

Body And Beyond - The Quest In Modern Indian English Women Poets' Love Poetry

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Abstract: Publication of Kamala Das' *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) was a kind of crossing of the Rubicon for Indian English poetry and particularly Indian English women poetry. The bold new themes included assertion of Gender-identity and uninhibited expression of 'endless female hungers'. Modern Indian English women poets have unabashedly articulated their female sexuality and carnal desires against a rather traditional socio-cultural background. Body thematics has come to occupy a prime place in their writings . A significant aspect herein is the ambivalence of these poets' attitude towards Body and related physicality as they portray both the 'pains of hell' and the 'pleasures of heaven' related to the Body World. This paper takes up perusal of these Modern Indian English women poets' chequered engagement with Body , their exaltations and their disappointments ,their expectations and their disillusionments. It also analyses the undertaken quest and the ultimate vision of Love and Life as expressed in the writings of these poets.

Keywords : Love, female sexuality, carnal desires, Body thematics, ambivalence, quest , ultimate vision.

Introduction

The most revolutionary feature of modern love poetry is its frank, free and uninhibited portrayal of sex. With the change in the societal attitude towards sex, it is no more a forbidden fruit. It has rather come to be regarded as the most significant building-block in the magnificent edifice of love. The moderns deem sex and sensuality to be a vital part of man's life and so the acceptance and celebration of life in *toto* naturally involves celebration and acceptance of these aspects. Romantic idealism has now given way to a realism that pulsates with the beats of blood and herein energy and vigour replace the earlier timidity and tenderness. India, though a land of asceticism and austerity, also has a rich tradition of eroticism in literature and art. Vatsyayan's *Kamasutra* and the erotica preserved in the stones of Khajuraho is a native heritage. Our modern poets are conscious of this tradition of erotica bequeathed to them. Nissim Ezekiel in 'Hymns in Darkness' exclaims:

How freely they mention

Breasts and buttock

They are my poetic ancestors.

(Harish Raizada)

Since Ezekiel pronounced "nakedness is good", our poets have not looked back.

Expression of Female Sexuality - Indian Female Poetic Tradition

The contemporary women poets have had precedent of expression of female sexuality in their women poetic predecessors. As early as 1730-59, Muddupalani's controversial and revolutionary work *Radhika Santvanam* focussed on female sexuality and initiative in sex. The women poets of the day have exploded the myth of writing of the physical as being genetically unsuited for women. English as a language of the Western world and its liberal values has offered great liberties to Indian English women poets. Herein they feel free from the social and cultural mores which the mother-tongue represents. So like their male counterparts, they have expressed themselves uninhibitedly and have challenged the notion that "only foreign men air their crotches." (Eunice Desouza , Bruce King)

Contemporary Women Love Poetry Scenario

With these modern poets, we have come far away from the times of the first predecessors Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. The approach to the theme of love is substantially different in the two generations of poets. Dr. A.N. Dwivedi has also made an observation to the same effect, "contemporary Indo-Anglian poets make a definite break away from the traditional practice of 19th century poets with regard to treatment of love".

A very vital difference is revealed in their attitude towards physicality in love. Sarojini Naidu was sensuous in some of her poems, but moderns have given a totally uninhibited, free and frank treatment to the physical. Philip Lindsay has glorified Judith Wright as "the only woman who has kissed and told" and observes that among women poets, none has written honestly and without shame of her desires. Modern Indian English women poets have frankly revealed much more against the backdrop of a very traditional society which is yet to accept physical desire of the female as natural or desirable. Critics have gone to the extent of observing that these poets' viewpoint is not in consistence with Indian sensibility. Actually, frankness of these poets is an outcome of the metamorphical changes taking place all-around and the privilege that use of English language gives them. We have candid revelation of otherwise repressed female sexuality.

For the moderns, the quest was taken further by Kamala Das who reinvigorated the tradition of love poetry by a contemporary new voice. Kamala Das onwards, love gets a realistic, concrete and analytical treatment.

The Bliss of Body

The desire for the physical and for the bliss therefrom finds expression in phrases which beautifully convey the pleasure in a capsule form. Kamala Das feels tormented by her "endless female hungers" ('The Lion'), it is a hunger "as old as life" for Sunita Jain ('We Met Fair Lost'), and "tapestries of ecstasies" ('I Love You') for Pia Ganguly. To borrow an expression from Sujatha Modayil, these women poets have "tasted ecstasies of Khajuraho and Ajanta" ('Who is She') and we have in their writings the pleasure-world of sex unravelled before us from a woman's perspective.

