

Voicing The Voiceless: Social Consciousness In Modern Indian English Women Poetry

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Abstract

For the last few decades, women-writing has been centre-stage of Literary and Critical scenario in India, with women litterateurs making their presence strongly felt in all the genres of literature. Poetry has emerged as their favourite genre before and after independence though the thematic concerns of the pre and post independence generation have substantially varied. The Romantic Indian English women poets represented by Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu have not revealed much social consciousness and their major thematic concerns continue to be nature, love, eternity, spiritual and mystical leanings. In the post-independence scenario, the canvas gets much wider as the poets transcend their personal self and relate to the world around, revealing wide-ranging social consciousness and concern in their writings. The pathetic lives of the deprived, destitute and downtrodden people are at the core of their social concern. This paper explores the theme of their social consciousness in depth, studies their social concern and brings out their overall final vision for society.

Keywords: social consciousness, post- independence, poetry, core, deprived sections, final vision.

Introduction

Social consciousness or consciousness of the milieu is very natural in a human being, especially, in an artist as his higher sensitivity and refined sensibility arm him not only with a better sight but also a keen insight into all phenomena. Expression of this social awareness and zeitgeist is what makes literature a unique and invaluable record of man's physical, mental and spiritual journey through various ages since the dawn of creation. Such an awareness also gives a wider range, a greater authenticity and liveliness to a literary work. A writer's concern with his immediate social scenario has come to be considered as not only an important but also a necessary virtue (Conquest xiv)

Women litterateurs have generally been criticized for the narrow range of their writing and Jane Austen's limited range has become a literary cliché to describe the restricted world and vision of any writer. The writing of women generally centres around their personal and that too family life. The world outside seems to be beyond their ken and they reveal only a little social consciousness or awareness of the events, circumstances and situations around them. Indian English women poets are no exception and the charge most frequently and scathingly levelled against them has been their lack of social consciousness and obsessive concern with the theme of love. A number of critics have pointed out this serious limitation. Dr. A.N. Dwivedi observes, "They woefully lack the national and political consciousness" and "they seem to suffer from an insular outlook and narrow range as they have failed to voice forcefully hopes and fears, joys and miseries of the common man in India"(26). Monika Varma, herself a poet and a critic, wants their writing to be more than mere "Sighs and thighs"(27). Lakshmi Kannan, another practising poet, has pointed towards their poetry as being a "narrow social phenomenon"(3). Most of the critical work on Indo-Anglian women poets has also so far centred around the study of the theme of love in their writings.

Admittedly, one does not find much social consciousness in the pre-Independence poets represented by Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. However, the scenario substantially changes with the modern Indian

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English women poets. One of the most distinctive features of modern literature is its increased social consciousness and concern. In their quest for meaning the post-Independence women poets move further to a wider context i.e. the society around them. Various facets of society affect their sensitivity and sensibility in the process and their poetry records both the diverse social situations and the responses these situations elicit from them. These poets have expressed the deep anguish experienced by a sensitive soul seeking fulfilment in a world sans values. With the greater self-exposure has come a greater expansion of self. These poets have transcended their narrow selves and reacted to the world around them. Gauri Pant represents the modern women poets expanding awareness and social commitment :

*The camera of my sharpened senses
Portrays the caravan of happenings
Unfolding their nakedness
Stripping them bare.*

(Abidi 282)

An important concern of their social consciousness continues to be the issues related to women, but they have also reacted to the diverse facets of social life. The poets published during the last few years have a wide canvas and reveal awareness not only of women-related issues but also of the entire social scenario in an otherwise limited world where hitherto the women poets had echoed single song "the song of you [lover] sung for years" ('The Song for You': Sunita Jain, *Till I Find Myself*, p.42), one reads with interest a new poet Achla Bhatia's statement of a new awakening in her poem 'Dreams':

*The suffering of others
Throb and become a part of me*

(Awakening 26)

Theme of Social Consciousness

The poor and the downtrodden sections of society have compelled the maximum attention of these poets. Their own secondary status gives them a kind of imaginative empathy and makes them more sensitive and sympathetic towards these ignored and oppressed people. Sujatha Modayil cannot forget the sordidness and poverty of Indian society beneath its gala exterior of dances and beer and luxuries' and tells a man from West

*Like a maggot inside a shining fruit
I've got death and sadness written inside me
My womb is filled with
The poverty of my people-*

('Barriers' 40)

India's poverty has become proverbial and an integral part of India's image. A curious foreigner enquires from Sunita Jain: "Did many die of hunger?" (At the Bus stop, *Man of My Desires*, p.15). What makes the situation really tragic and irritating is the very wide gulf that exists here between the haves and the have-nots. That such contradictions still exist after so many years of independence is a matter of great concern for these poets. Mamta Kalia witnesses both the struggle of the poor to eke out a living and the inactive, luxurious life of the rich in her poem 'A Pretty Girl crosses the Road'. In one world 'urchins sell popcorn' and in the other your capital earns you multiprofit'. Margaret Chatterjee sadly watches the scene in 'Near Howrah Station' as one woman picks up some edible from a pile of muck and another, a rich matron, alights from a taxi with 'endless bundles'. We have striking contrast between children dripping water from a stagnant cattle-trodden pool and sleek cars slipping by' in Monika Varma's 'Drongo'. Rukmini Nair thus points out the social malady:

*Cars zip past
who cares for the backwaters, huh?*

(Age' 78)

Vested interests make the abridgement of this gap not only difficult but almost impossible, Eunice De Souza brings out the failure of socialistic efforts of a Bishop in her poem 'Varca 1942'. His attempt

to make the landlords and the peasants worship together is foiled, he is shot at and ultimately the status-quo is restored:

Land lords were landlords

and peasants peasants

Ever after:

(*Modern Indian Poetry in English* 133)

Millions of people continue to live below the poverty line, It is a world reeking with slum-dwellers, footpath- wallas, beggars, poor labourers, exploited workers and farmers and such a pathetic state of the poor and the attitude of the rich people towards them has really upset these poets . Our cities are sore and bleeding with slums. A detailed sketch of the sordid slum life has been presented in Leela Dharamraj's poem 'Slum Sithouette'. The children have dust-stained, bare-skinny bodies, tousled hair and they play in muddy gutters . Some mothers raise loud cries and demand milk in charity whereas the others with babies at breasts beg with eyes. The condition of women in poverty is really miserable:

Men kick their unfaithful

Wives who, nevertheless, beget children

And resign themselves to an inescapable fate.

The condition of the footpath-dwellers is heart-rending. The place stinks with flies, fleas and foul breath. A lady's widowed saree sets off 'wrinkled sags' of breasts. With bosom asleep on ribs' she cannot sell herself even cheap'. As portrayed by Lakshmi Kannan in her poem 'An Embarrasment' , the picture is highly repulsive as

Scratching her matty hair.

She spews a bloody betel ooze

On to puddle, spawning with mosquito

(*The Glow and the Grey* 25)

The poverty-stricken state of the poor children has compelled these poets' attention time and again. So much perturbed is Pia Ganguly to see this 'dance of hunger' that history with its past grandeur offers just no consolation. During a visit to the Taj, one of the wonders of world, the poet notices many

children crying , and they were crying

not because the begum was dead

but because they were hungry.

('Follow up on Taj' 31)

Taj's grandeur fades and it seems not what Tagore calls it 'a tear frozen on the cheek of time' but a tear frozen on the cheek of the poor. These children grow up in very unhealthy surroundings and in an ugly world where they become familiar with

tar, cement

broken walls, black

muckheaps, rags

litter and dust,

stabs, curses, gamblers, stones.

(Monika Varma , 'Drongo')

Working class is the back-bone of a country and still it is the most oppressed section. Our poets have voiced their concern about the miserable state and exploitation of this section

I sing for all who work head bent

close against the great red sun

who labour toothnail sinew bone

against glass metal paper stone

(Meena Alexander, *The Bird's Bright Ring* 15)

Achla Bhatia's poem 'Awakening' is a sympathetic reflection on the fate of these people. The labourers toil hard to raise mansions by the sweat of their brows. These creatures
*languish in the smouldering heat
of hunger and humiliation,
the pain and pangs of poverty
Peep through their eyes*

(19)

But the world moves on unruffled while these unfortunate people live amidst the din of dust and death. In Nilima Wig's 'The Labourer' a labourer works in very hard conditions under violent red sky and scorching sun. This young man has ambition to 'reach for the sky' but is crushed between two powerful trucks-symbols of our modern mechanised cruel world. None notices his death as he was entirely irrelevant and immaterial for the world around him

*Who cared if he was dead or alive anyway
-just one among multitudes.*

(*The Distant Echo* 34)

The children of the working class who grow up as undesirable and unwanted creatures finally go astray. Majority of the workers in our country is that of child-labours. The childhood of such children is dead, they have grown-up heads on their very young shoulders and often turn out to be embittered criminals:

*He is what they made him
And he is giving to the world
What he got from it.*

(Vijaya Goel, 'Creation')

The life of all these people - working class, slum-dwellers, footpath-wallas, beggars and their children is fraught with miseries. Their condition is pathetic as Man and Animal are reduced to the same level. Near Achla Bhatia's house is a heap of rubbish where

*A stray blackish pup and
a ragged old man
Eat the same garbage everyday*

('Existence' 29)

The condition is so wretched that even heavens should be whacked apart and gods descend to earth, but gods do not take pity on these people and Nilima Wig lodges her protest against divinity also:

*They have no heart or soul for those who have no
money to buy their packaged love.*

('In the Hospital' 38)

