

**Violence, Women and the Public Sphere: A Critical Study of  
Contemporary Indian English Women Poets**

**Ph.D. Thesis**

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## Chapter VI

### Conclusion: Revisiting the Argument

From the Buddhist *Therigatha* (a collection of poems composed by Buddhist nuns in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC) to the present times, the creative output of women has tenaciously confronted oppressive ideologies that are rooted in bigoted structures. As sites of symbolic desecration of religious, communal and national honor the destinies of women have always been inextricably intertwined with violence. Independent India witnessed the rise of 'new woman' who aspired to attain higher education, professional jobs and equal rights with men. A radical change in self-perception integrated with insights from women's movement across the globe made Indian English women poetry creative and subversive at the same time. Poets like Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza launched an insurgent attack on patriarchy that undermines the complex experiential reality of women by forging on them the burden of socio-religious doctrines. Their questioning of universally-fixed categories like gender and heteronormativity made this oeuvre highly feminist. The poets candidly expressed their personal experiences in all its distinctiveness and immediacy, a trait that was alien to women's poetry prior to them. Their contemporary counterparts have established a secure place for Indian English women poetry in the larger body of poetry being produced in English worldwide. Contemporary Indian English women poets expand and transform the poetic landscape in many ways. They dismiss patriarchal hierarchy but do not exhibit a staunch adherence to only feminist paradigms. They use poetry as a sociological medium to enter into issues of public importance and also as a literary tool to test the syntactic boundaries of the genre. They delineate subjects like politics, war and public sphere that remained a prerogative of male writers for a long time.

A number of feudal remnants that still prevail in the Indian culture especially in the public domain try to discourage women from moving out of the traditionally defined roles. However, instead of locking themselves away from the potential horrors of the public sphere or surrendering to the contingent realities, they give voice to the tribulations borne by women. They address topics like career, terrorism, insurgency, consumerism and neoliberal values which eschew an all feminist reading of the corpus. They use their communicative abilities to discuss issues that have a greater implication in the everyday life of women instead of rooting their argument in critical theories or philosophies.

The burgeoning corpus of contemporary Indian English Women Poetry majorly comprises of an increased engagement of women poets with their socio-political environment. Despite the commonality they share in terms of location, class, education and profession each poet exhibits a unique style of negotiating with normative womanhood and complex processes that dominate the public realm. The complexities of the Indian society in terms of caste-class-gender milieu are further compounded by poverty, illiteracy and violence and hence a humanist conceptualization of spatio-temporal realities becomes necessary. Women poets renegotiate the identity of women that is grounded in gender-religious identification and its subsequent representations in literature. They offer a womanist vision of the female body in the public sphere while simultaneously shattering a series of silence built around the same. The poets revisit myths and folklore to rectify the stereotypical images of 'good' and 'bad' women and not to borrow content or poetic idiom from it. Women poets look down upon the non-acceptance of fellow women who fail to abide by the male-centric definitions of beauty, virtue, body and sexuality.

Indian English women poets criticize the misogyny rampant in families, communities, caste system and professional spaces of the Indian society. The poets also engage with the intersectional ties of community-caste-patriarchy and evaluate the position of minority and dalit women in both social and feminist organizations. Minority and dalit women who struggle under the twin framework of communal-caste hierarchy and gender discrimination are also the ones who suffer the most violent rapes, mutilations and harassment. The response of the women poets to various forms of violence despite being discreetly rebellious carries a prophetic momentum. The poetic transmutation of violence is actually an appeal to the people to be more sensitive and accommodating so that women may also live peacefully in a society which is theirs too.

Through a number of evocative metaphors, images and paintings, Imtiaz Dharker outlines the different forms of physical and psychological violence that women combat on a daily basis. The poet rebels against socio-cultural, religious and political restrictions that stifle the individuality of women. She reinterprets and reconstructs the notion of woman from a humanist point of view and urges them to revolt against unmitigated patriarchal oppression. However, being an educated-working woman with an exposure to varied cultures imparts her position of privilege. Though Dharker began her own poetic journey from behind the veil, she has moved into the globalized landscape of the metropolitan world which somehow detaches her from the real problems of the subaltern women. Therefore, her attempt to liberate women from the shackles of gendered discrimination and religious orthodoxy at times seems a romantic enterprise. In order to lay bare the contradictions inherent in the Indian mythology, Rukmini Bhaya Nair roots Indian myths in modern socio-political context like Partition, Babri mosque demolition and Godhara carnage. Her rendering

