

Feminism in the Writings of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'Femina' meaning 'woman'. It refers to the advocacy women's rights, status and power on par with men on the grounds of equality of sex. The term has garnered popularity in early twentieth century when there ensued a struggle to secure women's suffrage and later for women's emancipation from patriarchal oppression. Contrary to popular opinion, its impact, however was not restricted to only urban population but soon extended even to rural areas. Many Indian women poets and writers have applied the term significantly in their writings and attained global recognition. Prominent among them are Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya, and Bharathi Mukherjee. The paper attempts to shed light on the evolution of Feminism. It dwells on some of the writings of Kamala Das, her autobiography *My Story*, "The Old Playhouse and Other Poems", "A Doll for the Child Prostitute", "An Introduction", and "A Widow's Lament".

KEYWORDS

Feminism, advocacy, suffrage, emancipation, patriarchy, gender, self-expression, domination, marginalization

Introduction

Kamala Surayya, renowned for her fiery poems and explicit autobiography is the Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry. Her pen name is Madhavi Kutty to Malayalam readers and Kamala Das to English patrons. She is a feminist to the core. All her writings, be it short stories or poems, consists of vivid descriptions of child marriage, love, lust, infidelity, puberty, menstruation and physical intimacy with feminist voice. Her writings profoundly fight for the emancipation of women. All her attempts are towards educating, enlightening and championing for the cause of women's rights. Her moorings in the traditions of the Nair community and clear understanding of the Indian socio-religious conditions

transpired her to conceive her own brand of feminism that fits for Indian conditions.

In all her writings, Kamala Das lends her voice to the subjugated women against male tyrannies and comes out as an ardent spokesperson for women's liberation movement in India. They articulate her strong desire to be liberated from the clutches of the male dominated society. One can find a voice of protest from the feminist perspective in her autobiography 'My Story'. She opines that the socialization of women as women makes them what they become. Her women characters are ordinary good girls from the society's standard. Their deprivation and needs make them rebels. She never accepts passivity and inferiority and also rejects all conventions. In her

poem 'An Introduction' we can study the irresistible urge for freedom from the conventional role of a woman. It throws light on the life of a woman in patriarchal society.

I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers
cut my hair short and ignore
My womanliness.
Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer,
be a cook
Be a quarreller with servants.

The above lines explain how she is forced to give up frankness and attain the nature of a daughter-in-law. She is forced to do everything her in-laws desire her to do. She is taunted, scolded and advised not to express her grief if she is troubled by her married life.

Kamala Das who is obsessed with a desire for freedom, knows from her personal experience that for women, marriage stifles any slender possibility of autonomy. According to her woman is treated by man as his slave and expects her to surrender. The poem 'I Shall Some Day' from the collection of 'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' is addressed to the husband. The theme is the intense desire of the woman to break loose from the 'cocoon' of the false love and tired lust.

I shall someday leave, leave the
cocoon
You built around me with morning
tea.
Love-words flung from doorways
and
of course
Your tired lust. I shall someday take
Wings fly around, as often petals.

Das earnestly wishes that husband-wife relationship be based on mutuality and reciprocity. But these relations reflect an

imbalance of power, with women as victims.

In the poem, A Widow's Lament, she wrote with the motto of challenging the traditional framework that can construct women. She assumed a woman isolated in the male dominated society has no place for its women:

'This has always been Someone
else's world not mine
My man my sons forming the axis
While I, wife and mother
Climbed the glass panes of their
eyes.'

In some of her poems, she speaks about her affairs with other men as a kind of escape from her man or master. She is desperately keen on debunking the myth of femininity and protesting against the 'sex roles.' She revolts against the definition of woman as a sexual being that exists for another. She exposes her restlessness with the fetters of femininity when she writes, using sarcasm in 'The Suicide'

'But,
I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife.'

Kamala opines that marriage sanctions man a license to use female body but she detests this kind of masculine possessiveness. She voices her restlessness with monstrous cruelties of men against women as well as against women's unquestioning acceptance of their destiny. The writing of autobiography, 'My Story', was essential for her. It is her personal and professional experience as a woman in the patriarchal society. It helped her to vent out her frustration and disappointment, her childhood deprivation, and the experience of being neglected throughout.

The autobiography, 'My Story', was originally published in Malayalam title *Enthe Katha*. It is a chronologically ordered poem written in a realistic style. Kamala Das recounts the trials of her marriage and her painful self-awakening as a woman and a writer. Though it seems to be autobiographical, it has plenty of fiction in it.

The poet Sachithananadan said, "I cannot think of any other Indian autobiography that so honestly captures a woman's inner life in all its sad solitude. It's desperate longing for real love and its desire for transcendence, its tumult of colors and its turbulent poetry."

