. Unfortunately, this legacy still holds, even today. It rejects feminine pleasures and sensations. The woman's body becomes useful to the extent that it satiates the urges of the man and becomes a vehicle of procreation. There is no room to consider the implications of sex on the female mind. Female sexuality is still considered to be profane and vulgar. In our society, man is entitled to sexual freedom. Erotic capacity of a man is celebrated by appreciative words like 'Virile', 'potent' and 'strong'. However, the sexual experience of a woman is considered an eyesore, a fall, a depravity and an antithesis of femininity. Words like 'cold' and 'frigid' regulate the passivity of the female body and mind. The modern women poets protest against de-sexing of women. They frown upon the conventional notion of Indian womanhood. For them, poetry reveals the quintessential woman. Their trump card is an exposition of female sexuality. They take the reader into labyrinth of body and sexual experiences, while depicting the feminine psyche. Contemporary Indian women poets consider sex as the essential part of

human life. It is an irresistible and uncontrollable biological need. It gives them pleasure and happiness. They accept the challenging task of sharing their bodily experiences through their writings. They become free and candid in the portrayal of sex. They redefine themselves in the foreground of sexuality. The body becomes the central metaphor in their confessional poetry. Kamala Das feels that what she gets in the name of love is nothing more than 'skin's lazy hungers. She feels that man is always crazy of lust. Sexual union with him gives no satisfaction; rather it gives pain seen in *The Sunshine Cat*:

They said each

Of them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not

In my nature to love

Kamala Das describes the sex act as blissful in the following lines:

On the bed with him, boundaries of

Paradise had shrunk to mere

Six-by-two

Poetry of Gauri Deshpande impresses the readers by the forthright and lyrical expression of feminine erotic impulses. For example, in poem on a *Lost Love*:

I am earth/Vast deep and black and I receive/The first rain/Sweet generous/Lashing throbbing/It's smell forever in my blood/ Its imprint deep within my quick/Yellow daisies burst out/ On my breast and thigh/ At its very touch

Gauri Deshpande writes of sexual unfulfillment and the loss of her individuality. She revolts against the male domination. Her three volumes *Between Births*, *Lost Love* and *Beyond the Slaughter house* display man-woman relationship,



involving discontentment, tension and frustration. Between Births deals with the modern woman's rebellion against the male domination. Her, *The Female of the Species* opens itself to the female world. *Death and the Habit* deals with death. In her poem *Death*, the female persona feels that marriage is the second name of death. She is waiting for her end to come, treating it as a 'tardy lover' and husband. The all-pervading power of marriage in the society makes the regulations, through a sense of guilt and shame, silence women's voices. She protests against the interference of religion and social customs in the values of life felt sincerely by an individual. In the poem *Battle-Line in Purdah*, she expresses the conflict between the man and the woman, who can neither be lovers, nor husband and wife. Using *purdah* as a metaphor, she writes as follows:

She half remembers things from/ Someone else's life,/ Perhaps from yours or mine/ Carefully carrying what we do not own/ Between the thighs,/ A sense of shame.

Sunita Jain is known for her candid expression. Her first volume of poetry *Man of My Desires* presents a typical feminine sensibility caught in the anguish of love and dejection. Her poetry depicts a woman caught in the whirlpool of desires, her need for love and fulfilment. She records the sensitive feelings of a love-long woman and how she loses her identity to adjust in a family:

I grow to your size/ I chopped my wings;/ Our creature existence/ I thought would be Bliss/ As you held me tight/ Tightening your grip Time

Sunita Jain believes that a woman takes a new individuality to get adjusted to a man. Still, she is held tightly by her husband. Women, while following

the traditions of the society, have to surrender their freedom and individuality to men. In her collection of poems *Silences*, she voices out the injustice and impartiality in human relationship. She sings of the agony and anguish of love. Sujatha Modayil is strongly aware of her feminine identity. She finds herself tossed to the common feminine destiny of suffering and her poems convey a deep sense of pain and despair caused by frustration in love. She writes in *The Attic of Night*:

Stones lay upon her eyes

And each day tears fell

Upon her face, a river bed

With five lines carved by misery...

