



POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM IN THE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

V.KAVITHA

Research Scholar, Department of English,
Dr.M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, University, Periyar E.V.R. High Road, NH 4 Highway,
Maduravoyal, Chennai, Tamil Nadu.
E-mail: vkavitha912@gmail.com

Abstract

Post-colonial feminist theories give a new perspective to feminism as they talk about the plight of the women in an oppressed or imperialised society. The women seemed to have undergone 'double colonisation', once by the ideas of the coloniser and again by the patriarchal society they lived in. Even in the efforts to revive the society's identity and lost culture, as a postcolonial reaction, women had to fight to carve their own place and status. This fight of the women within their own oppressed society led them to a realisation. It dawned upon the women of the colonies and the third world countries that their ideas of feminism cannot be drawn from the 'middle-class', Euro-centric' feminist movements. Their fight was different. They realised that the women of different societies had to search for their identity in their own society. This gave an individualistic tone and native fervour to the women writers of different societies. This research paper aims to identify the feminist ideas, the cultural fervour and individualism in the poems of Kamala Das.

Key words: Postcolonial feminism; Kamala Das; Feminism; Post colonialism

Introduction

Postcolonial feminism is a relatively modern subject that speaks about the needs of the third world women. It is the representation of the lives and plights of the non-western women of different countries addressed from the cultural, social, political and economic viewpoints of their own countries. It takes into account the effect of long-term imperialism and colonisation of their country and their people. It is the struggle of the women who undergo double colonisation, oppression of their own patriarchal society as well as the imperialistic ideas of the coloniser. In simple terms, postcolonial feminism can be called as a subset of feminism or post colonialism. But it is more than that. It is a reaction against the western feminist ideas as well as the postcolonial discourses of their country that failed to cover the gender issues. Postcolonial feminism is an active contributor to both feminism as well as post colonialism.

Feminism and Postcolonial Feminism

Feminism, as a movement, primarily evolved from the struggles of the white western middle-class women. It addressed their needs, in different phases of history, that include suffrage, equal pay for work, and the reproductive and sexual rights of women. The ideas were based on the gender equality and equal rights for men and women. The Euro-American feminists considered the third world women as the victims of oppression by a society which is characterised by cultural and social backwardness. The third world women did not know what they were going through and they needed to be enlightened and rescued. The western feminists tried to bring the issues of the third world women to be dealt with under the wings of the 'sisterhood'. They attempted to apply the ideas of 'rights' and 'equality' as the needs of these women. This again ended up as another form of imperialism on the third world women. They were forced with feminist ideas and the 'ideal woman' image which did not suit them or cater to their needs. In the course of time, it was realised that the theories of feminism were not sufficient to explain the plights of the women across the world. As Mohanty(1991) points

out in one of her works, "Western feminists appropriate and "colonise" the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterise the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries. It is in the process of homogenization and systemisation of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse and this power needs to be defined and named".

The feminists of the third world countries and the postcolonial societies saw it as a kind of intellectual colonialism. It was said that "superseding cultural or religious traditions in the name of women's rights is an act of intellectual colonialism which entails an inadmissible intromission"(Moller Okin, 1999). Western feminism was seen as a kind of replication of neo-colonialism. This gave way to the emergence of postcolonial feminism, the expression of feminist ideas from different postcolonial societies. It emerged as a theory around 1980s. It is built on the idea that a 'woman' is more than a woman. She is to be seen as an individual, defined by the factors like race, colour, class and nation along with her gender. The western feminism did not take into account the above-mentioned identities of the third world women. Postcolonial feminists observe and respect the differences between the women belonging to different countries or races. Western feminism, on the other hand, tried to bring in a common identity for women, and in the process leveled out the individual differences and needs.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park say that "Postcolonial feminism cannot be regarded simply as a subset of postcolonial studies, or, alternatively, as another variety of feminism. Rather it is an intervention that is changing the configurations of both postcolonial and feminist studies. Postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neo-colonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights" (Schwarz and Ray, 2005).

Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism played key roles in both colonialism and feminism. It expanded the feminist theories by including the issues of race and culture. It expanded postcolonial theories by including the gender issues. Postcolonial Feminists started telling their own stories, gave voice to their struggles and needs, regardless of what other feminists claimed them to do or not to do. They understood that their situation is not just because of the gender differences, but because of a lot of other oppressive factors. Their fight was against the oppressive factors of their own society defined by their race and culture. They began to have a picture of their social conditions and a choice of the specific issues about their lives that they wanted to address. For example, in a culture where women feel a particularly strong affiliation to motherhood and household responsibilities, their expressions focused on their other basic needs and liberation without any expectation of equality in the gender roles.

This understanding of postcolonial feminism gives a deeper insight to the writings of the feminist writers from different countries. It facilitates a better perspective to the society they live and their lives in the society. An analysis of the postcolonial elements of the poems of Kamala Das ascertains her strife in the society she lived in and her expectations of her patriarchal society. She knew what she was going through and the message she conveys to her society is specific rather than generalized.

Postcolonial Feminism in the Poems of Kamala Das

Kamala Das(1934-2009) was a major Indian poet of Postcolonial era. She is known for her confessional style of writing, and an open and honest treatment of female sexuality and marital issues. Her extensive and incontestable contribution to the Indian poetry has earned her the title 'The Mother of Modern English Poetry'. She is a bilingual poet and has written in Malayalam, her mother tongue, in addition to English. Her feminism does not claim to identify itself with any other type of feminism. Her feminist writings are more of a gut reaction for the expectations with which the postcolonial society ties down women. Her poems are a strong expression of her needs.

She impulsively speaks about the gender roles thrust on her by the society, not the world in general, but the society she livein. The gender roles and the patriarchal nature of the society was something that she found oppressive from a young age. She found her growth as a woman as a rather disturbing factor. She reflects the idea when she talks about the 'sprouting hair' and 'swelling limbs' that were rather unwelcomed in

her poem "An Introduction". They became reasons for the people around her to control her. 'The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me' is symbolic of the cultural burden she carried by being a woman in the society that comes down heavily on women in the name of rules and expectations.

Since she could not do anything about the strong cultural background that levied a great deal of oppression on women, she tried to hide her identity through a lame attempt of dressing up like a man. She says,

"I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness"

However, her tone conveys that it was indeed an idea that she came up with as a young girl and may not be a decisive step towards establishing her place as a woman. She does not seem to be the woman who believes that the liberty in dressing would bring about any change in her status as a woman in the society. It was just a passing idea that was immediately crushed by the expectations of the society. Her attempts went futile and her role was a pre-defined one.

"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."

'Fit in' is where she loses her identity and forced to become a typical woman of the society where she has to wear a saree, cook, run the house and fight with the servants.

Her poems repeatedly talk about her quest for love and the different men in whom she tried to find love at different points of time. She looks for emotional fulfillment and an intellectual surrender in the men she encounters and falls in love endlessly. But, these men are a part of the intellectually oppressed subaltern society and they fail to erase her eternal loneliness. There are all one and alike.

The men she meets are the typical men of a postcolonial patriarchal society. They themselves are not yet released from the intellectual oppression of the colonisers and their ideals of western superiority. However, this does not stop them from trying to own their women by their domination and the gender roles they strictly impose on their women. In the poem 'The Old Playhouse' she describes how she is dominated and imprisoned by the man of her house by restricting her to the role and duties of a 'wife'. She puts in a very indifferent, detached statement when she says, 'you called me wife', a role that has been imposed on her. At a point of time, her intelligence fails her and she is even afraid of giving him a reply. She talks about his 'monstrous ego', his ability to satiate her lust and serve her with 'lethal doses of love'. But, for her, this role of a man in her life never fulfils her real. Her quest for a man's love is really a quest for identity. In him she wants to find her identity and learn who she is.

"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."

Playing the role of a wife only makes her 'cower' and become a 'dwarf'. What makes the domination even worse for her is her stark realisation that her man is indeed a slave himself, intellectually inferior and imprisoned. When she talks about her husband, she says,

"Your room is
Always lit by artificial lights, your windows always
Shut."

