

New Trends and Themes in the Poetry of 20th and 21st Century Indo-Anglian Women Poets

Paper Submission: 01/05/2021, Date of Acceptance: 15/05/2021, Date of Publication: 25/05/2021



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Abstract

Indo-Anglian women writers have ever been extremely realistic in their presentation of human emotions. The poems of these women poets are beautiful literary pieces of their literary talent and craftsmanship. These women poets boldly shared their vision and mission and their emotions and aspirations through their writings. They have succeeded in establishing their identity in world literature and are firm to retain their identity at home too. These poets dealt with new trends and themes in their poetry like Love, Sex, Man-Woman relationship, Betrayal, Loneliness and Identity crisis, etc. They used poetry as a powerful medium to bring about a social change. Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Imtiaz Dharker, Eunice D'Souza, Monika Verma and others, for instance, despite being Indian women from a traditional background, broke away the social barriers to elevate confessional poetry to the highest level and make it truly modern with their passion for Self-Identity.

Keywords: Extremely Realistic, Craftsmanship, Trends and Themes, Confessional, Identity And Vision.

Introduction

Indian writers in English, during pre and post-independence periods, have ever been extremely rich in their unique ways of presenting human emotions. The Indian women poets also have been constantly enriching the Indian English Poetry by their presentations of new trends and themes. The poems of these women poets are beautiful literary pieces of their literary talent and craftsmanship. Several voices emerged on the poetic horizon arresting attention of the literary stalwarts. These women poets boldly shared their vision and mission and their emotions and aspirations through their writings. They have succeeded in establishing their identity in world literature and are firm to retain their identity at home.

Indian English poetry can broadly be divided into three phases. The first phase generally deals with imitative poetry. This was at the time of colonial period when poets like Henry Vivian Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Toru Dutt imitated the Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, etc. The second phase belongs to assimilative poetry which was technically Romantic but Patriotic in spirit. The poets like Sri Aurobindo and R. N. Tagore composed patriotic poems evincing their focus on the Spirituality, the Soul and the Almighty God. Last phase deals with the contemporary poetry. This phase of Indian English poetry started after the Independence of the Nation. This phase of Indian English Poetry encompasses a lot of trends, themes and variations.

The Post-Independence Indian English Poetry can be traced back to Nissim Ezekiel's "A Time To Change" (1952). Since then, Indian English Poetry has grown in leaps and bounds, with luminaries like Dom Moraes, Arun Kolatkar, Adil Jussawala, A.K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Keki N. Daruwala, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia and Imtiaz Dharker dominating the scene. These poets dealt with new trends and themes in their poetry like Love, Sex, Man-Woman relationship, Betrayal, Loneliness and Identity crisis, etc. They used poetry as a powerful medium to bring about a social change. The poets after Ezekiel, writing in English, gave the language a unique Indian flavour, peppering it with local color and idioms. Their contribution to Indian English Literature is immense and they

have managed to carve out a niche for themselves in the world of arts and letters. Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Imtiaz Dharker, Eunice D'Souza, Monika Verma and others, for instance, despite being Indian women from a traditional background, broke away the social barriers to elevate confessional poetry to the highest level and make it truly modern.

The above-mentioned poets are widely anthologized and their poems are a part of the undergraduate and postgraduate programs of many universities. It cannot be denied that they deserve to be a part of the canon. However, it is time now, along with these poets, to look at the new crop of poets, like Sujata Bhatt, Smita Agarwal and Srividya Shivkumar, who are ensuring that Indian English Poetry is a living and breathing literary form in the present times. Therefore, this paper proposes to examine NEW TRENDS AND THEMES IN THE POETRY OF 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY INDIAN ENGLISH WOMEN POETS from the year 1950 onward. Keeping the scope and the relevance of the paper in view, I shall take only six women poets: Three from 20th century and three from 21st century Indian English Poetry. First three of these poetesses started writing after independence and the others have started writing and publishing more recently, but even their maiden ventures hold myriad promises for the future and have made a mark in the art of versification with their beautiful and vibrant verses.

