

**TRACING AND IDENTIFYING THE SUBMERGED RHYTHMS OF THE
VOICELESS IN INDIA: A PHYSICAL-METAPHYSICAL-SPIRITUAL
ANALYSIS OF ARUNDHATI SUBRAMANIAM**

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ABSTRACT

Multiple socio-political changes have always created a powerful influence on creative writing. Within the massive, universal corpus of literary creativity, Indian English writing spans across from the pre-colonial, colonial to the post-colonial era. It is a complex interweaving of the Indian experience, with its regional involvements and international affiliations made possible through English, and enriched by the diasporic experiences of writers not confined geographically to India. Post-independent Indian English poetry, embraces variety of modern themes and ideas especially women subjectivity. After 1980s, India's poetic circle became flooded with remarkable women poets and ArundhatiSubramaniam occupies a prestigious place in this field. Her creations are an outpour of the various simple and complicated experiences of her life. Her poems cover the various physical, metaphysical and spiritual stages of human existence and experience. This paper intends to highlight a feminist's observation of the multiple facets of humanity.

Keywords: socio-political, Indian English, post-colonial, diasporic, post-independent, metaphysical, feminist, humanity

‘The Vedas cry aloud, the Puranas shout;”
No good may come to a woman.”
I was born with a woman's body
How am I to attain truth?
"They are foolish, seductive, deceptive -
Any connection with a woman is disastrous.”
Bahina says, "If a woman's body is so harmful,
How in the world will I reach truth?” ‘
[Bahinabai (1682-1700)]

The massive canon of world's literature is a result of the patriarchal monopoly which has developed and permeated to every crack and fissures of the human society. Women have always been a victim of male autocracy and even the historical periodization has appeared to be biased. If we draw our attention towards the English literary history we find that during the Renaissance or Romantic period there exist no records of women's writing despite the fact, women have been producing towering works under insurmountable difficulties. But the periodization bypasses them leaving such writings deeply buried in the sands of anonymity. Recent investigations have unearthed a startling fact that the so called dull literary period between Richardson's death and Sir Walter Scott's emergence is indeed richly strewn with writings of women.

The Victorian culture was enchained with multiple boundaries and limitations of human existence. The women were as usual the primary victims of this irrationality. According to Shirley and Enid Ardener, women's sphere exists as a separate area of cultural experience apart from the largely shared experiences with men. Certain aspects are largely outside male experiences and this is what Shirley and Ardener calls as 'wild area'. They built a model of two circles, one representing the dominant male group and the other 'muted group'. The term 'muted' is pregnant with meanings and suggests 'problems of both language and power'. Besides being a political revolution the Women's movement that began in 1960s also became a major literary force to eradicate this 'muted' existence of women and extract their true voice, a counter canon of the patriarchal literary order. According to Elaine Showalter, feminist criticism can prosper in two solid modes:

- 1) Evolving an ideological base in the role of women as a reader in order to give a women-specific interpretation to texts.
- 2) Feminist or women as writers which is also called gynocritique enabling to create experiences, categories and structures of writing which have been deliberately supported by patriarchal enterprises.

This parallel issue of textuality and sexuality has been further developed and discussed by Sandra Gilbert and later on by Helen Cixous through the concept of *écriture féminine*. But Sandra Gilbert's concept established women as mere revisionists of men's works and has been condemned by Elaine Showalter. Showalter was of the view that rather than becoming as mere revisionist it is important for the feminists to build up a viable revolutionary framework that would truly facilitate articulation of women's expression. French feminists like Helen Cixous established the idea of female body as a meaningful sign *écriture féminine* to suggest the point of departure for a leap into the vast area of female difference which governs women's treatment in patriarchal literature and its privileging in feminist critical writings.

Women's role in Pre-colonial social structures reveals that feminism was visualized differently in India as compared to the west. Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates being conducted about violence against women. Historical circumstances and values in India have caused feminists to develop a feminism that differs from Western feminism. For example, the idea of women as "powerful" is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion, which has retained visibility in all sections of society. This has provided women with traditional "cultural spaces." Moreover, in the Western notion of "self" relies in competitive individualism where people are described as "born free yet everywhere in chains." In India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social collective. The heterogeneity of the Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies, contributing to the existence of multiple feminisms. Hence, feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of

consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women, and women as a group. The multifariously oppressed Indian women, a typical characteristic feature of the ‘third-world’ societies has been described as ‘gendered subaltern’ a term coined by GayatriSpivack. Gendered Subalternity binds the issues of feminism and post-colonialism as co-existing aspects. Spivack is of the view that, in order to be heard and known, the oppressed subaltern must adopt Western ways of knowing, of thought, reasoning, and language. Because of such Westernization, a subaltern can never express their ways of knowing (thought, reasoning, and language) and instead must conform expression of their non–Western knowledge of colonial life to Western ways of knowing the world.

