



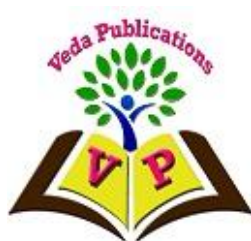
OPEN TO OPINION: RADICAL FEMALE POETIC VOICES OF MEDIEVAL AND MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT



The 'pre' and 'post' Independence phases of Indian feminism are somehow categorized on the basis of some noticeable socio-political status of women in the country. Despite, these convenient academic categories, there is something very substantial in literary world of female poets of India. The present paper places in a critical perspective the life and literary endeavors of a medieval poet, Mirabai and her modern counterpart Kamala Das. It attempts to reflect on their consciousness of self-identity with a refusal to the accepted mores of the society. The paper explores the struggle of a woman to express her own opinion in a patriarchal society through the creative writings of both Mirabai and Kamala Das.

Keywords: *Equality, Expression, Feminism, Freedom, Individuality, Patriarchy.*

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The history of feminism in India is commonly divided into three phases. The first phase is considered to be the mid-eighteenth century when some European colonists raised their voices against the social evils of 'sati', child-marriage etc. The second phase is viewed as the emergence of women's organizations during Quit India Movement and the third phase begins after Independence which focuses on fair treatment of women at home and outside including political parity. Despite, these three convenient academic divisions, there is something very substantial in literary world of female poets of

India. A vista of the beautiful psychological images in the poetry of a medieval Indian woman, Mira Bai and her modern counterpart, Kamala Das reflect disobedient colours on the patriarchal canvas, still unnoticed or usually neglected in the legacy of Indian feminism.

Living in India some 500 years ago, Mirabai was quite a rebel, believing passionately in a woman's freedom to choose her own life's path and religion. Consequently, she suffered many punishments and hardships. Knowing how women still struggle with similar injustices, it is not surprising



that her story and poetry still resonate today. She is the most celebrated of the women poets of medieval times. Several works like *Narsiji Ki Mahero*, *Gitagovinda Ka Tika*, *Ragagovinda*, *Garva-gita* and *Raga-Vihaga* are attributed to her. She is an example of a subjective poet: i.e. her own self is her raw material. She was the great poetess of the sixteenth century whose songs are among the best known in India. Born into a noble family, Mirabai was only 4 or 5 years old when her mother died. Moving in with her grandmother, the child became enthralled with and intensely devoted to Lord Krishna. At age of 16, by her uncle's arrangement, she was married to a prince, who died just three years later. She enraged her in-laws by openly disdain wealth, refusing to worship the family deity, and defying their expectations to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Narrowly escaping attempts on her life by members of her husband's family, Mirabai went on to live the life she desired. She wandered among those of all castes as an ecstatic, singing and dancing in public temples, writing her poetry, and making pilgrimages in dedication of her life to the love of Lord Krishna. Soon she acted as a rebel, not hesitating to break the conventions and often ignored the rigid codes of behaviour set for the women by the society. This incurred the wrath of the family, especially of the new king. She says:

None dare come in my way
I go enchanted
Kicking aside the glories of my ancestors.
(*Mystic Songs of Meera*: 48) [1]

The above lines are deep and poignant. They depict the tenderness of a woman's heart and also its vigorous defiance of social norms. Apparently Rana wanted to put a stop to all this. After extended conflict with her in-laws, they reportedly attempted to poison her.

Why must I not hate your palace Rana?
You, sent me the cup of poison to kill
Lo, I drank it as the offering to my lord.
(*Mystic Songs of Meera*: 25)

Her true devotion towards Lord Krishna saved her and she was allowed to leave the palace. She reportedly spent her later years visiting places associated with Krishna and partaking in the good company of other devotees, until finally she went to

Dwarka. She was absorbed into the image of Krishna there. Her poetry, her personality and her life became a shining example of devotion and her total surrender at the feet of Girdhar gave her immense popularity and everlasting appeal. Mirabai's devotional fervour not only led to the production of poetry of a highly emotive, lyrical and sensual nature, it also challenged many of the existing social values and traditions. By freely associating with *sadhus* and *sants* and expressing her ecstatic devotion to Krishna, Mira violated the existing social norms for which she was upbraided by her family. The intensity of Mira's devotion which was expressed in her poetry is free from any consideration of loss and gain. She defies the society and transgresses the law and makes love the be-all and end-all of life.

