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Redefining Womanhood - A Reading of Kamala Das's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the issues of feminism in India and the position of women in the Indian society in the light of Kamala Das's poetry. Post-Independence, Indian women writers have exhibited a strong sense of freedom and self-dependence of thought and action in their works. Kamala Das's poetry is a symbol of reliance, intellectual freedom and empowerment of Indian women. This is an endeavour to analyse how Kamala Das redefines womanhood in her poetry through the use of concrete imagery, symbols and her crisp and novel ideas about women, their position in a male-dominated Indian society and many other issues surrounding her and many other women of the country.

Key-words: Feminism, Womanhood, Kamala Das, Poetry, Indian Writing in English.

Redefining Womanhood: A Reading of Kamala Das's Poetry

“And She had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality, she may very well have invented herself.”

-Toni Morrison

Women have always been a marginalized and ignored group of people, be it in the society or in literature. Both, women and society, started becoming aware about the rights of women only in the 19th century. Since then, women have slowly started becoming more liberal and individualistic. Although being a social issue, this movement of women empowerment has got reflected in literature, time and again. Kamala Das is a name that instantly strikes one's mind when one thinks about poetry on women and womanhood in Indian English Poetry.

Kamala Das (later, Kamala Surayya) (March 31, 1934- May 31, 2009) was a prominent Indian woman poet and litterateur of the twentieth century. She wrote in two languages: English and Malayalam. She wrote by the pen name of Madhavikutty in Malayalam. The major share of Das's popularity in English is largely due to her Autobiography, “My Story” and her confessional poems. Das, who belonged to a conservative Hindu family, converted to Islam at the age of 65 under the influence of her lover, whom she mentions as Sadiq Ali. She passed away at the age of 75 in Pune in 2009.

Her contributions to the English literature include a novel; ‘Alphabet of Lust’ (1977), a collection of short stories; ‘Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories’ (1992), and poetry collections like ‘Summer in Calcutta (1965), ‘The Descendants’ (1967), ‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (1973), ‘Only The Soul Knows How To Sing’ (1996) and ‘Tonight This Savage Rite’ (1979; with Pritish Nandy).

This paper intends to discuss various aspects of womanhood in the Indian context and how Kamala Das redefines it in her own way in her poems. According to Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane,

The issue of empowerment of women, which is a central concern for feminism, is conceptually interconnected with the concepts of identity and freedom. Unless and until the possibility of having a stable identity and freedom is assumed, all deliberations regarding empowerment become redundant. (Kelkar and Gangavane, 2003, Page No.)

Das always seems to be standing for this kind of womanhood which intends to encourage women towards finding and accepting their individual identities. The twentieth-century Indian society, in which Das herself lived, always asked for more sacrifices and adjustments from a woman's side to sustain a relationship or to maintain equilibrium in the family compared to a man. This acceptance of the subjugation of women even by

women themselves disturbed Das. In the modern times, with the rapid spread of education and under the influence of contemporary and modernised western values, an Indian writer like Das feels, 'the uneasy burden of suppression or subjugation'(Mohanty, 1995, Page No.48). According to Niranjan Mohanty,

She becomes vocal in defining her identity. She thinks in terms of her rights and responsibilities. (Mohanty, 1995, Page No.48)

As she writes in her poem, "An Introduction",

"...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."(Das, 2007, Page No.120)

A large part of society still believes that the primordial goal of a woman's life is to get married and produce children and without it, her life is a failure. Das herself came from a family which expected her to fit into the mould of 'a woman' every now and then. Kamala Das completely defies and condemns this situation through her frank and rather harsh words in "An Introduction".

K.V. Surendran observes,

In the society to which Kamala Das belongs it was impossible for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke, against a male's sense of superiority because the male almost occupied the position of a god. (Surendran, 2000, Page No.152)

However, Das had always been a rebel and has always fought to give women the place they deserved in the society. In her poem, 'An Introduction', which is believed to be an autobiographical one, she frankly shows her disregard towards the marriage of compromise which mostly demands compromise from the woman's side. The way she tells women to shun away the false notion of womanliness which attacks their self-esteem is indeed appreciable.

"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 felt so beaten.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.

I shrank pitifully.

Then...I wore a shirt and my

Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

My womanliness.”(Das, 2007, Page No.119-120)

Ignoring this ‘womanliness’- the conventional concept of being a woman; women should accept their own identities and celebrate the way they naturally are. This is a very necessary step towards making the society-at-large accept women as they are and more importantly as individuals. Linda Nicholson Rightly observes that,

The writers argued that women are socialized to internalize a conception of themselves as lesser beings. To counter such socialization, women need to construct their own conceptions of what being a woman is all about and to begin prizing and loving themselves as women, women need to become ‘woman identified’.(Nicholson, 1997, Page No.147-148)

Das's subtle narration in the poem, “The Suicide” points towards the condition of women at large whose identities are caged and limited only to their husbands, children and families and who want to carve their own identities but hardly are able to because of the lack of courage to do so. She sarcastically portrays the condition of the women who seem to be living the life merely like a puppet in the hands of people (i.e. men) around them:

“I must pose

I must pretend,

I must act the role

Of happy woman,

Happy wife.

