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## “...sing of what rushes in your veins”: An Assessment of Ghazal as an Expression of Resentment in Basudhara Roy

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### **Abstract:**

Basudhara Roy has emerged as a significant voice among the contemporary feminist Indian English poets with her four collections of poems, *Moon in my Teacup* (2019), *Stitching a Home* (2021), *Inhabiting* (2022) and *A Blur of a Woman* (2024). Her poems are characterised by inimitable healing reflections that counterbalance her keen revelation of the hazy and glazed zones surrounding women. Roy has caught the fancy of poetry lovers in literary circles in India with a refreshing combination of wistful mood, warm emotion, perky tenderness and skilled use of language. Her poems routinely appear in several new and established online and print magazines, journals, and anthologies.

Roy’s poetry “bring(s) women to writing” by making them its subject, object, and muse. It explores and speaks for women. It celebrates them as friends, family, colleagues, goddesses, and other mythological figures. It broods over women’s bodies, health, passions, ambition, and socio-cultural conditions, with a subtle and yet explicit red-flagging of patriarchy that hinders the wholesome blossoming of women. Roy’s poetry strives to acknowledge and reinforce the voices and concerns of women. It can be seen as an effort to break free from the male-centric norms and narratives that threaten to silence women. Roy’s “writing (poems) about women” also try to bring women “closer to body” like Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” encourages women to write their own stories, to speak their truths, and to laugh in defiance of the forces that seek to silence them.

Women’s stories should continue to be told and retold. Roy takes determined steps towards retelling women’s tales by attempting experimentation at several levels of her writing. Apart from using a unique diction, she attempts creative use of the ghazal form. Although many

Indian English poets have written ghazals in English, few women poets seem to have ventured in this area. Therefore, the paper attempts to study Basudhara Roy’s poetry in general, and her ghazal “Of Light”, in particular, in the context of “écriture féminine” to highlight that the motto of the poet’s reading and writing strategies is to “resist death and make trouble”. It argues that Roy’s poems and her use of ghazal underscore her conviction to venture into “new ways of writing and interpreting” as a feminist act to “bring women ...to their meaning in history”.

**Keywords: Ecriture Féminine, Ghazal, Basudhara Roy, Indian English Poetry, Women Poets.**

### **Introduction**

Since Gender Equality has been incorporated as the fifth specific target among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations (for the global community to achieve by the year 2030), there seems to be a renewed thrust and determination to gain definitive outcomes in reducing gender bias in all spheres of life. The worlds of poetry and literature are no exception. A significant way poetry enhances gender sensitivity is by representing the existing socio-political and cultural conditions and asking relevant questions regarding essential issues.

Questioning the conventional social norms concerning positioning of women, expressing experiences of suppression, biases, and violence by women and highlighting issues of sexuality, desire, and aspiration for an accommodating and empowering world have been integral to the exploration of womanhood in Indian English Poetry. (Naik & Narayan 2001) The genre has evolved with the contributions of prominent feminist poets, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza and many others.

M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan in the book, *Indian English Literature 1980-2000*, underscore the key features of women poets writing during the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kamala Das continues the trend of bold articulation of female desires in poetry. Suniti Namjoshi, Margaret Chatterjee, and Eunice de Souza, base their verses on retelling of traditional fables. They use aggressive irony and quiet reflections to attack the double standards of society. Tara Patel explores several facets of love while Imtiaz Dharker asks intelligent and sensitive questions about taboos such as that of purdah. Charmayne D’Souza takes a critical view on man woman relations and loss of romance in marriage. Melanie Silgado offers a

broad view of all human relations while Menka Shivdasani reflects on the sordidness of city life. Sunita Jain's collections of poems are marked by celebration of love but dwell on the darker side of love too. Many of these poets show strong notes of feminism in their verses. For example, De' Souza pictures various roles and responses of women; "waspish spinster", "calm", "not stupid" etc.. Poets such as Arundhati Subramanian, Tishani Doshi, and Meena Kandasamy continue to interrogate society's unjust treatment of its womenfolk while probing deeper into their mental and emotional depths. Using a broad spectrum of perceptions, experiences, and imaginativeness they have kept women's issues spotlighted. Basudhara Roy seems to follow in the footsteps of her fellow poets with refreshing incision and thrust in her verses.

