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**NEGOTIATING DUTY AND DEVOTION THROUGH POETRY: SELF, DESIRE AND PROTEST IN THE VERSES OF BAHINABAI AND KAMALA DAS**

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**Abstract-**

*This paper explores the lives and writings of two Indian women poets, Bahinabai and Kamala Das, who, despite living centuries apart, reflect shared struggles and spiritual journeys in their poetry. Bahinabai, a 17th-century saint from Maharashtra, and Kamala Das, a 20th-century modern poet, each sought ways to balance their inner devotion with societal expectations that confined women to traditional roles. Bahinabai's poems reveal her struggles within an abusive marriage and her spiritual devotion to Vithoba, a Hindu deity, while also showing her reverence for Tukaram, a lower-caste saint. Her poetry studies the emotional complexities of a woman torn between her responsibilities as a wife and her spirituality. Similarly, Kamala Das's poetry describes her search for ideal love, often portrayed through the myth of Radha and Krishna. Deeply dissatisfied with her marriage, Kamala Das sought fulfilment through the divine figure of Krishna, who represented perfect love, which she believed could free her from societal constraints.*

*This analysis highlights how both women used poetry to challenge cultural expectations quietly. Through their distinct voices, both question why women are often expected to choose between personal spiritual freedom and fulfilling traditional roles. By reclaiming their right to worship and express love as they saw fit, Bahinabai and Das subtly resisted the limitations imposed on women's spiritual and emotional lives. Their verses show the deep resilience and autonomy of female voices in Indian literature. Women's spirituality and emotional freedom are enduring themes that remain reflected despite the changing times. Both poets express the conflict between their earthly familial love for their husbands and their transcendental love for the divine, thus raising questions about spiritual freedom. By examining the articulations of these female*

*poets from different centuries, this paper examines how, despite the intervening years, many female poets have not changed much.*

**Key words:** Bahinabai, Kamala Das, Spiritual Devotion, Resilience

Bhakti Movement in India, roughly spread over a decade, is considered having a significant role in transforming the socio-religious strata through its emphasis on Bhakti or devotion which often blurred the caste and even the gender hierarchy. For women, the marginalised group that has always been kept on the periphery, the path of Bhakti and spirituality was full of struggle and resistance. While female saint like Akka Mahadevi who lived during the 1100s in Karnataka challenged society's dictation of modesty and spirituality by renouncing all worldly possessions, including her domestic life and even her clothes, Bahinabai remains synonymous with the kind of resistance that stands for balancing between Bhakti and duty. Kamala Das also known as Kamala Surayya after her conversion into Islam, born almost three centuries after Bahinabai, also encounters a struggle similar to that of Bahinabai, while following her spiritual path. Both Bahinabai and Kamala Das express their struggle and resistance through their poems. The poems written by Bahinabai are called Abhang or Abhanga, a specific Marathi poetic meter, used for devotional poetry and songs. This paper aims to present a unique comparative Indian female through the poetry of two women poets, Bahinabai and Kamala Das. Both poets express the conflict between their earthly familial love for their husbands and their transcendental love for the divine, thus raising questions about spiritual freedom. By examining the concerned female poets from different centuries, this paper moves beyond viewing the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the modern times as isolated and closed, connecting key tropes that continue into modernity.

Bahinabai, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Barkari female saint from Maharashtra, remains an important figure of Bhakti Movement for perfectly balancing the tension between her Bhakti (devotion to Vithoba, also known as Vithal), and her duty towards her husband (domesticity). Born in a Brahmin family, Bahinabai was married at three. At the age of eleven, she starts living with her husband. After some years, Bahinabai began experiencing visions of Vithoba and it was the Sudra saint Tukaram, a poet who made Vithoba popular through his devotional poems, who guided her through the path of spiritual awakening. Being a Brahmin and an ardent follower of Vedantic rituals, her husband, often found it challenging to understand his young wife's devotion to a lower-caste man. He took all possible measures to dissuade her from following Sant Tukaram.

This became the reason for conflict between Bahinabai and her husband, which often resulted in her being beaten up severely by her husband.

