



PERSPECTIVE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN KAMALA DAS'S POETRY

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Abstract:

Kamala Das is one of the leading Indian English woman poets who writes with strong feminist perspective. Her poetry discovers the best articulation of feminine sensibility and its suppression in a male dominated society. Kamala Das's poems exhibits courage and a determined spirit through her inherent creative ability to fight against the illogical traditional norms that are designed to dominate women. Her bold and fearless exhibition of self is incomparable and therefore she is an inspiration for every Indian woman to fight for her own rights, empowerment, self-identity, self-dignity and equality of status. Her poems not only are read as a feminist perspective but are also considered as a source for women empowerment. This paper tries to analyse the poetic works of Kamala Das in the light of Feminist perspective. This study would also throw light on literature as an instrument for social rectification and woman empowerment.

Key words: *Feminism, Feminist perspective, Feminine sensibility, ethos, humiliation, oppression, patriarchy and empowerment.*

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INTRODUCTION:

India has witnessed many creative people who are renowned artists, writers, poets, sculptors, musicians, etc., They have not only enriched our cultural heritage but also have influenced many people across the globe. In the arena of poetry, there are many poets who have extensively contributed to the treasure of Indian literature. Most of them are renowned males and a few female poets who have reached a successful height in the world of poetry.

The poems of the women poets have aroused emotions and have motivated many women to stand up for themselves. It empowered women to fight for her rights and oppose patriarchal,

cultural and discriminative social structure in India. Like a great number of progressive individuals from different walks of life who have contributed for the gender equality and woman empowerment in India, Savitri Bai Phule, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Mahadevi Verma and many other women poets advocated for the cause of women through their writings.

Kamala Das is one of the leading Indian English woman poets who writes with strong feminist perspective. She is a bilingual writer writing in Malayalam, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty and in English. She writes about feminine sensuality, sensibility and sexuality as well. Most of



her themes are love, betrayal, anguish, quest for identity and women problems. She had an unhappy and dissatisfied life. She had been a victim to patriarchal preconceptions, discriminations and domination at large. She occupies an exceptional place amidst the Indian women poets as she advocated for the cause of women and their identity in the society. Her poems often display feminist ethos. She was very bold and did not hesitate to write on Women's sexuality. She was admired for her courage to speak up sensitive issues about women openly. Kamala Das's feminine sensibility is often witnessed in her poems. Srinivas Iyenger writes, "Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive, largely, man-made world". (Tilak 89) Suresh Kohli too confirms about Kamala Das, as she says: "her vision is vitally particularised by the woman's point of view". (Tilak 89)

Kamala Das herself has been exploited under the Indian traditional patriarchal system. She had experienced humiliation and suppression imposed by the social severity. She was constantly unhappy with the traditional beliefs which prevailed in the society and she refused to adhere it. Her poems present her as a courageous and determined person who sets out to raise her voice and fight against the forces that try to curb the rights of women. She straight way opposed the norms that were dominating women in general and also her ownself in person. Her creative ability against the wrongs of the society found place in her poems. Her fearlessness and bold approach to situations distinguishes her from other poets. Her writings are often against the illogical traditional norms that are

imposed upon women and dominate them. Kamala Das is an embodiment of Women empowerment. Her writings usually revolve around equality of status, self-identity, and motivation.

In 1965, Kamala Das's first collection of poems *The Summer in Calcutta* was published at the time when "English poetry by Indian women had moved on from such colonial and nationalist themes as the rewriting of legends, praise of peasants, and from general ethical statements to writing about personal experiences". (King, 147) Das in her poems had "abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian poets were still governed by "19th-century diction, sentiment and romanticised love." (<https://peoplepill.com/people/kamala-surayya>)

Thereafter *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems I* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991) and *The only Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996) got published. Kamala Das has "made a mark, is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest Indian poets writing in English, one who had the courage to express her essentially feminine sensibility, honestly and sincerely, without any reserve or inhibitions". (Tilak, 67) Her poems portray the conditions of women in the Indian Society though it is almost 50 years ago but it is still relevant. She wrote her poems when there was a male dominated society and the women were just suppressed and forced to be silent. It was that time she took up her pen to speak against the oppressions on women and tried to throw light on the sufferings of women at large. She not only became one with the oppressed women but also exposed the pitiable



circumstances to the world.

