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FEMINIST CONCERN AND A READING OF KAMALA DAS'S MAJOR LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

The basic concerns of feminism revolve round the degenerated and marginalised state of the women in society throughout centuries. Feminism does not imply war against male in general. Rather it concerns with the female deprivation and gender discrimination in almost all the spheres of life – social, cultural, economic, political, religious and even familial. Feminist movement fundamentally aimed at establishing women's equal rights, equity, and justice in all spheres of life. Feminism also involves establishing a distinct women identity, hitherto denied to them by the patriarchy. They also raised their voice against all sorts of atrocities and exploitation in male-dominated society. Many women intellectuals and writers are actively engaged in waging war against male domination and raised their voice against any sort of discrimination, exploitation, atrocity or torture against women. Among Indian poets and intellectuals, Kamala Das is one of the strongest poets who vehemently protested against male domination and fought for emancipation of women. She is free, frank, bold, straightforward, unhesitant and even militant in expressing her agonised female identity. The paper aims at focussing this feminist concern expressed in major literary works of Kamala Das.

Keywords: Feminism, concern, discrimination, emancipation, vehemently.

Feminism is a contemporary phenomenon in critical writings and literature which fundamentally centres on women's struggle against the age-old phallogocentric notion of male superiority and female subordination in all the fields of social, economic, political, cultural, legal, educational and even in familial and conjugal life. It also centres upon fighting against tortures and exploitation of women in patriarchal society and establishing gender equality, equity and justice and thereby achieving women's emancipation and establishing female identity in society. There are a limited number of poets and intellectuals in India who dared to raise their voice against the age-old customs, traditions and rituals which systematically legalized or institutionalized male domination and female subjugation in the society and family. Kamala Das is a unique name who not only raised these issues of discrimination, injustice, inequity, deprivation and atrocities against women but also depicts the glaring picture of barbarity and atrocities meted out to women in its many diverse forms and dimensions. For this she looks both inside and outside; explores her inner self and the surrounding ambience which isolates her as other, a woman, distinctly different from her male counterpart. She does not spare even the family members, including her husband and parents who indulged in the process of exploitation- familial, social, economic and sexual. In her autobiographical work *My Story*, she says that 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 throughout her poetic and personal life. The close reading of her following book of poems gives enough evidence of her frank and fearless feminist concerns. These magnificent anthologies are *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996).

The fundamental concepts that structured the concepts of feminist concerns in all three waves of feminist movement use the following premises as its strongest resources:

- 1 Patriarchy, prevalent in all societies, leads to gender-specific claims to superiority on the ground that the seed of man (the phallic principle) helps bring a new life into being and ensures the continuity of the family.
- 2 Patriarchy ignores the fact that gender inequality has no legal basis and women do not belong to a ‘sex class’, and this leads to oppression and exploitation of women for non-/extra-scientific reasons like biology (anatomical structure), the institution of marriage (making equals unequal), and heterosexuality (disapproval of other forms of sexuality) as it does in case of social class and ethnicity.
- 3 Institutionalized relationships which show a complex of hierarchies like father-son, husband-wife, superior-subordinate, male-female etc were used to pave the way for the subsequent establishment of an investor-investment kind of structure, leading to gender and economic exploitation.
- 4 Share in control over technology and development is necessary for ensuring women’s liberation as it would free them from the processes of conceiving, bearing babies, childbirth, and the subsequent responsibility for their nurture.
- 5 All men are neither ‘the class enemy’ of women nor all male-female relationships are oppressive and exploitative in nature, with the fight being restricted to the demand for a fair share of control over development, which was an exclusively male preserve thus far.
- 6 Women, unlike men, experience a dual form of exploitation because men exercise some or the other form of unnatural authority to oppress women both at the workplace and within the confines of their homes and this high-handedness essentially symbolizes the treatment of women as a commodity.

