

A Study of Identities in Contemporary Indian English Women Poets from a Hindu Philosophical Perspective

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Bio-Note

I am an Assistant Professor in Government First Grade College, Gubbi. I have submitted my Ph D thesis in Tumkur University and waiting for my Viva Voce to complete. I am interested in culture studies, structuralism and semiotics. My Ph D topic is "Circulation of ideologies- A Study of Personal Narratives of Kushwanth Singh, S.L Bhyrappa, Kamala Das and Shobha De"

Declaration

I have read and understood and agreed to the terms and conditions and guidelines of the journal.

Abstract

One can attain a sense of self only through self. Though the society naturalizes and internalizes certain identities and ideologies within an individual, every individual struggles to have sense of self. This is called quest for identity. This quest takes various designs and patterns in different individuals. The article tries to identify the design and pattern of contemporary Indian women poetesses' quest for identity from Hindu philosophical perspective.

Contemporary Indian women poets approach patriarchal institutions from two opposite attitudes. Some contemporary Indian women poets have identified themselves as non-conformers and rebels to the patriarchal social structures while some are agreeable courteous, obliging and courteous with the patriarchal structures.

Charmayne D Souza identifies herself as an avenger because of the neglect and injustice met by men on her physical psychological entities and freedom. In a poem 'Selling Guide', she writes,

“if I could,
I would cut off
My lovers’ heads
One by one,
And serenade them
To sleep in my spare time.

Melanie Silgado strongly oppose the loss of self-worth, security of women in the globalized society. She is ready to desert and abandon love, because her nights, her dignity that has been deprived of by patriarchal structures. In the poem ‘A Memory’ she writes,

“No there is no togetherness for us
I cannot merge
Forgive me for my flesh and blood.”

Kamala Das is cynical and satabout a woman covering her body completely in order to maintain respect and honor in the society. She writes,

If wrappings of cloth can
Impart respectability, the
Most respectable persons
Are Egyptian mummies
All wrapped in layers and

Layers of gauze.

Aditi Rao in the poem “Not Being a man I bleed like This”

Her voice grew loud inside her

Stomach, exploded one day, shattered

The wall, took root with the banyan.

We have all tried rolling it back

Into her throat. It has steadily refused.

This projection and picturization of themselves by these contemporary women poets’ as rebels, non-conformers and audacious would not be approved by the Hindu philosophy. Though Kamala Das identified herself as a non-conformer to societal patriarchal structures in the initial stage of her life, Kamala Das gets approval from the Hindu philosophy because she reaches the state of *nirmoha* stage which is the final goal of Hindu philosophy for an individual. One can trace Kamala Das’ psychological growth of quest for identity towards *nirmoha* stage in her autobiography, *My Story*. *Nirmoha* is a state when one disidentifies oneself with glorified and ideal selves of the society and shun make belief identities of the society and take up fundamental identities of a creature in the universe. It says that one is connected with all substances and objects in the universe. This condition would make life fly, evolve and life would be a growth and not stagnation. It is movement from untruth to truth. One has to disidentify oneself with all the identities he has learnt in the society and culture and learn to become a piece of life and throb and breathe as a piece of life. It wishes an individual to reach a state of happiness of possession and inclusiveness in all living creatures, air, earth, sky, the mountain. Everything becomes his

and he becomes an element of everything. This brings supreme union of an individual with the universal. In this stage, a human being loves everything and he becomes generous towards everything. (Sadguru)

It is state of nirmoha when the individual loses interest in the make belief material world and starts to get ultimate happiness in his union with universe. Kamala Das in her journey and her endeavor for the acquisition and formation of self-image through a quest for identity achieved this state of nirmoha. Her individual self, in its desperate search for love, starts distributing love. She writes,

Disease and pain matured me. I forgot the art of localizing my love. I found it easy to love nearly all those who came to see us. Even to my husband I became a mother.” I had shed carnal desire as a snake might shed its skin. I could no longer pretend either. I was no longer bed worthy, no longer a charmer of lecherous men. But my articles on free love had titillated many. So, I continued to get phone calls from men who wanted to proposition me. Sex did not interest me except as a gift to my husband to make him happy. I had painted a wrong image in my writings. A few of our acquaintances tried to touch me and made indiscreet suggestions. I was horrified. When I showed my disgust at their behavior they became my harshest critics. (Das 183-184)

