



Facets of Feminism in Kamala Das's Poetry

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Abstract

Kamala Das is a feminist of Indian pattern. She comes from a Nair family. She belongs to the tradition of matriarchal society and rituals of folk belief. The traditional beliefs of this society are “carrying milk to the snake shrine. Indian feminism is to assert the shared identity of both the genders. That is, both men and women belong to the human race. For Indian Women it is part of humanism. It is understood that woman does not break the human bondage – the relationship between husband and wife even though they turn out to be a square peg in the round hole. Their feminism consists of live and let live. Indian feminism calls for the creation of an environment where men and women can express themselves freely and move fearlessly. Apart, they are given full opportunity to attain the pinnacle of their potential. Womenhood is a celebration of life. Women gives an opportunity to man to attain his aims and ambitions while the woman herself does not remain backward, ignorant and miserable. Women perform difficult and multiple roles. In house-hold task they sustain their families on their shoulders. From scrubbing to cooking, from washing to mending, the women perform multiple tasks. A maid employed for swapping, scrubbing, washing and cleaning is recognised but the woman of the house if she does these tasks, she is not recognised to be so. Angel of the house is denied even the status of a servant. The work of managing a household, rearing up children, entertaining the guests and the relatives and looking after the needs of members of the family is no work at all. Thus, house-wives are not given the status of earning members of either by the family or the society. Hence, feminism is “an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at the place of work and within the family and conscious action to change this situation”.

Key Words: Perspective Thematic Exploitation Pinnacle Celebration Commodity, Indelible, Quest, Frustration, Ego Privatization Authority. Crucial, Oppression, Patriarchy, Excitement, Subjugation Assessment.

Introduction:

Kamala Das was born on March 31, 1934 in Malabar in Kerala. Her love for poetry began at an early age. The poetry of her mother also left an indelible impression on her young mind. She was educated at home and married at fifteen to K.Madhava Das, who was many years older. She bore her first child at Sixteen, but her husband was often in a fatherly role to the children and to her. She says that she “was mature enough to be a mother only when my third child was born” (Warrior – Interview). Das had to do writing along with her household duties, after her family went to bed, she started writing poems till morning.

She is known to her Malyalam readers as Madhavikutty, to her English audience as Kamala Das, and to her Muslim brethren as Kamala Suraiyya – she is known internationally for profound feminine, lyrical English poetry and at home for her short stories in Malayalam. She and her family later moved to Mumbai and from there to Calcutta before returning to Kerala.

Kamal Das was a bilingual writer. In 1965 her *Summer in Calcutta* (Kent’s award Winner) was published. The other collection of English poems are *The Descendants* (1967) *The Old Play House and Other Poems 1 (73) Mana* (1975) and *Only The Soul Knows How To Sing*. Her controversial memoir, *My Story* was published in English in 1975.

Kamala Das has received awards such as Asian poetry prize for her work, Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries Academy Award and Kerala Sahitya Academy Award. Her Works are translated into French, Spanish, Russian, German and Japanese.

This article tries to explore Das as a poet from feminine perspective. Das poetry springs from her personal experience, even though it is watered and enriched by her study of the Western Writers. Therefore, she says “Had we not grown up listening to the firm voices of Chekov, Flaubert, Materlink, Mainsfield and Virginia Woolf”? Her poetry reflects her recollection of childhood, her parents and their attitude to her, marital life, extra-marital affairs, craze for security and performance, quest for ideal love which leads her to accept Radhakrishna myth. She goes beyond this in reverting to Islam with a new name Suriaya. For her poetry is “... like music in the Kael’s egg” (“Nani”, *The Old Playhouse and Other poems* p-40).

Kamala Das's feminine perspective in her poetry has not been fully explored. Though there are attempts by some of the critics to see various facets of the problem, yet one has to discover the virgin aspects of this study.

