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## “INDIAN WOMEN POETS: MAPPING OUT NEW TERRAINS”

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper offers a study on the poetic excellence of women Indian poets writing with full deft and skill in the post independence era. The works taken for study include Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silangardo, Eunice De Souza, Imitez Dharker, Sunita Agrawal, Sujata Bhatt, Charmayne D' Souza and Vimla Agrawal.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian women, poets, irony, image, symbol and suggestive.



### INTRODUCTION

Kamla Das ( Madhuavikuti), alias Suraiya Begum uses verse form to express the need and desires of the female subject in the large patriarchal society of India. Poetry, to her, has been a medium to express the self, 'a room of their own', where they could voice their deepest, 'sensibilities' and bare their souls, unfettered by the 'senses' of a misfit and unsympathetic world. Her works are a fascinating study of the entire gamut of female desires throbbing with a sense of her own experiences. It is on this ground that she is considered by most of the critics as confessional poet. Her autobiography, *My Story* reveals that her poems are indeed an intense study of her personal traumas and tribulations that she faced in her married life bereft of emotional bonding. Truly speaking her poems are not merely confessions but her voicing for female identity. Fascinated by the wide range of feminine aspects that she depicts in her poems, M.K. Naik aptly remarks: " Several faces of Eve are exhibited here - woman as sweet-heart, flirt, wife, woman of the world, mother, middle aged woman matron and above all as an untiring seeker of the psychological processes of behind both femininity and masculinity (M. K. Naik)."

Kamla Das firmly holds the view that the sufferings of a woman are as old as the Himalaya and has been felt across the time. She corroborates this through her poem, '*The Maggots*.' She uses ancient Hindu myth. On their last night together Krishna asks Radha if she is disturbed by his kisses. Radha says, "Not at all, but thought, What is / it to the corpse if the maggots nip (*The Maggots* 1967)."

Das voices the silence of Radha and makes us aware of her searing pain. By making a powerful goddess prey to such thought, she validates the point of the ordinary women to have similar feelings. Kamla Das is aptly regarded as a greater champion of freedom for women. In her poem "*In Love*" she talks of the "sad lie/ of my endless lust'. Critics have generally assigned the views and experiences of her persona to the poet herself. Publication of her autobiography, *My story* ( 1976) has also encouraged her readers to relate her poems with her life. Her poems present the persona as an unhappy woman, unfortunate wife and reluctant nymphomaniac. In *My Story* she talks of her highly regimented

atmosphere in which she grew because of her excessive parental control. Her parents considered her merely a puppet. Very soon she realizes that she has been "a burden and a responsibility" on their parents. Even marriage failed to extricate her from the sense of identity crisis and 'non-being'. Almost all her poems can be interpreted as an attempt to redefine her identity in hostile setting. In her poem, 'Composition' she raises a question regarding her identity:

I asked my husband/Am I hitherto  
Am I lesbian /Or am I just plain frigid?  
He only laughed. For such questions..... answers must emerge from within.

Existential questions begin to torment her mind. She starts meditating on the reality of one's existence, the nature of freedom. Failure in love epitomizes in her the dialects of self-evolution. There are, however, no easy answers to such questions, as the poet herself avers in another beautiful poem 'Nani':

*...each truth  
Ends thus with a query. It is this designed  
Deafness that turns mortality into  
Immortality, the definite into  
The soft indefinite.*

The poet finds no way out of her torments of the world, and her quest remains incomplete. This is perhaps the crux of her problems. In her poem, 'An Introduction', there is an expression of her sense of loss and her struggle to come out of the crisis, aggravated by the uncalled for solicitations of Sunday categorizes who would exhort her to,

*Dress in sarees, be girl,  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh!*

The poet finds it difficult to fit herself to the behavioural pattern expected in a tradition-ridden family. The persona in her poems breaks away from the traditional role of a woman:

*Then....I wore a shirt and my  
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored  
My womanliness...*

She pertinently protests against this "soul killing" subjugation and planning "to tame a swallow" and asks: "Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried/ beneath a man?" 'The Old Playhouse' caricatures the lyrical feminine role and castigates the drafting of woman:

*You called me wife,  
offer at right moment the vitamins. Cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego.*

Married life in such an atmosphere is hardly better than a farce. In 'The Descendants' the poet ironically provides a panacea for a happy married life:

*Husbands and wives, here is my advice to you,  
Obey each other's crazy commands...*

The frustration and loneliness oblige the persona to resort to a life of presentation. She herself says in *"The Suicide"*: "I must pretend/ I must act the role/ Of happy woman,/ happy wife". And love is reduced to the mechanical act of bodily union, "a / finished jigsaw". The urge for freedom from living with the husband therefore grows into an obsession: "*Love-words flung from doorway and of course/Your tired lust*". This would explain Kamla Das's flair for references to extra-marital relations in her autobiography, death wish, and even the recent conversion.

