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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 26: Tara Patel

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DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

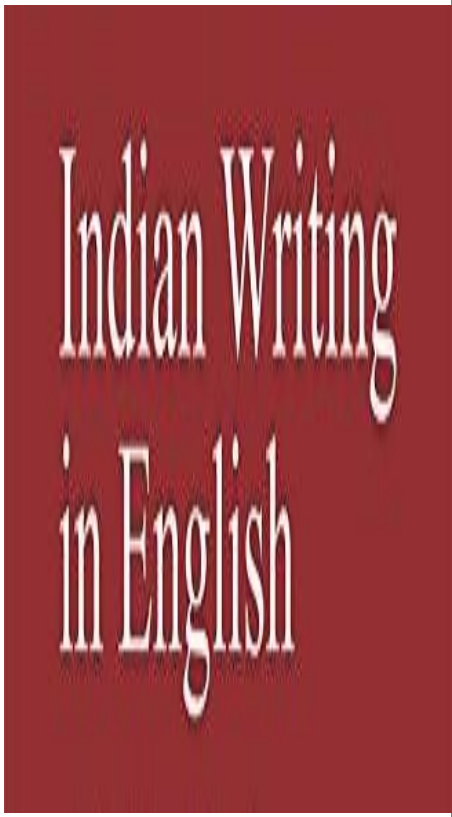


Background

- Four phases of Indian Writing in English-

1. Colonialism (1825 to 1900)
2. Nationalism (1900 to 1950)
3. Modernism (1950 to 1980)
4. Post-modernism (1980 to Present)

- The fourth phase (Contemporary Period) has witnessed many strong women voices like Menka Shivdasani, Lakshmi Kannan, Meena Kandasamy, Leela Gandhi, Temsula Ao and others.
- Tara Patel, another strong voice of women, belongs to this phase of Indian English Poetry.



Tara Patel

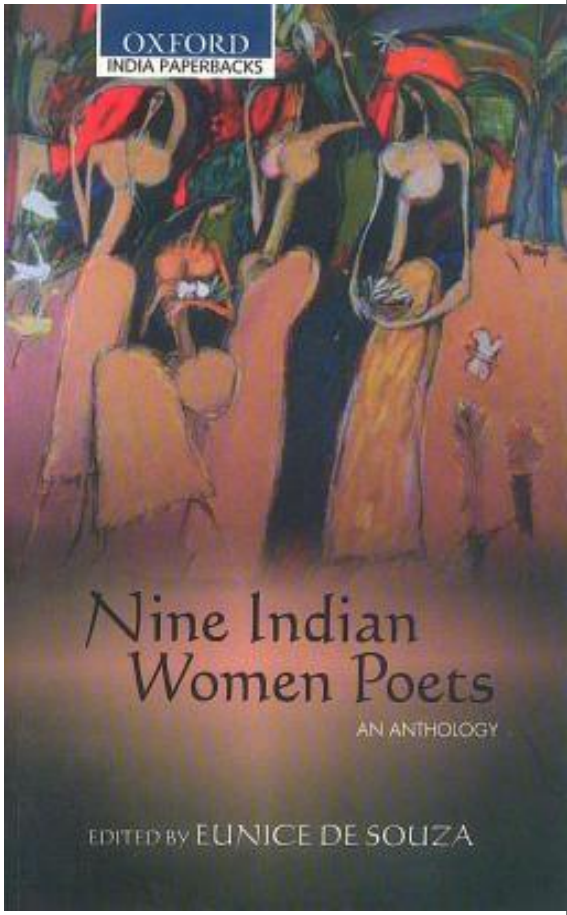
- Born in 1949,educated in Gujarat and Malaysia
- Spent her first twenty years in Malaysia.
- Then came to Bombay where she begins to write poetry.
- Also came in contact with Nissim Ezekiel.
- Poet, Columnist and Journalist.
- Her only poetry collection- *Single Woman*, published in 1992.



