



Interrogation and Negation of Patriarchy in the Poems of Kamala Das

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Writing is a means of creating a place in the world; and the use of personal voice and self-revelation becomes a source of self-assertion for the women writers. This is a natural consequence of the cry for gender justice all over the world. The feminist thought and the feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women's movements all over the world and it is reflected in their writings. Men may try their hands at writing about women's bodies, but according to the feminist critique, only a woman whose very biology gives her an edge could write and read these texts successfully. Similarly, it is the woman who belongs to the subaltern area of weaker sex can give a true voice to the problems faced by them in a male dominated society.

Women, in order to liberate themselves and advance, need to empower themselves to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject them to patriarchal domination and control. In their creative writings, the women writers started discussing openly the various types of oppressions that women have to face in the highly patriarchal society. The women protagonists in their works question the oppressive role of society and confront the oppositions strongly and find out a new path out of the age-old traditions and customs. Thus, they emerge as individuals with their own idiosyncrasies who are empowered and have the courage of conviction. They are the 'new women', who could be likened to the flooding rivers that find a pathway even through crevices and obstacles. Women's writing impacts their very existence in the socio-cultural milieu as it accelerates their shift from a marginal position to a central one. Earlier, the suffering wife, the weeping widow, or the sacrificing mothers were the only images found in literature. The iconoclastic approach was to break the stereotypes and to regenerate an image of a woman who can think, speak, execute, earn, win and wield the sceptre.

It is so disheartening to say that despite many people voicing the liberation of women and many women reaching great heights on par with men, they are still considered inferior to men. Androcentric attitude of men stands as an obstacle in the path of many women who try to take confident strides to be successful in their professional lives. This disparity and discrimination in approaching and evaluating a man and a woman as separate entities and not commonly as human beings could be viewed as the root cause of all the sufferings inflicted on women by their counterparts who are supposed to protect and safeguard them. "The issues women have been dealing with have been similar worldwide but varied by the pace of change allowed by political climate and cultural beliefs" (Thomsen 3).

Kamala Surayya (1934-2009), popularly known as Madhavikutty and Kamala Das, is beyond doubt the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. Her poetic collection includes *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse And Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *Only Soul Knows How To Sing* (1996). Kamala Das's poetry is remarkably realistic and is replete with feministic ethos.

Kamala Das is a legendary woman poet who epitomizes the modernization of the Indian feminine poetic psyche. Her poetry is equipped with female experience of emotional shock of an unhappy marriage, humiliation of desire less surrender in sex and her disgust at the male domination. Ms.Das is a rebel poet- a feminist rebel against the patriarchal forces imposing stereo typed role on women. Kamala Das's poetry also accentuate women's psyche of rebellion against male supremacy and ego when she identifies love either with physical relationship or an unfulfilled longing. Her achievement is her daring and unconventional portrayal of the emotion of love in its countless number of shades. In Devendra Kohli's words, "Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her

individual freedom and identity” (Kohli 188). She has forcefully raised her voice against male tyrannies in her poems such as ‘An Introduction’, ‘Summer in Calcutta’, ‘Marine Drive’, ‘A Relationship’ etc. Kamala Das’s expression of feminism is at times explicit and at times implicit. She has been celebrated as a champion of women’s causes. Her writings reveal a strong feminist streak in various forms.

There is no denying the fact that Kamala Das revolts against the masculine character of our civilization, but she also shows her restlessness towards women’s passive acceptance of subjugation as the appointed lot.

Kamala Das exposes her restlessness in her poem “The Suicide” where she writes:

But,
I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of A Happy Woman,
Happy wife. (40-46)

In the aforesaid lines, the derision of woman’s emotions is evident that even if a woman is not happy as a wife or as a woman, she must pretend herself to be a happy wife. Kamala Das is not in favour of physical love that her strong husband showers on her, rather she pines for emotional identity which is not afforded by him. The poetess hammers hard at her husband and articulates her intense desire of escaping from his clutches and attaining ‘freedom’. This has been incorporated in the poem “Substitute”:

Yet I was thinking, lying beside him
That I loved, and was much loved.
It is physically a thing, he said suddenl
End it, I cried
End it, and let us be free.
This freedom was our last strange toy. (2-7)

In a nutshell, the poetry of Kamala Das staunchly etches the emotional picture of woman and succinctly reiterates that she should not be treated as a commodity or a subaltern. She should be bestowed with a respectable position in society.