Women’s writing in India dates back to the Vedic age. During the Vedic age, more than 3,000 years ago, women were assigned an honorable place in society. They shared an equal status with their men folk and enjoyed a kind of liberty that actually had societal sanctions.

In spite of matrilineal heritage in several parts of India, no written records of women’s literary prowess exists before 6th century BC. The emergence of the first body of poetry by women in India could be attributed to the advent of Buddhism. Buddhism offered women the opportunity to break away from the restrictions of home life, a major factor in the rise of Indian women’s literature in the early 6th century BC. The earliest known anthology of women’s literature in India has been identified as those belonging to the Therigatha nuns, contemporaries of Buddha. Amongst them, Mutta, expresses:

‘So free am I, so gloriously free, free from three petty things -
from mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord’.

In order to escape from the frustrations and monotonicity of domestic traditions and marriage women chose to join the Buddhist ‘sangha’. Thus emerged poems and songs about what it meant to be free from household chores and sexual slavery. Although the early forms of writing addressed the issue of personal freedom, the poetry that followed later was a celebration of womanhood and sexuality. The Sangam poets that dominated the era between ca. 100 BC-AD 250 wrote extensively about what it meant to have a female body. The translation of VenmanipputiKuruntokai’s ‘What she said to her girlfriend’ reads:

‘On the banks shaded by a punnai clustered with flowers, when we made
love my eyes saw him and my ears heard him; my arms grow beautiful in
the coupling and grow lean as they come away.’

(1991: *History of Tamil Poetry*)

According to A. K. Ramanujan, in the Sangam age disparities in gender are evident in the way women have written about their experiences. Some of the poems are deep echoes of bodily love and passion, the foolishness of war and the ‘spears’ that men left with to wage wars. The colonial invasion in the 18th century influenced the decline of women writing in India. The result of the loss of the kingdoms led to the loss of patronage to women in courts.

Vedas and Sangam Tamil literature have the highest number of women poets (poetesses) in the world. It is amazing to see they were able to compose poems and attend assemblies. GargiVachaknavi was the only example one can quote for women’s education and freedom from the most ancient days. She was invited to attend an assembly of scholars to discuss philosophical matters.

The new generation of Tamil women poets writing today, especially after 1980s – whether naturalist, realist, feminist or modernist – have better access to publishing (whether little magazines, middle magazines or the small press) comes into the limelight through popular media. But this situation would have been unimaginable in the 70s and 80s. Thirisadai was the

first woman to publish her collection *PaniyalPattaPaththuMarangalway* back in 1972. Entitling all the women writers as feminists will be a narrow connotation. But controversy still rages about their classification. Poets like LathaRamakrishnan and Perundevi do not prefer to associate themselves with the ‘womanist’ group. They prefer to be called writers rather than women poets. LathaRamakrishnan would want to be judged along with the accomplishments of other male poets. Perundevi says, ‘If at all one chooses to identify oneself with a womanist group it should be a strategic choice made in her fight against patriarchy, for all the cultural institutions are patriarchal or phallogocentric.’ (1996: *Tamil poetry in the Contemporary Times*)

The major problem amongst the women writers is their exploration of the ‘body.’ Kamala Das is an engaging name whose confessional poetry is a nude expression of her sexual experiences and desires. She also challenged the existing literary conventions. But the female poet’s explorations of sexuality have been wrongly called as ‘body language.’ Moreover their overt expression about their sexuality often stops with the naming of body parts. While the woman poet has a compulsion to feminize her perceptions she has the additional responsibility of ‘humanizing her femininity.’ Virginia Woolf pointed out the ‘outward’ and ‘inward’ obstacles to women writers. According to Woolf, ‘She (woman writer) still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome.’ (2012: *A Room of One’s Own*)

Among the contemporary women Poets of India, especially Tamil poets, Arundhati Subramaniam commands a venerating position. Her poetic creations are a breakaway from the thematic and ideological limitations of her predecessors. Her poetry covers a wide field of various physical, metaphysical and spiritual aspects of human existence and experience. In 5:46, *Andheri Local*, Subramaniam speaks of an individual’s daily experience in the women’s compartment of a ‘Bombay local’. She associates the suffocation of women in the compartment with their real life disasters. Every travelling woman in the compartment has their own separate dreams, destinies, sufferings and disasters. They have their own respective physical appearances with unique physical features but they are bounded by the same string of agony of patriarchal domination. She uses the organic imageries of ‘flesh’, ‘organza’, ‘odours’, and ‘ovaries’ not as sexual innuendoes but highlighting the female physical consciousness which demands respect from the “patriarchal methodolatry” (term of contempt coined by Elaine Showalter). Towards the concluding part of the poem she invokes the mystical image of Goddess Kali, who physically appears to be wild and nude. Woman’s organs are not the food for men’s limitless sexual hunger. Bhakti poetess Akkamahadevi uses the female body to condemn the patriarchal conceptualization of women. She says, ‘Brother, you’ve come drawn by the beauty of these billowing breasts, this brimming youth. I am no woman brother, no whore’. Subramaniam’s usage of the imagery of Goddess Kali symbolically demands to worship and respect every female figure in the form of divinity. She relates the power and energy of the Andheri local with the divine strength and power of femininity. So she describes it as ‘Kali on wheels’. After descending from the train the lady chooses to fulfill her own wish over the wish of her lover. She says:

‘When I descend
 I could choose
 To dice carrots
 Or a lover
 I postpone the latter
 (5:46, *Andheri Local*)

In this way the poem concludes in a mild language of protest. This mildness takes a violent turn in *Demand* where Subramaniam openly disrupts the greedy, lustful male social order. Sketching a very negative and dull picture, she goes on to claim that the males lead purposeless life of lust and greed. All forms of male affection, love, care and compassion towards their female counterpart are just to meet their sole purpose of appeasing their endless physical thirst. Women are treated as ‘rice-starved, dhoop-soaked’, crumpled clothes ‘in a family cupboard’. She expresses her extreme hatred towards the male ‘breath’ around her. The male figure always remains attached to the female with false assurances and promises. He always has his own selfish motives to satisfy. Women are like the play dolls for the patriarchy. Subramaniam highlights this tradition of women’s subjugation and suffering since her ‘foremothers’ who might not be so much aware of it. They survive like the worn out, crumpled linen used and then thrown away behind the cupboard doors. This poem along with its theme holds a massive significance in terms of its diction as well. The language reveals the indigenous feminine conscience of the poet. The usage of words like ‘dhoop-soaked’, ‘foremothers’ is a celebration of Helen Cixous’ concept of ‘écriture feminine’. Her violent attitude continues till the end of her poem as she concludes:

‘...reminding you
That this
This uncensored wilderness
Of greed
Is simply-
Or not so simply-
Body’.
(*Demand*)

Her outright violent attitude towards the male-centered society gradually turns towards the search of feminine existence. The poem, *Home*, is a revelation of the angst of Feminine existentialism. Though, Sartre’s theory of existentialism spread the realization of the futility of human existence and bringing an end to the essence-existence conflict, but feminists feel alienated from this theory. They are of the view that women’s existential crisis occupies a separate area and its existence lies outside the male social order. This poem contradicts the Pinteresque concept of ‘home’ which was believed to be a secured, harmless and peaceful place, far away from the menace of the outside world. For women, the home is a place of complete suppression and subjugation. It appears as a prison trap for them. They rot and suffer throughout their life within these four walls. The very introductory lines reveal her urgent search for freedom from the shackles of domestic life. She wants to ‘slip in and out of rooms without a trace’. This slipping out is a way to escape from the burdens of the household chores. Subramaniam wishes that she never belonged to any home and she could have wondered freely according to her own whims and fancies. For her the home is a place for endless controversies and cacophonies of family life. Within such a confused state of existence a woman’s self-identity remains ignored and slowly fades away into the dark cracks and ‘crevices’ of human existence. So Subramaniam concludes by saying:

“A home, like this body, So alien when I try to belong,
So hospitable. When I decide I’m just visiting”. (*Home*)

Another well discussed work of Arundhati Subramaniam that once again reveal the width and the depth of her poetic themes is *Recycled*. The underlying theme of the poem is the problems of displacement and identity crisis in diaspora. But Subramaniam’s uniqueness lies in

the process of drawing a co-relation between the issues of femininity and diaspora. Both suffer from partial or complete uprootedness and existential anxiety. This poem captures the feminine diasporic experiences of Subramaniam herself who has undergone this double oppression throughout her life. According to Salman Rushdie:

‘Our lives disconnect and reconnect, we move on, and later we may again touch one another, again bounce away. This is the felt shape of a human life, neither simply linear nor wholly disjunctive nor endlessly bifurcating, but rather this bouncy-castle sequence of bumpings-into and tumbings-apart.’ (1999: *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*)

This disconnecting and reconnecting is the core issue of diaspora which pushes and individual towards a barren, deserted existence. This barren, deserted experience is also associated with the life of the women as well. All the dreams and aspirations of the individuals exist in dreams and fancies. Its fulfillment happens only in the virtual state. So she says:

‘...what we are so often told, That fancy has wings And dreams come true, Even if it takes years.....’ (*Recycled*)

As Subramaniam travels through the Trossachs in Scotland, she remembers her sweet cherishing memories of her childhood in Bombay, where she was born. But with the passage of time these memories have been poisoned with a bitter taste. Similar to a diasporic individual the constraints of time strip a woman of her original identity and she survives as a crumble of flesh and blood, completely displaced and ignored

A meticulous analysis of the poetic creations of Arundhati Subramaniam exposes the exploration of multifarious ambivalences – around human intimacy with its bottlenecks and surprises, life in a Third World megalopolis, myth, the politics of culture and gender, and the persistent trope of the existential journey.

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