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Resistance against Patriarchal Tyranny in Poetry of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT: Kamala Das's poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and self. Obviously, this is not an easy and uncomplicated process as this involves discarding a lot, adopting a defiant attitude and probing the bruised self that expresses itself in so many different moods ranging from despair and dejection to anger and bewildered sense of rootlessness. This is best expressed through felt emotions in an intensely personalized idiom. Her poetry presents an Indian woman who has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. Kamala Das inaugurates a new age for woman poets by doing so, an age seeking to forge new idiom, a new medium and newer modes of address, constituting a total rejection of the conventional modes of poetic expression of the dominant culture. The shock generated by this is something resembling the shock created by the America's most poignant confessional poet Sylvia Plath. Both the poetesses decided that time had come to liberate English poetry from the old modes of poetry. Their poems are seen as the expression of the pitiable plight of a defenseless woman who needs love consideration and sympathy and desires a loving husband, warmth and home. Such an interpretation comes from a reluctance to give up the traditional mental attitude.

KEYWORDS: Nihilism, Corrosive, Patriarchal Paradigms, Immobility, Dilemma, Adapt, Domineering, Defenseless, Unbridled, Conform, Hegemonic, Domesticated, Sexual Politics, Establishment.

Modernity in English literature means a rejection of the past. The modernists declared themselves opposed to the idealism and romanticism of their predecessors. Modern art has indeed been acutely conscious of nihilism, the violence, and the anguish, which permeate our society. In modern English verse, the atmosphere of tension and guilt is all pervasive. One should remember that poetry is an experience by which sensibility is aroused and the mind widened to new perception and association. It is not only a means of exercising the intelligence alone, but of opening the whole mind to impression and suggestion. Modern poetry is still regarded by the overwhelming majority as a principle anti-traditional not only by its adverse critics but also by its proponents. Firstly the Modern American poets have rid themselves of clichés, worn out literary materials, and the other stereotypes of Victorianism. Having sloughed these dead conventions off, they have proceeded to write of American scene, American things, and the American people. A brief survey of modern tendencies supports the belief that we live in an age of the supremely important revolutionary periods of English poetry. Here modern means simply out of the traditional poetry.

With the advent of the British and the gradual infiltration of western patriarchal paradigms, this traditional and indigenous pattern of acceptability came to be viewed as outmoded. The Nayer youth grew ashamed of their time-honored woman-centered Indian society and rushed to pay homage to the patriarchal institutions of their colonial masters. The traditional woman is associated with the enclosed world of the household. In her guise as a mother, wife and helpmate, she exhibits a basic passivity and immobility. Kamala Das is not like the majority of women of India who calmly accept the boredom and ugliness of their situation. She rather has the courage to face the truth. She reveals the conflict between tradition and modernity—the dilemma of a majority of the Indian women. Today the Indian woman is at the crossroads. She looks back and is unwilling to accept the fast eroding traditional social norms and values. She looks forward and is willing to adapt herself to the modern style of living and thinking. The poetry of Kamala Das must be viewed in the light of this growing feminine consciousness. She acquired this consciousness under hostile circumstances dependent upon the society of her childhood days. She feels exploited and cheated by the civilization of which she is a part. Her community, family and civilization expect her to perform the role of a temptress, the goddess, the child and the mother. But she has no respect for the culture which has made use of her. As one can gather from *My Story*, the speaker is alienated as a child from her father, a symbol of domineering patriarchy; from her mother, who all the time lay on her stomach writing poetry and hence no time for the children; from her classmates and teachers at the English Boarding school in Calcutta. She presents her brother and herself at the beginning of her autobiography as the children of loveless parents. Gradually she says, "our instincts told us to keep away from the limelight" (Kamala Das 05). Humiliated at the boarding school by the white children and at home by the brutally domineering husband, she



became a powerful iconoclast. Her outcries are based on the central premise of the painful experience of being a woman.

Devendra Kohliemarks :

“Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity” (Kamala Das 29).

Marriage has hurt her ego, leaving her unfulfilled. Hence her poems have become the honest vernacular of her heart.

