

Kamala Das – A Voice for Her Own Identity

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ABSTRACT: - In the recent times, there has been steady hike in the production of imaginative literature in English by the Indian writers. The consistent efforts by the bright Indians in putting their bright ideas and heightened sensibility in English language have drawn world wide attention. It is true that only a language is a universally acknowledged medium of expression through which a writer struggle to pour in the rich pearls of his imagination and the great struggle of seeking compromise through uncompromising wilderness, which makes the real story of the literature of true identity. Kamala Das protested against the prevalent systems of the society. Her offended feminine self went on emotional wanderings attempting to explore an identity and freedom for her own in particular and for the whole of women creed in general. Her sympathetic understanding and explication revelation of the problem of Indian woman in general obviously make her a feminist. Kamala Das has vividly visualized the world of “vacant ecstasy” and sterility through numerous functional images and symbols in her poetry. She finds herself catapulted into a series of situations where she became merely a puppet in the hands of male domination. Being bold, she protested and expressed her frustrations, rancor and loneliness through the medium of poetry. Her poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian women who attempt to free her sexually and domestically from the role bondage sanctioned to her by the patriarchal society. Thus the voice of Kamala Das for finding her own identity becomes the voice of women for seeking better living conditions and equal human rights for themselves.

I. INTRODUCTION

Poetry written anywhere in the world would have its particular immediate context and these contexts are developed in accordance with the society we live in. When poets write, it is obvious they would refer to their environment, social and cultural implications and the general attitude and tendencies of the society, in which they exist with their fellow beings. Thus poets give words to the hopes, fears and aspirations of the people. The choice of themes might differ among them individually but their poetry would remain their natural response to the conditions of their existence. During 20th century, there emerged a great feeling among the poets, writers and scholars of different countries writing in English to establish, the identity of their own writings as a distinctive force of their own cultural heritage and literary enterprises. With the receding of the romantic tradition, the second wave of Indian poetry in English emerged just around the beginning of post-Independence era. Kamala Das is one of pioneering post-independence Indian English poets who have contributed immensely to the growth and development of modern Indian English poetry. Kamala Das, also known as Madhavikutty in her mother-tongue, Malayalam, is a trail blazer in the Indian English Poetry. Her poetry highlights and condemns the inequalities and injustices in the treatment of women -the disadvantages women have to bear on account of their gender.

II. DISCUSSION

Traditionally, the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. One factor contributing to this prejudice is the fact that most of the women write about the enclosed domestic space, and women’s perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of male writers who deal with ‘weightier’ themes. Since proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, a frequent judgment is made that the writers, and their works, belong to a high social strata, and are cut off from the reality of Indian life. The majority of the novels and poems written by women depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife, this subject matter often being considered superficial compared to the depiction of the depressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes. Indian women poets writing in English from Toru Dutt to Kamala Das reveal the mind-boggling variety of themes as well as style that poetry is capable of offering. It needs to be remembered that poetry written by women should not be viewed only as feminist poetry rather they too have taken multiple themes and voiced social changes in their works and Kamala Das is the example of the same. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of words and some syntactical construction are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English. “This is an

