

SUBVERTING THE HIERARCHY IN THE SEXUAL ACT: 'FEMALE SEXUALITY', 'SUBJECTIVITY', AND 'DEHUMANIZATION OF THE PHALLUS' IN INDIAN WOMEN'S POETRY

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What is the definition of Female Sexuality? And who were the ones to define it? By now it is an established fact that the idea of female sexuality prevalent over the centuries is not something given in nature, or biologically true, but is only a “cultural construction”. Female sexuality has been culturally constructed, and this construction culturally absorbed through various means with a view to disempowering woman, the medical sciences and literature being two of the tools of this cultural absorption. The historical construction of female sexuality was a systematized process of cultural oppression and suppression of women. Within this system, female sexuality was believed to be essentially passive. Biologically, a woman’s sexual organs were supposed only to serve the reproductive function with no other purpose whatsoever. Sexual fulfillment was totally out of the question. Sexual indulgence was a luxury they could not afford. A woman was required to play the culturally assigned roles of wife and mother, and even seek her fulfillment in playing those roles, for that, supposedly, was her “natural destiny”. Carol Groneman writes that “by the end of the nineteenth century an ideology was firmly established: women by nature were less sexually desirous than male.” (Groneman 345) Ideas of feminine modesty, passiveness and even “passionlessness” formed the norm of female sexuality, that is, the ideal as well as “natural” female sexual behaviour. In any established system, there is the norm, there are the adherents to that norm, and there are the aberrant. Within patriarchy various means are employed to ostracize women who do not adhere to the normative code of conduct. It is a well-established patriarchal policy to club these non-confirming women under an umbrella term “Nymphomaniac”. A nymphomaniac was a woman “diagnosed” with certain “symptoms” that included “committing adultery, being divorced, or feeling more passionate than their husbands” (Groneman 341).

The term NYMPHOMANIA resonates with a sense of the insatiable sexuality of women, devouring, depraved, diseased. It conjures up an aggressively sexual female who both terrifies and titillates men. Surrounded by myth, hyperbole, and fantasy, the twentieth-century notion of a nymphomaniac is embedded in the popular culture... (Groneman 337). Nymphomania thus got the status of a medical condition, and thus female behaviour got “medicalized”. The “sexually transgressive” female came to be seen as diseased. The idea got so culturally and psychologically absorbed that even women who sought sexual fulfillment or indulged in sex for pleasure consulted physicians for their sexually indulgent behaviour. Physicians took various measures to fit them back to the norm. The most pathetic cure that some of them recommended was “to remove the ovaries”. Most often “the outcome for nymphomaniacs was prostitution or the insane asylum” (Groneman 352). The medical sciences and literature alike have played the role of the arbiters of morality. Literature has always been an agent for the propagation and strengthening of the patriarchal moral code. In literature too the sexually transgressive female is always punished in the end – she faces either death or ostracism. Within a patriarchal social system that has no place for the aberrant, these non-confirming women are, very tactfully, sent to the margins, outside the periphery of the so-called civilized society.

Sexual experience has been as much of women as it was for men. But historically, women have been denied the right to give voice to their experiences. Sex was always a hush-hush topic for women, and explicit sexual content was never socially acceptable in women’s work. This paper, therefore, attempts at reflecting how a number of Indian woman poets have emerged from the long cultural suppression of the female voice to subvert all ideological assumptions that connect female desire to passivity. In defiance of “patriarchal censure”, these woman poets have created their own images of female sexuality, and presented us with new images of the heterosexual encounter, where women do not passively respond to male desire but actively participate in the act. They have shown that female sexuality is not fixed, not one, but can be multiply defined, and is definitely not passionless.

Kamala Das is one such poet in whose poetry we find a total involvement in sex and a high degree of sexual frankness. In her poetry one can trace a line of development from an early passivity (although unwilling) to an active participation. Refusing to bear the burden of femininity imposed within a patriarchal structure, and talking of her inability to “fit in”, to “belong”, to play the culture-assigned roles, she writes in “An Introduction”:

“The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. Then ... I wore a shirt and my
Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroidered, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers.”

The categorizer’s further instruct, “Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a / Nympho.” But Das won’t care. If they call her a “nympho” she would be one, and play that role without inhibition.

If we follow the route of her poems, Das can be seen making a journey towards sexual fulfillment, beginning from love to sexual love to pure sex. Her poems “An Introduction”, “The Old Playhouse”, “The Looking Glass”, and “The Stone Age” offer four different images of the sexual encounter. The first, offered in “An Introduction”, is the patriarchal norm that both men and women have internalized. Here both the man and the woman are seen playing their respective roles – the active male and the passive female – and do not question it:

“...I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him... the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me... the ocean’s tireless
Waiting...”

