

SISTER POETS: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY ANAMIKA AND SUJATA BHATT

Shweta Sharma

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

GGSIU University,

Delhi

&

Assistant Professor of English

Northern India Engineering College,

affiliated to GGSIP University,

Delhi

Abstract

The research paper is an attempt to compare and contrast the two eminent women poets – Anamika and Sujata Bhatt. Both the contemporary women poets despite the fact that write in different circumstances have come up with similar kind of sensibilities, especially communicating the emotions at the women's end. The refreshing part of these women poets is that apart from bringing the female sensitivity to the upper crust, they have touched upon various other sensitivities related with the people of different strata's of society. They are conscious of multiple oppressions prevalent in society. One diasporic writer and another native one, the combined study of both the poets helps in understanding the direction which contemporary women's poetry is heading towards.

Nineteenth century was the age of great scientific discoveries and the greatest of them was the discovery of self-esteem in the colony of colonies – a woman's heart, the heart even of Asooryampashyas, women in Harems and Anthahpurams (Anamika, *Translating Racial Memory* 14). In the twenty first century, this discovery resulted into rapid and immense change in woman's ideology. This is best reflected through literature. Contemporary Indian Women's Literature has done commendable growth; it has attracted the critiques and has also become major area of research. Through this paper an attempt has been made to study two prolific poets in the light of Contemporary Women's Poetry – Anamika and Sujata Bhatt. Despite the facts, that both the poets are unique in their own ways, write in different languages but the concept of universal sisterhood reflects in their work. Both the poets have written poetry which touches woman's life. In conversation with poet Anamika, understanding of the contemporary women's literature became even more clear; she highlighted that contemporary women's poetry has taken three major aspects into consideration: firstly, the aspect of ecology has been taken into account.

Secondly, the impact of globalization is quite evident in women's literature. Women's poetry go for a balanced universe - whatever is happening across the globe effects the literature. Lastly, the folk-lore and mythology is revived in contemporary poetry¹. And all these factors are evident in the poetry of both the poets.

In India, among the contemporary women writers Anamika's is the most oblique and subtle treatment of the poetic materials. Her themes are reflected in her stylistic twists; her poetics is a pleasant blend of aesthetic and ethics, tradition and modernity, the mythopoeic and the contemporary. Her diversity in themes, references to historical characters, inculcation of folklores makes her poetry even more interesting. Different shades of meaning flash up in poems like – Antakshari, Furniture, Country, A Nap in the Library, Safety Pin etc, through the pleasant juxtaposition of cosmic and common place.

In contrast to Anamika, Sujata Bhatt born in India, studied and married overseas has similar renderings in Literature. Her interactions with various cultures and languages have led to the blossom of innovative themes in her poetry. German, English, Hindi, Gujarati – the amalgamation of all these languages and hence cultures puts forth a rich text to read. Poems like Augatora, Brunizem, Gazpacho, New Orleans Revisited, Honeymoon, etc reflects the diverse representation of culture and society. Although, Anamika and Sujata Bhatt both the poets have written poems revolving around female characters but they are refreshing in their own way.

Anamika in many of her poems has used the suppression of women as a tool of advantage. Akshay Kumar writes in his book 'Poetry, Politics and Culture', "Hindi women's poetry of 1990's largely focuses on the poetics and politics of space; however its woman protagonist now begins to celebrate her exile and homelessness. She has realized the bondages of her context and therefore, as a loose free-floating text, she would prefer to remain decontextualized, un-interpreted." (Kumar, 333) Such representation has come out in Anamika's poem 'Darwaza' :

*I was a door,
the more they banged on me
the more I expanded my limits.²*

The poem mentioned above has two interpretations; first where a door has been used as a metaphor for woman: the more a woman is suppressed it helps her more in evolving as a human being. She gathers lot many things from life as she keeps on moving within limits. Another angle to the same poem is that a woman holds two different worlds- inner one and outer one and this door prevents people from looking into the inner world where she has hidden various complexities of life.

In the next few lines she says, only the selected could look beyond that door, and visualize a complete world in this marking. An Indian woman who is always found indulged in domestic work, is not even relaxed inside; there also a complex vicious circle keeps on moving:

*The ones who came inside saw –
a vicious circle is on the move
a grinder stops and spinning wheel moves on.
Spinning wheel stops and the needle-scissors begin to play
something or the other
on the endless move, always.*

And the irony is the hard work of woman is not even acknowledged. Along with her deeds, all the wishes and opportunities of life are either swept off or collected and flung in the attic.

