

Dethronement Of God And Dislodgement Of Religion In Contemporary Indian English Women Poetry

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Abstract:

Across the globe, the women-writing of last few decades is characterized by women's quest for evolving their own view of Self, Society and the Supreme Self. In this voyage, they have re-examined and re-evaluated the entire existing social-political-cultural matrix--various systems, structures and even the metaphysical and esoteric entities like God and Religion. Contemporary women writers have not been votaries of the traditional religions, rituals and customs. Even in a country like India, otherwise steeped in religiosity and spirituality, the contemporary Indian women writers-especially Indian English women writers seem to adopt an Anti-God and Anti-Religion stance. The poetry of contemporary Indian English women poets is a succinct and intense expression of their critique and castigation of the existing state of Religion and related affairs. This research paper dwells on the agony, angst and vehement protest of these poets against the distortion and defilement of religion caused by the vitiated thoughts and acts of religion-related people; and also the Super power itself who in their perception is a callous, unjust and cruel force. The present study also explores the ultimate vision of these women poets as they seek to create a human-friendly humane God and Religion.

Keywords: women writing, angst, protest, Anti-God, Anti-religion, quest, vision, human-friendly, humane.

Introduction

Humans have always been aware of a power that Creates, Preserves and Destroys the universe. In the Primitive Age, the natural elements were worshipped as gods. With the establishment of various religions, gods and goddesses multiplied and godhood was conferred upon human avatars also. In fact, god is the psychological necessity of humans-the ultimate shelter and resort in face of despair and failure. So, humankind has kept God alive and God is a very much a part of human consciousness. Though human response to God has varied from blind faith to cynicism, God has remained a crucial point of reference all over the world through all ages.

The Pre-Independence Voices of Faith in India

India is a citadel of religious spirit. Spiritualism and fatalism have been characteristics of the Indian mind through ages. Our scriptures are thickly populated with various gods and goddesses of different origins:

*Here, the gods roam freely,
disguised as snakes or monkeys.
every tree is sacred.*

(Sujata Bhatt, 'A Different History')

What makes an Indian unique is her/his mystical bent of mind that Tagore immortalized through his Nobel Prize-winning work *Gitanjali* (1913). Early Indian English poets-Tagore and even Aurobindo are thorough mystics. The earliest known anthology of women's literature comprises of songs composed by Buddhist 'theris' or nuns. Regional women poets like Akkamahadevi, Sule Sankavva, Janabai, Gangasati Rami, Atukuri Molla and Mirabai have established the tradition of expression of mystical longings by women poets.

The first Indian English woman poet Toru Dutt gives expression to the Bhakti cult and unflinching faith in God in her poem 'Prahlaad':

*In him I trust
He can protect me if He will
And if this body turn to dust
He can new life again instil.*

(*Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* 151)

Prahlaad forbears his father's cruelties and vindicates glory of the living God. Toru had faith in God but she has not written much about God or revealed any mystic vision:

Hath be a shape or hath be none

I know not this

(ibid)

is her candid confession.

The first prolific Indian English poet Sarojini Naidu has composed a few poems imbued with mysticism. Three of her poems entitled 'The Soul's Prayer', 'In Salutation to Eternal Peace' and 'To a Buddha Seated on Lotus' have been included in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1917). In 'The Soul's Prayer' the poet prays to God to give her all passionate despair and rapture. God unfolds the mystery of life and death to her : "Life is a prison of my light/and death the shadow of my face" (*The Bird of Time* 124). In her poem 'In Salutation to the Eternal Peace' she seeks eternal peace in solitude as a sensuous mystic. The poem contains her apprehension of divine and the poet's

*Glad heart is drunk and drenched with thee
O inmost vine of living ecstasy
O intimate essence of eternity.*

(*The Bird of Time* 137)

