



EMERGING TRENDS IN THE POETRY OF SMITA AGRAWAL

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ABSTRACT

Indian English poetry has been framing new destiny of modern Indian English literature. Initial thirty to forty years of post-independent period have been characterized by realistic, modernistic and pessimistic modes customary in Indo-English poetry. These varied modes have paved path for a new trend in Indian English poetry which are non-representational, contemporary conscious, experimental, resisting, optimistic, distinctive and symbolic etc. The global exposure and the spirit of life the post independent Indian women poets writing in English exhibit new trends in their poetry. Smita Agrawal has brought about fresh air into the poetry written in English along with new style and trends. The poem chosen to identify the emerging trends is from *Wish-granting Words* (2002) by Smita Agrawal.
Keywords: linguistic style, freedom, expression.

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Every poet writes with a purpose and intention. Expressing her intention Smita Agarwal tells in an interview with Nilanshu Agarwal that “a poem performs a civilizing function, answering not only a human need for emotional expression but for rational control as well” (*Kavya Bharati* 236). The present collection of poetry entitled *Wish-Granting Words* is an excellent exhibition of her deep love and reverence of poetry, which according to her “performs a civilizing function.” Her poems began to get published from 1991. It was in 2002 that her first collection, *Wish Granting Words* appeared. Her first book has an epitaph quoted from the renowned Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. The epitaph is in Devanagiri script. She is the only Indian poet to who has set the trend to prefix Urdu and Hindi to collections of poetry in English.

Her love for music and poetry make her a very respectable poet in Indian writing in English. For her poetry and music are inseparable. She said in one of the interviews that “Poetry is music . . . Even in free verse we aim for internal rhyme, assonance, repetition, alliteration, anaphora, for what purpose, if not to create the music of sound? Certainly, my training in music has taught my ear to catch even the softest of sounds and rhythms” (241).

Distinctive Linguistic Style

The stamp of Smita Agarwal as a Professor of English is distinctly seen in her poetry. She brings the reflection of a teacher in her poem stylistically when she writes; “Pen and ink sketches of Chesterton, /Lamb, Blake *et al*, lightning *sans*” (“The Bed Book” 24-25). The choice of words and phraseology is what make a poet distinct and Smita Agarwal is distinct in this regard. She does so beautifully; “Upright, I’m uptight” (“The Lie of

the Land: A Letter to Chatwin" 8). She continues to demonstrate her distinctive linguistic style in the following lines of the same poem:

Slope may give me the slip
 And have me come down hard-
 Down to the very rock-bottom
 All muscle and bone, my legs feel
 Responsible for most of my bad-hair
 Days. If I were a creepy-crawly,
 Or an airy-fairy, I'd at least
 Stick to instincts; never dare;
 Nor feel piqued at the bamboo's
 Jointed stilts able to
 Wave to the sun, bow to the wind. (25-35)

As a Professor of English the poet is aware of the impression the type of sentences can create, therefore she uses interrogatives to finish her poem "Enchilida" to show the desire to want and give; "What is it he wants? What may she give him?" (*Wish-granting Words* 11). The poet has her own way of using phrases which appear quite interesting to readers like; "What gesture of atonement can I make?/You whom I've flogged in dreams each/time you upset an apple-cart with a/sneeze or fever?" ("Our foster-nurse of nature is repose" 15-18). The description of the place showcases the linguistic style of the poet:

In the clear air
 Of the quiet living-room,
 On the handcrafted teapoy,
 A plaster-cast of 'Yakshi with Lotus'
 Continued with its shut-eyed
 Half smile . . .
 Her ormolu Ditmar oil-lamp glowed . . . ("At Fourteen" 7-13)

Words have the power of creating magic with new combinations. Writer beautifully describes as to how she is able to elicit meanings from the written words; "My eyes lick them off the page;/ I chew them, suck the juices, / Let the flavours seep in" ("The Word-worker" 1-3). The poet further tells that she uncovers the layers of meaning lying under the cover of words:

I rip
 Off masks, bequeath new skin,
 Dragoon words into birthing
 Faces never before born. (9-12)