Similarly, when asked by an interviewer why she hadn't considered converting to Islam before, Kamala Das replied in one of her interviews, "I did. But my husband put it off. He said I wasn't mature enough yet to seek another religion. Play with Krishna a while longer, he told me." Even after several hundred years, men's patronising attitude when it comes to women's spirituality does not change. Despite having apparent conflicts with her husband due to her overarching and ecstatic love for her Divine Lover in the form of Lord Vithoba, another name for Krishna, she took her role as a wife and responsibilities to her earthly husband seriously. Kamala Das is a 20th-century poet, well known for her open and frank description of female desire and the experience of being a woman in India. Although there is almost a 300-year gap between the two poets, surprisingly, Kamala Das's poems, based on the motifs of Radha-Krishna, echo some of the tropes used by Bahinabai in her *abhangas*. While studying Indian women's literary genre, Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold have rejected the discourse of Indian women as subjugated and voiceless. James C. Scott, in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, has said that marginalised groups cannot be treated as entirely silenced without considering their lack of means to disseminate their views publically. Often, Bahinabai is criticised for trying to balance between an abusive husband and her spiritual quest instead of outrightly leaving him like a rebel. But Bahinabai, through glorifying devotion towards Vithoba, reclaims women's right to spiritual freedom and redefines the criteria for Brahmanhood.

By challenging the tradition of robbing women of their right to control their spiritual practices, Bahinabai uses her autobiography "Atmacharita" to assert that husbands cannot replace God. Unlike Kamala Das, Bahinabai does not discuss physical love in her poems. Kamala Das' love poems can be categorised into two groups. One group focuses on fulfilling physical love, while the other group explores the search for ideal love that brings serenity and tranquillity to the soul. This perfect love can free her from all the chains of society. It is this freedom that drives her towards spiritual love. Commenting on Kamala Das's use of Radha-Krishna in her writings, Kurup says,

"By seeking solace in the Radha-Krishna myth, Kamala Das builds up a mythic pattern within her own predicament and achieves a double-purpose: one, she associates the myth with experiences of loss and longing to represent her own quest for ideal love and its failure and two, she uses it as a symbol for the soul's desire to

merge with the Godhead. On another level, the soul's readiness to abandon all social consideration for the sake of God justifies her breaking of social ties through adultery. (111)"

Kamala Das's quest for a perfect partner in Krishna prevails as a motif in many of her poems. She imagines her partner as a source of wisdom that can bestow peace and tranquillity to her agitated mind. The knowledge that can bring an end to her ego and give her complete liberty from the rigid social code that chains her. As she writes in her autobiography *My Story* (1973),

"I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Subconsciously, I hoped for the death of my ego. I was looking for the executioner whose axe would leave my head in two." (180).

*My Story* was groundbreaking in challenging conventional perceptions of Indian womanhood in a bold manner, exploring intimate themes that remain relevant for many even today,

In search of that source of wisdom, she moves vainly among many men to look for the desirable one and returns with this realisation that Krishna is the only source of that wisdom she is looking for. In her poem *A Man is a Season*, the poet expresses her deeply personal and emotional experiences. Being entrenched in a deeply patriarchal society, Kamala Das nonetheless manages to candidly convey her melancholy and frustration against the institution of marriage in her writings. While understanding that marriage is a significant emotional and spiritual bond, she seeks extramarital relationships for love and intimacy, which she finds lacking in her disappointing marital life. In *A Man is a Season*, Das asks Krishna why he allows her to be with other men when those men are merely His 'shadows'.

A man is a season.  
You are eternity.  
To teach me this, you let me toss my youth like coins  
Into various hands; you let me mate with shadows,  
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife  
Seek ecstasy in others' arms (Tonight, This Savage Rite 21).

In the poem above, Kamala Das complains to Lord Krishna, treating Him as if he were another human being. Bahinabai, in her 'abhangas', writes about her dilemma between following

the instructions of the scripture and her devotion towards God. As a wife, she is expected to devote her life to serving her husband, but as a woman, serving her husband is not the only thing she desires to do. Her abhangas showcase her decision-making process, which turns complex due to the intervention of society and religious scriptures.

To leave a husband is against the teachings of the Vedas, and thereby one can never acquire the supreme spiritual riches.

At my door there seemed a great serpent hissing at me. How could I live under such conditions?

It is the teaching of the Vedas, that one should not neglect one's duty, but my love was for the worship of God (Hari).

