

Negotiating Men/Women in Modern Indian Poetry Translated into English

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Abstract: With the growth of Indian poetry in English many Indian women poets have come to the periphery of writing poems. Toru Dutt or Kamala Das inspired many women poets to hold their pens to be vocal against women's oppression in Indian society even after India's Independence. But women's position is still the same as it was oppressed by male dominated society before. Though society has changed and the view towards women has also changed, Indian poets have represented women as oppressed and negative. They are "problems". They are subjects to their male counterparts and thus their position becomes objective. In the poems of Gagan Gill, Eunice de Souza, Jyotsna Milan, Hira Bansode, Mrinal Pande, Vaidehi and many others modern Indian women are represented as a group of "powerless women". But, are women always oppressed by men? In this respect I have dealt with both man and woman as represented by the Indian poets in different languages throughout the country. We have seen how balance cannot be drawn by paving a battleground between man and woman. And without the balance peace is hardly discernible in our society. The position of both men and women rests on mutual co-operation. The battle of power can only make unrest. In this paper I have tried to focus on the position of both men and women in the translated of Indian poetry of many Indian poets into English.

Keywords: translated poems, modern Indian poets, battle of power, co-operation, balance, position in society.

Virginia Woolf in the chapter 'Androgyny' in her essay *A Room of One's Own* writes, ".....in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties." (Woolf, 901).

Before we start our discussion on the position of both men and women in modern translated Indian poetry in English today, I like to draw an instance from our regular education system on the battle-ground of men and women. From the very beginning of our education system, irrespective of language barrier, we have been taught *men* always as the antonym of *women*. In any language in a class-room situation when a student is asked to say the antonym of men, any student must say that it is women. Hence, the battle-ground for men/women is already prepared. We are fighting today seeking for an elevated space for women in our society and we discuss women's lower position in our society indeed, but

we often forget the prepared battle-ground for men and women. It has become a battle-ground of power: on the one hand, there is a powerful group (men), and on the other the powerless group (women). But who makes this division between powerful and powerless groups remains unknown and is a matter of debate for which we should avail another paper. Historical accounts are necessary to isolate women poets from main stream Indian poetry. In *The Oxford Anthology of modern Indian poetry* Vinay Dharwadker writes in the 'Afterwords', "The situation of women poets in Indian English, in fact, may be a good measure of the change as a whole. In the 1960s the foreground was occupied by relatively isolated figures like Monika Verma and Kamala Das. In the 1970s Gauri Deshpande, Malathi Ra, Anna Sujatha Madayil, Lakshmi Kannan, Mamta Kalia, and Sunita Jain, as well as Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado, Priya Karunakar, Debjani Chatterjee, Nasima Aziz, and Meena Alexander entered the picture, giving it the look of a community of women poets." (Anthology, 204). Thus he gives the names of the Indian women poets who not only wrote in English but also those whose poems in their native languages were translated into English by themselves or by others. He concludes the paragraph with the statement that, "Together with their counterparts in the other languages, these women writers have effectively displaced Indian writing from its 'traditional male-dominated centres.'" (Anthology, 204).

The path which was paved by poets like Toru Dutt or Kamala Das gets a new way in the hands of the women poets of India. The women poets not only limited themselves to any one language. In a multi-lingual country like India, they write in as many languages they know. Obviously, Indian native languages are their first language; but, as a second language they often choose English for its wide access in our world. The situation has changed since Das writes about the problem in following English as the language in which she wants to write. Kamala Das writes,

Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queeriness
All mine, mine alone.
It is half-English, half-Indian, funny
Perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see?" (An Introduction)

In this above quoted extract a clear distinction has been made between 'mother tongue' and English. With the development of modern Indian poetry since Independence, the scope for Indian poets has been changed in case of choosing a language. Women as writers become free in their choices regarding language. In Indian context the position of women always recurs in poetry. It is always dominated and regulated by men. Popati Ramchand Hiranandani (b. 1924), a scholar, critic and teacher of Sindhi language, stresses in her poem 'Husband', translated from Sindhi

by the poet herself, on the dominated voice of the husband, the man in the family, as:

You cook for me. | I provide you | With two meals a day. | This home
| Has lively children. | They're my own blood. | They'll use my
money, | Make my name in the world, | And carry on my line.

She universalizes the husband in the Indian context. This story is not only restricted to this poem only; rather, it is a regular and familiar traditional thought that provokes the poet to focus on the household affair. The identity of the wife is thought to be inserted in the identity of the husband. So, in the words of the husband,

You're my children's mother, | That's why you're my wife.....
..You belong to me- I own everything that's yours.
With me | It's different. | I'm your husband.

The last line is dominating and silently tyrannical. It declares the very presence of the husband obliterating the wife.

