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## **When Women Speak: Indian English Women Poet's Response to Riots**

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**Abstract:**

*This aim of this paper is to examine the different approaches taken by the Indian English women poets to write about and cope with the dehumanising effects of communal violence. Specific works of three Indian English women poets will be studied to discover their response and its gender-specificities.*

I feel sometimes welling up in me all this inchoate rage against all that I see as not right, unjust and unfair. I rage but I find myself powerless to change things and the only means I have are words, poetry...

-Rukmini Bhaya Nair<sup>1</sup>

In the bi-polar world of victim and aggressor, women are almost always to be seen hopelessly inhabiting the side of the affected. More so is the case in the acts of violence like riots and genocides, where women usually keep away from any active participation in violence but have always bore the worst burnt as victims: the tortured, the raped, the burnt, the widowed, the orphaned, the-one-left-without-a-son/husband/father/brother. The most horrible cruelties and atrocities are reserved for them. In the Indian context, be it 1947, 1984, 1992-3, 2002, or any other, women and children have continued to be the worst hit casualties and literature has borne a witness to it. Be it in the works of Manto, Rajan Singh Bedi, or Krishan Chander. But how women writers and poets, who have always been vocal about being victims -of patriarchy, traditions, institutions or discrimination- have responded to this? This aim of this paper is to examine the different approaches taken by the Indian English women poets to write about and cope with the dehumanising effects of communal violence. Specific works of three Indian English women poets will be studied to discover their response and its gender-specificities.

The poetry of Indian English women poets has been accused of being oblivious to the socio-political concern. Sarojini Naidu, one of the two literary predecessors of the Indian women poets writing in English (the other being Toru Dutt) was politically active but her poetry lacked political strain. It is only lyrics and melody, as cultural stereotypes would have it. The Modern Indian English poetry that came after the independence was a breakthrough. This period allowed a presentation of a spectacle of the predicament of man in a modern world. Poems were less formal, embodying a direct personal voice with a sense of opposition, cynicism and ironies of life. It gave the poets a greater room and more opportunities for free play of thoughts and feelings. An evaluation of relation with others and local surroundings along with self-revelation found expression.

Bruce King remarks that the concern of the new poets became their relationship to, and alienation from the realities of their society (5). Issues discovered were of self-exploration, political and social consciousness. This period provided a fertile ground for the women poets to write about political issues, but the results were not as desired. Though the chief occupations of the post Independence generation of Indian English poets included their relation to their milieu: the sense of alienation, aversion to milieu, harsh realities, the anguish, anger and protest in society; only some stray pieces concerned with the communal violence and its aftermath, like Keki N. Daruwalla's "Death by Burial" :

Half the village could be Hindu, half Muslim.

Enough case for a riot,

With half the village shouting

'death by fire!'

And the other half

'death by burial!' . (qtd. in Singh Kanwar 25)

Or an occasional "The Inheritance" by Kamala Das: 'Slay them... / ...disembowel their young ones / And scatter on the streets meagre innards.' (qtd. in Singh Kanwar 57)

Kanwar Dinesh Singh in his book Contemporary Indian English Poetry: Comparing Male and Female Voices writes:

Men poets have shown concern for their milieu but their responses are not emotional. Since women have been traditionally concerned with home and family, the modern Indian Women poets, therefore show a more sensitive awareness of their milieu, voicing their angst and ire. The concern for the nation, in its wider terms- about politics etc.- seem almost negligible in their poetic expressions as in some of the poems of men." (94-5).

Women poets are seen as giving a personal view of India confined to a limited space, that too in terms of personal feminine experience.

The two poets discussed in this paper, have produced at least one collection each specifically written as a response to or against the background of communal violence. RukminiBhaya Nair's *The Ayodhya Cantos*, ImtiazDharker's *Postcards from God* are concerned with the Hindu-Muslim communal violence and its dehumanising effects that ensued from the demolition of Babri mosque in 1992, communal riots and bomb blasts in Mumbai (1992-93) respectively. Even though their womanhood allows them an escape from nationhood into universal constructs, their Indian origins (or associations in case of ImtiazDharker) makes them inheritors of similar socio-cultural experiences. These women poets do not form a purely homogenous entity. They vary in their identity as much as in their poetry. RukminiBhaya Nair is an Indian Hindu and a professor of Linguistics, while ImtiazDharker is a Muslim of Pakistani origin born and brought up in England and living in India. She is an artist and a movie-maker. Each one of them articulates their horror at the violence in their distinct ways in their poetry through their varying use of language, style and formal techniques.