The book presents how her quest for love started in childhood. It also portrays her unhappy marriage seeking support from make-believe lovers. At 15, she got married to a much older man her parents arranged for her. She was terribly upset by the turn of events that grabbed her life. The book takes the reader through the eccentric whimsical days and nights that she had spent with her husband. She had no mental bond with her husband and all through her life she treated him as an outsider. Hers was an unhappy marriage and so she lived in the world of imagination with make-believe lovers. These lovers consoled her and gave emotional support which she failed to get it from her husband.

"Getting a man to love you is so easy
Only be honest about your wants as woman
Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much softer, younger, lovelier."

Though the autobiography 'My

story' is full of sad theme, it is humorous in narrative. She imbibes satire and humor to the practices of society. This is found when she led a peaceful life with herself and in relation with her husband committing herself to the happenings and consequences. She is found taking care of her three sons with much love and care, playing with them. Thus, she shared a warm-open relation with her children. Furthermore, she dealt with early death uniquely. She was stricken with the grave disease of heart problem and had to undergo surgery. At this moment, she dealt with death as magically as she dealt with life. She welcomed as a stranger. She never expressed her fear of death.

In a nutshell, the book is a good read with effective precepts liked by all men, women, old, young, thinkers and feminists. It is a book meant for all generations irrespective of time and clime. It has a universal appeal.

In another story, "A Doll for a Child Prostitute", Kamala Das presents a gripping and moving tragic tale of a 13-year-old girl, Rukmani whose mother Anasuya brings her for sale to the brothel house owned by the fat lady Aye. Rukmani commits herself without any cry because it was a good escape for her to be away from her beastly step-father.

Rukmani and other girls like Sita and Mira are too young to realize the full implication of the profession they have been thrown into. The following reading revokes sympathy and remorse in the mind of the reader: 'I cannot sleep in the day,' said Rukmani. Sita commented saying 'You are so innocent. Do you think we can sleep at night in this house? We shall all be so busy entertaining the visitors.'

'Visitors at night?' asked Rukmani.
'Who will come at night?'

'Men come to do things here,' said Sita.

'What things,' asked Rukmani. She was thinking of her step-father and the pain she had experienced.

The inspector sahib persuades Ayee and gets hold of Rukmani. But she herself struggles to get free by jeering at him and inflicting scratches in his face. Later, he cajoles her and whispers to her that he will buy her a red frock and panties with lace on them. In his second attempt he promises her that he will buy a doll that opens and closes its eyes as he fondles her chubby arms and cries mummy when she presses it on its stomach. Rukmani feels moved by the words of the man and tells him that he resembles her father who left her and went away. Having said so, she surrenders herself to him.

Thus, the short story "A Doll for the Child Prostitute" is a moving account of a woman's struggle for existence and vividly portrays the practice of engaging in promiscuous sexual relations owing to poverty and the degradation brought upon by it.

No doubt girls and women are in the whoring industry due to abject poverty and force. In my opinion the government can stop this forced prostitution by joining its hands with voluntary organizations and civil societies.

The new woman of Kamala Das' dream is determined to win her independence as a human being and seems to be questioning the sexual rights of man which he takes for granted. She cannot accept the limits set for her by man, as she cannot develop a sense of invisibility, or cannot be bound by the fetters of femininity. She rather wishes to bring about a sexual revolution. She is intolerant of the kind of passivity and

timidity her mother exhibited. But Kamala Das who sees her own grim future in her mother's accepted inferior position seems to be protesting against her mother for not revolting against the meaningless male commands, against the male efforts to establish women's inferiority.

In the poem 'Conflagration' she directly asks the woman thus:

'Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried beneath a man?'

In one of her interviews, Kamala Das states: 'I wanted to make women of my generation feel that if men could do something wrong, they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realize that they were equal. I wanted to remove gender difference.'

Kamala Das is a spokeswoman of the Indian counterpart of the woman's liberation. She has broken away with the romantic-idealistic tradition and rendered a realistic and concrete portrayal of life-experience especially in the ambit of man-woman relationship. She unlocks her sexuality that is just as much as feminine as masculine. Her boldness, frankness and honesty are unsurpassed to this day. We, the women of India are very fortunate to have the unique and powerful voice of Kamala Das. Her unflinching hard work, inspiration, boldness and courage have brought changes in the attitude of Malayali women.

Conclusion

Kamala Das has earned a name for her candid and frank portrayal of women much before feminist studies takes roots in the Indian soil. Woman occupies the pivotal position in all her works. She clearly knows what is achievable and what is not in accordance to the Indian scenario and has the exact knowledge of where to stop.

Thus, Das is a typically feminine

Indian woman with somewhat western influences that grow in the course of her creative writings, particularly her poetry and acquires traits of a feminine setting within the ambit of Indian myth and culture.

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