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THE IMAGE OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD IN THE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

The exploration of *self* and the candour with which Kamala Das has expressed her personal concerns and predicaments lend an authentic tone to her poetry and help create an authentic image of Indian womanhood caught between her individual awareness and feminine consciousness and the demands of a traditional patriarchal mindset. Despite its Anglo-American origin, the concept of Feminism is highly relevant to the Indian context. Assumptions, methods and procedures of the feminists can be applied as a tool to evaluate the image, status, role, and the socio-cultural recognition of women in Indian society represented through various literary texts –classical, contemporary, regional, Hindi or Indian English Literature. Whether it is the classical Indian literature like the Ramayan, the Mahabharata, or the works of Sharat Chandra, Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das, GirishKarnad, Arundhati Roy and many others– all can be evaluated from a feminist perspective which decidedly adds to our understanding of feminine psyche and the pattern of its responses to different personal and social situations. The present paper is an attempt to appreciate the effective manner in which the nuances of contemporary Indian womanhood are reflected in the experiences of different women personae articulated through the poet's creative imagination.

Key words: traditional, patriarchal, feminine consciousness, womanhood, identity.

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Indian mythology and religious scriptures have created fascinating pictures of ideal Indian women, the epitomes of selflessness, patience, abounding love who lead spiritually vibrant lives. The early Indian English women poets like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu have celebrated the 'ideal' image of Indian women in their poems. Commenting on Toru Dutt's delineation of women A. N. Dwivedi says that Savitri, Sita and Jogadhya Uma are the ideal representative of Indian womanhood and offer an opportunity to the poetess to reveal the mysterious feminine nature. Toru's intimate feelings are expressed through them.(Dwivedi118)Her first poem "Savitri" narrates the fortune of the princess Savitri, the ideal of Indian womanhood, who follows Yama boldly in order to reclaim her husband from the clutches of Death and when she is asked to retrace her steps home

and perform the duties of a widow, she refuses to obey. It depicts the constancy of the heroine, her chastity, womanly modesty, humility as well as her courage and her great love for her husband Satyavan. Her actions are considered as "the highest standard of conjugal love" in the traditional Indian society even today. Nevertheless, through the story, Dutt also discloses the pitiable plight of the widows of her time. She writes:

And think upon the dreadful curse
Of widowhood; the vigils, fasts
And penances; no life is worse
Than hopeless life—the while it lasts. ("Savitri", *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, 46)

Her poem "Sita" also beautifully portrays the plight of a rejected wife and her children.

Similarly, Sarojini's poems breathe an Indian air with particular light on women and their glory. They are mellifluous and recreate an image of ideal Indian woman of Ancient times. Her poems like "Indian Love Song", "Village Song", "Pardanashin" and "Indian Dancers" portray the life of Indian Woman of different sects where women are seen dancing, enjoying and involved in the thoughts of their lovers. Love is the prominent theme of Sarojini Naidu's poetry where women are shown as devotees who are ready to surrender before their lovers. "If You Call Me", "The Path of Tears", "The Sanctuary" and "The Worship of Love" mirror the role of woman as a beloved in diverse moods. Even when a woman is complaining about negligence, she shows her preparedness to accept all humiliation and suffering at her lover's hands as sweet token of love. "Love's Guerdon" gives an example of the same:

Fires were the wounds
You struck me O my love
And bitter were the blows!
Sweeter from dear hands all suffering
That rich love tokens other comrades bring
Of crimson Oleander and of rose.
("Love's Guerdon", ll. 50-55)

But the picture of Indian women that emerges in Kamala Das's poetry are entirely different from those presented by her predecessors like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who do express concern about the pitiable condition of women living with the constricted social mores but in their poetry the voice of revolt is seldom heard. The influence of the Feminist movement in the West is clearly reflected in the Post-colonial Indian writings, especially poetry, which is the most subjective of all literary genres. Modern Indian women poets, influenced by feminist trends, give voice to feminine desires, hopes, fears and frustrations of Indian women in their journey from traditional to modernity. Poets like Kamala Das, Imtiaz Dharker, Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia etc. revolt against the restraints in the patriarchal society and express the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individuality, identity and freedom. These poets with the help of their creative imagination clamour for dignity, status and equal treatment for women on both individual and social fronts. Male writers like Sharat Chandra, Tagore and amongst the contemporary poets Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan etc. have also powerfully portrayed various aspects of Indian women but Kamala Das being herself the subject of womanly experiences effectively gives voice to aspirations, frustrations and emotional upheavals of a woman conscious of her individuality in the Indian social milieu.

