



## THE EXISTENTIAL SUFFERINGS IN KAJAL AHMED'S *WERE I A MARTYR*

K.A. VILASINI<sup>1</sup>, Dr. X. JOHN PAUL<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar, VIT University, Vellore. vilasini.ashokan@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, VIT University, Vellore. johnpaul.xavier@vit.ac.in

### Abstract

This paper critically focuses on the existential elements in Kajal Ahmed's *Where I a Martyr*. The philosophy of existentialism is a prominent topic of discussion in literature right from the ancient to modern era. Being a women is a challenging task in the world and the existential sufferings of women due to war, religion and culture is highlighted in the poem *Where I a Martyr*. The paper attempts to express how to solve the conflicts of women after being affected by wars. Kajal Ahmed's *Where I a Martyr* marks as a turning point in Kurdish literature which depicts the voice of women and their inner psyche.

**Keynote:** Authenticity, Meaninglessness, War, Existence, Identity.

Kajal ahmed was born in Kirkuk in Iraq. In 1986, she started writing poetry and in 1992 she became a journalist. She not only writes poems but also commentary and analysis on social issues, politics and especially on women issues. Almost all her poems have been translated into various languages such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Norwegian and English. At the age of 21 Kajal Ahmed started publishing her poems. She presently lives in Sulaimaniya. Kajal Ahmed is a remarkable person and she gained a reputation for her brave, poignant and challenging work throughout the Kurdish speaking world. Her famous works are *Benderi Bermoda* (1999), *Wutekani Wutin* (1999), *Qaweyek le gel ev da* (2001), *Awenem sikand* (2004) and *Poems* that were translated by Mimi Khalvati and Choman Hardi (Enitharmon Press/Poetry Translation Centre, 2008).

The poem *Were I a Martyr* opens with the lines,

"I want no flowers,  
no epoch of union,  
no dawn of disunion. (*Were I a Martyr* 1-3)

The word 'no' represents 'nothingness' in the world. The poem from the beginning till the end contains the single word 'no' which denotes 'nothingness'. No flowers, no kisses, no tears, no miseries, no candy at the funeral, no financial or heavenly incentives. Here 'I' denotes the author and the psychology, inner motives, feelings and desires are reflected in the poem. She is deprived of her husband's departure and therefore she insists on saying she wants nothing except her husband. *Were I a Martyr* is a mourning poem where she reflects the sorrows and longing for her husband. The emptiness is echoing in each and every line "I want no". Furthermore at the end of the four of the last six lines, "nothing" is present like a tag. This nothing represents "Snowman" who is the cousin to the winter of Stevens and wintering to which Rilke invites Orpheus. Ahmad is projected as a martyr, she has a mindset as that of winter who chooses to be ahead of all parting.

According to Abdulla Pashew, a famous Kurdish poet in Iraq says, "The poet is more than a poet in Kurdistan." Which means that Kurdish poets are the poets of the people who writes for the society and the political administration but not for themselves. Unlike in America, where the poet seems to belong mostly to other poets and they represent one after the other, Kurdish poets are public figures. This is because every personal choices are reflected on the public figure and no choice is private among Kurdish people. When Kajal Ahmad got married, she was badly criticized by the Kurdish people saying that she had betrayed their nation by marrying a Jordanian. Her husband is not a complete Jordanian. He is a life-long resident of Jordan but

descends from Diyarbakir which is considered to be the heartland of Kurdish ethnicity. Being raised with a typical Islam community, woman faces several challenges in choosing her husband of her own choice. The personal choice of woman gives the political imbalance and many controversial problems for woman. In a recent interview Ahmed says, "And what if I had married a Jordanian? How is that a betrayal of my Kurdishness?" The existential struggle of the author is highly depicted through her poem. Ahmed as a rebellion of the society voiced out the personal freedom of woman and she broke out the cultural set of marriage of a woman.