Mamta Kalia's collection of poems *Tribute to Papa* is abound in the intensity of sexual love and passion. The poem *Love Made a Housewife Out of Me* reveals the agonies of a modern housewife, the feelings of a textile designer, losing the charm of her earlier days. Another poem *How could he do* reveals, the sexual harassment of a woman at the work place by her senior. Although women are equally educated, talented and skilful, it is not at all recognised by the people in the society. . They have to adjust themselves not only to their husbands but also to the other members in the family where they lose their identity and lead a worthless existence. This is clearly expressed by Mamta Kalia in one of her poems by name *Nine Indian Women Poets*,

I no longer feel I'm Mamta Kalia

I'm Kamala

Or Vimla

Or Kanta or Shanta,



I cook, I wash, I bear, I rear,

I sulk, I sag.

Meena Alexander, one of the prominent women writers, has published many critical articles. Her poetic volumes are *Bird's Bright Ring*, *Without Place*, *I Root My Name*, *Stone Roots*, *House of a Thousand Doors*, *The Storm and Night Scene* and *The Garden*. Her themes reflect the cry and torment of a woman's soul. In a poem *Stained Word*, she says:

Light cannot mutilate

As sight does,

Only a woman

Mute in a blind land

Knows this...

The helpless conditions like loneliness, boredom and humility lead some of the women poets to think of death and suicide. Death is shown as the ultimate way to escape from these problems. It is also considered as a means of salvation. Poets like Kamala Das, Sujatha Modayil, Sunita Jain, Suniti Namjoshi, Lila Ray, Christine Gomez, Vijay Goel, Thomas Gray, Nasima Aziz have chosen death and sorrow as the themes in some of their poems. Lila Ray writes,

The end was death.

Saw death is always death.

Does a man have the right to choose?

Sujatha Modayil expresses the idea that death is inescapable as follows in two lines poem on *Minerals killing*, 'I saw the trees stand bare,/Saw death would touch us too'. Apart from these themes, modern Indian women writers have also become increasingly conscious of their identity crisis. They

voice their concerns about their role in the society, expressing a note of dissent, wherever they find it necessarily. Their interest in dealing with the problems of women and their assertion of women's point of view reflects their feminist awareness. A woman has no freedom of thought, her participation and advice have not been given due credit. Elders in her childhood and husband later always control her. Women poets rebel against the society that imposed restrictions on them. Kamala Das expresses the following view in poem *An Introduction*, "Dress in sarees, be girl/Be wife, they said - be embroiderer, be cook,/Be a quarreller with servants, fit in, Oh,/Belong, cried the categorizers.

Monika Varma expresses the social restraint on women in poem on *Green Leaves and Gold*,/I climbed tree.... Get down at once/It is unsuitable for young women,.The governess said.

Lakshmi Kannan is also a poet advocating for self-awareness. She acknowledges the woman's inner urges in the poem *Karuppan and Karuppayi*. Vimla Rao writes of the agonies of love, that love never brings comfort. Social consciousness and concern also occupy an important role in Indian women writing in English. The poor, the slum dwellers, beggars, poor laborers, servants, farmers, widows, dowry, violence, war, peace etc are described in many of the poems of Indian women like Mamta Kalia, Rukmini Nair, Eunice De Souza, Sujatha Modayil, Achla Bhatia, Leela Daramaraj, Monika Varma, Dorothy Sinha, Sujatha Bhatt, Mary Ann Gupta, Mary Das Gupta etc. These modern poets became aware of the social problems and the issues related to women and were bold enough to make others aware of it. The woman poets in regional



languages who deal with this new awakening are also recognised. Talakavathi in Tamil, Anuradha Potdar in Marathi, Vasantha Kannabiran, Manikonda Surya Kumari and Savithri in Telugu, Manjit Tiwana in Panjabi, Amrita Bharati in Hindi write about women and their problems like menstruation, sex, labour room experiences etc. Their imaginative efforts extend beyond the cultural expectations of womanhood. The publication of stories from Indian Christian Life by Kamala Saththianandan in the year 1898 marked the beginning of the short story in English, by the Indian writers. But the tradition of the short story in India may be traced back to the 'Panchatantra', the Jataka Tales, Katha Sariotsagara. When the Indian short story came of age in the 1930's its possibilities as an art form were realized.

