

Search of “Herself” in Monika Varma’s Across the Vast Spaces

Dr. Gagandeep
Assistant Professor, Department of English
S D (PG) College Panipat

ABSTRACT

Monika Varma being a sensitive poet feels the “search of herself” in the patriarchal world and hence, she makes a temporary withdrawal into the “metaphysical world” of her poetry. But this withdrawal into the other world is just a technique employed by the poet to rediscover and redefine herself. She returns into the former world, but not as a “victim” but as a “victor.” She gets better knowledge of life through her strategic retreat. Monika Varma completes her quest for identity after getting “self-enlightenment.” She solves her problems on her own ground and completes the circle with an achievement of “wholeness.”

Key words: Romantic Idealism, Metaphysical World, Identity-Crisis, Patriarchal World, Self-enlightenment.

The unexpected exposure to the intricate problems of new Indian society made new fields of experience available to poets like Monika Varma. She favours romantic idealism in her attempt to confront the new situation. The romantic idealism combined with the honesty of experience makes her a “new romantic.” She is directly influenced by Tagore’s philosophy and his doctrine to nature. Monika Varma’s poetry is the outcome of her response to the three specific areas of experience related to nature, personal life and poetry as an art.

Monika Varma being a sensitive poet feels the “search of herself” in the patriarchal world and hence, she makes a temporary withdrawal into the “metaphysical world” of her poetry. But this withdrawal into the other world is just a technique employed by the poet to rediscover and redefine herself. She returns into the former world, but not as a “victim” but as a “victor.” She gets better knowledge of life through her strategic retreat.

Monika Varma’s *Across the Vast Spaces* can be better appreciated if divided, for the sake of analysis, into the following four phases of poetic ideological development:

1. Knowledge of the “law of threshold”;
2. Temporary withdrawal into the “metaphysical world”;
3. Transformation;
4. Self-realization.

For women, according to the law of threshold, a step over the bar is an act of transgression. Having committed that act, they may never re-enter their designated first world and must live by their irretrievable choice of making the other world their permanent space. The law allows multiple existences for men but only a single one for women. The craving of the persona’s soul for extension is expressed in the following lines:

*Let me move to other lands,
Other skies.
Let me move to a new kind of freedom,*

*a freedom of the spirit.....
a heart clear and cool,
a mind not muddled by absurd, unimportant
Daily demands. ("To Other Lands," 27)*

In the above lines, freedom demanded by the persona is against the law of threshold. Hence, there start conflicts, contradictions, tensions and problems in life. The pressures that deny her humanity are breached by her existential probing like "who am I?" She feels the "identity-crisis" due to her identification as a "mother", "beloved", "wife", "sister", etc. and not as an "individual" that she is.

Notably enough, Monika Varma does not turn to poetry as a means of cathartic release from the tensions of love relationship like other women poets do. Monika Varma clearly understands the strains of the threshold zone located in the problematic gender. This problem exists because tradition grants woman's supremacy in the interior, enclosed space whereas man's supremacy is celebrated in the interior, open-ended world. When she feels the tyranny of this law, she comes to know that the external forms of her life are full of constant activity, but her inner voice speaks a different language of tentative aspiration. At this point she feels the need to change herself, and badly asserts in her poem "The Problem":

*I must Change
My way of Living
I must change my thinking
I must look at things in a different way. ("The Problem" 25)*

In the above lines she seems to prepare herself for a change but then:

*But how?
That's the problem
And that is why gods are made of stone
In my country..... ("The Problem", 25)*

In the earlier two lines of the above stanza she feels the problem on a personal ground, but in later two she extends the problem to a universal level. She tries to resolve her personal problems philosophically with the help of her poetic creativity. To overcome the identity crisis, she presents herself as a small unit which is merely a particle of the "vast space." In the above lines she dilutes her problems by merging them with those of the whole of mankind and does not blame God for it. Rather she expresses their helplessness:

*How else would they bear the sorrows of mankind...?
Through tears, too, like drops of water,
Wear rock and stone away. ("The Problem", 25)*

She favours God because first, He is made of stone; secondly, the number of sorrow-stricken people is infinite, as suggested by the three dots after "mankind." The same crimped image of God is projected by Imtiaz Darker when she says, "God who has created the whole world has been now reduced into a frame meant only for complaints" (32).

In the second phase of her poetry she deconstructs the image of woman with the help of a temporary withdrawal. She uses it as a technique to interpret and understand the life more clearly. She shows how the device of withdrawal can be used not only as a device to lay bare the social ills, but also as a method of dealing with and solving these maladies. Annis Pratt describes the process of withdrawal that renders women "alien in their own land,

trapped by dependency upon male whims, who try to disentangle themselves from wifely behavior or motherhood where her own children have become stingers... and try to escape from the inexorable enclosure to a new environment where maleness and femaleness no long undermine the development of the human personality... this new environment is beyond sexual politics, a new kind of space” (67-68).