### **Basudhara Roy: An introduction**

I would like to take liberty to introduce Basudhara Roy as "Steel Magnolia" of Indian English poetry. The expression seems to fit her for two reasons. Firstly, it hints at her place identity: her connection to Jamshedpur, the steel city in Jharkhand, India. Secondly, it captures her writerly persona resonating with the fortitudes inherent in the femininity of women. Roy's poetry collections, *Moon in my Teacup*, *Stitching a Home*, *Inhabiting*, and *A Blur of a Woman* have registered her compelling presence on the Indian English poetic scene with their distinct artistic and communicative potential that "bring(s) women to writing" by making them both the plot and the protagonist. Roy sings of a range of female figures such as friends, family, colleague, and mythological women. She applies novel perspectives to the experiences of women and mulls their concerns such as body, health, passion, ambition, childbearing, child rearing, family, housekeeping with a critical eye to patriarchy that hinders women's self-awareness.

In Indian English Poetry, the regional markers of a poet's identity have always been underlined boldly. Basudhara Roy's immediate surroundings in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, offer a cosmopolitan and industrial vibe. The terrain is a part of the vivid landscape of the Chhota Nagpur plateau and offers modern urban amenities. It is populated by tribal people, also called Adivasi, and people from across India. Roy's poetry does not seem to be making an obvious and direct use of her regional associations and environment in terms of naming and evoking the local sights, sounds or issues of women for that matter. Her vantage point seems more personal and internal than external. She expresses the lived experiences of womanhood and

questions conventions by attempting to establish an allegiance with women around her. However, she appears keener on the matters of the “universal woman” which subsumes the concerns of women everywhere.

### **Bringing women to writing**

Roy brings women to writing in many ways. Firstly, she sketches their inside makeup contouring their multiple roles and responsibilities, emotional and mental fragilities, and resistances and resiliency. Secondly, she looks at women in the light of the social situation. In her poems, the emotional and the cognitive world of women often seem at odds with the society, giving expression to women’s pet peeves against the socio-cultural biases. In addition, Roy showcases women’s dreams, desires, and aspirations.

Roy’s women are gritty women who could be mired in quotidian concerns and yet be reflective of the existential questions. They may look silly and carefree from the outside but nurture values of empathy and humanity deep within their minds and hearts. The poem ‘Pillion riding, on a Winter Evening’ lists important worries of middle-aged women as health conditions, familial conflicts, and financial woes:

Two middle-aged women,  
credulous faces, untended hair,  
lost to hypertension, thyroid, anaemia,  
to never-ending family cares,  
budgeted shoppings, bickering helps  
filial discontent, spousal neglect,  
caesared bodies, stormy passions,  
stretch-marked hobbies, lost careers,  
and virgin dream gardens— (*Moon in My Teacup*, 88)

The lines recount the routine concerns and responsibilities of women—their burden seems too much. However, the women are not deterred by their responsibilities. Not only they are willing to acknowledge and embrace the life’s challenges and endless tasks but also make time to indulge in the little joys of living:

“attuned only

to our gains  
we pocket the change  
from each transaction, the jokes, smiles, laughters, phone calls  
borrowed lipsticks, dresses...

Women find joy and energy amid the hurdles and limitations from a discerning camaraderie with the fellow women. They might not be related to each other but are connected by “soul-blood”. These women gel over identical experiences of ostracising of “wombless body” and celebrate their sisterhood when “...insomnia claims / the other side of an unequal bed— (66)

### **The givers of inexhaustible gifts**

The lives and conditions of women are affected to a great extent by the patriarchal ideals and structures. Roy’s women are critical of society’s exploitative approach and examine the ways society surreptitiously traps and constricts women. One way the society limits women is by popularising some notions as noble and desirable; for instance, the notion of “giving” as an expected behaviour of women. In the following lines, the notion of giving is seen as dubious, especially when used for women’s response to her partner:

...I keep giving;  
you royally receive,

...

God-like, divine,  
you pour love like wine  
fortifying what dwindling self

with illusions megalomaniacal?  
It’s high time, I think,  
You stopped playing God. (‘Unrequited’, 41)

The persona in the verse admonishes her partner for his thankless receipt of her gifts. She warns him against becoming a megalomaniacal monster who receives ungratefully. There is a scathing disapproval of conjugality reigned by lack of mutuality. Poems such as ‘The Right Kind of Woman’ (*Stitching a Home*), ‘Comings’, ‘Off / Duty’, and ‘Un/Dolling Your House’

(*Inhabiting*) too, reflect the hideousness of patriarchal tinge in the notion of selfless giving:

When you want me, call and I will  
appear, expressions tidied, smile  
well-placed, voice washed clean  
of reproach. You will, mollified,  
find in me all you have ever desired—  
contentment, gaiety, sacrifice,

love without hope of receipt, (‘Un/Dolling Your House’ 67)

Doris Rita Alphonso, in introduction to “Feminine Writing and Women’s Difference”, notes Helen Cixous’ critique of phallogocentric economies of exchange and debt versus gift economies. Cixous formulates feminine economies in terms of giving: “The feminine gives of herself continually without losing herself in the exchange.” Her desire is not exploitative but marked by a generous intent. (Oliver, 2000, 255) However, Roy seems to have reservations against glorification of meek and selfless giving and offers “Un/Dolling” as a powerful declaration to “break free” from such “tradition”.

