

The Corporal Man- Woman Relationship in Contemporary Indian English Poetry

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Abstract:

Man-woman relationship has always been a tangled web of intricacies and complexities. These complexities are often the resultant of heterogeneous outlooks, sensibilities and manner of tackling a certain situation. Besides the varied psychosexual complexities of men and women are inevitable as both of them are inherently different from one another. And hence they usually possess (more or less) different feelings, beliefs, ideals, values attitudes, preferences and choices etc. The biological difference between the two, although both belong to the same species, is the primary reason behind this inequality. Social notions and prejudices have also contributed their fair share to widen this gap. However, modern researches have proved that gender is more a biological product than a social construct. Sigmund Freud, the great master of psychology and human behaviour, was of the notion that the difference between masculine and feminine behavior is nothing but a result of anatomical differences. Furthermore, he adds that since the women lack external genitals, their behavior is feminine. He uses the term 'penis-envy' and 'castration complex' to elaborate the feeling of inferiority among women. Even the sense of envy that women generally feel arises out of the men's position of greater power and freedom. However, the second wave feminists of the 1960s have rejected Freud's concepts of penis envy, passivity, weaker super-ego etc. Some of them even critiqued Freud. In 1974, however, Juliet Michelle tried to develop Freud's psychoanalysis for the feminist theory in her work 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism'. Later on, Simone De Beauvoire's work 'The Second Sex'(1949) proved to be a Bible for the later feminists by arguing that a woman is not feminine by birth but she is made so by the society. The present paper deals with the eternal struggle between the two sexes through the description of the poetry pieces of the contemporary Indian English poets. Comparing male and female voices in the matters of sex, their sensory experiences as well as their basic human experiences is something this paper strives at.

Keywords: Man-woman relationship, heterogeneous outlooks, psychosexual complexities, penis-envy, second-wave feminists, psychoanalysis, feminism.

There is no doubt in the fact that man and woman have some anatomical differences, yet there is a great many similarities between the two. Over the years psychoanalysts and feminists have made many attempts to explore the possible differences between masculine and feminine gender and roles. It has also been an area of research as to how these inherent, but obvious, differences get reflected in the social, psychological, and emotional behaviour, and the creative expressions of men and women. The very fact that both men and women are 'humans', makes them similar in so many aspects. Both the sexes or genders possess the basic human emotions like love, hatred, jealousy, sorrow etc. Even their sensory experiences like seeing, hearing, healing, etc are all alike. Also, both the genders receive almost similar amounts of societal and political pressure. Spiritual occupations, as well as the pursuit for

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meaning in life, is something which lures and motivates both men and women equally. In fact, the changing dimensions of the society also affect them in a similar fashion. Be it contemporary materialism, consumerism or any such force, both men and women are equally prone to them.

In Indian context, too, both men and women are considered to be the two inseparable faces of the same coin. Literature, especially poetry, provides both of them to vent out their inner frustration, ideology and whatever other factors are ruling their respective minds. Hence, it becomes a must to discuss comparatively how male and female poets respond to matters like love, passion, emotion, sexuality, body, marriage etc. Now their voice is identical, resembling each other's; now they sing in different tunes.

In the arena of Indian English poetry, Nissim Ezekiel is considered to be the pioneer of modernism. According to him, man- woman relationships are founded or rather hinged entirely on physicality and sensuousness. He is considered to be a poet of the body. A major portion of his poetry is loaded with a series of sumptuous descriptions of the act of lovemaking and the female body as well. His descriptions are bare up to an extent of being blunt and do not evoke any sort of emotion. Occasionally his words become a bit obscene too in a failed attempt to create an erotic appeal. However, in comparison with his "poetic ancestors", the Sanskrit eroticists, he finds himself still inhibited. In his "Passion Poems- 3: The Sanskrit Poets", he writes:

How freely they mention
breasts and buttocks.
They are my poetic ancestors.
Why am I so inhibited? (214)