Contemporary Consciousness

The poet is alert to her surroundings and loves to portray the objects, events and settings in her creative writing. Her visits to different places create an impression in her psyche and she quite naturally depict in her poem. Her visit to Khajuraho, a famous group of Hindu temples and Jain temples in central part of India, finds material for her poem entitled "Samyukta at Khajurao". This group of monuments is UNESCO World Heritage Site where different cultural activities are organized which attract artistes and people from all over the world. The poet describes the music festival organized in the premises of Khajurao temples; "Monuments, March nights, spin a/world of their own. You emerge from/the sanctum on to the pillared porch/ of the temple" (*Wish-granting Words* 7). Her awareness of the surroundings and consciousness about settings is quite remarkably shown by the poet. Her observation is quite keen and she is able to convey her idea to the readers without any confusion of ambiguity. Her revelation of the movement and activities of the modern salesman and the responses of the potential customers shows her contemporary consciousness:

My finger
 On a bell . . .
 Of a door introducing a
 Space, framing fa face; the initial,
 Quizzical look hardening into a
 Stare; a disembodied
 Syllable yes? ("The Salesman" 14-20)

The poet is quite alert to what human beings are doing to their environment, so she conveys message through her poems. She informs people about the existence of polythene in the life around us which is dangerous that may cause harm to animals if they eat them; "Their cows continue/ To chew on paper and polythene/ Foraged from a public bin." ("Dust Storm in April" 20-22). The dust storm is very common natural phenomenon in India and especially in the warm states of India. Uttar Pradesh, during summer season, is quite hot which is beautifully pictured by the poet when she writes;

Through the haze, blinding
 Headlights catch the walkers
 Hurrying; plump, middle-aged
 Women in trainers, trying to
 Outrun the storm. ("Dust Storm in April" 9-13)

The poet shows her anxiety about the contemporary conditions of India of the nineties and reveals them in her poem "Monsoon Cantata":

Suicide-squad assassinations, communal
 Conflagrations, scams, arms deals, a tribal
 Woman gang-raped, mute deaths in custody,
 India in the nineteen nineties. (*Wish-granting Words* 34)

New Woman

The poet wants her women to have their identity and freedom. The freedom of being and expression is what poet wants to convey through her poems. In Indian social setup where men supremacy dominates the relationship women have little to gain for. But her woman is not complacent and wants her position to change for good. Therefore she raises her voice saying; "I'm fighting for space/ . . . I'm squabbling for space" ("Hotel Palm Grove, Bombay" 1-3). The struggle is not easy and the effort needs to be quite powerful in order to change the status of women in the society, so the protagonist says; "I fight for space/Doggedly . . ." (20-21). The world in which the new woman wants to live is a world of her own where there is freedom of expression, choice and life. She doesn't want to be dictated by men for every act of her life. So she refuses to accept the interference of man and declares her freedom; "I am fighting for a space/Where an image of your face/Won't intrude . . ." (22-24). The new woman has a voice of her own and she strives to gain that; "A space for words . . . / Wish-granting words" (42-43). Smita Agarwal's poetry had brought about a great change in the way her women dealt with hurts. The evidence of this change is seen in the poem "At Forty" where she presents the progressing litany; "At nine/ the passing away of a puppy,/ . . . at sixteen, heartbreak,/ . . . at twenty one/ . . . transpose distress" ("At Forty" 1-7) but she "has become a rational thing"(17) in the end. The new trend and attitude are discussed across the poets that followed Smita. She wants her woman to be treated equally and should not be exploited due to discrimination. She says; "If there is love and trust, they can aim for a relationship of equality and mutual respect" (Interview with Nilanshu Agarwal, *Kavya Bharati* 241)

Global Geographical and Cultural Acquaintance

Settings of Smita Agrawal's poems are not foreign lands but the geographical love and cultural acquaintance of various places in India find prominent place in her poems. She makes her readers aware of the significant places known for their geographical setting or cultural significance. She describes the visit to Khajuraho, a place known for its nagara-style architectural symbolism and their erotic sculptures. The place is

also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. She describe the places in Allahabad when she writes; 6:30 in the evening/ Down Hastings Road,/ . . . Over the Polo Ground” (“Dust Storm in April” 1-4). Allahabad also becomes live in the readers’ minds when she writes; “Past Kempty Falls, Yamuna Bridge, we ride” (“Joyride” 7).The reader can visit Bombay and the location of the hotel in the poem “Hotel Palm Grove, Bombay” where poet gives the geographical description of the location of the occupants in the hotel; “A copper-coloured Shivaji,/ His two young sons and a cannon,/Look out at the Arabian Sea;” (*Wish-granting Words* 31).