Her Poetry Collection

- Her only poetry collection- ***Single Woman***
- She has been anthologized in *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology,* edited by Eunice de Souza.
- Patel's famous poems-:

➢ *Woman*
➢ *Request*
➢ *In Bombay*
➢ *Mother*
➢ *In a Working Women's Hostel*
➢ *Now and Then*



General Themes of Patel's Poetry

- Agonizing experiences of women
- Alienation, Despair, Existential Crisis
- Love and Relationship
- Challenge to the traditional norms
- Sexual Frustrations
- Unemployment
- Conflict within Selves
- Expectation vs. Reality
- Corporeality of body

“Woman”

A woman’s life is a reaction
to the crack of a whip.
She learns to dodge it as it whistles
around her
but sometimes, it lands on the thick,
distorted welt of her memory,
reminding her of lessons learned
in the past.
Then in rebellion she turned her face
to the whip,
till pain become a river in flood
wreaking vengeance.

She ran away to live as an escaped convict,
or a refugee,
or a yogi in wilderness of civilization.
Beneath the thick, distorted self of her memory,
she dreams,
anyone could have touched baby-smooth skin
with kisses.

“Request”

Sometimes for old times sake
you should look me up.
Have lunch with me, I’ll pay the bill.
How little I know you though I loved
you for so long,
and still do for old times sake.

You cannot forget me so completely.
Remember me a little and meet me sometimes.
Once in a while for good luck,
do not negate the past.
Indulge me.

Not because I want to embarrass you.
It is not your lack of love which distresses me any more.
I'm no longer obsessed with a blind emotion which promises everything and nothing.
You have to be young forever to be in love like that.

I will not bore you with detail of how I lived for months after your exit.
But because I am pining for an old pleasure, have lunch with me one of these days.
I miss you most when I am eating alone.

A man should look up a woman sometimes for old times sake.
For reasons other than those which are obsolete.
Have lunch with me,
I'll pay the bill..

Characteristic Features of Her Poetry

- Indian Setting
- Personal voice
- Free Verse and simple vocabulary
- Portrayal of working women
- Desire vs. societal compulsions
- Admission of the stark reality of women's life
- Longing for companionship
- Talks of "locked Indian womanhood".
- Critique of male dominance

Gift me a smile, a smile I can float on,
warm myself in.Save myself.
A look, touch, word, smile-are all on par (18-20)

“Of Now and Then”

You want to talk to someone.
You want to talk to someone seriously, quietly,
without the distraction of getting angry,
or crying, or touching.
You don't want to beg.

You want to talk to someone, not confidentially,
not in private:
the whole world must listen in.
You want to talk to someone because silence
is a kind of suicide.

You want to be 18, hike up a hill,
kiss beneath a lime tree in the light
of a hundred candles,
before a Catholic shrine.
The colour of zinnias burning in your eyes.

You want to eat oranges, try dodging raindrops,
make clouds in your coffee.
When did you last look into a mirror
and smile like a geranium petal?
When did you last dream?
When did you last get wet?

You want to talk and talk to someone
other than yourself.
In the end, you don't want to talk to anyone,
you want to keep quiet.
You want someone to talk to you!

“In a Working Women's Hostel”

1
The evening is an experience of high tide.
I escape. Twelve storeys above the city
the terrace is my great outdoors.
Rs.350 p.m. to meet God is not much at all.
Somewhere along the skyscraper skyline
I walk to and fro. A nun without a vocation!

Am I lonely? Or am I a loner? The difference
must be resolved quickly now.
My private communion is overlooked by superior
balconies, terraces.
The sun makes a wedding finale. A henna-
coloured horizon, smudged eyeshadow clouds.

A patchwork of lights coming on compete
gaudily with the stars.
The rising full moon tells a familiar story.
A breeze purrs, inspires fear, I trip over
the silver wings fluttering on the crazy floor.
A distant sea roars in my ears.

Up here flight is a dangerous illusion.
Crying is a terminal argument. I
return to my room.