Through this poem, the poet has showcased the condition of a middle class Indian Woman, who transcends her physical boundaries, by being spiritually and creatively alert, making best of her loneliness and walking tall amidst handicaps.

Sujata Bhatt's poem 'A Story for Pearse', based on her aunt- Hirabhen has similar representations; where a woman is tortured, beaten up, whipped. All these tortures led her to take a decision in which she is free from all the boundaries:

*My great-aunt Hirabhen
 was rescued from her mother-in-law
 rescued from her husband
 soon after she was married.
 Her mother-in-law used to beat her
 with a bamboo pole.
 She made her work all day
 with little food,
 then whipped her every night
 until her pretty skin turned ugly.*

Here, Hirabhen in a country like India where calling off a marriage makes woman's life even more difficult; took a strong decision of being free. But here being free is not that easy, one has to otherize her soul:

*But I am certain
 That her soul walked out
 on her that day in court.
 After the battle was won
 There was nothing more
 For the soul to say-
 After she was free
 She could never feel her soul again.*

Both the poets have tried to anatomize the pain of married Indian woman. Apart from understanding the hidden traumas of woman's life, contemporary woman poets look for macro level changes too. They are socially, globally aware poets. They are concerned with the different social evils prevalent in the society. Anamika, living in a developing country, where there are several issues to be improved upon; being a poet she never falls short of highlighting such aspects through literature. Her poem 'Scavenging Children' exemplifies it perfectly. The poem dwells into the lives of street children indulged in picking rags and garbage from the streets. Despite the fact that the poem raises quite an intense issue; it has been made lively by showing the enthusiasm and motivation filled in poor children. Opening lines of the poem say:

*They are always in a hurry
 badly hungry
 and filled with lightening energy.*

The language of the poem is quite simple and the tone of the poem reflects the energy encapsulated in those small children, 'energy' which instead of being used for education is being wasted in earning money at such small age. Anamika through this poem says that these children are definitely learning new lessons of life but quite different from the children of well-to-do

families. And expressions like ‘badly hungry’ depict the picture of poverty stricken India. The poem has been written in such a way that it paints a picture in the minds of readers of those small street children running here and there for their livelihood.

*With long strides
they walk against the wind and
their loose attire
balloons up and
stretches like a sail.*

It also shows that the clothes they wear are not their own; their condition is such that for the basic necessity of food, shelter and cloth they need to rely on others mercy. Their loose attire confirms this fact.

Next few lines are a satire on the illegal practice of child labour prevalent in society. The poet has written how these children carry the weight of empty wine bottles on their back. These small children have been dragging the baggage of poverty, hunger and pressure of earning in such small age. Such burden of life has even hampered their physical state; ‘stooped back’ shows that they are not only carrying the burden of empty bottles but also pressure of earning their livelihood. As lines of the poem goes:

*At times the bottles of rum
singing inside the sack
murmurs to their stooped back
‘How are you? How is the market?’*

Questions such as “How is the market?” shows the painful fact that these small children are plunged into the process of making money. And this process takes them into a dark world of corruption and misdeed, signified in the poem by the word ‘hell.’ This word connotes a gloomy world where children lose their innocence and turn into negative beings.

*Moving ahead
they reach
hell.*

In a single poem, Anamika has brought various sensitivities together; poverty, child labour and pain of homelessness too. These poverty stricken children don’t have homes, but they understand the value of having it and fulfil their desire of living in homes by building small houses with empty match boxes and other waste materials.

*They don’t have their own
but they know pretty well the value of home!*

Last lines of the poem leave an everlasting impact, saying that the pain and morbidity of lives of these small children even fill the eyes of God with tears. Poet has in fact shown that God is also turning out to be helpless in such case.

*God too cleans his glasses
using the foil of cigarettes collected by them.*

Children at such tender stage, when need to have education, health, fun, etc. if are exposed to negativity, they lose their innocence. And this problem pertains throughout the world- whether it is east or west. Sujata Bhatt draws the attention of readers, by quoting the accidental killing of children in United States. Her poem ‘Walking Across the Brooklyn Bridge, July 1990’, shows her concern for the killing of children through guns either by their brothers, sisters or by their fathers. It actually questions the trend of keeping the guns in home, which led to devastating

results. If children at such age instead of playing with toys play with guns, it will lead to violent outcomes undoubtedly. The poem begins as:

*In New York
children are being shot
to death this summer.
It's usually an accident.
Someone else, no doubt an adult,
was meant to be killed instead.*

In western countries, especially United States many cases have come up when youngsters have used guns to ooze out their frustrations. Shooting a person to death, seems to be a solution for them. Following lines depict it:

*It's not a war,
just a way to settle disagreements.*

The poet says, walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, she feels as if it is a cage where everything has stuck, especially the dead bodies of children. The surrounding air is such from wherever she hears; she gets to know the news regarding the killing of children.

*Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge
One feels removed from everything...
The children somehow get in
The way: They're found dead
in the car, in the house,
in the crib. Sometimes it happens
that the father
was cleaning the gun.*

She is also worried for the refugee children from Vietnam. Their acculturation in a new environment, their settling down in a place (refers to the war period of 1990's when a large number of people migrated from Vietnam to US) was a big issue of concern for their parents as well. Through the poem she says:

*Looking across the water
I think of those people from Vietnam.
The mothers, the fathers,
what they wouldn't have given,
what they would still give-
their blood, their hair, their lives, their kidneys,
their lungs, their fingers, their thumbs-
to get their children
past the Statue of Liberty.*

Both the poets have written beautifully on intense issues. But they are not confined to it only. Contemporary Indian Women's Poetry has large variety to showcase. One more poem by Anamika brings out another side of her creativity. The poem entitled 'A Nap in Library' is a satire on the modern world where the library has lost its original motive. The poem has been written keeping in mind The Sahitya Academy Library situated in Delhi. Instead of being a centre of knowledge and learning it has become a place to rest, eat and talk.

The poet in a very lucid manner writes that library is the only place left on earth which is silent, cool and safe to sit and relax from the hustle-bustle of life.

Heat is unbelievable!

*there is no such calm and safe place on earth
 to relax and yawn.*

Further she says that now there is a particular group of people who visit library. The poem connotatively comments that this place is not meant for youngsters. Visitors of the library include people of a certain age group, especially the old. Such a depiction shows the acute observation of the poet; she has written the poem in a manner that readers can easily create an image of such a library in their minds. These visitors of library are dressed up in loose old-fashioned clothes, matching the old books of the library. They have fixed time to visit library and defined books to read. They are just like historical characters of Bhishma Pitamaha, King Lear, etc. Carrying their lunch boxes they come to this book museum, where they sit, relax and have their lunch peacefully. All such instances show that essence of library is fading day by day.

*They, King Lear, Blonde Old Women
 Bhishma Pitamaha and Vidur
 come with several dishes in their small tiffin.
 After having their lunch,
 they move to washrooms to clean tiffin-boxes
 they take their own time
 to choose a thin book with thick pages,
 with enthusiasm they read a page or two
 just to make sure
 their glasses are working through.*

These old men then select books of their choice and read in such a manner that they internalize what they read. At times they see themselves as Ashoka, Buddha or Akbar, and sometimes they look for traits of Madhubala and Nutan. And at last after reading few pages they slip into dreams.

*About whomsoever they read
 they move into that character.
 One by one as Ashoka, Buddha and Akbar.
 Hither-thither they look for
 Madhubala and tantrums of Nutan.
 Prithvi Kapoor and attitude of their generation
 and drained they doze in chair.*

In such inception looking for oldest scripts of the world, they themselves become worn out scripts written on metal.

*Sleeping with their mouths wide open
 they themselves become extinct Bhujrapatra,
 tasting the dust
 falling from world's oldest scripts.*

All such poems highlights that poets like Anamika and Bhatt are not bounded by the confessional mushiness of the feminist aggression of the early years. These poets are sensitive towards social oppressions of all kinds. In fact the contemporary poets have developed a different attitude of viewing the lives of women. Gone are the days when the women literature was confined to the traumas of bed-room, frustration of kitchen and irritation of forced relationships. Now it is not only about gender equality, it is also about how working woman sacrifices her dreams, as in Anamika's poem – First Pension; now it is not only about

relationship between man and woman, it is about how two women relate with each-other through their common experiences. Anamika retains the idea of ‘universal sisterhood’ in her works; according to which a woman may belong to any nation, class or race, her psychological, emotional, lingual and moral problems will remain same. This has also been claimed by French psychologists. The poem ‘Rishta’ highlights the similar situation where two unacquainted women find themselves in relation - a relation based on similar hardships of life.

*She was a stranger
 the only thread that ran between us is
 that we were the customers of same grocery shop
 in our new housing society.*

A woman is so strongly bound by a web of relationships (children, husband, in-laws, lover, critics, neighbours, etc.), that she is alienated from her own self. Unable to communicate to herself, at times she finds herself reflected in another woman who usually carries the same burdens of life. And the pleasure to regain the lost self is immense:

*She looked even more tired
 than me,
 Still she smiled!*

Parallel to this one can take the poem ‘Is it a Voice?’ by Sujata Bhatt. The poem is based on famous Norwegian Painter’s work entitled as ‘The Scream’. In starting of the poem, the voice connotes a woman; but at the end the word voice symbolizes all other people who keep on raising demands from woman. And amidst all such voices woman becomes silent. Her voice is suppressed.

