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Thematic Concerns in the Poetry of Menka Shivdasani

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Abstract

Indian Writing in English has carved its place in the world of English literature. There is a vast difference between Indian Writing in English of earlier times and today. Present generation of India writers in English have their own style and individuality which have earned them reputation and awards at the global level. Genuine class of Indian creative minds are penning fiction, poetry, prose and short stories. The issues of the contemporary world are forming the themes of these creative pieces. Sensitive writers have touched the hearts of the readers not only in India but also across the world. Indian poetry in English, as a form, emerged as one of the most effective mediums for conveying human sensibilities. The glorious history of Indian poetry in English blossomed in the hands of Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobinod, Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezzekiel, KamlaDas, Jayanta Mahapatra, Shiv K. Kumar, Arun Kolaktar and many more who have been able to move the hearts of millions. Not only men but women poets also contributed to the legacy of poetry in English by Indians. Amongst the contemporary women writers MenkaShivdasani is one such poet who has established a name for herself among the present generation of women poets. Present paper explores the range of themes that appear in her poems and the sheer intensity with which she is able to reach her readers.

Keywords- Indian, Poetry, Women, Themes, Concerns

Introduction

Indian writing in English has come a long way and today it has earned a prestigious position in the world of English literature. There has been rich literature produced in almost all genres by Indian writers in English. Novels, short story, dramas, poetry, Autobiographies etc, written by Indian writers have been recognized globally. The rich legacy of Indian writers which began with the literary geniuses like Raja Rao (1908-2006), Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), R. K.Narayan (1906-2001), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Kamala Das (1934-2009), Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) etc. still continues.

The rich tradition of Indian English Poetry can be traced back to the 19th century. Renowned poets like Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Manmohan Ghosh (1869-1924), Shri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) were the torch bearers of Indian English poetry. Then came a fresh poetic breed of poets like Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), Kamala Das (1934-2009), Jayanta Mahapatra (1928), Shiv K. Kumar (1921-2017), O.P. Bhatnager (1912-19760), A. K. Ramanajun (1929-1993), PritishNandy (1951), Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004) etc.

Indian English Poetry holds a rich history with diversified themes and new trends. There is a rich number of Indian women poets who have touched various dimension of existence with elegance and style. Among the present Indian women poets in English the prominent once are Rukmani Bhaya Nair (1952-), Sujata Bhatt (1956-), Smita Agrawal (1958-), MenkaShivdasani (1961-), Mani Rao (1965), Nandini Sahu (1973-) and Meena Kandaswami (1984-). These women writers born after Indian Independence have given new height and glory to the Indian poetry in English. These women poets are well aware of the native and the global sensibilities. They have brought new fervor and fresh treatment of subject in their poetry. It has been rightly remarked “Indian English poetry did not seriously begin to exist between Independence (1947) and 1960. It is only in the 1960s that Indian poetry in English began to exist independently with the stamp of originality and automatically” (B.K. Das 154). In this way Indian poetry in English in the modern times has evolved with new characteristic features: “It acquired a distinct character and discovered its own voice. The voice is discovered by the poets genius for intimately registering the idiom of his own world”. (B.K. Das 154).

MenkaShivdasani (1961-) is one of the strong voices of Indian English poetry written by women representing the contemporary Indian English poetry. She is the author of two collections of poetry, *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990), and *Stet* (2001). She is also co-translator of *Freedom and Fissures*, an anthology of Sindhi Partition Poetry, published by the Sahitya Academy. Menka’s work has been extensively represented in anthologies and literary magazines, both in India and abroad. Her poem, *An Atheist’s Confessions* (2012) has been included in the University of Mumbai Second Year

Bachelor Arts, English textbook, *Indian Literature in English: An Anthology* (2012). She recently edited an anthology of Indian poetry for www.bigbridge.org, a 16-year-old arts and literary website in the United States. She is also the editor of an anthology of women's writing, being brought out by Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW). Her illustrious career as a journalist includes a period with *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong and publication of eight books co-authored with Raju Kane. MenkaShivdasni and some other women poets who not only totally upset the phallogocentric discourse of Indian English poetry by introducing in it a new range of thematic contents in new voices, but relate their experiences in their art from a really broad spectrum of elegance and style.