These women poets well comprehend the mutual physical craving of both sexes which seeks to find full satiation in physical consummation. Kamala Das, a 'poet of the body' like Ezekiel, feels so 'incomplete, apart and yearning' without the physical intimacy in her poem 'The Lion'. Sunita Jain evokes the traditional image of the soft female body clamouring for the hardness of male body in 'We Met Fair Lost'. Her lover needed 'arches of my body' and she needed his 'ribcage hardness, the shoulder's bowwidth'. Sujatha Modayil reveals her consciousness of the primitive cry of blood and its comfort in her poem 'All Gone'. It is but natural - when the lover's black panther body gives a clarion call, the beloved's blood rises to a storm of passion and fire.

This desire makes the poets fond of the male body. Kamala Das knows: "It was my desire that made him male and beautiful". ('A Relationship', *Tonight, This Savage Rite* 32). She dwells on the physical details of the male body with great fondness in her poem 'The Looking Glass' and shocks readers' sensibility as such material has not been a part of refined poetic expression. The perfection of man's limbs enthral the poet and she lovingly eyes and records masculine activities and bodily reactions of his nude body during his bathing and easing himself. In Kamala's view, to this masculinity, a woman should give her essential femininity - the 'scent of long hair', 'musk of sweat between breasts' and the 'warm shock of menstrual blood'. Lalitha Venkateswaran in 'Inventory' dotingly details the face that haunts her - his low shining cap of hair, tender brown eyes, flat clean jaw and miraculous neck. However, the graphic presentation of the opposite sex and Male Body is rare in these poets as compared to the male poets who have revelled in descriptions of Female Body.

The sexual desire being aroused and the bodies becoming desirable, the physical act takes place with all its passionate intensity and brings an overflowing bliss and pleasure. Kamala revels in the act which brings for her paradise on the earth:

*on the bed with him, boundaries of
paradise had shrunk to mere
six-by-two.*

('The Invitation')

'Ask me, Ask me' is her strain which culminates in "Ask me, what is bliss" ('The Stone Age', *Tonight, this Savage Rite* 12). Lalitha Venkateswaran's body in "Fired" learns 'new delight' in the shape of fitting to his need. She hangs her 'coat of passion' on his 'pointed breast' and Gauri Pant pours "burning lava of breath on his lips" ('Routine', *Staircase* 17-14). Lover's hands roaming over beloved's body find oasis in the desert. It is a mutual pleasure as Imtiaz Dharker's Saleema "pours out her breasts to fill cup of his white hands" (*Purdah and Other Poems* 9). Obviously, the pleasure is so tempting that they cannot escape the mesmerisms of the lover's blood.

The world of Nature also comes to play an important role in this sweet melody of love. It arouses the lovers' passion

*Laburnum blossom
Brushes against my cheek,
Maddening me as I run
Impatient for your mouth*

(Margaret Chatterjee, 'In an Earlier Manner')

A lonely watchman thinks of his wife as tops of toddy trees suffuse themselves in intense colour in Mary Dasgupta's 'Birbhum'. The bliss and joy of lovers extend to encompass even the world of Nature. At times the objects of Nature make a splendid background for the drama of love. They have also been used as symbols and images for erotic descriptions. Nature is friendly to lovers and the activities of Nature in different seasons are in harmony with the activities in the world of lovers. Monika Varma has beautifully captured this harmony in her poem 'The Time of Green Leaves is Gold' which is like the rendering of Kalidas' *Ritu Sanharam* in a small poem, syncing the lovers' passions and activities with summer, rainy season and autumn. The impact of the spring has been brought out in another of her poems 'Gita Govinda'. With its maddened and maddening breeze, the season 'breaks the vows of ascetics'. Srimati, the heroine, is filled with the 'agony of love' and is 'desperate with desire' as the whole Brindaban rejoices in 'passionate love'. The poets beautifully describe love-making in traditionally Indian, highly charged and erotic Nature imagery:

*I twine my limbs
About your trunk
Nor easily yourself
can extricate*

*My tendrils hold
Your every part
So close entwined we be.*

('Margaret Chatterjee , 'Lyric 6')

The imagery of earth and rain has frequently been applied to suggest the act of consummation. Gauri Deshpande thus expresses her bliss: *I am earth/Vast deep and black/and I receive/the first rain/sweet and generous lashing/ throbbing Yellow daisies burst out/On my breast and thigh/At its very touch*"('Poems on a Lost Love').