Opening lines of the poem questions, whether it is a voice or it is a woman. It is difficult to distinguish; and this voice from dawn till dusk follows her fellow beings (especially family members).

*Is it a voice
 Or is it a woman?
 Or shall I say: there is a voice
 That is a woman?
 She stares at you
 in the morning, she returns to you
 in the evening.*

There is a river of frustration, tension running after a woman. Nothing changes for her. This tumultuous background which comprises demands from all relations- the pressure of being perfect daughter, wife, mother always keeps a woman worried and under stress. In this landscape of noises, she loses herself for the sake of others and no one cares to look for her, understand her:

*The river runs behind her.
 The sun is a white bar
 on the blue river.
 The moon is a yellow bar
 on a black river.
 Where can you look to understand her?*

Despite all those frustrating demands, she greets everyone with smile and keeps her head high. She is not ashamed of not being perfect, of not being too demanding or assertive. The

concept of forcing a woman to be an ideal the way it is described in our mythological texts, myths and culture has been slashed down here.

She greets you

With her smoky eyes and her head held high.

The last lines of the poem taking a twist says that (she) a woman is too silent in comparison to all relations who keep on demanding something or other and that's why the poet calls them 'a voice'. And for such voice, woman becomes negligible and hence turned as too silent. This silence is a positive reinforcement for her.

She is so silent

for someone who is a voice.

Overall, we can say Contemporary Women's Poetry has various facets to it. Now women poets not only talk about feminist issues; but they also discuss the macro level issues of society. Referring to Keats' concept of Chameleon Poet, one can say that Contemporary Poets are like chameleon changing according to the environment, entering into different personas like that of a poor child, middle class woman and even something abstract as voice. Poems by Anamika and Sujata Bhatt cover a wide spectrum of ideas and emotions. Anamika, herself promotes this idea of having different personas to bring out the effective poetry, she calls it 'parkaya pravesh'.³ Whether it is a mundane issue or something special or historical which has affected the weak segment of society, these poets keep an eye on all such issues. This sense of communication makes this field of modern women's poetry even more valuable.

Anamika, in an interview throws light on contemporary poetic scenario. She says "The poets of the twentieth century are not in a position to anatomize pain, hope and love. There is no didacticism possible there. Culture, history, family and self are inextricably connected and layered. And the patriarchal divide between the personal and political is gone with the wind!"⁴

Contemporary women's poetry has moved from speed to velocity, that is, from directionless constant to a value along with the direction and enforces the idea of 'personal is political'. Anamika visualizes this through the metaphor of weaving. According to her the feminist worldview believes "in slashing down the hierarchy not only between the macro and the micro, the political and the personal, the cosmic and the common place, the sacred and the profane but also between classes, castes, creeds and genders. In fact, the theme of slashing down hierarchy between social binaries is very well reflected in its witty juxtaposition of images drawn from range of the 'highbrow' and the 'lowly' patterns of life. In a way these women poets are daughters of Donne."⁵

There has been an immense shift in the paradigms of women's literature and modern women poetry states it clearly. It is the need of the hour that these contemporary poets should be studied independently rather than casting them into the framework of post-colonialism or feminism. Poets like Sujata Bhatt and Anamika require broader perspective on the part of the readers; then only this categorization of Contemporary Women's Poetry will be fruitful.

Notes:

- ¹ An interview with the poet Anamika helped a lot in creating a background for the study. She precisely identified three major aspects around which contemporary women's poetry could be studied and this led to the enhanced understanding of the modern poetry.
- ² The translations of the poems by Anamika, has been done by me with the help of poet herself. Her contribution has been immense in translating and hence communicating her poems in other languages.
- ³ In her book entitled 'Kavita Mein Aurat', Anamika has coined the term 'parkaya pravesh' with numerous examples to comprehend it completely. She defines it as comprehending oneself with other's point of view and combining the two alternative view points together.
- ⁴ During an interview with Arundhati Subramaniam, Anamika discussed the scenario of Contemporary Women's Poetry and mentioned how the women's poetry is gaining new direction. For more details refer to complete interview available on www.poetryinternationalweb.com
- ⁵ Anamika, including herself considers modern woman poets as daughters of Donne. She for sure is the one, as in her own way she has mastered the art of levelling the playfield and articulating the most profound observation in witty ways.

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