In brief, Kamla Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility which articulates without inhibitions the plight and predicament of women doomed to live in an intensely man-made world. What imparts deeper significance to her poetry is their universality. As the poet herself says, her persona is "every / woman who seeks love". He who touches Das's poem touches a woman. Keki N. Daruwalla, an intelligent fellow-poet, is of the view that Das takes note on the "inner world of failings, frustrations and relationships' and the "intensity of feeling" and "the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex" and maintains that love, the lazy animal hungers of the flesh' and the hurt and humiliations faced by women are "the warp and woof of her poetic fabric (Keki N. Daruwalla, 1980)".

The feminine psyche's obsession with sex, however, does not get perverted into nymphomania because of the inherent urge for spiritual fulfillment in love through the medium of sex. The true nature of Das's treatment of love can be properly understood if we keep her Nair lineage in mind. Originally, Nair society was the "matrilineal, matrilocal organisation' and did not hinder the plurality of husbands to a Nair woman". But later, "it treated marital relations with increasing rigidity from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (M.K.Naik 1990)".

This fact will explain the unusual frankness in Das's poetry and her attitude to love. M. Elias has tried to show that Das's "sinfulness or innocence is not the product of modern conditions in India or elsewhere, but that they originate from inherited complexes" due to her Nair lineage (M.K.Naik 1983). While this line of enquiry may reveal an important aspect of Das's poetry and may not appear farfetched, it is undoubtedly reductionist and therefore of little value. Das is a pioneer in Indian feminist writing and what gives special significance to her poetry is her honest and concentrated communication of experience for its own sake.

Tagore was apt in stating that only a woman can appreciate the pain and sufferings of another woman. In this reference, Mamta Kalia is a befitting name. She writes with full felicity in Hindi as well as in English language. Unlike Kamla Das, she does not take to writing poetry on account of an emotional-sexual compulsion to "take in with greed, like a forest-fire that /Consumes" but out of sheer motivation to "pick my nose/ in a public place". Wit and irony are allowed to sway the reverence and filial bonds to commonly expected norms in the Indian context. To the persona of her best known title poem of her first volume of English verses, "*Tribute to Papa and Other Poems*" (1970), nothing has happened "except two children/ and two miscarriages'. Both the parents of the persona are demythologized. Papa is an "unsuccessful man" who failed to "wangle a cosy place in the world" and has always lived a life of "limited dreams", and mama can scarcely be "proud of your creativity--/ Except for the comfort/ That I look like papa/ and not like the neighbour/ who shared our bathroom". The poem begins with rhetorical questions and rushes head-long to demolish age-old notions of reverence, ideal role model and respectability:

Who care for you papa?  
 Who cares for your clean thoughts, clean words, clean teeth?  
 Who wants to be an angel like you?  
 Who wants it?  
 You are an unsuccessful man, papa.  
 Couldn't wangle a cosy place in the world.

The poem makes the point very succinctly clear regarding intergenerational tensions in our middle-class families, the tendency to amass wealth through corrupt means, the hush-hush hypocritical

prudency, and so on. The persona stays sort of calling her father as 'bastard'; as in Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" but the consideration of the last line is just devastating.

Melanie Silgado, another excellent Indian poet, also approaches her elders with a similar candid irreverence. She would not now let her father raise an accusing finger:

Wherever you are, will you, turn your index finger away?  
I grant you divine power that it took to live your kind of life,...  
Father, perhaps you have lived too much.

Silgado's treatment of her grandmother is even more casual. She lives all alone as her sons are far away and daughters being too old after her. Her old confidence has been replaced by a fear: "Fear of the dark/ And fear that you might" ....Commenting on Silgado's poems, Bruce King observes; " an earlier generation of ( Indian ) women seemed to feel that the problem of life could be solved through man's love. In de Souza and Silgado the women seem to live their life in their own way. If they make a mess of their lives it is their mess and not the fault of a husband or lover(Bruce King, 1987)." These poets, however, are not willing to spare their husbands or lovers at times, although their occupation with their father is far more pronounced.

