



Feminist Assertions in Kamala Das : A Study of an Introduction & the Sunshine Cat

KEYWORDS

feminine, emancipation, sensibility, discrimination

Hemanta Sarma

Asstt. Prof., Deptt.of .English, MurkongSelek College, Jonai, P.O. Jonai Dist. Dhemaji 787060, Assam

ABSTRACT *Feminism basically concerns with women's marginalised position in society, discrimination faced by them because of the patriarchal culture and way of their emancipation. It involves political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. The literary feminism too deals with cultural, economic, educational and social inequalities of women in the male dominated society and the writers of feminism deal with the problems of women from female point of view. Many modern Indian English women poets raise their voices against the persecution of women in a male dominated society. They are feminists ready to assert their lives in a new and different way. They are worth reading for its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality and intensely personal voice. Kamala Das is the pioneer who gave clear, frank and straightforward expression to feminine sensibility and rebels against the conventions and restraints of society. In her poetry she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman. This article focuses on the two of her well-known poems: An Introduction and The Sunshine Cat where we find the best expression of feminine sensibility.*

Feminism is a recent literary phenomenon and generally centring on a women's struggle for equality and to be accepted as a human being. It is basically concerned with women's marginalised position in society, discrimination faced by them because of the patriarchal culture and way of their emancipation. It involves political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. The literary feminism too deals with cultural, economic, educational and social inequalities of women in the male dominated society and the writers of feminism deal with the problems of women from female point of view. According to Linda Gordon, "*Feminism is an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it.*"

A number of earliest practitioners of feminism like Mary Wollstonecraft (*The Vindication of the Rights of Women*), Margaret Fuller (*Women in the Seventeenth Century*), JS Mill (*The Subjection of Will*), Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*), Simon de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), Mary Ellmann (*Thinking about Women*), Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics*) questioned long standing, dominant, male phalocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretation in literature and also sought more equality and freedom for women.

There are some common assumption and concepts behind the writings of feminist writers. According to them, institutions of literature and critical practice have been vitiated from the two concepts, i.e the patriarchal ideology and the concept of gender. In the entire realm of literature it is the male who dominates and whenever the women appear in any role she is given subservient, marginal and ordinary role. This is designed by the literary artist. So, the feminists challenged these things – patriarchal concept of gender and one sided evaluation of literary output – which constitute their common ideology. They assert the writing from female point of view and for the female centred approach to life

Many modern Indian English women poets raise their voices against the persecution of women in a male dominated society. They are feminists ready to assert their lives in a

new and different way. Those women poets in contemporary Indo-Englian literature display feminist ethos in their poems. They are worth reading for its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality and intensely personal voice.

.Kamala Das is the pioneer of feminism sensibility in Indian English poetry. With the advent of Kamala Das women poetry takes a sudden turn who frankly expresses the feminine sensibility, its exploitation, its hurts, anguishes and suppression in a male dominated society. In her poetry she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman. No doubt, her poetry is confessional and autobiographical but at times it has universal appeal too. In her poetry and her famous autobiography 'My Story', she expresses her own frustration and resentment in a male dominated world and tries to maintain her individuality and feminine identity. According to M K Nayak , "*Das's poetry produces one of a bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within.*" A large part of her poetry represents female voice true to woman's experience. The intensely personal and confessional quality of Das's work recalls in some ways Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Judith Wrights.

This article focuses on the two of her well-known poems: **An Introduction** and **The Sunshine Cat** that brings out all the maladies that paralyses a woman and also her yearning for feminine identity in a male dominated world.

An Introduction is an autobiographical and confessional in tone. Included in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), the poem reveals a gender bias and the poet's assertion in favour of living spontaneously in her own way. It presents the truthful picture of her life, her emotions of love and sex, her revolutionary attitude against the callous and cruel patriarchy and her bold pleading for feminism.