Indian poetry in English began before Indian Independence. The poets can be divided into three divisions (I) Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Toru Dutt (1856-1874) Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) (II) Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dilip Chitre, Darauwalla and Kamala Das, (III) (Post Modernism) 1980-Agha Shahid Ali, Saleem Peeradina, Virakm Seth and Imtiaz Dharker: The New Poetry begins from Nission Ezekiel and the poets of the writers workshop group led by P.Lal.

The poets of post-modern era promise a variety of new devices including parody, pastiche, collage, inter-textuality and literary cannibalism of various degrees. One of the main thematic concern of these poets is the nature of poetry itself. They are involved in the Indian context celebration of difference and the exploitation of ethnicity. Femininity, she realised was associated with inferiority, passivity and total submission to authority. This sexual politics the relationship of dominance and subordination between husband and wife nauseated that 'the most mediocre of males feeling himself a demigod as compared with women; she is uneasy with the male tyranny but she is also uneasy with the fact that woman remain totally reconciled to their inferior position vis-à-vis men. She is against the fact that gender stereotypes is what the society expects and that most of the women try to conform to the image which Betty Friedman refers to as the 'Feminine Mystique' she can see no reason why a woman must annihilate herself in order to conform to the image of an ideal woman; passive, docile, selfless, an 'Angel in the House'. But much to her uneasiness she finds that each and every woman in her family is reconciled to the myths of male sovereignty, to the dogma of woman's inherent inferiority to the image of woman as a sexual object.

On the other hand the western mode of feminism began in the nineteenth century. Mary Wollstonecraft advises women to become masculine. In the second sex, Simon-de-beavoir says that women have never shared the world equally with men for they are dependent on men. And Germaine Greer says, "The most valuable commodity in the family is a loving heart where happiness consists in seeing others happy".

For Kamala Das feminism means search for ideal love and security, identity, quest for the extramarital love affairs to decide on her own whether one can get ideal love else-where, or only in the company of her husband. In her poems, she explores sympathetically the plight of women from the moment of deflowering to her husband's indifferent and callous attitude

towards her. She experiences throughout her life male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and physical exploitation, the utter disregard for her wishes and her spiritual guests in celebrating the beauty and courage of being a woman.

Kamala Das has been held in high esteem by critics of her poetry. Sunanda P.Chavan in *The Four Voice: A study of Indian Women Poets in English* says that the poetry of Kamala Das Symbolises... the elemental quest of a woman, a deeply sexual being for a man... with man-woman relationship in its full complexity. She has modernised the Indian poetic psyche. Devendra Kohli comments on her poetry: “But within her limitations, she writes poetry which (is) brilliantly, ruthlessly and lovingly honest and spontaneous”.

For Anisur Rahman, Kamala Das’s greatness of poetry lies in her imagery. Her says “Admittedly it is a poet’s range and choice of imagery that constitute the elements of greatness in his art” Bijay Kumar Das has this to say on Kamala Das. The variety of moods, the change of tone, the emphatic employment of new diction, and the subtle poetic touch make her poetry moving and loveable”.

Feroza Jussawalla makes the following perspective remark: “The subject of Kamala Das’s poetry is solely that of the struggle to find the self beyond the physical and thus find the freedom to create”. Bruce Kings Pin points by saying that Kamala Das’s poems are neither situated in the act of sex nor in feeling of love; they are instead involved with the self and its varied, often conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of the ego, self, dramatization and feeling of shame and depression”.

Keki N.Daruwalla, an intelligent fellow-poet, is of the view that Das has “In a manner shown the way to the [other] women poets in India”. He particularly takes note of the inner world of failings, frustrations and relationship” and the “intensity of feeling” and “the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex” and maintains that love, the “lazy animal hungers of the flesh” and the hurt and humiliations faced by women are “the warp and woof of her poetic fabric. She fought with herself to become a unique person and articulated it through poetry. She is unique both as a person and a poet Scores of women poets of India are trying to emulate her. It was the tone of her poems which brought them out from the inhibition.