When Nature joins hands with their misfortune, the condition is simply hopeless. Whether it is flood or famine, a poor man is always the worst affected one. Margaret Chatterjee has portrayed a very moving picture of famine-struck people in her poem "Bihar". Human bodies shrink, eyes bulge out, skin is parched and the body that 'leapt from love' is thinned to 'bare structure?'. Village people flee to the town for food but old Rama can not make it and

*The vultures found him soon
In valley of dry bones.*

(*Towards the Sun* 21)

What really makes matters worse, however, is not the natural calamity but the attitude of society towards its less fortunate section. The agony of humans ceaselessly struggling, does not the least affect the rich socialite women who indulge in merry-making, bridge-playing, jewellery talks and parties. Sujatha Modayil feels alone in such company as they are dead to "Compassion's tender touch". (Alone in Company', *Crucifixions*, p.11). The rich people neither understand nor want to know:

Why Champabai's baby cries in her arms

*Why people agitate.
They victoriously vegetate.*

(Mamta Kalia , ' A Pretty Girl Crosses the Road')

Even while the rich show concern for the poor, it is only a display of charity or squeezing out of self-aggrandizement, De Souza has satirized such pseudo-hierophants of the poor and ignoble attitude of the rich towards the poor. Every Christmas the rich people undertake the noble task of feeding the poor but reality is painfully different. The rich arrive very late and poor dears' wait like children waiting for a treat. They are instructed around

*Bring your plate
Don't move
Don't try turning up for more
No.*

(De Souza , 'Feeding the Poor at Christmas')

To cap it all, the poor are told to say 'thank you' and in return to perform, a rosary for rich every evening and the entire charity is reduced to mockery. With such an attitude on the part of the rich, the saga of poor people's suffering and sorrow seems to be infinite and one wonders with Achla Bhatia

*When the tears and travails of
Vast humanity will end ?*

('Dust and Death' 19)

Social Concern and Egalitarian Vision of the Poets

A very significant feature of these women poets' writing on this subject is that they have not only portrayed plight of the poor or chastized the attitude of the rich people towards them but they have also endowed these common people, 'the unknown brick-work' of society with grace and dignity. For these poets such people are not mere dregs' of society or objects of pity and sympathy but individuals in their own right and hence deserve our respect. Margaret Chatterjee glorifies people like cobbler, washerman ,sweeper, gardener etc. In her poem 'Figures in the Daily Liturgy', each of them is glorified with even religious overtones

*The sweeper makes ready
The place where we live
Without this how could you
Spread your prayer mat*

(*The Rimless World* 4)

Monika Varma in 'Man' celebrates the dignity of a man in the slums. Any indulgence in pity on him in practical or in form of articles, treatises. census reports and gazeteers is improper and insulting as he is not mere statistics or figures, but is' very much alive in his own way. The poet goes rhetorical

*He is, a cipher but a cipher without whom
There would be no meaning, no country
No love, home
No me ... No you...*

(*Quartered Questions and Queries* 27)

Dorothy Sinha eulogizes common people like woman-labourer and maid-servant in her poems. Dignity of labour lifts these people on to a very high pedestal in the poet's eyes. A woman labourer with child in arms, fatigue of heat and dust on her face and bundle of load on her head appears 'a queen' to the poet and she feels like doing obeisance to this uncrowned queen in her poem 'The Woman Worker':

*Yet, on her head
Like a crown
She carried a load*

(*Contemporary Indo-English Verse* 60)

Thus, these poets have shown a great humanistic and democratic concern and the concern is genuine. With a poet like Achla Bhatia, the 'Moments Recollected' are not of daffodils or ecstasies of love but

of the wretched state of labourers, farmers, poverty-stricken beggars, starving children and the crying vendors. The very first question that Nilima Wig puts to God in her 'Encounter with God' is : "Why have you created so much misery?" (*The Distant Echo* 19)

The modern Indian English poets wish to usher a New Era where tears and travails of humanity will end and all individuals will live a life of dignity which is every human being's right. The world painted by our modern women poets is a world where people die of hunger and human beings are callous and inhuman to their fellow-beings but these poets have not portrayed a state of hopelessness. They retain faith in the essential goodness of man and are optimistic about the future of the mankind. Margaret Chatterjee expresses her unflinching faith in the future of human civilization in her poem 'To Pablo Naruda':

*One day the human landscape
will be beautiful.*

(*The Sound of Wings* 29)

Conclusion

In fact , these women poets represent a very crucial phase in Indian English poetry - a phase marked by the individual in women poets coming out of her cocoon and going beyond her obsession with mere personal self. It has been accomplished in stages. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu did not evidence much social consciousness. With Kamala Das these poets became aware of the issues related to women and the new poets publishing during last few decades have a real wide canvas. A special mention must be made of Rukmini Nair and Sujata Bhatt who possess a global and integrated consciousness where the past and the present, the East and the West all come together. For the first time, concerns are not only feminine but human and these poets are well on their way to be recognised as full-fledged poets instead of what they are derogatively referred to , i.e., 'poetesses'.

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