Symbolism

Use of symbols is quite beautifully done by the poet in her poems. Different symbols are used to convey varied meanings. Her poem “The Map” is a symbol of inner secrets a man’s life; “The map also reveals secrets, such as/the direction in which the wind will blow, /Where the dark clouds will gather, /Where it will pour” (“The Map” 11-14). Similarly, “The Bed Book” is a symbol of the bond between a child and mother. The narrator still remembers the bed tales told by her mother to her. She remembers and says; “Mother thank you,/ For the fairytale” (“The Bed Book” 26-27). In the poem “Stain” nature is treated as the symbol of bonding between people in any relationship. The colour of bonding takes the form of “stain” as a mark if the relationship is carried out sincerely and seriously. On the emotional ground poet is quite sentimental when she narrates the selfless love of an Indian father for his children. Her father, despite ailing, takes his children for a ‘joyride’ and makes them enjoy their outing. She regards her father a symbol of love and sacrifice. She expresses her gratitude towards her father when she says; “Fighting diabetes, your time you bide: . . .You take us for a crazy jeep ride” (“Joyride” 4-6). Smita takes symbols from nature to express her emotions. Parrots are the symbols of love expressed in the poem with the same title “Parrots”. She uses the symbol of drake to show as to how difficult is migration for people. She expresses the pain of the bird to convey the feeling of a person who is tired of movement or journey; “Tire, feel old and abject? Should I/Give up migrations, settle down to rest?” (“The Drake” 18-19).

Scientific and Medical Terminology

Smita Agarwal is a Professor of English at Allahabad University, Allahabad, India. Her profession makes her well informed and knowledgeable. Her acquaintance with the modern terms makes her use these terms quite naturally and with exceptional ease in her poem, like she uses the term “aesthesia” to describe the mental responsiveness and awareness of the narrator in the poem “Samyukta at Khajuraho”. The narrator through this state experiences sensation and perception, after listening to the music or song. The poet shows her skills and knowledge of gardening where through the process of grafting a new breed of plant or clone is created. She carefully uses the terms technically used in gardening:

Under a croton I’m
grafting. I whittle away half an inch
of hide, expose the xylem dull-white
as bone. Apply hormone powder, dress
the wound with moss, wrap a piece of
plastic, secure it with twine. I’ll
wait a fortnight for the sap to
weave roots for the clone. (“Stain” 2-9)

In the poem “Alphabets of Nature” the poet uses technical terms from fauna and flora:

He pulls out the pistils, dips/The stigmas into the pollen/Takes the anthers apart” (*Wish-granting Words* 16). The poem “the Planetoid” is an example of poet’s knowledge about the celestial bodies and their movements in the galaxy. Readers are transported to the world of planets, stars and other non-earthly bodies;

It drifts slowly, dreaming. This is
No straight and narrow path but an
Orbit . . .
The planetoid senses it

A shower of meteorites awaits it.
 . . . The planetoid is
 Accustomed to these astroblemes.
 What it fears is plate tectonics. ("The Planetoid" 1-11)

Indian English Poetic Diction

Like other contemporary poets Smita Agarwal is quite comfortable in using words from Hindi and Urdu languages. The couplet quoted in the epitaph of her poetry collection *Wish-granting Words* is also taken from a great Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Her poems demonstrate how comfortable her readers are with the language on their tongue which too is like the compound of variety that is the 'chutney'. The colloquial tone of her poetry set a trend in the Indian women poetry written in English. The appeal is quite powerful because the language is not imposed but it creeps into the flow of poem quite naturally, just like when she writes; "You assure me that I belong to/the land of *karma*" ("Our foster-nurse of nature is repose" 11-12). The poet is quite efficient in giving the poem the feel of the contemporary time. Therefore she uses words from Hindi related to the time making it quite natural; "Back in India for good-/ . . . Meetings, *satyagraha*" ("Feb. 1944. Kasturba Talks of Life with Gandhi" 19-21)

