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Women's Predicament in Selected Poems of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Feminism has been used and interpreted in numerous shades of meaning, but the core idea being one and the same that women should have equal rights, power and opportunity on par with men in a society. Kamala Das' quest for identity is directly the progeny of an old social set up, oriented towards the total annihilation of the feminine personality. Love is the major theme of her poetry but the depth of her distress seems to have left a constant sting in her soul and that leads to her identity with a certain tincture of pang. The ever-changing reality of life inevitably reflects itself in literature. The position of women in society is no exception to this characteristic. The place of woman all over the world particularly in India has been undergoing a rapid change today. This coincides with the starting and the growth of Indian writing in English.

Keywords

Experience; Hegemony; Feminism; Glorification; Swamped.



The character of typical Indian woman was overwhelmingly swamped by the male dominated attitudes against the backdrop of an exclusively male-dominated culture. She was left with no mind or personality of her own. The glorification of Sita image, particularly by women, the Pativrata ideal and the craving to be a mother of sons – all these are reflections of the male attitudes to which she had succumbed through ages. The woman in life and in literature had no existence save that of a shadowy, suffering pathetic creature.

The changes brought about by western culture and education, the struggle of the country for freedom and the changes in the economic conditions which changed the rigid structure of the family, proved strong levers to bring the woman out of the shadow.

The struggle that started in women's life at the turn of the century, which is still going on, has spread many to fields where women have started moving – education, work, politics, society and above all, the home. Literature has started reflecting the spirit that has emanated from this struggle of women to be them. Women are defined as the centre of Indian culture, but they are actually imprisoned in the walls of the family and shackled by tradition. They now look them from a different angle. This has resulted in the beginning of a new image of woman in literature. The extent of change in her status in life and in society could be assessed by reference to her image reflected in literature.

Common images of women are reflected in various literatures of the world. Woman as mother and protector, woman as inspirer and cherisher, woman as the motivating primal – force – “shakthi”, protecting good and destroying evil, woman as the chaste, suffering wife, woman as charmer or seductress are some of the facets familiar in literature.

The emergence of woman writings in English in India is of great importance. It brings a new age of brightness for Indian woman. Social reforms influenced by the great personalities like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi and the foreign personalities like William Bentick had their impact on

the status of women in Indian society and brought them out of the tyranny of the social evils. But the subordination lingers long in the society. As Iyengar says,

The relief from dependency was still out of the reach of most women. So the battle for freedom was taken over by a few educated women, who in their effort to communicate to the world their own bitter experiences as women as well as their ideas of social reform, turned writers. (56)

Kamala Das occupies a position as a poetess of talent and artistry. She has attracted international attention by virtue of her bold, uninhibited articulation of feminine urges along with other women poets like Gouri Deshpande, Mamta Kalai and others. Kamala Das has written many books like *Summer in Calcutta*, *Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and other poems*. Her anguished affirmation of independence is seen in her autobiography, "My Story". Kamala Das' quest for identity is directly the progeny of an old social set up, oriented towards the total annihilation of the feminine personality. Love and sex are the major themes of her poetry but the depth of her distress seems to have left a constant sting in her soul and that leads to her identity with a certain tincture of pangs.

Kamala Das has projected her feminist voice in all her poems which is a device to liberate women from the bondage of slavery from the male dominated society. "Summer in Calcutta" depicts the sensuous absorption of sunlight which may be thought as a metaphor for the poetess' destination. The male chauvinism on the feminine psyche is reduced when she lets herself participate in the world of nature.

The poem records the subjugation of male's hegemony over female. The poetess refers to the sensuous absorption of sunlight which brings her a sense of relaxation, a warm intoxication which inspires, as well as relaxes so

that her worries doze. The poem also celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over the defeat of love.

The poem “The Old Playhouse” is the poet's protest against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female. A woman is expected to play certain conventional roles, and her own wishes and aspirations are not taken into account. In “The Looking Glass” Kamala Das portrays the nudity of the stark reality of life.

In the poem “An Introduction”, Kamla Das presents the latent truth and places words boldly in such a manner in which people understand have their own comings. Her expression becomes dramatic, strong and is against old images: “I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask / For, he drew a youth of sixteen / He did not beat me / But my sad woman – body felt so beated:

(The Old Playhouse and other poems, 26, 27).

Thus the poem is a mirror which faithfully captures the image of man's ego, and the humiliation of woman in a male dominated society. Social conventions have chalked out the role for women, and they must passively accept it. Kamala Das herself was called upon to play such a role in a bond, which she could not untie, and lifelong frustration was the consequence. Thus the poem is fairly autobiographical. Kamala Das presents feminist voice through her poetry.

She discovers the male hegemony from the inner core of her feminine consciousness. Kamala Das' personality has its irreparable anchors in sexual love and when it is refused she feels her life meaningless, barren and a waste land. She bursts out in the poem “The Suicide”,

O, sea, I am fed up,

I want to be simple,

I want to be loved

If love is not to be had,

I want to be dead. ("The Suicide")

The poem is a monologue addressed to the sea. She finds death desirable because, for her, life is not going to be redeemed.

Her search for identity is sex-oriented. In the context of feminist voice, Kamala Das has given Indian English poetry a new discourse, the discourse of woman's corporal language from the point of view of woman. Kamala Das' feminine sensibility is also fully expressed in her poem. "The Music Party", in which a woman's desire to feel the warmth of love while the music lasts is followed by the agonies, when she is left alone:

I wish my
Everywhere similarly
Brave and had look at you
At least once before the
Singing stopped and you left
Quickly, without goodbye. . . ("The Music Party")

The aroma of feminism is obviously reflected in her silent eyes. His leaving the place without saying a 'goodbye' is the final jolt she receives. She reveals her typical feminine persona by longing for central-love. The concept of feminism is best expressed in "Jaisurya" which depicts labour pain and birth of the child;

They raised him
To me then, proud Jaisurya, my son
Separated from darkness that was mine. ("Jaisurya")

Here, the name of the child had been chosen even before his birth. This is clear proof of the mother's overwhelming love for the unborn child. Placing the adjective 'proud' before the name Jaisurya is like crowning the child. The woman seeing the smile of the child forgets her own pains of bearing it. The poem stresses the feminine sensibility of Kamala Das.

Since time immemorial, women have felt that they deserve a better deal at the hands of men. Women who are conscious of their emotional needs are strive for self-fulfillment, rejecting the existing traditions and social set-up and longing for a more liberal and unconventional ways of life. This sensibility for women's liberation finds a place even in literature. A literature should be written with a woman-centred attitude, challenging patriarchy, which is the most pervasive ideology of power. The development of a woman's mind asserting equality – has been described by Elaine Showalter. Showalter states that there are three phases in women's writings. The first phase of male superiority was when everything revolved round men. Women too followed this view taking on male pseudonyms. They imitated the dominant male models and internalized their aesthetic and social values. The female writers wrote about women, but they wrote from what is popular in patriarchy, not from an angle which demands equal rights and status for women as men. They imitated male authors who had marginalized women either on this side as a mother, goddess or on the other side as vamp, temptress, seductress etc. Women were presented in these types and not regarded as autonomous individuals.

Kamala Das represents herself as a feminist through her poems. The yearning for love and sense of liberation from the shackles of chauvinistic society are the recurrent themes of her writings. No doubt that Kamala Das is really the microcosm of macrocosm of women's struggle for freedom and self-actualization.

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