Her work has also appeared in collections such as *An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry*, *Confronting Love* and *Fulcrum's Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change*. Her poems are also been included in *We Speak in Changing Languages* (Sahitya Academy), the *Blood axe Book of Contemporary Poets*, *Sixty Indian Poets*, *Both Sides of the Sky* (National Book Trust) and *Interior Decoration: Poem by Fifty-four Women from Ten Languages*. Her poems have also been translated into various languages like Marathi, Malayalam and Gujarati. As earlier mentioned, through journalism, Menka's career includes a stint with *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong and the publication of eight books co-authored with Raju Kane, two of which were released by the former Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Currently she is the Director of *The Source*, a content and Communications Company based in Mumbai. She is also the co-organizer of the Mumbai Chapter of the 100 Thousand Poets, the proceedings of which form part of the Stanford University archive.

MenkaShivdasani creates a new world of poetry dealing with variety of themes like Loneliness, Death, Feminism, Nature, Man Woman relationship, Love and Sex, Contemporary problem, Spiritual Spirit, Elements of Indianness, Romantic Elements, Moral Values, Humanism, Quest for identity, etc. Motivated and guided by the late Nissim Ezekiel, MenkaShivdasani's creative world takes a serious and hard look at the world which is close to her and even beyond. Her themes are divergent and larger than "Home and Heard". This characteristic of her poetic genius comes with a long experience. MenkaShivdasani herself wrote about her poetic creation "In my experience of battling poetry for more than four decades, I have always felt that beyond a point, the poems have nothing to do with me. Sometimes they creep in quietly at other times, they tear through the drapes in the midst of hurricanes, but as I try to tame them, make them my own they settle down in a corner glaring balefully insisting I leave them alone". (Introduction, *Frazil* xiii).

MenkaShivdasani is not only a renowned poet but also a widely experienced journalist. She is also the founding member of The Bombay Poet Circle and of the Asia Pacific Writers and Translators Association. Her rich career with tremendous experience is reflected in the themes of her poems. Keki. Daruwalla rightly remarked “MenkaShivdasani’s poetry is both original and striking unusual, not just her tangential way of putting things across, but also how thought process and imagination run away with the poem and make it exciting. An experience is translated into another experience and then gets mixed with fancy in juice blender” (Cover Page, *Frazil*)

MenkaShivdasani is a unique Indian woman poet in English. “Her poetry holds together a private world of chaotic emotions through its logical development and its strikingly imaginative images.” (Bruce King 313) Shivdasani is versatile poet with a wide range of themes in her poems.

Feminism

MenkaShivdasani seeks place and space for woman in the male dominated society. She advocates for the freedom and individual identity of women in the society. But to break the age old shackle where women have been sub-ordinate is not very easy. Raghupathi: in his *Critical Perspective on Contemporary Woman Poets in Indian English Poetry* says: “But this ‘womanhood’ that she tries to seek is not easy to get only a series of experiences that not only harden just as carbon is subjected to various process to make what can be called a diamond but also awaken the inner to the realities in the mundane world” (133). Her poems are the specimen of the uselessness of the taboos imposed by society: “I have learned other lessons, / which, I suspect, do not mean a thing” (“School Girl No More”, *Frazil* 75). Her woman wants to be a free bird. She wants to fly, unbounded by any kind of imprisonment. Though she doesn’t have physical wings but still her inner urge to fly expresses her desire for freedom in a world where social and familiar responsibilities hold the woman back from the flying. In this way MenkaShivdasani let her woman to liberate herself and enjoy the glory of freedom: “I learned the mechanics / of bird-flying in Biology / but did not possess the wings”. (“School Girl No More” *Frazil* 75). Shivdasani’s feminist perspective is very obvious when she presents her woman very strong where she is able to endure anything and emerge an Iron woman. She writes; “Hammer means to sit / stretch me into wires” (“Iron Woman” *Frazil* 64). The protagonists further says;

I will turn into a plough,
or light up
the world in return.
Freed from the meteorite
with lightning tongue,

