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(Not) Naming the Other: Altering the Conceptualization of Difference in Lyric Poetry

In Kunwar Narayan's poem in Hindi titled "Ek Ajeeb – si Mushkil" (A Strange Problem), the speaker intends to hate particular communities but his hate is defused each time he thinks of a particular name which belongs to these communities. For instance, he wants to hate the English who colonized his country, but his love for Shakespeare overpowers his hatred for them. When one thinks of a community or a crowd, often one thinks of it as a mass of nameless people with one common trait which marks its identity irrespective of individual differences. The anonymous other who is part of this community is thought of as just another person of the same type. As soon as the other is named, the difference that individuates them is concretized. Naming turns the other from a general idea to a particular entity; one can relate to them as an individual subject and not as an abstraction. The act of naming grants alters the conceptualization of difference and grants a singular subjectivity to the other, opening up a space for dialogue. As Martin Buber notes, "Were there no genuine dialogue, there would be no poetry."

In this paper, I will be reading select lyric poetry written in Odia, Hindi, Urdu, English et al and look at how the anonymous and the crowds are treated in lyric poetry. In lyric poetry, the speaker is mostly anonymous but the one spoken about may or may not be named. I will study how (not) naming informs the speaking/reading self's approach to difference and shapes the possibility of a dialogue between the self and the other as presented in these poems. I would attempt to show how a pluralistic approach to alterity, instead of a binary one, makes the interplay between identity and difference in these poems more fruitful.