The position of women is subordinated from the birth of a girl. Gagan Gill, the Hindi poet from New Delhi, presents the same view towards women in her poem 'The Girl's Desire Moves Among Her Bangles'. She proves to be very farsighted in searching for the root of women's subordinated position in our society. It is a social taboo that in Indian social circumstances a woman's happiness depends on her husband. After her husband's death she is not allowed to wear bangles or coloured wearing. She is prepared for this future of her from her birth and the system that brings her to this future is named marriage. It is a woman who is slept in the girl. Her bangles are the signs of her happiness.

The girl's desire moves among her bangles
They should break first on his bed
Then on the threshold of his house.

Here are clear indications of the smashed happiness and obliteration of the woman's identity. "On his bed" signifies the sexual appetite of her man that breaks her bangles during the sexual assimilation of the two lovers, the mating nights after marriage. And later "on the threshold of his house" signifies the death of the husband that in Indian society impels women to break their bangles. In both the cases women are the oppressed. The image of voice-less women crosses the boundary of reality to paintings as reflected in Eunice de Souza's poem 'Women in Dutch Painting'.

an aunt who did not answer her husband back, | not because she was
plain, | and an aunt who writes poems | and hopes her avocado
seeds | will sprout in the kitchen. | Her voice is oatmeal and honey.

In the first picture the aunt who does not give her husband an answer back and in the second picture in which an aunt writes poems and is limited and caged in her kitchen with her writings are the instances of those women who could have done much better than their counterparts if they were not dominated by the male dominated society. It reminds us of Shakespeare's imaginary sister Judith as imagined by Virginia Woolf, after whom Woolf generalizes "that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half

wizard, feared and mocked at.” (Woolf, 898) Here, the aunt's voice mixes in the air of her kitchen. The two images of aunts, one does not give her husband answer back and another who writes out her mind in the form of poems, joined together give the idea that though the woman does not reply her husband, she takes poetry as a medium of expressing her mind. But in this male-dominated society her voice is resisted. Kitchen is seen by many Indian poets as typical boundary for women. Vaidehi starts her poem 'Girl in the Kitchen' as-

Like other things | They say a kitchen too | Means many things |
But for this girl | This kitchen is her house | This that and every
house | Even the house of burial.” (lines 1-7)

Kitchens are not only common but necessary in every house also. It is like a stomach. The girl in the poem representing the Indian womanhood in general spends her days in the kitchen blowing “*foo foo* into the fire”.

Sexually women are always depicted as subordinated. Whereas in Kamala Das the woman dedicates herself to the wish of her male mate, in Jyotsna Milan's 'Woman, 2' the woman becomes the victim of sexuality. Whereas Das writes in "The Looking Glass"-

Getting a man to love you is easy | Only be honest about your wants
as | Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him | So that he sees
himself the stronger one | And believes it so, and you so much more
| Softer, younger, lovelier.....Admit your | Admiration.”

Milan writes,

the man says, | 'I'm God.'
The woman | Looks, | And convulsing with the pain | O losing God,
| She turns away | Her face.” (lines 9-16).

In sexual acts when the man acts as a God or God-like, i.e. dominating and tyrannical and subjective, the woman is considered as objective and the puppet in the hands of her male counterpart. He screams in penetration during sexual intercourse and “convulsing with the pain” she sets her body “on fire”. This is the male voice that declares himself as God and the woman turns her face away from the God. Here, sexuality is shown as a torture, a kind of rape. This is totally in opposition with Das's idea of crossing the sexual boundary by sexual acts. Nudity and intercourse are not the medium of crossing the gender identity. Rather, in Milan sexual acts are the means of dominating women. It creates gender biasness. Hira Bansode revolts in 'Woman' in the form of a river. It is a river's contribution that makes a sea and grows it vaster and wider, but the sea rejecting the river's contribution flows worshipping its own name. She considers “a woman's gift/ is as large as the sky”. Here is a woman voice that revolts against the oppression. Woman's contribution in a society is great though it is often not considered. In the last lines where she sentimentalizes about the rift in their merger by saying,

but you went on | Worshipping yourself | You never thought | Of
becoming a river | And merging | With me” (lines 11-16).

It is the woman's endeavour to create the merger with her counterpart but the other remains proud of himself and snobbish. But why do they need merger? The answer remains in Akhtar-ul-Iman's 'Compromise',

I hate her, she despises me. | But when we meet | In the loneliness,
the darkness, | We become one whole, like a lump of kneaded clay, |
Hatred leave, silence stays, | The silence that covered the earth |
After it was created, | And we go on breaking | Like branches. (lines
34-42).

The merger is like Donne's hyperbolic merger. The two better hemispheres meet to create a complete round. But the battle-ground is not sought. The men/women battle-ground can never make a complete round or a complete society. They are not competitors, but counterparts. Together they comprise the society. The Malayalam poet N. Balami Amma finds in 'To My Daughter' the rising power in women.

Your mind may grow restless with unhappy thoughts, | Your body
may be weary of household tasks, | But I have no fears for you. | Your
power to turn worms into butterflies | Comforts me. (lines 22-26)

The society has become a battle-ground of powers. But to create a good and well-educated society we need co-operation forgetting the gender identities.

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