I expand without breaking.
You may melt me and mix me,
I emerge even purer,
magnetic and ready to strike
Iron woman, in her element. ("Iron Woman, *Frazil* 64)

Sense of Spirituality

There are different shades of meaning in the poems of MenkaShivdasani, one of them is the theme of an individual growing into maturity and realization of some truth which is divine in nature. Human life is a journey from birth to death and in this journey one passes through different phases of childhood, adolescence, youth and maturity. As one grows in experience one learns to consolidate one's faith and belief system and faith helps to discover the truth for oneself. "The Atheist's Confession" is one such a poem about faith but it comes only in the state of maturity. The poet writes: "Twenty two. I no longer worship/Myself, or him" ("The Atheist's Confession", *Frazil* 88). There is realization of some kind "I look at the sculptures in the puja room/and wonder-are the gods/finally beginning to smile again?" (89). Her another poem "What We Do to Our Gods" she tells that doing committing sin and trying to be good by chanting the prayers of God can lead us to nowhere: "We grab them, stab them, sink our lines /We are still good for we chant god's name /as we serve death on our dining tables" (*Frazil* 4)

Loneliness

Shivdasani explores the life of an individual who faces the horrors and the temptation of living alone in a flat. There is an element of anxiety of leading a single life all alone. This lonely life gets even more complicated when it is the life of a woman where there is sense of fear, betrayal and victimization. In her poem "Lover Loser, Addict" this sense of loneliness emerges; "The butterfly / no longer struggles, so you think all is well / Then you realize it's not fluttering any more / because it's dead" (*Frazil* 84). In the poem "For the Wole Soyinka" Menka compares the solitary confinement of the famous Nigerian playwright, poet and essayist, Wole Soyinka with her own sense of "Confinement" or alienation. Though, Soyinka and Shivdasani belong to the different parts of the world "Yet both of us (them) belong to confined worlds" (*The Safe House* 22). There are poems after poems in which Shivdasani reveals the loneliness of the modern man. This loneliness finds expression in the "Waiting"; Already, there is / dryness deep within," ("Waiting", *Frazil* 60). Similarly, in the poem "Between the Shaft and the Shoulder" the poet expresses the condition of alienation;

in worlds we couldn't share,
away from the bustle and the ticking clock,

Whose hands touch

Only once a day. (*Frazil*54)

Life is very happy and peaceful when we live in the company of others but it is very sad when left alone; “Now, as the waters turn calm, / I pull the canoe through, / feel the Brahmaputra in my eyes”. (“Castaway”, *Frazil* 67). Artificiality of modern life has led to a pitiable condition of modern man’s state of loneliness; “I wait alone / seeing silence fall / on a painted wall. (“Paper Smiles”, *Frazil* 105)

Death

Menka Shivdasani deals with the theme of death in a very striking and unusual way. Some of the titles of the poem are evident of this aspect like “Sarcophagus”, “Diving Board”, “Funeral”, “Long Distance”, “Epitaph” etc. Her description is at times so striking that the reader gets awestruck.:

The skeleton, grinning, cried

for flesh and skin. No sound wave

would condescend to move,

so no one heard

except the coffin walls. (*Sarcophagus*, *Frazil* 27)

She further writes “Yes, they’d chanted songs on the occasion, / but some time one’s term expires, / death must go on” (“Sarcophagus”, *Frazil* 27) She presents a very sad picture of an individual who after death is so much remembered by his near and dear ones. If death is natural then to some extent the pain of separation is relatively less than the unnatural death or death by suicide. She writes “Did you think of the friends / who’d miss you? You no longer/ needed them.” (“Diving Board”, *Frazil* 77). But it is truth that one who has gone can never come back, only his memories return; “you come up sometimes to breathe / our memories. And your image smiles” (“Diving Board” *Frazil* 77) In another poem “Epitaph” the poet reveals the color of death; “The trouble is, / we do not wear white/on the wedding day. (“Epitaph”, *Frazil* 28). Poems like “Funeral”, “Long Distance” etc. show the pain of death at the same time the reaction of the world to the death. The poet shows the ceremony of funeral and the reaction of those for whom funeral is a ceremony to perform. The pain of death is reflected in the following lines:

She did not see him that day

when laid him out

in his best new clothes.