Mirabai is at her best in giving expression to the women's deep sense of loneliness, even of being abandoned by their husbands. In the absence of their husbands, women not only felt a deep sense of physical loneliness and longing but also afraid that their husbands may have forgotten them or sought solace in the company of other women. Her poetry, devoted to Lord Krishna as her lover and husband and also the way of life she adopted brought in social criticism. While Mirabai herself acted as a rebel, her basic attitude towards women's role in society was traditional. To some extent it shows how powerful was the tradition about woman's role and behavior pattern in family and society. Yet Mirabai represents a voice of protest against it and suggests that these values need to be modified or applied in a more humane and liberal manner.

She was perhaps the most vigorous woman of medieval times who challenged her Age as Kamala Das did in our times. Kamala Das is one of the leading poets in Indian Poetry in English Language. No doubt her poetry is English in language, but is Indian in sensibility and content. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment and reflects its moods. She has brought much credit to herself by virtue of her originality, novelty, daring and the courage of her beliefs and convictions. She is known internationally for her profoundly feminine, lyrical English poetry and at home for her short stories in Malayalam.

With the poet, Kamala Das, her private life, particularly under strain of psychological crises,



becomes a major theme. Her creative sensitivity is strongly committed to her personality. She has dismantled the barrier between private and public self by baring her soul and herself in her literary works. She asserts, "When I write about other people, I do not feel fulfilled as a writer. I don't find my face floating above words..." All the three major volumes of Kamala Das's poems i.e. *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Play House and Other Poems* (1973) refer to the revelations of her self. In all these volumes, there is a note of subjectivism. It takes us to the deepest emotions of a woman's inner being. The third volume of her poetry *The Old Play House and Other Poems* shows Kamala Das as a rebellious poet who is very much aware of the liberation of all women. She revolts against the male-dominated society. She is a dejected lover who is in search of a secure relationship. She is frustrated in her childhood as well as when she matures. She could not get the emotional stability. She gave a poetic shape to all her feelings and emotions.

There is protest, experiment and faith in the poetry of Kamala Das. She is in search for her identity of self. In this effort, she suffers from a mild nervous breakdown. She forgets all her misery, despair and grief. It is like an escape from her worries and anxieties. She writes in an article in 'Blitz':

Madness was the best escape for the unhappy girl that I was. It offered an escape more satisfying than that offered by drugs or psycho-analysis. It was invisible armour that I wore to conceal my real self. Inside it, underneath the brave smiles and the braver talk, a little girl hid herself in the dark, weeping: Nobody could see her.[2]

Her first book, *Summer in Calcutta* was a promising start. She abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girl fantasies, of eternal, bloodless and unrequited love. This collection is full of the images of love, sex, deprivation, fulfillment, separation and the death processes of the day to day life. It offers an example of her personal experience in life. Her subject matter

mainly wanders around the place of woman in a male dominated society. She cannot be called a staunch feminist, because feminist philosophy declares independence from man while Kamala Das's woman exists with man. In her poetry, several faces of Eve are exhibited, woman as sweet heart, flirt, wife, mother, middle aged matron and above all woman as an untiring seeker of the nature of the psychological processes behind femininity and masculinity. There are many poems in her collection that are more forceful and integrated. "An Introduction" is one of them. It is a piece of self-revelation:

Don't write in English, they said;
English is not your mother-tongue.
Why not leave me alone, critics, friends,
visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its
queernesses
All mine, mine alone.

(Summer in Calcutta: 59) [3]

Her rebellious attitude is depicted in the poem. In this short poem, Kamala Das has given us a self-portrait and the anatomy of her mind, recounting the major incidents of her life and the experiences which had affected her most till the time of her writing this poem. It is a poem of revolt against conventionalism and against the restraints which society has been imposing upon women. Kamala Das's feminism or her advocacy for the rights of women clearly appears here. Her rebellious attitude is evident when she starts wearing male dresses and moves around the male-dominated society. Her poetry has a special force and appeal for us primarily because of the honesty and candour with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual with a distinctive identity and to be her authentic self even if this involves breaking the moulds of traditional ethics and propriety. Her poetry voices a protest against the restrictions of our society. Devinder Kohli remarks, "An Introduction' is not only a candid and witty piece of self-revelation but a state of her credo, her attitude to language and experience." [4]

Being a realist, Kamala Das represents reality as it is. She is very honest in depicting the feelings of her heart. She is a rebel, who struggles for the cause



of woman. In many poems, she describes woman's lust for love which is very passionate. In the poem "In Love" she says, "Now that I Love You curled like an old mongrel/My life lies, content/In you..."[5] (Summer in Calcutta: 30) She confesses her experience of love with astonishing candidness:

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.
(Summer in Calcutta : 59-60)

She feels herself all alone in the world. It is appropriate to say of her poems that whosoever touches these poems touches a woman. The poetess has here voiced her own inner frustrations, by using the story of the woman persona as an objective co-relative. The modern woman's predicament is energetically voiced in this poem, but her challenge of the socio-moral laws, her flaunting for them is unpardonable.

