

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.3.69>

An Analytical Study of Resistance against Cultural Violence in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

Matthew Arnold defines culture as, “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our own stock notions and habits” (Wikipedia). Unfortunately, this dynamic picture of culture has never been possessed in true sense; because the history of culture, since the formation of organized societies anywhere in the world, has been the history of cultural domination and suppression. The proponents of cultural values find their own culture better than those of others. They spread and impose these values in the name of truth with the help of ideological and repressive state apparatus. India has been maintaining its patriarchal culture since centuries; and women have been made the worst victims of it. Women, because of the dominance of these men-centric societal rules and norms, are pushed to periphery and forced to live the life of a second-class citizen. Some women have raised their voices against these atrocities and defied to obey the illogical patriarchal rules. Kamla Das, a vocal Indian poetess who herself has been a victim of such binary cultural norms, has expressed her egalitarian thoughts in many of her poems. She writes freely about the needs and desires of women and finds patriarchal society responsible behind the maldevelopment of its society in general and women in particular.

Keywords: Culture, Violence, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Domination, Suppression, Desires

Culture is an inter-disciplinary concept which encompasses a big range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. In the words of E.B. Tylor, culture is, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (01). *Cambridge Online English Dictionary* defines culture as, "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time" (n. p.). Gleaning through the

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above definitions, culture can be summarized as the sum total of all those values and beliefs by which anyone live harmoniously in the society. These values and beliefs are cherished, protected and maintained from one generation to another with unbroken continuity by those who have faith in them. To a large extent, these values and beliefs decide the social fabric of any community. But the matter becomes problematic when some people do not find themselves compatible with the existing cultural norms and try to deviate from them. Under this condition, those who respect their culture, react violently and inflict pain upon others as the deviators become a possible threat for their social structures. Instead of focusing on the merits and demerits of any cultural rule, they become hostile and revengeful and perpetuate violence in the name of culture.

Since the time of European enlightenment, many metanarratives have been constructed and people have been conditioned to adopt those narratives as if they were divine. Culture mostly carries binaries of good and bad, fair and unfair, logical and illogical, high and low and the dominant culture tries to suppress the marginalized cultures. The history of the world has been the history of cultural dominance since the time human beings formed societies till now. This domination is exercised through the power structures of any specific society which are sometimes overt and at other times covert. The idea of cultural violence emanates from the fact that no single culture of the world is perfect and pure; therefore imposing and enforcing one's culture on others is unwanted. However, if people of the same culture differ from one another, the power structure of the society compels the dissidents either to follow the norms or be the victims of perpetual physical and psychological torture. This power-structure takes support of many other inter-linked traditions, institutions and societal norms to consolidate its base, to make it divine. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, states:

By 'cultural violence' we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence -exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) - that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. (*JPR* 291)

In almost all the traditional, social and cultural institutions of all the patriarchal societies of the world, women are considered to be the second class citizens. Simone de Beauvoir elucidates it when she states that a woman is, "an object and essential to man because it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realization" (*The Second Sex* 173). Indian patriarchal culture has rendered Indian women incapable of using their full potential. Except a handful of examples, Indian women are still lagging behind because of their incapacities of self-determinations concerning their own freedoms and choices. Indian women are particularly unfortunate as multiple religious, social and cultural norms of diverse Indian societies depicts 'good woman' to be dependent on her husband and utterly faithful to him. Innumerable familial taboos grow from time to time

which compel women to accept subservient roles. Even the ancient Indian scriptures denounce women as impure and imperfect creatures. In the words of Manu, the ancient Hindu lawgiver, “No act is to be done according to (her) own will by a young girl, a young woman or even by an old woman though in (their own) houses” (“Ordinances” 130).

Post-independence Indian English poetry especially by women has marked a new beginning in the realm of creative world. Their poetry is iconoclastic and challenging due to their open concerns for women’s problems and demands of freedom and choices. The feminine sensibility of these Indian English women poets is noticeable in the sense it projects the emergence of New Woman; who is not submissive, docile, silent and ready to bear anything in life, but a woman who is resilient, assertive, puts an open resistance to her suppression and above all who well understands herself. She is not only aware of the harsh realities of life, but is also aware of her demands, desires and is desperate to fulfill them. Kamala Das is one of the comets in the galaxy of post-independence Indian English Women Poets who shines brightly in the sky of literary world because of her open resistance to the patriarchal culture of Indian society.

Kamala Das was born in a traditional Nair (Brahmin) community in Thrissur District of Kerala. She passed her childhood partly at Nalapat, Kerala and partly in Kolkata. She was married at the age of fifteen to Madhava Das who was a bank officer. She was not more than 16 when she begot her first son. She had bitter memories of her early marriage. She had to suffer a lot of hardships due to traditional and stable culture of her society which denies freedom. She was deprived of proper study, proper marriage, proper love and a respectable livelihood. In the introductory page of her autobiography, *My Story*, she claims that, “every middle class bed is a cross on which the woman is crucified. Man falls in lust, not love; women crush in real self-destroying love” (*My Story*). Kamla Das wants to emancipate Indian womanhood from the widely circulated myth of ‘Pativarta’ as she asserts, “Marriage should be a light weight contract, a promise of protection when the need arises and championship in bed and out of it” (*What Women Expect Out of Marriage* 20-21). She raises her voice against the inhuman torture of women in her essay *Enough of Pativerta* and motivates women to proceed ahead with courage and confidence to face the challenges of their lives. In her own words, “Challenges should be met with courage and confidence, not with a canine whine” (15).

