

## **Anguished and Assertive Voice: Feminist Consciousness in Kamala Das's Select Poems**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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. Feminists examine experiences of the women from all races, classes and cultures. The traditional images of women as an evil force, a temptress, an inferior being, and as an impediment in man's spiritual path have been totally discarded in favour of a more human, egalitarian image mainly due to the efforts of the feminists and the male humanists. Kamala Das is one of the most popular poets of India who have gained space even in the West. As a feminist, she attacks the convention- ridden society. Her attacks on senseless restrictions and conventions plead for the liberation of her sisterhood from the clutches of conventional roles set by the sex obsessed world of domineering male. This paper proposes to highlight Kamala Das's assertive voice for the rights of women and explicate her attacks on the convention- ridden Indian society by ; subverting the traditional roles of a woman. In the select poems, "An Introduction," "Old Playhouse," "The Freaks," "The Maggots," "Luminol," "The Sunshine Cat" and "A Feminist's Lament" from the collection *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, she pleads for the liberation of her sisterhood from the clutches of the sex - obsessed world of the domineering male.

### **KEYWORDS**

Feminism; Conscious; Women's writing; Kamala Das.

Feminist scholarship originates and participates in the larger efforts of feminism to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized women and as such, it seeks to redefine ideas of male and female. Feminists claim that literature bears the stamp of male domination. A major portion of literature has been written from the male point of view either by ignoring or suppressing woman's point of view. The ideology of gender is inscribed and it is produced and reproduced in cultural practice. Feminists

examine experiences of the women from all races, classes and cultures. The traditional images of women as an evil force, a temptress, an inferior being, and as an impediment in man's spiritual path have been totally discarded in favour of a more human, egalitarian image mainly due to the efforts of the feminists and the male humanists.

This paper proposes to highlight Kamala Das's assertive voice for the rights of women and explicate her attacks on the convention- ridden Indian society by

subverting the traditional roles of a woman. In the select poems, "An Introduction," "Old Playhouse," "The Freaks," "The Maggots," "Luminol," "The Sunshine Cat" and "A Feminist's Lament" from the collection *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, she pleads for the liberation of her sisterhood from the clutches of the sex-obsessed world of the domineering male.

Feminist criticism is rationally diverged. Elaine Showalter remarks that, "All [French, Marxist, English and American feminists] are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority" (313). One of the major ideological values, that the feminist criticism share is the concept of patriarchy on sexism. All feminine critics believe that the entire cultural spectrum is dominated by a patriarchal value. Another issue is the idea of femininity. There is a clear distinction between the expressions 'female' and 'feminine'. The concept of female is biological, related to female body and female experience. Femininity is actually and essentially a cultural product. Toril Moi defines "'Feminism' as apolitical position, 'Femaleness' as a biology and 'Femininity' as a set of culturally determined characteristics" (117). The patriarchal ideology in its cultural dimension creates femininity.

Kamala Das has created a permanent place for herself in the contemporary Indian English poetry. She is one of the most popular poets of India who have gained space even in the West. Like Jane Austen, Kamala Das moves within her limited range with grace and skill. 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 poet 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" (314). Das uses a franker' more pervasive anatomical imagery. She is against the conventional concept of love concerned with purely physical qualification. She, by her bold confessions and iconoclastic attitudes towards taboos, emerges as a Western oriented Indian woman- an emancipated woman- coming to terms with her modern existence even within the background of her Hindu ethos. She is a feminist poet who in Showalter's terms "tries to be biological, to write from the critic's [her] body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form" (314). Her attacks on senseless restrictions and conventions implore for the liberation of her sisterhood from the clutches of conventional roles set by the sex-obsessed world of domineering male. Amritha Pritam of Punjab is her Indian counterpart in her passionate plea for the emancipation of women from the dominant male ego.

Das's poems reveal her protest against the conventions of the society and the constraints and restrictions which husbands 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. Her tone of resentment and indignation in the poems chosen for exploration stresses the desirability and need of the recognition of the claims and rights of the Indian women in general. She may be regarded as the champion of the rights of women who sets upon breaking the chains of slavery.

In the poem, "An Introduction," Das portrays herself as a liberated modern woman. She is an Indian by birth. However, various factors make up her present being: "I am Indian, very brown, born in/ Malabar; I speak three languages, write in / Two, dream in one" (4-6). She could speak and write in Malayalam but English is vital to her poetic self. She asks her relatives, friends and critics, "Why not leave Me

alone ....Why not let me speak in / Any language I like?" (7-10). She thus claims her right to speak any language as she wishes. The way she handles Indian English with all its peculiar traits is as personal as she puts it: "The language I speak / Becomes mine... All mine, mine alone" (12). She doesn't welcome the attempt of the society to fit her within its mould. She is also not happy about the critics' comment that writing in English is not appropriate to her as writing in her mother tongue. She is not bothered about the critics. All feminist critics have:

drawn attention to the philosophical, linguistic, and practical problems of women's use of language, and the debate over language is one of the most exciting areas in gynocriticism (315).