The second, offered in “The Old Playhouse” is again the normal role-playing as active male and passive female, but with a slight(or not so slight) difference, for here the poetic persona is fed up of her passive role. She is fed up of being the tamed swallow. She is tired of her caged life and has a strong “urge to fly” back to the open sky. As wife she has never had the opportunity to “grow”. She has always effaced her “self” to fulfill her husband’s wishes. And she laments that in the process her mind has become “an old/ Playhouse with all its lights put out.” It has been “You” all through who was the doer, she lacked agency and only passively responded to her husband’s desire:

“ ...every
Lesson you gave was about yourself. You were pleased
With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices.”

But now the woman wants to break free from this caged experience, from that life of enforced inactivity. She wants her “will” and “reason” back. She “seek[s] at last/ An end, a pure, total freedom...”

The third, offered in “The Looking Glass” is the ideal balanced relation between man and woman, one of a consummated marriage where there is mutual sexual satisfaction, where both partners equally participate, where no one exploits and no one passively submits. The poet advises, “be honest about your wants as /Woman.” She advises woman to exercise her agency, and uses strong verbs like “Stand”, “Notice”, “Gift”, thus empowering woman to stop playing the role of the “acted-upon”, and to act. The poem, moreover, shows Das’s handling of the male nude who is used as a vehicle for the expression as well as the arousal of erotic feelings just as the female nude has always been used in literature:

‘...Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.”

It satisfies the voyeur in a female reader. In this poem, Das invests woman with the power of the gaze. No longer only the object of the gaze, she now returns the gaze as a way of making claims on the male body. For long the object in a male phallogocentric discourse, she emerges here as ‘subject’, as ‘self’ and not the ‘other’. Assuming the subject position she not only uses her eyes to watch the male ‘other’ but also observes the observing eye of the ‘other’. Das urges her to not sit with downcast eyes but watch, explore and find pleasure.

The fourth, offered in “The Stone Age” provides the perfect alternative when one is caught up in a sexually unsatisfying marriage. The poem is a statement of sexual deviance. The poetic persona is bored of a husband who constantly tries to keep her in his protective arms, restricts her in a world that begins and ends with him. As wife she is belittled, turned into “a bird of stone”, “a granite Dove” – lifeless, inanimate things drained of all emotions and desires that are little pieces of decoration for the drawing room. But in an act of defiance, she “knock[s] at another’s door”, perhaps the door of a lover. She treats herself with an extra-marital sexual encounter, and finds total “bliss” in it. This bliss is not marital bliss but sexual bliss for which she is ready to pay any price. So she says in the end: “...ask me what is bliss and what its price”. The poem is an assertion of sexual freedom. It asserts that woman too has a right to sexual

fulfillment, and if marriage fails to provide that fulfillment she can always seek other avenues, just as men have been shamelessly doing for ages.

These women poets too have set their own norms for the perfect male body. And anyone failing to meet those standards is far from satisfying their “endless female hungers”. More so, such men even arouse their disgust. In Kamala Das’s poetry too two categories of men can be found – the first, those who attract women and to whom they readily offer their bodies, and the second, those who fill them with disgust, who do not meet their expectations of a sexual partner. “The Stone Age” is a poem where both these categories are juxtaposed. On one hand is the husband who is called an “old fat spider”, and on the other the lover, the libertine who is described variously as a “lion”, “a great tree”, etc. He, like the other male figure in “The Looking Glass”, is a representation of the ideal erotic male, the epitome of masculine beauty designed to appeal to liberated women. The husband, on the other hand is not sufficiently masculine. Thus while freeing themselves from the cultural pressures of an enforced femininity, these poets, nonetheless, reinforce on men the cultural requirements of masculinity by ranking them in terms of their physical attributes.