into poetry, subjects like fallibility of Hindu Gods, computer, spider and cockroach considerably distinguishes her corpus from her contemporaries. Nair weaves politics, cognitive psychology, linguistics and literary theories in her poems in order to provide a formal poetic framework to women poets. The exploration of complex topics through an interdisciplinary approach makes her poetic idiom both investigative and experimental. Nair's poetry is often misapprehended as unintelligible and convoluted in academic circles across the sub-continent but her proposition that male poets are never criticized for being intellectually rigorous furnishes a sound counter-critique. The total literary yield of Seeme Qasim and Mamta Kalia is limited to two anthologies each. Qasim offers a descriptive cataloging of communal disturbance and the bearing it has on the lives of Muslims especially Muslim women. A tactful exploration of physical violence, sexual brutality and humiliation inflicted on women during riots makes her poems perceptive but they fail to offer anything more than a faithful reproduction of their lived reality. Kalia's poems embody an aesthetic renegotiation of the multiple roles performed by a modern woman in the domestic, public and professional sphere. In a lucid yet introspective tone, she addresses a range of relevant issue like urban lifestyle, monotony of routine living, inflation and patriarchal violence against women. Her poems are stripped of scrupulous details and scholarly pretensions that accompany the works of some of the widely-known modern Indian poets. One of the swiftly-emerging names in Contemporary Indian English Women Poetry is Meena Kandasamy who wears many hats: she a poet, translator, fiction-writer, columnist, activist and actor. Kandasamy's unapologetic confrontation of patriarchy, caste hierarchy and language places the issues of dalit women in the mainstream. Her poems can be regarded as an appeal for the creation of a socio-literary space that is readily willing to accommodate the deprived and marginalized.

She uses poetry as a platform to avenge the indignation hurled upon dalit community for ages but in the process, some of her poems become propagandist.

Though the sweep of explication and interpretation of the selected poets uncovers the profundity of this genre but their works mark only an evolutionary and not a revolutionary poetic disjunction. The poets entangle themselves with the issue of public importance and relevance but most of them get limited to merely exposition of the problem in place of offering tangible solutions. However, at the same time it cannot be denied that the poets succeed in formulating a poetic idiom and creating a poetic ambience that nurtures their experiences and gives them a space to appreciate both their commonalities and differences.

Contemporary Indian English Women Poetry uses 'reject-reflect-reorient-represent' approach to articulate the experiential and aesthetic journey of the poets across time and diverse discursive positions. They reject the ubiquitous influence of masculinist notions of desirable-undesirable and permissible-impermissible on society, culture, religion and language. They also discard the poetic tradition inherited from their poet predecessors as it hopelessly sways between defiance and urge to be accepted. Their rejection of derivative definitions and literary paradigms is followed by a reflection on deprivation, cruelty and violence suffered by today's women outside the secure confines of home. The reflection on women-specific issues naturally impels them to unlearn and reorient themselves to the changing demands of women and poetry in the present times. They finally rebuild an alternate poetic framework devised to break the silences imposed on them by patriarchy and represent the experiences of women as they are.

Poetry has survived the vagaries of criticism and emerged as a powerful discourse that engages with the changing dynamics of gender, politics and culture.

Out of the other genres, poetry alone has the potential to render new meanings every time it is revisited. As a researcher evolves over time, he/she is bound to discover fresh layers in a poem that are not noticed in the initial readings. A detailed exploration of some ideas has not been possible as they fall outside the range of the present study. A few recommendations for future research in this area are enumerated below:

a) Violence against women has received a lot of critical attention in the passing years but violence committed by women remains largely unrecognized. The increasing involvement of women in rioting and anti-reservation movements points towards a new situation. Some of the reason behind women's participation in militant bodies and supporting their male oppressors in committing violence against vulnerable groups has been touched upon in this study. To explore it in detail would be a pragmatic area of research.

b) A comparative analysis of male and female Contemporary Indian English Poets would reveal the similarities and differences in their handling the themes of man-woman relationship, nature, politics and violence. An examination of the influence of gender of a poet (if at all) on the language, technique and style would be constructive.

c) In order to trace the changing aspects of female identity in the Indian society, a scrutiny of the way women poets renegotiate with history, culture and myth is imperative. However, it is more important to examine that does their 'new Indian woman' persona make them a construct of another kind.

d) To obtain a more comprehensive overview of the poetic sensibilities of Indian women poets, Indian women poetry in English translation can be analyzed too. It will be helpful in understanding the changes in gender roles across regions, expressed in multiple languages and flavor.