I must keep the right distance

Between me and the low.

And I must keep the right distance,

Between me and the high.”(Das, 2010, Page No.6)

In her poem ‘The Old Playhouse’, she depicts how women are considered merely a thing or means to satisfy the social, personal and sexual needs of men in our society and sarcastically despises the situation of women in our society:

“You were pleased

With my body’s response, its weather, its usual shallow

Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured

Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed

My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. 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 incoherent replies.”(Das, 2010, Page No.13)

We may say that Kamala Das was a true-blue feminist. She definitely was. However, her definition of feminism was quite different and revolutionary for her times. When asked about her thoughts on feminism, she said,

Feminism as the western people see it, is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance. I can never hate the male because I have loved my husband and I still love my children, who are sons. And I think from masculine company I have derived a lot of happiness. So I will never be able to hate them.(Ahmad, 2009, page no.283)

She stands for a kind of womanhood where women get accepted by the male as having equal intellect, wants and needs. She wants women to be accepted as individuals in a society. She also wants women to get frank

and open about their desires, needs and individuality and then make men and the society-at-large accept her as she is; a little traditional, a little modern; a little liberal, a little dependent; a little submissive and a little rebellious. That's where her redefined womanhood gets reflected. That's why she writes in "The Looking Glass",

“Getting a man to love you is easy

Only be honest about your wants as woman.”(Das, 2004, Page No.160)

Highly oppressed by her own family in her real life, Das expresses her feelings and thoughts very liberally in her poems. She is very frank and modern in expressing her thoughts on love and sexuality. When asked what her idea of an ideal man-woman relationship is, she replies,

The woman making the man feel more like a man; the man making the woman feel more like a woman. That would be a perfect man-woman relation. (Kaur, 1995, page no.161)

She gives importance to an equal amount of honesty and dedication of a man and a woman towards each other in a relationship in order to make it an ideal and a successful one. Complete acceptance of each other and total surrender are also the elements she seeks in a man-woman relationship. She further writes in 'The Looking Glass',

“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. Admit your

Admiration. Notice the perfection

Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under

The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,

Dropping towels, and the jerky way he

Urinate. All the fond details that make

Him male and your only man.”

(Das, 2004, Page No. 160-161)

'The Looking Glass' is an important poem by Kamala Das as here she tries to define womanhood in her own way. Like she said, Feminism or womanhood for her is not cursing or hating the men. She doesn't even reject the fact that a woman needs a man as much as a man needs a woman to fulfil her needs and lead her life. She has no hesitation accepting her man as he is, physically stronger than her because that is the course of the nature. Her man's strength only makes her feel more loved and protected and she completely loves it. This poem succeeds in giving an insight into Kamala Das's idea of feminism which tries to harmonise the modern notions of womanhood with the Indian conventionalities of womanhood. For her, womanhood is to carve out a woman's own identity as an individual without withdrawing her conventional identities such as a daughter, a sister, a mother and a wife. For her, there is nothing wrong in a complete surrender of a wife towards her man, only condition is that it should be out of love.

"Gift him all,

Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of

Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,

The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your

Endless female hungers" (Das, 2004, Page No. 161)

Also, her bold voice echoes when she says that with a completely surrendered woman, comes her needs to which must be satisfied by the man. This should be a welcomed thought in the society because, 'Ironically some feminists have tended to dismiss issues of sexual pleasure, well-being and contentedness as irrelevant' (Hooks, 2000, Page No.150) and thus have lacked behind in looking at the various aspects of womanhood through contemporary glasses. Das felt that if sexual surrendering comes out of love then there is nothing wrong in it, it is wrong only when it comes out of oppression and fear. In an interview, she was asked how a liberated woman like her could obey the commands of her husband like a machine. Her answer to that was,

I'm a fond wife; I'm a fond daughter but I don't know whether fondness has anything to do with tradition. I believe we were born free. The minute they cut the umbilical cord we are free. I am free to the extent that the choice is mine now. These are minor things. 'Don't come down, don't wear bindi' etc. I don't fret much about it if it can please him-little things which don't mean much to me anyway. But if he says: 'blacken your face with tar' I may not do it because I would hate to see my face that way. But I am free I think. I am free to give him

compassion and I am free to obey his whims. I am free to that extent because I can make life miserable for him if I want to, if I disobey him. (Kaur, 1995, Page No. 160)