The rich experience of love bestows many other blessing besides the physical pleasure. It makes the beloved feel as if her physical charm has increased. In 'Held Between Your Arm Spaces' Sunita Jain feels that she has turned 'utterly lovely' in her lover's convoluted tight grips. Mirror grills an 'all-aglow' poet 'Is It love ?' and she quickly hushes it 'hush...silly'. A 'bloom' that is 'bestowed' by 'his glance' shines in Gauri Deshpande's eyes and hair in her poem 'Marks II'. Kamala Das' body gleams under the lover's touch as 'burnished brass' in 'The Looking Glass'. Love has the power to revitalize and rejuvenate also. It drives runnels where life had dried for so long. The arteries of Sujatha Modayil's 'longing heart' which was once a 'walled city' throb with renascent blood and she sings 'A Song of Joy'. Dead and starved Margaret Chatterjee is revitalized by lover in 'Leila':

*Elisha wise you lay
And mouth to mouth
Breathed me awake*

(Towards the Sun 20)

The immense power of the physical comes to define Time, Space and Seasons for the lovers. The beloved experiences various seasons through the physical contact with the lover in Margaret Chatterjee's 'Urban Love' :

*I know when it's winter
From the coldness of your cheeks.
Now I know the rains have come
From the salt taste of your skin.*

(Towards the Sun, 10)

For her, the lover's presence is like 'drenching rain' and his absence is summer. Time is also measured in the lover's context: *If anyone said/They didn't believe/In time/I'd tell them/how you went/One day you were here/And the next not* ('Ciphers'). For Tapati Mookerji , Space is thus defined:

*The only space which traps
And binds me
Is the half-moon of your pearly brow.*

('The Philosopher's Lament')

Thus, all philosophic concepts of Time and Space are defined by love for these lovers, and Seasons, Time, Space also derive meaning from the lover's physical presence.

Quest Transcends Body

At times ,the physical takes these women beyond the physical world also. They transcend sex through sex and it makes them experience the state of cosmic consciousness. It is a religious act for Chitra Pershad and a source of spiritual rebirth in 'Disarmed' where a "phoenix rises from consuming flame". When blood satiates blood, the spirit is 'extended'. She derives from the physical a 'psychedelic joy' and envisions the blissful eternity:

*No Marijuana window did I need
To glimpse landscape of eternity
you were enough for me.*

(Chitra Pershad , Harish Raizada)

Physical love is transformed into spiritual love in Lila Ray. She is apprehensive about the transience of earthly love and proceeds to spiritual love in stages. The poet ultimately reaches where nothing endures but love of God:

*I look within and you are there
I look without and you are there.
You are with me everywhere.*

('Is it With You')

For Gauri Deshpande, the act is a transforming one which binds her with her lover in 'a fellowship of blood':

*The alchemy of blood
that stained and matted your belly hair
has converted you magically
and made us the same
each the other's secret self*

*bejewelled and bright red
In a fellowship of blood.*

('Poems on a Lost Love')

The stars, moon, roads and sky are Nilima Wig's witness that the moment was "our tryst with eternity (' Down Years', *The Distant Echo*, 10).

The physical acquires pronounced cosmic proportions in Kamala Das . Her endless female hungers become a cosmic and all-consuming fire in ' Forest Fire' where like Whitman she intends to contain multitudes:

In me shall sleep the baby. walk the lovers...old shall sit.

Street lamps shall glimmer...cabaret girls cavort... wedding drums

Resound .eunuch whirls around...wounded moan.

During the act, act itself becomes cosmic in nature:

We sang each note rising out of

Sea, out of wind, out of earth

('Convict')

Here all basic 'tatvas' like water, wind and earth are involved in the act of love. Kamala Das' journey from the physical to the spiritual is contained in the poem 'Ghanashyam'. The poet expresses the bliss, peace and tranquillity that such a fulfilment brings: " Ghanashyam, you have like a koel/built your nest in the harbour of my heart /my life until now a sleeping jungle /is astir with music" (*Tonight This Savage Rite* 18). These are her moments of mystical leanings and longings. Her search for spiritual love finds objective- correlative in Radha-Krishna and Mira-Krishna myths. Even in the first volume we have poems like 'Radha-Krishna' expressing such sentiment where the river becomes hers and so does Kadamba tree where 'our homeless souls will return' someday. The poet goes sentimental in another poem 'Radha': "O Krishna, I'm melting, melting.../ nothing remains but you(*The Descendants* 9). As the quest throughout has been for an abstract ideal of love, Kamala proceeds from 'sakaar' to 'nirakaar' in her pilgrim's progress:

Loving this one I

Seek but another way to know

Who has no more a body

To offer and whose blue face is

A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams.

