FEMINIST ETHOS IN KAMALA DAS’S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Problems of women is the central theme of the most of the women writers. It is quite natural to expose the problems of individual viewing universal point of view. But it quite ridiculous to think of how a women is being exploited in many ways even after seven decades of independent India. The questions arises is this the independence many of our martyrs dream of? In case of certain writers like Kamala Das, the solutions to the sorrows and sufferings of women are quite strange and revolutionary. Sometimes contemporary society never agrees with the views of such writers. My paper titled, “Feminist Ethos in Kamala Das’s Poetry” examines how the feminist ethos reflected in the poetry of Kamla Das. For this I have taken a few experiences to quote certain incidents from her autobiography. Her poetry expresses chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Her readers sympathetically responded to her frankness with regard to sexual matters. Her early poetry mirrored fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice.

Keywords: Women, Problems, Exploited, Ethos, Love, Betrayal, Anguish and Personal Voice.

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Kamala Das, a woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature writes feminist ethos in her poetry. She is a bilingual writer writing in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty and in English. Her poetry expresses chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Her readers sympathetically responded to her frankness with regard to sexual matters. Her early poetry mirrored fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice. All of them lamented for the lack of attention to structure and craftsmanship of her poetry. It is understood from the reading of her poetry that she led an unhappy, dissatisfied life even from her childhood being a victim of patriarchal prejudices and discrimination. For my examination, I took her works like Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Collected Poems I (1984), The Best of Kamala Das (1991) and Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (1996). Actually they are praiseworthy for their versatile exposure so even the scholars such as Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, Sunil Kumar and a host of others find a powerful feminist imagery in her
poetry, focusing on issues of marriage, problems in motherhood, women’s relationship in different manners, and the role of women in traditional Indian society.

While discussing about her conversion into Islam, it was said that she hoped herself for spiritual fulfilment of life after life in man and woman relationship. She later confessed it as a folly. Actually she longed for an eternal life with her body and soul after her life on earth because of her frustration by love and loneliness. She loved her body as she loved her soul. Her bodily desires are not satisfied by her life so she wants to achieve it in any way. Here comes the matter of Religion. Hinduism does not permit anyone either male or female for such life. Unfortunately it is more stressed on female than male in course of its practice during the time immemorial. She converted to Islam in 1999 taking a new name Kamala Surayya. It was an action that she had been contemplating for many years. In her words:

“Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is the Purdah. Second is the security that Islam provides to women. In fact, both these reasons are complementary. Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women a sense of security. Only Islam gives protection to women. I have been lonely all through my life. At nights, I used to sleep by embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is my company. Islam is the only religion in the world that gives love and protection to women. Therefore, I have converted.”

(“Kamala Das”)

Her conversion caused much ire and furore among Hindu fanatics and they started threatening her through letters and phone calls. Most dejected she bade goodbye to her ancestral house and native place and sought refuge in his son’s house in Mumbai.

She was bitterly wounded by her patriarchal prejudice ever from her childhood days which lead to unhappy and dissatisfied life. She is married off at the age of 13 to a cousin who being very busy employee. In My Book she describes, her “father was an autocrat” (91) and her mother “vague and indifferent” (20). Her parents considered her “a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to a relative when she was only a school girl” (82). Thus she was compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She 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. (Collected Poems I 56-60)

Her husband’s willingness to let her have her sexual experiences with others was a further blow to her ego. It is this pressure of family background that created a tension in her poetry. The earlier woman poets of India had adjusted themselves to the situation having no feeling of revolt. But Kamala Das raised strongly her rebellious voice against the unjust patriarchal domination. In the same poem she presents the image of a doll to portray a woman’s miserable condition: “Yet another nodding / Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to / Warm his bed at night” (Collected Poems I 56-60). She hates traditional sex roles assigned to women by the patriarchy. In the poem “Introduction” one finds resentment and refusal:

... Then I wore a shirt and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of this womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife, they cried. Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreller with servants. (The Best of Kamala Das 12-13)

The indifference of man to woman’s miseries is depicted in her poem “The Stone Age.” To quote from it:

You turn me into a bird of stone,
a granite dove,
you build round me a shabby drawing room
and strike my face absentmindedly while
you read. (The Best of Kamala Das 97-98)

“Though the love affair gives her excitement in the
beginning, it is accompanied by disillusionment. Her
lover is incapable of giving her a blissful experience”
(Raveendran 16). Thus her frustration is expressed
through her poem “The Freak”:
. . . Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin’s lazy hungers? . . . (Only the Soul 59)

Kamala Das longed for protection of her
identity which was crushed under the shackles of
tradition and culture. As result, she conceives of the
male as beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego
under which the women loses her identity. Her
poetry reflects this ideas very strongly including
freedom to rebel. She enumerates the male felonies
in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and
rebellion in her poetry . . . Many of her poems convey
the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside
marriage. Their love is a disgusted lust, a poor
substitute for real love. Her life is considered
experiments with love and the repeated failures of
her experiments force her ego to be resentful and
defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a
substitute for the real experience of true love. (34-
35).

The woman’s spirit of rebellion against male
domination and ego is found in the poem “The
Conflagration.”

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive.
A world extend a Pot beyond his six foot
frame.” (qtd. in Iyer 214)

“The Old Play House” also voices her protest against
the male domination and the resultant humiliation:
. . . 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 . . .
(The Old Playhouse 1)

The plight of a married woman, chained to
her husband’s house is depicted in the opening lines
of the poem “The Old Play House”:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she
would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes
left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the
endless
Pathways of the sky. . . (The Old Playhouse 1)

Thus Kamala Das is exclusively concerned
with the personal experience of love. “For her ideal
love is the fulfilment of the levels of body and mind.
It is the experience beyond sex through sex. The
tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual
fulfilment from the husband leads her to search for it
elsewhere. Each relationship only intensifies her
disappointment faced with the sense of absolute
frustration and loneliness” (Iyer 203). Though she
seeks the perfection of masculine being in every
lover, it ends in failure because of the impossibility of
realizing this ideal in human form. The experience of
frustration sets the psyche in the attitude of
rebellion.

“I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman
Happy wife” (The Descendants p. 2) (qtd. in
Iyer 204)

Kamala Das writes in her poetry about the
position of woman and resist the dominace of man.
The influence of patriarchy is found in all religions as
well as their scriptures. As the religious leaders were
all men, the scriptures written by them were male-
oriented and as a result, women were given inferior
position in families as well as societies. There is no
doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-
Anglian poetry—a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or
even Sarojini Naidu. Kamala Das’s is a fiercely
feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to
articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive
largely man-made world . . . Of course, the endless
reiteration of such hurt, such disillusion, such
cynicism, must sooner or later degenerate into a
mannerism, but one hopes—and her exceptional
talent offers the ground for such hopes—she will
outgrow this obsession in due course and find her way to a season less trying. Her poems reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, acute sense of isolation, fragmentation and loss of identity. Modern Indian woman’s ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. She seems to have the combination in herself—wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. While her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love, she is also proud of her being the seducer, the collector especially of those men who pose as lady killers (Iyer 193-194).

REFERENCES


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Dr. G. Mohana Charyulu, Associate Professor and Chairman, Research Progress and Assessment Committee, Department of English, K L University, Vaddeswaram, Guntur dist. A.P., has been teaching English Language and Literature to the Students of Graduation, Post Graduation and Research Scholars for the last two decades. Two M.Phills and One Ph.D is awarded under his Supervision another two are waiting for the award. His Thesis on “A Study of Concepts: English New Criticism in the light of Indian Poetics” created a new approach in understanding Indian Criticism with English Literary Criticism. He is expert in ELT, ILT, Translational Studies and Criticism. There are 33 Publications in International and National Journals on Language Literature and Translation and 12 Presentations in International and National Conferences, Seminars and Workshops. One book titled “Kalakaar” is released and another one “My Review and My Criticism” is on the line. Presently He is supervising 7 Ph.D Scholars along with his regular academic works in the University.