'Buddha Seated on a Lotus' refers to Buddha's experience of mystic rapture. Many other poems like 'Kali the Mother', 'Flute Player of Brindaban', 'Song of Radha', 'Kanhaya' etc. have mystical touch. 'The Temple' expresses ardent longing of Self to merge with the Divine. Sarojini Naidu's poems on the Indian scene abound in references to Hindu gods, goddesses and mythological characters. Dr. Narsingh Srivastava has noted her intense religious feeling that finds expression mainly in her poems on Hindu deities ,especially in lyrics of Sri Radha and Krsna. She was a national poet with a cosmopolitan outlook and has also composed poems about Muslim religion – 'The Prayer of Islam', 'The Imam Bara', 'The Call to Evening Prayer' and 'Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad'. 'The Prayer of Islam' contains 99 Arabic names of God and is significantly titled. 'The Imam Bara' evokes pathos of the tragic martyrdom of Hasan and Hussain. In many other poems we have pictures of muezzin calling for prayer from mosque-minaret. Thus, Sarojini does not reveal any systematic mystic vision or approach like Tagore but she has proved herself to be a believer and a sincere worshipper. Her beauty is her religious tolerance and her approach of synthesis.

The Post- independence Indian Women Poetry Scenario – The Jeremiad and the Lambast

Modern age is an age of science and reason. It sets a very high premium on empiricism and is allergic to the invisible, the abstract and the mystical. Erosion of values has shifted emphasis from God to Mammon. These factors have dethroned God and dislodged religion. The modern Trinity is Mammon, Bacchus and Cupid. Modern human has become sceptic, cynical or even hostile to God and religion. It is an age when our intellectuals declare: "Nor is mystic exaltation in any way more rewarding than euphoria produced by a slug of scotch whisky"(Khushwant Singh).

The creed of false gurus and pseudo god-men has converted even the believers into non-believers. Though teeming millions continue with their blind faith in God and rituals, yet those who can see through the veneer of religious hypocrisy are a disillusioned lot. The havoc caused by religious fanaticism on various occasions is a part of moderns' consciousness. Satan disguised as God lets loose the deluge of destruction. Sitting on the roof of a train to Pakistan:

*He spouted religious purity
The rules of democracy*

(Joy Shree , 'The Jackals Wait Below')

and later under the cover of soothing darkness ,he slit throats and chopped limbs: Religious rites provide venerability to Satan:

*And then Satan
Blood tears and gore
Last night he sat
By a sacred fire, performing holy rites
Adding incense, flowers
Butter and sandalwood
... ..
Bowed before a brick
He carried it
From home to earth
From town to village
Crashing cymbals,
Blowing trumpets
In his wake he leaves
Broken vessels, shattered lives,
Crushed bangles.
smeared sindoor .*

(ibid)

Sujata Bhatt is also disillusioned with religious chaos and the abuse of religion. Swastika, the symbol of religious faith, lost all its gleam as she grew up. Religion has perpetrated quarrels, murders and promiscuity. Swastikas printed at the wedding invitations where paper-quality is determined by dowry further erode its spiritual significance. The poet wonders:

Oh, didn't I love the Hindu

Swastika

*And late, one day did not I start wishing
I could rescue that shape from history?*

(Devibhen Pathak)

Other factors have also shaken faith in God and religion. Modern religious leaders are hypocrites who have expertise in contemporary ways and mannerism and grow vain and big-bellied with pride in Monika Varma's 'Quartered Questions and Queries'. Their attitude is lustful. In Imtiaz Dharker's 'Purdah' there is 'nothing holy' in the young priest's look and in Desouza's 'Miss Louise' Father Hans feels an arrow through his heart on seeing the lady. Such godmen cannot get any one out of cul-de-sac of chaos or quagmire. When Ma Kali's procession has passed, 'all the roofs and verandas of heart' are empty in Mary Gupta's 'Ma Kali'.

Faith in the Almighty's benevolence is adversely affected due to man-made injustices and atrocities also. The plight of a woman - starved, brutally beaten and tortured by her husband and in-laws makes her give up faith in the benevolence of God in Sujata Bhatt's 'A Story for Pearce'. The lady could not have believed in a 'Lord who allows her torture'. The theory that God made man in his Image also stands defeated because of man's evil deeds:

*how would she have continued
believing in a god who
dwells in every heart?
The lord in her mother-in-law's heart
The lord in her husband's heart?*

All these factors have influenced these poets' attitude towards God. Gauri Deshpande presents a modern's view in her poem 'Renaissance'. When the secret of Earth is divulged:

*We will know in generations of certainty
There's no lord to take a hold on*

The debris of a modern metropolis would reveal the moderns' lack of faith in God:

*This was once a great metropole
In years unwashed, uncleaned without their Lord*

(ibid)

The modern generation has no knowledge or understanding of God and the really awakened people are muted:

*What indeed are gods? What is god himself?
Who knows
those who know cannot speak.*

(Monika Verma, 'Quartered Questions and Queries')

Even Kamala Das, a poet in 'quest of divine paramour', was irritated with her religious-minded grandmother:

*She was really simple,
Fed on God for years
All her feasts were monotonous
For the dish always was God.*

(Blood)

Modern worshippers do not have a genuine faith in God. It is just in vogue to have a chapel in one's garden in old age:

*When I am old and rich and gracious
i shall have a little chapel in my garden*

Prayers are offered but the real concern is show-off, Suniti Namjoshi plans her dress at the prayer beforehand:

*I shall always pray in a white Sari
White is so becoming to prayer*

('The Little Chapel')

Prayers are also considered to be a reflection of impotence and a colossal wastage of time in the modern world:

*When you cannot think of doing anything,
You start praying.
Spending useless hours at the temple.*

(Mamta Kalia, 'Tribute to Papa')

If a modern takes to praying, his prayer is malicious in nature where he wants God not only to 'Float my boat/ ahead of the rest but also "keep others back"' in Malavika Sanghvi's 'Prayer (*Poems Recent and Early* 45).

Modern beings reveals a disrespectful attitude towards God. Pia Ganguly presents an ironical picture of God in 'Self and Thee'. The poem deserves to be quoted *in toto* to bring out her mocking attitude towards God and Indian Philosophy of existence- 'dust to dust', It is a modern's mockery of the Second Coming:

*I saw god today
he was dressed in blue jeans
he was so casual
that i know
he had to be
Californian
I caught him
smoking
i also caught him
tossing ashes
on the lupin bed
next to red dahlias
some dust to dust
theory, eh?
he was winking
at the passers by
smiling at Christmas
i gave him a jelly bean
and he promised me heaven
only after
i would not tell on him
to myself*

God is 'he' not 'He, as ordinary as the poet. He has been stripped off all halo and grandeur by the moderns:

*Is God as great as we make Him out to be?
At times I feel He's wholly human*

(Shree Devi, 'On A Shikar')

Commercial making of the statues of gods in Bankura is very casually and mockingly dealt with by Rukmini Nair in her poem 'God from Bankura':

*A God has to be.
Smart, that is.
Four arms were quite respectable.
Really.*

A modern's sceptical and insolent attitude towards the popular rituals is presented in Rukmini Nair's poem 'Shaligrama'. She treats the ritual as a superstition. The little stone is held in great esteem throughout India. It is the metamorphosis of Vishnu and 'Toolsee' and possession of its water is supposed to be a key to happiness in this life and after-life. For the poet, it is only a 'pretty stone'. The stone slips from her hand and she makes it clear:

*You can't expect me to
well, what am I supposed
To do - cry at its being
Cracked, like you? Hell.*

Sujata Bhatt has also written disapprovingly of the narrow definition of Sin in India and the excessive religious-mindedness that has virtually made a mockery of gods by associating them with each smallest activity. Here

*It is a sin-
to be rude to a book
It is a sin to shove a book aside
with your foot.
a sin to slam books down
hard on a table,
You must learn how to turn pages gently
without disturbing Saraswati*

('A Different History')

These poets have gone beyond their attitude of insolence to declare God a malevolent force, a mute spectator of suffering and even imperfect. For Nilima Wig, gods have no heart or soul for those who have no money to buy their packaged love'('Hospital', *The Distant Echo*, p.38). Vijaya Goel brings out the callousness and cruelty of God to the poor people in her ironically entitled poem 'Generosity'. A poor man walks bare-foot, in a torn shirt, braving the cold. It is a chilly winter morning and he is 'fighting the tears' near a temple:

*Yes, that is the home,
the abode of god
where he prays each day
and from the men of lord
begs a few coins.
Thus he is able to collect energy enough
to thank the Almighty
for being so kind and generous.*

Dorothy Sinha holds God answerable to His people and calls His explanation for the misery of the poor people in her poem 'God':

*God must answer them,
For he created them
In his image
he made them .*

(*Contemporary Indo- English Verse1* 61)