Kamala Das was unhappy with her life since her childhood as her parents considered her as a burden. Considering her as a responsibility, her family married her to a relative at a very tender age when she was just a school going girl. It was the age when she was supposed to play with doll was forced into marriage to become a wife and then a mother at an early age. Her frustrations with her life and her parents are witnessed in the 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)

Further, the poet presents the image of a doll to depict a woman's miserable condition after her marriage. Her desires are not given importance but she has to behave good just like a doll and to fulfil her master's lustful desires:

Yet another nodding

Doll for his parlour, a walkie-talkie one to
Warm his bed at night". (Collected Poems I 56-60)

The poem, "The Old Playhouse", is structured with the feminist perspectives on the patriarchal society in India. Kamala Das displays her total dissatisfaction with her married life with her self-centred husband. The speaker in the poem talks about the anguish which is due to the male dominated society. She connects her own stay in her marital house to the abandoned old playhouse. Her husband is portrayed as an egoistic human being and he always thinks about his own sensual desires. In the poem the speaker is seen protesting against her husband and also blames him for controlling her like a caged bird- Swallow, which deprived her from the trills of romance and curbed her freedom. The

husband has tried his best to wipe out the beautiful, colourful memories of his wife's past where she was a free bird and had a distinct identity of her own. He longs to see his wife a transformed person as per his own requirement in which there is no place for her freewill and freedom.

The opening lines of the poem "The Old Playhouse" points to the devastating fortune of couple's marriage. It also sees marriage beyond the gratification of sensual desires but it looks forward to a relationship that is constructed upon mutual trust and mutual understanding. Kamala Das tries to speak about her own condition of being a caged bird. She says her husband had captivated her and her freedom to move around the world is curbed. This condition of her is beautifully articulated in the following lines:

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)

The speaker says she married him to learn about herself but he made her learn about him, which obviously shows that she came in a quest for self-identity and growth as an individual but her husband taught her about himself. Helene Cixous rightly point out that in patriarchal society, a man supports only himself, he says: "that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism" (Cixous pp. 879). The speaker mourns for her happy past that is no more existing in her life. She feels that she married him not to explore her husband but to learn about her own self which would enable her to



grow. She is critical of her emotionless husband who treats her just as an object to satisfy his lustful desires. Her thoughts about why she married him is made clear as she says:

It was not to gather knowledge
Of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but
every
Lesson you gave was about yourself. 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. (The
Old Playhouse 1)

The speaker in the poem was abandoned, isolated and her emotions were overlooked by her husband. Kamala Das tries to portray her own condition where she feels all alone in dismay. Her disordered marital life is the outcome of her unemotional and egoistic husband. That further resulted in hopelessness and isolation for Kamala Das. Kamala das has always been sincere and true to herself when it comes to writing poems or prose. Further, we can see that she compares her husband's ego to a monstrous ego. As per the rules of the society, she was supposed to look after the comforts of her husband, to fulfil his needs and play the role of a conventional, submissive Hindu wife. All these responsibilities had dwarfed and skimmed her own

charisma. Her dignity and independence are forcibly taken away. She states that her free will and logical reasoning has disappeared. Her femininity is dominated by masculinity. Thus, she suffers a psychological disorder as she mumbles illogical responses to her husband's questioning. Das's mental condition is evident as she says:

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)

