



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE
AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)

A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

<http://www.ijelr.in>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4., 2016 (Oct.-Dec.)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

WOMEN'S DILEMMA IN THE WORKS OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das was a woman much ahead of her times because of the explicitness she used in her works .In this paper attempts will be made demonstrate how the writer through her works explores and brings to the forefront deplorable state of women in the Indian society. This will be analysed by highlighting various themes like Love, Identity Crisis, dichotomy between Self and the Other, tone of Confessional Mode, Autobiographical elements and the Bluntness with which she progresses in her work. Keywords :,Male Chauvinism, Hierarchy, Frankness

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Kamala Das is considered amongst the distinguished Indian writers who wrote variety of works and gained fame chiefly from her subjective collections of poems and explicit autobiography. Her collection of poems includes *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendant* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other poems* (1973). It is significant to make note of the fact that her work is an exploration of the idea of a woman ,what she stands for ,her daily dilemmas and her many selves that she begins to discover as she moves in her journey of life. She is a distinct writer of her age. This is well established by Bruce King who observes- "Das's themes go beyond stereotyped longings and complaints. Even her feeling of loneliness and disappointment are part of a larger-than-life personality, obsessive in its awareness of its self, yet creating a drama of selfhood". In the following paragraphs it will be observed how she powerfully demonstrates the dilemmas and sufferings of the women.

Kamala Das as a writer is unique in the sense of how her poetry can be distinguished from the romanticism of Toru Dutt's and Sarojini Naidu's works. It must be understood that she is able to portray the dilemma a woman goes through in her daily life only because her work has elements of bluntness and frankness added to them. Noted critic Devinder Kohli had once noted "Kamala Das is essentially a poet of the modern Indian woman's ambivalence". This state of confusion for women stems from daily conflicts that she has to face. This is well evidenced in her work. Moreover, the idea of confessionalism highlights the dilemma of women in a more detailed manner. In her work – "The Suicide" she painfully states the mental agony a women goes through :

I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,

Happy wife.'

Thus, the lines clearly depict the pretentious garb a woman has to put on herself to fulfill the expectations of the society and to be labeled as a happy as well as an acceptable wife.

Kamala Das through her writings conveys several layers of themes blurred into each other to depict the trauma of a woman's real needs and desire. For instance, she makes use of mythology to explore this idea as she often explores the Radha –Krishna motif. In her poem "The Maggots" she states:

"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 lines clearly demonstrate a woman's dilemma where she compares herself to a 'corpse' being eaten by 'Maggots'. This on a larger scale becomes suggestive of two aspects. Firstly, it seems that by using the idea of the divine the writer attempts to gather reader's attention to the main issue. This main issue is not Radha-Krishna relationship but the hardships of any women. Through the usage of Radha as a figure it seems the purpose is to show women as hegemonic entities as a whole who suffer at the hands of the patriarchal society irrespective of whether they are rich or poor. Secondly, the poem unlike its contemporaries is written in a manner which doesn't celebrate love rather offers an insight and makes the reader question the very idea of love being something which should be mutual in the man-woman relationship. Otherwise, as projected in the poem this very idea of love becomes suffocating for another gender usually which is the female. The woman then is the sufferer as a whole who is expected to conform to the various definitions that are constructed without taking into the consideration her wishes.

In another of her famous writings – "An Introduction", one notices how the writer through the theme of identity crises displays beautifully the notion of women's anxiety and fear she is made to go through in her daily life.

'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 quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers.'

As one notices, the identity crisis can be seen in the statement where she is unable to categorize herself as a fixed entity because as a woman she is expected to play the role of many individuals – a girl, wife, embroiderer, cook, quarreler. This, it seems the writer suggests that in the process of categorizing, the woman is unable to play the role of her real self. Thereby, adding to the dilemma she faces on a regular basis.

