



Traces of Feminist Approaches in the poems of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is the name of such an individual who has registered a unique imprint in the history of Indian writing in English after Independence. Her writings are replete with her agonizing cry of a woman frustrated in love and her uninhibited unlocking of her ironical delineation of the male prejudice. She explored a woman's quest for freedom from sexual and domestic oppression and examined the paradoxes of life and relationship with great emotional depth. The note of a feminist tenor is an unmistakable presence in her works and her conscious attempt to give a jolt to patriarchal complacency makes her much criticized and sensational but authentic voice. My attempt in this paper is to trace how she asserts an emphatic identity of a woman, especially of a wife in her poetry and indulges in unequivocal exposition of her feminist identity.

KEYWORDS

Male Prejudice, Feminist, Marginalized.

Introduction: Kamala Das has neither followed the beaten track blindly nor has she endeavoured to develop and enrich any existing literary tradition in Indian writing in English. In fact, a distinctive literary tradition starts after her, which shakes the corpus of Indian writing in English so integrally that her single-handed contribution endows an unprecedented maturity and magnitude. Undoubtedly, she is credited with the caliber of magnetizing the international attention towards Indian writing in English. Pre-independent Indian writing in English is fundamentally of nationalistic spirit and often philosophic or spiritual. Das, however, finds the agonizing cry of her frustrated self so compelling that she starts writing from the depth of her realization, experience and sensibility. What stupefies the audience of the 60's is the originality and frankness of her expression and that impression of wonder only continues in the upcoming decades.

The poet felt the suffocation of matriarchal bondage, screwed by male chauvinism or the society. In fact, in our society male perspective is equivalent to social perspective and thus a sort of deconstruction of social values a deliberate attempt to narrow down the periphery of social role has been exercised down the ages. So when in **An Introduction** the poet says:

**"Dress in Sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said..."**

the word 'they' refers to this complementary implication/equation and relation between society and men. Conspicuously, men express their views, demands and desires as social views and demands. Somehow the women are elbowed out from the center of the society and forced to live a life of a marginalized class. Indeed, this registers an age-old dichotomy where women are made or rather compelled to live a life of **'the other'**. Although women have as much right to express their dreams, desires, and ideas and assert their demand as men have been exercising since time-immemorial, they are always confined in the four walls with domestic fencing.

The poet in a simple and candid language has depicted this mind-set of the society and at the same time exposed the male domination of the day. It is not only issues of defining their domestic roles men, in the guise of society direct what

women should put on? How should they behave? What kind of profession should they opt for? Not only women are instructed are what should they do but also what they should not do!

"Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia ...
...**Don't** cry embarrassingly loud..."

This repeated use of **'Don't'** is in tune with the social thought process of a patriarchal structure. Thus men assume to play the role of preaching the do's and don'ts for women and the society expects women to abide by them religiously. The moment one tries to question the set-belief or tries to disturb the pattern, she is made to **'Fit in'** in either of the roles she is supposed to play in the society

**"... be girl
Be wife, they said... Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants...
...It is time to
Choose a name, a role"**

Indeed, it has been important to **choose a name, a role** as that would restrict her to a narrow boundary and hence the categorizers get seriously busy in the task. It has to be kept in mind that the practice of assigning roles to women is not in question; but the objective is under scrutiny here. If a role helps an individual to grow with the task, it becomes an enriching process for both the individual and the task. But if the role is made to serve some narrow minded objective and imposed on someone to cripple her growth, it gets prejudiced. So when the poet says: **It is time to / Choose a name, a role** she in fact, ironically exposes the politics of male chauvinism.