Kamala Das’s attempt is to move from margin to centre, from a position to little or no consequence to one which is crucial to her world. Hence through her poems she shifts her focus from woman as the representative of patriarchal power to her woman as a separate self. In a bid to tell the male world that she cares little for them or their authority, she narcissistically turns to herself. Infact it is the story of every women caught in a hostile

socio-cultural environment and in dissatisfying relationships. Das shows a single mindedness in the pursuit of her themes which remain unchanged despite minor variation.

Kamala Das relies on her life and experiences for the themes of her poems. Anisur Rahman observes that her personae or her own “mutilated, self tormented by temporal consciousness (20). There is an abiding sense of crisis which pervades her poetry as she relentlessly tries to built an identity in a patriarchal society. The existential framework of her prose and poetry underlies the dynamic of self evolution. Her poetry is marked by a feminist consciousness as well as feminist sense of resistance to male oppression. She evolves a female identity as a person in her writings.

Kamala Das’s search for Ghanashyam in the poem of that title symbolises her eagerness to discover the self (CPO 93-95) the ‘I’ here refers not only to the individual experience of the speaker but to the general lack of courage to plumb beneath the surface level of reality. Das’s experiences only reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness.

The following four of her poems, *Summer in Calcutta*, *An Introduction*, *The Looking Glass* and *Jaisurya* highlight the positive traits, both thematic and stylistic in order to find out the eternal and universal themes in Das’s poetry and project the new idiomatic devices that she develops to communicate the themes in the linguistic discourse of the woman to liberate herself from the bondage of flimsy romance, slavery to man and the destiny of manipulation by man for being the mother of his children.

In *Summer in Calcutta* the poet focuses on the sensuous absorption of sunlight which may be considered a metaphor for the poet’s attraction and fascination with life itself. The collocation of the images called from the world of nature and the images visualising the poet’s participation in the heady ecstasy and excitement of life underlines. Her poet’s sensuous emotional and aesthetic responses to the irresistible appeal of the vibrant spectrum of life at large. The masculine domination on the feminine psyche can be mitigated and nullified by the women when she lets herself participate in the world of nature and in the excitement of life independently. At the end of the poem, the poet develops a syndrome of metaphors that imaginately projects her inebriated infatuation with the spectacle of life proscribing the phobia of male domination from the inner core of her consciousness. On the surface, *Summer in Calcutta* celebrates the poet’s joyful participation in life; but when read between the lines, the poem records the poet’s deflation of the masculine hegemony over woman.

Thus the poem demonstrates Das’s quest for and discovery of truth which was hidden behind the screen by the phenomenon of man’s subjugation of woman.

In the context of Feminist movement, Das has lent Indian English poetry a new discourse, the discourse of woman's body language from the point of view of woman. Hence Das's search for truth lead to her search for an appropriate medium that would be both novel and vital.

The poet search for the truth continues. She searches it through life, nature and herself. Before she can reach the truth, she goes through pain, as nature goes through rain and darkness before reaching the stasis of light. And the poet is one with Nature in the process, as portrayed in the poem "Jaisurya".

It rained on the day my son
was born, a slanting rain
that began with The First Labour pain and kept me
company, sighing, wailing and roaring
when I groaned so that I smiled and stopped my complaints to hear its grief.

Hence the poet's search for truth ends happily and brightly in the metaphor of the birth of her son. The discovery of joy, happiness, hope and light it communicated through physical, tangible and sensuous images. The assessment of Das's contribution to Indian English poetry should be based on an analysis of the theme and style of her poetry rather than a vicarious enjoyment of the sexual images. No doubt Das has given a berth to sex imagery in Indian English poetry, but that was necessitated by her feminist Quest as truth. Das's search for truth compels her to throw away the trappings that the society laid on the woman.

In the poem "An Introduction" Das minces no words while laying bare the reality. To communicate her quest and vision of truth, she uses words boldly, speaking in a manner in which people have not spoken before. Her resultant mode of speech becomes dramatic, powerful and iconoclastic. The high pitch of her tone may appear hysterical but rather it is revelatory, which reminds us of what Juliet Mitchell says about the discourse of hysteria.