The pressure of social traditions, leads the young woman to nowhere and make puppets out of them. But, her critical efforts to exist take the form of a rebellion. The first step towards the search for being is to rebel. The attempt to choose her husband is the existence of her choice. Kajal Ahmed is caught in the problem and conflict that deal with her condition as being-in-the world. In this poem, Ahmed feels lonely and longs desperately for love. Her consciousness, seems unable to open herself to others and remain in their own prisons. Her self-centered activity has removed her from the highest exercise of a consciousness and the very condition of its existence (i.e) communication with the external world. This fundamental quest is situated in the specific role as wife and is not determined by others. Based on the analysis of the characteristics of existentialism, it would not be out of the context that Kajal Ahmed is affiliated as "the existential woman".

The psychic or existential needs of each individual vary according to the cultural set up, social status and sex. In Iraq, especially in the life of Muslim woman society plays a dominant role. It is a mentality to survive on the threads of attachment. The ties with society and culture is more important than her own welfare. The women feels completely lost when the society criticizes her badly. If this binding force is missing in Kajal Ahmed, the quest for linkage can well lead a woman to serious emotional problems and thus finally leads to existential struggle.

I want no tears  
over the coffin or me, a corpse.  
I want no cherry tree of sympathy  
dragged to the walls of my grave,  
no flowers or kisses,  
no tears or miseries. (14-19)

She voiced out her intentions through this poem to re-conceive the politicized religious concept of "martyr." The poet goes beyond the socially and legally accepted limits against the tradition of martyrdom. Not only that she does not want anything but also she commands to those she leaves behind to cherish nothing as her final gift. Not with anger but with gratitude the poet transgresses against the tradition of martyrdom. She is replete and this is her revolution.

Though the position woman started undergoing a change and an awareness in all walks of life dawned on woman she is taking pains to acquire her own identity. She is not able to get her enough freedom to choose her life of herself. A great stress has been laid on the education of women and attempts are being made ever since to redefine their role in the family and society as well. Though higher education has instilled confidence in women and they started asserting themselves in various walks of life, when it comes to man-woman relationship it creates several disputes while women chooses to be liberal. She cannot expect liberation from the clutches of male and the clutches of the religious society. Germaine Greer in her essay *Women: persons or possessions* says when women is regarded as "property" they discourage individuality in them. This is to highlight the statement that women are considered as a property and not as a person.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society and this is nowhere truer than Islamic nations. She resents the role of a daughter and looks forward to the role of a wife with the hope that her new role will help her in winning her freedom. But unfortunately it does not favour her life. Marriage proves to be another trap and women feel like caged animal in the society. The traditional attitude of society is contained in Manjusrmiti lines (i.e) Pita raksat Kaumarye bharta raksah. Yauvane raksanti sathavire putrah na stri svatnantram arhati. It happens not only in Indian and Kurdish people but across the world. The father looks after her during childhood, the husband protects her during youth and

the sons take care of her when she becomes old. Moreover, she has to follow the traditional rules laid by the society. Thus, finally the woman is never fit for freedom.

The woman is being criticised for whatever she does independently. When Kajal Ahmad began to cover her head, once again she is criticised badly. She has caved into the pressures of a male driven society. She can no longer claim to be a feminist. It makes her more of a feminist to cover and say these things. It makes her less. From all these chaos and confusions she faces existential suffering and says that death can attain peace and is an escape to the problems. Ahmad just wants to be a moment of nothing in this crowd of competing desires. Thus she choose death as a lovely subjunctive where she would reject the offered incentives such as forgiveness for all sin, eternal life in paradise and virgins in heaven. Finally, she says she came into the world with nothing and she is ready to die with nothing. These are stated in the concluding line,

"Bring nothing.  
Hold nothing.  
I die as a homeland without a flag, without a voice.  
I am grateful.  
I want nothing.  
I will accept nothing." (20-25)

Thus the poem *Where I a Martyr* is a love poem written by Kajal Ahmed who voiced out the societal and religious consequences of personal choice. This affects her entire life and encounter with existential sufferings that finally leads to death. The consequences and the existential sufferings of women who chooses to be free is the central subject of the poem. Though in the surface level the poem gives just the love and the long for love for her husband, it also shows the existential struggle and the religious impact of freedom in depth.

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