A Feminist Approach to Kamala Das’ Poems: “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse.”

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ABSTRACT: Kamala Das, born on March 31, 1934 in Malabar (Kerala) started writing at an early age, yet her major works appeared in the post-independent era when the most Indian English writers, in their poetic output, had deviated their attention from the common themes of national, mythical and colonial interests to the more straightforward expression of their personal experiences. Writing is a means of creating a place in the world; and the use of personal voice and self revelation becomes a source of self assertion for the women writers. This is a natural consequence of the cry for gender justice all over the world. The influence of the feminist movement of the West is reflected in many writings, especially poetry, which is the most subjective of all literary genres. Modern Indian women writers, influenced by feminist trends, clamour for equal dignity, status and treatment on all fronts. Kamala Das, the most confessional poet with sex dominant themes, gives voice to feminine desires, hopes and fears. In poems like “An Introduction”, “Afterwards”, “Looking Glass” and several others she seems to be bold enough to express secret longings and aspirations of womanhood entangled in marital obstacles. This research paper would attempt to unfold how she revolts against the restraints in a patriarchal society and expresses the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individuality, identity and freedom.

I. Introduction

Feminist critics reject the androgynistic assertion of the creative mind being sexless, saying that imagination cannot evade the conscious or unconscious structures of gender. It is impossible to separate the imagination from a socially, sexually and historically positioned self. Virginia Woolf describes how a woman writer seeks within herself ‘the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber…’ Men may try their hands at writing about women’s bodies, but according to the feminist critique, only a woman whose very biology gives her an edge could write and read these texts successfully. Similarly it is the woman who belongs to this subaltern area of weaker sex who can give a true voice to the problems faced by them in a male dominated society. Womanhood itself shapes women expression. It is their distinct mode of perception that leads them to speak and write differently from men.

Gynocritics assert the existence of a distinctive woman’s language, which French feminist, Helene Cixous, coined as écriture feminine. They generate texts from the brain which maybe considered the metaphorical womb. A woman writer feels the artistic creation of man involving the phallic pen on the virgin paper a form of violation destroying the female body. In woman’s writing, sexuality is identified with textuality, as a woman judges herself through her body; the female self is always identified with the female body in women’s literature. Writing from the perspective of body as a source of imagery, Kamala Das’ writing is intimate, confessional and innovative at least in thematic expression, if not in style and form. It is the unsatisfied dreams and desires of Kamala Das which in turn shape the erotic themes of her poems. She concentrates on the ‘wild zone’ to make the invisible visible. It is this wild zone that is the language of the repressed.

Brought up in the warmth of matrilineal society of Kerala, Kamala Das was uprooted when her father moved to Kolkata. Being a victim to patriarchal prejudices and discriminations even from her childhood she has had an unhappy and dissatisfied life. After attending a Catholic boarding school for a brief period, Kamala Das was married off at the age of 13 to a cousin who being very busy employee just considered her a cook and sexual partner, having no time to love her. Left by herself, as she and her husband moved from one metropolitan city to the other, in accordance with his job, she turned rebellion. 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 the tensions of the body in her poetry issue from. Her fierce individuality was something which Indian readers were not used to. In a male-dominated world the earlier women poets of India had acquiesced with the given situation, hardly feeling any need to revolt against it. Das may be a poet with repetitive themes, and having lack of technique or theory, yet she is numbered among the leading poets for her strong rebellious voice against the unjust patriarchal domination. Her protest against stronger sex is evident from the recurrent ‘sex’ themes. An objective reading of her poems reveals spokesperson of suppressed gender that is woman. The intensely personal and confessional quality of Das’ works recalls in some ways Anne Sexton and
Sylvia Plath, who attempt to work out their traumas in poetry.

The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. Her poems show strong sense of consciousness of herself as a woman. This consciousness is often reflected in quick apprehension of male desire and the quick reaction to it:

_...These men who call me beautiful, not seeing me with eyes but with hands_ (Das, 1991, p.49)

Being a woman, she brings a sense of locality to her poems. There are rooms in which she lives; bedrooms, restaurants, streets in which she meets her lovers.

This paper will focus on the two of her well-known poems: “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse,” that bring out almost all the maladies that plague the women and express the poet’s protest and resistance in the very description of the problems.

II. “An Introduction” and “The Old Playhouse”

“An Introduction”, much anthologized poem, can be studied from the feminist concerns based on women’s culture including biology, linguistics and psychoanalysis in relation to social context. Included first in _Summer in Calcutta_ and then in _The Old Playhouse and Other Poems_, the poem voices the concerns of a woman rebelling against the norms and dictates of a patriarchal society that asks her to ‘fit in’ and ‘belong’ against her own wishes. Her rebellion against patriarchy is to secure an identity for herself in a male dominated world. The poem begins with the assertion, “I don’t know politics, but I know the names of those in power” (Das 1973, p.26) , showing lack of concern for politics in a country where politics is generally considered a domain for men; and where a woman is just a victim of it. We are made aware of the cultural differences:

_I am Indian, Very brown, born in Malabar._ (Das, 1973,p.26)

A brown complexion for an Indian woman disqualifies her prospects of good marriage, fairness being equated with beauty in this country. Next come a defiant assertion of her right to choose any language she likes for poetic expression, in response to the suggestions that she should not write in English. Perhaps she is referring here to the concept of _écriture feminine_. Her choice of English as a medium of expression with her own regularities and eccentricities, her joys and longings, she believes, is the voice of her instincts as the cawing is to crows and roaring, to lions.

