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INDIAN LITERATURE: A SAGA OF SOCIAL SUFFERING; with special Reference to Indian Women Poets

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ABSTRACT :

Literature is the product of a writer's reaction to life and a writer himself is the product of his society. Consciously or unconsciously, all literature articulate the spirit of time which is the most essential accretion of all political, social, cultural and religious characteristics of a particular age. These influences assume even greater significance in the case of women writing as women lead a society defined and society governed life.

KEYWORDS :

Social, Cultural and Religious characteristics, Women poets.

INTRODUCTION :

Creativity is a medium through which the women poets express themselves. The condition of the modern world is so disturbing that sensitive psyche of these poets is unable to withstand the degradation and devaluation of moral, social, economic and religious values. For these poets creation is an outcome of passions; for some it is intellectual exercise and for others it involves the heart and the mind. The poetry of Indian English women poets is an effort of the poets who continuously struggle to carve out their identity and individuality. Poetic creativity is a way to self- assessment and self- realization.

A study of Indian English Women poets in English demands at the outset, a clarification of a few issues related to it. The very term "Women Poets" implies an attempt to isolate "Women" poets for "Men" poets, and consider them as a group only on the basis of sex. Working through radical movements and silent changes, through legal and political battles, women are learning to know and discover themselves.

The aim of this paper is to explore the theme of Indian Literature; a saga of social suffering; with special references to Indian English Women Poets. The depicted women poets through this chain of thought are Pre-independent era poetess Sarojini Naidu, trans-formational phase – poet Kamala Das and modern poets like Monika Verma, Charmayne D'souza and Anna Sujatha Mathai etc. These women poets with their "extra inch of sensitivity" try to portray the dilemma of feminism. Feminism is described as "a political situation", "femaleness" as a matter of biology and "femininity" as asset of culturally defined characteristics,¹

Pen being the phallic symbol, its use was considered a male prerogative and a woman was

thought to be “genetically unsuited” for literary production. In male imagination a “proper woman” was an “angel” in the home and creative activity was almost a taboo for perfect woman. This attitude is best revealed in the poetry of modern awakened woman. Women writers were viewed as “intruders on the right of men” and castigated as “neurotic”, “mad”, “abnormal”, “monster” and “intellectual eunuch”.

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1940) popularly known as the “Nightingale of India” has been the most prominent woman poet of the colonial period who has got great recognition in India and abroad. Her poetical works include *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird Of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917), her main themes were nature, Love, devotion, god, spirituality, life and death. She voiced women’s predicaments in her few poems. She fearlessly condemned evil customs such as infant marriage, purdah, sati etc. She felt concerned for the desperate condition of the widows;

*Nay let her be! What comfort can we give,
For joy so frail, for hope so fugitive?
The yearnings of unfulfilled delight,
The moonless vigils of her lonely night,
And flowering springs that mark her empty years?
(‘Dirge’, The spectred flute).*

The words in the above lines like ‘Fugitive’, ‘Unfulfilled’, ‘Moonless’, ‘Lonely’, ‘Empty’, suggest futility of widow’s life in society.

In one of her other short poem *Satee*, the deep emotion and pathos, on the sudden demise of a woman’s husband, she justifies the ‘self’ - immolation of a widow in the following lines.

*Shall the blossom live if the tree is
dead? Life of my life, death’s bitter
sword,
Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?
(‘Satee’, The spectred flute, P.18.)*

In the above cited lines of poem ‘Flesh’ is referring to the widow and ‘soul’ for the husband who is no more.

In this saga of social suffering, Kamala Das represented a sea change through her unconventional voice, expressing the dreams and desires of a woman. The real picture of womanhood was in topsy-turvydom and the transition first emerged in the credo of “confessional poetry” which she established as a rebellious act of self – definition in this desperate situation Kamala Das’s quest for identity is directly the offspring of male dominated social set-up, oriented towards the total annihilation of the feminine personality. What is not real and genuine cannot satisfy her. She designed “a new world”, by explaining the feminine identity through different paradoxical situations. Das’s poetry dramatizes an “aching disappointment” which she has superbly shifted to succeeding women poets. The evils of dowry, child marriages and ill matched marriages have continued violence and crime against women. And to this has been added the heinous crime of female- foeticide – an Indian Specialty. The agony of social suffering of Indian woman is best presented in Kamala das’s “An Introduction”, where her poetic self is struggling to retain its identity against the “categorizers”, who asks her to fit in :

*Dress in Saree, Be Girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with the servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers³.*

In the above lines, she bitterly rejects the stereotyped, typical and particular rules of the

patriarchal society imposed to female identity.

Shifting next to the modern women poets, Monika Varma expresses the imprisoned female in following lines;

*Give me space space not just to exist,
But live. Let there be space for smiles,
Give me space..... space for laughter ,
Why live if laughter lies.
Oh give me space for one little day
before I die⁴ .
(Give Me Space.P.9)*

The above lines suggest that she doesn't want only to live physically in the world, but spiritually, mentally and psychologically as well.

Charnayne D' Souza's collection of poems entitled *A Spelling Guide To woman* (1990) paints the picture of woman who is marginalized and cyphered. The title of collection divided into four sections entitled as *Alpha, Beta, Gamma* and *Delta* respectively. Writing to Charmayne D' Souza's is an appetite, a psychic necessity, a spiritual hunger, a biological drive to write away the loneliness and the betrayal.

Most of the so called societies are patriarchal in nature. Patriarchy means. "a society or a country governed by men⁵." In her first poem "Spelling guide to woman", she superbly defines the word woman":

*Woo men,
Womb men,
Woe men,
Whim men,
Warm men,
Who men,
no, women⁶ .*

The above poem is the gist of collection. It suggests that all the important functions in the life of a "male" are completed by "female" still she is subordinated and marginalized. A female is wooed by a male first, then she is gifted a baby by him; either legitimate or illegitimate. The interpretation of the child's legitimacy is again in the grip of male.

Simon De Beauvoir expresses this entrapment in the following manner: "I looked and it was revelation; this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men"⁷.

Since time immemorial woman has been the victim of male domination and oppression and treated like a beast of burden and object of pleasure. The saga of unending suffering is captured in the poem, "The Enemy To Come," as she cries;

*I do not see you
When I see you
I see you
Only as the enemy
to come
(“The Enemy to come,”P.36.)*

And last but not least the marital dissatisfaction comes out in the poem entitled "Cattle-Front", by Charmayne D'Souza,

*She must be prepared to attempt
to the funeral arrangements
Of her marriage
make the wedding veil
her shroud.
(" Cattle-Front," P.37)*

She ironically makes her poetry a vehicle for the expression of her resentment against her husband. She uses the word "funeral" which symbolizes "marriage" and the word "shroud" stand for the "bridal's dress". She considers life after marriage as death.

In the nut shell, any genre of literature can be better, appreciated if discussed under the light of its contemporary scenario. Finally all the Indian women poets discussed under study seeks for their respective identity as a human being first because patriarchy defines woman as, "nothing but the sex, the womb, the ovaries."⁸

The unending saga of suffering can better be appreciated with Dorothy Richardson remarks that "They (women) have no faith in their own ability to change their environment, because they have been taught that women cannot make it through life – economically, socially, emotionally as sexually without men. Their only choice is to take a relationship on his terms"⁹.

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