Thus, feminism, it appears from the discussion above, confronts patriarchy on the ground of its (a) phallic-centred claims to superiority, (b) use of institutionalized hierarchies and structures to perpetrate these claims, (c) sole control over development, (d) use of biology and heterosexuality to create restrictions, (e) commodification of women at home and at work, and (f) insensitive treatment of women for childbirth.

The memorable poems of Das’s great anthologies voice fourth the traumatic experience of exploitation, oppression, atrocities and injustices against women.

Love, Lust and Betrayal:

From the beginning of her writings, Kamala Das is obsessed with the diverse forms of gender-based discrimination against women. She touches upon this issue by closely referring to her association with her family members- father, mother, brother, sister, husband, relative and friends. She did not spare any soul as regard to her subjugation as woman, primarily in the close circle of family and friends. She expressed her dissatisfaction and anger against her isolation, fear, psychological trauma and sexual exploitation. She shows how she became a toy at the hand of the male members of her family who treated her as mere burden. She vehemently protested against this inequality and insensitivity. In her debut collection *Summer in Calcutta* the introductory poem ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’ very wryly presents the arid state and desolation of a eunuch which clearly alludes to her immediate post-marital days. In the same way “My Mother at Sixty-six”, “Sluggish Wants” uphold the faces of those who surround her with no smile on their faces but only desire. This shows the fearful and critical existence of her identity which remained always at a risk. Without any veil she presents the loveless relation between herself and her husband in “The End of the Spring”:

"While I wait for your phone call...."

I'm not sure who to trust anymore.

My heart is broken by you or by the voice in my head that tells me no. (1-3).

The above lines show the arid emotional state of the speaker whose bondage of love for her husband is completely shattered due to her husband's indifference and lack of emotional and spiritual attachment with the wife.

Kamala Das unveils without any hesitation her parents' lack of love and emotional attachment for her as she was a girl child. They considered her a burden and was careless of their responsibility as parents to raise her. She got this caring love from her grandma only. She wrote her heart and clearly reveals how her parents neglected her throughout her childhood, adolescent age and even the days later. "Our parents took us for granted and considered us simple puppets moving our limbs according to the pulls they gave us," she said in her autobiography, *My Story* (63). She realizes the true and unconditional love only after her grandma's death because neither her mother nor her father had any emotional attachment of love with her. She expresses her bereaved heart in her poem "My Grandmother's House" in *Summer in Calcutta*.

Kamala Das's autobiography, *My Story*, unfolds her aggrieved heart as both her parents were careless and indifferent for the children particularly, for her as she was a girl child. She presents his father as symbol of patriarchy. According to Das, "our instincts advised us to remain out of the spotlight, to hide in the area of the kitchen where we might hold together the shreds of our self-respect." (12). She was more to suffer while she was forcefully married at the age of only 13. When it came to her conjugal life, it is worse than ever. Her husband had no emotional relationship with her, neither he tried to realize her mind and her wishes. It was only the carnal relation that he was interested to fulfil his desires. She was utterly shocked and overwhelmed with the feelings of loneliness, lovelessness and painful feelings of betrayal. This is well expressed in "The Old Playhouse":

..... 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 ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf. (12-16)

A strong sense of despair, futility and dread is expressed in another well-known poem "The Freaks" from the anthology *Summer in Calcutta*. The poet vehemently expressed her anger and anguish against the lustful relation in conjugal life of the speaker. She is overwhelmed with the arid state of soulless carnality in man-woman relation. She depicts how her husband becomes totally devoid of any emotional attachment in relation to the speaker. She felt terribly disgusted and ashamed with the relation which does not respect the feelings of the heart and there is no mental relation between the two. What remains there is only beastly carnality:

...Can this man with

Nimble finger-tips unleash

Nothing more alive than the

Skin's lazy hungers? Who can

Help us who have lived so long

And have failed in love? The heart,

An empty cistern, waiting

Through long hours, fills itself

With coiling snakes of silence.....(9-17)