The post-independence era is marked by India's search for her own identity. This search for identity is one of the remarkable features of Indian literature penned by Modern Indian Women Writers. Although our constitution has imparted many rights to women such as right to equality of opportunity, rights equal to men regarding marriage and divorce, the liberty of education and expression, and the makers of the constitution raised women's problems and sought equal footing for them with men on all fronts, but the condition of women has not improved much. In spite of all types of progress, women are even today humiliated and harassed in homes, outside as well as at the work places. Clara Nubile, in "The Danger of Gender" (2003), writes about what does it mean to be a woman in modern India?:

"Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of being a woman – wife – mother.... A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood, otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to traditional Indian views.... Indian women do not appear to have their independent role in society. Moreover, they must become a male appendix in order to have a role. Indian women are thus linked by male-definitions, sex-segregation patterns... Individualism is considered a western perversion and female individual space is unacceptable and inconceivable (Clara Nubile, 2003).

It is very ironic and painful that in India where goddesses are worshipped by millions of men, the innocent girls and women are still being harassed, tormented, raped and murdered ruthlessly by the evil-minded, corrupt and zehadi-minded people all-over the world. In India the woman is confined to "the triple

role of daughter-in-law, wife and mother." (Vrinda Nabar, 1995)

However, Indian women are happy to live in the four walls of their homes, looking after their kith and kin, but ours is a male-dominated society where the women are still sexually and biologically subjugated by men. A vast majority of women are reconciled to a life of humiliation in the form of gender bias and religious fanaticism while performing the roles of daughters, wives and mothers in a rigidly custom-bound milieu they live in. Sarah Grimble observes:

"Man has subjugated woman to his will, used as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind." (Sarah Grimble, 1970)

But now-a-days women are becoming aware of this fact that their inferiority is not ordained in Heaven. Women have realized that the system of patriarchy which existed since a long time, no longer serves the needs of the rapidly changing society now. The woman of today has courage to express her essentially feminine sensibility honestly and sincerely. We are celebrating 'Woman's Day' and 'Mother's Day' to show the tremendous change in women's position, but mere celebration is not sufficient to change the mentality of male-dominated society. It is like adding salt to the wound rather than paving the way for gender-equality. Mita Ghosh writes:

"A day – long celebration of a woman's supposedly special status in society hardly justifies the other 364 days of wrong doing towards women." (Mita Ghosh, 2008)

It is true, too, that we can't compensate 364 days' insults, abuses, physical and mental tortures, rapes and murders by one day's honour and respect. Although with the dawn of the new millennium, the modern Indian woman has been protesting against every kind of masculine dominion. She has stood and strongly trying to prove that she is free, liberated and assertive. The manhood should no longer ignore her concerns, interests and ambitions now. Literature is the best medium to express emotions and advocate ideas as it has a unique power of transcending all barriers of time and space. The manner in which it treats a particular theme and invests it with a universal meaning, binds the strangest of the people and the remotest of the places. It delineates the inner-life and subtle impersonal relationships of the characters in a subtle and sensible way. It records dreams and desires, fears and furies, facts and fiction in its minutest details to soothe and soften mankind in the hours of agony and anguish.

The Indo- Anglian women writers are constantly mapping new heights. They have a passion for self-identity and are breaking new grounds for them. Their characters are setting new trends in the society. They vividly delineate the pains and sufferings of women in united families, offices and public places. They plead that sex-exploitation and hypocrisy, traditional expectations of the family, obligations to society

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and snatching away of the individual freedom will only result in identity crisis. They are not willing to tolerate any underhand dealings in the field of love and have no inhibitions in giving due place to sexuality and the demands of the body.

“Kamala Das”, as Bruce King observes, “is a natural poet with an excellent feeling for sound rhythm, phrasing, image, symbol, word play and drama.”(Bruce King, 1987) While H. M. Williams in his survey of Indo-Anglian literature maintains that her poems succeed “because of the identity of feeling and structure.”(Williams, 1974) She is a versatile genius. She presents woman in many roles as daughter, wife, beloved, mother, street-walker, lovelorn, ecstatic, despondent, hoping, despairing, whoring and enduring, caught up in the vortex of her passions. Writing for her became the best way of attacking society, which expected total surrender and total silence on the part of women. Displeased with the kind of social conditioning and gender stereotyping, she feels that it is the gender discrimination and certain predetermined male defined roles imposed on girls that construct her feminine identity. In the poem, ‘An Introduction’ she tells about such a bigoted gender based ‘categorization’ prevailing in the society:

“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarrelor with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers.”