As Kamala Das breaks free from the metaphysical and romanticism which could be seen in her predecessors work and adopts a style of confessional mode, her poetry becomes relevant for many reasons. For instance, her poetry is written at a time when the world became a witness to many waves of feminism. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that postcolonial writings of India could have been influenced by ideas of feminism which developed around the world. Moreover, her usage of the confessional style also adds to her writings a sense of conscious awakening about one's rights. This is visible in her poem "My Grandmother's House" where she reminisces her childhood days and the love she received from her grandmother. The poem also is significant as she is reminded of the true love she once was fortunate to get from her grandmother. However, as one progresses through the poem one realizes that now she has to look at even strangers to search for that love.

“There is a house now far away where once
I received love...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 strangers’ doors to
Receive love ,at least in small changes?”

Even in her autobiography “My Story”, Kamala Das provides incidences where she had to face prejudice for being a female in the hands of male chauvinism. She states “father was an autocrat” (91) and her mother “vague and indifferent” (20). Infact for her parents she was nothing less than “a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to a relative when she was only a school girl (82). She conveys this idea of being considered a burden in her poem “Of Calcutta” where she says emphatically

“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.”

It is for this the writer through her artistic skills is able to communicate to the readers the mental agony she is going through as well as of many other women in an implicit manner through the usage of the mode of confessionalism. No wonder literary critic A.N. Dwivedi remarks, “Kamala Das is a typical confessional poet who pours her very heart into poetry. She is largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche”.

The pitiful treatment which is bestowed upon women by the society can also be seen in the poem “The Stone Age”. The lines are as follows :

“ You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove, you build round me a shabby room,
And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read.”

One clearly notices the societal hierarchy that exists in the society. The man-women relationship is the one where the man dominates as the statement cruelty states “And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly” . Besides, it seems that a female has no say of her own and she has to suppress her feelings and is expected to behave according to the men in her life. This is evident as she is made to shrink into “a bird of stone” . The very usage of the extreme word ‘stone’ , ‘granite’ is suggestive of the discrimination that she has to live with. With her excellent usage of combination of the words ‘bird of stone’, granite dove’ she is also able to depict powerfully the misery that women has to suffer. This is because women like birds and dove who were born to be not only beautiful but also independent are now trapped by the beastly worldly acts as they are reduced to ‘bird of stone’ and ‘a granite dove’. The usage of bird imagery can also be seen in another of her poem with the name “The old play house” where the bird is symbolic of a woman. “ 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.” Again, clearly depicted the same idea of women who were born to be eternally free yet was tamed throughout the course of her life by the male dominated society. No wonder , K.R.S. Iyengar states “Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility.”

Kamala Das emerges as a poet who becomes representative of modern women’s dilemma and ambivalence. This is further strengthened by the autobiographical elements that she adds to her work as she seems to emphasis through it the idea that every women undergoes oppression irrespective of the positional strata she occupies. She then becomes the Subaltern ,the Other. It is for this ,she fluctuates between various identities, blurring lines as she moves back and forth from one to another . Infact , there is constant tension between her several personalities and this split in the personality is because of the agony ,pain and trauma she suffers from the various arenas in her life. A women is expected to bear, to adjust to all sorts of treatment she

is given and this is what defines her. She cannot question or doubt anything till the time the men folk accept it as being correct. However, Kamala Das through her works shatters all the conventional notion of the established as she lays open the hollowness and the hypocritical stand of the society as she frankly discusses the issues which otherwise were restricted into the private sphere. The writer uses her bluntness as a weapon to dismantle the centuries old stereotypes that keep the women restricted and play a passive role. She has nothing to hide as she attacks openly the patriarchal mindset by her witty and radical statements in her writings. She strongly protests the conventional marital bond where she feels suffocated because she is unable to feel completely happy and questions the idea of love which is defined only from the males perspectives and where the needs and wants of women are often ignored.

In conclusion, as one begins analyzing the works of Kamala Das one observes how through her artistic expression she is able to rightly convey the sad plight and the injustice that is meted out to women in contemporary times. Thus, her poems become a medium through which she as a writer, highlights the need of women's liberation at the earliest, as she powerfully demonstrated the anxiety of women. It is for this Syd Harrex conveys- "Kamala Das's poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian women who attempts to free her sexually and domestically from bondage sanctioned by the past.

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