
GENERAL SECTION

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Interrogating Gender and Empowering Women: A Study of Selected Poems of Rupī Kaur and Tishani Doshi

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Abstract

In my paper, I have endeavoured to examine some selected poems of Rupī Kaur and Tishani Doshi. Both of them challenge the gender stereotypes prevalent in society and address the feminist issues perceived through multiple avenues of life. The women in their poems are the crusaders of hope for the marginalised, peripheral women in the world. I have examined how they aim at transforming the world to create a better future for everyone. The women they presented in their poems are free thinkers. I have attempted to show how these two women poets projected women who assert their rights and might and prove their self-sufficiency leaving their silenced, suppressed, peripheral zone of existence. The women of Kaur and Doshi's poems question the lopsided societal norms which are preserved in gender-politics.

Keywords: Gender, Empowerment, Feminist, Women

Gender, the social elaboration of biological sex, constitutes one's sense of identity. It is central to our understanding of 'self'. In "Feminist and Gender Theories", Scott Appelrouth and Laura Edles say: "Gender is something we do and perform" (317). This stereotypical gender discourse triggers the "bifurcation of consciousness"¹ in women. According to Dorothy Smith, the

patriarchal women get trapped between the masculine-oriented, dominant abstract world, and the concrete world of mother and wife (qtd. in Appelrouth and Edles 321). Women are expected to adapt to a male-defined, male-dominated world. In this paper, I have selected some specific poems of two eminent poets named Rupri Kaur and Tishani Doshi to challenge the “matrix of domination.”² Breaking the silence and empowering women in literary space underscore a moment of insubordination to the myopic power structure. Their militant approach is a direct insult to the androcentric, lopsided society. Kaur’s spokesperson refuses to be the “other” and claims to be a “unified subject” in a poem titled “home”:

I dive into the well of my body
and end up in another world
everything I need
already exists in me
there’s no need
to look anywhere else. (1-6)

Tishani Doshi’s feminist approach is quite palpable in her poems. In a talk with Janice S. Rodrigues, on 4 Nov. 2017 in *The Navhind Times*, Doshi says, “Feminism is freedom, and freedom, to quote the great Nina Simone, is to have no fear. So, it’s both those things- a life of freedom, a life without freedom” (Interview).

Following Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir gives a theoretical framework of gender discrimination. She says: “He is the subject; he is the Absolute; she is the other” (qtd. in Appelrouth and Edles 316). She uses the Hegelian terminology of “pour-soi” and “en-soi” to identify the man/woman binary. According to Hegel, men are moulded in the role of “pour-soi” i.e., for themselves. It is a continual process of self-realisation and creative freedom, while women are put into the role of en-soi i.e.in-itself, in which they consent to become an object (qtd. in Appelrouth and Edles 316). Beauvoir dismantles this traditional concept by urging women to decline to be “other”. Her female readers are to develop their rational, masculine, faculties and critical power to reconstruct themselves as “pour-soi’ or transcendental subjects. Being radically dynamic and experimental by nature, Indian English poetry addresses new challenges, embraces new theoretical tenets, and explores new horizons of thought for the readers. I have selected the poems of Rupri Kaur and Tishani Doshi as

the female protagonists they presented in their poems leave their passive zone of “silence” and turn out to be iconoclasts to empower women.

Rupi Kaur (1992-), an Indo-Canadian poet has charmed the world by sending a message to society so directly. The Instapoet celebrates the world of women in all its forms. Kaur’s collections of poems are anthologised in *Milk and Honey* (2014), *The Sun and Her Flowers* (2017). The poems in these are vivid, and realistic in their appeal. The multifarious nuances of a woman’s life and her perceptions remain the areas of her poetic articulation. The woman in her poems stands for courage, bravery and strength. They are the independent spokespersons of the female world which throws away the age-old taboos set on them by male chauvinism. On 6 Oct. 2016, she posted a poem on Facebook about the assertion of the female voice in transforming the world. In today’s world, women not only claim their rights, but they also become iconoclasts in reforming the world. The poem was published in the anthology called *Milk and Honey* (2014). The title is symbolic. It denotes the sustenance for thriving. Women are the source of creativity and reproduction. In Kaur’s poem, success for the female protagonist means a happier society for all. The philanthropic note becomes conspicuous and inimitable in the painting drawn by the poem’s side. The visual beauty of the beehive with the bees on it is suggestive and emblematic of the poet’s efforts to reconstruct a beautiful, poverty-ridden world for all:

of course i want to be successful
 but i don’t crave success for me
 i need to be successful to gain
 enough milk and honey
 to help those around
 me succeed.³ (1-6)