accomplishment. It is important in the development of the national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistics standard of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech.” (1). According to Eunice de Souza women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das as - “She mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms.”(2)Poems of Kamala Das epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian women who attempt to free her sexually and domestically from the role bondage sanctioned to her by the patriarchal society and thus Kamala Das have portrayed the picture of changing society. The poetry of Kamala Das is characterized by a daring frankness, a total lack of inhibitions especially with reference to love and sex, this marked her as iconoclast "Kamala's poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self.”(3) In fact Kamala Das has come on the Indo-English poetic scene at a time when there has been a heightening of interest in the works of women all over the world. This is because there has been a re-thinking and a re-interpretation of the traditional role of women and the consequent emancipation of women in a male-dominated universe. Arlene R.K. Zide opines:"Kamala Das' themes transcend the 'personal' because what she attempts to poetize, is the 'universal experience' of a woman"(4) Thus Kamala Das has played instrumental role in voicing the social transformation. She is a revolutionary writer. Her voice is authentic, honest, frank, human to core, persuasive, and above all female. In her poem she expresses her inner pangs caused by marriage. She feels a sense of loss and suffocation for marriage commodifies her, crushes her soul, her spirit, her liberty and her essence as a women. Kamala Das has been regarded as a truly authentic feminine voice of power dealing with “conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe”. Her poetry to Devendra Kohli is “in the final analysis and acknowledgment and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being women”. As a poet of love and sex, Kamala Das looks most native, honest, and frank. She in her quest for freedom and identity in her poetry “reflects the artistic identity. It reflects the artistic movement between utopia and authenticity.”(5) Thus Kamala Das dared to reveal the changing attitude of women in the society. She audaciously and boldly faced all the criticism that came on her way, but as a true literary figure she started demanding rights of women in this patriarchal society. Outwardly everything seems to be correct in the life of women but the burden that she carries can only be understood and recognized by women. At the same time she believes that lack of solidarity between women, makes their condition bad to worse. Her poetic sweep has touched almost all aspects of modern life: love, politics, poverty, nature, relationships, ruins, myth, past, present and future and thus she truthfully depicted the change in the thinking of the society where women empowerment has become a major issue. As a woman she tries to see man woman relationship in its purest and idealized form. So dualism results from the fall from childhood innocence into the adult realm of sexuality, marriage and life amongst strangers. Consequently, the female voice in Kamala Das’s poetry apparently dangles between two worlds- one of sanity which is overshadowed by her social surroundings and well established traditions guiding human deportment, particularly of women how to behave and go about in the society and second, her psychological phenomenon which is prevailed upon by her emotional upheavals. . In Das’s poetry, moral inhibitions and social restraints force feminist voice feel oppressively snubbed which ultimately, force her to seek rebellious pursuits by breaking man-made laws of the society. As she declared-

“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. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.”(6)

Psychological, social and cultural proscriptions have unleashed tremendous amount of miseries and hardships to women. When Kamala Das opts for male clothing to hide her femininity, the guardians enforce typical female attire, with warnings to fit into the socially determined attributes of a woman, to become a wife and a mother and get confined to the domestic routine. She is threatened to remain within the four walls of her female space lest she should make herself a psychic or a maniac. Unhealthy environment forces woman feel depressed, frustrated and ultimately alienated which forces her to look at the world around her through colored binoculars. As Saleem Peeradina has discoursed: “She writes about love with obsession of a woman who can realize her being fully only through love. Not surprisingly, given the subject, the writing is some-times weak and self indulgent.” (7) Her sympathetic understanding explication and revelation of the problem of Indian woman in general, obviously make her feminist. In the words of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, “aggressively individualistic,” is Kamala Das *aka* MadhaviKutty, the so-called icon of Indian feminism. (8). Thus Kamala Das has truly reflected the societal changes in context of the living and psychological conditions of women in the society. In fact she not only draws forward the deplorable condition of women in society but she also raised her voice for demanding equal human rights for them.

III. CONCLUSION

Kamala Das displays feminist ethos in her poems. Her poems present her fearless voice in condemning the inequalities and injustice in the treatment of society towards women. The poet as an individual woman tried to voice a universal womanhood and tried to share her experiences, in her search for female identity and the identity consists of polarities. She has pictured the women demanding equal social status and even voiced her emotional demands. She denigrated the tradition-bound, conservative society which was always harsh on her conventional life style. She has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very honest woman. As a poet she considers it her duty to report every detail in real life faithfully. Dr. Konnur rightly points out when he says, "Kamala Das' autobiography clearly shows how her urge for identity and liberation finds its fulfillment in the superimposition of her poetic self over the domestic self which compelled her to play the monotonous and enslaved role of a wife".(9)

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