What Ezekiel seems to forget is that by mentioning "breasts and buttocks" only a poem does not qualify for the cannon of erotica. Eroticism is a bigger term comprising both psychological and spiritual aspects of love and corporeal elements as well. In Ezekiel's poems, the spiritual dimension of love is lacking and hence he does not rise up to the standards of Sanskrit eroticists whom he considers to be his poetic ancestors. What is found in his poem is not the tenderness and sweetness of love and passion, rather one finds crude, obvious and obscene expressions of sexuality. For instance, in "Nudes 1978:2", he writes:

"I love undressing", she has to say,
as she undresses. The verbal and visual join in her.
'Is this a part of you?', she asks
as she holds it, stares at it
Then she laughs...
"put your lingers there",
she pleads, as if I need
instructions. It's only impatience,
though, becoming frenzy
as I penetrate. 'Now', she claims, 'you are within me. aren't you
within me?' And she makes
me say, 'I am.' (32)

The aforesaid description reeks the poet's hedonist, wanton and self-indulgent feelings only. It is neither poetic nor erotic. Similarly his poem "Description" is replete with the descriptions of a woman's nudity of which the poet seems quite fond. His gaze is the typical unadulterated male gaze. For such a gaze a woman is merely a body, an object of sex and nothing else. What is most surprising is the fact that he nowhere expresses any desire to relate to the women as a person:

I will begin- but how should I begin?-

with hair, your hair, remembered hair,
 touched, smelt, lying silent there
 upon your head, beneath your arms,
 and then between your thighs a wonder
 of hair, secret
 in light and in darkness
 bare, suffering with joy
 Kisses light as air.
 And I will close- but is this fair? -
 with dawn and you
 reluctantly
 binding up your hair. (48)

It appears as if his point of view is typically chauvinistic and eccentric to a certain extent. Audaciously, he calls women as the "female animal" and in "Love poem" he calls them/her a beast of sex. In another poem by the title "On Giving Reasons", he even considers a woman's 'NO' as a disguised approval:

She gave me
 Six good reasons
 for saying no
 and then
 for no reason at all
 drop all her reasons
 with her clothes. (215)

It seems as if Ezekiel is obsessed with only the sexual activity between two persons and that too in a crudely carnal manner. Not only this, he even keeps on imagining the process of copulation in the animal world also, as in the poem "The behaviour of love birds" he states:
 The more the female fluffs,

the readier she is,
 And the more the male is
 encouraged.
 Finally, she solicits copulation
 by leaning forward,
 raising her head,
 and her tail.
 Newly formed pairs
 are rather awkward.
 The males make many mistakes,
 are frequently threatened
 and thwarted
 by their mates. (9)

In a fashion much similar to Ezekiel, Shiv K. Kumar has also composed poetry pieces replete with male sensuality and their obsession with sex. In his poem "A Mango Vendor", an old man is freely ogling at the poor woman who is the seller and is squatting behind a pyramid of mangoes. The poor mango vendor knows what is happening to her. She can easily feel the lust-laden eyes of the elderly, lecherous man but she seems unruffled by the gaze for she has the compulsion to sit there for her survival:

Through the slits
 of her patched blouse
 one bare shoulder
 two white moons
 pull all horses
 off the track

This old man's eyes
 idle birds pecking
 at the mango-nipples. (36)

Again in, Kumar's poem, "Wife At Prayer", the man is caught in carnal desires so much so that he resents the religious sentiments of his wife:

Who has tamed the raw wind
 around this grey room
 where stones are gods
 and musk roses do not inebriate?

Soft as the inside
 of a tender coconut, she weaves halos
 with joss-sticks that only
 incense my groins
 to break the truce.

Her gods cannot gloss
 my hieroglyphics.
 for have they ever drunk
 from buttercups? (30)

Similar to Ezekiel's content, Kumar's wife or the vendor on the street, all women appear to the men as a mere body, an object to quench their carnal thirst. However, where Ezekiel sounds utterly chauvinistic, Kumar seems to be aware of his helplessness for his bodily needs and guilt that traps his inner self.