She records her despair, discomfiture and frustration in majority of her poems. She has used symbolic language and characters to express her inner pain. She was a courageous and significant poet who had learnt to ignore what people will think and say. In ‘The Looking Glass’ she says:

“Getting a man to love you is easy
..... stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier.....
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers”

The poetess creates an inner world of her own which is shared by the reader and thus enables him or her to celebrate the joy of being an individual. Generally in our Indian society, marriage becomes the license for sexual – relationship whether the female partner feels comfortable or not. The poetess expresses her anger towards this attitude about married life. She shows her irritation in the concluding lines of ‘The Looking Glass’ against the customs and traditions that a widow, a woman without her man, has to follow. She asks why a woman is condemned to a drab, colorless and destitute existence of enforced celibacy aimed at containing her sexuality:

“Your Body which once under his touch had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.”

As a poetess Kamala Das’s natural instincts always stir her to achieve a higher position in Indian

English verse and to sustain the aesthetic and erotic beauty by giving it a new flavour by her own poetic craft. Her poetry is naturally Indian and by creating her own verse-universe, she has really enhanced the glory of Indian English Poetry at the National and International level. She has poured a great substance of the wine of her life bottle into her poetry.

Mamta Kalia, the next post-independence Indian English poetess, has dared to speak out her mind and pronounce the anxieties, agonies and angers in high tones. In her poetry, she has given a shocking treatment to the orthodoxy of traditions. She has fairly liberal views and so generation gap between Ms. Kalia and her father can easily be seen in her first volume of poems “Tribute to Papa and Other Poems”. She did not like to fulfill the expectations of her tradition-bound father. She does not like to repress her desires and does not care for anybody, even her father. As she writes in ‘Tribute to Papa’:

“Who cares for you, Papa?
Who cares for your clean thoughts, clean
words, clean teeth
..... I am seriously thinking of
Disowning you, Papa.”

She speaks out what she feels. She cannot compromise like average woman with any imposed situation. Like Kamala Das, she has poured her frustrations and other restrictions and expectations imposed on her in her poetry. Her married-life caused pain and sufferings due to her husband’s negligence, household duties and job-related responsibilities. Kalia’s poetry is not only about her frustrations and sufferings, it is also about the happy-times which she shared with her husband. As she misses her husband in the poem ‘Sunday Song’:

“I wonder at the emptiness
Of this Sunday and of all Sundays.
.....when you were here.
We’d rise late,
Sip each other’s tea,
bathe together,.....
We’d come back, make love again, call it a day.”
On the contrary, she reveals her anger in poem
‘Dubious Lovers’:

“Every time I open my mouth,
You feel let down,
and every time you discuss your pay scale,
I try hard not to frown.
If this goes on where will we end?”

Imtiaz Dharker, born in Lahore, raised and educated in Britain, now lives in India. She is also a versatile genius as she is a documentary film-maker, a poet and also an artist. Her poetry reveals her frustrations and tensions due to the restrictions and oppressions forced on women. She voiced against this discrimination in her society. Dharker’s first collection of poems is “Purdah”. The ‘Purdah’ is used not only as a veil but it is also a powerful symbol employed by mankind to signify the domination of man over woman. She brings out her anger towards the gendering of women from the very beginning. She conveys the irony when in ‘Purdah 1’ she says:

“Purdah is a kind of safety,
A body finds a place to hide”

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Actually, she wants to say that 'Purdah' is a mode to repress women and they are not allowed to express their feelings. It is like a cover to hide the identity of a woman as an individual human being. Women fall prey to humiliation and violence, whether physical, mental or emotional, for the sake of safety. Dharker has been a minute observer of such conditions of women. She is a revolutionary to raise her voice against all the suppressions and humiliations done against women in our society. To prove oneself as an individual is not an easy task, especially for women in a fanatic society. Everybody can not dare to raise her voice, hence in such conditions, poetess like Imtiaz Dharker and others become the mouthpiece of women who are compelled to be 'deaf and dumb' against all tortures and sufferings.

In the poem 'Grace', the poetess expresses her anger at women not being allowed into mosques. The mosque is a place which imparts peace and security. Everybody has right to seek communion with God and feel His presence with the self. But an old man from whom the narrator expected a word of learning, accuses her harshly of making the Mosque impure by coming inside, intentionally hinting at the state of menstruation. Without looking at her, showing off as a pious Muslim, he spits out his words with contempt:

"A woman comes
with her eyes concealed.
She trails the month behind her.
We are defiled..."