She did not see them

Crack his skull ("Funeral, Long Distance", *Frazil* 34).

In the same poem the poet reveals the reaction of two sets of people one those for whom attending the funeral is merely an activity: "The priest smiled, and carried a tiffin home / The relatives dispersed and promised to come again" (35). But the same death is a matter of intense grief that completely changes the life and the color of life of a woman: "The clothes on women body turned white, / though her eyes were red" (35).

Love

The theme of love takes different shades in the poetry of Menka Shivdasani. The meaning of love and its expression changes according to the age and the situation in the poems of Shivdasani. In her poem, "The Atheist's Confession" love emerges as a new God for the protagonist at the age twenty. At bubbling youth love seems to be a major source of happiness because the lovers enjoy the company of each other. "At twenty, the rose petals were on my cheeks / and in my hair and the bouquets/ he brought when he took me out to dinner. ("The Atheist's Confession", *Frazil* 88). But same love gets shattered at the age of twenty-two. "Twenty-two I no longer worship / myself or him. (89). In this way, the protagonist experiences a different shade of love and her experiences in love. At times in the poem of Menka Shivdasani love becomes sensuous and physically passionate, as can be seen in the poem "Buttoned Up": "Back in the water, you pull me/ roughly off your back" ("Buttoned Up", *Frazil* 82). Love making intensifies in the following lines:

You make love to the sharks as I
circle you like a moonless halo
and your unborn children turn
To jellyfish in the sand. ("Buttoned Up", *Frazil* 82)

In her poem, "Lover Loser Addict" Menka talks about "a mythic lover" in in this world where in the name of love there is a lot of exploitation. "All the world is well, mythic lover;/ the sky is blue; at least it looks that color/ from down here where the fires burn" ("Lover, loser, Addict", *Frazil* 84).

Quest for identity

Like any other woman of modern times Menka's woman desires to be the controller of her own destiny and refuses to controlled by others. In the poem "Hinges" the protagonist creates her own identity; "Now, I am building another body for myself" (*Frazil* 72). This poem symbolizes a woman who doesn't give up. A woman is not only meant for domestic and familial confinement, she is a "Island" in herself ; "she will fold in on herself, / tack in her pieces of earth, / and charges the contours / of her geography." ("Everywoman is an Island", *Safe House* 3). No force can overpower the modern woman as she is ready to break all the locks of bondage; "The padlocked door has been

forced open now". ("Implosion", *Frazil* 1). The sense of establishing one's place in the society is quite strong in the poem "The Whole Deal"; "It takes a special pair of molten eyes / to see that untouched self / and to meet yourself on the other side / where the rivers flow no the more." (*Frazil* 11). This sense of creating an identity makes an individual fully empowered; "That's when you feel empowered, / that's when you still feel whole". ("The Whole Deal", *Frazil* 11). No matter what the situation might be the desire of carving a place is expressed in beautiful poem "Iron Woman" where the character says; "I expand without breaking./ . . I emerge even purer, / . . . Iron woman in her element" (*Frazil* 64). Initially it takes courage to come out of the shell but once the wings of freedom are developed by inner strength then the sky is the limit. This feeling is beautifully expressed in the poem "Bird Woman"; "I am making friends / with the birds now/ and have discovered / my talons too." (*Safe House* 2). Even ordinary person has the right to have an identity in society which is reflected in the poem "Seamstress"; "A few more stitches. / and there you are/ perfect for the ramp" (*Frazil* 66). This struggle for earning a place and making the life meaningful an individual undertakes many journeys; "There are too many unfinished journeys left, / too many tangles ends./ . . begin the journey again. ("Unfinished Journey", *Frazil* 118).

Conclusion

MenkaShivdasani has touched the sensibilities of the readers by her tremendous range of themes. She is extremely versatile poet with a strong sense of awareness of her surroundings. She pens her thoughts not only on the domestic and familiar issues but also the global and universal concerns. Her appealing style has earned her a very reputed position amongst the contemporary Indian women poets in English.

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