Through ages, God has been considered to be the only perfect being but the moderns find him imperfect. Misery of humans and transience of human life are proofs of his 'callous carelessness' and Rohini Gupta warns Him:

*God, if you' d been here
among us, if you' d worked
with us side by side
God, bar influence
with your callous carelessness
we' d have fired you long ago.*

(*Contemporary Indo-English Verse I* 57)

Humans today have reached a stage where they feel confident and tempted to assess and criticize God's plans and patterns. Suniti Namjoshi finds no pattern in the creation of the universe and thinks it to be mere accidental:

*The whole of creation is purely accidental.
Are the stars arranged in sets?
Do they come in a jewel box?*

('It's a Quality of Gods')

She portrays God to be cruel and sadistic:

*It's a quality of the gods.
To see a creature with its back broken
And be unmoved.*

(*ibid*)

*They are insensitive
And cannot love and cannot grieve.* (*ibid*)

The poet calls these 'mirthless' and 'deathless' gods 'blase'. Dr. A.N. Dwivedi finds this poem "irredeemably nihilistic". Suniti Namjoshi presents God as a fraud merchant in her poem 'Rationale':

*If God were a merchant I could deal with him
And come away feeling pleasantly cheated
My god is rock-faced. He does not move.*

For Dr. Dwivedi, this poem brings out in unmistakable terms "her spit and venom at the whole creation of God...she is out to find faults not only with the creation, but also with the creator."

Rohini Gupta also indicts God for creating man as a faulty, fragile and imperfect creature. The Lord is with a Business brain:

his bargains are the shrewdest

*He's proud of the list
of broken fools
who didn't read the small type
close enough.*

(Contemporary Indo- English Verse1 57)

Pia Ganguly has accused God of bias and prejudice against women in her poem 'Gods in Revolt against Eve'. He is not impartial and has condemned women to eternal inferior status.

The Lost Bond Of Faith

So Suniti Namjoshi is not the only culprit. Negative portrayal of God is commonplace with these poets who belong to an era of shattered faiths. The odds of life baffle and torment them to arouse their ire against God as God seems to have forgotten His role of the Preserver of humanity. Misuse and abuse of religion and God by the vested interests and the pseudo-godmen have made these sensitive and sensible individuals sceptical, suspicious and cynical regarding all that relates to religion, religious places and God Himself. Consequently, these poets are very different from their predecessors in their attitude. Unlike Sarojini Naidu eternity and divinity are not their forte, unlike Tagore they are not flute of reed' for God to fill with music', nor is there any quest for divine life or divine light as in Aurobindo. Union with God has not been much looked forward to as means of solving the enigma of life and finding meaning in it. God does not appear in many poets while we have only sporadic reference to him in many others. The attitude is also of criticism and ridicule. Even the believers have not been able to present any systematic and definite vision or reveal faith in Him. Kamala Das, for all her spiritual quest, does not seem to have attained the peace that passeth understanding which could give comfort to her much agonized self. Satire and irony are the most deadly weapons in the armoury of women writing. Kamla Das also goes satirical:

*God is in His Heaven and all
Is right with this stinking world.*

(Kobli 82)

Conclusion

Sunita Jain continues to be tortured by the unsuccessful personal relationships. Her lines beautifully and succinctly sum up the attitude of these contemporary women poets towards God:

*I have been so small-
hearted in your quest;
lost to hurts
the bond of faith,*

(“God of My Childhood”)

With these poets, in God-Human equation, the emphasis is on human and God is a means to achieve the improvement of humans at the personal and the social level. Their disillusionment with God and their atheist attitude is but an expression of the doubts and uncertainty of the Age. They lack the comprehensive, transcendental vision that could help them overcome the chaos to reach the core of experience like Whitman and utter, “It is not chaos or death- it is form, union, plan-it is eternal life- It is happiness.” However, it goes to the credit of these women poets that they have asked searching questions regarding the present state of religion. Their forceful thought-provoking reappraisal is a positive step towards the formulation of a new faith -a humanitarian religion with more emphasis on humane qualities than religious rituals, and a God who is answerable to humankind. At the root of their jeremiad, their offensive censure and onslaught lies the concern and anxiety of the contemporary Indian English women poets for the creation of an egalitarian society and a humane human world.

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