Contd…

2
Waking up at night is a symptom of ageing.
I kick aside the warm weather of my blanket,
the touch of my own thighs, breasts,
is an embarrassment.
In the winter cold I fold myself up in supplication
to hear myself more clearly.

Listening to my own confessions is a
third-degree past-time.
I function as a one-woman courtroom.
I have sealed up my life i black envelopes
addressed to no one in particular.
'Confidential. It is the rough wool of a man
you want tonight and every night.'
'A woman can feed herself. Love begins
with a man.'
And so on and so on. The colour of bones
is in my hair now
and I have come to a standstill.
The passing days have a posthumous
touch to them.

Elements of Indianness in Patel's Poetry

- Imagery-: Gulmohar, Sindoor, Saree
- Mythological characters from Indian mythology-: Ram, Sita, Krishna, yogi
- Setting-: Her poetry has been set in Indian cities like Bombay.

" An interesting feature of Patel's verse is the sparseness of imagery in it. It is a poetry of transparent directness. It is perhaps here that the influence of Ezekiel is to be seen. It is unfortunate that Patel ceased to publish after her first collection." (Naik)

Themes Explained

- **Despair and existential crisis-**: Her poems have a tone of disappointment and surrender to social norms. Although her single woman fights but this society does not allow her to live on her own terms.

  "You think the world owes you a living,
  It does not,
  It does not even work for you." *(Birthday Notes 1983*)

- **Alienation**-: It's one of the most prominent themes of her poetry.

  "You want to talk to someone because silence
  is a kind of suicide." (*Now and Then*)

Contd…

- **Challenge to the male hegemony-**: Her *Single Woman* is a challenge to the constructed nature of society.

  "I cannot live like you, mother,
  maintain the status quo.
  I've moved out of square one.
  I cannot be a dutiful daughter." *(Mother)*

- **Relationship-:** Her longing for companionship is revealed through her poetry but again she has no freedom to chose her love.

  "But you are cursed by your parents
  you cannot love voluntarily." (*A Kind of Freedom*)

Her Single Woman (Hallmarks)

- Working woman and financially independent
- Supports living without any social compulsions
- Free from sexual taboos
- Aware of the corporeality of body
- Socially alienated
- Defies marriage and forced relations
- Always challenges the patriarchal structure
- Supports unconventional life
- Against emotional conditioning of women
- She is not “locked Indian womanhood.”

Contd…

When we met his ‘Hello’ was quick,
mine slow
Coconut oil ripened colour on his body.
After lunch our conversation was too long.
Exchanging notes on east and west
I asked his name,
he didn’t ask mine.

The matrimonial ads in the Indian newspapers
amused him.
His invitation to go go swimming naked
was turned down.
A long brown look accentuated the loneliness
of my inhibitions.

Both of us knew,
There was no time for the persuasions
I needed.
I should have gone to share the sun’s wine with him.
In such a man’s arms it must be
permanently afternoon.

A goodbye can be a hug and
‘Women’s lib in India is skin-deep, baby.’
For weeks I can brood of nothing else.
He is a growing regret,
a red bulb off and on reminding me of men
I cannot afford. (“ Calangute Beach, Goa”)

Critical Assessment

- "The predominant tone of Tara Patel's work is weariness so extreme that at times it sounds almost posthumous." – **Eunice de Souza**

- "Art, no matter how much about tragedy or even if about victims, usually ends in victories, triumphs, affirmation, heaven, dignity. Patel simply ignores such expectations and conventions. She has written a book of poems about life's disasters without pretending it really is not so bad after all." - **Bruce King**

- "The woman who suffers and the mind which creates are so closely identified here that the theoretical tools of literary criticism are no longer relevant. What Tara Patel has to say is said without disguise or deception."- **Paniker and Chandraka** (113)

“My permanent address is hell…

I function as a one-woman court room

I have sealed my life in black envelopes

Addressed to no one in particular”.

Thank You

Works Consulted

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