Kamla Das was an original, universally acknowledged Indian poetess who is known for her blatant resistance to various cultural taboos. She has shocked Indian society by breaking traditional boundaries through her open description of women’s sexuality, its needs and desires in both; her poems and her autobiography. Her poetry is intensely personal but her deep and explicit articulation of women’s experience makes it universal in which countless women find solace. She is the first bold voice in Indian poetry of feminine sensibilities with intense sensitivity and deep care for the poor, the deprived, the exploited and the neglected.

Kamla Das's poetry is a revolt against the traditional patriarchal culture of India in which women are conditioned to be a 'good woman'. Kamla is apprehensive that this 'idealized image of woman' would produce docile and submissive women and jeopardize the development of humanity as it results from the slavery of women. Women who are dependent on men, who fit themselves in patriarchal structures of the society, who never assert their demands and silently listen and accept their pre-decided roles, who throughout their lives bear the burden of their relatives, friends and family members, are good women. Kamla Das rejects these idealized notions of women and advocates for their independence and individual identity. She writes:

Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. (*An Introduction* 9-14)

Women in patriarchal societies are thought to be the sole guardians of culture. They are supposed to keep their faiths in their lovers, in their husbands without making any complaint. Women who sacrifice everything of them, are supposed to be cultured. But she opposes against this man-centric idea of loyalty and warns women that to get a man for love as a result of her sacrifice is easier, but she must be ready to bear the aftermath of love as men frequently change their love objects. Culture supports men in such circumstances because infidelity of a woman is dangerous and unwanted in Indian culture even if she herself is a deserted one. She suggests women that they must be more thoughtful in their choices of love because:

Oh yes, getting
A man to love is easy, but living
Without him afterwards may have to be
Faced. A living without life when you move
Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that
Gave up their search, with ears that hear only
His last voice calling out your name and your
Body which once under his touch had gleamed
Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute. (*The Looking Glass* 16-25)

Kamla Das challenge the phallogocentric idea of society in her poems. She has gone to the extreme to express women's needs and desires. Women's endless torture because of ill-matched marriages is one of the main themes of her poetry. She expresses her disregard for ill-matched marriages as she thinks that they are devoid of love. She believes that women in such marriages are crushed under the burden of various traditions and cultures. They are

thought to be the sole provider of domestic bliss to the whole family on the one hand, and to quench the lust of her husband on the other. Women in such marriages become objects of pleasures and, sometimes, start behaving abnormally. She holds men responsible for the abnormal behaviors of women as she finds that men wants to pacify their lust and do not support women on equal grounds. Women become ‘freaks’ only when they are cheated or exploited or deprived of desired love from their partners. She asserts:

I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust. (*The Freaks* 19-21)

Helen Cixous, one of the proponents of postmodern feminism, suggests women writers to write their experiences in their own language to assert their identities which Kamla Das has performed excellently well. In her own words, “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse” (*Beginning Theory* 128). Kamla Das’s fierce battle against patriarchy of Indian culture is well documented in many of her poems through her incoherent, semiotic language. She has written female experiences which have been repressed since centuries and need an expression. She has used ‘body imagery’ to lay bare the stark realities of the world. She criticizes the ruthless outlook of people towards eunuchs and gives an accounts of how they express their anguish through the movements of their bodies. She elucidates eunuchs’ pain in following words:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... (*The Dance of the Eunuchs* 1-6)

In the poem, *My Grandmother’s House*, she makes a contrast between the love and care which she received at her grandmother’s home and the love and care which she expects from her husband and her lovers. She expresses her deep pain over not receiving the same love and affection in her later life. Her desperate search for love at strangers doors results from the dissatisfaction of traditional patriarchal relationships which focuses more on domination and subjugation than on mutual-trust and mutual understanding and full devotion for each other. She breaks the conventional limitations to fulfill her desires. She accepts that her dissatisfaction in marital life is the result of her victimization in the hands of patriarchal culture in general and her husband in particular. She claims that she was not always distressed for love as once upon a time in her life, she had it in abundance, but now she feels extreme lack of it. She mentions:

...you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change? (*My Grandmother's House* 12-16)

She criticized the deification and reification of women in Hindu culture especially with the support of various myths and legends. Even the goddesses are depicted as the examples of the victims in the spiritual spectrum of life. Kamla Das states, "We taught our daughters even our goddesses were weak women, mindless, prideless, faceted to suffer...we let Sita after abduction after misery get abandoned by her husband when she was pregnant and helpless" (*Enough of Pativarta* 15). She protests this trend of Indian womanhood and raises the consciousness of Indian educated women to think more that their husbands and lovers. She wants women to redefine her happiness out of the narrow walls of wifehood and domesticity. She wants to emancipate women from this soul killing subjugation. She suggests women in her poem, *The Conflagration*:

Women, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It is time again to come alive,
The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame. (20)

Kamla Das raised her voice against humiliation and neglect of woman and revolts against the conventional definition of Indian womanhood throughout her life. She made her best efforts to convince people to understand the emotional cravings of women. She has dismantled the image of ideal womanhood in many of her poems and shown how patriarchy creates hegemonic structures for women's eternal torture. Kamla Das weaves the subject matters of her poetry around women's problems and difficulties which emanate from the patriarchal structures of the society. She consistently protested against the egocentric ideas of phallocentric society and was anxious enough on seeing the pathetic condition of contemporary Indian women. She kept on fighting the male prejudices and anti-feminist outlooks of the society till the last breath of her life. She strongly advocated that women need to get rid of the painful commitments of the outdated patriarchal rules of the society for their existence. The statement of Louis Bernikov that, "A woman poet constantly pits herself against cultural expectation of womanhood" seems appropriate about Kamla Das who left for her heavenly abode on May 31, 2009 ("Introduction"). But the coming generation will remember her as a great original creative personality, a philosopher of freedom, a prophet of women's emancipation and a poetess who has gone beyond the religious and social taboos.

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