These Indian woman poets are writing back to the empire of masculine phallogocentric literature by using the same tools that have been historically used against women. Gilbert and Gubar had remarked: “As long as women remain silent or speak in a body language of freely fluent multiple referentiality, “they will be”, as Xaviere Gauthier comments, summarizing the problem ‘outside the historical process. But if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt.’” (Gilbert and Gubar 519). These Indian woman poets use language as men do, in a way that works for, rather than against, women, in a way empowering enough to beat the enemy in their own game. It is the language of objectification, of dehumanization of the ‘other’. It is the language of obscenity that drags the civilized society out of complacency. An important aspect of this poetry is the treatment of the phallus. These poets have explored and experimented with the phallic image. They have shown that “[t]he phallus, a symbol of aggression, is at the same time excruciatingly vulnerable.” (Semmel and Kingsley 1). In Sujata Bhatt’s “White Asparagus”, Smita Agarwal’s “The Salesman” and Imtiaz Dharker’s “Eggplant” can be found the use of such phallic imagery where the male function is dehumanized, singled out from the male body, and treated as an object.

“White Asparagus” depicts a woman in her fourth month of pregnancy, swept by a sudden uncontrollable urge to have “*him*/ inside her again.” But, interestingly, she doesn’t want him as her husband, the man but the animal inside him. She wants him wild:

“Oh come like a horse, she wants to say,
move like a dog, a wolf,

become a suckling lion-cub – ”

White asparagus stands out as the phallic image – “sun-deprived white and purple-shadow veined”. The woman is turned on by “the shape of asparagus”. It whets her sexual appetite and makes her want more. And so,

“she buys three kilos
of the fat ones, thicker than anyone’s fingers,
she strokes the silky heads,
some are jauntily capped...
even the smell pulls her in – ”

The fact that she buys “three kilos of the fat ones” indicates that her “hunger” would not be satiated by one. The poem is thus a depiction of boundless and unconcerned female fantasy. The insatiable sexual appetite of a woman who wants to devour all is alien to men, and becomes the cause of their sexual anxiety. Her fantasy for more than one penis makes men feel the lack, the inadequacy. Talking of women’s art in “Sexual Imagery in Women’s Art”, Joan Semmel and April Kingsley write that dehumanization of the male-function was done “to overcome political and psychological threat”. They also write of the artist Judith Bernstein whose giant drawings of phallic screws make men feel “intimidated” by them. “Such a gargantuan sexual apparatus conjured up by a woman makes all normal sized penises seem inadequate. The depiction of more than one penis (which is frequent in women’s sexual imagery) also implies inadequacy. Men’s sexual anxiety is thus exacerbated by her fantasy.” (Semmel and Kingsley 2-3)

Intiaz Dharker’s “Eggplant” too creates a phallic image of the eggplant. The fact that both white asparagus and eggplant are vegetables makes of the phallus an object to be devoured. Here too the phallus is over-sized: “Impossible to hold, / you have to cradle it, / let it slide against your cheek.” It is “plump” and “full of milk”, indicating an abundance of semen.

The employment of phallic imagery is all too evident in Smita Agarwal’s “The Salesman”. The phallus is variously described as a “tap”, a “bell”, etc. Once again, the woman emerges as the doer. Once again the phallus is an object to be devoured: “...in my / Mouth the well known, indefinable / Taste of a tap run dry.” Otherwise it is just an inanimate object. The image is of an erect penis – “Right angled, poker-face perfect”. The poetic persona puts her fingers on a bell, which goes “*Bing-Bong*” instead of the usual “ting-tong”, a sound somewhat indicative that she puts her hand on the man’s testicles. The phallus is singled out, separated from the rest of the body, and given the status of pure object: “... a *disembodied* / Syllable *Yes?* drilling a hole / At a certain place...”

In the poems discussed we find images of woman exulting in the pleasure of her body. These women poets have challenged in their poetry the culturally absorbed tradition of discouraging women from taking sexual initiative. Kamala Das had said, "I'm a politician not a poet" (qtd. in De Souza 9). Her poems, like those of the others discussed here, are political expressions. These poems raise a voice against the cultural suppression of female sexuality. All these woman poets have created their own images of female sexuality as well as of masculinity, and in the process shown that female sexuality is not homogenous, it does not have a fixed definition, and every woman has her own individual sexuality. Female sexuality is not fixed, it is fluid, it is multiple. In "Patriarchy and the Woman-poet", Roopali Sircar Chibber complains that in some Indian women's poetry, "[t]he question of female sexuality, culturally suppressed, contained and cordoned off, is not fully addressed... Puritanically shying away from passion, they never probe the body, always touching the periphery of the mind."(Chibber 171) But this cannot be said of the poets discussed here. These poets have thoroughly dealt with the needs of the female body, with passion and with pleasure. One finds in their poems "the orgasmic ecstasy of sex". They have subverted the hierarchy in the sexual act by their representation of the active female and the passive male, as in "White Asparagus" where the woman initiates and the man follows, thus inverting the assigned gender roles.

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