Eunice De Souza's hard-edged book called *Fix* was seen by her community as a betrayal. The book was denounced from the pulpit at St. Peter's at Bandra, and Adil Jussawala said that if she continued on the same lines, she would soon be denounced at St. Peter's in Rome. De Souza attacks the cultural religiosity of her community and several catholic characters created by her appear to be "an embodiment of the complacency, the closed heart and mind (Veronica Brady, 1991)" responsible for evil in her world. In her beautiful poem, "Autobiographical" she claims to have killed her father when she was three and "muddled through several affairs/ and always come out badly". Having failed to learn anything from experience, she has headed all along "for the abyss with monotonous regularity'. De Souza also rebels against her family upbringing. Some of her poems have mainly to do with conflicts with parents. She writes in her poem "Forgive Me, Mother"; "The blood congeals at lover's touch/The guts dissolve in shit."

The poem concludes: "In dreams/ I back you". De Souza's poetry is feminist in its kind of awareness, female vision, and affinities to the mode of another women poets-rather than in a proclaimed commitment. Silgado realizes her relations with her parents in "*The Earthworm's story* as following:

You never knew that I wet my pillow  
Oftener than I had ever wet my bed.  
Forgive me for the things I said.

Imitaz Dharker's book, *Purdah* (1989) describes a sculpture working at creating a human body. In '*Battle-line*', Dharker presents the tension in evoking the conflict between man and woman, who can either be lovers or husband and wife. Poems about women in *Purdah II* tend to be flattened out by the overriding emotion of compassion:

Purdah is a kind of safety.  
The body finds a place to hide. ( p.50)

Poems of Smita Agrawal too frequently express women suffering in the form of tradition of impersonality. The speaker in "The Salesman" is aware of the reception he is likely to get and is hypersensitive about every move and sound he makes:

Making sure there is no one around  
I confront the first, lift my right

Leg right, miss the mark, hear in the silent...(p.63)

Sujata Bhatt writes of 'of the anguish of immigrants when they start to lose their first language. Dr. Shefali Balsari-Shah comments on the bilingualism of the poems: "Sujata Bhatt's experiments in bilingual poetry explore the conflict of the self divided between different cultures..... (Eunice de Souza, 2001)"

In '*The Peacock*', she catches the singularity of the bird, its miraculous beauty, and the sense of stillness one feels in the presence of such beauty: "His loud sharp call seems to come from nowhere. /Then, a flash of turquoise in the pipal tree." (p.73)

The poetry of Charmyne D' Souza, a poet of younger generation, is about the situations of women. Others are about landscapes, visits to museums, prisoners, schools for the handicapped at its best in poems such as '*The White Line Down the Road to Miinnessota*' when she contemplates an object and allows a number of images and ideas to arise from it without being whimsical or arbitrary. In her poem, '*God's Will*', handles the idea of a tragic world with deft irony:

A strange legacy, that: one holocaust,  
Thirty-five wars, a few million tortured and killed. (p.87)

A poet of relatively younger generation, Sunita Agrawal makes her persona wonder if her son would "Recollect the insular glory of your father/ Inviolate in her separate sbed room." In poem like this, the poet says, "A woman is trying to come into her own.' What these poets tend to forget is that their personae's disowning might create further problems in the society. As Pope would put it, "We think of our fathers fools so wise we grow / our wiser sons no doubt will think of us so". This is these poets' way of rejecting patriarchy and asserting their right to behave the way they deemed fit for themselves, and is not essentially different from Mamta Kalia's wish (contained in her poem "Compulsions") "to pay Sunday visits/ Totally undressed".

Traditional expectations of the family, obligations to society, snatching away of the individual freedom, exploitation and hypocrisy and sham perpetuated in the name of matrimony, however, only result in identity crisis. Mamta Kalia's "Anonymous" speaks of the resultant identity crisis:

I no longer feel I'm Mamta Kalia  
I'm Kamla  
Or Vimla  
Or Kanta or Shanta.  
I cook, I wash  
I bear, I rear.  
I nag. I wag.

Love is the dominant theme in the case of most of these poets. Love, says Byron, "in a man's life may be a thing apart; it's woman's whole existence". True love cannot be destroyed even by death. As Lila Ray writes in *The Valley of Vision*,

Those who love  
Redeem themselves and deify  
The times in which they live.  
The hardness of man's soul can be redeemed by tenderness of love:

These poets nevertheless would not tolerate any underhand dealings in the name of love. What they hate most is "the circus of love'. They would also disapprove of stereotypical roles and solutions. They have no inhibitions in giving due place to sexuality and the demands of body. Through poems like Meena Alexander's "Sita's Story" and Sunanda Swarup's "Lament of Urmila" they try to rewrite the

story of wronged women afresh. By writing verses they have attempted to create enough space for themselves and other women in the society. Moreover, they have tried and fashioned a distinctive idiom for their use, which is another way of creating space. Monika Verma speaks for all Indian women poets when she writes in her poem "Give me space" :

Give me space... space not just to exist  
But to live...

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