The poetess resents such conservative attitude and comments with irony on the grounds for considering women impure. Such attitude is generally received by the women during the stage of menstruation. It is strange and humorous too because menstruation is the natural procedure that shows that the woman is healthy and capable of producing children. But the woman is deprived even from worshipping the God in that condition. And this irony is enhanced in the poem by the fact that a woman is humiliated with contempt in the abode of God, who is compassionate and Merciful. In her poetry, there is a desire to liberate women from injustices and inequalities surrounding them and treating them as custodians of traditional fanatic values.

Sanjukta Dasgupta, one of the gems of 21st century Indian English poets, writes her poems in the feminist mode. Her collection of poems, "Lakshmi Unbound", takes the inspiration for its title from the great Romantic poet P.B. Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound". The poems are mostly feminist in nature. The first poem, entitled 'Lakshmi Unbound: A Soliloquy' starts with an incantation, asserting the essential freedom of a woman to be seen as a human being, and not being confined to roles fixed by gender stereotypes.

I just can't be Lakshmi
I have to break the silence
My wealth is not jewels
My wealth is my gipsy spirit.

The chilling poem 'I Killed Him M'Lord' narrates the horrific tale of a marriage rife with

domestic violence, resulting in a gruesome murder. Incorporating aspects of a dramatic monologue, the Jekyll-and-Hyde nature of the murdered man Amit, has been described employing similes deceptively beautiful to play up the horror.

Yet at daytime he was so calm, so caring
Running his fingers on the red stripes of my back
The fingers went forward, like a train on burnt
red tracks

His fingers played like a child
Running a toy car on the parent's back.
The gendered differences of even a personal space such as the toilet are explored in the poem 'Perspective'. Whereas for a man, the toilet is the place for philosophical reflections, for a woman it is "a private space for silent expression/of trauma, fears and oceans of tears." For women, it is the only place where they can breathe freely.

Vinita Agrawal is an award-winning poetess and writer based in Mumbai. Her book, "The Silk of Hunger" (2016), dedicated to her late father, is threaded with the pain of loss and absence, which can also be interpreted as death. The recurring theme of many of the poems in this book, has been vividly delineated in a couple of heart-rending similes.

And then the presence of your absence
Like a charcoal sketch without features
Like an endearment and no one to call it by.

In the poem 'Raw Silk', the poetess implores the person whom she would be meeting, presumably after a long absence, but not to greet with a hello as it would imply that they are strangers. Vinita's language is imaginative and simply exquisite here.

That greeting for strangers.....
We've shared too many moons on the palettes
of our nights
When we meet
Leave the race behind. Face me.

Her poem 'The Night of Father's Passing', replete with metaphors suggesting a pathetic fallacy, tender and devastating, is the agonized expression of a daughter's heartbreak.

Father passed away. Became an absence.
And time did turn into a thing.

It brought a sunless morning and a moonless night.
Marking my father absent.

"The Heart Is An Attic" (2018) by Srividya Sivakumar, an excellent poetess of 21st century India, essentially encompasses songs of the urban feminine experience. The poems are bold and beautiful enough to remind me of Kamala Das, but the aesthetic is Srividya's own. 'Façade', for instance, speaks about breasts, but rather than disembodied and dismembered entities, they are an intrinsic part of every woman's days, and contribute to her experience of life.

One of her poems 'One Night Stand' seamlessly blends a postmodern theme with the traditional form of rhymed and half-rhymed couplets, with the last four lines ending in a quatrain. The protagonist of the poem goes to bed with a new man every night, but behind each foray is a desperate seeking of the man she addresses, the man she actually loved:

"The beds are different the men are too,
I look in all the faces and do not find you."

The sad end of a love affair in contemporary times is vividly delineated in 'Sunder'. With the advent of social media, it is nearly impossible to mourn the loss of love in privacy, because our lives, including our relationships, are in the domain of public knowledge.

...the things were simple then, sorrow too.

Now the whole world knows about me and about you.

Aim of the Study

The present paper aims show this Passion and Endeavour of the six Post-Independence Indo-Anglian women poets- three from 20th Century and three from 21st century Indian English poetry.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that with the passage of time, Indian English Poetry has undergone a sea change. Starting with Spirituality and Patriotism, it has now come up to the issues of Self-Identity and Personal Experiences of all types. Giving up old traditional values of Love and Spirituality, the modern

poetesses are now using poetry as a mighty medium to bring about the necessary social changes in the society. The feelings of Diaspora and Nostalgia have now become the center marks of Contemporary Literature.

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