The tone of poetry and portrayal of women in the poems changed drastically with the advent of Kamala Das on the horizon of Indian English poetry. Her poetry written in the confessional mode gave voice to the awakened consciousness of contemporary educated Indian women who protested against the subaltern status of women in the patriarchal society. Their clamour for individual identity found expression in Das's bold assertions of female physicality and sexuality as well as her need for emotional fulfillment. The following rebellious lines call for the redefinition of the term 'happiness' extending beyond the confines of domesticity and wifehood. "There is a desire to extricate from this 'Soul Killing' subjugation"(Iyer371):

Women, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It is time again to come alive,
The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame."
("Conflagration")

Kamala Das broke free from the metaphysical and romantic traditions of Indian English poetry written by women poets like Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu and created a poetry that centered round her own feelings and desires which in the context of Indian milieu were often outrageous and shockingly bold.

In *My Story* she says:

A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her *personality*. (Italics mine)
(Das 124)

The statement clearly suggests that in spite of the essential aesthetic transmutations that her raw materials undergo before being transformed into poetic wholes, her poetry remains an expression of the first hand experiences and the responses thereof of a contemporary woman who is acutely aware of her feminine self as well as conscious of the demands of a traditional society. When her poetry is interpreted and appreciated without giving too much attention to the biographical details contained in her much publicized autobiography *My Story*, Das's poetry becomes a true reflection of the distress and dilemma of modern Indian women in conflict with the demands of the *self* and the expectations of the traditional patriarchal setup. Louis Bernikov's observation while commenting on the women poets of England and America is also true for the women poets of modern India in general and Kamala Das in particular: "A woman poet constantly pits herself against cultural expectation of 'Womanhood' and 'Woman's Writing'. She gives her imagination and courage to that struggle, pours energy into it in ways that do not exist for men. Womeness is sometimes seen as authenticity, the essence to be distilled in the poems..." (Bernikov 8)

Kamala Das's poems show strong sense of consciousness towards the feminine psyche. Iyengar takes her to be a writer of "fiercely feminine sensibility"(Iyenger 680) while SatyaDevJaggi affirms that "she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman" (Jaggi 17). The first person personal pronoun "I", which is strewn over her poetic canvas, represents the various poetic personae through whom the poet gives expression to different aspects of contemporary Indian womanhood. The poet has tried to present the feelings, desires, expectations and frustrations of a typical contemporary Indian woman and her longing for a respectable status in a patriarchal Indian society. She adopts an unconventional and innovative manner to give voice to the mute longings of the suppressed woman to free herself from the subaltern status, her search for an identity and individuality as well as her need of love and emotional fulfillment. Her three volumes of poems notably *Summer in Calcutta (1965)*, *The Descendents (1967)* and *The Old Play House and Other Poems (1975)* voice in full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian Woman's journey from tradition to modernity, but also the Indian women's sense of commitment to reality.

As is told by her in her autobiography *My Story*, Kamala Das was herself a middle class 'woman' struggler who had to face a lot of atrocities in the Indian patriarchal setup. In her poem "An Introduction" she presents herself as a woman and expresses her sensibility and also revolts against the society in a confessional mode. The poem articulates the anguish of the victims of the gender bias who are denied their need of emotional and intellectual fulfillment. A woman too has an equal right to see, learn and enjoy what the world offers to 'human beings'.