"Each line consists of short and abrupt pieces of phrases expressing the unpleasant method the gang of cynics including the husband treat the wife," says K.R. Ramachandran Nair in his book *The Poetry of Kamala*

Das' (21). The savagery and brutality of the lustful carnal love is well expressed in another remarkable poem "The Sunshine Cat". Male sexuality and callousness of a loveless relation is described by her with intense accuracy when she said:

They did this to her, the men who know her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher....(1-4)

She experienced same kind of male chauvinism when she craved for emotional attachment and love from other males, involving in extra-marital affairs. This she expressed in another of his poems "Substitute", taken from *The Descendants*, "Our bodies after love-making/Turned away, rejecting".

Exploration of Self and Identity:

All through her poetic journey Kamala Das continued to wage a war for establishing the identity of her ownself as well as searching avenues of freedom from patriarchy. As far as her identity is concerned, as a girl freedom for her was a far-flung fantasy. In man's mind woman is supposed to represent a 'doll', a headless doll. A toy lacks freedom and self-identity. It dances, plays, jumps or jerks solely at the wish of its owner. A toy has no head or if there remains a head, it is made of clay, thereby suggesting the fact that women are irrational and intellectually impotent. She is psychologically and physically rendered weak and inefficient by men. And she is supposed to satisfy the desires and whims of her male partners.

As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir 1949, p. 2). Many feminist critics demands that woman's servitude to a man is not a biological truth, rather it is the cultural construct which is created, established and perpetuated by men for male domination and women subjugation. A man of perfect temperament and admiration for all women like Radha's lover Krishna, was the object of her affections. "I craved for a change, for a new life, even though I was desired and loved as men adore their women back then. I was on the hunt for a perfect partner. When I travelled to Mathura, I was hunting for the one who left Radha behind and didn't return." (Das 1976, p. 165)... She wished for a life of love and compassion with him that was not possible in the actual world. Her actual love was not her spouse, but rather Krishna. She was desperate to be reunited with him. Let me be brought back to You, Lord, if it isn't too late" (p.180). Lord Krishna hears the pleadings of Das. In her imagination, she started to see herself as Radha, patiently awaiting the return of Krishna. Radha was Krishna's adored in her dream world, but she was an alien without a name in the actual world. Since these fantasies and dreams were free of limitations, Das found peace in them. As she got older, she discovered that writing was a way for her to express her unfulfilled ambitions and desires. Writing has evolved into a means of expressing oneself and finding one's place in the world. *Feminist Revolution and Kamala Das's My Story*, written by Iqbal Kaur, both highlight this aspect. ...of every self-determined woman who despite all the difficulties she faces in a man's world, must make efforts at self-actualization. It depicts "the struggle of a New Woman trying to find her own sense of self-worth and identity." (Kaur 1992, p.144)

Kamala Das, according to Eunice de Souza, laid out the landscape for postcolonial women in social and linguistic terms for women authors. Poems of Kamala Das, an Indian poet, represent the contemporary Indian woman's struggle to break free of the shackles of the patriarchal culture, and so she has depicted the changing society. This defined Kamala Das as an iconoclast because of her daring frankness, particularly in regards to love and sex, in her poems. Agonies of women rising from a position of slavery and bondage are shown in Kamala's poetry as she seeks to establish her identity and the self. When it comes to the Indo-English poetic landscape, Kamala Das has arrived just when interest in women's poetry has never been higher. To put it another way, there has been a shift in the role of women and the subsequent liberation of women in a male-dominated world due of this. Kamala Das has played an important role in raising awareness about social change. She is a ground-breaking author. As a female speaker, she has a voice that's both natural and compelling. It is in this poem that she acknowledges the pain that marriage has brought her. As a woman, she feels betrayed and suffocated by marriage since it reduces her to a commodity and smothers her spirit, freedom, and essence.