Her unconventional portrayal of certain controversial issues that hitherto have been taken as taboo in society, makes her a feminist of the most radical kind. Her major works such as *My Story*, *Alphabet of Lust*, *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, etc. reveal a woman’s painful experiences in a male dominated society. The openness and honesty with which she projects her feminist vision, rattles many conservative minds. For her, feminism is a kind of resistance against the system of patriarchy, despite the societal and family pressures on her to conform to the established feminine roles:

Dress in sarees, be girl /
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On wall or peep in through our laced- dropped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhvikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don’t play pretending roles... (“An Introduction” 35-42)

Das longs to come out of the shackles of power hungry males and her experiences are universal i.e. all women undergo the same experience as Kamala Das. The society is not generous enough to give women their justifiable rights. Thus the women have to fight back and enable themselves to establish their identity. Kamala Das embodies women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage and seeking to establish their identity and the self. She strongly protests against the restrictions of married life, domesticity, male domination, artificial comfort, and the hunger of love and lust. Das’s violent refusal to mould herself into a passive woman makes her a rebel. Kamala Das’s poetry is replete with broad social concerns forcing her to assert her identity.

The exploration of self and the candour with which Kamala Das has expressed her personal concerns and predicaments lend an authentic tone to her poetry and help create a genuine image of Indian womanhood caught between her individual awareness and feminine consciousness and the demands of a traditional patriarchal mindset. The picture of Indian women that emerges in Kamala Das’s poetry are entirely different from those presented by her predecessors like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who do express concern about

the pitiable condition of women living with the constricted social mores but in their poetry the voice of revolt is seldom heard. Poets like Kamala Das revolt against the restraints in the patriarchal society and express the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individuality, identity and freedom. Kamala Das being herself the subject of womanly experiences effectively gives voice to aspirations, frustrations and emotional upheavals of a woman conscious of her individuality in the Indian social milieu. Her poetry written in the confessional mode gave voice to the awakened consciousness of contemporary educated Indian women who protested against the subaltern status of women in the patriarchal society. Their clamour for individual identity found expression in Das's bold assertions of female physicality and sexuality as well as her need for emotional fulfillment. The following rebellious lines call for the redefinition of the term 'happiness' extending beyond the confines of domesticity and wifehood. "Women, is this happiness, this lying buried / Beneath a man? It is time again to come alive, The world / extends a lot beyond his six foot frame" (Conflagration" 6-8). "There is a desire to extricate from this 'Soul Killing' subjugation" (Iyer 371). Louis Bernikov's observation while commenting on the women poets of England and America is also true for the women poets of modern India in general and Kamala Das in particular: "A woman poet constantly pits herself against cultural expectation of 'Womanhood' and 'Woman's Writing'. She gives her imagination and courage to that struggle, pours energy into it in ways that do not exist for men. Womenhood is sometimes seen as authenticity, the essence to be distilled in the poems" (8).

Kamala Das's poems show strong sense of consciousness towards the feminine psyche. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar also expresses the same idea in these words: "Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in largely insensitive man-made world" (680) while Satyadev Jaggi affirms that "she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman" (17). She adopts an unconventional and innovative manner to give voice to the mute longings of the suppressed woman to free herself from the subaltern status, her search for an identity and individuality as well as her need of love and emotional fulfillment. Her three volumes of poems notably *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendents* (1967) and *The Old Play House and Other Poems* (1975) voice in full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian Woman's journey from tradition to modernity, but also the Indian women's sense of commitment to reality.

As a feminist, she attacks the convention ridden society. Her attacks on senseless restrictions and conventions plead for the liberation of her sisterhood. Her poetry is strong reactions to patriarchal value-system and justifications for the needs of women to be living beings. She reveals rebellious dimensions in her poetry. In other words, her poems are ponderings upon the unfortunate state of women in a male dominated society. This bespoke not just Das's own need, but it is also a representation of the desires of those voiceless, restricted women, who are taken for granted, both in household and outside.