This statement by Das tells us much about the kind of womanhood she stands for. A womanhood that is rebellious, liberal yet conventional in a way. Adding more to this idea, Bhargavi P. Rao writes,

Women who have conviction in 'feminism' as an ideology, need not be unfeminine in their attitude. Retaining their femininity, they can still protest against ideas and actions which hamper their personality. (Rao, 1995, Page No.122-123)

Though Kamala Das sees nothing wrong in a woman's surrender to her husband out of compassion, a man imposing himself on a woman out of his lust is something she can't bear. She draws a very fine line between 'love' and 'lust' in her poetry and opposes lust with great disgust. For example, she says in her poem, 'The Freaks':

“He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire... Can this man with
Nimble fingertips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers?” (Das, 2010, Page No. 36)

Das tries to give a voice to the pains of women who try their best to fulfil their man's needs everyday but don't get one simple thing in return which they always long for, his love. This continuous conflict between a man's lust and a woman's need for love often ends by a sacrifice on the woman's part, thanks to our male-dominated society. Although Kamala Das has often talked about the sexual needs of women, here she seems to be accepting the phenomenon that an emotional need for love is always more dominant in a woman's personality than her sexual needs. She also portrays the epitome of male-dominance in the Indian society by saying that a woman sometimes has to pretend to be lustful in order to save herself from the shame caused due to her unignorable need for love because in our male-dominated society, a woman's need is either considered as non-existent or as a laughing-stock. As she writes in the concluding part of 'The Freaks':

“I am a freak. It's only

To save my face, I flaunt, at

Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.” (Das, 2010, Page No.36)

Another prominent topic that Das has addressed in her poetry is that of sexual exploitation of women. According to her, the forced sexual relationships in an arranged marriage are nothing but rapes. And they happen every day, behind the shut doors and what's worse is that they happen to a girl with her family's concern. She writes in “The Sunshine Cat” about this heinous cruelty performed every day on thousands of women not only by their husbands but also sometimes by other men and that too, with their husband's concern:

“They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man

She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish,

And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor

Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, and the band

Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where

New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her

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, but I can be kind to you.

They let her slide from pegs of sanity into

A bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping.”

(Das, 2010, Page No.30)

In the later part of this poem, Das very poignantly points out the trauma that the suffering woman goes through during this whole process and how it murders her soul slowly, a little more everyday:

“Winter came and one day while locking her in, he

Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a

Lone, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when

He turned to take her out, she was a cold and

Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men.”

(Das, 2010, Page No.30)

Das wanted this evil of rape to be destroyed from the roots. The only way she could see to do that was empowering women, both mentally and physically. She strongly fought for the rights of female not only through her social-service but also through her poetry. According to her, every girl atleast should know one art in order to defend the abusers. She says in an interview,

I think the girls should learn Judo or Karate. I think teaching Judo or Karate should be made as important as teaching Mathematic. Probably, mathematics is unnecessary. A little bit of arithmetic is good enough for anyone but the girls must be taught some kind of martial art.(Kaur, 1995, Page No. 163)

The last short poem of Kamala Das which I would like to discuss here is, ‘A Request’. Kamala Das was a romantic at heart. By looking at her life, it seems that her quest for true love never ended. She even converted into Islam in order to marry a Muslim man after getting disappointed with her first husband Mr. Das. However, it seems that she didn’t get love and satisfaction from that marriage as well and was said to have regretted it:

“When I die

Do not throw

The meat and bones away

But pile them up

And let them tell

By their smell

What life was worth

On this earth

What love was worth

In the end.” (Das, 2010, Page No.41)

Her experiences seem to have made her believe that love was nothing but a romantic fantasy, that there was no value of dedicated love on this earth. This can be evidently seen in many of her works. Men who entered her life were never able to give her the platonic love she always longed for. And this happens to many women in India, or maybe in the world.

Summing up this discussion, one can say that Kamala Das redefines womanhood by making the society and especially the women aware of the suppression that they themselves go through and yet are unaware about. She tries to encourage them to become more liberal and independent and carve their own identities. According to critic Elaine Showalter,

“We can see patterns and phases in the evolution of a female tradition which correspond to the developmental phases of any subcultural art. I have called these the Feminine, Feminist and Female stages. In the Female Phase, ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest- two forms of dependency- and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature.” (Showalter, 1986, Page No. 176-177)

Das's poetry seems to belong to this 'Female' phase of female tradition in art. Kamala Das also tries hard to present the contradicting reality of Indian society where at one side women are worshipped as Goddesses and at the other side, they are oppressed and subjugated. Kamala Das is also said to be one of the most misread poet in Indian English literature. Her thoughts were a little sensational for her times, but they projected nothing but reality. To understand Kamala Das's poetry in a better way, it is necessary to re-read it in a

contemporary context. By re-reading it from a modern point of view, we might understand Kamala Das's poetry in a novel manner.

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