From the issue of the politics of language, the poet proceeds to the sexual politics. She recalls the unconscious terrors of her childhood from trees, clouds and rains and associates the thundering of storms and the ‘incoherent mutterings of the blazing funeral pyre’ with the masculine violence. Reference to the swelling limbs, growing hairs, the pitiful weight of breasts and womb and the sad woman’s body emphasizes the corporeal ground of women’s experience. Going on to make some distinction between sex, completely biological, and gender, a social construct, she says:

_Then…I wore a shirt and my Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl, be wife, they said. (Das, 1973, p.26/27)_

If in impulse, a woman defies the gender code and dresses up as a man and ‘sits on the wall’, she is subjected to humiliation, and the guardians of the morality force a respectable woman’s dress with the instructions that she should fit herself into the socially accepted roles of a woman i.e. a wife, mother, cook in order to get confined to the domestic routine. As she seeks fulfillment of her adolescent passion, a young husband is forced upon her to traumatise and torture her female body, since this is the site for the patriarchy to display its power and authority. The women in India are supposed to get married early otherwise they might be considered defective. Again this custom creates social adjustment problem for a woman, affecting her psyche.

The concluding lines of Kamala Das’ poem deal with the assertion of Virginia Woolf that women should act like a class regardless of class, race and social position. Das writes:

_I have no joys that are not yours, no Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I._ (Das, 1973, p.27)

The poem ends with the repetition of the first person singular ‘I’ to suggest the vindication of the body and the self. The idea of suppression of woman identity is seen from two perspectives:

The suppression of women as class is synonymous with the suppression of their freedom on the larger scale. However, the language and the style of the poem show that it voices the grievances of the middle/upper class; and fails to address the issues of the lower class. Besides, the present day women issues like sexual harassment, rapes and domestic violence still remain untouched, yet the content is still valid.

Like most of her confessional poems on love and sex, “The Old Playhouse” is characterized by an
emotional intensity of a wife caused by a deep sense of betrayal born out of her confinement in a marital bond. The poet puts both masculine and feminine world under scrutiny. The very title suggests the underlying meaning. The Playhouse reinforces the traditional gender roles and maintains the hegemony of men over women. The wife’s suffering is evident as the playhouse—symbolizing premarital freedom and joy, where singing and dancing were ways of expressing oneself—is shut with its lights put out. The woman after marriage is known by her well-defined social functions. The stifling atmosphere of her husband’s house with its artificial and male dominated setting has diminished her zeal for life:

...Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights,
Your window always shut. Even
the air conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of
your breath. (Das, 1973, p.1)

The poetic persona’s suppressive marriage life is expressed through the image of swallow, which symbolizes the beauty of woman and her free spirit. She is trapped and domesticated by her husband so that she could forgo the instinct to fly. She had sought his company to learn the ways of life, but ironically was taught only the lessons of gender roles; and how to please him by pouring his tea and giving him vitamins. Waiting on him she lost touch of her potential transcendence into her own person. Instead of growing or becoming her own person, she has to submit only ‘beneath’ him, feeling insignificant only as lesser of the two sexes:

...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... (Das, 1973, p.1)

Since in Indian society marriage is generally based on sex rather than on love, so only physical aspects of sex without a trace of emotions are expressed in the above lines. Although the persona is an Indian wife, the poet here does not mention the cultural setting, as she does in “An Introduction”. She connects nature and natural to women and ascribes artificiality to man. Man, who controls nature through inventions, also considers woman as a commodity. The reference to the story of Narcissus and Echo represent husband and wife relation. Similar to Echo’s curse the wife must repeat the rules society has made for her as a woman.

Yet towards the end the poet seems to be hopeful to resolve the love tension:

...and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure total freedom...
(Das, 1973, p.1/2)

Women should be wary of falling in love with an allusion of a person or with their own idealistic thought. The poem’s imagery, form and content all contribute to the depiction of man-woman relationship in an Indian setting. The word ‘technique’ and ‘lethal doze’ indicate that the man is technically killing her soul. The repetition of ‘you’ and ‘I’ also emphasizes the split between man and woman. The single stanza form is chosen to suggest that the feelings of woman are just natural and uncontrolled. The binary oppositions-like man/woman; nature artificiality; I/you; summer/pall- demonstrate the poet’s working against patriarchy that she challenges. She calls for the revision of social structure. However, she in no way means the women be treated as superior; she rather wishes they should be given equal chance to regain individuality.

III. CONCLUSION

‘A poet’s raw material is not stone and clay, it is her personality.’(My Story, p139) Kamala Das, the persona in the above mentioned poems, reflects women’s burdens, echoes and their struggles by using her own unafraid voice to examine the silences. Her aim as a poet is to underline the predicament of contemporary women beset by the crisis of the divided self. She wants to bring harmony out of this existence. She tries her best to uplift the position of women and thus resists the dominance of men. Writing in English helped her to communicate to a larger audience of women. As an individual woman she tries to voice a universal womanhood and to share her experiences, good or bad, with all other women. Love and sexuality encompass a strong component in her search for female identity and the identity consists of polarities. Identifying herself with other suffering women, Kamala Das universalizes the issues and the poems become a statement on gender differences and a move to transcend the socially imposed restrictions by yearning for individual love and freedom.

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