Kamala Das’s poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and self. Obviously, this is not an easy and uncomplicated process as this involves discarding a lot, adopting a defiant attitude and probing the bruised self that expresses itself in so many different moods ranging from despair and dejection to anger and bewildered sense of rootlessness. This is best expressed through felt emotions in an intensely personalized idiom. Her poetry presents an Indian woman who has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. Kamala Das inaugurates a new age for woman poets by doing so, an age seeking to forge new idiom, a new medium and newer modes of address, constituting a total rejection of the conventional modes of poetic expression of the dominant culture. The shock generated by this is something resembling the shock created by the America’s most poignant confessional poet Sylvia Plath. Both the poetesses decided that time had come to liberate English poetry from the old modes of poetry. Their poems are seen as the expression of the pitiable plight of a defenseless woman who needs love consideration and sympathy and desires a loving husband, warmth and home. Such an interpretation comes from a reluctance to give up the traditional mental attitude.

A close reading of the whole corpus of Kamala Das’ poetry reveals that the tone of the poetess all through is ‘nihilistic and corrosive’ which modern poetry so abundantly offers. She shakes all accepted norms of a stable male-oriented society. In her poetry, she is not celebrating unbridled sensuality, but projecting the stereotype of a wronged woman and at once asserting the need to establish her voice and identity. Her medium is a passionate inflamed assertion of that being which has remained mute, suppressed and battered through nameless centuries. She laments

“Where is my soul

My spirit where the muted tongue of my desires” (Collected Poems 59).

At an early age of fifteen, Das was married to an insensitive and unsympathetic man. Her pathos in domestic life deepened within no streak of regeneration. Her autobiography informs that the poet suffered a nervous breakdown at the age of nineteen as a neglected wife and stayed in Malabar with her loved grandmother who could cure her. For a different reason Sylvia Plath also had suffered a similar nervous breakdown almost at the same age that was due to an intense, nearly unbearable love for her adored father.

But Kamala Das never accepted the inevitable married life for a girl and its responsibilities. In the rotten set up of Hindu society, marriages are made without taking into account the suitability of the partners from various angles—their family background, age, education, financial status, and social connection. Kamala Das raises her voice of resentment against this hollow set-up. There are a good number of poems wherein Das registers her sense of suffocation issuing from her loss of liberty after marriage. She is iconoclastic in her approach to marriage. She grew revengeful towards her husband. Neither she was properly cared for by her parents, nor by office-going husband after marriage. This is how she conveys ironically, “I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandfather could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed” (*MyStory* 85)

Speaking of her parents’ unsuited alliance, Kamala Das writes, “My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched” (*MyStory* 05).

Her mother created domestic harmony in her life-time. But Kamala Das never showed a bit of interest in domestic life. She hammered hard at her husband. All her dream of a happy domestic life shattered and she expresses her husband’s cruelty and brutality:

“You stick a finger into my dreaming eye” (*The Old Play House*).

It symbolically presents an auditory representation of the brutal unconcern of the barbarous male and signifies extreme conditions of invaded privacy and harsh denial of female freedom. As Tennyson has written earlier:

“Man for the field and woman for the hearth”

Man for the sword and for needle she

Man to command and woman to obey”(Tennyson 32).

This is not an accepted term to Kamala Das. There exists no such code or principle, as can segregate both the sides of coin or relation between man and woman. No doubt this is a man-dominated society and a woman cannot take the position of a man. But if a woman is to be kept within chains or boundaries, a man must accept the reality that with all these restrictions she becomes more powerful to fight against injustice and cruelty of man. Kamala Das increases the



awareness of woman, that how the dead weight of outworn values can block the emotional and intellectual growth of an individual, especially a woman. A woman's world is ruled by man as woman is considered as a second rate citizen. She is treated as a person who has no individuality or identity of her own, who is merely there for the object of the sexual gratification of man. Speaking against this term, Kamala Das warns woman of the world:

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It is time again to come alive.
A world extends a pot beyond his six feet frame”(The Old Play House 20).

Kamala Das caricatures the feminine role to emphasize the plight of being a woman in this patriarchal society. She is asked to conform to the rules of the snobbish society. Kamala Das identifies with the sufferings of the mute victims of oppression. Here Kamala Das has become the mouthpiece of all women suffering passive pathos in a male hegemonic set up.

Time and again, she creates a revolt in the heart of a woman against the very institution of arranged wedding. About her earlier marriage planned by her parents, she felt disgusted and records, “My life has been planned and its course is charted by my relatives” (*MyStory* 85). She is treated as no more than a domesticated woman who is required to look after his house and children and attend to his whims and freaks. She is aware of this domestic routine and complains:

“You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into you tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins” (The Old Play House 01).

He has totally annihilated her identity and individuality.