The poet’s notion of the feminine is nourishing, soothing and life-giving. Their nature is synonymous with that of milk and honey, according to the poet. Her feminist perspective does not clash with her feminine nature. Though she is a feminist, her approach does not allow her to sacrifice her essential feminine ‘self’. Rather she protects it consciously in this poem. The women of Kaur’s world resist the injustices inflicted on them with their essential self which is animated

with the humane qualities of love, mercy and compassion for all. Love and compassion oozing out of her feminine self-retaliates patriarchal aggression:

how is it so easy for you
to be kind to people he asked.
milk and honey dripped
from my lips as I answered
cause people have not
been kind to me.⁴ (1-6)

The soft, mild, nurturing nature of the women is placed along with their destructive nature. Kaur is completely realistic in unveiling the bi-focal, antagonistic nature of the feminine self. In a poem from *Milk and Honey*, Kaur has beautifully exposed the contradictory nature of a woman:

i am water
soft enough
to offer life
tough enough
to drown it away.⁵ (1- 5)

These lines invite comparison with the liquid, ambivalent nature of water. Women like “water” are both life-giving as well as life-snatching.

Since the very inception of the feminist movement, the feminists were struggling to establish the self-sufficiency of a woman. They opposed the very societal construct in which women had been confined, silenced and marginalised. They were meant to attain completeness in their association with men. But in the present century, emerging poets like Kaur prove how the binary between the world of men and the world of women is erased. Kaur’s poems break the gender stereotypes and erase the discourse of “other” in a befitting way. She motivates the women:

the way you speak of yourself
the way you degrade yourself
into smallness
is abuse
self-harm.⁶ (1-5)

Tishani Doshi (1975-) is another important Indian English poet. Her important collections of poems are *Countries of the Body* (2006),

Everything Begins Elsewhere (2012), and *Girls are Coming Out of Woods* (2018). Unlike Kaur's, Doshi's poems are narrative by nature. I have two poems where the poet uses concrete images to delineate the sufferings of the women characters. In an interview with Janice Savina Rodrigues, she speaks of her feminist perception in *Girls are Coming Out of Woods* (2018): "These poems have at their centre the female body, questions about motherhood, mortality, gender violence and ageing" (Interview). I have selected the texts which focus on revealing the sufferings of women. Tishani Doshi's female protagonists are oppressed sexually. But they march onwards to subvert the construct of sexual domination. The poet celebrates the dynamic nature of womanhood.

In the poem titled "Girls are Coming out of Woods", the poet portrays the gloomy picture of the women abused sexually. The term "woods" carries the symbolic undertones in it. In this poem, the woods become the emblems of seclusion, isolation and deprivation. Generally, the sexually assaulted female victims cocoon themselves. The pain inflicted on them causes their shame. But Tishani Doshi's female protagonists take a militant standpoint. Instead of isolating themselves from society, they emerge out of the woods to share their story and cast aside their shame to protest. Instead of hiding themselves in the woods, they confront society to demand justice. The poet breaks the taboos related to the female body. She is comfortable in expressing the sufferings of the women protagonists in minute details. In the poem entitled "Girls are coming out of Woods", the poet portrays in minute detail the assertion of the victims:

Girls are coming out of the woods,
 wrapped in cloaks and hoods,
 carrying iron bars and candles
 and a multitude of scars, collected
 on acres of premature grass and city
 buses, in temples and bars. Girls
 are coming out of the woods
 with panties tied around their lips,
 making such a noise, it's impossible
 to hear. Is the world speaking too? (1-10)

