

Indian Women Poets – The Progenitors of *Écriture Feminine*

A. STELLA AROKIAMARY, S. RAJARAJAN

ABSTRACT

The use of 'female body' became an obvious necessity in the poems of modern women writers as they felt that a woman is left only with her body to make the protest. The focus of this paper is to say that this style of writing is not a new one for Indian women poets. Indian women literary culture can be traced far back ancient times. Hence, the study focuses on Indian women poets who are foregoing in implementation of the concepts of *Écriture féminine* and it is very apt to say that they are the Progenitors of this theory.

Keywords: *Écriture féminine*, Vedic, Buddhism, Indian feminist discourse, Progenitors.

Writing is the place where subversive thought can germinate and it is viewed as a new accessibility to make women create their world, with the help of which they are able to create new spaces for themselves. The use of 'female body' became an obvious necessity in the poems of modern women writers as they felt that a woman is left only with her body to make the protest. This mode of writing is theorised by French feminist Helen Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* where she offers her theory of *Écriture féminine* in the year 1976. *Écriture féminine* is a term coined by Helen Cixous and it is strain of postmodern feminist literary theory in which Cixous asserts that woman must write herself, must write about other women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies' because their sexuality has been repressed and denied.

Helen Cixous is considered to be the representative of *Écriture féminine* in 1974. But in India a similar genre was initiated by some of the Indian women writers who wrote poems in Pre-Vedic Vedic period which continued even after post-colonial period. They wrote with a feministic discourse making use of the body and sexuality as their text. In India, women's literary culture can be traced far back in ancient time. In the pre-Vedic and the Vedic Ages, women enjoyed considerably high status and freedom of thought and expression. Rig Veda the most ancient Indian scripture was composed between 1500 to 900 B.C. It consists of several hymns and poems by many women poets like Ghosa, Surya, Vach, Apala, Vishwavara and Yami. These women's verses are lively, candid, and depict contemporary life, *especially* experienced by woman. As quoted by Eunice de Souza in her introduction to the book *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*, it is mentioned that in Rig-Veda the poetess Apala had written a prayer to Indra, the God of Rain and fertility, as follows: "Make these, three places sprout, O Indra; my daddy's head and field, and this part of me below my waist" (27)

In the division of the Rig-Veda i.e. the 30th and the 40th sukta of the tenth mandala contain Ghosa mantras about woman's martial life and social status in those times. She writes that women were deemed equal to men, and in martial relationship, they were considered companions. Another poet Surya in her verses tells that women were subordinate to their husbands. The Vedas prescribed certain ideals and roles to be taken on by women and she was desired to have *lajja* (modesty and shyness), as is evident from the mantra below: *Adhah pashyasava mopari santram padakau hara Ma te kashaplakau drishantstree hi brahma babhuwitha* which is translated as "– O virtuous woman! Keep your glance downward. Do not look upward. Keep your feet together (do not spread your legs). Wear clothes in such a way that your lips and parts below your waist are not exposed (keep a veil)" [Rig-Veda: 8:43: 19].

The 'Shakti-cult' is another example to show that Women in the pre-Vedic and the Vedic times were held in high esteem. The Vedic pantheon mainly consisted of female gods like Durga (the goddess of power), Lakshmi (goddess of learning and wisdom), Kali, (the goddess of construction) Prithivi (the earth goddess), etc. This hints at the matrilineal family organisation and the authority of woman in those times. But the matriarchal system of the pre-Vedic times, however, began to lose its appeal in the Vedic era itself. The matrilineal structure was replaced by the patrilineal organisation. Although the society was governed in conformity of the strict Brahmanical principle yet women enjoyed considerably good status. They were free to get education. They had the right to choose their husband i.e., the 'Svayamvara'. They had the liberty to divorce the partner if he proved to be unskilful. Even the widows were allowed to remarry.

In the post Vedic period or the classical times the status of women was declined by the laws of Manu which gave women a subordination position and made them subjugated to the patriarchy. But the influence of Buddhism emerged in the post – Vedic times opposed the rigid codes of Brahmanism and gave a new passage to women emancipation. Women joined the Buddhist monks and took the order of nuns called "Bhikshuni-sanga". They started writing verses by expressing themselves. I.B. Horner in his book "Women Under Primitive Buddhism" has mentioned about 'Therigatha' a collection of verses containing seventy – three poems written by women poets like women like Mahapajapati, Gotami, Ambapali's and Keshma. The following excerpt from Ambapali's verse carries her sorrow words of her senility, her neglected being, and speaks of her surrender to her master: ' Today my body is sad shell/They all turn aside./Today its wall are breaking fast /Why did I think of it with pride?'

A poet from Sanskrit named Bhagavadi in her verse laments the loss of love between husband and wife after marriage, as

quoted by Eunice de Souza in her introduction to the book *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* follows:

At first our bodies knew a perfect oneness,
But grew two: the lover,
you and I, unhappy, I, the loved
Now you are the husband, I the wife.
What else should come of this my life
A tree too hard to break,
If not such bitter fruit. (25)

Eunice de Souza in her book *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* remarks that the ancient women poets “often sexually explicit in a way that few modern women can match” like the Prakrit. For example, the metaphorical expression and powerful sexual symbolism as in the lines:

Woman wanting more
not having come
seeing a cart in the middle
of the village
Oh blessed indeed
Says the hub of the wheel
With the axle in it
All the time (27)

The invasion of Muslims into India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and by the rule of Mughals in the sixteenth century once again subdued women under patriarchy. But there was an upsurge of ‘Bhakthi Movement’ during the Mughal period made many women to write in different Indian languages. Mainly they showed their devotion to Lord Krishna referring him as their lover. For instance, Jana Bai from Maharashtra, in a poem seeks the help of lord Krishna ‘with the house work, rub down her aching back and clean her hair when it is full of lice’. (Qtd. Eunice. P.7) Some other women poets, like Mira Bai, from Rajasthan, wrote her devotional poems assuming Krishna as their lover and they were Indramathi, Daya Bai, and Ratnavali.

Margret Macnicol in her book *Poems by Indian Women* refers to a Kannada poet Honnama, expressing her anger over a man's foolishness in demeaning a woman:

The mother who brought them forth (blind fools)/ Is she not a woman?/Alas Why do short-sighted fools pour forth ridicule, crying "Woman, Woman". [The Value of Woman, 44].

In the nineteenth century many reformist movements were started to show their concern on women subordination. In India women bravely took part in freedom fight like Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi remained an example where her valour is glorified by a Hindi poet called Subha Kumari Chauhan in the following lines in fulfilling Cixous' assertion that a woman must write about other woman. "Khoob ladi mardaani woh to Jhansi wali/rani thi" which is translated as to say that 'she fought with masculine valour: she was the queen of Jhansi'.

In the post-colonial period, in 1965s Kamala Das is identified as the progenitor of this new style of writing and later it has influenced her successors. Das is against the male egotism when she writes in the poem "The Old Play House"

You were pleased With my body's response,
its weather, its usual shallow convulsions.
You dribbled spittle into my mouth,
you powered yourself into every nook and cranny,
you embalmed my poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices (8-12).

An in-depth study of her poems reflect that she challenges the gender discrimination by parallel running of a particular type of writing which Helen Cixous terms as *Écriture féminine*.

The study in this paper foregrounds the creative expressions of Indian women poets who were foregoing in an implementation of the concepts of *Écriture féminine* and it is very apt to say that they are the Progenitors of this theory.

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