*Hysteria is the Woman's simultaneous acceptance
and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under
patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine
and to
refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse.*

Conclusion:

Das's quest for truth is not partial, it is all embracing and does not exclude man from the perspective. As a woman she allows man the proper place in her life. Her poem *'The Looking Glass'* embodies her perception of truth regarding man-woman relational matrix. The looking glass provides the objectivity for projecting the woman vis-à-vis the man. Here also Das does not mirror matters. Her representation of the perspective on man-woman juxtaposition betrays no partiality, no prejudice. The poem depicts Kamala Das's nocturnal encounters with men in her hectic quest for emotional satisfaction.

In Das's work, the English language for poetry acquires a new dimension, a new vitality, a fresh look and strength as he uses body imagery to lay bare the stark reality of life.

"The old playhouse" depicts how irremediably her cherished dreams and desires have been pulverised in the company of her spider-like husband. "He no longer calls for me, he no longer comes to me or stands at the open window to smile at me". This crystallisation of married love in the wake of the wife declining in the rule of years is profoundly agonising. No wonder Kamala grows vindictive in the assertion of her own individuality, no matter sex-oriented. This theme finds repeated expression in her poems. In *"The Conflagration"* she asks herself piteously and sarcastically: "Women, is this happiness, this lying buried beneath a man"? Here Kamala Das has become the mouthpiece of all women, suffering silent agonies in a male-dominated set up.

The frustration in married life and the breaking of the emotional ties between husband and wife are symbolically presented in *"The Bangles"*. Kamala Das seems to present the discontentment and disharmony in married relationship. The woman sufferer in this way realises the fallacy in married relations. In such poems Kamala Das portrays the tribulations of the woman who has lost anchorage in the turbular sea of human life. The person is denied of love and comfort. The husband all the times remains complacent, making her act according to his whims.

The portrayal of marriage and the husband in her poems in relation to the self and the yearning for fulfillment projected in the dream of union with an elusive lover are based on sex. The antithetical attitudes of men and woman play an important role in the construction of Kamala Das's imagery. That her poetic imagination to a considerable extent is based on sexuality, is implicitly marked in her poem". An introduction

-I met a man, loved him Call
Him not by any name, he is everyman
who wants a woman, just as I am ever
Woman who seeks love.

Mrs. Das's marital life is based on incongruity. She was married at the early age of fifteen to a bank official and was bound to do the domestic duties in the family against her tender feelings and yearnings for emotional involvement. This sort of existence in her husband's home presents the miserably predicament image. The male domination on feminine psyche can be diminished and dilapidated by a woman who she lets herself participate in the world of nature and in the amelioration of her status independently. In a crowded world of men and women she finds-herself utterly alone. In poem like *The Freaks*, *My Grandmother House*, *A Hot Noon in Malabar*, *The Sunday Cat*, *The Invitation* and *The Looking Glass*, she describes an ache growing inside her and disturbing her.

The particular and the general, the local and the universal merge together in her poem as she finds in herself the character of the whole humanity, and her humanity is replicated in other women.

The poetry of Kamala Das must be viewed in the light of her feminine consciousness. She acquired this consciousness under hostile circumstances dependent upon the society of her childhood days. Repressive attributes caused fragmentation to herself. As a poet, she is conscious of her creative faculties and tries to break chains and restraints. She indulges in self-awareness self exposure and self introspection in order to define herself poetically. The aim of the poet is not self-exposure but self-discovery and self-examination. She structures self-exploration in order to search her lost identity of a woman and as a poet.

Kamala Das has been unique literary phenomenon in India. Frank, bold and controversial in life and literature, Kamala Das made enormous contribution to the growth of Indian poetry in English. Although she sporadically ventured into the realms of fiction, she will be remembered primarily for her poetry because it is an poet that she excels herself.

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