The technique of Monika Varma is not of an escapist but rather of the realist. She accepts the problems calmly and solves them patiently, but without crying. Her poetry is a continuous creative process. Her attitude towards nature is deeply rooted in her metaphysical approach of life as a whole. She philosophically accepts the oriental doctrine of wise passivity, and believes, like Tagore, in the joy as the basic principle of life. She poetically depicts the process:

*and my being moves away from all these questing.
these coiled-care whys: why should I grieve:
there is laughter in a silver thread of breeze.*

(“In This Loud World,” 11)

The above lines clearly show the technique of temporary withdrawal of the persona and the rediscovery of the hidden potential. She learns not to suppress her talents rather she starts to interpret life in a positive manner and solves most of the problems of life through metaphysical approach.

Mamata Kalia is pain stricken when she finds that living has become more difficult than dying. She heaves a sigh of relief when she finds:

*'No one expired in the hospital.
Today
What a day!' (17)*

Modern man's condition is very peculiar. His is a world where all pervasive death, destruction, chaos and gloom are the order of the day and life has changed into death-in-life. But Monika Varma suggests that whereas life provides us perishable things till death, but death is the greatest giver because there is “rebirth” after death. The body is a mere garb, apparel that is supported for sometime by the soul.

Monika Varma as a mature poet accepts the facts of “death” philosophically. During her temporary withdrawal she contemplates over the major issues of life. "Her philosophical interpretation of life can be found in her poem 'Gleanings' which has close parallel to Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*" (134). The poem's theme is that life is a continuous rhythm and that the dynamism in life should be retained.

Frustration in the case of Monika Varma initially springs from her arenas of the lack of opportunity within the male-dominated world. She feels herself to be a victim of “male-gaze” (Wagner 53). Kamala Dass also feels a great need of redefining the female personality in such a situation. It is her sincere effort to “redefine herself and her world without...by breaking away completely and violently from the traditional roles of women” (Hornby 499).

Monika Varma suggests in her poems that the persona removes her not to escape but to gather strength to live in harmony with humanity without having to sacrifice her individual desires. Withdrawal in this light is seen as tearing away the “yellow wall paper,” (Kurup 114) a freedom from entrapment and reconciliation with oneself. Pratt feels that – “peeling away from matriarchal experience in this sense constitutes a healthy action where she gathers power to enable her to leap forward more effectively, a process which daily defines the ‘qualitative leap’ beyond the ‘male Maya’...” (Pratt 166).

She bitterly rejects the stereotyped, typical and particular roles of females in which her personality is rendered into a single fixed image. Jung calls this quest a quest for “individuation” or wholeness; “a process by which a person becomes a psychological individual, with separate, indivisible unit or wholeness” (Kapur 112). Transformation is the change of personality, mode of thinking and reassessment of values in the state of withdrawal. This transformation of values not only gives a new identity to the persona but also the capacity to live with a specified identity within patriarchy.

Her poetry is really an art of silence, having profundity of thoughts. Its meaning is subtly camouflaged. It is the literature of wisdom in which silence is used to communicate the infinite courage of endurance. This silence is a part of her strategy to get across to the fundamental psychological truths. The dreams, illusions and hallucinations reveal the hidden desires of man.

Finally, Monika Varma completes her quest for identity after getting “self-enlightenment.” She solves her problems on her own ground and completes the circle with an achievement of “wholeness.” She comes back from the metaphysical world, but as a transformed woman and reintegrates with the earlier world with a better understanding of life. In her poem “To Other Lands” she asserts:

*But the thought, the idea broke
Only today, I remind some you,
Some me and wait
For a remembrance, a themetore-state.*

(“To Other Lands” 27)

She ultimately learns to balance both the worlds simultaneously with the help of her poetic creativity. She confidently states:

*Across the vast spaces
I weave words.*

She ultimately succeeds in designing “a new world” for the craving souls of modern, awakened women. She designs it not in the physical but in the psychological world. She cultivates her inner self to balance both the worlds philosophically. Her metaphysical poetry helps one to understand the “vast spaces” of human problems and the “narrow spaces” of human approach and she perfectly balances them in her poetry.

REFERENCES

- Dharkar, Imtiaz. *Postcards from God*. New Delhi: Viking Publications, 1994. Print.
- Horn, Hornby. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*. 4th ed. 1948. rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.
- Kalia, Mamta. *Poems 78*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop Publication Ltd., 1987. Print.
- Kapur, Promila. *Marriage and the Working Women in India*. Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1970. Print.
- Pratt, Annis. *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*. Bloomington: Sadina University Press, 1981. Print.
- Richardson, Dorothy. *The Long Day*. London: Macmillan Pvt. Ltd., 1976. Print.
- Varma, Monika. *Across the Vast Spaces*. Calcutta: Mudrankan Printing Press Ltd., 1975. Print.
- Wagner, Jean. *The Search for Songs of Intelligent Life in the Universal*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. Print.