('A Phantom Lotus')

The poet well comprehends the final reality:

Only the souls may enter

The vortex of the sea

('The Suicide')

The spiritual part in Kamala Das' poetry is so very conspicuous that critics have gone to the extent of observing that " throughout she was in quest of a spiritual paramour, the eternal companion of her soul, the Divine Mate, her Krishna"(A .N. Dwivedi).Such a stance makes Feroza Jussawalla opine that the subject of her poetry is "solely that of the struggle to find her self beyond the physical".

Rejection of Mere physicality

A very significant point which merits attention about these poets' vision of love is that mere carnal or bodily pleasures are not the *summum bonum* of their concept of love. If there is no other woman poet who has as much revelled in the physical as Kamala Das, then there is none who has expressed as much disgust and aversion to the male body and the physical act. She clearly wants more than Body and her 'endless female hungers' cannot be satiated with merely physical communion:

I leave unsatisfied for what does he bare for me

on the bed except his well-tanned body.

('The Swamp')

Gross physicality is unacceptable to this 'Queen of Erotica' :

it is physical thing he said suddenly

End it ,I cried and let us be free

('Substitute')

And her resolve is:

I am not yours for the asking

I do not feel the need.

('Composition')

If love is not an enriching and uplifting experience, it is an anathema to Kamala Das :

I throw the bodies out

I cannot stand their smell.

(‘Suicide’)

Mamta Kalia also expresses her dislike for and disillusionment with the merely physical:

After the first few moments

it gets so gawky

will look at each other sheepishly

(‘Dubious Lovers’)

In her poem ‘Let Go’ Sunita Jain complains against love’s degeneration into lust. The lover takes her
not in love’s

renewed mystery

but in lust parasitic.

She craves to love without physicality: *Let me love you/ as a tree loves/with all its flower tips on fire/ without embracing.*
(‘Capsuled in Our Hearts’).

Gauri Deshpande finds modern love-making *sans* real physical or spiritual intensity. ‘Eves’ feel disillusioned as they do not find “plunging depth of souls” (‘No more’, *Between Births* 7) . Suniti Namjoshi is so much disgusted with mere physicality in love that she talks nowhere of love but always of sex in a satirical vein. To A .N Dwivedi “ reader seems to be engulfed with a deep sense of horror and disgust in the matter of love and sex while reading Suniti Namjoshi”(“ Suniti Namjoshi : Art and Artifice in Her Work”).She always deprecates and denigrates sex through animal imagery where the background has sinister nuances with shadows of Satan looming large. The lady is a ‘temptress’, the man is a ‘beast’. ‘Metamorphosis’ is Namjoshi’s poem with an ironical title as it shows degeneration of humans to the animal level : “In the end /we mated like dogs”. Margaret Chatterjee refers to the ‘adult scars’ which give pain to a woman when the man leaves after having gratified his sexual appetite :

loving quickly he

Turned his back

while soundlessly

she wept

into the night.

(‘Scars’)

Conclusion

In fact ,for these women poets, sex is important not for its own sake but as an integral part of love .It can be enjoyable and desirable only when the physical is an expression of and is accompanied by finer feelings. The physical must be complemented by emotional, mental and spiritual fulfilment. Love should also include tenderness, care, concern, compassion and soothing impact. Mere coitus is devoid of the blissful, revitalising, resurrecting and fulfilling power. These poets seem to share the noble concept of love which Herbert Marcuse has presented in his book *Eros and Civilization* that in sexual gratification, man has to be higher being ,committed to higher values and sexuality is to be dignified by love . In the absence of finer feelings, sex becomes a mere tool of exploitation and this ‘male worm’ concept puts women off the physical .That is why the very women poets who have eulogized body and sex have also loathed it, as in its crude form, it hurts their feelings and self-respect. Obviously ,mere physical cannot hold any sensitive human being for long and for these women poets in particular , love is more than a mere raw passion and a woman is much more than a mere sex-object.

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