Like a true feminist, she asserts her individuality, and does not bother about being accused of using a language half English and half Indian:

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, it Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is  
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and  
Is aware. (12-20)

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 closed the door. He did not beat me

But my sad woman body felt beaten.  
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank  
Pitifully. (27-31)

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 decides to be free from all the restrictions imposed upon her as she tries to negate her femininity: "Then I wore a shirt and my/ Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored/ My womanliness" (31-33). Once she becomes the target of social censure. Friends and relatives are aghast. They frown on her. They expect her to be the conventional housewife:

.....Dress in sarees, be girl,  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer,  
be cook,  
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in,  
.....Don't sit  
On walls or peep in through our lace  
- draped windows.  
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better  
Still, be Madhavikutty. (33-39)

The society urges her not to be a split personality suffering from a psychological disorder. According to the society it is in fulfilling the expectations of the society that she could get herself an identity. She adapts a non conformist role towards society. The thought she has is autonomous. She gives a blow to those who think it a slur on their patriotic fervour to write in English. She is against the convention ridden Hindu society which insists on her accepting a name, a role and a function. The poet is against the roles which the conservative society imposes on her and expects her to play them faithfully. She hurls defiance at the 'do's and 'don'ts' inflicted upon her by the traditional society. By wearing a shirt and having her hair cut, she alienates herself from the society which insists a lot of restrictions only on women. She being a staunch

feminist is filled with the spirit of equality and wants her fellow women to be freed from the convention ridden taboos of the society.

In the "Old Playhouse" Das exposes a love that seeks fruition through the fulfillment of the "skins lazy hungers" (12). She launches a strident attack on the social exploitation of women by man to satiate his carnal cravings. 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" (6-7). On the contrary, wherever she turns she finds the sex obsessed and dominant male world.

Das is against the male egotism when she writes:

.....You were pleased  
with my body's response, its  
weather, its usual shallow  
convulsions. You dribbled spittle  
into my mouth, you poured  
yourself into every nook and cranny,  
you embalmed  
my poor lust with your bitter-sweet  
juices.(8-12)

The poetic persona feels that her husband, not bothering about her feelings, indulges in such things only to satisfy his needs. She makes a virulent attack on the constraints of conjugal life, the snares of domesticity as suggested by the phrase "tame a swallow" (1). The "swallow" stands for the freedom which she yearns for. The poet, once a free bird having an "urge to fly" (4) in the endless /pathways of the sky" (4-5) and enjoying the "rudder breezes/ of the fall and the smoke from burning leaves" (18-19), is now confined to her husband's room "lit by artificial lights" (20). She feels that her sense of freedom is stifled in this largely male dominated married life. The society compels her to be confined in his room with its "artificial lights" (20), "air conditioner" (21) and the "male scent" (22). She feels as if she is in a prison and expresses her resentment at the customary

subordination of the female sex to the male:

.....Cowering  
beneath your monstrous ego I ate  
the magic loaf and  
became a dwarf. I lost my will and  
reason, to all your  
questions I mumbled incoherent  
replies. (14-17)

The domineering male ego suppresses the woman who becomes a "dwarf" and the poet considers that all men's techniques are similar. She equates man's love with "Narcissus." Narcissus also symbolizes male ego. Like the mythical Narcissus the male partner seeks physical gratification without corresponding sexual and psychological responses from his partner. However, the poet seeks a total spiritual transformation which cannot be realized through the gratification of physical cravings with this man or possibly with another man. She wants to transform the body based sexual experience into a rich and satisfying spiritual experience. This can be achieved by transcending the barriers of the physical as symbolized by the breaking of the mirror and erasing of the water that reflects male ego. Her experiences enable her to have a depressing judgment of men being absolutely self-centered in their relation with her. This autobiographical poem thus expresses a voice against the pressure of domesticity and against the male domination in the routine of family life.

In another poem "The Freaks" the poet protests the fulfillment of sexual urge and refuses to identify "skin's lazy hunger" (12) with love. Hence, she questions,

.....Can this man with  
Nimble finger-tips unleash  
Nothing more alive than the  
Skin's lazy hungers? (9-12)

The poet's male partner in this poem is a man of "sun stained cheek" (1). He is a womanizer as his "sun stained

cheek" symbolizes his frequent visit to different woman at different times. He symbolizes "Id," and craves physical fulfillment of sex. His mouth resembles "a dark cavern" and suggests of his excessive passion for skin communicated ecstasies. He places his right hand on her knee to stimulate sexual desires and to entice her into lustful entanglement. The phrase "tripping/ Idly over puddles of/ Desire" (4-9), indicates the absence of genuine love. Her male partner cannot surge on wings of love since he is rooted to bodily responses whereas she is extremely doubtful whether he can be her match in her hunger for the higher reaches of fulfillment.