Kamala Das started her quest for identity when the societal norms oppressed her and treated her as an object of a man’s love and server of his family. She rebelled against the societal patterns and she started to work against societal canons of a wife by experimenting with extra marital affairs. She separates from her husband and starts to live in her ancestral house Nalpat in Kerala. Though Hindu philosophy would disagree with the fixities like societal ideologies like patriarchy, it would also disagree ‘with the way’ Kamala Das came out of false identities and

make belief identities of the material world because Hindu philosophy and Buddhism do not recommend individual to lose hope and become desperate when the strong imposes, oppresses and exploits heaps injustice on it. It never favors throwing away and abstinence of losing safety and security of one's family and basic needs just for quest for identity. These philosophies believe that one can never continue quest for identity, explore, enrich, master and experience higher dimension of life if one abandon basic necessities of food shelter and safety and security needs. Once Buddha stops his lecture to a group of hungry farmers because according to Payutto, "When people are overwhelmed and in pain through suffering, they are incapable of religious teaching". If individual is caught in the trap struggling for fulfilling basic necessities, he can never experiment and understand the elements, pros and cons of a higher identity from a higher dimension of life. (Payutto)

Hindu philosophy would approve of Eunice de Souza kind of projection of self or identity as a cool, balanced poise in dealing with the challenges and problems posed by the patriarchal society. Eunice de Souza addresses the women community as a whole and encourages them to be patient in dealing with men and remain self-contented. Whatever the injustice one suffers at the hands of men like neglect, a woman should wait because like cats, men will return to them one or the other day to their litter trays. Moreover, according to Hindu philosophy the ultimate goal of a human being is to inclusiveness of the individual into the ultimate being the Brahman. Furthermore, Hinduism believes that desire and longing for a human being remains with her even after one gets the longed object because the longed object fails to fulfill an individual. It is always incomplete. So, why should a human being waste his time and energy for the possession of another human being?

Kamala Das experiments and searches the ways, dimensions, dominant hegemonial patterns, designs of longing for a loving male and suddenly deserts it because the male starts to weave hegemonial material designs on her. So, she creates and hallucinates a desired male in a mystical form of Lord Krishna. After some time, she deserts this mystical form to identify with the Muslim religion. She converts herself into a Muslim and calls herself Kamala Surrayya. This sudden bombastic U turns, retractions and annulment brings lot of demands on her. She has to put herself into new situations, new adjustments and materials. She has to cope with entirely new set of things which would frustrate and dishearten her. According to Hindu philosophy, once when a woman is in a certain dimension of one's life, she should enjoy, be grateful and explore all the possibilities of that dimension. When she is in love, she should explore all the possibilities of experiencing fulfillment and satisfaction in that particular dimension. She should know the ways of love, the places when love would vanish, when love would die down, ways of escaping from the hormonal incited love, types of love, the logistics of its appearance, its nature, characteristics, spell and effects. If a woman takes up a job, she should work in a mechanical way but explore various methods and means of creating higher state of materials, happiness for the receivers of her work with. She should work, explore, expand on that feeling and state of mind rather than throw away a relationship if it does not answer her needs. This mental balance, strength and stability is seen in Eunice de Souza's poetry.

Eunice De Souza in the poem, 'Advice to women' writes,

“Keep cats

If you want to learn to cope with

The otherness of lovers

Otherness is not always neglect-

This stare of perpetual surprise

In those great green eyes

Will teach you

To die alone.”

Eunice de Souza is self-assured, composed and emotionally stable. Similarly, Anna Sujatha Modayil in her poem 'No Spring' writes,

“I wonder if spring is only hormonal

I am no longer- emotional

I am a well- adjusted individual.

Or try to be.

Melanie Silgado in her poem, 'The Earth Worm Story' writes,

“It does not matter

If that's your foot over me”

These women poets find solace from various aspects of life and doesn't hang on to the longing for love. They involve in various ways of mental occupation. Nikitha Gill in her poem 'A Thousand Stories Long' writes,

Woman

You are a thousand stories long,

With the depth of the ocean

And an entire constellation

Woven into your soul.

And you must remember this

Before any man

Tries to convince you

That you are any less.

Charmayne D Souza makes a conscious and determined effort to create a space for herself. In the poem 'Star peace', she writes,

Today

I barter neither knowledge

Nor light

To man or god

I am my own light

My own stay.

My own orbit.

These women are not disturbed and bogged down by the sneers, jeers, underestimation of men towards them. They are self-assured and confident. They deconstruct the history of the world to find solace and strength for themselves. Like the true Hindu philosophy which

recommends individuals to unite with the universal reality which includes various worlds like the animal world, plant world, air, water, mountain, knowledge, by disentangling and untying from the immediate material reality around human beings and individuals, women have moved beyond their bodies to a larger cosmos of universe, existence and questions of life. Nibedine Sen writes on the transient life. She writes,

These footprints have walked us

Through ages of love,

Ages of hate and now will recede

Us with the timely wave

Ocean knows the water marks

Will never stay.