Devindra Kohli observes that "Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity" (Kohli 29). The central burden of her poetry springs from the conflict between a woman's loss of freedom and identity in a patriarchal society and her ruthless fight to attain the same values. She startles the conformist society by her attempts to redefine herself in personal relationships even by breaking the traditional concept of womanhood. Her poems are simply the image cut out of her life. One area of experience that is often common is the widening new awareness and awakening amongst the women; the awareness that was not there say, a century ago or so. Her poems like, "An Introduction", "A Relationship", "Summer in Calcutta", "The Freaks", "The Old Playhouse", "The Dance of Eunuchs" and several other poems have indicated her boldness and freedom in speaking aloud the secret longings and aspirations of womankind.

Ms. Das, in her poems questions the roles of a wife, mother and daughter in a patriarchal society. She expresses: "I want to disturb society out of its complacence. I found the complacence a very ugly state. I wanted to make women of my generation feel that if men could do something wrong, they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realize that they were equal. I wanted to remove the gender difference" (*My Story* 166). Kamala Das desires to keep women's own way beyond the theories, ideologies and social practices based on the ideals of the humanitarian values. She longs for equal respect to every living soul and says that the cultural value cannot be accepted as the ultimate end of human survival and the basis of female suppression. She attempts to highlight the private world of feminine consciousness exhibiting the burden of social convention and the construction of the sexual binary that never permit a woman to seek an identity either in personal or professional life. Her feminist consciousness is that of the third stage that is, the female stage in which a woman becomes conscious of her own identity and asserts for it.

Sexual exploitation, betrayal, and the lack of love in man-woman relationship are the major themes in her poetry. She portrays a loveless relationship as unbearable and as a means of oppression. Kamala Das conceives the male as a beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the woman loses her

identity. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry.

In Kamala Das's poetry we locate the best articulation of feminine sensibility, its concealment in a male dominated society. She renounced the age-old and to some degree sterile aestheticism for freedom of brain and body. Woman's rights, as a type of rebel against male centric preferences and predisposition, can be found in most of her poems. "The Old Playhouse" expresses the vehemence and fierceness of those women whose individuality and identity are crushed after marriage in the name of her being the provider of domestic bliss to the family. In this poem, Kamala Das not just delineates the predicament and sufferings of a wedded woman bound to her better half's home, but her rebellion against the male domination. A playhouse is a miniature rendition of a house for little girls to play as homemakers. Thus, the title imagery questions the socio-cultural attempt to reinforce and perpetuate the traditional gender roles. The poem strikes a sharp note at the very outset:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky. (1-5)

The man wants to tame the woman who is metaphorically presented as a swallow. In the long process of domestication, she is deprived of her urge to fly. Kamala Das is also conscious of the bane of the creatively inclined woman whose search for equality always ends in frustration.

The hopeless state of a woman in a patriarchal society has richly been depicted in the accompanying lines of the poem:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled in coherent replies. (12-17)

The narrator protests the aberrations of married life as well as the casual display of male ego with all its horrid manifestations. Man's indifference reduces woman to dwarf and the family to a little room. The male ego and his sexual exploitation transform the woman into a grotesque creature with diminished personality:

When asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten
the weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank pitifully." (Introduction 27-32)

Though Kamala Das has been often labeled as "a feminist" for her candour in dealing with women's needs and desires, she "has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism" (Raveendran 52). She raises her voice against humiliation and neglect of woman and revolts against the conventional definition of Indian womanhood. She expects the society to understand the emotional cravings of women and in the process initiates the task of dismantling the image of the ideal womanhood imposed on them by men. "Her poetry is in final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a Woman" (Kohli 89). The image of the woman that emerges in the whole corpus of Das's poetry powerfully expresses the problem and pathos of the Indian woman emerging from an imposed passive role in the patriarchal setup to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity in the changing socio-cultural scenario.

"An Introduction", much anthologized poem, can be studied from the feminist concerns based on women's culture including biology, linguistics and psychoanalysis in relation to social context. Included first in *Summer in Calcutta* and then in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, the poem voices the concerns of a woman rebelling against the norms and dictates of a patriarchal society that asks her to fit in and belong against her own wishes. Her rebellion against patriarchy is to secure an identity for herself in a male dominated world. The poem begins with the assertion, "I don't know politics but I know the names / Of those in power" (An Introduction 1-2), showing lack of concern for politics in a country where politics is generally considered a domain for men; and where a woman is just a victim of it.