The poet is sarcastic about the silence of the world regarding the violence against women. The expression "multitude of scars" on the

female body reveals the inhuman tortures to which women are subjected. The scars are symbolic. These are more on their mind. The poet gets rid of any kind of inhibition in portraying reality. The lines “Girls are/ coming out of the woods, lifting/ their broken legs high, leaking secrets/ from unfastened thighs” (12-15) become an appropriate objective correlative in offering the exact images of brutality towards the raped. In an interview with Nicholas Wroe on 27 July 2019, she says that the idea of the female body has always been central to her work (Interview). The poet is ironically projecting the victim’s demand for justice while the victim’s family is trying to hide the fact. It is a slap on the societal silence over crimes. The scathing satire leaves the society unmasked most unsparingly and unapologetically:

. . .all the lies
whispered by strangers and swimming
coaches, and uncles, especially uncles,
who said spreading would be light
and easy... (16-20)

The untold stories of the raped are carved on their psyche. They try to question the society and its norms by emerging out of their cocoon to reveal the truth:

. . . Girls are coming
out of the woods, clearing the ground
to scatter their stories. Even those girls
found naked in ditches and wells,
those forgotten in neglected attics,
and buried in river beds like sediments
from a different century. They’ve crawled
their way out from behind curtains
of childhood, the silver-pink weight
of their bodies pushing against water,
against the sad, feathered tarnish
of remembrance. . . (24-35)

Tishani Doshi makes use of some telling images to present the stories of women in a vivid, realistic way. The graphic details of sexual violence inflicted on a woman’s body” demand an immediate redressal. The poetry of Doshi is essentialised to raise social awareness or consciousness. The language she uses is bold, undaunting as her approach is.

The poem titled “Contract” is a message to her dear readers where she promises them to:

turn her skin inside out,
to reinvent every lost word, to burnish,
to steal, to do what I must
in order to singe your lungs. (2-5).

Doshi’s readers are left with a task to delve deep into her psyche and reformulate a new society which can be a haven for the women who suffer, protest and transform. The poem is quite radical in its approach. Instead of lulling the readers into a passive acceptance of the injustices, the iconoclast here instigates them to change the mindset of the world so that it can be a better place for living. The enormity of pain cannot prevent her from telling the truth. The lacerated soul of the poet craves no solace: “I will forgo happiness, / stab myself repeatedly, / and lower my head into countless ovens” (6-8). The feminist in her turns militant in refusing the shackles of the society. Society becomes powerless to stifle her voice. The poet makes an appeal to her readers:

Don’t kill me. Reader,
This neck has been working for years
to harden itself against the axe.
This body, meagre as it is,
Has lost so many limbs to wars, so many
eyes and hearts to romance. But love me,
and I will follow you everywhere –
to the dusty corners of childhood,
to every downfall and resurrection.
Till your skin becomes my skin. (19-28)

Conclusion: In this paper, I have tried to analyse and establish the fact that in the present century, the struggle for women’s empowerment has succeeded in achieving a great height, as women are not defined by their three-fold roles of being a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Rather they leave their passive zone of remaining suppressed, oppressed and marginalised by the dominant section of the society. Today’s women assert their rights and might. Kaur celebrates the unflagging, undying strength of women: “and here you are living/despite it all” (1-2)⁷. It is Kaur who says:

what’s the greatest lesson a woman should learn?
that since day one, she’s already had everything

she needs within herself. It's the world that convinced her she did not. (qtd. in Bozeman)

Women in Kaur and Doshi's poems are free thinkers. They have liberated themselves from any kind of bondage which diminishes them.

Notes

1. The term "Bifurcation of consciousness" is coined by Dorothy E. Smith. Smith used it to demarcate the split between the world as we experience it and the dominant masculine point of view to which we must adapt. See pages 320-321, "Feminist and Gender Theories", https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/38628_7.pdf Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.
2. It is coined by Patricia Hill Collins. In "Everyday World as Problematic", Dorothy Smith brings in Patricia's concept of a "matrix of domination" to "underscore that one's position in society is made up of multiple contiguous standpoints" (334).
3. The poem reminds us of Kaur's other poem on love and fellow-feeling. The poet's power to sympathise with others is beautifully woven there: "of hate/is an easy lazy thing/ but to love/ takes strength/everyone has/but not all are/willing to practice."
4. "A Quote from Milk and Honey." *Goodreads*, Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8021335-how-is-it-so-easy-for-youto-be-kind-to>.
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