The poem ' An Introduction' opens with the poet's introducing herself as an innocent girl entirely ignorant of the ways of the world. The poem begins with assertion:

I don't know politics, but I know the names

of those in power,

When she grows up further tension begins. First of all, her right to choose any language she likes. She has great fascination for the English language. But her family members ask her not to use it. She is fed up with such types of restriction imposed by the patriarchal domination. She boldly resents and refuses this restriction on her freedom of expression and her identity. This is the earliest reaction of her identity:

*Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins
.....why not let me speak in
Any language I like?*

In the second stage, when she attains puberty and adolescence, the patriarchy of her family gets her married:

*I was child, and later they
Told me I grew for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair when
I 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 fell so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully.*

It implies the poet's piteous plight under the patriarchal domination, her yearning for love and freedom. It shows the miserable condition of an average Indian woman who gets married early. Love is denied, instead of it, they receive sexual exploitation and humiliation.

She has to live in restriction posed by the conservative male dominated society. She is compelled to accept the traditional feminine role as a girl, house-wife, a cook, a quarreller and so on. She rebels against such womanliness:

*Dress in saris, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
Be a quarreller with servants.*

The poet also observes the monopoly of the patriarchal society:

*Be Amy, or be Kamala, or better
Still be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love*

A woman in Indian society is always instructed to observe the well-established norms of the male dominated family. The poet realises that her experiences are the experiences of every woman who are devoid of love and liberty. It makes her rebellious and she boldly and frankly asserts:

*..... I met a man, loved him, call
Him not by any name, he is every man,
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him...the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me.....*

The concluding lines of the poem records the poet's longing for autonomy and a woman identity. She asserts her

determination to live spontaneously a life of passions and emotions and wants to be herself and live her life:

*I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself?*

Thus, the poem An Introduction is a representative confessional and autobiographical poem. She is well aware of her individuality and feminine identity and asserts it in the poem.

Like most of her confessional poems, **The Sunshine Cat** is another striking poem by Das. Included in *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), the poem reveals the emotional intensity of a wife caused by much sexual humiliation and exploitation and her confinement in marital bond. It strongly revolts the male dominated society and presents a bitter reality of life.

The poem is concerned with the plight of a woman who has become the prey of the lust of many men. She has not achieved emotional fulfilment with her husband as well as other men with whom she has been intimate contact. They want her only sexually and don't respond to her love. And it brings identity crisis in her feminine self:

*They did this to her, the man who knows her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor used
her.*

The woman strives to find emotional fulfilment in love but proves to be futile. Her husband is a mean and lustful like others. She calls her husband 'a ruthless watcher'. In the absence of love he is interested in satisfying his lust and physical desire. In such an emotional sterility and loveless atmosphere the woman's heart is:

*A bed made soft with tears, and she lay there weeping
For sleep had lost its use. I shall build walls with tears
She said wall to shut me in.*

She yearns for love but all of them refuse to love her and all are equally proved to be lustful. She is so disgusted that she wants to wipe away their memories – their lust, their smells and their ugly hair on their chests. She says:

*Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget
To forget, oh, to forget, and they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not*

This is her strong voice to forget all humiliation that she has faced.

The miseries of utter loneliness, humiliation and non fulfilment of love cast a melancholy shadow over her and she becomes:

*She was a cold and
Half –dead woman, now of no use at all to man.*

Such is the life of woman in male dominated society where her individuality, identity and freedom are at stake. A woman is always denied love and emotional fulfilment in her married life. It only fills a woman's life with frustrations and humiliations.

To conclude, Kamala Das is the name of feminine sensibility. She is aware of her feminist identity and asserts it in her poems. She rebels against the exploitation of women in a

male made world and opposes all well established conventions and norms of the society, which are meant to exploit womankind. According to KRS Iyenger, "*Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man -made world.*" By identifying herself with other suffering women, Kamala Das transfers her personal anguish into a universal one and her poetry become a bold pleading for feminism.

References:

1. Das Kamala, 'An Introduction' & 'The Sunshine Cat' in the book 'Poems Old and New', edtd. By Forum for English studies, Dibrugarh University, Macmillan India Ltd. 2001
2. Iyenger KR Srinivasa : Indian Writing in English, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1962
3. Nayak MK : A History of Indian English Literature, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1982
4. Pattanayaka B.K. Aspects of Post- structuralism, Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction & Feminist Criticism, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly, 2005
5. Kumar, Dr. Satish, Indo-Anglian Poetry : A Critical Study of the Poets, Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal, Agra