The poem articulates the anguish of the victims of gender bias who are denied their need for emotional and intellectual fulfillment. A woman too has an equal right to see, learn and enjoy what the world offers to 'human beings': "I have no joys that are not yours, no / Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I." ("An Introduction" 60-61)

In poem after poem Das ridicules the male ego which enslaves woman and keeps her in nets of domesticity. The poem "The Stone Age," for example, presents the indifference of man to woman's miseries:

You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby room,
And stroke my pitted face absentmindedly while
you read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. (3-7)

The speaker addresses her man who builds around her a stony wall of comfort and turns her into an inanimate object. The man creates a domestic stone age and the mystique of femininity that goes with it.

In "The Sunshine Cat", Kamala Das describes a specific case of the abuse of a woman. She portrays her callous husband as "selfish" and "coward". She calls him a 'ruthless watcher' who keeps watch on her and thus curtails her freedom of movement. The title suggests a yellow cat. It is not really a cat that has given her company when she was imprisoned but a mere streak of sunshine which spilled into the room when her husband kept her confined in a room. He could confine only her physical body:

Her husband shut her
in, every morning; locked her in a room of books
with a streak of sunshine lying near the door, like
a yellow cat. (14-17)

The woman in the poem seeks a fulfilling experience in the company of her man who has constantly disappointed her by his insincerity, infidelity, and inconstancy. To her he is an oppressor and opportunist. The poem is a silent registration of the helpless indignation at the humiliation of woman in a male-dominated world where no one cares for her individuality, aspiration and the need for emotional fulfillment. To the world outside, she is a sunshine cat appearing always happy with all physical comforts. In reality, she is a yellow cat, a deceased cat. The denial of freedom and fulfillment has taken away all her charm, youth and beauty.

"The Looking Glass" is another poem in which Kamala Das underlines patriarchal prejudices. The poem exposes the hypocrisy, and the hollowness of the male dominated society which associates inferiority, submissiveness with the feminine and in contrast strength, power and assertiveness with the masculine:

Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier... Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. (3-11)

No doubt, the victimization of woman is evident, but woman doesn't even realize that she is a victim. It appears that she blames the need of male to humiliate woman and wonders why women show a submissive reconciliation with the female servitude. She feels that the feminine mystique has always been exploited by man who treats her as a slave.

Kamala Das was unconventional in life, and she is equally unconventional in poetry. She refuses to conform to the traditional roles which a woman and a wife is expected to play. As a social rebel, her poems portray a desire to break away from the dull routine of domesticity. She, as a feminist, revolts against the patriarchal society, where male ego takes the decision, and women have to keep silence ignoring their own power and capacity. She dares to challenge the tradition that silences the feminine in women, for which women regard themselves as inferior, passive and the 'Other'. She violates the systematic, traditional norms and values in order to secure an unconventional position of women in society, where she will be given significance and respect. She exposes the sterility of patriarchal society where woman is denied genuine love and spiritual gratification. As a feminist, she challenges the absurd gender distinctions prevalent in the society.

As a revolutionary writer Kamala Das always stands apart and has carved a niche of herself. In her writings the readers first viewed the desire, the sexuality she feels as a woman and how audaciously she proclaims it. Her poetry is the genuine outburst of her spasmodic force. It is altogether a novel arena of literature where being a woman she freely writes about her body, her instinct, her possessions, her lust which she feels for men. It is a new kind of woman born in Indian context.

Conventional studies have relegated women to body and mind to men. However, Kamala Das critiqued, mocked and subverted these representations by writing through her body and about her bodily needs. In fact, her writing becomes a celebration of the woman's body through a typical writing of her own. Das has

turned towards the self and given voice to the otherwise suppressed women's voice. The primary witticism of a woman activist is to challenge the traditional structure that exhibits a woman as powerless, agreeable, aloof, passive, bashful and enthusiastic. E. V. Ramakrishnan rightly stresses that in her poetry Kamala Das "has always dealt with private humiliations and sufferings... Indian critics have found in her poems the voice of the new liberated Indian woman"(112).

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