### **“love for liberty”**

Basudhara Roy’s poems highlight an urgent need to be “unwalled by home” and “step out” in a way that “no conches can ever call us back.” (‘Off/Duty’, *Stitching a Home*, 63-64) A set of poems in *Inhabiting*, speak for women’s freedom from conventional ways of life. In the poem ‘Advice for Durga’, for example, the speaker calls out the appropriation of the images of iconic Hindu deities, Durga and Kali, and questions why the goddesses wield tools of the Gods; “unmindful of why all your hands should serve them / or why tools were never yours to begin with” (61). The lines imply that women need to reject the tools of patriarchy and hone their own skills, voices, and potential. Structured as a series of questions, the verse coalesces Durga’s image with that of Ishtar, Inana, Astarte, Cybele –mythical figures of similar stature, powers and symbolism from other part of the world –to convey that history, stories, and iconography have manipulated and failed women everywhere.

In the poem 'For Kali', the persona takes up the role of a sympathizer and a comrade of Kali. She claims to see "agony and dreams" in the figure of the goddess. Contrary to the common perception of an uninformed awe and wonder of a devotee, the persona looks at Kali with new searching eyes and finds in the deity's image a quest for awareness and freedom. In the wildness of Kali she finds "sufficiency" and an intent to search the truth of the self through body. Kali appears as the "primordial mother of night"; her disarrayed hair is "unquenched waterfall" beating over "tradition's timeless rocks."; her "taut limbs" "truth's tumescence" (*Inhabiting* 52) and wilderness of pubis, "dark self-definition". The persona feels that Kali's "tale" remains "untold" because of an ageless battle / between silence and speech:

suspended between your witnessing teeth, is an ageless battle  
 between silence and speech. Your tale, Kali, remains untold  
 ...Only your body  
 is a crusading ship, determined to reach meaning's shore.  
 Rest this vigil for a moment, Kali. Lie down in dust with me,  
 ...  
 "Rest from being a warrior, Kali. Let me calm your commitment,  
 caress you into a sleep. You must be so weary of being a scream." (52-53)

Kali symbolises women's undying fervour to speak up against the powerful and perennial attempt at silencing them. Likewise, Roy's poems are a form of speech against silence. Her very act of writing is a feminist act where her poems scream against the fixed meanings and truths. The poem 'Letter to an Unborn Mother' recounts the tribulations on the journey of motherhood and tears off the romanticized, generic, and dreamy portrayals of the processes of pregnancy and delivery. There are mothers with interrogatory presence; mothers who are "resented, unwanted, (and) loathed. Motherhood to many involves fears and insecurities: "knives, syringes, need of heirs", "...nutrition /forbidden, unafforded", "... food-poisoning, ragging". The poem demands that all mothers be set free from such prejudices:

....And what nation,  
 tell me mother, can safeguard  
 us from such persecution? What  
 flag, what colour, what anthem



mother, can finally set us free? (*Inhabiting* 58)

The poem ‘Memories of my Grandmother as a Clock’ narrates the intriguing life-story of grandmother through recall and conversations. Grandmother tears through male-centric ways and instructs women to make their minds “invincible” like a “fortress” (70). The poem ‘Woman-to-Woman’ exhorts women to gather their inner strength; sing of what rushes in your veins:

...only when you draw sap  
from the earth’s breast, home the  
earthworm in your soil; only when the

sky stretches above you free, ... (*Inhabiting* 74)

Such poems prove the poet’s conviction to write inspiring anthems for women’s liberation from the fetters of patriarchy.

Apart from challenging the set socio-cultural boundaries, Roy attempts to push the artistic boundaries of her verses with a possibility of limitlessness by infusing in them new questions, new emotions, and new perspectives. Though her poems are lyrical and are often organised in stanzas of two, three, and four lines, there are levels of determined experimentation in her writing. First, the experimentation occurs at the level of diction. The writer explores meaning and suggestiveness of words in broader contexts with her “home” grown vocabulary of the dietary and savory (‘Culinary Love’ and ‘Memorial’) of arboricultural, parenting, and housekeeping. Another attempt at experimentation appears in her increasing use of the ghazal form.