A similar voice resonates with Kumar's poem "Wife At Prayer". A.K. Ramanujan with his "Mythologies 3" seems nowhere behind in the depiction and portrayal of man's sensual attitude towards the woman body. The wife is seen offering her prayers to Lord Shiva (chanting Om) while the lustful husband plays with her body. He hardly pays any heed to her religious sentiments despite the wife's request to not to touch her while she is in prayer:

And all he could think of was
 her round breast,
 her musk, her darling navel
 and the rest. (228)

Loveless man-woman relationship which is founded solely on physical needs and sexual encounters can be found in many poems of Jayanta Mahapatra also. For instance in his long poem "The Twenty - fifth anniversary of a Republic: 1975", he writes:

In my dreams when I fondle Kamala's brazen breasts
 my hands encounter the blind flowers at a desecrated tomb. (32)

The lines reek of crude sexuality and are extremely gross and decadent. No tender emotion between a man and a woman is shown to be evoking by the image. Images of whores are also a regular feature of his poems like "Absence" and "The Whorehouse in A Calcutta Street".

As a soothing contrast, in women's poetry the men-women relationship is not so dry and devoid of emotion. It is also not projected as a body oriented affair only. The female poets do not write about sensual relish as frequently as their male counterparts. Only a few instances are there where male body can be seen being described and displayed. One such rare explicit attempt can be observed in Kamala Das's poem by the name "The Looking Glass":

Notice the perfection
of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
The shower, the shy walk
across the bathroom floor
Dropping towels and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male. (25)

Das stands comparable to Ezekiel as she also depicts the corporeal in a bold, brash and uninhibited manner. While Ezekiel is seen flashing his chauvinistic attitude Das, too, can be seen asserting her feminine ego. She believes in and practices male-bashing without any hesitation. She stands juxtaposed to Ezekiel who exposes the female body just to quench his sexual thirst. She is also in the habit of giving candid and vivid descriptions of sex and love making. The only saving grace is that she misses the presence of emotion in sexual encounters. This lack of emotion during the act of sex causes her great despair and ultimately leads her to cynicism. In "The Stone Age", she lays bare her disappointment:

Ask me everybody, ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavour of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways
like a hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubis. Ask me
why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against
my breasts
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short
and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss
and what its price... (12)

There is no sense of regret or despair for a loveless and emotionless sexual relationship in the male voices. They are busy only in providing graphic details of sensuality without even batting their eyelids at the lack of love or emotions. Contrary to this heartless attitude, the female voices (including Das also) openly express the disgust and disappointment felt by them while experiencing mechanical churning of bodies. For instance, Sunita Jain feels bruised after such a loveless encounter and hence complains:

My body bruised
by your lust teeth marked;
the insatiable searing

of our last love
will it outlive
this despair?
Hold me love, hold me near. (14)

In her another poem “The Prey”, she uses the image of a hunter and its prey to describe the man and woman relationship:

bait - wait
watch - duck
dash - caught (17)

Jain, undoubtedly, respects the physical union and she, it seems, is in a constant search of a holistic union of both physical and spiritual loves. She, too, longs for respect and emotional bonding. Another female poet Gauri Deshpande is seen to be carrying a sense of candour and freedom of expression while making confessions about her sexual experiences. Quite outspoken and upfront she is, and so is her expression of felt love in “Poems On a Lost Love”:

I am earth
vast deep and dark
and I receive
the first rain
sweet, generous,
lashing, throbbing;
its smell forever in my blood
its imprint deep
within my quirk.
Yellow daisies burst out
on my breast and thigh
at its very touch. (22)

In her poem “Beauty and the Beast”, Suniti Namjoshi expresses her acrimony for the bestial elements in sex and that too in a fearless and frank style:

Beauty loved the ugly beast
And thinking ‘twas a Prince she'd wed,
Waited for his shape to change,
And found there were two beasts in bed. (21)

Namjoshi is not a bit hesitant even while she writes that in the end of a sexual encounter both the partners mated like dogs.

Thus, it is obvious that the modern male and female poets are not a wee shy while responding to the physical and erotic aspects of man woman relationship. However, while the man are not at all affected by the lack of emotional warmth during the act of sex, the female voice is evidently lamenting over the lack of spiritual, emotional and mutual warmth for each other.

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