Moreover, the speaker in the poem highlights how a woman becomes an object in the patriarchal society. She is constrained to the four walls of the house just like a caged bird. She is kept isolated and cut off from the outside world. This exposes the cruelty of the male dominated society. She can neither communicate nor step out of the house without the permission of her ruthless husband. The poem portrays a woman as an object or property and fails to count her in human being. She stresses for intellectual and creative space in the patriarchal society that is much required to experience one's freedom. It also reflects on the ignored voices and feelings of the innermost soul of a woman who desires to feel the fresh breeze opening the shut windows. The whole house is smelling only of the male scent and human sweat as there no place for the fresh air to pass by. She feels abandoned at her wedded house where there are no more singing and dancing. Her mind appears to her just like an old playhouse with no lights on. The description of her martial house which is compared to the old



playhouse is observed in the following lines of the poem:

The summer
Begins to pall. I remember the rudder breezes
Of the fall and the smoke from the burning leaves.
Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows
always
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath. The
cut flowers
In the vases have begun to smell of human sweat.
There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an
old
Playhouse with all its lights put out. (The Old
Playhouse 1)

Therefore, we can see that the poem is written from the feminist perspective and also tries to empower women to strive harder to identify oneself. The poem throws light on the rigid patriarchal society and its oppression on women in general. It is an expression of the poet to voice against the male domination in the society. Monush R Marak rightly says that the "The Old Playhouse" poem "serves as an expression of one's individuality, self and role in the society and a quest for self-identity". (Marak, 25)

The strong man's technique is
Always the same, he serves his love in lethal doses,
For, love is Narcissus at the water's edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the
mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.
(The Old Playhouse 1)

Kamala Das's "An Introduction" is an autobiographical poem, where she presents her feelings and thoughts in a courageous way and rebels against the male domination. This poem is the poet's quest for identity. It also emphasises on both pain and love as a dominant theme in the poem. She realises her own identity and brings awareness to all women that there is a need for every woman to raise her voice against all the forces that belittles them. She displays her fury and denial to the patriarchal norms that govern the society and often interfere with the women's choice of lifestyle. The poet is seen all alone and frustrated with her life. She longs for love that is real and the norms that would be empowering women. Her simplicity in writing has the power to touch every heart and also raises voices against the forces that withheld women's right to freedom. She portrays an enraged self and pictures a new woman, which is articulated in the following lines of the poem:

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)
Kamala Das's feminism tries to question the women's identity as the society imposes restraints that are imposed on women. She also maintains that the women's personal feelings are part of shared experiences of all women. Her bold expression of who she is beautifully articulated in the poem:
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (The



Best of Kamala Das 12- 13)

Further in the poem “I Shall Some Day”, we see Kamala Das trying her best to free herself from the shackles that are curbing her freedom. She considers her condition as a bird and tries to free herself from the chains of illogical traditional hindrances in life. She says that one day she will surely free herself and nothing can prevent it from happening. The poet desired to flee exiting the patriarchal control and longed to have a place where she would exercise her freedom. She articulates in “I Shall Some Day”:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon

You built around me with morning tea,

Love-words flung from doorways and of course

Your tired lust, I shall someday take

Wings fly around. (Summer in Calcutta 1-5)

Kamala Das’s poems exhibits courage and a determined spirit through her inherent creative ability to fight against the illogical traditional norms that are designed to dominate women. Her bold and fearless exhibition of self is incomparable and therefore an inspiration for every Indian woman in their fight for empowerment, self-identity, self-dignity and equality of status. Her poems not only are read as a feminist perspective but are also considered as a source of women empowerment. Dr. Kumar rightly said: “Kamala Das succeeds in transcending the personal and embracing the universal. This is also perhaps the most significant factor that has contributed to her wide popularity and critical acclaim abroad”. (Kumar 108)

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Cite This Article:

* *Capt. Dr. Mukherjee R., (2023). Perspective and Women Empowerment in Kamala Das’s Poetry, Educreator Research Journal, Volume–X, Issue– II, March –April 2023, 32-37.*