Ghazal as a poetic form originated in Arabic and Persian poetry. It comprises a series of couplets (called shers) that are thematically independent yet connected by a common emotional thread. Each couplet typically consists of two lines (Russell) with a rhyme scheme that includes a refrain (radif) at the end of the second line, often accompanied by a rhyme (qafiyah) before it. The ghazal traditionally explores themes of love, loss, and beauty, employing metaphors and lyrical expressions. It became prominent in Persian literature and later influenced Urdu, Hindi, and other languages.

## Indian English Ghazal

Ghazal can take various forms, each reflecting different cultural and linguistic traditions. Arabic Ghazal, considered to be the original form, is marked by its use of classical Arabic language and themes of love and mysticism. Popular in Persian literature (Narang) ghazal often delves into philosophical and spiritual themes as in Rumi and Hafez. Urdu Ghazal is marked by its lyrical quality and emotional depth, with poets like Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz leading the way. Hindi Ghazal emerged from Urdu influences, and incorporates cultural nuances specific to the Hindi-speaking world. English Ghazal represents modern adaptations of the form that maintain the structure but explore contemporary themes. In the context of Indian English Poetry, prominent practitioners of ghazal include Agha Shahid Ali. A Kashmiri-American poet, Ali was influenced by the conventions of Persian and Urdu poetry and used ghazal form to express themes of loss and longing. His poems gained from the ghazal “conciseness, repetitive images and phrases to develop suggestions of symbolic narrative ...” (King, Bruce) Keki N. Daruwalla is another poet who has written ghazal in English using contemporary themes such as partition.

### Writing Strategies: Ghazal as a tool to express resentment

Basudhara Roy’s attempt at writing ghazal in English could be seen as part of the continuum. Her ghazal titled “Of Light” was published under the title “For Kali and other poems by Basudhara Roy” on August 8, 2021 on *lucywritersplatform.com*. Another ghazal, “Ghazal for Words” was published in RIC Journal in August 2024. Her latest book, *A Blur of a Woman* features eight ghazals; ‘Water Ghazal’, ‘A Ghazal for Beginning’, ‘Monsoon Ghazal’, ‘A Ghazal Tonight’, ‘Ghazal of Rain’, ‘A Ghazal in Me’, ‘Ghazal of Necessity’, ‘Ghazal of the Body’.

The ghazal “Of Light” adheres to the core structural norm of the ghazal with initial couplet and refrain at the end of each couplet, rhyming, and requirement of minimum five couplets. However, it places within the form a terrible story of rape and assault of women in India along with a mocking overview of gender-biased mythology and social institutions as sources of oppression.

In your court’s taut silence, I brood  
of light,  
the genesis, conscience, habitude

of light.

Hewn in me are your first lawgiver's  
edicts,

I am Shatarupa to Brahma, a lewd  
of light.

Everywhere I go, I am met only in  
parts,

vulva to tongue shred by a crude of  
light.

Razed in annexation to your  
hunger's fire,

Manipur to Hathras, a vicissitude of  
light.

Each plundered robe decries my  
trust,

A dhobi's taunt, a dice, an allude of  
light?

Although couplet end rhyme create a musical effect, there is nothing musical about the experience in the poem. The ghazal “Of Light” is not about light. It is not about love, longing, beauty or grace either. It's about darkness of age old perception of women. The verses trace, lament, question, and expose the scriptural, historical and current social outlook to women as a tantalizing object of desire and their continuous subjection to lewdness and physical assault. The ghazal tastes as a bitter potion of reality in a form that has been conventionally linked to “romantic cum mystical engagements”. It generates feelings of repulsion and rage. The refrain “of light” reinforces the absence of light and bleak tone combined with direct and crude imagery makes the overall impact scathing and terrifying. Allusion of rape and violence against women in the ghazal appears as a statement. The use of the form of lyric that once sang of the beauty and elegance of women to showcase crime against women speaks volume about the condition of women in the society.

Ghazal' use to accommodate “socio-political discoursing” is not new. Mirza Ghalib, the renowned ghazal writer, commented on the contemporary socio-political turbulence in his ghazals. Adrienne Rich, too used ghazals to fight desolation caused by patriarchy. (Chatterjee

and Malshe) As mentioned before, Agha Shahid Ali and Keki N. Daruwalla, too, used the form for addressing divergent and unconventional themes. Likewise, in the hands of Basudhara Roy ghazal undergoes a “curious experiment”. It is politically conscious; it is defiant, it shocks and surprises and leaves the readers wondering about its real potential.” (Bilal 2019)

## Conclusion

To sum up, Roy’s poems, and her ghazal “Of Light”, register a vehement charge against the conscience of society regarding how it treats its women. They lament an all-round attempt to stifle woman’s individuality and rob her of her position as an equal. They serve as mirrors to both man and woman as the creators of the current and the future society and remind women never to be oblivious “of their meaning in history”.

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