Since time immemorial men have always been seeking to enjoy absolute freedom or dominance in society and the basic pre-requisite to fulfill this desire is to have none to share or challenge the their freedom. Hence, it is quite clear that they would not allow women to enjoy the upper hand, as in that case their desire would nip in the bud. The formula, which they exercise, is that there should be a suppressed unit in the

society to be ruled by the dominating unit. Notably, the paradox of the system is that it is the suppressed unit that offers lease to the existence of the dominating unit. So to perpetuate the dominance the dominating unit has to carry on the suppression. Thus, the suppression-domination relationship becomes mutually responsive and suggestive of the idea that suppression of women will continue as long as the urge for dominance of men sustains and unfortunately, kamala Das in her experience does not find the otherwise. In *The Stone Age* when she refers her husband '**ancient settler**', the connotation of the same suppression-domination relationship resonates with an agonizing realization from her.

"Fond husband, **ancient settler** in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving web of bewilderment,.. "
[The Stone Age]

Even as a child her experience was bitter as she fell a victim to patriarchal prejudice. The reference to patriarchal domination is well expressed in her autobiography '**My Story**' when she tells her 'father was an autocrat' and when she refers to the conjugal disharmony of her parents, as expressed in **My Story**: "**My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched**" the same tale of patriarchal prejudice is explicit. Even when she tells her parents considered her "a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to relative when she was only a school girl." She was compelled to become a premature wife and a mother. She unlocks her heart and complains about it in her poem *Of Calcutta*:

"I was sent away, to protect a family's
Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some
Abstraction, sent to another city to be
A relative's wife."

Her critical view of the social (= male) perspective is palpable in her use of the phrase "**to defend some Abstraction**". Indeed, women have always been the wretched prey to social framework- howsoever mono-dimensional and suppressive that may be to the women. Kamala's marriage at her premature age owes to such social '**Abstraction**' and the same is the story of almost all Indian girls of the day. Even before her realization of life's denotation, she is made to step in a greater sphere and at the age of fifteen she is married to a man who was more than double the age of her. She was not at all prepared both mentally and physically to enter matrimonial relationship at that time. But the dictates of patriarchy she could not disobey.

The appraisal of women by men is akin to the image of a 'doll' and this she refers in the same poem:

"Yet another nodding
Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to
Warm his bed at night "

and the 'doll' reference unmistakably reminds of Nora Krogstad in Henrik Ibsen's masterpiece *A Doll's House* where Nora champions an individual's liberation from the shackles and restraints of society. When she walks out of the house, slamming the door behind her Nora actually gives a trumpet-call to women to rise and be vocal for their due right. The indif-

ference of men to women's miseries is repeatedly referred in Das's poems like *The Stone Age*:

"You turn me into a bird of stone,
a granite Dove,
You build round me a shabby drawing room"

The feeling of anxiety, alienation, futility and acute sense of isolation under severe patriarchal domination often cries out desperately when she deplores the contemptible canine status of a housewife in her husband's home. The note of humiliation and oppression in these lines is unmistakably arresting and explicitly corresponds to feminist literary parlance. To quote from the poem "Of Calcutta":

"Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog
Jumping my routine hoops each day."

'Jilted in love' Das, unlike a traditional Indian woman does not admit the lot of mere resignation to fate; rather seeks the realization of true love in other men "**I met a man, I loved him**". Her confession of having relationship with other men is also an attempt on her part to question the practice of polygamy of men and to give a jolt to patriarchal legacy. The injustice and inequality that women have been subjected in this man made world since time-immemorial are questioned and condemned with grudge in her works. Though, the recurring articulation of her psychological hurts and cynicism of expression degenerate into a mannerism, as Srinivasa Iyengar opines, the same point, however, makes it clear that how great and 'lethal' have been the wounds into the depth of her feminine sensibility.

Conclusion: In fine, it can be summed up that Kamala Das through her works champions the cause of women, imparts language to their so far unearthed agonizing cry and turns out to be an iconoclast in shattering the patriarchal fencing of politicized morality. Indeed, she stimulates Indian women to identify the room of their own and realize that they should not suppress their sensation for the sake of patriarchal domination. They should, on the contrary, give voice to their latent emotion and thus establish their own individuality, beyond the shadows of masculine hegemony.

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