The idea of impermanence of the identity, of self, of nature and earth is brought out in this poem. As Mandira Gosh writes in article, “Contemporary Indian English poetry” writes.’ The women poets transcend gender, religion and class. They are grounded in their country but possess universal vision which make them and their thoughts profound and extraordinary. These grasp on the patriarchy would be an easy, good, stress-free, conflict less and balanced model for the women masses to follow.’(Gosh)

According to Sadguru, when a child progresses from childhood to adulthood, it starts to identify with things and substances which is not itself as a child. It has to adjust to the structures and institutions of the society. Then, a human being is shifting from fundamental identities to false identities and glorified identities of the society. This alienation would set the process of

quest for identity. Quest for identity is the basic nature of a human being. Identities should evolve from the sense of self. Outside things should not give identities to an individual but an individual should endeavor for the acquisition and formation of the self-image through a quest for identity. Soren Kierkegaard observes that man's identity is threatened by the metaphysical systems in which his nature is irrevocably fixed. Kierkegaard discovers the real identity of man is his inner self. Which is the 'true self'. To him, subjectivity is truth and reality; hence, it is this inner self, which constitutes the real identity of man. Identity is the projection of the subjective self of a person; it depends on how he pictures himself, and his endeavor for the acquisition and formation of this self-image through a quest for identity. (Erik H. Erikson). This process of quest for identity is seen in all contemporary Indian women poets including Kamala Das and Eunice De Souza. Each woman poet is in a different stage of quest for identity. Some are beginners while some have moved along the path and stabilized with fruits of quest for identity.

Many contemporary young women poets are in the first stage of quest for identity. They have diverged and disagreed with the set patterns of patriarchal structures and institutions of the society. With the objective of finding the ways of freedom and happiness from the dominant ideological structures and identities of the society, they have started their quest for identity. They have taken various ways of dealing with these false and glorified identities of the society. Some are audacious, obstinate, rebellious, satirical, cynical to the dominant ideological structures while some have moved beyond these initial reactions to identify themselves beyond the structures and institutions of the society towards the 'real' which is in the realm of the unexplored. In the first encounter of the false and glorified ideological structures of the society like patriarchy, the women poets have articulated the meanings with the patriarchal structures at the center and later they have deconstructed these structures in various ways. The articulations in contemporary

poets have also happened by looking at these structures as less important than other serious structures on the economy like Meena Alexander emphasizing the undue importance given to women's suffering and pain under patriarchal structures where women have other bigger issues to take up in the globalized capitalized market economies. The articulation of these patriarchal structures ranges from high importance to sheer neglect and deemphasizing for these structures. Sometimes, the women poets have paid inattention and amnesia to these structures.

Hindu Philosophy does look at things beyond the material and empirical analysis of the world. Unlike the western philosophies which perceive the world in terms of the empirical, explicit, material, pragmatic aspects of life, Hinduism moves beyond the perceptible, visible world towards the unseen, spiritual forces at work. Opposite to the perception of strength by the west in terms of conspicuous, apparent, manifest visible power, physical prowess of the strong, Hinduism emphasizes concealed, indistinct, invisible, unnoticeable, vague hidden strength in the weak and the tame. It recommends the weak and the disadvantaged to empower themselves with power of the will and spirit. Hinduism believes that true strength and power comes from strength of the soul and not from physical prowess. The great Panchatantra stories are moral stories of Hindus. It is a record of the recommended morals and values of the society of 3rd century B. C. These stories inspired the Jataka tales of Buddhism and Aesop fables of the western world. The Panchatantra by Vishnu Sharma recommends the weak to arm themselves with 'wise conduct of life'. In a story like 'Crow and the water Pitcher' the presence of mind and intelligence is more important than strength. The story 'Crocodile and the Monkey' advises the readers to learn to be calm and cool in chaotic situations. A slow and heavy animal like tortoise can win the race if it endeavors with consistent and steady efforts. Hinduism emphasizes the importance of discriminative intelligence in the accomplishment of one's tasks in untested situations. Hinduism

recommends the weak to equip themselves with the strength of team support and spirit to combat the strong. In the story of ‘ Hirnayaka and Laghupatanaka, all the animals-the mouse, pigeons, tortoise, the deer work in association with the highest team spirit and survive their existence. To put together, Hinduism recommends various path to combat the strong and the powerful. It also cautions the weak to be aware of a friend who was formerly an enemy.

To sum up, majority of the women poets have caught up with the Hindu and Buddhist philosophical thoughts in dealing with the dominant patriarchy and societal systems. They are experimenting various yogas which means union with the universal through various ways- union through karma, union through intelligence, union through Bhakti, union through spirit with the universal. Yet, lot more needs to be done by these women poets. Certainly, the beginning is made.

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