Here the husband stands all for suppression and cruelty. Kamala Das presents a feminist movement through her poetry. She discovers the male hegemony from the inner core of her feminine consciousness. The feminine inquisition however rebels against the very basis of antique ethos, against all the established order. The antithesis has initiated in Indian women's outlook in as much as it is felt that women cannot evolve their full individuality in family or society within the traditional bounds. She is bound to do the domestic duties in the family against her tender feelings and yearnings for emotional involvement. She can never persuade him to forget that she is woman, who craves for love, companionship and understanding. As she confesses in *My story*:

“I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign
arms, the loneliness of my life” (*MyStory* 84).

But she finds it difficult to adjust to the barrenness of a married life. She often feels that love is a hollow word as the male-oriented society shows no understanding of a woman's aspiration. She feels frustrated about her freedom that her husband offered her, when she got married. She expected a husband as understanding, as caring as her grandmother who looked after her, corrected and advised her. It was a matter of disappointment when she writes:

“Freedom became my dancing shoe
How well I danced.”

Put together, her poetry is a dissertation and that too a well documented one of her lived experience. And the experience she has in life as we often come across in her poems, are of unkind society. The pull and pushes of cultural restrictions, family background and the traditions of an orthodox family have often shaped her feelings and ideas, often outspoken. She feels unhappy about her marriage, as she appeared to be a puppet the strings of which were being held firmly by her parents. She had no freedom in selecting an ideal lover for her. Others did all the planning for her marriage and she was not even consulted on the subject:

“You chose my clothes for me
My tutors, my hobbies, my friends,
And at fifteen with my first saree you picked
me a husband.”

It is interesting to note that this heat and dust is directed towards the trenchant sexual politics ingrained in our social and domestic conventions. Her language is a violent formula of expressing the very heat and dust of her humiliation in being a sabotaged and relegated being in the world. “An introduction” is an autobiographical initiation of her poetic verse wherein Kamala Das makes a categorical introspective exposition of an average woman in the process



of growth and the humiliating circumstances in her culture. What goes in the poem hereafter is a continual resentment towards the politics of sex in the context of which woman arduously suffers a suffocative inexpressible stance:

“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants” (The Old Play House 17).

Kamala Das’ outcries are on the central ground of the painful experience of being a woman. What has stirred her sensitive psyche is the dehumanization of woman as a being. The spiraling self, as an insect pinned to wall, rages within against this lack of social recognition for her lot. The articulation of this anger becomes impossible in any socially accepted language formulas. She remains under constant threat of loss of the freedom. Life appears to be slipping out of the grips, like a fish that constantly slips out of the clutches of the fishes, in the sea of living. The dilemma that the poet projects reminds one of a child eating sweetmeat that wants to relish it and hold it back too.

The categorical distinction and differentiation between man and woman as naturalistic creatures puts man as a self-serving conservative agent, serving his own purposes, and cold-shouldering his feminine counterpart into a state of negligence and unwantedness. As confessing about her laborious routine, she explains:

“Here in my husband’s home, I am trained circus dog
Jumping my routine hoops each day” (Collected Poems, 59).

And at the background of this outburst is a rebellious spirit against centuries of oppression undergone by women. When she is denied the very channel of self-realization as a woman and as an individual, she feels hunted and persecuted. As a poet, she is conscious of her creative faculties and tries to break chains and restraints. She is sick of the routine when everything is mechanical. Most of the poems by Kamala Das are exploration of the gender roles an Indian woman plays—the embarrassment they involve, the resistance they provoke, and the pain they cause. The confessional mode becomes a device to formalize the process of analysis and adjustment of the problems that crop up in this patriarchal structure of the society. The traditional society tried to clip off her wings of freedom. She wrote in full confessional mode:

“You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her” (The Old Play House 01).

The image of swallow and flight are appropriately used to express feminine experience particularly as a wife. She encounters the predatory element of the human beings in their menacing aspects. It is tamed by will and practice and has been taught never to make demands. About the marriage she has expressed her disappointment time and again to tell the world that women are not mere toys; they are also individuals with their own preferences. She wishes to fly to attain the freedom from this cruel domesticity. The following poetic passage reveals the monotony and tiresomeness of a hollow married life:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea” (Summer in Calcutta 52).

Kamala Das is here as a liberated woman, who resents the cocoon built around her and desires to flit away without any restrictions. The ‘cocoon’ stands for the establishment of all sorts—for the bonds of marriage, family, and society from which she wishes to fly away. She is classified along with Sylvia Plath and noted for the confessional mode of writing,

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