



Research Article

DIASPORA POETRY: PROBING THROUGH POETIC IDIOMS

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ABSTRACT

Indian Diasporic Poetry has had its own history and its trajectory started sometime in the 1960's when noted poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Vijay Seshadri, Suniti Namjoshi and others migrated to foreign lands and began to come up with their creative expressions. A few like Vijay Seshadri completely merged with the culture of the host country and his poetry is submerged in the American ethos and culture. On the other hand, Ramanujan adhered himself to his Dravidian culture and Indian mythology. His poems have a typical aroma of his native place and are flavoured with everything which is Indian. The following paper attempts to explore the poetic sensibilities of a few reputed diasporic poets and tries to understand the themes and inspirations of their poetic oeuvres. A strong longing for the roots and the loss of language have been the common themes of poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and also Agha Shahid Ali. Suniti Namjoshi on the other hand, has created a niche of herself by intrepidly challenging the patriarchal setup and in this process rewriting several myths and legends in her own style, giving the rightful place to the woman in her texts; and also quite audaciously declaring her sexual preferences through her poetry and works of fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1960's were the time when winds of development were seen in Indian poetry in English. This was the time when we saw the emergence of poets like Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes and one could say that it was the birth of Modern Indian poetry in English. At the same time countries like United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, France and Canada, witnessed the arrival and scattered presence in their territories of those Indian poets writing in English, which are given the name of Diasporic poets. Many common tropes in the biographies of these poets, as well as engagement with a variety of similar themes in their poetry, lend themselves to a productive comparison of their lives and works. The diasporic poets belong to different regions of the home country and often have different regional languages and their early lives have been marked by migrations precipitated by the travels and migrations of their families. These poets of the diaspora have their poems, which map complex relationships with their mother tongues, languages of colonial inheritance and languages of myriad spaces they have inhabited. These poets developed an ambivalent relationship to the English language, steeped as it is in the history of colonial oppression, and yet paradoxically, this became the language of creative expression for them.

In this paper, an attempt is made to study the poetry of poets like A. K. Ramanujan, Vijay Seshadri, Dom Moraes, Agha Shahid Ali and also the women poets like Sujata Bhatt, Imtiaz Dharker, Suniti Namjoshi and Meena Alexander.

Ramanujan's poems have a technical perfection which is exemplary. His poetry is never pedantic or verbose and is written in a language which is crisp, intense and casual. In his poem 'The Striders' in order to draw the attention of the reader he has introduced even ambiguity.

"And search/for certain thin/stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs/Sea them perch/on dry capillary legs/weightless/on the ripple skin /of a stream/No, not only prophets /walk on water. This bug sits/ on a landslide of lights/and drowns eye/deep/into its tiny strip/of sky."(*The Striders*, P.1)

The poems of Ramanujan are finely crafted pieces, and the words shine with depth of meaning. The words create a rhythm and form which enhance the value of his poetry.

Ramanujan has laid equal stress on the meaning, as well as the design of each poem. The designer poems of Ramanujan are not only a treat to the eye, but also indicate a multi-layered meaning. To identify the central theme of Ramanujan's poems one has to proceed cautiously with patience and imagination.

Vijay Seshadri is a poet who migrated to America in the early 1960's and occupies a special place in American Poetic society and also is the first one to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. He is philosophical, urbane, speculative and possesses a hybrid lyricism that typifies a certain kind of twenty- first- century

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poetics that has come to be seen as characteristically American. When one reads Seshadri's poems, it is not quite apparent that he is an immigrant from India. For example, there is a poem "An Oral History of Migration", and though it's a dramatic monologue from a perspective of a African-American born in the 1930's, one senses that the identification the speaker makes with his guitar is commensurate with the transmigration of a poet into the language he uses, and the language too uses him, creating a notion of identity which is complicated by dislocation in space and time. The speaker writes:

Some people think if you keep jumping
Over a patch of ground, jump
like some bighorn sheep,
the patch of ground eventually go away.
It don't; it's always there.....(Vijay Seshadri :An Oral History of Migration)

The long poem "Lifeline" was anthologized in Best American Poetry of 1997 and in a microcosm offers many of the themes that Seshadri explores in his work. The narrative structure of the poem shows that Seshadri's irrepressibility and baroqueness are not compulsions but are introduced as necessary to demonstrate and solve particular problems. Seshadri has proved himself to be an epistemological poet, one who is concerned with the scope of the human mind and its limitations, yet, rather than abiding in a purely Parnassian realm of speculation, his poems also include pop cultural references. He also cultivates a Wallace Stevensesque focus on Metaphysics and a John Ashbery like parataxis, where ideas leap from line to line, clause to clause, using coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions to maintain an equilibrium between disparate figures.

Agha Shahid Ali (1949- 2001) has been critically acclaimed both in America and internationally and his work has been translated into several languages, including Italian, Hebrew, Kashmiri and Urdu. Shahid was very clear about his identity as a poet. Describing his voice as "deeply rooted, and yet cosmopolitan," he considered himself, "first and foremosta poet in the English Language". Agha Shahid's themes of exile, loss, nostalgia, and his political concerns are expressed largely through an engagement with history and memory. In the "The Dacca Gauzes" he merges literature with history and memory. "The Dacca Gauzes", one of his most popular poems, draws its central image, the "Dacca Muslin", from The Picture of Dorian Gray, mentioned in the poem's epigraph: "for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca gauzes."

His book, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, published by Norton in 1991, melded histories and memories, cultures and traditions and demonstrates in many ways Shahid's immersion in American culture. He uses a number of metaphors in this poem, and gives particular prominence to Emily Dickinson's "Evanescence" in a sequence of eleven poems titled "In Search of Evanescence" and in the title poem, "A Nostalgist's map of America" in which the word "Evanescence" is repeated six times. Although the poems in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* incorporate attempts at "syllabics, stanzas, one sentence poems, metrical rhythms," in Shahid's words, "he was not following any clear cut rules but an inner ear to make them metrical." When he was working on *The Country Without a Post Office* in the years 1990 to 1996, he was already moving

towards form. Two things coincided with the writing of this book: the start of political turbulence in Kashmir, and Shahid's meeting with James Merrill. Raising "the stakes" for himself, challenging himself to use traditional poetic forms he had never tried before, and taking on the agony caused by the conflict in Kashmir, Shahid found that both the rigorous poetic forms and James Merrill, did not allow him to make things "convenient" or himself. "Its large subject-matter, the turmoil in Kashmir," in Shahid's words, "accompanies my largest aesthetic canvas so far. I wanted to honour the cruel luck of being given as one's subject the destruction of one's homeland.....by serving the language and not letting it become an aesthetic convenience."

Conscious of the aesthetic effect of his poems and sensitive to the power of language, his ear was always attuned to the texture and music of language; sometimes a phrase shaped a poem, sometimes a single word. What mattered to Shahid above all was aesthetics and form. Though his poetry was always concerned with matters of political conscience and fairness, he never subordinated form to politics. The centrality of loss, longing, and death in Shahid's poetry on Kashmir brings a relevance and immediacy to his readers, which has led to his being referred to as the "voice of Kashmir". Along with his strong social conscience and the intricate web of death, dreams, memory, and history woven into his verse, the reader finds in his poetry a multiplicity of belonging, a fascination with his environment, a reaching toward the universal through the local and personal. Indeed, his seems to be an identity that is not fractured, his poems expressing no anxiety about a hyphenated identity but, rather, imparting a sense of multiplicity well suited to a poet of a country without a post office. "Lenox Hill", is one of his famous poems where he talks about Kashmir and also role reversals, the poet on the role of the mother and his mother that of his daughter. This is expressed in the following lines:

"As you sit here by me, you" re just like my mother,"
She tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
She's watching, at the Reel, her first film with Father.
If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,
I'd save you- my daughter - from God. The Universe
Opens its ledger. I write : How helpless was God's mother!
("Lennox Hill", The Country Without a Post Office)

The women poets like Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt and Imtiaz Dharker are interested in exploring the lyric poem as a genre that intervenes in issues facing the world. Alexander and Dharker respond in their lyric poems to the violence they encountered in the social and political spheres following 9/11. Bhatt grapples with the legacy of Nazi violence in her adoptive homeland of Germany. In an interview soon after 9/11, Alexander spoke about the peculiar propensity of the lyric form to capture traumatic events in the public sphere while also enabling a distancing from the intensity of the present moment:

"It seems to me that the lyric poem is a place of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem you have to enter into a dream state. Yet, at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect it becomes a very intense place to reflect on the world....In the composition of poetry, something that is very difficult to face is brought within the purview of language, into a zone of images and is crystallized. And that act of crystallizing the emotion through

the image actually has its own peculiar grace, which frees in one, if only momentarily, of the burden of the experience. This seems to be the great gift of poetry.”(*Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander*, pp. 87)

Along with literary and linguistic traditions, both Alexander and Bhatt have responded to works of visual art through their poetry. Imtiaz Dharker, in addition to being an established poet, is also an artist. In several of her volumes, her poems are paired with stunning drawings which complement and enhance the poems and produce powerful intersections of visual and literary text, a task which is not possible with any one medium in isolation. Similarly, Bhatt’s *A Colour for Solitude* (2002) is a long sequence of poems tracing her interest in the works of Rainer Rilke, Clara Rilke both sculptors and their friend Paula Becker- a painter.

The poetry of these women poets maps complex relationships with their mother tongues, languages of colonial inheritance and also the regional languages which they have acquired while living in the different regional spaces of the country. These poets have developed an ambivalent relationship to the English language, steeped as it is in the history of colonial oppression, and yet, paradoxically, this became the language of creative expression for them. For Sujata Bhatt, the addition of German leads to an increased level of complexity to this already complex linguistic history. Thus, Bhatt’s poetry has to negotiate her relationship with three languages: Gujarati, her mother tongue; English, the language of primary creative expression; and German, the language of her adopted country in adult life.

Bhatt gives expression to a fully developed aesthetic of postcolonial hybridity in poems such as “Search for my tongue”, where she mixes words in Gujarati script with Gujarati in Roman script followed by English translation. At the heart of the poem she is confronting the loss of her mother tongue and eventually reclaiming it in the hybrid aesthetic of the poem, which mixes languages and scripts.

“I ask you, what would you do
if you had two tongues in your mouth,
and lost the first one, the mother tongue
and could not really know the other,
the foreign tongue.”(Sujata Bhatt : *Brunizem*)

She has quite audaciously fore-grounded female bodily experiences in her poetry. She has a number of poems that are unabashedly erotic and focus on women’s experiences of sexual gratification. In poems such as “White Asparagus” we see the arrival of a female consciousness that is open in its quest for physical pleasure and is not racked by guilt or shame in admitting to its own bodily needs. In this poem she documents the heightened state of female desire during pregnancy.

“She’s young, this is her first time
She’s slim and the nausea has gone.
Her belly’s just starting to get rounder
her breasts itch all day,
and she’s surprised that what she wants
is him
inside her again.
Oh come like a horse, she wants to say,
move like a dog, a wolf,
become a suckling lion-cub.”

(Sujata Bhatt: *Monkey Shadows*)

She discusses taboo topics such as female masturbation, which has been traditionally unexpressed and something which is considered as a male sexual behaviour. This poem deliberately subverts the tradition of lyric poetry that constitutes the female body as an object of the male gaze, only depicted as a source of sexual gratification for male lust. Instead, the poet depicts the female body as an agent active in its quest for pleasure, without guilt or fear of chastisement.

