

Gomata and Other Poems: The Female alter-ego in Rukmini Bhaya Nair's Poetry

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Abstract

The paper considers Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poem 'Gomata' where the cow is depicted as a helpless figure as also the Gulmohur and Gargi or women in the poem 'Genderrole' from her other poems. These entities are considered as the female alter-ego that is engaged in an eternal battle to be free.

Keywords - Alter-ego, Eternal, Shackles, Self-imposed

The power of poetry cannot be fathomed but its effect on human mind and soul has been understood to be unequivocally soothing. Poetry transports its readers into a phantasmagoric world, rejuvenating the soul in the process. It is the window which enables a view of grassland and clouds, of cattle and flock, of humans and angels. Innumerable definitions and deliberations on the topic have only contributed to add to its growing interest and its readers. The day-to-day hum drum and jarring cacophony attain tranquility and serenity in the study of poetry, a state of mind that every man desires.

Toru Dutt's lyrical elegance, Tagore's religious raptures, Sarojini Naidu's patriotic renderings, are a few examples that form a part of our glorious past of brilliant poetry in English by Indian poets. The beauty of nature in Toru Dutt's poetry, the appealing and mesmerizing hues of dawn and dusk, the soothing and alluring glow of soft moonlight; nature as seen through this play of light and shadow of various hues and shades bring into a man's life the desired eternal peace of heart and soul that he longs for in this life full of strife.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's poetry has a unique blend of nature, God and his longing for God's grace and mercy. In Gitanjali his poems are filled with an emotional strain that call for God's presence and benevolence and the ensuing rapturous pleasure felt by him while singing to God. Nature plays an important role in his poems as it is an integral part of the universe that is an attribute of God.

The poetry of Sarojini Naidu depicts the national and also the cultural identity of our country through her patriotic and her sentimental poems. Her poems always

have India at their heart be it the ecstasy of having achieved independence or a dialogue with the weavers who never tire or the Lord Krishna himself as the subject of a poem. Her poetic renderings are an outcome of an intelligent mind gifted with poetic imagination.

The poetry of twentieth century presents a very different picture from the poetry of the past in the sense that the subject of poetry takes quite a shift from the emotional or romantic strain to a realistic and practical outlook. The poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, and Vikram Seth depicts the life of man as he is living today. Escapism and imagination are eclipsed by realism and practicality. Nature's beauty is overshadowed by man's predicaments faced by him in his life full of struggle and gloom. The realistic strain continues in the later twentieth century poetry to poetry of the present day as well and we see poets like Jeet Thayil, Arundhati Subramanyam, Shiv K. Kumar, Gieve Patel and many other poets writing of the problems or issues of the present time.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair, also writing in the present has the predicaments of modern life as the subject of her poems. 'Gomata'; an ode to the cow is a poem where the poet eulogises the cow for being able to stand against all the atrocities she has to face through the day. She asks the cow about her predicament and the whirlpool of cacophony all around her and expresses her surprise at being able to keep her calm in such situations. She praises her for maintaining a 'Buddha somnolence' in the face of such adverse and disturbing situations that she gets entangled in and still has to remain calm. The reference is to the traffic that goes past her and so much of noise that she has to put up with like the blaring sounds of the vehicles that wheeze past her in busy traffic hours on the roads where she spends her days. The poet is amazed at the stamina she possesses because even after birthing a calf a short time before, she is again ready to continue with her daily chores in the same calm manner.

The questions to the cow take a more forceful turn and the poet feels more and more disturbed at the cow's attitude and gradually the tone takes up a reproaching stance and demands a reaction from the cow. The cow is

challenged and the probing interrogations become dart like so as to wake up the cow from her 'Buddha somnolence' and catapult her into taking action against her predicaments. She is reminded of the horns that she possesses, that they are a weapon to be used and not mere embellishments to exhibit.

Those killing horns, cow, belong to you
 And poetry
 That is yours too
 Because you are a poem, and because
 You have been a poem, and bred poems, for
 so long (94-98)

She speaks of cow in a metaphorical sense and treats cow as a poem and also a poet (basically women poets). The poem culminates in a reproach to the cow asking her to use her horns as weapons for her safety and stand up for herself in times of need instead of exhibiting a calm disposition and meek demeanor. The emotional stress is apparent in the concluding lines of the poem where feelings reach their crescendo and the poet virtually spurs on the cow to rise and act. A reader may be coerced to believe that the cow or Gomata is also a female alter-ego who is caught up in predicaments that she has to end with the aid of her own might, just as a cow needs to use her horns for her safety.