When it comes to the "battle between passivity and revolt against the male orientated cosmos," Kamala Das has been considered as an authentically feminine voice of strength. "In the ultimate analysis and appreciation and celebration of the beauty and bravery of being women," she writes in her poem to Devendra Kohli. When it comes to writing about love and sex, Kamala Das seems to be the most authentic and open. Poetry "reflects the creative identity" of the poet's search for freedom and self-expression. Art "symbolizes a shift in creative expression between utopia and reality." (Kulshrestha1980, pp. 22-24) She dares to demonstrate how society's attitudes about women have changed, so Kamala Das did just that. The criticism she received was brave and aggressive, but as a literary personality she began to advocate for women's rights in this patriarchal environment. The weight that women carry can only be acknowledged and understood by other women, despite the fact that everything seems to be natural on the surface. Despite this, she feels that the lack of support from other women makes their situation much worse. Love, politics, poverty, nature, relationships, and myth are just few of the subjects she has explored in her poetry. She has accurately described a culture where women's empowerment has become a big concern. To perceive the man-woman interaction in its purest and idealised form, she strives to be a lady of virtue. The descent from childhood innocence into adult sexuality, marriage, and social life among strangers is the source of dualism. Because of this, Kamala Das's feminine voice in poetry seems to be caught between two worlds: sanity, which is obscured by her social surrounds and well-established traditions directing human deportment, especially for women, and psychology, which is dominated by her emotional upheavals. Feminist voices in Das's poetry are suppressed by societal norms and moral inhibitions, leading them to fight against the system by breaching the rules of the land.

Conclusion

Kamala Das is accused of *nymphomania* and a show of obscenity by her critics until her death on 31 May 2009. The narrator in her poems appears to readers as a rebel, a staunch feminist, rising in revolt against a phallogocentric world. Most of her feminist poems reveal a radical feminist ideology which moved the poet to talk of sex and the meaninglessness of both marital and adulterous adventures quite fearlessly. The descriptions, narrations, rhetoric etc indicate, implicitly or explicitly, the existence of the features of radical feminism in them. It is surprising, therefore, when we find Raveendran (1994) arguing that Kamala Das, often labelled as 'a feminist', was never known 'to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism. This appears to be far from the truth, for quite to the contrary, a close reading of some of the poems we discuss draw attention to the fact that the 'evidence' of 'nymphomania' and 'obscenity' is essentially a corroboration of the existence of radical feminism in her poems.

Das's poems can be taken easily as the product of an exercise of both 'self-expression' and 'self-realisation'. The spontaneity of expression may make them appear obscene because the narrator in her poems does not mince her words. The simultaneity of the attempts to cling to the tradition and the yearning to help affect a change gives the poems a sharper edge. The ambivalence reflected in them, although at a superficial level, makes them more attractive. The poem read as a whole implies that the 'I' in "An Introduction" represents both men and women. Sex is accepted as a categorial relationship which has social sanction according to the Indian belief system. The prohibition imposed by social custom on a free public debate on sex still holds.

Kamala Das must be credited with the fact that she accepts sex as ordinary a need for a human being as are food, shelter, security etc, not for women alone. Hence, it is unfair to single out women as nymphomaniacs and/or as passive recipients. The narrator in her poems does not want women to remain silent sufferers of all humiliations but to be bold enough to demand fair play and equality in status because the soul knows no difference between sexes.

It seems to us that the narrator in Kamala Das's poems is troubled by the question of the growing chasm between the ideal and reality. The ideal of equality in man-woman relationship is far from attained in real life, the unity of man and woman in coitus is only a mirage and the woman in the poems is determined not to rest until such time as it is restored. Kamala Das confesses of women's failure in bringing about a change in the male psyche. Yet there is room to believe that changes are bound to come with the passage of time. Women's refusal to follow the dictates of the tradition will ensure that. It is clear that she is expressing the inner voice of women

in her poems, since we can see that women are oppressed in a male dominated society (also known as patriarchy). She made men's abuse of women public knowledge. This is her victory as a feminist, as a woman, as a human being for upholding the raw truth and demanding justice and equality of all human beings.

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