Says Bahini, 'I was in a sea of troubles. How can I describe the increasing anguish of my heart!

(Abhanga 62)

Poetry becomes the mechanism through which she navigates the tension between devotion and domesticity. The Vedas clearly instruct a wife on her duty towards her husband, but Bahinabai is drawn to a different life. Her reverence and affection towards her teacher, the lower-caste poet Saint Tukaram, becomes the reason for her husband's jealousy, which often results in physical abuse. Bahinabai cannot comprehend her husband's emphasis on the invincibility of the Vedas and Vedic rituals when she believes in Tukaram's message of placing devotion over rituals. Bahinabai's poems represent how women were perceived in the 17th century: oppressed by society and religion. As Bahinabai says,

The Vedas cry aloud, the Puranas shout

"No good may come to woman."

I was born with a woman's body

How am I to attain Truth?

"They are foolish, seductive and deceptive –

Any connection with a woman is disastrous."

Bahina says, "If a woman's body is so harmful,

How in this world will I reach Truth?" (Abhanga 63)

Through her experiences as a woman in India, Das has become a powerful advocate for gender equality and social change. She resists the deep-rooted systems of gender oppression and

inequity and profoundly examines social conventions and religious beliefs that often fail to protect women from oppressive forces. Here, Das symbolises hope for those who dare to challenge social, political and economic injustices. She identifies herself as a Devdasi in her Lines Addressed to Devdasi, exemplifying her bravery and representing her rebellion against the oppressive mechanisms that restrict and silence women.

Ultimately there comes a time  
When all faces look alike  
All voices sound similar  
All trees and lakes and mountains  
Appear to bear common signature.  
It is then that you walk past your friends  
And not recognize  
And hear their questions but pick  
No meaning out of words  
It is then that your desires cease  
And homesickness begins  
And you sit on the temples steps  
A silent Devadasi, lovelorn  
And aware of her destiny ... (CP, 101)

In this poem, Kamala Das talks about the oppression that women face. She continues the discussion about oppression that Bahinabai started long ago in her writings. Both women struggle with the conflicting roles of being a dutiful wife and a devoted follower of God, seeking to find a balance between the two or striving for complete freedom.

In worshipping Thee I can still be true to my duty of devotion to my husband. Thou, O God (Meghashyama) must thus think also.  
The Supreme spiritual riches are surely not contrary to the Vedas.  
Therefore, think of this purpose of mine.  
Says Bahini: 'Oh God (Hari), think at once of my longing, by which I can (Abhanga 68)

While Kamala Das writes in her poem, *Krishna*

Your body is my prison, Krishna,  
I cannot see beyond it.  
Your darkness blinds me,  
Your love words shut out the wise world's din. (From *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. (Collected Poems 75)

Again, she writes,

Loving this one,  
I seek but another way to know Him who has no more a body  
To offer, and whose blue face is  
A phantom lotus on the waters of my dreams. (*A Phantom Lous, Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*)

Bahinabai talks about serving her husband like a devoted wife. In one of her abhangas, she calls her husband the water, and she is a mere fish. Her existence is only through her husband.

I'll serve my husband – he's my god ...  
My husband's my guru; my husband's my way this  
is my heart's true resolve.  
If my husband goes off, renouncing the world,  
Pandurang (Vithoba), what good will it do me to live among men? ...  
My husband's the soul; I'm the body ...  
My husband's the water; I'm a fish in it.  
How can I survive? ...  
Why should the stone god Vitthal (Vithoba)  
and the dream saint Tuka (Tukaram)  
Deprive me of the happiness I know? (Abhanga, 36)

On the other hand, Kamala Das humanises the image of Krishna, as in the poem Ghanshyam, where she calls Krishna the 'fisherman' towards whom she moves forward like an enchanted fish.

Both Bahinabai and Kamala, Das's poetry, show how society trains women to become ideal wives and echo what Simon De Beauvoir says in her book *The Second Sex* (1949): "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman". This imagination of having Krishna with her always helps Bahinabai navigate the troubles, pain and sorrow caused by other men in her life. Thus, through the poems of these two poetesses, the continuities of this long, porous 18<sup>th</sup>-century tradition can be seen even in the 20th century.

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