Voice of Decent Resistance

Resistance is a key to acquisition of a place. The narrator in the poem "Hotel Palm Grove, Bombay" is fighting out for the physical space. Though initially it appears to be a battle for physical freedom yet it has a far reaching consequence. The narrator says; "I'm fighting for space./ In a double-occupancy room/ I'm squabbling for space" ("Hotel Palm Grove, Bombay" 1-3). There is a glide from physical freedom to freedom of expression in the poem. The narrator seems to be not only jostling for physical space but also for freedom of expression. Her struggle is to resist the male supremacy where there is no intrusion. The protagonist says, "I'm fighting for a space/Where an image of your face/Won't intrude . . ." (22-24). The narrator concludes with her resistance and effort to find a space of speech and liberty of expression; "A space for words . . ./Wish-granting words" (42-43). The poet expresses that there is a continuous protest against the disorder and discrimination existing in the society. The spirit of resistance is expressed in the following lines:

Something is knocking down that gate,
 Something in connivance with the rain,
 I turn my back to it, stare steadfastly
 At the gas burner, at the metal frame of
 its round head with pricked-in holes.
 Something has knocked down the gate,
 Contralto voices come storming in
 . . . I turn on the gate,
 Flare like the many
 Blue, incandescent flames. (*Wish-granting Words* 34)

The poetic tone of Smita Agarwal is of a rebellion and defiance.

Psychological Element

Poets can peep into the innermost recesses of the human consciousness and Smita Agarwal is also quite dexterous in doing so. She presents figuratively the emotional turmoil of the modern man by comparing it with lava of a volcano; "It's been fuming yet never allowed/Its seething discontents to spew out./sometimes lava boils and collects" ("The Map" 19-21). Through these lines the poet tries to convey the it is very difficult to convey one's dissents and discontents but ultimately when the limit is reached the emotions burst like the lava boils and collection on the mouth of the volcano tip. The poet selects careful phrases to show the inner tumult of a wife which is reflected on the surface without being said any word or done anything. Husband and wife relations have hit the dissonance which comes on the surface through emotional outburst; "Her secret pain comes

gushing out. /Unable to do or say anything/I explore inter-stellar space" ("Discord" 10-12). The poet shows the conflict through an analogy "Like two crossed knives, husband and wife" (15).

Boldness in Expression

Modern generation of Indian women poets do not shy away in speaking about physical love or sex. Smita Agarwal in an interview with Agarwal spoke freely on the subject of sex:

India has a tradition of the erotic as exemplified by Khajuraho, Kalidas, Jayadeva, to name just three. The list is really long. There is no forbidden subject in art. Art breaks boundaries, allows new things to be born and the old and accepted to grow ... Yes, the erotic may be uncomfortable to read or see but that does not make it irrelevant. (Interview with Nilanshu Agarwal in *Kavya Bharti* 239)

The openness in the society has led to openness in relationship and love making; "we make love;/no bodies touching, not a sound;/locked-in eyes . . ." ("Making Out" 4-6). The poet further illustrates the love making act with boldness:

You shrink into yourself. All of
Your six feet seem to be folding
Up. Your loose clothes are flapping
In the wind- (7-10)

Finally the love culminates with the final act; "A teenager overwhelmed by/his first love." (15-16). Another prominent expression with bold intent can be seen in the lines from "Feb. 1944. Kasturba Talks of Life with Gandhi"; "Out of sheer curiosity,/Touched each other in places-/ All the while giggling uncontrollably . . ." (*Wish-granting Words* 25). Love making sequence is given a long description by the poet in the poem "Parrots" where the passionate act of male and female parrots is shown:

There . . . he's licking her throat,
Burying his head between her breasts,
He's suckling them like
Sucking on ripe mangoes . . .
Here, he's at her navel . . .
He's sloshing his tongue around . . .
He's turned her over . . .
Nips at the back of her shoulders,
Bites all down her spine, (*Wish-granting Words* 30)

The narrator in one of the poems says that she is fighting for space in the bed with her partner. She illustrates as to what happens in the bedroom; "Your thing upper lip, I suck out/From behind your moustache/When I kiss you . . ." ("Hotel Palm grove, Bombay" 35-36). The bold love making continues for supremacy; "Even as we fall/ Upon the bed/I'm fighting/For space . . ." (38-41).

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