

Kamala Das' Selected Poems : A Review in the light of Feminist Consciousness

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Feminism (of late called 'womanism') is a serious attempt to formulate the issues and find solutions to gender problems. It was started by Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1949). She points out that women are not a minority like the blacks and they are not a product of history like proletariat. Feminist scholarship originates and participates in the larger efforts of feminism to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized women. Major portion of literature has been written from the male point of view either by ignoring or suppressing woman's point of view. The traditional images of women as an evil force, a temptress, an inferior being and as impediment in man's spiritual path have totally been discarded in favour of a more human and egalitarian image due to efforts of the feminists and the male humanists.

Kamala Das is a singer of feminine sensibility and rebels against the convention-ridden society which is meant to exploit womankind in a male gaze world. In her poetry, she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman. Her vision is vitally particularized by woman's point of view. She is aware of her femininity and asserts it in poem after poem. Her failure to realize fulfilment in love and security and her sexual exploitation, imposed on her by the time honoured institution of marriage, disillusionment and frustrations turned her into a social rebel.

The topic is intended to highlight Kamala Das' anguished and assertive voice for the right of women and explicate her attack on the male-oriented world by subverting the traditional roles of a woman. In her selected poems, "An Introduction", "The Freaks", "Old Playhouse", "The Sunshine Cat", and "The Looking Glass", Kamala Das pleads for the liberation of her femininity from the cruel clutches of the sex-obsessed world of the domineering male.

Kamala Das has created a permanent place for herself in the contemporary Indian English poetry. As a feminist, she attacks the convention-ridden society. She is a feminist blazing a

new trail of emancipation for Indian women. She is called the poetess of the body for she is the first to speak frankly about sex. In Showalter's words, "Feminist Criticism written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery". She is against the conventional concept of love concerned with purely physical qualification. She attacks on senseless restriction and conventions implore for the liberation of her sisterhood from the clutches of conventional roles set by the sex obsessed world of domineering male. Her poems reveal her protest against the conventions of the society and the constraints and restrictions which husband or society in general impose upon women. They imply not only her pursuit and attainment of freedom to act just as she likes, but also her advocacy of the right of all women to enjoy such freedom. In the poem "An Introduction", Kamala Das portrays herself as a liberated modern woman. She is an Indian by birth. However, various factors make up her present being as revealed in the lines- I am Indian, very brown born in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one". Here, she claims her right to speak any language as she wishes. The way she handles Indian English with all its characteristics is as personal as she puts it. "The language I speak/ Becomes mine All mine, mine alone".

Kamala Das feels at ease with the English language and identifies it as the language of her soul. Recalling her past experience she raises her voice against the concept of early marriage. Even when she was a child, she has been given in marriage to a man. With agony, she says,

.... He drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and close the door. He did not beat me But my sad woman body felt beater.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank pitifully"

Her body has shrunk at the onslaught of her lover's lust. Her psychological and physical yearnings are not fulfilled whereas she is compelled to fulfil the needs of her husband. This experience makes her react like a rebel. She is also against the roles which the conservative society imposes on her and expects her to play them faithfully. By wearing a shirt and having her hair cut, she alienates herself from restriction of the society. She being a staunch feminist is filled with the essential spirit of equality.

In another poem "The Freaks", the poetess protests the fulfilment of sexual large and refuses to identify 'skin's lazy hunger' with love. Hence, she questions through the lines
can this man with

Nimble finger hips unleash Nothing more alive than the Skin's lazy hungers?

The poetess' male partner in this poem is a man of "Sun stained cheek". He symbolizes "Id" and craves physical fulfilment of sex. It is in the heart where love is enthroned but the poetess' heart is an empty container longing for an ultimate creative fulfilment through love. She admits: "I am freaks. It is only/To save my face, I flaunt, at /times, a grand flamboyant

lust". In the title, the word 'freaks' means abnormal person who deviates from accepted social norms. Here, the poetess was not only talks for herself but also for other women having similar experiences who seek an intense fulfilment through love. Indian women usually do not discuss their sexual experiences for "The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are linked to their cultural environment". Being the product of the cultural forces, the female psyche is forced to bear anything and everything. Kamala Das constantly refuses to accept their silence.

'The freaks' is a confessional and autobiographical poem which authentically records the lovelessness emotional sterility and disintegration, the frustration and disillusionments, the pretensions of flaring sting, at times, a grand, flamboyant hurt in the poetess' married life. It is a faithful poetic statement of feminine sensibility, humiliated and exploited in male dominated society.

In the "Old Playhouse", she launches an attack on the social exploitation of women by man to gratify his casual crossings. She approaches her husband considering him her lover with an intention to perceive her real self: "I came to you but to learn / what I was". She is against the male egotism when she writes:

.....you are pleased

With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow

Convulsions you dribbed spittle into my mouth

You poured yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed

...my poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices.

The poetess feels that her husband, not bothering about her feeling, indulges in such things only to satisfy his needs, She makes a poignant attack on the restriction of conjugal life. She feels that her sense of freedom is smashed by this largely male dominated married life. The poetess seeks a total spiritual transformation which cannot be realized through the gratification of physical cravings. She wants to transform the body based on sexual experience into a rich and satisfying spiritual experience. This can be achieved by transcending the barriers of the physical as symbolized by breaking of the mirror and erasing of the water that reflects male ego. This autobiographical poem expresses a voice against the pressure of domesticity and against the monotonous daily routine of family life.

In "The Sunshine Cat", Kamala Das describes a specific case of the abuse of a woman. The title suggests a yellow cat. It is not really a cat that has given her company when she was imprisoned but a mere streak of sunshine which spilled into the room when her husband kept her confined in a room. He could confine only her physical body:

..... Her husband shut her

In, every morning; looked her in a room of books

With streak of sunshine lying near the door, like
A yellow cat.

She was forced to play the conventional role of a wife within the four walls of her house. She thought herself to be "a yellow creature" of her hatred imagination. Her beauty and youth prematurely vanished. Such is the life of a woman in a male-dominated world. She is a mere nobody, an object of sheer sexual enjoyment. This lyric beautifully reveals the inner vacuity in a woman's life through apt images.

Her another poem "The Looking Glass" externalizes the humiliations and frustrations the women have to suffer in a male-dominated social order. The poetess remarks sarcastically that a woman should accept the cruel reality that she is merely an object for the satisfaction of man's hurt. She can have physical gratification but her earnest yearning for emotional fulfillment can never be realized. She should accept unquestioningly male superiority and should admire him :

All the fond details that make
Him male and your only male

The poem reflects the poetess' scathing criticism against the 'male-gaze' society under the clutch of which women are used just like the peels of an orange.

Kamala Das, a revolutionary poet, has thus started the trend towards frankness in the treatment of subject. Through such open hearted expression of her sense of insecurity and helplessness, she legitimizes her feminine ego and her female identity. In her - poems, she expresses her desires to seek a pure and total freedom for the whole society and articulates the anguished assistive voices of women who are silenced by the convention ridden society.

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