'Genderoles' is an interesting piece of composition where the female alter-ego poses questions to her mentor. Written in an experimental and innovative style, the poem is about women who have achieved self-confidence and are challenging Shankara to perform household chores like them and still remain calm and wear a smile at the end of the day.

We have wrung poems from household tasks
 Carrying water child sorrow can you do as much? (19-20)
 The innovative style of the poem adds to the amusing element in her poetry and the harshness of the challenge thus, seems to have softened.

Gargi's 'Silence' portrays Gargi as yet another female alter-ego who is an epitome of sacrifice because she refrains from asking questions to her mentor, Yagnavalkya, in a verbal combat on his own behest. Gargi is an intelligent female character from the vedas who almost wins a contest against her own mentor but for the fact that she withdraws at the last moment and thus lets her mentor win.

Stop, Gargi! Stop! If you ask so much, for so much
 Your head will fall off-or mine. I'm not ashamed
 To admit my wisdom has limits. ... (29-31)

The apparent irony cannot be mistaken in the quoted lines

as Yagnavalkya stops Gargi from asking further questions saying that doing so may lead her own self into a problematic situation.

In the poem 'Gulmohur' the female alter-ego has a more pronounced and deep rooted obstacle or hurdle to cross as the tree itself is rooted to the ground and is involved in a continuous and unending effort to free itself. 'Gulmohur' is a beautiful composition that makes use of personification in a most effective manner and a reader actually feels a sense of loss and helplessness in the plight of the tree. The movements of the branches of a Gulmohur tree on a windy day are seen by the poet as an effort made by it to free itself of the rootedness. The powerful visual imagery of Gulmohur speaks volumes about the poet's expertise and about the Gulmohur being a female alter-ego.

Nair, in 'First Light', writes of the emptiness of a human heart and the invisible shackles that hold a woman back. It treats the mind-set of every woman who has innumerable aspirations but is held back owing to an unknown fear, a mist that confuses the vision and determination. 'First Light' conveys the darkness of a human heart, the negativity that captures an individual when everything seems to dissatisfy him and every entity seems like a hurdle, a complex predicament. There is a dearth of zeal and one feels disheartened at the presence of a window and wishes it to be a door, "Ask any restless woman at four / In the morning and she will tell you / Everything, but everything, is a barrier . . . / And the window - why is it never a door?" (19-21,26). The yearning for freedom is apparent and all those hurdles are mere excuses which can easily be crossed if one possesses the desired mind-set.

On one hand, the fetters and shackles in 'First Light' are illusory, an idiosyncrasy of the mind and on the other, in 'Gulmohur' it is the rootedness against an ebullient enthusiasm. Each Gulmohur leaf is seen as an angelfish by the poet and the angelfish seems to be trapped in a bowl which in this case is the sky. As usual the analogy is attractive, novel and impressive but the extended simile is still more forceful, expressing the helplessness and restlessness of the Gulmohur.

Swimming round and round
 In the cold grey lucence
 Of the hooligan monsoon
 But unable to escape, play
 Her deft wit off against
 A loutish rain cloud (20-25)

Both the subjects, the human mind (woman at four) and the gulmohur are under consideration and produce an

antithetical picture. The female alter-ego is challenged in both the cases, but both are in juxtaposition because one (woman) is challenged on the inside and the other (gulmohur) on the outside.

'Pigeon' has as its subject another female alter-ego who lives in the city amidst slum garbage where she has made her nest but longs for her native dwelling in the forest. Pieces of broken glass, some twigs, rags and such garbage is used by the pigeon to make her nest where she returns every evening to her squabs who wait for her to come and feed them. Nair senses a longing in the pigeon's heart for the long lost home that was the forest which no longer exists. Here Nair is hinting at the present environmental problem as well where loss of green belts has led to global warming and the ensuing ill effects on life on earth. Pigeons, thus, may be considered as an alter-ego to female

slum dwellers of the city who also may be lost in nostalgia of the home that they have left behind in search of new horizons.

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