I have no joys that are not yours,
No aches which are not yours I too call myself "I".
("An Introduction", ll. 58,59)

The opening statement of the "An Introduction" – a polyphonic text seeking articulation in a single verbal construct – "I do not know politics" is a confession of ignorance with an ironic exposure of the society where a woman with her marginalized status is not supposed to be aware of the contemporary political activities. She is just a victim of politics and even her knowledge in this field has no impact on her personal life. The transformation of a school building into a brothel house speaks a lot about the degenerating condition where women are condemned to sell off their bodies to be used as toys:

My first school-house
Is now a brothel,
And
The ladies sun themselves on the lawn
In the afternoons
With their greying hair,
Newly washed,
Left undyed.
Who can say, looking at them,
That they are toys,
Fit for the roaring nights?
(“Composition”, ll.172-182)

Different women personae in Kamala Das’s poems represent common Indian women who are treated ruthlessly by male hegemony in a prejudiced culture. Another poem "Composition" depicts the hurt responses of a woman who fails to experience the feeling of being loved as she crosses her childhood. In the words of AnisurRehman “In the course of the circular movement of the poem is enumerated the wages she has paid for her existence. The consistent fatigued tone and the ironic overtones dominate the poem’s structure.” (Rehman19) The world of a woman changes as soon as innocence is replaced by growing consciousness.

The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth,...
(“Composition”, ll.136-137)

The poet gives voice to the experience of disgust at the male domination, the trauma of an unhappy marriage, the humiliation of a desire-less surrender in sex, and the daring desire to liberate herself from the overburdening shackles of stereotype subaltern status especially in the sphere of man-woman relationship. The following lines in “An Introduction” imaginatively present the basic difference between a man and a woman which can be a key to a better understanding of womanhood.

..... In him ... the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me...the oceans' tireless
Waiting.
(“An Introduction”, ll. 46-48)

In her poem "The Freaks" she brings out the emotional emptiness and sterility of an unhappy married life and the intensity of the misery of the wife who surrenders to her insensitive husband. Her empty heart is therefore filled only with a stinging silence. She calls herself a freak or an abnormal person who has to make a show of being lustful to be regarded as a normal being.

..... 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.
(“The Freaks”, ll.12-17)

The persona is a representative of a modern Indian woman who is conscious of her physical and emotional needs and expects sexual and emotional fulfillment in a man-woman relationship.

In the poem "The Prisoner" a woman’s yearning for true love has been powerfully expressed in terms of an escape from the prison house. The lack of emotional fulfillment in a man-woman relationship is like an imprisonment. The metaphorical expression powerfully presents the dilemma of a modern woman who feels trapped into the conflicting demands of her own physical desires and her emotional needs:

As the convict studies
his Prison's geography

I study the trappings
of your body, dear love,
for I must someday find
An escape from its snare.
(“The Prisoner”, ll.01-06)

In the poem “Summer in Calcutta” the image of April sun apparently stands for heat and intoxication whereas the juice of April sun sparks with sensuousness. The repetitive occurrence of the ‘drink’ evokes the mood of sensuality. However, Devindra Kohli, a noted critic of Kamala Das fails to appreciate the deeper layer of meanings and experiences when he opines that “the poem is an Indian poet’s reaction to the torture of the Indian summer” (Kohli, 1975, 73) In fact the depiction of the sensuous absorption of sunlight emerges as a metaphor for the poet's destination. The male chauvinism on the feminine psyche is reduced when she lets herself participate in the world of nature and gets the stimulation of life.

How
Brief the term of my
Devotion, how brief
Your reign when I with
Glass in hand, drink, drink,
And drink again this
Juice of April suns.
(“Summer in Calcutta”, ll. 19-25)

“The Looking Glass” ironically reflects the helplessness of the woman as it reflects the desires of the woman to portray her man as the stronger part in the pair. If the man leaves her, she suffers from loneliness and lack of love and if the man dies, she keeps lamenting over his death throughout her life. So, in this situation where is her individuality in the pair? The mirror emerges as the complex symbol of societal attitude that perpetuates the gender bias and illustrates the pride of man and the humiliations of woman who is just a foil to prove his superiority.

...Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier...Admit your
Admiration. Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, ...
(“The Looking Glass”, ll. 03-07)

The poem also ironically comments on the lack of realization of the worth of self on her part:

...All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.
(“The Looking Glass”, ll. 11,12)

There is an ironic pleading to all women to kneel before the male ego since it is implicit in the institution of marriage.

Turn your home into a merry
dog-house,
marriage is meant to be all this
anyway,
being arranged in
most humorous heaven.
(“Composition”, ll. 195-200)

The poem “Stone Age” is in the form of a monologue from the mouth of a woman who finds neither love nor happiness in her relationship with her husband. The powerful images show how the desperate wife develops illicit relationship in the hope of finding true love but ultimately finds herself being physically

exploited in the name of love. This poem portrays the husband of the persona as "old fat spider" who weaves webs of bewilderment around her and erects the dead, dull stony wall of domesticity which acts like a trap to suck up the vitality of the victim and make it lifeless. The callous indifference of her husband turns her into "a bird of stone". The pain inflicted by him has been expressed powerfully in her accusation, "You stick a finger into my dreaming eye". The woman's heart is ripped:

...Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price....

("The Stone Age", ll. 22,23)

another poem "The Old Playhouse" expresses the vehemence and fierceness of those women whose individuality and identity are crushed after marriage in the name of her being the provider of domestic bliss to the family. A playhouse is a miniature rendition of a house for little girls to play as homemakers. Thus the title imagery questions the socio-cultural attempt to reinforce and perpetuate the traditional gender roles. The poem strikes a sharp note at the very outset:

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", ll. 01-05)

She has been limited to breaking saccharine into tea and offering vitamins at the right moment. There is a caricature of the role of wife and consequent reduction of personality:

Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

("The Old Playhouse", ll. 15-17)

The element of familiarity imparts the poem a tragic dimension. The playhouse has lost its inherent joy and innocence. She laments:

There is
No more singing, no more dance, my mind is an old
Playhouse with all its lights put out.

("The Old Playhouse", ll. 24-26)

The confessional tone not only lends an authentic tone to her expression but also becomes a choral voice for the contemporary Indian womanhood fervently calling for a symbiotic and harmonious relationship between the two sexes.

In the poem "The Sunshine Cat", the persona rants over the disillusionment in her yearning for a fulfilling love both within and outside marriage. The 'men', which included her husband, took advantage of her emotional instability and she "clinged" on to this "band of cynics". Her insecurity and pitiable status is reflected in the expressions such as

... clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget,
To forget, oh, to forget... and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you...

("The Sunshine Cat", ll. 05-10)

The word "kind" is suggestive of the patronizing attitude of the young lovers, they 'use' her with an air of condescension. She is forced to "build walls with tears...walls to shut herself in". In the name of satisfying her intellectual craving and material comforts her husband jails her in a room full of books. Her only ray of hope is the streak of sunlight beneath the door, her Sunshine Cat – the sunny impulse in her. As her life approached its

winter, her husband, while locking her, notices that this streak had reduced to a thin line, that is, age and despondency had made her useless for men. The poem focuses on the phallogocentric attitude of the society which considers that the sole purpose of the woman in man's life is for sexual gratification.

The poet reveals the pain of a woman bound in a loveless marriage in her poem, "Maggots" by transferring her experiences to Radha, who after the blissful love relation which Krishna, feels like being a corpse after her marriage:

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left.
That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love ? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, what is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip ?
(“The Maggots”, ll. 01-07)

The poet brings in the Krishna myth to articulate her vision of ideal love in man-woman relationships. It is remarkable that in Devotional Poetry of Bhaktikal, Krishna is a symbol of pure love. Her beautiful poem “Radha” reveals with rare intensity both her pain and quest for true love simultaneously:

O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but you
You...
(“Radha”, ll. 08-10)

“Ghanshyam” is also a revelation of painful purgatorial quest for the ideal of love. The quest compels her to say that she sees 'the beautiful Krishna in every man'. Her poetry oscillates between the modern to the traditional when she links the woman's extramarital affairs to the myth of Krishna and his *Gopi*.

Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind
And the flute luring her
From home and her husband, ...
(“Vrindavan”, ll. 01-03)

While making a psychoanalytical interpretation of Hindu myths Sudhir Kakar points out that Krishna "encourages the individual to identify with an ideal primal self released from all social and super ego constraints"(Kakar98). Such an interpretation of the myth adds another dimension to Das's expressions when she uses Radha-Krishna myth in her poems. It is obvious that a reference to Krishna myth or to the imaginary ideal of Vrindavan is a quest as well as an attempt to escape from the social code of conduct.

The dejection of the hurt feminine sensibility of a woman has been expressed in very simple words in “The Suicide”. The poet yearns to go deep down into the bed of the sea and negate all the drudgery arising out of her emotional displacement:

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had
I want to be dead....
(“The Suicide”, ll. 50-55)

However, there are several poems in which Kamala Das has presented another aspect of Indian womanhood - the beautiful emotional bonding and fulfilling relationships the Indian women maintain in the society. In the absence of true love and emotional stability the persona is reminded of her grandmother. She becomes a symbol of love and security in the nostalgic feelings of an unhappily married woman living in a society with a traditional patriarchal mindset. In the poem ‘My Grandmother's House’ the woman recalls her childhood in

her grandmother's house and the memory of her grandmother and her house makes her sad and almost heartbroken. As the poem progresses, it shows that the persona is not happy in her husband's house. She does not want to identify herself as a wife but rather wants to be the little girl, who was happy and whom everybody loved. The pride expressed in the poem owes its genesis to the unconditional love she received there in the matriarchal setup. She admits:

...you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved...I who have lost
My way and beg now at stranger's doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?
("My Grandmother's House", ll. 12-16)

K. R. Ramchandran rightly says that these lines suggest that "the woman's ideal relationship is based on mutual love, without lust, passion without desire and possession without condescension." (Ramchandran 98)

Her poems "Jaisurya" and "Afterwards" explore filial love and express the pride of motherhood, a distinct feature of Indian woman's feminine sensibility. The poem "Jaisurya" is about labour pain and child birth:

They raised him
To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son
Separated from darkness that was mine
And in me.

("Jaisurya", ll. 33-36)

The adjective 'proud' before the pre-decided name of the newborn is suggestive of the mother's pride and her overwhelming love for the child. The mother adores the child and forgets the pains of bearing it.

Indian women are also shown to be not unconcerned with the typical female concern that threatened even Cleopatra. The typical feminine awareness is the vital core of her poem "Beauty was a Short Season". Both happiness and beauty are identified here for their transience.

Happiness,
Yes,
That was a moment or two
And beauty
A short season...
For what hazy cause we outlive
Like gnarled fruit trees
The fecund season?
("Beauty was a Short Season")

Thus Kamala Das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman's ambivalence who gives expression to it more nakedly than any other Indian woman poet. The complex picture of Indian womanhood that emerges from her poetry is because she reveals her feminine sensibility in diverse role such as wife, beloved, mistress, sister, mother, daughter, grand-daughter and even nymphomaniac. Even though regarded as a confessional poet, Kamala Das has made use of several types of subjects for the presentation of woman and her sensibility. Though Kamala Das has been often labeled as "a feminist" for her candour in dealing with women's needs and desires, she "has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism" (Raveendran 52). She raises her voice against humiliation and neglect of woman and revolts against the conventional definition of Indian womanhood. She expects the society to understand the emotional cravings of women and in the process initiates the task of dismantling the image of the ideal womanhood imposed on them by men. Her criticism for bringing to surface the desires put under the carpet definitely points to the dogmas associated with the woman's expression of desire in the Indian society. Her views can be characterized as "a gut response," a reaction that, like her poetry, is unfettered by other's notions of right and wrong. Devindra Kohli aptly observes, "Her poetry is in final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and

courage of being a Woman" (Kohli ,1980, 89). The image of the woman that emerges in the whole corpus of Das's poetry powerfully expresses the problem and pathos of the Indian woman emerging from an imposed passive role in the patriarchal setup to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity in the changing socio-cultural scenario.

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