Unfortunately, this does not stop him from spreading his ego and imposing a control on her. She says,

"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"

For her, the house is filled with the dominating air of the man, even if it is the stench of staying closed for so long. The same kind of impression reflected in the poem 'The Stone Age'. He is one that belongs to the stone age in his mind and yet capable of controlling the woman he calls wife.

"Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment"

What looks like a need for love and an attempt to quench her physical thirst can actually be a yearning for an intellectual companionship and surrender to a suitable male. Sadly, she does not find the man she looks for in the colonised society of male imprisoned in the patriarchal ideologies. They all turned out to be the same.

"Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself I
In this world..."

Even in the other men she expected something more than the physical love and ended up feeling frustrated every time. In the poem 'The Freak' she talks about this expectation she has for a male who can go beyond satiating the physical needs.

". . . Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers? . . ."

The gender roles and the oppression or ignorance of the men around her were not the only problems Kamala Das was talking about. She goes beyond the boundary of just being a woman and expresses herself as a rebel against the clichéd ideas of a society colonised for so long. She expresses herself as a human who has been reduced to being a woman. The poem 'An Introduction' begins with a confession 'I don't know politics' which is the representation of the state of the women of the marginalised society that she lived in. Though, superficially, it looks like a confession of her ignorance, it is just a statement of her role in the society. A society that does not expect its women to deal in politics, in spite of her knowing the names of the political leaders 'like days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru'. She is also aware of the politics around language in India. "*An Introduction*" begins with her stand on the postcolonial reaction against the coloniser's language. It was a period when the coloniser's language was hated as the coloniser himself. The continued use of the language was debated and there was a set of people who passionately wanted the language driven out of the land. But Kamala Das proved yet again that she was an independent thinker with a clear stand. She expresses her objective for the English language. She is neither glorifying it nor rejecting it. She is not in awe with the language. Rather, she has preferred to personalize the language and use it to her advantage. She says

"It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it
is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions..."

Raja Rao, in his introduction to "*kanthapura*" (1938), mentions English as an 'alien language' and observes that the writers cannot mimic the English writers, but, at the same time, should make sure that their writings are universal. Kamala Das, on the other hand, shows an attitude of having accepted English as a tool that she can tweak and control to her will.

Her deep empathy extends and encompasses the condition of the fellow beings and the society around her. She is aware of the class differences prevailing in the society.

"I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.
I must keep the right distance
Between me and the low.

And I must keep the right distance
Between me and the high."

It was not just the gender roles bothering her, but also the class roles which is evident from these lines from her poem 'The Suicide'.

In the poem 'The Dance of the Eunuchs', her description of the eunuchs emanates a kind of sadness that radiates and reflects in the minds of the readers.

"Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and or children left unborn....
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness
Were in each of them."

This is understandably the condition of the transgender in a society which is very specific about the gender roles and marginalizing the people who do not fit in. In Kamala Das, we see an empathy who sees the world around her with all its pain and unfairness transcending the limits of her own needs and body. She can 'see' the society that oppresses her. She observes how helpless and powerless the society that could only watch this plight of the eunuchs.

"All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice...."

The society has no promise to give or salvation to make. The lines express the stale and wasted condition of the society which has become stale and stinking.

Kamal Das was not just a confessional poet who wrote about her struggles as a woman, her needs and expectations. In more than one way, she expanded the boundaries of the art of poetry in the country in its postcolonial era. She should be seen as the voice of a class of oppressed subaltern society rather than as a feminist who wrote about women. She broke the traditional set of rules that regulated the postcolonial discourse as well as the feminist writing. She was a postcolonial writer in the truest sense of the word.

References

- Mohanty, C.T. (2003) *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practising Solidarity*, Duke University Press.
- Moghadam, V. (2002) 'Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate,' *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer), pp. 1135-1171.
- Moller, O. (1999). *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* Princeton University Press.
- Schwarz H, Ray S (Ed.) (2005) *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Satchinandan, K. (1996) "Transcending the Body." *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. By Kamala Das. Kottayam: DC Books.