Not only this, but Bhatt’s poetry gives expression to experiences of childbirth, menstruation, and motherhood. In addition to this, Bhatt also draws on the relatively taboo and repressed topics of infertility, miscarriage, and pregnancy loss from the archive of her own lived experiences as a woman. About her grief associated with her recurrent miscarriages , she writes-

Fetus after fetus lost

Can’t you take me away
From this city.

(Sujata Bhatt: *Collected Poems*.274-275)

We can never fail to look at the distinctive writings of the diasporic poet and mythmaker, Suniti Namjoshi. She doesn’t follow the typical conventions of a diaspora writer, but looks at life, patriarchy, sexuality and feminist issues from her own point of view and thus stands apart among all diasporic writers, and among women writers in particular. In her poetry, Namjoshi often uses speaking animals as the protagonists and challenges the conventional power structures in the society. At the same time, she questions the moral integrity and exposes the discrimination at all levels in this ‘always men dominated world’. At times her poems are also inserted between the long narratives of her fictional work, or often they are in the form of epigraphs in the beginning of her chapters. Her work has been vociferously criticised by several critics and Indian authors for the audacious depiction of sexual desire and eroticism; and strong inclinations of lesbianism, and the male community as typical oppressors and agents of exploitation.

But at the same time, we cannot rule out the showcasing of Indian culture in her poetry, inter-textuality of mythological characters and also the presence of Marathi humour and sensibility. Namjoshi’s style is characterised by “verbal economy” and it is also devoid of any self complacency. Her compositions are generally short: many two or three line poems, or even her larger poetry is considerably short.

She does not believe that authors have the authority to assign definitive meanings to the texts they have written. Instead, she offers clues and asks questions to her readers, undermining assumptions about what is perceived to be universal ie. Human experience. Namjoshi’s way of looking this life and human experience is from different angles. She uses irony and sarcasm throughout her work and makes use of playfulness as a powerful weapon to speak about serious matters. Namjoshi writes with certain playfulness, and this is also essential in the Hindu concept of *Leela*, the interpretation of the universe as a divine play. Unlike other diasporic writers, her stories are not realistic but fantastic; sometimes they move around science fiction or on dystopias, (The Mothers of Maya Diip & Building Babel), genres that are not often associated with Indian Women’s writing. Her poetry abounds with references

to her Indian upbringing. Her intertextual references range from Western Literature- Gullivers's Travels or Alice in Wonderland- to Indian related topics such as funeral pyres (in "one I saw" from Poems) or the Hindu religious imagery (as in The Conversations of Cow) . Her characters are most of the time animals like monkeys, cows which talk, and this inspiration comes from Aesop's Fables, and also The Panchtantra, a book of Indian folk tales.

"I love to hear her laugh,
would not see her grieve,
but a teacup of brine would have seemed
more seemingly. I could sail in such a cup,
be swayed by her sighs.

She gluts me on the milk
of healthy giantesses:

"Poor little manikin,
will nothing make you grow?"

I grow. I am growing. You should
see me in her dreams."

(Suniti Namjoshi: *The Jackass and the Lady*)

Diasporic poetry, compared to the genre of diasporic fiction has been not adequately represented. Even the corpus of work in this area is substantially less and also does not find a prompt place in the publishing houses. Many works remain unpublished to this date. But with the emergence of new diasporic poets like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Jeet Thayil, Chitra Divakaruni, Uma Parameswaran, Sudeep Sen and Vikram Seth this genre is prospering day by day. And it will be quite challenging to further decipher and study the creative expressions of these poets. About the diasporic poets, the author and poet Sudeep Sen writes-

"The diversity and multi cultural representation allow the poets to have a dialogue between themselves and also the places they come from or have been influenced by. Their poems create an inherent syntactical and historical tension- something that celebrates the written word, imagination, artistry, intellect and humanity."(Sen 23)

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