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## The silenced subalterns in recent Indian English women poets

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### Abstract

Indian Women poets writing in English from Toru Dutt to Kamala Das and from Sarojini Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi reveal the bewildering variety of theme as well as style that poetry is capable of offering. Poetry written by women need not be viewed only as feminist poetry. However, literature by women tends to get marginalized because of the disparate tendencies of reception to their writings. With the emergence of Indian English women poets, there came a new era of feministic writings in Indian English Literature.

The word 'Feminism' seems to refer to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. The subjugation of woman is a central fact of history and it is the main cause of all psychological disorders in society. A noted critic, Chaman Nahal, observes the basic concept of feminism as, "I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome whether it is husband, father, the community or a religious group. When women will free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes".

Women poets have often raised their voice against social and cultural conventions that constrained their freedom and perpetrated a sort of institutional subjection of women. They believe that women need to explore their collective consciousness and shared experience in order to transcend the fragmentation and isolation of their lives. Thus, the present paper is an attempt to assert the women poets' individuality and feminine identity against social and cultural conformity by analyzing some of the poems of recent Indian English Women Poets.

### 1. Introduction

Modern India is witnessing the emergence of a new woman with a distinct sense of identity in the man-oriented society, owing to the process of urbanization and westernization. That is why, the conflict between tradition and modernity at various levels-social, cultural, familiar, national and cosmopolitan is well marked in the works of these women poets. They depict the changing position of women in the modern Indian society and hence, their poetry is a complex blend of aestheticism and activism, representing women's struggle to break out of the patriarchal taboos and attain an unbiased position of their own. Thus, with the emergence of Indian English Women poets, there came a new era of feministic writings in Indian English Literature.

However, if we peep in to history, we will find out that history witnesses anguish and agony of women. They have been kept away from basic needs and fundamental rights and their world have been merely treated as an object of sensual satisfaction. Thus, courtesans and folk singers used carnal passion and erotic sensibilities in their songs to attack the male literary tradition. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, victorian morality redefined sexual mores for women giving birth to the concept of "the proper lady". Kamala Das felt this to be a new technique by the male to further silence the women. Her poems reflect her powerful instinct of self-realisation, incompatibility with the inadequacies of life, frustration and gender complex. Although, almost all her writings show her concern for social and cultural construction of gender, raising her protest against marginalization and exploitation of women, yet she does not question the importance of men by talking of equality, individuality or of complete emancipation. Rather she articulates the man-woman relationship. She turns aggressive in her expression, but it is pleading – pleading with males for spiritual satisfaction through a balanced and perfect union of the two. Mrs. Das plays out her role of almost neurotic woman, wife, mistress and reluctant nymphomaniac longing for the lost joys and pleasures of innocence and childhood. Parthasarthy says, "her tone is distinctively feminine." That is why, she strongly encounters the male world in her own terms and ironically, also

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focuses a critique of heterosexual power and hypocrisy. Her feelings and experience demonstrate the inner voice and aspiration of woman's world.

*I met a man, loved him call  
Him not by any name, he is every man  
Who wants a woman, just I am every  
Woman seeks love, in him..... the hungry  
Haste of revers, in me ..... the ocean's tireless waiting.*

These lines not merely exhibit the passivity but also reflect the rebellion against the man-dominated world. Further, she talks about the traditional role of woman which complicates the man-woman relationship and she desires freedom from it;

*I wore a shirt and my  
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored  
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said, be embroiderer, be cook  
Belong, cried the categorizers*

Das's poems show the woman to be drifting towards fulfilment of passions such a confession can be witnessed in 'The Freaks'. She asked herself with a note of disappointment in "The Testing of the Siren".

*Ah, why does love come to me like pain  
Again and again and again?*

This is how her poetry remains a dominant articulation of a female world who aspired to raise her emotions in a vast unfeeling world.

Then, there emerged another woman poet, Toru Dutt, who is often called the Keats of the Indo-English literature. The place of Toru Dutt in Indian poetry in English is highly admirable. She was born on March 4, 1856 in Bengal and she died on August 30, 1877, in the prime of her youth at 21. She died, like John Keats, of consumption and the end came slow and sad. James Darmesteter pays a befitting tribute to her, "The daughter of Bengal, so admirable and so strangely gifted, Hindu by race and tradition, and an English woman by education, a French woman at heart, a poet in English, prose writer in French, who at the age of 18 made India acquainted with the poets of France in the rhyme of England, who blended in herself three souls and three traditions, ..., presents in the history of literature a phenomenon without parallel."

Toru Dutt's literary achievements lay more in her poetic works than in her prose writings. Toru Dutt started writing her verses in her very early age. She was very much influenced by the poetry of the Romantic and the Victorian poets. Her poetry is meagre, consisting of *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. But she "compels attention" as KRS Iyengar puts it. Her poetry is full of sensitive descriptions, lyricism and vigour. *A Sheaf* was her only work to be published during her life time. It was a collection of 165 translation of French poems with critical notes running in to forty pages. During the last hundred odd years, it is a handful of her often anthologized poems, like 'Our Casuarina Tree', 'A Sea of Foliage Girds Our Garden Round', 'My vocation', 'Sita', 'Savitri', 'The Lotus', 'Baugmaree', 'Tree of Life', and 'Lakshman', which have engaged the attention of everyone. Another notable thing about Toru Dutt, was her capability to eclipse the dominant culture of the colonizer quite instinctively in her sonnet entitled 'Lotus'. The poem proclaimed the beginning of cultural fusion without surrendering indigenous identity. This is how the poem goes:

*Love came to Flora asking for a flower  
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,  
The lily and the rose, long, long had been  
Rivals for that high honor. Bards of power  
Had sung their claims. "The rose can never tower  
Like the pale lily with her Juno mien" –  
"But is the lily lovelier?" Thus between  
Flower – factions rang the strife in Psyche's bower.  
"Give me a flower delicious as the rose  
And stately as the lily in her pride" –  
But of what color?" – "Rose-red", Love first chose,  
Then prayed – "No, lily – white – or, both provide;"  
And flora gave the lotus, "rose-red" dyed,  
And "lily – white" – the queenliest flower that blows.*

It appears that the poet is familiar with references to Flora, Juno and Psyche. Hence, love has been personified and invoked here.

Then the poem "Our Casuarina Tree," a symbolic poem brings out the significance of the rich tradition of Indian culture and philosophy. As in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", the bird symbolises the world of art and beauty", similarly in Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree", the tree connotes the nostalgic feelings and memory of Toru Dutt. In the first stanza, she imagined the rugged trunk of the tree to a huge python winding round and round. She depicts:

*The giant wears the scarf and flowers are hung  
In crimson clusters all the boughs among  
Whereon all day are gathered bird and bee  
And of at nights the garden overflows  
With one sweets song that seems to have no close  
Sung darkling from our tree while men repose.*

These lines vividly present a beautiful pictures of nature in and around the tree. It recalls the poetry of the romantic poets. The words 'darkling', 'repose', 'crimson', 'clusters' remind us of such types of common phrases of the romantic poets particularly in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", Toru Dutt thinks that the tree has an emotional significance in her life. It is the tree under which she used to play with her brother and sister whom cruel fate had snatched from her. Thus, the poem has an affinity to Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" where the poet finds eternal bliss in the world of the nightingale. The poem dives deep into the deep and unfathomable ocean of the spirituality. Sri Aurobindo has rightly observed: "She was an accomplished verse builder with a delicate talent and some outbreaks of genius and she wrote things that were attractive and sometimes something that had a strong energy of language and a rhythmic force".

Contemporary women writers have been concerned with a number of other interrelated issues: the sexual objectification of women, sexual violence and exploitation. The Indo-British author, Sumiti Namjoshi, addresses the complexities of defining her particular identity as a diasporic, Indian lesbian feminist in relation to others' variously particularized identities:

"Identity is not only a matter of self-definition. It also depends on the identity that other people attribute to one..... As a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all the other creatures who have their own identities or perhaps I mean their own identification? It's apparent that the components of the core identity change from place to place and period to period. Today's main components seem to be based on gender, skin colour, and sexual choice, as well as other factors such as nationality and religion... Any threat to the sense of self causes a violent reaction but then – how are we all to live?"

Suniti Namjoshi feels so oppressed by this male-dominated socio-cultural system that “she considers compulsory heterosexuality as a repressive social structure that systematically subordinates women” To Namjoshi being a lesbian means ending identification with heterosexuality. It means ending the personal stake in the male world so that she joins women individually and collectively to end their oppression. Sumiti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscom be in the “Introduction” of their *Flesh and Paper* write, “... a lesbian woman does not inhabit the worlds that make sense to heterosexual men.” They do not consider” male heterosexual literary tradition as “universal’ and say:

*For us, love is not the same; sex is not the same;  
parenting is not the same; work is not the same; safety is  
not the same; respect is not the same; trust is not the same.  
death might, perhaps, be the same.*

Suniti Namjoshi is perplexed and baffled by the labyrinths. Riddles and contradictions of human life and everything appears hollow and worthless to her:

*Life is an exercise in living  
I'm sick and needn't say  
Anything that makes sense at all.*

Her fragmented psyche and alienated existence in a foreign land cause discontentment with the situation. Sometimes it appears that her poems are filled with nostalgia for her motherland and discontentment with the materialism of the foreign land, but at the same time India of her poetry becomes “the India of poverty and pettiness, of old age and lost luster”

*You lie there,  
Smiling, lazy, wicked,  
Unashamed of yourself,  
Lazy in a blue sea.  
You really don't think  
You might smarten yourself.*

Thus, it can be aptly remarked that Suniti Namjoshi's poetry often becomes an expression of her lesbian desires and diasporic experiences. She is the first Indian woman writer to have openly declared her sexual preference as lesbian and “has since held that kind of sexual life one chooses to lead is a purely personal matter, where an individual's autonomy should neither be checked nor curtailed”. As she does not want to give up in these man-made society, so her poetry reveals the schizophrenic battle with her divided self.

Hence, a brief study of some of the well known Indian English women poets clearly brings out this fact that they have innovated a new vernacular that acknowledges subjectivity and specific circumstance. These English women poets have articulated their dissatisfaction, bitterness and frustration in their poetry rather unabashedly and audaciously. They have joined hands and voices for justice on all fronts. Sometimes they have turned to radical feminism in their rebellion against deeply entrenched patriarchies. Modern Indian women poets have adopted strong subversive strategies in order to give vent to their feelings and thoughts. They have written to avenge themselves, to break their silence, express their anger and to tell their stories.

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