In the poems of ImtiazDharker the villain is not easily identified. The 'god' writing postcards to her does not know on whose side is he: the sufferers' or the perpetrators? God "is nothing but a space / that someone has to fill" (3). She attempts to reach out to all thinking individuals troubled by religious fundamentalism. The anguish at a metropolis managed by extremism and fundamentalism can be either god's over the plight of his creation, or the poet's over the despair of countless men and women who are fated to live lives of violence.

Her poetry is political, committed to the cause of truth and humanity rather than party or ideology. Her poetry is consciously feminist, consciously political. She accuses the people in the corridors of power where "permission has been given / for the carnage to begin" (78). The poem titled "8 January 1993" (following her "6 December 1992") begins: '

The bolt bangs in.  
A match is struck and thrown.  
The burning has begun.  
Afterwards  
the bodies are removed  
one by one.  
And this is left:  
...  
a blistered cupboard  
like a looted face  
that opened its mouth  
in a scream  
that never finds an end. (81)

She never gives away the religious identities of the 'bodies'. The 'we' bullied into silence are the people of collective humanity; people living in an age of fire and blood, knowing that peace and brotherhood have become clichés. Turned into a crowd, we have grown too loud to hear ourselves. Just like her god who is a visitor, a tourist in the world, she too feels alienated from her surroundings, as a foreigner in a city ravaged by violent forces where streets are battered and time disjointed. Using her position as a multiple outsider and her identity as a double minority (by virtue of her sex and religion) to examine large social problems, she writes:

I was born a foreigner.  
I carried on from there  
To become a foreigner everywhere  
...  
All kinds of places and groups  
Of people who have an admirable  
History would, almost certainly,  
Distance themselves from me.  
...  
I don't fit,  
Like a clumsily-translated poem (101)

Her poems work through their understated irony and minimalism. The avoided ornamentation and metaphor, laxity and economy of style, diction and form mark her poems. The associational, psychodramatic and confessional modes work through understated irony rather than articulated comment.

RukminiBhaya Nair too brings god(s) into her poetry. Unlike Dharker's god who urges to keep the channels open and promises to get through to us; gods in "The Ayodhya Cantos" are all too human. Admitting a loss of faith and power in poetry, she examines the dehumanising effects of communal violence as it affects Sita(ra) -a young girl, almost a child, who could be either a Hindu or a Muslim-and her relationship with Hanuman. More creative and experimental, she responds through a narrative which brings myth, history and reality together to recount the demolition of Babri mosque in 1992. With characters like Hanuman (as keeper of a chai shop in Ayodhya), Sita and Vishnu (as manipulative politician), she juxtaposes the timeless with the temporal, the past with the present. Her icons and images range from the profane to the sacred, giving an all inclusive picture of the nation. As Hanuman ironically says: "A Bajrang-Dal stray would do, muttering the Hanuman Chalisa, / Misquoting the Gita..." (23).

Speaking about The Ayodhya Cantos, Christopher Levenson says:

If Nissim Ezekiel gave Indian English Poetry a model of formal rigor and incisive thought, and JayantMahapatra created an imaginative realm fusing immediate sensation and personal meditations, RukminiBhaya Nair shows how both profoundly serious social issues and intimate personal moments can be imaginatively probed through the disciplined exercise of sensitive intelligence, passionate inquiry and unflinchingly open-minded, readily sel-critical discernment (qtd. in Rahman and Kazi Ansari 263)

Her poetry is a site where 'protest, play and pleasure' creatively interact. Allegorical in scope, her work goes backward in time to create a stage where political drama of national scale can be acted out. Her national allegory lies halfway between poetry and drama. The male form of national allegory is appropriated by making Sita the centre of the drama. By humanising the theological beings, she attempts to uncover the narrative behind the demolition in order to explain why it attracted so much fury. Determined to speak out, whatever the odds, she says:

I feel sometimes welling up in me all this inchoate rage against all that I see as not right, unjust and unfair. I rage but I find myself powerless to change things and the only means I have are words, poetry, but I sometimes wish I also had an arsenal of curses at my command to burn out all the evils I witness... (Rahman and Kazi Ansari 349)

It is this speaking out which is exhorted by the voiceless chorus of the gods addressing the Priests and the People of Ayodhya: "Citizens of Ayodhya, pray / If you must but above all, act!... / India is yours! The last word belongs to you." (42)

Do Rukmini Bhaya Nair's innovations giving power to the narrative, take away the effect from the contents? Or Imtiaz Dharker's poems expose her formative years in Britain rather than India?; these questions are open to interpretations. But examining the range of different techniques and narratives these women poets have adopted to articulate their responses to the violence, it can be said that the category of Indian English Women poets is not fixed or static where one woman's response is identical to another, even if they are addressing the dehumanising effect (of violence) which cuts across the boundaries of class, education, religion and sex. The loss (of life among other things) that is a remainder of the senseless bloodshed is what these two poets address but each one gives it their own personal touch.

#### References

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