It is in the heart where love is enthroned but the poet's heart is an "empty cistern" (15), an empty container longing for an ultimate creative fulfillment through love. Therefore she is sexually incompatible and fails to respond to his advances. She admits: "I am a freak. It is only/To save my face, I flaunt, at/ Times, a grand flamboyant lust" (18-20). She realizes that her male partner falls below her vibrant expectation of an intense fulfillment of eternal love through physical love. For the sake of the society she pretends to be responsive to him but in reality she is not. She tries to imagine a world for her "outside of love, a world, however, made impossible by social boundaries" (Showalter 320). A freak is a person who has broken away from the conventional society. The title in its pluralistic tone suggests that the poet not only talks for herself but also for other women having similar experiences who seek an intense fulfillment through love.

In Kamala Das's vision womanhood involves certain collective experiences. She creates a 'female space' and attempts to "bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak" (Showalter 324). 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 intricately linked to their cultural environments" (Showalter 321). It being the product of the cultural forces, the female psyche is forced to bear anything and everything. Indian women are expected to be docile and not allowed to express their agony. Kamala Das consistently refuses to accept their silence. She identifies the feelings of longing and loss as collective experience. In the poem, "The Maggots," Das confirms how old the sufferings of women are:

At sunset on the river bank, Krishna  
loved her for the last time and left.  
That night in her husband's arms  
Radha felt  
so dead that he asked what is wrong  
do you mind my kisses love, and she  
said  
no, not at all, but thought, what is  
it to the corpse if the maggots nip?  
(1-7)

Radha is unable to express her longing for her Krishna since she is married to another man. She has already offered her soul to Krishna and suffers mentally. Hiding her agony she allows her husband to kiss her. Das gives voice to this silenced cry of agony as she asks, "What is it to the corpse if the maggots nip?"

In the poem "Luminol" the poet registers her protest against the skin "communicated" ecstasies as they cease to gratify the craving of the souls. The poet longs for an escape from the sex obsessed world of man through pills into a beautiful state of sleep. In this state of "the soul's mute/Arena" (12, 13) her male partner can have an amorous play with her body and cannot reach her soul. She suggests that the higher reaches soul can be attained only by an intense fulfillment through love and not through lust. The title "Luminol" means an illuminated state of self awareness, somewhere in the hidden recesses of poetic consciousness of Kamala Das. It is a state of dream where she completely forgets the world of deception, despair and

disappointment and where she attains the higher reaches of the soul. The inner agonies expressed in the poem are not merely those of Kamala Das, but of entire woman folk.

In "The Sunshine Cat", 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; locked her in a  
room of books  
With streak of sunshine lying near  
the door, like  
A yellow cat. (14-17)

However clever the husband may have been, he could not stop the spirit's flight from her body. On the contrary, one day when he returned, he has found her "cold and half-dead" (21). One may wonder, is death the only channel available to a woman to escape from the atrocities and physical abuse. It looks like defeatism but by her death, a woman can disappoint man and thwart his evil designs. The woman in the poem seeks a fulfilling experience in the company of her man who has always disappointed her by his insincerity, infidelity, and inconstancy. To her he is an oppressor and opportunist. The poem is a silent registration of the helpless indignation at the humiliation of woman in a male-dominated world where no one cares for her individuality, aspiration and the need for emotional fulfillment. To the world outside, she is a sunshine cat appearing always happy with all physical comforts. In reality she is a yellow cat, a deceased cat. The denial of freedom and

fulfillment has taken away all her charm, youth and beauty.

In "A Feminist's Lament," Das raises her voice against the concept of "Ideal woman." She begins the poem with a charge: "An ideal woman, they said, was but /a masochist" (1-2). Masochist is a person who gets pleasure in her own pain or humiliation. An ideal woman is supposed to be:

...Trained from infancy  
To wear the flannels of cowardice  
Next to her skin, trained to lie inert  
Under a male, committed by vows  
To feed her, clothe her and buy for her  
The 1000 sq. ft. flat with a loft  
For storing the debris of passing  
years. (2-8)

Das laments at the curtailment of freedom of the so called ideal woman who seems to live with all comforts. As the title suggests, she laments about the helpless state of women. She urges every woman to be courageous and not to be a coward and asks, "What was courage worth / at the very end" (14-15).

Kamala Das, a revolutionary poet, has thus started the trend towards frankness in the treatment of subject. Every poem of her has come directly from her heart and is based on an actual personal experience. 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 assertive voices of women who are silenced by the convention ridden society.

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