Kamala Das's poetry offers a poetic model of a feminine mind confronted by the male-dominated society of Southern India. It centers on sexual insufficiency for the gratification of woman in her. All her works of poetry reflect the confessional tone of feelings of such situations in her personal life. These situations quickly shift and assume new postures, new attitude of defence. Bruce King reflecting upon the works of Kamala Das says:

Writing is a means of creating a place in the world; the use of the personal voice and self-revelation are means of self-assertion. Das opened areas in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling; she showed how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the public world. She brings a sense of locality in her poems..... Das's poems assume their location, create their space by being set in situations rather than by observing or alluding to their environment.[6]

In the poem "The Descendants" she describes the plight of all women. She talks of women's liberation. They are often hurt by their husbands

though there is not any scar or bruise on the surface level. Even then they feel hurt emotionally; women regard themselves as nailed by their men. They are crucified like Jesus Christ. They are not actually crucified on the cross, but in soft beds and pillows. They are never redeemed of their plight. None comes to protect them. Kamala Das describes the plight of women:

We have lain in every weather
Nailed no, not
To crosses, but to soft beds and against
Softer forms

(The Descendants : 8)[7]

The poem "The Old Play House" is the finest lyric in the collection. The Play House is the poet's mind in which floating sensations, regrets and stray thoughts and memory are the actors which act their parts in the dark with all the lights shut out. The poem is the poet's protest against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female. The woman is expected to play certain conventional roles and her own wishes and aspirations are not taken into account. It is evident from the poem that woman is still in the grip of slavery of man. She is still regarded as the second sex:

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
Became a dwarf. I lost my will or reason
to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.

(The Old Play House and Other Poems : 11)[8]

In her short stories too, Kamala Das is concerned with the sad plight of woman. She exposes the hypocrisy of men, their possessiveness and obsession with the female body, their insensitivity to female sensibility. Iqbal Kaur points out:

A thematic and structural survey of Kamala Das's prose convinces the reader that she writes it with the same urgency and the same feminine sensibility as she does her verses. Apparently, her immense popularity as a poetess has misguided her critics and reviewers who generally



consider her poetry as the be all and end all of her artistic being. [9]

In *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, a collection of short stories featuring tales of innocence and eroticism Kamala Das presents a gripping picture of exploitation of women by men. Light is thrown on various shades and roles of women as a stereotyped wife, as a prostitute, as a mother, as a child bearer and last but not the least as an object of entertainment for men. The most touching story in the collection is the title story which shows the tortures on a female-child being forced into prostitution. The other stories, namely "A Little Kitten", "Darjeeling", "Sanatan Chowdhary's Wife", "The Tattered Blanket" and "Leu Kaemia" present different images of woman as a sexual object.

Kamala Das is not recognized as a prose writer in comparison to her poetical achievements. She has also written a number of miscellaneous essays which, like her poems have made her a controversial figure because of the views which she has expressed in them. Some of these essays bear the following titles: "I Studied All Men", "What Women expect out of Marriage and What They Get?" and "I Had Lived Beautifully". In these essays she explored in the time of excess and loudness that marks her love-poems, the significance of her status as a woman and a writer in post-colonial India. Her prose work re-echoes the sexual humiliation of woman in the hands of male dominated society. Through recurrent treatment of female sexual humiliation by male, Kamala Das aims to jolt men and awaken them to how they exploit feminine chastity by denying them emotional bond when they sincerely long for. The ache and anguish of her failure in marriage finds expression in her poetry, fiction and prose work. The presence of autobiographical elements lends authenticity and sincerity to her work. Bibhu Prasad Pandhi proclaims: "Apart from her expert use of language, she has a sincerity of feeling and an honesty of experience that most of the women poets of India lack." [10]

Kamala Das and Mirabai are thus revolutionary poets who started the trend towards frankness and candour in the treatment of a subject which was almost taboo and which women poets particularly hesitated to deal with. Both of them thus are

trendsetters and the trend started by them has now become almost the vogue. They criticized the tradition-bound conservative society which of course, was always harsh on their unconventional life style. One thing is sure: they are far ahead of their respective times in depicting their ideas, unconcerned about what others think of them. The emotive quality of their poems, their ability to provide social critique and the representation of self that crosses boundaries between the personal and public life has given their poetry a special flavour to be tasted.

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