Literature of the 1950's and 1960s which stresses their frustration rather than a sense of fulfilment' Indian women's writing of the 1970s represents an important step ahead which discloses the careful attention of the critic and the interest of the reader. One can establish an order through defiance. One is driven to a situation where there is no way but to hit back. Women writers have tried to hit back with whatever force they have one such writer is Raji Narasimhan, whose novel 'Forever Free' (1979), is a very good example of establishing a different model of living through defiance. Another novel by Uma Vasudev, 'The Song for Anasuya' (1978), is of this kind, of paying back the men in their own terms. A feminist novel for India is not a novel which a woman writes just because she is a woman and knows how to write. It is written by the one who has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurised by all kinds of visible and invisible,

external and internal forces, by the one who is not carried away by feminism. An attempt shall be made to study the various aspects of feminism that were taken by Shashi Deshpande in her novels and to see how far she has succeeded in securing for the members of her sex, their present available status in the family and in society. Most of the novels of early 20th century by Indian women writers in English are also autobiographical projections. Torn When women began to write about their experiences and when critics began to discuss these narratives many taboos were lifted and many walls broken, uniting women all over the world leading to stronger and bolder mass movements. These shared experiences not only helped women to understand each other better but also to recognize the nature of the strength inherent in female bonding. By the late twentieth century there was a profusion of writings by women, especially novels and even more discussions on the experiences of women. In India too, many women had begun to share their experiences. Looking at the early history of Indian English Literature, one realizes that women writers were rare. However, when we come to the post-Independence era, things begin to change. For example, in A History of Indian English Literature (1982), M. K. Naik comments that a notable feature of the time "is the emergence of an entire school of women novelists" (213). Though it is debatable whether these writers form any sort of a school or not, one cannot dismiss the fact that since the 1970s, more and more women writers have emerged in India. India has always had a rich oral tradition. Stories and the telling of stories form an integral part of the Indian psyche. In the estimation of India's foremost psychoanalyst and cultural commentator Sudhir Kakar, narratives are much



more than mere means of passing the time for Indians: "The spell of the story has always exercised a special potency in the oral-based Indian tradition and Indians have characteristically sought expression of central and collective meanings through narrative design. While the 20th century West has wrenched philosophy, history, and other human concerns out of integrated narrative structures to form the discourse of isolated social sciences, the preferred medium of instruction and transmission of psychological, metaphysical, and social thought in India continues to be the story. Narrative has thus been prominently used as a way of thinking, as a way of reasoning about complex situations, as an inquiry into the nature of reality (5).

This is especially true of Indian women. Women in India have traditionally been tellers of tales. The fact that one of the pioneers among Indian novelists, Raja Rao in his *Kanthapura* (1938) opted for a female lead narrator to give voice to the legends of the land certifies the statement. Even in casual conversations one finds a marked proclivity among the older Indian women to use stories to prove their point or to express their understanding of what the world is like or what it ought to be like. Almost every question directed to older women invariably leads to the much-awaited, "Let me tell you a story." In their writings they have used not only the mythic materials of the epics, the lives of gods and the animal fables of the Panchatantra and Jataka, but also the more realistic material of family histories and memories. Women writing in English in India do not form a coherent group. The geographical, historical and stylistic variety of these writers is extensive. They come from various cultural, linguistic, and

geographical backgrounds making Gita Krishnankutty, a well-known translator from Malayalam, comment that "there is no single 'India' or 'Indians'" (2). Literature written by women in these postmodern, postcolonial times, aided by feminist criticism has emerged as "a new discipline . . . that has as the object of its study, a new field: women's writing" (25), wrote Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, in their preface to the first volume of the applauded work *Women Writing in India*, published in 1993. This maiden attempt at representing the voice of the voiceless was in fact a late arrival. Indian women had been writing in their mother-tongues for a long time and even in English, since 1870. But when these works are studied as women's writing, charted as an area of study and sculpted into a tradition, they take on a significance that is of contemporary invention. Numerous gifted women have made significant contributions to Indian Writing in English.

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